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MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS

1 Peter 1:13-16

On July 19, 1989 the pilots flying the DC-10 airliner designated United Airlines flight 232 that was going from Denver to Chicago, felt a sudden jolt while at their cruising altitude of 37,000 feet. The jolt was unnerving, for they could not imagine what had caused it. It was more than turbulence and you don’t hit bumps at 37,000 feet. What happened next was even more disturbing. The aircraft began a gradual but uncommanded descent and slow roll to the right. They tried to correct both the descent and the roll, but the aircraft did not respond to any of their control inputs. They asked another pilot who was on board the flight to look out the windows of the passenger compartment to see if the flight control surfaces were moving in response to the cockpit controls. They weren’t moving at all. In other words, the pilots now knew they had no control over the plane. What they did not know was that the fan disk in the number 3 engine that was in the tail of the plane, had exploded. The explosion of that fan disk sent what was essentially shrapnel, flying out. The shrapnel had severed the hydraulic lines. The DC-10 had not one, but two backups to the primary hydraulic system for safety reasons, but in what has been described as a one in a billion chance, the lines for all 3 systems were severed. Without a functioning hydraulic system all those flight control surfaces, the flaps, the slats, the ailerons, the elevator and the rudder were frozen in place and useless.

In addition to that critical problem the pilots got indications that the number 3 engine was also not functioning, so they shut it down, but still had 2 engines, one on each wing. The pilots declared an emergency and were directed to the nearest divert airport, Sioux City’s Gateway Airport. But how could they steer the aircraft and make a landing when they had no usable controls? Imagine trying to drive a car when the steering wheel and brakes stop functioning while you are traveling at freeway speed. Remarkably the pilots were able to gain some measure of control by manipulating the engine throttles. Giving more throttle to the engine on the right wing enabled them to stop the roll to the right. They did what they could to control the descent, but their rate of descent was much greater than it would normally be for a landing, but as they were making their approach they were flying at 220 knots as opposed to the 140 that was the normal landing speed for that aircraft. The only runway they could get the plane lined up for was actually closed, but it was their only hope. Just as they were about to touch down the plane again made a sudden roll to the right, causing the right wing to impact the ground, and essentially threw the plane into a crash. But the pilots had done enough to give them a chance. Sadly, 112 people died in the crash, but 184 of the 296 people on board survived. The NTSB later considered adding a segment to pilot training with just such a scenario, loss of all hydraulics and thus all control systems. However, they ultimately decided against that because when they ran a number of expert pilots through repeated simulations of the situation they found that the pilots were unable to produce even a single survivable landing. Most weren’t even able to get anywhere close to the ground before the plane totally spun out of control. They decided there was no point in training pilots for what was a non-recoverable situation.

What caused that fan disk to explode? The meticulous investigation discovered that there was a flaw in the block of titanium from which the disk was made. They figured out that there was the tiniest impurity in the titanium that the process was supposed to remove, but had failed to do so. That impurity went undetected and caused a microscopic air bubble in the titanium, which eventually became a tiny crack. That fan disk with its fatal flaw lasted for 18 years of flights. But that crack grew until it was so large that finally under the pressure of flight at high speed it blew the disk apart.

Could a seemingly small and insignificant impurity in us have a similar disastrous effect? Could something we don’t even notice some day surprise us by blowing our lives apart? We live in this world under pressure. We have the pressure of constantly being attacked by an enemy who violently and relentlessly seeks to destroy us. We have the pressure of living in a world where we are aliens, a world that regards us in a way that is akin to the way our immune systems regard alien microbes. That pressure can find that small impurity. It can lead to catastrophic failure. Let’s look at 1 Peter 1:13-16 to see how we can avoid that.

GO TO GENERAL QUARTERS

Peter tells us in verse 13 to have minds that are alert and fully sober. Literally he wrote, “belt up the waist of your mind.” You can understand why the translators interpreted that for us. What does “the waist of your mind” mean and how are we supposed to “belt it up”? Think of how people dressed in that day. They wore long robes. Suppose you had to dig a trench. A robe is not the ideal dress for such an occasion.

Mark Attenbury told a story in his book, *The Ten Dumbest Things Christians Do*, about something that happened at a wedding he officiated. Before the wedding the wedding party went to a park with a beautiful setting to take pictures. Unfortunately, the night before it had rained heavily. To get to the spot chosen for the pictures they had to navigate around a large puddle. A wedding gown is not ideal for navigating around puddles. The result was sadly predictable. The bride tripped and fell into the puddle. An hour before the big ceremony her beautiful gown was irretrievably mud stained. Some clothes are just not intended for action.

In order to prepare for work or action first century people had to tie their robes up so they were out of the way. That’s the illustration Peter was using in this passage. Get your mind ready for action, because it is about to happen. In the Navy when battle is about to take place, they make an announcement throughout the ship. “General quarters, general quarters. All hands man your battle stations.” In other words, every body get ready to fight. That’s what this verse means.

As aliens in this world we need to man our battle stations. We need to get ready for battle. In 2 Corinthians 2:11 Paul mentioned not wanting to be outwitted by Satan. Then he said, “For we are not unaware of his schemes. Paul and his colleagues were very much aware of the enemy’s tricks. However, frequently we are oblivious to Satan’s schemes. Peter was calling us to battle stations because we are in a battle. Being aliens in this world is part of that battle. It is one of the schemes that Satan uses to try to defeat us. We need to wake up to that fact. The enemy is using the culture around us and its ever present pressure upon us to try to trip us up.

However, that is not the only scheme that Satan uses. One of the oldest books in the Bible is Job. We’ve all used the expression, “That’s the oldest trick in the book.” Well one of the oldest tricks in the book is in Job. What was the scheme Satan used there? He tried to hammer Job with one grief after another in an attempt to get him to curse God. He wanted him to turn away from God in hurt and anger.

Do you think that Satan has retired that play? Do you think he said, “Well, I thought we had Job there. But he kept his faith in God. I took everything from him, and still it didn’t destroy his faith. I guess that just doesn’t work, so I won’t try that anymore.” Do you think that’s what Satan has done? Is he like a football coach who dreamed up an ingenious trick play, then called it in a game, only to see it totally blow up in his face and as a result says, “I’ll never use that play again”?

No, Satan didn’t retire that strategy. Satan has before and will again try to hit you with such confounding reversals and losses, with such unbearable pains, that you might give up. That you would think that you absolutely cannot and will not trust God. Peter is telling us to not be surprised when this happens. Would you be surprised if you were in the Navy and you got the call to battle stations, when suddenly enemy airplanes started launch missiles at your ship and strafing it? Would you say, “Why are they doing this? I didn’t do anything to them, so why are they trying to kill me?” You’d be foolish if you did. Of course they’re attacking you. You are in a war and they are the enemy. Peter is telling us, “Of course these things are going to happen to you. You are in a war and Satan is the enemy.”

I have friends that are going through ordeals, trials, that cause me to shudder. I fear for them. I wonder if I were in their place if I could handle what they’re dealing with, if I could stand firm. What Peter is telling us is a key to having perspective on such situations. We need to see them for what they are. They are attacks intended to destroy our faith, and the most important thing we can do is recognize that reality and know that the worst thing we could do is let the attack succeed by abandoning our faith in our Lord.

If we instead focus on ourselves and feel sorry for ourselves, it creates that little impurity. It causes a little crack down deep, and when the pressure gets great enough, it will blow us apart. Satan has used that strategy with many people with great success. So we need to go on the alert, prepare for the battle.

PUT YOUR HOPE IN THE RIGHT THING

The next thing we can do to keep from having that disastrous explosion in our soul is to focus on the right thing. Peter says, “Set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.” What do you put your hope in? Peter says we should put our hope in what is going to happen when Jesus comes back. He has already mentioned in verse 4 that we have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. He said in verse 9 we receive the salvation of our souls. In verses 10-12 he said even the prophets and angels long to understand the things that we have and the inheritance that is waiting for us. It is so great that it fills us with an inexpressible and glorious joy according to verse 8.

We looked a few weeks ago at this hope. We saw that it is a living hope grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, the hope that this inheritance will be the resolution of all the sadness of life, the fulfillment of a longing so deep within us that we can’t even quite understand or express what it is, but that we feel it powerfully. This is the hope we should focus on.

We tend to put our hope in life going the way we want. What we put our hope in is enormously important. For many years I attended meetings for pastors in San Diego County. I remember a young guy, a few years younger than me, who started coming to the meetings because he was planting a new church out in East County. He was a vibrant guy, full of enthusiasm. He struck me as a person with a lot of natural leadership ability, the kind of person people would follow. The first few times he was there he had the opportunity to talk about his plans and his dreams and his progress in his ministry. I remember a point at which I thought, “Uh oh. This is not going to end well.” He envisioned rapid growth for his church and it quickly becoming a large, maybe even a megachurch. He kind of assumed this was bound to happen, because though he was young, he had some experience in ministry and had seen that kind of success in everything he had done. But what hit me was, this was important to him. He, in a sense, was putting his hope in having that kind of success. Over the next couple of years I saw that initial excitement of a new ministry grow. There were some bumps in the road and obstacles, as always in ministry, but he was off to a good start. But after a couple of years things appeared to cool off and his church hit a plateau. I began to see some frustration start peeking through. Then the hard things really set in. There was dissension and discouragement. Some in the church were disgruntled, complaining, and leaving. Eventually he stopped coming to the meeting. I asked someone where he was. He had given up on his church plant. The church had closed and he had left pastoral ministry altogether.

He put his hope in the wrong thing, and when that hope was not fulfilled, it caused a collapse. As far as I know he didn’t give up his faith. But a man who could have been useful as a servant of the Lord gave up that calling. I hope that maybe some day he learned and grew from that, but I don’t know what happened to him. Most of us aren’t pastors planting churches so you might think this doesn’t apply. But it is the larger lesson that is important here. It is possible to put your hope in something that sets you up to fail.

We are going to hope in many things in life. It is not human to go through life not hoping for good things to happen. Imagine a person who said, “I expect to never be loved, to fail at everything I do, to feel awful and to have some hideous, fatal disease kill me at a young age. I see no reason to hope for anything other than that.” What do you think that person would be like? Pretty sure they wouldn’t be full of joy, love and life. We are going to hope for things. We will hope that we find and experience love, that we have at least a modicum of good health, that we have some success in a chosen endeavor such as a career, and so much more. It is not wrong to hope for those things.

Sadly, disappointment is a fact of life. Disappointment happens when something we hoped for did not happen. Life is going to be full of hopes that are never fulfilled. I hoped I would be a great athlete. Disappointment. I hoped when I wrote some novels that they would sell well and that maybe that could even be a side career for me. Disappointment. I hoped that I wouldn’t get fired from the ministry I served once. That also proved to be a disappointment. There were much more serious disappointments, ones that were tragic and painful.

Yes, of course we will hope for good in life, but that is not the hope we anchor our lives on. Those hopes will come and go. Some will be fulfilled, but then we will move on to something else, but others will be met with disappointment. If we anchor our lives on those hopes our lives will become a nauseating, unstable roller coaster, because life will be so full of the ups and downs. And the worst part is, if we make some of those hopes the bedrock of our lives, it becomes that tiny impurity in our lives that can develop into a crack, and when the pressure becomes severe enough, it will blow our lives apart.

To make sure that we don’t have that little impurity turn into a crack and explode our lives, we always need to remember that our true hope, the hope that is the anchor for our souls that keeps us firm and in place, is not hope for something in this life. It is the hope we have at the appearing of Jesus Christ. That hope is unshakeable, and it is the most important hope we have.

PURSUE HOLINESS

The message of verses 14-15 sound very religious and unappealing to some people. Don’t conform to the evil desires you have, instead be holy in all you do. We think our desires aren’t all that evil. In fact, they are the things that make life enjoyable, that’s why we desire them. Yeah, typical religious people, they tell you to not do all the things you want to do, the things that are actually fun and make life interesting. Instead of doing that you should be holy in everything. Oh, great. Be holy. We know what holy people are like. We avoid them like the corona virus. Is there a vaccine to protect us from holy people? And now Peter says we are supposed to be like them. Thanks, but no thanks. Maybe having those desires and fulfilling them will cause an impurity that will lead to a catastrophic failure in my life, but at least I will enjoy the ride before it does. Being holy will mean just enduring a life that is as enjoyable as having a root canal. Yeah, here’s my life, one long root canal. Lovely.

That is not what Peter meant. Remember that he wanted us to have lives “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” Jesus wants us to experience real life. He said that’s why he came. So maybe we don’t understand what Peter means here. Let’s start with those evil desires. We tend to think when Peter mentioned our “evil desires” that he means we have terrible, evil urges inside us. We’re actually monsters inside, disguised demons, who must hide our cruel and twisted cravings and somehow control them in order to be part of a civilized society. However, that’s not what he meant at all.

The desires he meant are not all dark and monstrous. There are a couple of reasons why Peter labeled them evil. The first is that they are evil because they are all about self. Most of our desires are actually natural and/or neutral. We have desires for food. Is that monstrous? Is it dark and twisted? No, it’s just a natural desire. We need to eat. But that desire for food is always food for me. I don’t get hungry because someone else needs to eat. It is a desire focused on what I need and want.

The problem is that many of our desires are self directed and focused. I want food for me, I want love for me, I want sex for me, I want approval for me, I want recognition for me, I want power for me. Our desires put our attention on ourselves. Even our desires for other people are there because we think the fulfillment of them will make us happy. They are evil because they put self at the center of everything. The message of the events of Genesis 3 is that is where all the problems of a fallen world came from.

I’ve been reading a book titled *Black Flags, Blue Water*. It is the history of America’s most notorious pirates. Ay, matey, me be readin’ about pirates! Shiver me timbers. I was surprised to learn that contrary to what we often think, pirates typically tried to avoid getting in fights. They were really just thieves who stole from people on ships, and the last thing they wanted was violence. Sometimes they encountered slave ships and they’d steal slaves so they could sell them. What an abomination and horror slavery is. Making people slaves is surely an evil desire. It is literally inhumane and cruel. But how does it start? A person wants to make money for themselves. That’s what important. Do whatever it takes to make that happen. Even enslaving other people. The desire to get for oneself creates the possibility of unlimited evil. Piracy itself was another example. The pirates just wanted wealth for themselves. And so they decided to take it. Many of them were poor and could see no other way to accomplish that. Everywhere in this world untold evil is unleashed by the desire to get what one wants or needs for oneself. It is the cause of unlimited pain. That is part of why Peter speaks of our evil desires.

The second reason our desires are evil is because they are, as Paul calls them in Ephesians 4:22, deceitful. They lie to us. They tell us that if we can fulfill them then we will be satisfied, happy and our lives will be full. We will have the life we long for. It’s all a lie. Fulfilling our desires at times is necessary. We desire food because we haven’t eaten, so we need to eat. But having the food we desire will never satisfy us and make our lives full.

Just think about the simple example of food. You desire food because your body needs it, so you eat. And you are satisfied. So that is not a deceitful desire because I desired the food, I ate it, and now I’m happy, right? How long does that last? We’ve all had that experience of having a sumptuous, delicious and huge meal, maybe a holiday feast. We’ve over eaten because it was so good, and we say, “I don’t think I’ll ever eat again.” Is that true? Are you done? That was the last meal of your life and it will sustain you for the rest of your years? No, we all know that the next morning we will wake up and will be, to our amazement, hungry. We will need to eat again. Food can never give us permanent, ultimate satisfaction.

Many of our desires suggest that they can. If we can only fulfill them then we will have that ultimate satisfaction. We will have joy and we will be content. But it turns out they’re all like food. If they satisfy at all, it is only for a brief time. Then we think we need more, or we need something different. Our desires, while not necessarily dark, twisted and monstrous, are evil because they lead us to harm others in the pursuit of self, and because they lead us to live in pursuit of that which proves to be a mirage and can never give us what we really want. They waste our lives.

Peter holds out being holy as the thing that can save us from the perils of our own evil desires. Let’s think about holiness for a bit. The basic idea of holiness means being set apart, special. Think about that idea of being set apart. For something to be holy is for it to be so special that it causes in us a sense of awe.

A number of years ago Laurie and I were in Honolulu and we decided to visit the Punchbowl, officially the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. This is where many veterans are buried, much like the national cemeteries here in San Diego. Wow, you guys are exciting people. You’re in Hawaii on vacation and you went to a cemetery? Obviously you are holy people, meaning dull and deeply unexciting. Hey, don’t be hating, bro. We just wanted to see it. I wasn’t prepared for the effect it had on me. I figured we’d just briefly look at it and then cross it off our list of things we’d never done before. But we started walking among the graves and I began noticing one grave after another with the final date, December 7, 1941. These were men who died at Pearl Harbor. That was very sobering. I saw several graves marked with indications that the person buried there had been awarded some of our nation’s highest medals for bravery, including one Congressional Medal of Honor, our nation’s highest award. The tenor of our little visit changed. As we were looking at these graves, we heard the haunting tones of a trumpet playing. In another part of the cemetery a graveside service was being concluded with full military honors. The trumpet played the familiar notes of *Taps*. I can’t even label what I was feeling, but I can tell you it was *powerful*. It was a mixture of humility and a sense of reverence and awe. I had the sense of how holy that place was. Holiness produces that sense of awe and a sense of humility.

Laurie and I were reminiscing recently about moments in our lives that were memorable. One happened not far from that Punch Bowl experience. We were standing on a hotel rooftop one evening looking down on the hotel pool and the ocean beyond it. It was a deliciously warm evening, and there was a spectacular full moon. The moonlight was reflecting on the water, and it was impossibly beautiful. That moment in my memory is frozen in time because it was so incredibly beautiful and joyful. It is holy, because it is special, set apart.

When you think of holiness you must never think of stuffy, stodgy, rigid, judgmental, religious. That is not holy. Holy is so awesome it fills you with reverence, it humbles you. It is powerful. It is so beautiful you can feel its beauty down deep inside in a way that is so profound that you can’t even express it. That’s what the Bible means when it says God is holy. He is that awesome, that spectacular, that beautiful. When Peter says we should be holy because God is holy he means we should pursue living in such a way that it is that beautiful, that awesome, that fills other people with that sense that our life is something special, something so magnificent it touches them deeply and humbles them. That’s what it means to be holy.

Writer and pastor, Francis Chan, told a story that gives us a glimpse of real holiness. A number of years ago the church where he was serving had a series of speakers come to their church. The first was a missionary who talked about his work with a remote tribe in Papua New Guinea. In his talk, which was powerful, he said he was doing that work in large part because of a man named Von, his former youth pastor, who loved him and inspired him to live for Christ. Chan said the next week they had another speaker who ministered to kids living in poverty, and at one point he mentioned he was in that ministry because he was inspired by his former youth pastor, Von. It was surprising coincidence. Not long after that they had another speaker, a man named Dan who worked with people at the Rescue Mission in LA. After his talk, Chan was talking with Dan and he said casually, “It was so weird. Recently we had speakers two weeks in a row who mentioned how much impact the same youth pastor had on them, a guy named Von.” Dan looked surprised and said, “I know Von. He now has a ministry to people living off the dumps in Tijuana.” This caught my attention because though I didn’t know Von, I know who he was. He served as a youth pastor here in San Diego. I had a friend that I served on a church staff with who had gone into ministry because he was impacted by Von. Von was used by God to impact thousands of lives and literally hundreds of people went into various ministries because of him. Dan went on to tell Chan, “I was in Tijuana with Von recently, and kids would run up to him, excited to see him. He showed such love and affection for them. Francis, it was eerie: the whole time I was walking with Von I kept thinking, *If Jesus was on earth, I think this is what it would feel like to walk with him*. He loved everyone he ran into. People were just drawn to his love and affection.” And then Dan said, “The day I spent with Von was the closest thing I’ve ever experienced to walking with Jesus.”

That is being holy. It is a life that draws people in with its love and goodness and genuine caring. Don’t you think anyone would want that? Wouldn’t we all want to be holy like that? To be like that and have that kind of effect on people is more satisfying, more joyful, more fulfilling than any other desire we will ever have. That is what Peter meant when he said we should be holy.

CONCLUSION

A common reaction to this is, “That sounds well and good, but I can’t be like that.” Yes, I know you can’t. If you could truly be just like Jesus, Jesus would not have had to go through what he endured to rescue you. But that doesn’t mean this passage is pointless because it is not possible. If that were true then Peter would not have written it in the first place. He wrote this with the assumption that people could actually do what he was encouraging them to do. Von clearly was living that kind of life. So what do we do with this?

This passage has a lot to do with how we think. Remember how it started. Be alert, prepare your minds for action. This is largely about how we think. It tells 3 things about how to think.

First is our state of mind. Be alert, recognizing that you are an alien here and you will be under attack. Expect that, don’t be surprised by it, and prepare for it.

Second is what we put hope in. What should we hope for? Set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed. This is the sure and solid hope that will not fail.

Third, what are we aiming at in life? It is fine to desire things and hope for things, but what should drive us is that desire to be holy, to live so filled with God’s grace, so possessed by his love, so passionate about serving him, that we begin to actually be like him, so his love and his grace and his goodness spills out of us onto others. This is about changing our focus, being clear that being holy is really what we want most of all, and pursuing that with all our hearts.