

Life on the Road—Practical Life Studies based on 1 Peter
Conversion and Transformation—Applying a Theology of Journey in Peter’s Writings

Introduction

LESSONS FROM A THEOLOGY OF JOURNEY

Christianity is a journey of conversion and transformation—the more common words are salvation and sanctification. These ideas are clearly seen in 1 Peter in his emphasis on holiness and suffering.

“The Bible is filled with journey theology—from the Exodus to Jesus’ Jerusalem journey to the journeys of gospel growth in Acts to Peter’s description of Christians as alien journeyers. Church history reveals that people of every age have sought to understand life through the metaphor of journey.

“This two part series will consider two important Petrine themes—holiness and suffering in the context of journey. The first part will consider holiness in the view of the Desert Fathers; the second will seek to make sense of this world’s experiences, especially the place of suffering, by considering the teaching of Bernard of Clairvaux concerning the highest love.”

One of the best known sections of Scripture where journey theology is evident is in Luke-Acts.

One might think of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* from the 1600s.

Historically, the same theology informed concepts of manifest destiny in our nation, pioneering and the frontier, and was often reflected in songs.

To introduce this series, I call your attention to the text of 1 Pet 2:11-25. Note the transition—holy lifestyle leads to suffering.

Petrine concepts that will inform this study include (1) hosts and strangers, (2) shame and honor, (3) the major themes of holiness and suffering, and (4) spirituality, as evidenced throughout church history, but esp. 12th c. Joachim of Fiore.

Session #1

THE HIGHEST LIFE—OVERCOMING THE TEMPTATION TO HOLLOW HOLINESS

Thomas a Kempis, 1380-1471, “Temptations—those have always been the stepping stones by which the Saints marched forward.”

“This is what often distresses me and shames me [Lord] in your sight, that I am so apt to fall, so weak in resisting my passions. Even though I don’t give way to them all together, the way they keep on at me all the time is very irksome and distressing; I get sick and tired of living day in, day out, at war with myself.”

...Sick and tired of living day in, day out at war with myself.—Thomas a Kempis

Indeed, is that not our problem—we cannot quite get holiness right—holiness and purity, based on the fact that God is holy. We short circuit the concept, we speak of being set apart, but there is more. Set apart how?

- Holy: 1 Pet 1:15,16; 2:5,9; 3:5
- Sanctifying: 1:2
- Salvation: 1:5,9,10; 2:2

We face problems in starting the journey.

Some travelers never quite get on track as they start the journey because they are unprepared for the difficulties they encounter. They start, but stop. The challenges of the way leave the pilgrim frustrated, disoriented, discouraged, resigned to failure or little headway. Spiritual dryness, prayerlessness, temptation, discouragement. There is a way through the beginning—there is a way to conversion—it is the way of holiness.

Desert Fathers—in the 3rd and 4th c. 1000s of men and women left cities and villages and headed into the deserts of the Middle East. Protest movement. They were sickened by the lax spirit of accommodation that characterized the culture and compromised the church. This occurred around, shortly after, the time that Constantine recognized Christianity.

Christians no longer lived with fear of persecution and in fact it became a cultural imperative to give at least some sign of lukewarm allegiance to the new faith. These desert journeyers knew Jesus had called his followers to a better discipleship, and in the desert they genuinely hoped to live out the call of Jesus to sell their possessions and leave all and follow him.

But going to the desert is full of surprises. They sought to escape the temptations and compromises of life in the city. They discovered that it is one thing to leave the city and the prostitutes behind, it is another to leave the temptation behind. If anything, the temptation of lustful thoughts seemed to intensify in the harsh desert. The desert thus became a spiritual battleground. Those who battled and won were prized for their wisdom. We still read some of their pithy sayings and quirky stories and gain great spiritual insight.

This is in reality a part of the process of conversion. We have almost missed entirely the role of sanctification. We have not studied, we have not dialogued. We are saved but not sanctified. The first great Petrine theme is holiness—this is an essential part of the conversion process.

The gift of temptation

A young monk prayed for the Lord to take away his passions. He thought he would thus be free from, even invulnerable to, temptations. The wiser monk observed that the soul is matured only in battles. Pray to the Lord that some struggle be stirred up within you. Peter clearly sees the place of such temptations and struggles. Lord, give me strength that I might get through the fight alive.

This story may jar us from spiritual complacency. Have you ever felt compelled to ask the Lord to stir up new temptations? We pray lead us not into temptation. My point is that we have allowed ourselves to think that spiritual depth is being invulnerable to temptation. We have made being tempted a sin. We have felt sinful in the temptation. Rather we should seek victory in the experience, and the victory is not always best won in isolation. The metal is tempered in the fire, but the butter melts.

Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, tells of Abbot who said, “The virtue of the monk is made manifest by temptations.” We seldom pray with gratitude for the gift of temptation.

Resisting temptations

The desert fathers also talk to us about how to resist temptation. This is a clear Petrine theme. Merton again: The abbot advised a troubled brother to go outside, open his upper garment, and catch the wind. “If you cannot catch the wind, neither can you prevent distracting thoughts from entering your head. Your job is to say no to them.” It is not sinful to be tempted. Holiness is not surrendered in the temptation, but temptations are best dealt with in early stages. Entertaining the seduction of temptation, we surrender something of ourselves, resistance weakens.

Battling temptation

Discern what leads us into the presence of temptation, with the temptation to sacrifice our set-apartness, our holiness, our sanctification. Is it acquisitiveness—the desire for things? What are the usual external conditions or internal emotions that increase vulnerability? Are we reactionary? Are we taking our battles out on others? The solution is not in fleeing or ignoring the problem, but in facing it head-on. We must deal with the realities of life to allow grace to work in our hearts.

Seeing temptation for what it is

Once more from Merton: An elder, “When the eyes of an ox or mule are covered, then he goes round and round turning the mill wheel; but if his eyes are uncovered he will not go around in the circle of the mill wheel. So too the devil if he manages to cover the eyes of a man, he can humiliate him in every sin. But if that man’s eyes are not closed, he can easily escape the devil.”

Failure to see temptation for what it really is leads to servile slavery. The desert fathers call us to brutal honesty with ourselves and God concerning our maturity and desire to grow up. Plain truth demands we see beyond the seduction to the high personal cost to the soul (i.e. pornography): shame, self-loathing, and most tragically, the diminished capacity for true intimacy which our heart desires.

The antidote—a burning passion for God

The antidote for temptation—the key to holiness—is staying close to God. The capacity for sinning is terrifying to one whose passion burns for God. Listen once more to Abbot John: The monk must be like the man who, sitting under a tree, looks up and perceives all kinds of snakes and wild beasts running at him. Since he cannot fight them all, he climbs the tree and gets away from them. The monk, at all times, should do the same. When evil thoughts are aroused by the enemy, he should fly, by prayer, to the Lord, and he will be saved.”

We are as spiritual athletes, training and discipling (disciplining) for life in the Spirit. Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said, “Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, my little fast, my prayer, meditation, and contemplative silence; according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do?” The elder abbot arose, stretched his hands toward heaven so his fingers became like ten lamps of fire and said, “Why not be totally changed into fire?”

The solution we seek is not a scrupulously guarded life. Victory over temptation is not our ultimate goal, although it is a real struggle we face along the way. God is calling us to radical transformation. Medieval writer Richard Rolle, *Fire of Love*: “The perfect never carry combustibles with them into the next life! All their sins are burnt up in the heat of their love for Christ.”

Love consumes sin, not conscience, theological correctness, moral correctness, or fear of punishment. Love one another: 1:22; 2:17; 3:8; 4:8.

It is love for Jesus that spurs us to resist temptation, as it is his love that spurs us to love one another. Jesus’ love can burn away our very will to sin.

Augustine: “To my God a heart of flame...to myself a heart of steel.”

Session #2

THE HIGHEST LOVE—FINDING OUR IDENTITY IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING

“...through loving myself in the wrong way...I lost myself; by seeking you alone...I have found both myself and you.”—Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471)

Being a Christian means participating fully in an inner journey—a journey of following Jesus. We must learn to obey and to imitate. We must learn the intimacy of sharing, and our lives are transformed by that relationship. Jesus calls us to change, to develop spiritual eyes tuned to the signs of his presence in our lives. Jesus wants nothing less than a radically new creation. This is a journey of transformation, through an ever-deepening identification with Jesus. The theme of suffering for Peter, and for many after him, is focused fully in participating with Jesus so that we become like him.

We introduced the Petrine thread of love in the first session and saw its relationship to temptation and holiness. The second great Petrine theme is suffering. This is a part of the process of transformation. In suffering we are changed. In suffering we find God and we thus find ourselves.

Bernard of Clairvaux is our historical figure for this session, for what he teaches us of the connection between identity and suffering.

The mystery of self—crisis when I suffer and crisis when I don't

Pascal said there are two great mysteries: God and self. He writes of the second: What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe.” (Pensees)

How do we see ourselves. Peter and Bernard of Clairvaux offer us a healthier view, despite our wildly contradictory experiences.

Connecting love and suffering, how can I love God in suffering?

One of the interesting contributions of Bernard (1090-1153) is his treatise, On Loving God, where he writes with profound insight about how we see ourselves and the intimate relationship to the way we see God.

For Bernard, there are four levels of loving God. First is love of self for self's sake. This is not calculating self-interest or narcissism but the healthy human impulse to look after self. This is the basis of love your neighbor as yourself.

Second is love of God for self's sake. This is the call to God for his help and protection. We call out to God at this level not because we love him but because we need him. Our devotion to God is polluted with self-interest. I turn to God because I am miserable, incapable on my own. Confession is often shot through with self-interest. Obedience is based on eternal self-protection. John Donne, “a repentance not to be repented of.” Bernard assures that these are sequential.

Third is love of God for God's sake. Bernard says those who reach this level of love are those who love God not because he is good to them but simply because he is good.

Finally, to reach the highest love entails letting go of self and a full preoccupation with God. Thus we are surprised with Bernard says this is to be described as love of self for God's sake. This is a way of seeing ourselves that is deeply rooted in our relationship with God: a love of self that is not the self-preservation of love level #1 but a higher, chastened love of self, fueled by love for God and zeal for his glory. It is this love that empowers us to deal with suffering as Christ dealt with suffering. Our example in Peter's writings is Christ.

Redefined by God: accepting the radical redefinition God wants to work in my life through suffering

Is this kind of love within our reach? If not, we will struggle with suffering. But such is hard when we feel the internal self-imposed exile. How can I love the slippery foreign self I know? The self that falls short of my own expectations constantly?

We must learn to live intensely with ourselves. Our transformation rests on our faithfulness in making the turn away from futile attempts to define myself on my own terms, to in hope allow God to radically redefine who I am. This is Bernard's view—this is Peter through and through.

Grounding our identity in Jesus—the ultimate in transformation

We must silence both the voices of self-adulation and self-loathing, lest we be confused, insecure, hopelessly absorbed in the culture of self which surrounds us.

Pascal again: Know them, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Be humble, impotent reason! Be silent, feeble nature! Learn that man infinitely transcends man, hear from your master your true condition, which is unknown to you. Listen to God.

Listening to God's true objective words thins our tangled subjectivity. To follow Jesus is to follow his path, with our identity wrapped up in his (Col. 3:3). We are loved by him. Able to cast off the fraudulent self-identity, the insecure, we find strong, true identity in Christ, the mystery of intimate relationship with the Father.

Bernard: In my creation he gave me myself; in the incarnation he gave himself; and when he did that he gave me myself. Given and given again, I owe myself in return for myself, twice over."

Living in the security of his love, receive the radical redefinition of newness through his grace, we respond to love by offering him all we can—even in suffering, certainly in humility. We are hopeful, and honest in sharing hope. We open to him where his glory can shine. We love the self he desires us to be. Secure in this new self, we are free to laugh with lightness at the voice that would praise us and the voice that would loath us. We live a self-forgetful life of service, and we find and even love ourselves. Freed from the prison of self, we love ourselves for God's sake, and risk nothing if God's direction for us is suffering.