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1 Peter 1:3-5

Second Message

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# EYES FIXED ON THE HORIZON

*SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND*

One of my favorite movies this year was *Dead Poets Society*, the story of a classic English boys school and a not-so-classic English professor who used the vehicle of poetry to give his adolescent students a passion for life—a difficult assignment, to say the least. But this man succeeded by employing rather unconventional teaching methods. In the first scene he marches his students out of the classroom and into a hallway, to a trophy case displaying pictures of all the former notable graduates of the school, people who had made a name for themselves in the world.

“Look into these faces,” he commands, “peer into their eyes. When they were here, the whole world was like an oyster opened before them. Where are they now?” he asks. “They are fertilizing worms! How many opportunities did they miss?” he wonders. He quotes Henry David Thoreau’s “Walden,” saying, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Then, quoting a Latin saying, he cries, “*Carpe diem! Carpe diem!*” (Seize the day!). His exhortation echoes in the hearts of his young students. He wanted them to look to the horizon, to the inevitability of death, so that they might have a passion for life. This is how he urges them to give their life meaning, by seizing the day. I loved the movie, partly because I am a rebel at heart, and partly because I have a passion for life.

This is the same approach which the apostle Peter takes as he writes his first letter to Christians in A.D. 64. He wants them to live with a passion for life. He wants them to seize the day. They, too, must keep their eyes fixed on the horizon. Their horizon is not death, however. Peter looks past death to a cosmic renewal: A new heavens and a new earth. We have already seen that the early church was about to undergo a crisis. Soon the apostles who walked with Jesus will all have passed on. The church is weak, decentralized, and dispersed throughout the world. Persecution under the Emperor Nero is about to be intensified.

But Peter’s word to these early Christians is that when they fully understand their identity, who they are, and what is their relationship to the world (they are aliens and sojourners), then they will have influence in society. Everything would naturally follow once they understood their identity as believers. They were aliens to the world, pilgrims living in tents as they made their journey to their heavenly home. In the world therefore they experienced alienation. But, on the other hand, with God they were the elect; they were loved. The tension between these two realities, rather than being a threat to believers, actually enhances God’s grace in the soul of man.

In verses 3-12 of chapter 1, Peter tells these sojourners about the glorious salvation which Christ has accomplished. Like an artist working on canvas, he paints the whole panorama of salvation—future, present, and past—to demonstrate the fullness of this marvelous gift. This morning therefore we will look at our future salvation in Jesus Christ, given in verses 3-5.

## I. A Living Hope

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith, for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice... (1 Pet 1:3-6a NASB)**

According to Peter, hope is the dominant characteristic of Christians living in an alien world. But hope is a rare commodity in this world, isn’t it? Even what little hope there is comes in ever-diminishing quantities. Eloquent philosophers who have death as their horizon tell us there is no hope. Listen to the honest words of English philosopher Bertrand Russell, writing about life:

The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach and where none tarry long. One by one, as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent Death. Brief and powerless is Man’s life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.

Man, according to the philosophers, has no hope.

What hope do the rabbis in the synagogue hold out? Do they offer any hope for man? At a memorial service I attended once I heard the rabbi recite the Kadesh, the prayers for the dead: “May their memory live forever in our hearts,” he prayed. A dead hope. I wondered to myself, “How long will their memory last?” Who cares about the generations that have preceded us? This is nothing but a dead hope.

How about the sports pages? Many people turn there for hope, if only for an hour or a day. Here is what the Philadelphia Eagles quarterback was quoted as saying last week: “I give so much of myself on Sunday, I drain all the life out of myself out there so that maybe our city can have a little pride. Maybe everybody can forget just for a little while how hard life really is.” An elusive hope, in other words.

When we look for hope in the world, then, here is what we find: no hope, a dead hope, and an elusive hope. But if you are a pilgrim following Jesus Christ, says Peter, you have a living hope. That is because our hope is based on a Person, Jesus the Messiah, who conquered death itself in the resurrection. When Jesus first announced that he was the Messianic King, the Jews were very excited. The prophets had talked about the Messiah’s dealing with the enemies of Israel, and the Jews felt that at last they would be vindicated. Here

was one who would overthrow the Romans. But Rome was too insignificant an enemy of the Messiah: He came to defeat the cosmic enemy of sin itself—sin, pride, the world, the flesh, and the devil, yea, even the last enemy, death. When Jesus defeated that last enemy by his resurrection from the dead, according to the apostles, he opened the door to a new age, to eternal life. Now, for the first time, eternity had invaded the realm of time. Now it was now possible to enter into that new dimension by being born again. This is what the Christian can experience in the world today.

The meaning of the words “born again,” a term which is very widely used in our day, escapes many people. The Greek preposition which comes before the verb in Scripture can either mean born “again” (a second time), or, born “from above,” i.e. from heaven. In his encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus said to this man, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you are born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus interpreted Jesus’ words as saying he had to be born again physically. This is why he asks Jesus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter again into his mother’s womb?” But Jesus meant his words to be taken in the second sense, in light of the promise of the New Covenant (John 3:3-8). “No,” he replied, “it means being born of water and of Spirit. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” This was to fulfill what the prophets predicted, when God would remove the heart of stone from his people and give them a heart of flesh which would respond to him.

The new birth is described in two aspects: 1) cleansing (“born of water”), and 2) new life (“born of Spirit”) (John 3:5). This is what the prophets had longed for, as we see in Ezekiel:

**“For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land. Then I will *sprinkle clean water on you* [born of water] and you will be clean... Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put *my Spirit* [born of Spirit] within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will be careful to observe my ordinances” (Ezek 36:25-27)**

All of this is available to us now, says Peter. Eternity has burst forth into history. Christians have a living hope.

The implication for believers is clear: We should be excited about life! Woe to us if we are bored! Woe to us if we have the blahs, if we regard life as humdrum, if we are living merely in three dimensions, when the fourth dimension has been opened up to us in this world.

In the movie I mentioned earlier, the professor urged his students to have a new perspective on life. To emphasize his point, he read poem by Byron from their classic poetry textbook. Then he read the textbook’s analysis of the poem, which was very formulaic, pedantic and boring. The scene showed the boys taking copious notes of what he was saying, but when he had finished he interrupts them, “This is all wrong! Tear this introduction out of your books!” The boys gleefully comply and begin ripping pages from their textbook. They were learning that there was a new, more fulfilling way to look at the poems of Byron.

When I was taking a course on religion at Stanford University years ago, the textbook was a 1,200-page work by a liberal theologian. Every word seemed to have five syllables. This writer referred to God as “the ground of all being,” “the ultimate concern,” etc. I got so tired of all this stuff that I went with my roommate to the highest point in our fraternity building in protest and tossed the textbook

out the window. We were saying that there was another view of life, in the Scriptures themselves, that was much easier to understand. The Bible takes us into the fourth dimension. Our textbook weighed us down on earth.

I would encourage you students present who are taking courses in psychology, history, sociology, philosophy, or whatever, that when you hear what the finite minds of men have to say about these subjects, you can agree that they have made good observations about life, but they are missing a whole dimension. The Kingdom of God has come from heaven to earth, and it has opened up eternity to us. In physics, Newton saw only three dimensions. Einstein saw four. He introduced his Theory of Relativity, and blew apart Newtonian physics. This is how we are to live as Christians. The new age is present and we enter into it by means of the Holy Spirit. Eternity is here to feed the soul right now.

I have been trying to teach this concept to my children. While on vacation in Oregon this summer, I took my youngest daughter Katie for a walk in a meadow. It had just rained, and there were puddles of water all over the place. While she was looking into a puddle, I asked her, “Katie, what do you see?” “Mud,” she said. Then we walked some distance and looked back at the meadow. Now we saw the puddles from a different angle. They reflected the beautiful light back coming down from the sky back toward the heavens, making the puddles a mirror of the heavens. “What do you see now?” I asked her. “I see clouds and snow-capped peaks and sky,” she said.

It is the same with us. When we gaze directly into our soul, as my daughter had gazed into a puddle, what we see is muck and mire. But when we come to Christ, God washes us with his blood, cleanses us with his Spirit, and his light shines in our spirit. That is when we see the new creation reflected in our life. As Christians, this is the kind of perspective we should have. We have a living hope, based on One who has conquered death, and inaugurated the Kingdom of God, and we partake of that by means of the Holy Spirit. If you are not born again, you are missing this whole new dimension. Christians have a living hope!

## II. A Future Hope: “Still But Not Yet”

Although we have a living hope, it is also a future hope. It is still yet to be, as Peter declares in verses 4-5: “[We] obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away; reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Though we feed on this life it is merely a taste of something yet to come. The Kingdom has already been inaugurated—it is now—but it is still yet future.

What exactly is this inheritance to be revealed at the last time? What are you and I going to possess? We are going to possess the life of God himself! And, Scripture goes on to say, not only is God our inheritance, but the saints are his inheritance. We are going to possess the life of God in the symphony of the saints of all time. This is not just an abstract thought. It is God’s love in all of its dimensions—its length and breadth and height and width—in all of his people whom you love.

I had a taste of this love earlier this year in Eastern Europe. During the first week, while we were camping, one of our team shared with our friends there that it was the love of Christ that brought him to God. About five years ago, he said, that love manifested itself in his room one night. He woke up and sensed the presence of Christ

in such an overwhelming way that he came to faith. He had never since had the same experience, he said.

As we continued teaching during the week, and our love for these people became even more intense because the police were hounding us all the time, when it was time for a number of them to leave, they shared with us words of appreciation that I will never forget. All of us were so overcome with emotion we were unable to speak. I said to my friend who had shared his testimony earlier, “You must say something.” Although he was weeping, he was able at last to say, “I have already said that when I came to Christ it was his love that led me to do this. Now I have experienced *love twice*.” The initial experience which he had face to face with Christ was now filled out in a symphony with these simple ones who loved him, and it was a far greater experience, filled out in the panoramic symphony of the saints. That is what heaven will be like.

Some morning we will all awake from our dark midnight, whether it be sickness, divorce, loneliness, an accident, whatever, and we will find ourselves standing by a stream in our resurrection bodies. We will hear Abraham speaking to his people. We will hear David singing. We will see the Lord descending from his throne. And we will see a prepared table stretching from east to west. That is when we will begin to comprehend the dimensions of the love of Christ.

So we have a living hope and a future hope.

There is a third dimension to our hope, says Peter.

### III. A Sure Hope

#### A. An Incorruptible Future

Notice the adjectives that the apostle uses to describe our future: it is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (it will not fade away). In the Old Testament, the land was the inheritance which God gave to his people. That was how they experienced the life of God. This is why the psalmists pleaded to be spared from death—because in death they would be separated from their physical inheritance, the land. Their desire was to continue to walk in the land of the living. But in the New Covenant we have an inheritance that cannot be taken away from us in death. It is imperishable.

And it is undefiled. Referring to their inheritance in the Old Testament, Moses warns the Israelites in Leviticus 18:27 to not defile the land by sinning. They did, of course, corrupt the land and the land spewed them out of its mouth. But our new inheritance is unspoiled and unstained by any taint of sin.

Finally, our new inheritance will not fade away. In her exile, Israel lost her land, but our inheritance is not a temporary thing; it is unimpaired by time. Abraham knew this. The writer to the Hebrews tells us Abraham knew that the land of Israel was merely a shadow of the heavenly land which was yet future. Here is what he says,

**By faith [Abraham] lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb 11:9-10)**

Ray Stedman is presently writing a commentary on Hebrews (actually, his first exegetical commentary for teachers). Here is what he says about this verse:

Abraham saw what John saw in Revelation: a city coming down from heaven on earth (Rev 21). That is what Abraham longed for;

an earth run after God’s order, where people would dwell together in peace, harmony, blessing, beauty and liberty. Because of that hope he was content to dwell his whole life in tents, looking for God’s fulfillment. Abraham shows us that faith seizes upon a revealed event and lives in anticipation of it...Once again we see the deliberate link between the visible and the invisible. The land of Canaan was a picture of the heavenly country which would be theirs by faith.<sup>1</sup>

This is the incorruptible future to which Peter is referring. As the apostle says later, in his second letter, “according to His promise we are looking for a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13).

#### B. A Secure Future

Secondly, says Peter, our future is secure. God protects it for us. It is, in the apostle’s words, “reserved in heaven for you.” As the executor of several estates I find it is very difficult to protect assets. Inflation, taxes and attorneys’ fees see to that. But there is none of that in heaven. Our inheritance is reserved; it is secure.

Not only that, but God protects those who are the recipients of this inheritance. Peter says that we “are protected by the power of God through faith.” Faith surrounds us like a military garrison to protect us until we meet the Lord in glory, and he brings the two together.

My wife’s mother and grandmother died in consecutive years and I became executor of both estates. The grandmother had land in Oklahoma that had been in the family since the Land Rush, and it was her desire that this whole section of wheat farms be passed down intact to her grandchildren. During the last ten years of her life she saved thousands upon thousands of dollars in savings accounts to pay the estate taxes upon her death, and she went to her grave feeling she had accomplished her goal to protect the family inheritance. As her executor, however, I soon discovered that the money she had saved did not even begin to meet the taxes demanded of the estate. In the end we had to sell all the farms in order to pay the Internal Revenue Service and the attorneys. There is nothing left of the inheritance of land which had been passed down through the generations.

The remaining monies were passed down to the two grandchildren, my wife and her sister. The sister took some of the money and began to spend it on cocaine. I had to step in to protect her life and her inheritance by setting up a trust fund so that she could not get her hands on the money. But it was too late. Her drug habit resulted in her contracting AIDS, and she died. Despite all my good intentions, I could preserve neither the inheritance nor the heirs. Ten days before this young woman died, however, as she lay on her death bed, two of my Christian brothers led her to Christ. Now everything is different and her hope is secure. God had preserved for her her inheritance in the new heavens and the new earth. No one could touch that. And he gave her a resurrection body. On that glorious day when she died she received her true inheritance because she had been born again.

What a blessed hope we have as we contemplate our secure future! The implications for us are clear: We ought to live with abandon! Let us stop worrying about material and physical things and invest instead in the new heavens and the new earth “where rust and moth do not destroy.” I was rebuked in Eastern Europe when I realized how much I possess and yet how little I risk for Jesus. I was with people who had very little, yet they risked everything for him. Although nationals are forbidden to have contact with foreigners, the family

I stayed with had shared their food with an American missionary who was in the hospital there because the food he was receiving was so bad. Although the police caught them, they did not care about the risk they were taking but every day faithfully brought this man a meal. They were not investing in this life but in the New Jerusalem. Then I came to stay with this family although they already had a reputation for befriending foreigners. I remained with them for a week and they fed me and loved me at great risk to themselves. They got caught again but they did not care. Their faith overcame any fear they might have had. Let us live with abandon like these brothers and sisters!

Cast your eyes on your ultimate destination, says Peter. What an important word to take to heart by those who are about to undergo intense persecution! Look to the new heavens and new earth, with all of their beauty and glory. Look beyond the veil of this life and see the absolute certainty of heavenly realities. This living hope will stabilize your wavering soul, and sharpen your appetite for the world to come.

This then is the Christian's hope: a living hope, a future hope, and a secure hope. What does God ask of us in return?

## IV. Our Response: Singing Before Dawn

### A. Bless God: Appreciation for Mercy

Our text today opens with the words “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again”; and it ends in verse 6 with the words, “in this you greatly rejoice...” God began a whole new cosmic creation for us. What did we contribute to this marvelous work? Nothing, except our sin, which put Jesus Christ on the cross. What moved God to set all of this in motion was his great heart of mercy shown to every one of us. In the Scriptures, mercy and loyal love are the basis of all God's actions in salvation history. Though he is mighty and sovereign, his heart is easily moved to come to our aid because of our helplessness in order that he might fulfill his covenantal love towards us. This is why he sets all of this in motion. In Psalm 40, the king writes,

**He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay;**

**And He set my feet upon a rock, making my footsteps firm.**

**And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God...**

**Thou, O Lord, wilt not withhold Thy *compassion* from me;**

**Thy [*loyal love*] and Thy truth will continually preserve me.**

(Ps 40:2, 3, 11)

### B. Rejoice In God

All that God wants is appreciation from us in return for the marvelous things which he has done for us. Bless God. Thank him and sing to him with joy before the dawn.

In *Dead Poets Society*, the theme “Seize the day” was the professor's constant reminder to his students. One boy determined to do just that by going into the theater. He took the leading role in a play by Shakespeare and met with great success. But the young man's father coerced him into leaving the stage because he saw no future in it for him. There was nothing but death on the horizon for this young man. In order to “seize the day,” he felt he had no option but to take his own life. He committed suicide to make his life meaningful.

But Peter gives these Christians a new horizon, beyond the veil of death, a salvation so glorious—and guaranteed—that it evokes joy inexpressible and full of glory, even in the midst of persecution. A true, heartfelt understanding of this gift ought to bring resounding choruses of praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing moves our hearts more than when people take the time to tell us we are appreciated. Nothing moves the heart of God more than when we take time to tell him we appreciate him.

I want to close this morning by sharing with you the most valuable gift I brought out of Eastern Europe. The leader of the denomination we were sharing with, who had written 10,000 poems to Jesus while he was imprisoned for his faith, died a few months before we got there this year. We received a copy of the last poem which he wrote shortly before his death, and I want to read that to you now. This poem actually celebrates an incident in the apostle Peter's life, the time when Peter was in a boat out on the lake of Galilee and he saw Jesus standing on the shore. Here is what this man wrote in his own hand before he died.

### I SEE YOU ON THE SHORE

I see you on the shore,

I have yet to walk,

But you wait for me there,

My sorrow to break

In sweet verse of my heart.

You come on the cloud,

The storm is heavy,

My boat I have pushed into the white waters

Victoriously,

My love sings for You.

You rise up leading

The Universe

The histories below,

I know, soon

The divine walking

Will be at an end.

Fellow pilgrims, keep your eyes on the horizon and you will see Jesus on the shore.

1. Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews* (IVP New Testament Commentary; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 124, 126.