

To Be a Burning Bush ***1 Thessalonians 4:1-8***

***Lord, let me live my life on Horeb's heights,
A living echo of the Feast of Lights .
I know I'm molded out of Eden's earth,
Addicted to the nectar of the night.
With neither willingness nor works nor worth,
I mask my hopelessness with empty mirth.
And yet I dream of flaming out my day,
A beacon beaming out the second birth,
Aflame with Fire that never burns away.
For then I know I'll hear the Pillar say,
This ground is holy for My Spirit's here.
And on this ground there is no might or may,
No if or when. Eternal skies are clear
For His Shekinah cloud is always near***

The old shepherd figured his life was all but over. But he could not have been more wrong. His life was just about to begin.

The old man spent his first forty years as a pampered palace prince in Egypt. He spent the next forty years as a simple shepherd, watching a flock of sheep that fed on wiry desert grass.

Then one day between oases, he squinted up into the sunlight. Something was burning on a ragged, rocky mountaintop.

It was not easy. But the old shepherd climbed up that steep slope, his joints aching and his legs almost giving out.

On top of that mountain, Moses the shepherd became Moses the leader and lawgiver, the prophet and judge.

On Mount Horeb, he saw a bush that crackled with orange and yellow flames. But the bush was not consumed by the fire.

Then as the old man stared in wonder at the bush, he heard a voice call out his name. And that made the old shepherd tremble.

The One who was speaking was the eternal Creator God. He came to call Moses away from his desert flock. But first, the Lord had a strange demand for the old man.

...remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. Exodus 3:5

That leaves us with an important question. How can soil and stones, twigs and decayed leaves be holy?

Answering that question is more than satisfying idle curiosity. It is essential to understand precisely what it means to be holy.

The thin, rocky soil on Mount Horeb was holy for one simple reason. It had been set aside by God Himself to be used only and exclusively for His presence, His power and His purpose.

That is what it means to be holy. And that is precisely what every born again believer is called to be.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification... Verse 3

Holiness is being set aside by God for God. Sanctification is the process of becoming holy. And that was Paul's subject as he turned his attention to more specific issues.

The Message

The big man was a black African. A medical doctor, he had spent his life healing the hurts of his countrymen in the Cameroon.

He spoke about the epidemic of AIDS in Africa. And when a reporter tried to link the disease to impure water and contaminated clinics, the doctor quietly corrected him.

"No," he said, "the real problem, is our culture."

That was the problem with Macedonian converts too. They lived in a sexual cesspool.

And they always had. As far back as anyone could trace their family tree, neither sensual nor sexual drives were to be controlled in any way. Quite the contrary, they were to be indulged.

In his first letter to the troubled church at Corinth, Paul quoted a saying every Macedonian accepted without question.

Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, 1 Corinthians 6:13

Their society was a lot like our own. They rejected the very idea that satisfying human passions without restraint was immoral.

And so it is in our own day. Those who do not know the Lord Jesus as Christ and King, as Savior and Sovereign reject the very idea of sexual immorality.

Like the Macedonians, a great many people today believe human desires are not to be trained and tethered but are to be satisfied in any way a person might choose.

So when pagan gentiles received Christ as their Redeemer and became born again children of God, they had to be taught a new way of living. And that is precisely what Paul did.

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. Verse 1

Two thousand years of time has not changed one thing. People not only need to be told that God loves them and Jesus died for them and rose up from among the dead.

They also need to be taught that receiving Christ demands that they change the way they live. That was Paul's message.

He taught people who lived in a sensual society that their heavenly Father wants them to live a brand new way. And that demanded that they swim against the strong current of their culture.

For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; Verses 2-3

The men the Master chose to serve as His special messengers were kept on a short tether. They were not allowed to freelance and teach whatever they wanted.

Before He rose up into the clouds to return to His Father, our loving Lord issued orders for all His servants, both then and now.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and

lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Matthew 28:20-21

The apostles' teaching was intentionally limited. The Lord Jesus commanded them not only to make disciples. They were also to teach those new converts Christ's commandments. And nothing else.

That is why Paul could confidently claim that staying away from sexual immorality is God's perfect will. And we who love and live for the Lord Jesus must remember that.

The great apostle did not issue this command on his own. He merely relayed our Redeemer's requirements.

The word Paul used is the one from which we get words like *pornography*. It refers to all sexual activities that are prohibited by God's Word.

That means it is our infallible God's perfect will that those who call themselves His children are not to indulge in sex outside of marriage, no matter how consensual it might be.

It also means that, for Christians, such sexual activities as homosexuality and pornography are not allowed, either.

Like the world in which saints at Thessalonica lived, our own society rejects the very idea that such acts are immoral. But our great and gracious God says they are.

And that is all the motivation any believer needs.

The Mandate

The New Testament repeatedly describes a believer's physical body as a vessel.

...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; 2 Corinthians 4:7

Like a vase made of muddy clay, every human being's body is polluted by sinful passions. It is as fragile as an earthen vessel, too.

Still, we who love the Lord Jesus have reason to rejoice. Our flesh and bone body might be both tainted and temporary. But it is the holiest of all possible temples.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

That is one reason why we are to be exceedingly careful not to pollute our flesh and blood body by indulging unrestrained passions.

...that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; Verses 4-5

We cannot explain away indulging desires for sex or for the ecstatic euphoria of drug use by saying that everyone around us is doing it. Christ commanded that we are not to be like this world.

This world is dominated by the dominion of darkness. The devil is the lord of all those who have never trusted Christ.

Like the men who opposed our Savior, they not only do Satan's bidding. They want to live by his demented, destructive standards.

You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. John 8:44

Of course, people who have never known the Lord Jesus are not to be blamed because they desire to do the devil's bidding. They are shackled slaves who are incapable of doing anything else.

But we who know the Lord Jesus are not to let our lustful passions run free. Sexual sins pollute the human body.

In God's mind that is defiling His holy temple. And He will not overlook so serious a sin.

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

The Law of Moses appointed members of the tribe of Levi as caretakers first of the tabernacle: the tent temple, and later the stone temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. They were make sure it was kept as a holy place. But they did not always do their job.

And any place or person that is holy is to set aside to be used by God for His power, presence and purpose. And for nothing else.

So while the Master drove money changers and animal merchants from the temple courtyard, that was not all He did that day. He also spent the afternoon patrolling the temple courtyard.

And He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. Mark 11:16

Some shoppers used the temple courtyard as a shortcut to the Eastern Gate. But our Lord would not allow them to do that.

He stopped them and made them go back and take the long way around through the crowded streets. And He did so for good reason. They were using God's holy temple for their own purposes.

The life of every born again believer is also set aside to be used only for God's purposes. So if we do things merely to satisfy our own sensual pleasure, we are defiling the holy temple of our body.

But that is not the only reason why the Redeemed are to abstain from sexual immorality.

...and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. Verse 6

The Greek grammar in that verse links defrauding a brother with the matter under discussion: sexual sins. And that is an important reminder for everyone who has been redeemed.

Sexual sins of every stripe also violate Christ's command to love one another. Such immoral activities use another human being as a means to satisfy our own passion for pleasure.

The Savior shed His blood for all human beings. And that includes prostitutes and pornography models.

They are precious to Him. And He will not overlook using them.

The Means

The price God's Son paid for both our sins and our sinfulness was hideous and horrible. But He willingly paid that price that we might be delivered from both the power and the penalty of sin.

And He did so that we might be purified from the pollutants and poisons of iniquity and immorality.

For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. Verse 7

We are like prisoners who have been delivered from a holocaust concentration camp. And just as it is unthinkable for such a delivered prisoner to willingly return to that camp, so it is unthinkable for a forgiven saint to return to the sin that once shackled him.

How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Romans 6:2

Being baptized is acting out a prayer to God. It is telling Him we want to put all our old passions and practices to death and live a new life as a child of our holy God.

So it is never excusable for Christians to return to the sins they were delivered from. That is

dishonoring our Savior's shed blood.

It is exciting and exhilarating to know that our Lord has a wonderful new life for us. Jesus said He comes to us as the Shepherd of our soul. And He calls us to live a new life of freedom.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. John 10:10

That is one reason why Paul made such a stern statement about what indulging sins of passion means.

So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you. Verse 8

Adam sinned at Eden by submitting when Satan tempted him to disobey God. By doing that he made the devil his overlord.

And the Lord Jesus said that is precisely what we do when we who trust in Him sin.

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin." John 8:34

In his letter to Christians in the city of Rome, the apostle Paul provided us with a brief commentary and explanation of our Savior's statement about sin and slavery.

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? Romans 6:16

Sinning is submitting to Satan as his slave. That is why the apostle Paul told Christians at Thessalonica that rejecting the Redeemer's requirement that Christians abstain from sexual and sensual sin is rejecting the Lord who gave Himself for them.

Still, even if we accept our Savior's demand, we are left with a haunting question. After all, the real issue is not what we should do.

But how! How can we keep Christ's command that we are to live pure a life? That is the question.

Fortunately, Paul's stern statement that rejecting morality is rejecting God includes the answer. He did so by adding that the Spirit Who lives within us is holy.

The precious and powerful Holy Spirit within us gives us both the strength and resolve to resist temptations. But we must walk in flawless fellowship with our Savior Spirit.

And that means obeying God's Word. Writing to Timothy, Paul described precisely how a committed Christian is to resist the temptation to indulge unrestrained passion.

Now flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. 2 Timothy 2:22

One evening, King David stood on the rooftop of his palace. On a neighboring rooftop, a beautiful woman was bathing in the nude.

If David had turned away and gone back inside, he never would have sinned with that woman, Bathsheba. And if we indulge sensual temptations, we will not be able to stand, either.

On Mount Horeb, Moses saw a burning bush. Both that bush and the ground around it was holy. It was set aside for God and God alone. That is what we are to be. We are to be holy.

The history of Christianity is littered with sincere saints who fell into sin and brought shame upon both themselves and their Lord.

And all of them fell because they did not flee away from temptations to indulge lusts. The Spirit could have delivered them.

But they stopped short of obeying Him.