

1 Peter 2:11-17

How have you felt listening to the news this week? In addition to the ongoing horrors in Ukraine and the Middle East, there is now potential regime change or massacre in Iran, the Venezuelan president abducted by America, and President Trump threatening to annexe Greenland. Most of us are used to living in a relatively peaceful world, but the world order we may have thought was secure seems to be shaking and crumbling around us. Here are some of the words John Simpson wrote in an article a couple of days ago:

“I’ve reported on more than 40 wars around the world But I’ve never seen a year as worrying as 2025 has been ... Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenski has warned that the current conflict in his country could escalate into a world war. After 60 years of observing conflict, I’ve got a nasty feeling he’s right.”

What does that leave us feeling? Fear, anxiety, bewilderment? Could it be that in our lifetime we will find ourselves living under a brutal totalitarian state, possibly with all the props that make our current lives comfortable stripped away?

Before we get too depressed, let’s have a look at our passage today and see if it has anything to speak into this situation.

Those of you have been coming to these Valley Worship services recently will know that we have been working through Peter’s 1st Letter. and we have now reached a sort of pivot point in the book, where Peter is about to show us how, what he has been teaching us about God, works out in practice.

If we look at v.11, he is speaking to those who are “Dear friends”, or “Dearly beloved by God” as the more accurate translation reads, but who are also foreigners and exiles, those living temporarily in a hostile world, rather than in their real home.

Where is home for you? Some of us have lived in this valley for a long time and probably see it as home. For others, home is far away, maybe across the ocean. For a long time, even when I lived in London, if asked, I would say home was Scotland where I grew up. Then when I lived in America with John, home was England and now it is this valley.

But Peter is reminding us that this world is not our true home, it is not where we belong. If we are Christians, we have been adopted into God's family and our true home is with him, in heaven, the sphere where God dwells not up there in the sky somewhere.

As we know from reading Psalm 100 earlier, God made us and we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. That is where we belong. Home is where he is.

That's why we don't need to be afraid when we look at the state of this world and all the horrors going on around us, when we lose our health, our money or even our houses, when we see our aging bodies letting us down more and more. This world is just our temporary home, it is not our true home and God has promised right at the end of the Bible that the time is coming when there will be no more pain or sadness or death.

But! Peter doesn't just want to reassure us; he also has a strong warning for us to hear. He says "I urge you" – a strong word meaning I plead with you, I entreat you, "to abstain from sinful desires which wage war against your soul".

He is not saying that all desire is wrong. Desires are God-given and good as long as they are healthy desires. But desires can also be corrupted and led astray by sin and then they become unhealthy.

What are sinful desires and where do they come from? Sin is really that part of us which is bent away from God and from obedience to his will and which thinks it can do better on its own, without him.

From this sinful, self-centred nature which is deep in every human being, come all sorts of desires. We can find many lists of them in the bible – sexual immorality, pride, greed, envy, slander, idolatry, hatred, witchcraft, adultery and all sorts of others. It may be tempting to look at the lists of the worst ones and think we are off the hook but, if we are honest, what about those times when we find ourselves gossiping about someone else, or realise we are holding onto unforgiveness when someone has hurt us, or being envious of what belongs to another. These ugly desires are always there lurking whenever we decide that what would benefit us is more important than genuinely loving and respecting another person or obeying God.

I caught myself in a classic one yesterday. We have a farm at Twyford and if we find people walking round the fields we stop them and ask them to go back to the footpath so they don't damage the crops. But yesterday I climbed over a padlocked gate in this valley and walked round a beautiful sunny field with my dogs because it looked so irresistible – what hypocrisy! Judging others but letting myself off the hook.

Sin is easiest to understand if we imagine making the “I” in the middle into a big capital letter – I am what is important, I am at the centre, my needs are what count.

It is not surprising that Peter says that these sinful desires are waging war against our souls. But later in this book, he goes on to explain another side to the battle. 1 Peter 5:8-9a:

“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him.”

In addition to the unseen battle going on inside us, we have a spiritual enemy, who the bible calls the devil, the tempter, the accuser, who is constantly trying to draw us away from God and to lead us back into bondage to sin and to guilt. Throughout history he has been trying to stop people from believing in God and then once they do believe in him, trying to disrupt their relationship with God. Then when Jesus was crucified and died, what could have been the enemy's biggest victory turned into his ultimate defeat as the sinless Jesus rose victorious from the dead setting us free from our bondage to sin and disarming the devil's power over us.

So, when we feel that struggle going on inside what do we do? Peter says “Resist the devil” and “Abstain from sinful desires”. In other words, say No. The trouble is that anyone who has tried to give up cigarettes or alcohol or even eating to excess knows how hard it is to say no. That is why God has given us his Holy Spirit to help us.

Galatians 5:16 says “Walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh”.

This means that the key to resisting temptation is not just to say No to sin it is saying Yes to the Spirit, and submitting to him, walking with him daily and asking him to lead us away from sin and into freedom.

I failed dismally at saying No on Tuesday. I had set aside a clear day to concentrate on writing this talk but at about 8am I couldn't resist checking my phone for messages and then kept thinking I would just deal with one more thing, then another and before I knew it, at 4.30pm I had wasted the whole day responding to messages. I kept sitting down to work on the talk and then tapping my phone once more just to see if there was an important notification showing. There always was but all of them could have waited till later. Why do I so often allow that little phone to control me?

The battle was won when I sat down in a chair, without my phone, relaxed, and spent some time enjoying God's presence and trying to tune into what he might want to say to me or show me. He is far nicer to hang out with than that lump of metal which is constantly distracting me with its notifications and demands for speedy answers to messages. For the rest of this week I have learned that when my phone is constantly interrupting what I am doing or my mind fills up with other distractions, the best thing I can do is to retreat to a quiet place on my own and just spend five or ten minutes with God, allowing him to sort of recalibrate me so I am tuned in to him and his presence again.

I mentioned at the beginning that v. 11 is a sort of pivot point in this book before Peter goes into more practical application so let's now look at what sort of lives he is going to urge us to live.

In v. 12 he reminds us that part of the reason we are to live good lives is because it brings glory to God when we do. Even though people might persecute us for our faith, as they did Peter, when we live godly lives eventually that will lead to God being praised.

Then from v.13 he goes on to talk about the fact that we should submit for the Lord's sake, to every human authority. When we think of the state and authorities, I expect we think of our pretty benevolent society where Peter might be suggesting we keep to the speed limit or be very honest when filling in our tax returns. What about Christians living in oppressive states today? To what extent are we meant to always submit to the authorities, whether benevolent or harsh? Peter was writing this during

the reign of Nero who was a cruel and brutal tyrant who was persecuting the Christians and under whose reign Peter would shortly be martyred himself. What if our equivalent of Nero is a Hitler or a Putin? Do we have still have to submit to him?

Peter explains here in v.14 that the authorities have a God-given role to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. But our overall allegiance must always be to God and so when a human authority defies what he has established or commanded then we need to obey God rather than them. We could sum up v.16 by saying that genuine freedom is the freedom to serve God, exercised under law.

There are three stories in the book of Acts which demonstrate this well. In the first two, Acts 5 and Acts 12, the authorities have put the apostles in prison but during the night an angel goes into the prison and leads them out through locked doors. Then in Acts 16, when Peter and Silas are in prison, there is an earthquake and the prison doors fly open but God has not told the apostles to leave so they stay put. As a result, the jailer and his whole family believe in Jesus.

Peter finishes in v. 17 with a great little summary of what mutual submission looks like. We are to respect every human being, to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, to fear God and to honour the emperor. Note the different levels of obligation there – we give respect and honour to people in general and to the governing authorities but we are to have a deep love for our family in Christ and above all we are to fear God. Not fear the enemy or the state or even the world situation but fear the one who stands high above all of them.

Where does today's passage leave us? What might we each carry into next week? For me I think it prompts me to remember three things:

1. Firstly, to remember where my true home is and invest in it more than in this world. To carve out time daily to dwell in God's presence.
2. Secondly, not to forget that I am caught up in a very real battle and to keep asking the Holy Spirit to help me to win it
3. Lastly, I want to remember this week that the world is watching and that how I behave will affect what the world thinks of God. It is his reputation which is at stake.

What about you? Is there one thing you could take away today as your priority this week? One thing you think Peter might urge you to do?

Might there even be some here who know they do want to know the security of having that eternal home, of knowing they belong to God as a certain hope not just a wishful thought.

Or perhaps you feel caught up in a battle at the moment and want the Holy Spirit to help you.

There are many people here who would love to talk and pray through these things with you so do come forward at the end of the service and grab one of us.