

Ps 149:1,2
Ps 65:2
Ps 33:3,4,5,6
Ps 66:1,2
Hy 28:1,23,4
1 Peter 1:1-12
1 Peter 1:3a

Yarrow, August 23, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Peter, it's obvious, is ecstatic about praising God. Somehow, we feel that that's the way it should be, for we know that God created us for His glory. But time and again we experience that the brokenness of life gets in the way of being excited about praising God; there are simply too many headaches and too much heartache....

It turns out, brothers and sisters, that Peter and his readers knew very well that life had so much brokenness. Peter addresses his letter to "strangers in the world" (vs 1) – and none of us likes to be strangers, aliens, to the people around us. On top of that, Peter admits in vs 6 that his readers are "suffer[ing] grief in all kinds of trials." He gives more detail in 4:12: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering...." Peter knew his readers were grappling with ample brokenness in their lives.

Yet he can burst out in this song of praise to God! In brokenness and struggle we find it difficult to praise God, even unnatural and forced, and so we wonder: what prompts Peter to break out into this song of blessing? What's there for us to learn from this passage??

Peter, congregation, has a vision for living that's so much broader than he used to have. In the passage before us he shares this perspective with his readers –you and me included– so that we might share his exuberance in praising God.

THE VISTAS OF THE NEW WORLD PROMPT PETER TO BELT OUT HIS PRAISE FOR GOD.

1. The setting of Peter's readers,
2. The reason for Peter's praise,
3. The encouragement for today.

1. The setting of Peter's readers,

According to vs 1, Peter shares his excitement about praising God with "strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia." The five place names are provinces located in the northern part of present day Turkey. This was a sparsely populated section of the world, off the beaten path, and so of little political and economic significance. The locals had lived there for years and years, and so had their own customs and accent, their own cherished tribes and family bonds.

It is known from books outside the Bible that Emperor Claudius of Rome established a number of cities in these five provinces, and populated them with people from other parts of his empire. That's to say: particular people were uprooted from their historic homes and compelled to relocate to Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. Exiles they were in a strange land, surrounded by people of strange culture and language.

Now it's one thing if exiles to a new land get to live by themselves, forming enclaves of ethnic groupings so that they can retain their own language and customs. It's a different thing if these exiles of a particular background get scattered throughout the region, with a few here and a few there. They're truly strangers, and they stick out.

So here's the question: what does it feel like to be a stranger, a foreigner, an alien? Most of us are so much part of Canadian society that we don't know what it's like to be a foreigner here. But around us we see numerous new migrants to our land, people who don't dress like Canadians usually do, who don't speak the language of our corner of the country, whose skin colour and religion and perhaps even ethical practices put them in a minority. We talk about them, look askance at them, keep them a bit at arm's length.... Easy to be an alien, a foreigner? It's pretty obvious: no, it isn't. We don't find it hard at all to understand that the locals will blame the intruding foreigners for the bad things that happen in the community; in fact, they become scapegoats for whatever goes wrong.... Being an alien isn't fun.

According to vs 1, Peter's readers were "strangers in the world," or, as other translations have it, "aliens", "foreigners". It's likely, then, that his readers were among the people the emperor had forcibly scattered around in the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. That being the case, then they knew from first hand experience what being a stranger was all about.

But now notice: Peter does not begin his letter by saying, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to *Claudius' exiles*, strangers in the world, scattered through" the five provinces; rather, he describes his readers as "God's elect, strangers in the world." The point is that Peter's readers are "strangers" not because of Claudius' decree to exile particular people, but they're strangers because of *God's* decree to ordain particular people to salvation in Jesus Christ. Peter's readers knew from daily life what being "strangers in the world" is all about, but at the end of the day it's not Claudius' decree that makes these addressees strangers, but God's decree.

What that decree of election is? Vs 2: Peter's addressees "have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...." The reference is to the fact that with the fall into sin the entire human race rejected God the Creator and joined Satan in rebellion against God. From the entire mass of people on Satan's side, the Lord God in mercy determined to save a particular limited percentage. Those whom He chose He determined to set free from slavery to sin and Satan through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, and reconcile these people to the God they rejected in Paradise. He did not have to save any (for all rejected Him), and so His decision to save some is strictly mercy. More, God's decree is to save *particular* persons, Johnny and not Jimmy, Susie and not Susannah. And that too is strictly mercy. The Lord has not made clear in Scripture what percentage of the total human race He would save, but it's certainly not all people.

Well now, the people to whom Peter writes are amongst "God's elect..., chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." These same people are "strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia." Interesting: these elect are strangers, aliens.... That's not comfortable.... Yet in their hearing Peter burst forth into a song of praise! Why mention the reality of being strangers and aliens, and in the next breath belt out praise for God? And why must these "strangers" hear this praise??

That's our second point:

2. The reason for Peter's praise

The reason for the praise is given in the words that follow our text. Vs 3b: "In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope...." The critical word here is the term 'new birth'. We read that phrase, and our thoughts go to Lord's Day 33 of the Catechism about conversion, the putting to death of the old nature and the coming to life of the new nature – new birth. It's indeed true,

congregation, that we need to keep in mind the notion of conversion as described in Lord's Day 33 as we listen to Peter's words in our chapter. But we need to listen first to the words of the apostle himself.

The word translated as "new birth" occurs only twice in the Bible (the second passage being 1 Peter 1:23, which is in turn dependent on our text), and actually means "born again". We know what being born is. A person confined to the womb is set free from its confinements and enters a whole new world of opportunity; that's birth, and it's happened to all of us. Birth involves radical change, change in environment, change in opportunity, change in growth. That too has happened to us all; our 'being born' delivered us from the limitations of the womb (limitations that would eventually have stifled our life altogether), and gave us opportunity to grow and develop, space to learn to crawl, to walk, to run, freedom to see the bigger world as it really was – something we couldn't see from within the womb. Our being born, then, was a momentous thing, and it gave us new perspectives on life and how big the world is, and our lives have never been the same since. In fact, we realize well that if we after birth insisted on thinking and acting as if we were still in the womb, we simply couldn't survive; the mindset would kill us.

I need to belabour the point for a moment. Would Umbro the Unborn be correct in his conclusion that the world is no bigger than his womb? Once one has been born, is outside the womb, the evidence is so obvious that the world is bigger than the womb alone.

Well now, Peter tells his readers that God "in His great mercy ... has given us new birth," or (as other translations have it) "has caused us to be born again" (ESV, NASB). The picture, then, is that Peter's readers have been *born a second time*. Their second birth, though, is not a physical rebirth (as if, to use Nicodemus' words, they could enter their mother's womb and be born again). Their second birth is on a different level, but is just as dramatic and life-changing. Specifically, as birth gets you out of the small, confined world of the womb into something much bigger and more exciting, so too one's second birth gets you out of the small, limited world of what the naked eye sees day by day into something much bigger and more exciting. What is it that the eye sees every day? Why, the world we're so used to is a world of brokenness, of suffering, of sweat and tears. It's a world of friction between people, of battling with sickness and pain, a world that ends in death for one and all; even Michael Jackson is returning to dust. True, this world is so much bigger than the womb, but at the end of the day this world also has its limitations, and one of the walls of our world is death – and we never know how close we are to reaching that wall. The human spirit would love to transcend the limitations that come with death, as well as the limitations that come with the sicknesses that lead to death. But we can't; ours is a finite world, riddled with pain and frustration. The people to whom Peter writes experience some of that limitation, that frustration, in the suffering that comes with being strangers in a strange land....

Peter, though, reminds his readers – "God's elect" as they are – of the "new birth" God has given them, a "new birth into a living hope." His point? By God's grace Peter's readers have escaped the narrow confines of the womb of this world and have come into a new existence of far greater vista and opportunity. The life they had in this fallen world was stifling, and will ultimately kill all who remain entrapped in this world of limitations. The world they have entered is one of hope, is one of life, is one of unlimited opportunity, is one of excitement and place to grow.

Why is this new world so exciting, one of "living hope"? It came about through "the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Peter himself had thoroughly despaired when Jesus Christ was crucified.... He'd been convinced that the man he'd followed for three years, the man who had healed so many sick, raised so many dead, cleansed so many lepers, would break open the painful limitations of this fallen world. But He was crucified, killed; Peter had obviously backed the wrong horse and this world would remain so broken, so limited, the wall of death so much a reality....

But on that remarkable Easter Sunday the very Jesus whom some disciples buried on Good Friday appeared to Peter as a very living man – and so Peter was confronted with the startling reality

that Jesus Christ had punctured that wall of death and so expanded the world of His reality. That new world in which death was overcome was a much bigger world, a world with so much more opportunity and excitement. Peter saw with his own eyes that the risen Jesus, present though He was in this world as the naked eye sees it, was not limited to this small world, for He majestically ascended from this earth—despite the laws of gravity we’re so used to—and rode the cloud into the glorious presence of God Himself. The startling resurrection of Jesus Christ was for Peter a new birth, a breaking out of a confined world that knows the claustrophobia of death (and the sickness and grief that comes with it) and an entry into a new world where sin is atoned for and the consequences of sin are curses no more, a new world wherein man is reconciled to God in heaven and belong to Him as His prize possession. It’s a world of heretofore unimagined opportunity and privilege; how delightful to be children of God and heirs of righteousness! Imagine: while on this earth one is a stranger and nothing you possess is secure, you have through God’s mighty work an “inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade”! What perspective that gives, what excitement and what opportunity! Concentrate my energy on that which passes away? On what people can take from me? What a waste.... For that matter: get bogged down by being a stranger in society? That’s a short term little problem compared to the eternal inheritance God has stored up for me in heaven!

All of that brings us back to the question of being a stranger in the world. Peter’s letter is addressed to “strangers”, being “aliens” or “foreigners” in society. We’re a bit doubtful of the foreigners around us, and so are convinced that we don’t want anyone to consider us ‘strangers’. But the people Peter addresses were seen as ‘strangers’, aliens, by those around them. Why was that?? That, brothers and sisters, is ultimately because they’d been born anew into a living hope, and the people around them had not been similarly born anew! By way of comparison: the unbelieving people around them lived in the small and restricted world of the womb where they were limited in what they could do and in their ability to grow, limited by the finiteness of this broken life. But the elect of God had been born anew, had entered a world not beset by death for they’d seen Christ risen from the dead. The world into which the elect had been born was not burdened by the judgment of God on sin, for the Christ who arose from the dead had triumphed over sin and reconciled sinners to God the Creator. There’s was a world attached to heaven, governed by heaven, reconciled to heaven – and so was a much bigger world than the earthbound world of their neighbour’s thinking.

But if these Christians have a much bigger view of reality, if their world encompasses a heaven and a God-who-is-Father that the unbelievers cannot even begin to imagine, what a radically different *view of the world* fills the believers’ minds and determines their thinking and their acting! That worldview takes God for real, and so embraces as fact the liberating realization that I’m safe in the hands of this sovereign God-who-is-my-Father. This worldview recognizes that material wealth and bodily health is not what this life is all about, for that will pass away as God from heaven comes in Jesus Christ to live with people on this renewed earth in the New Jerusalem. So the child of God with the bigger worldview, a view not limited by the walls of the womb, thinks in a different way than the people of this world, gets excited about lasting things, dreams about bigger things. *And that’s a difference that people not (yet) born again, people still limited by the claustrophobia of the womb, invariably notice –* and they look at you as strangers, as people from another planet. And they’re not all wrong! The elect of God know life’s headquarters to be in heaven where the resurrected Christ is enthroned over the world we *can* see *and* over the worlds we *can’t* see, and so the child of God refuses to be limited by the restrictions of this broken world.

No wonder Peter can belt out his praise for God! What a privilege to be liberated from the narrow confines of our first birth—this world—and be allowed to look beyond the walls of this broken life into a bigger, hope-giving reality! That God would give such privilege to sinners, would open their eyes to see reality as it is, would give His Son to set sinners free: what a God, praise be to Him! That

God would give *me* the privilege to be born into a living hope, would let *me* be receiver of an eternal inheritance that can never perish: again, what a God, praise be to Him! No wonder Peter belts out his praise for God in the hearing of these elect strangers; he wants them to join him in praising such a God! So we're at our third point:

3. The encouragement for today

How, brothers and sisters, should Peter's readers of long ago respond to such a perspective on life? How should we respond?

The answer is so easy. How's a child to respond to the fact of his birth? Shall he deny the reality of his birth, and pretend he's still in the womb, with all the limitations of that place that's been so comfortable to him for so many weeks? We realise: that defeats the purpose of being born. As time moves on, the child once born learns to love life, learns to run, to explore, to enjoy – and praise the God who created life and the opportunity to enjoy life outside the womb. To learn to love life and to enjoy it does not require a *command* to the child; he readily does it response to be privileges of the opportunities before him.

How much more is this true in relation to the work of God in our second birth! Shall we act as if we're still in the womb, as if life is no more than the little world our eyes can see and the news reports on – a life of brokenness and pain and limitations?? Shall we not recognize that the world is much bigger, the opportunities much wider, the vistas much broader, existence much longer, that we're reconciled to God and He's prepared an eternal inheritance far more glorious than we can ever find or receive in this life? It brings about a whole different way of living, and the people around us will notice that our eyes are lifted off this limited earth and fixed on heaven above where Christ our Redeemer is. They think we're strange, and that's OK by us for we realize that we got the better end of the deal – for ours is a perspective that goes beyond the grave and into the presence of God Most High.

Uncomfortable with being strangers in this world?? No, not at all! On the contrary, join Peter in praising God for the privilege of being different, the privilege of being chosen out of a world that's perishing, being granted a new, better, exciting view of reality – one no eye has seen, or ear heard, or the heart of man conceived. What a God, that He'd prepare such vistas of hope for sinners!

It all, brothers and sisters, leaves a question. It's this: are you comfortable with the people around you seeing you as an oddball? Or are you a bit embarrassed about being different? Let me ask the question differently: do you feel a bit awkward that you –unlike millions around you– are no longer in the confined space of this world, have instead been born anew into a bigger life that encompasses reconciliation with God so that you're an heir to life eternal? You know, beloved, the fact that God has chosen us to be His and so had us born again is nothing to be ashamed of. It's instead reason to join Peter in the eulogy of vs 3: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" Then there's no reason either to pretend to the world around us that we're not so different after all.... Truly, dressing the way the world does, talking the way the spiritually unborn around us talk, acting the way the world acts really is silly..., and deadly.... Imagine acting as if we're still in the womb....