

March 13, 2016

Sojourners

Fighting for Your Soul to the Glory of God

1 Peter 2:11 – 12

For you who believe, Christ, is precious. He is the living stone, choice and precious in the sight of God. He is precious because He is the initiator and the perfecter and the sustainer of our faith. He is precious because believing in Him we can't lose. He is precious because we were once not a people, but now we are the people of God through His mercy. We were stumbling and lost in darkness and now have been brought into His marvelous light. We are a chosen, kingly, priestly, holy possession of God. We are all this, Peter says, that we may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. Is Jesus the precious cornerstone to you? This is what the world needs to hear – Why He is so precious to me. We have been called for this purpose – **to declare the great worth of Christ to the people still stumbling in darkness.** That is the mission. That is what we are called to do as living stones in the house of God – to bring people into the worship of this precious cornerstone.

Now right after Peter unveils our mission in the world, he tells us that the success of that mission will be affected to a large degree on the outcome of a personal battle we all fight. Peter says there is a war going on and he calls it a war against the soul. And it is a war in which the glory of God hangs in the balance. This is not an insignificant thing. This isn't just about winning the battle against unholy desires for the sake of personal holiness. The glory of God is at stake. The whole thrust of Peter's thought here is that the behavior and conduct of the people of God would actually point unbelievers to God; and there is something waging a war to see that fail; and if we are not engaged in the war, God does not get any glory. I love what John Piper says about what it means to glorify God: ***God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.*** You see when people see that your greatest satisfaction and your highest joy is God Himself, that not only makes much of God, gives Him glory, but it points people to God.

First of all, Peter appeals to his readers on the basis of who they are: *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles.* **Sojourners**, or aliens was a term used to describe someone living in a country that was not their homeland, without any of the rights afforded real citizens of the country. It is how we might describe an illegal immigrant today. **Exiles**, or strangers is a term Peter has already used in chapter one to describe someone living in another country legally, but temporarily. It is how we might describe the status of an international student from another country who comes to study at an American university. And Peter says, 'Beloved of God, I urge you as aliens and strangers...' What is Peter saying? Why is he appealing to their status as aliens and strangers?

I think Peter is making the connection for them to the father of faith, Abraham, who described himself as an alien and stranger in the land when he went to buy a burial plot for Sarah in Genesis 23. In her commentary on 1 Peter, Karen Jobes says, "*With the allusion to Abraham, [Peter] reminds his readers that they stand in a long tradition of people who were chosen by God and called to be aliens and strangers in the places where they lived.*"¹ In other words, the people of God are by design supposed to see themselves as different from the culture around them. They're not supposed to make themselves comfortable in the culture or consider themselves at home. We're to consider ourselves as temporary visitors to another country, or illegal immigrants who might be living here, but our hearts belong to our home country. We live in the world, but we are not of the world. Our motivations are different. Our goals are different. Our living is different as aliens and strangers. Peter is linking these believers, and us, with all those who have gone before in this life of faith, living as aliens and strangers in the world.

He says, *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.* Peter says '*There's a war going on against your soul, and it is coming from your flesh, and I want you to fight it like aliens and strangers*'. The obvious reference was to the way in which aliens and strangers interacted with the culture in which they were living. Because they were either temporary visitors, or alien residents, they either could not or would not fully participate in the customs and practices of the host country.

1 Karen Jobes, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 1 Peter, (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Mich, 2005), 168.

In many respects, they kept themselves separate from the culture, even while they were living in the culture. Peter's readers were living in cultures that were strange and unfamiliar and even hostile to them. Peter called his readers *the elect exiles of the dispersion* in chapter one. In other words they had been dispersed from their homeland to live as aliens and strangers in some other country. They found themselves in places where they didn't share the same values or morals or beliefs as the majority of people, and they abstained from participation. Christians found themselves living in cultures that threw away unwanted babies, and they abstained from doing that. They lived among people that practiced ritual sex with temple prostitutes and they abstained from that. There were enormous pressures on these Christians to conform to the culture around them and they resisted.

And Peter tells them, *'Just like you abstain from certain things as aliens and strangers, do that with the passions of the flesh that are at war with your soul. Don't get comfortable with those things. Don't cave in to the pressures of unbridled desires. Battle it like aliens and strangers'*. You see, there is a war being waged at the deepest level for the domination of our souls and the glory of God, and it is far more serious and deadly than any war we face in the physical realm. It is a battle that must be won. Your soul is at stake. Jesus said, *'What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and lose his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?'* [Luke 16:26] And the glory of God is at stake. Peter says the goal of our good and godly behavior among the Gentiles is that they would see the glory of God. So this is really important.

Peter pinpoints the location of the assault – it comes from the flesh to attack the soul. *'passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul'*. Other translations use the word *lust*. The word translated *passions* or *lust* here is actually a morally and ethically neutral word. That is, the word itself, *epithumia*, carries no connotations of good or evil. It simply means *desire, longing, or craving*. The same word is used in Philippians 1 where Paul confesses to a *'passion [or longing] to depart and to be with Christ.'* And Jesus uses this word to describe the great desire He had to eat the final Passover with His disciples, - *'Epithumia, epethumeo, I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you...'* And I don't think anyone would say having passions like those is a bad thing. Just to have passion, or a desire or longing is not necessarily a sinful thing. We **need** to lust after the things of God, we **need** to lust after more wisdom and knowledge of God, we **need** have a passion for Christ. C.S. Lewis pointed out that the problem is not passion or lust, it is misdirected passion, misdirected lust. *'We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he can not imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.'*

So the problem is not simply desire, or lust, but rather the problem is the focus and the object of that lust. And here Peter says to abstain from **fleshly lusts** – that is, abstain from those desires that are rooted in satisfying yourself by illegitimate means. *Passions of the flesh* paints a picture of unrestrained indulgence directed at pleasing yourself. And these are the desires that are waging a war against our souls. The Bible tells us that we have three main enemies in our lives – the world, the flesh and the devil. And the object of each one of these is the **destruction** of our souls and an assault on the glory of God. Peter has already reminded us in chapter 1 that the object of our faith in Christ is the **salvation** of our souls to the glory of God.

This is a battle over your soul. In other words, Peter is saying here, *'You have come to Christ as the living stone; you're a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people of God who have received His mercy so that you might bear witness of His grace and goodness. And you need to know there are enemies of your soul that are looking to corrupt you and render you ineffective and useless in this mission; so you need to fight for your soul.'* Life is war – and our soul is the scene of one of the great battlefields. One of our most implacable enemies lives in our flesh and all of its energy is directed at the destruction of our souls. To paraphrase a quote, *'We have met the enemy and he is in us.'*

In the beginning, God created man perfect, spirit, soul and body in perfect union and harmony with God and each other. But something happened on both a spiritual and physical level when we chose to go our own way and rebelled against God. What happened was that sin entered the equation. Paul tells us in Romans 5: *'Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all have sinned.'* [Romans 5:12] And sin not only entered into the world, it entered into us – death spread to all men because sin spread to all men. Sin came in and took up residence in the body, and as result death comes to all men. In chapter 6 Paul speaks about our body of sin and how the cross deals with that. And in chapter seven he talks about the sin that lives in us and his personal battle with it and ends crying out, *'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?'* [Romans 7:24]

Paul recognized that there is a resident sin living in our bodies that gives rise to desires that are at war with our souls. And it is these sinful destructive desires we have originating from within that Peter calls the **passions of the flesh**. These are the strong, man-exalting, God-dishonoring, self-pleasure-promoting desires that seek to rule us. These are desires that do not have as their object the glory of God, but the pleasure of the individual. Paul talks about this battle of desires in Galatians 5: *For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.* And then Paul goes on to list the **expression** of those desires if left unchecked: *immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry,[making God in our image] sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

You see, things like immorality and idolatry and strife and jealousy and anger and drunkenness and all the rest, are expressions of the unchecked desires of our sinful flesh. What makes it sinful, is not so much the expression as the fact that your desires rule you. It is saying, 'I want something so much that I'll break the rules to get it. I want my own way so much that I don't care what God says'. It is saying 'I want this so much that I'll do anything to get it'. It can be good, legitimate desires that become what some commentators label as **unbridled** desires. That is a desire that has become a fixation so to speak. It is a desire that controls you and bursts the boundaries of what is proper and good and it consumes you. It promises satisfaction and fulfillment, but what it really does is work to destroy your soul.

And Peter's solution to this is really very simple. 'Just stop it'. 'Abstain from fleshly lusts' he says. I looked this up in the Greek lexicon and the word translated abstain actually means abstain. I looked this word up in the English dictionary as well and found that abstain means to 'refrain oneself from doing or enjoying something, as in abstaining from chocolate'. Really, that's what it said. And right away everyone's thinking, 'O great, God doesn't want us to have any fun. I knew Christians were joy-killers'. But that isn't what Peter is talking about at all. He is saying, '*Refrain from indulging those fleshly lusts because although they promise the world, they'll end up wrecking your world. Don't give in to their seductive lies. Abstain. Refrain. Just don't. Trust that the promises of God are worth more than the promises of your desires*'.

In his book "The Great Divorce," C.S. Lewis gives an allegorical story about a ghost of a man consumed by lust who is venturing out of hell and visiting heaven. And lust is depicted as a red lizard that sits on his shoulder and whispers seductively in his ear. Occasionally, the man would snarl at the lizard and tell it to shut up and stop. But in the end, the man would inevitably do whatever the lizard asked him to do. The lizard eventually persuades the man to turn around and go back to hell. As he's leaving heaven, the ghost is confronted by a massive, flaming angel. The angel asks the ghost for permission to kill the lizard but he hesitates and starts making excuses. But after a long and revealing conversation, the ghost admits that the lizard is ruining his life and gives the angel permission to kill it. Instantly, the flaming angel snatches the lizard, breaks its neck and hurls it to the ground. Believing he'll die without the lizard, the ghost gasps and falls backwards. But now that the spell of lust is broken the man who was once a ghost is wonderfully remade into a real and solid person. And the interesting thing is that instead of dying, the lizard is changed into a spectacular stallion. With great tears of joy and appreciation the man gets on the horse and rides off into the heavens.

What C.S. Lewis was trying show here is really profound. The ghost wanted to be free of the lizard, and yet he couldn't. And here Peter says, 'The way to be free is to abstain'. The way to deal with these fleshly lusts is to abstain from them. You see, on our own, we can't deal with them. We have to let the flaming angel deal with them. In other words we refrain from indulging them, and allow God to break their necks. How do we do that, you ask? Well, first of all we have to realize that we cannot make peace with this enemy, we can't come to terms with this enemy, we can't ignore this enemy – the only solution is to kill this enemy. I'm sure that's what the great Puritan theologian had in mind when he said, '*Be killing sin or it will be killing you*'. So how does that happen? How do we kill those unbridled passions? The answer is you kill it like you kill anything else. You deprive it of life-sustaining ingredients. Want to kill a fish? Take it out of the water. Want to kill plants? Block the sunlight. Deprive whatever you're looking to kill of its life-sustaining ingredients. That's what abstaining does. Abstain from fleshly lusts and watch them die.

But don't make the mistake of thinking that this is some religious aesthetic practice of self-denial. You can't abstain if you don't have the power to abstain. On the one hand we need to *not* listen to the seductive voice of the red lizard, but we also need someone to wring its neck. And this can't happen if you don't belong to Christ. Listen to Paul as he writes to the Romans in chapter eight: *'For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.'* [Romans 8:13-14] And he prefaces that with *'So then brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh to live according to the flesh...'* [Romans 8:12]

You see, there are only two types of people in this world – those who are obligated to the flesh, and those who are not. There are those who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the Spirit. And the only ones capable of abstaining from fleshly desires are those who belong to God. If you have come to Christ, you've been made alive to God, and the ruling center of your being is now the Spirit of God. Instead of being ruled by the passions of the flesh, you are under the control of the Holy Spirit. And Paul says that we are no longer under obligation to live according to the passions of the flesh. That is, we now have a choice, will we follow the urgings of fleshly lusts, or will we be led by the Spirit of God? And the leading of the Spirit of God here is not some esoteric, mystical practice, or monastic aeteticism. What the Spirit of God leads you to do is to abstain.

As believers, we now have within, both the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit. The Spirit of God within the believer is actively engaged in opposition to the lusts that are within the flesh. It is telling us to abstain. Don't go there. Stop it. The lusts of the flesh are trying to turn our souls, our mind, emotions and will in one direction, and the Holy Spirit of God is working to turn us in the other. The question is, 'Do you have the Holy Spirit resident in you? Is He now your center of control? Are you abstaining or indulging? This is the difference between those who have been reborn to new life in Christ and those who have not. Those who have not, really have no choice but to be led by the desires of the flesh. Christians are those who are continually putting to death those passions and desires that spring from the flesh.

If you are a Christian, if the Spirit of God lives in you, you live with great hope. You are no longer part of this world, but you have been set apart for God. You live as an alien and stranger here. You are no longer under the control of your ungodly passions and desires, you are not a slave to sin, you do not have to give in to sexual lusts, outbursts of anger, depression, hatred, jealousy, and all the other expressions of fleshly lusts – but rather, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you can abstain. Don't tell me that you are a Christian, and then say that you just can't control your anger, or lust for pornography, or your thought life, or your sharp tongue – that is not biblical. Either you are a Christian and the Holy Spirit is in control – or you are not and your lusts are in control. Both cannot be true. One of our great problems is that we do not really believe the Scriptures – we don't really think that the Bible has the answers for our issue.

In his second letter, Peter tells us that the word of God is more than sufficient for all our issues: *'...seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.'* [2 Peter 1:3-4] God is not inadequate and His word is all-inclusive. There are no questions for which He has no answers; there are no circumstances that baffle Him or cause Him to rethink His position; there are no issues you have that He cannot bring resolution. There are no battles He cannot win and He has given to us everything necessary for success in our fight – the problem is never with God – He stands ready to deliver when we call on Him.

In the story of the man and the red lizard of lust, Lewis was also making another profound statement. In the story the man is afraid that the death of his lust will be the death of him. And yet he makes an incredible discovery. Once the lizard's neck is broken, he comes to life as it were. He's no longer a ghostly outline, but he's made into a real and solid person. And the lust he was protecting that was wrecking his life and leading him to hell, was remade into legitimate desire. *"Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering, whispering thing compared with that richness and energy of desire which will arise when lust has been killed."* Instead of giving into desires that are off limits, we begin to experience a pure desire. A God-centered desire, which is birthed in us to experience the greatest joy possible. The joy that comes from knowing that God isn't just saving us from our sin, but that He is up to something far more profound. God is in the process of saving our souls for a life of love and joy and peace and self-control that reflect His glory.

Because this is not only a battle for your soul, but a battle for the glory of God. *Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.* If in our desires we do not glorify God, He stands diminished in the eyes of those who watch us. If we live our lives without pointing to the glory of God, then we've wasted our lives. The goal of abstaining from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul is that God would be magnified in us and others would be won to His goodness. The goal of good and godly behavior among the Gentiles is that they would see the glory of God and make much of Him as well. Our lives are meant to magnify God. This doesn't mean that we somehow make Him big – what could we do to make the limitless God any bigger? It means that we magnify Him the same way a telescope magnifies those tiny pinpricks of light we call stars and suddenly we see how impossibly huge and awesome they really are.

If the unbelievers around us observe the same fleshly lusts being expressed in our lives as they do in the world – why would they ever glorify God? One of the most powerful proofs that Jesus Christ is Lord is lives that have been radically transformed. One of the great reasons we need to fight for our souls against the lusts of the flesh is so that God would be glorified in us by our lives making much of Him in the world. The great Scottish preacher Alexander MacLaren said, *"The world takes its notions of God, most of all, from the people who say that they belong to God's family. They read us a great deal more than they read the Bible. They see us; they only hear about Jesus Christ"*² Jesus told His disciples, *"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven"* [Matthew 5:16]

During World War II, missionaries Herb and Ruth Clingen and their young son spent three years in a Japanese prison camp in the Philippines. In his diary Herb recorded that their captors murdered, tortured, and starved to death many of their fellow prisoners. The camp commandant, Konishi, was hated and feared more than the others. Herb writes, *"Konishi found an inventive way to abuse us even more. He increased the food ration but gave us palay--unhusked rice. Eating the rice with its razor-sharp outer shell would cause intestinal bleeding that would kill us in hours. We had no tools to remove the husks, and doing the job manually--by pounding the grain or rolling it with a heavy stick--consumed more calories than the rice would supply. It was a death sentence for all internees"*³

The Clingens and the other survivors were rescued from certain death when General Douglas MacArthur and his forces liberated them from captivity. That very day Konishi had planned to gun down all the remaining prisoners. Years later Herb and Ruth *"learned that Konishi had been found working as a grounds keeper at a Manila golf course. He was put on trial for his war crimes and hanged. Before his execution he professed conversion to Christianity, saying he had been deeply affected by the testimony of the Christian missionaries he had persecuted"*⁴ Konishi saw the way these Christians lived and the way they died and it worked to bring him finally to repentance and eternal life. One of the most powerful pictures of this is found in Mark chapter 15. Jesus had been beaten and hung on the cross, and He had just breathed His last breath and died, and Mark records the scene around the cross at that moment: *"And when the centurion, who stood facing Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'"* [Mark 15:35] When people around see the way we live, and the way we die, treasuring Christ more than anything, when they see our greatest joy and satisfaction is God Himself, their eyes are opened to His greatness and beauty and God is glorified.

*Our gracious Father and God,
Have mercy on us in this fight for our soul and Your glory. Grant us strength to abstain from the deadly delights of lust. Oh how we cherish the victories You give. Let us live there more and more. Grant us the will and desire to say no to every temptation that would seduce us away from all that pleases You. Help us fight for holiness and give us the heart to make war on our impurities. Show us the infinite and all-satisfying glory of the crucified Christ. Let us know Your greatness and worth and glory and grace and power that staggers our hearts and leads us to repentance. May we so delight ourselves in You that sin loses its appeal and we are consumed by Your glory. Let us live as those who have been made glad in God and live to make others glad in You we pray in the sin-conquering name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.*

2 Alexander MacClaren, First and Second Peter and First John (N.Y.: Eaton and Maines, 1910), 105.

3 Herb and Ruth Clingen, "Song of Deliverance," *Masterpiece* [Spring 1989]:12.

4 Ibid, 13.