

From the Pulpit of the Japanese Baptist Church of North Texas
July 3, 2016

Journey to Heaven

1 Peter 2:11-12

2:11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

2:12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

1. Home in Heaven

A long time ago, a church hosted a guest gospel singer, Yasuhiro Oda. It was in the afternoon gathering and people started to sing hymns and an old Japanese song “*Furusato* (my old home)”. There were many people living in America far way from Japan for a long time. When they sang “*Furusato*”, tears were on their eyes. Mr. Oda was joking, “You never cry when you sing hymns but you have tears when you sing ‘*Furusato*’? Are you truly Christians?” However, he knew how why they cried. Everyone has their own old home and the special feeling for it. In such a situation where you live in a foreign country far away from your home and cannot return easily, it is natural that you feel homesick.

Today’s reading says, “you as sojourners and exiles”. 1 Peter was addressed to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus,

Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia”. These people were persecuted because of their faith and literally became sojourners and exiles. But in verse 11, Peter addresses “sojourners and exiles” not only to the people living in foreign countries but also to all the Christians.

“Sojourners and exiles” sounds pretty sad, but those who believe in Jesus Christ are God’s people and children of God, who are born in Heaven and their citizenship is in heaven. If we understand that heaven is our home and we come from heaven and return to heaven, then we are not lonely any more even if we are “sojourners and exiles” on this earth, because we are strengthened by the clear purpose of returning to heavenly home.

However, to do so, we have to believe in “heaven” as a real place. Is heaven real to you or is it just a word? As you have affections to the place where you are born, do you feel the same for heaven? How can we make it real and certain for us?

We can achieve this through experiencing the salvation by Jesus Christ. Those who believe in Jesus Christ know the joy of being free of sins. They share the experience of being transferred from dark to light, death to life. The salvation by Jesus Christ is not at a secular level, such as simply being lucky or psychologically feel better. Salvation is accomplished by the power from heaven. It is a big change that takes place in heaven. Lord Jesus says, “There will be more joy in heaven over sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:7) Truly, those who believe in Jesus Christ have this joy, through which they know heaven. Lord Jesus also says, “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10:21) If you don’t feel certain about heaven, then

you cannot experience the assurance of salvation that your names are written in heaven.

The reason why believers are certain about heaven is that Lord is there in heaven. Lord came from heaven and returned to heaven. Lord promised us when he returned to heaven, “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (John 14:2-3) Because Lord is there, we are certain about heaven. We seek for the place where our Lord resides.

2. Walk on Earth

“Heaven” is for real. There is the citizenship of the believers, and their names are written down for sure. The believers are allowed to taste the joy of heaven even on earth; but they are still living on this world not in heaven. It’s very difficult for those who were born in heaven to live in the secular world. If they try to live straightforward, on every corner they got some troubles. In order to keep eternal way whereas everything is changing along with the generations, they will be abandoned. People would not understand the way to call for the invisible God, because in the assemblages or society, there is the power to push out something different. In every generation and society, the truthful believers are always recognized as “sojourners”, “exiles”, or “gentiles”.

In verse 11, it says, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul,” which means it is right to be sojourners and exiles. It rather

teaches that we should be the sojourners and exiles. The people of flesh follow the frame of flesh, and lives in the rules of flesh. On the other hand, the believers, who are sojourners and exiles in this world, don't have to follow the desire of flesh. Moreover, they shall have to avoid the things against God's will.

Even though we are believers, we sometimes are attracted by earthly things. For the temporary pleasure, or being outstanding, they might have the rough choice and be swallowed up by the world. The believers cannot forget that they were saved through Jesus Christ and connected to heaven. Whatever happens, they remember that in consciousness. So, if they were pulled in temptations, their minds got conflict and feel pain. However, if they keep soaking themselves in the world, and serving both God and the world at the same time, the conflict and pain are getting away. It is most dangerous for the believers. We need to make up our minds to follow God.

Christians are saved already. They could taste the joy and peace that came from the forgiveness of sin. In this world, however, sins still exist. They might be defeated by the sins of themselves, or involved in the sins of others, or bound in the sins of society. So, unless we are raised, the war of faith keep being waged. Christians yet don't give up seeking salvation and sanctification from sin. Because they have the hope that we will be completely saved from sin when we return heaven. This hope supports the believers, and we shall open our eyes through the hope of heaven.

In verse 12, it teaches another thing about the walk of believers in this world. It says, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your

good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” Here, the word, “gentiles” means those who not have faith yet. Christians were called sojourners, exiles or gentiles by people not believe. They were abandoned by the world, spoken that “they are not our fellows.” However, in the Bible, those who don’t believe in Jesus Christ are marked as “gentiles” and the believers are the people of God.

The reason why the Bible calls non-Christians “gentiles” is not to make Christians to be boast of themselves and disrespect those who are not yet believers. It teaches for the people of God, Christians, the responsibilities on the people not yet believe in Jesus Christ. The responsibility is to testify Heaven by the honorable conduct. So, what is the “honorable conduct”? Is it something to be outstanding or calling attentions? If so, not many people will achieve that. There is no such thing honorable other than faith, to live as the people of God in this world. This is the testimony for people not yet believe. To live as sojourners, exiles or gentiles by themselves, and to testify God, is identical. Believers live as believers. This is the most important testimony.

3. Construction

Finally, let’s learn that the believers’ journey to he is the pilgrimage journey. Every religion has its own pilgrimage journey to the Holy Land. For Christians, the Holy Land is Israel especially Jerusalem where we can find the trace of Lord Jesus. From the ancient time, people have pilgrimaged to Jerusalem. However, Lord Jesus does not stay in Jerusalem. He stays in heaven. The believers should aim to go to the Holy Place of heaven, not the Holy Land. The Christians go on

a journey in order to see face to face with Lord Jesus in heaven.

One of the definitions for “Church” is “the crowd of pilgrims to heaven.” In the US especially Texas which is known as “the buckle of the Bible belt”, the churches are rooted in the society strongly, and we tend to forget that the church is on the pilgrimage to heaven. But the church is not the group of people who settle in this world. Moreover, the purpose of the church is not growing bigger for herself. The church shows and leads the people to heaven, not shows herself to them. On the roof of the church building, you can find the small tower standing to the sky, which is called steeple. The steeple is there to show the heaven to people. Therefore, no matter what kinds of activities the churches do or how close relationships are, there is no meaning for having the steeple if we do not share the grace of God that is in heaven, and not encourage our pilgrimage journey to heaven each other.

The worship service every Sunday is the milestone of the pilgrimage and the Lord’s Supper every month is the meal of the stage. We get closer to heaven by repeating the worship service and Lord’s Supper. We watch heaven and make sure our destination of our journey through worshiping on earth. We receive the power for the pilgrimage journey from the Lord’s Supper. Therefore, we say in the order of the Lord’s Supper, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:26). Through the Lord’s Supper, we wait the completion of salvation as well as remembering the salvation the Lord achieved on the cross. The complete salvation will happen “when Lord comes back”.

“You proclaim the Lord’s death.” The meaning of “to proclaim” could be “to preach”. In the Lord’s Supper, there are not many words. However, the Lord’s Supper itself tells us boldly about the Lord on the cross, the resurrection, and the second coming of the Lord. We started to go on the pilgrimage journey again. During the journey, we should tell what we have heard about the Lord to people on the road. The way, more people will be joined to the pilgrimage to heaven. We are “sojourners and exiles.” We have to know and be aware who we are. Let get started to go on the journey to heaven, from this time of worship and the Lord’s Supper.

(Prayer)

Dear father in heaven, we are the sojourners and exiles in this world. Though we are not able to understand heaven with our sense, lead us to receive this fact by faith. Then, please give us deeper desire of seeking for the hometown in heaven. By the Lord’s Supper, which you prepared for us, strengthen us and help us to move forward to the hometown in heaven joyfully. In the name of Lord Jesus, Amen.