

A Heavenly Perspective

Genesis 3:1-6; I John 2:12-17

He's 88, she's 82. They've been married 65 years, and for the last 26 of those, they've lived in the same senior citizens' building on the banks of the St. John's River in Jacksonville Florida. He has Alzheimer's, and thus needs consistency, for things to stay in a routine, for things to look the same.

And then Hurricane Irma came calling, and everything was ruined – even the records they piled in their bathtub, after the waters rose above the rim. What will they do now?

The world passeth away – that's what John tells us in verse 17. And if there's nothing else we have learned from Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, let alone Katrina, it is that there is no guarantee that all the things we have gathered up during our lives will be with us tomorrow.

But it isn't just hurricanes that threaten our stuff, is it? Anyone who has ever been through a house fire has learned the same lesson. In fact, this truth should eventually become obvious to all of us – those who have to decide what to do with all the possessions of a loved one who has passed on know all too well that none of us can take it with us. How does the old joke go? – I've never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer.

But John points out that the impermanence of things is true even on the broadest scale. For he isn't just talking about a flooded apartment here and a burned-out house there. No, in verse 17, he says that the whole world is passing away. This is the same point Peter made in our responsive reading. Peter said that since God destroyed the whole world by a flood long ago, we should not be surprised that it will be consumed by fire when Christ comes again.

The world passeth away. Nothing in this world lasts forever. Surely that realization should help us adjust our goals in life. Surely keeping such a heavenly perspective in mind should help us put a higher priority on spiritual things than on material things, right?

Oh, but that's so much easier said than done, isn't it? For even if we acknowledge with our minds that the world is passing away, the lust thereof, our desires for the material things around us are quite another matter. In fact, wanting what we don't already have seems to be a universal condition, something that's hardwired into our human nature. For even Adam and Eve couldn't stand there being just one thing that they couldn't have, just one forbidden fruit among all the trees of the Garden of Eden.

Yes, Eve knew what John was talking about in verse 16. She knew about the lust of the flesh, the cravings of our material, bodily self. For her, that meant thinking that the forbidden fruit was good for food. But the lust of the flesh really includes the desire for anything of a physical nature in the world, anything we can touch or taste or see.

How can we avoid such temptation? Well, it would be easy for us to fall into the error of the ascetics, assuming that we need to deny ourselves any physical pleasure at all, emptying out our bank accounts and wearing burlap shirts. One monk named Simon even went so far as to live on the top of a column in the Syrian desert. But remember – John didn't say the problem was the things of the world. He said the problem was our lusting after them, our desire for them. And that desire can be with us, no matter how much or how little we have.

But it isn't just the lust of the flesh we have to avoid, for John also condemns the lust of the eyes. Again, in the Garden of Eden, Eve experienced both of these temptations. She not only saw that the fruit was good for food, but that it was also pleasant, a delight to the eyes. But aren't our physical desires activated when we see things we want? I mean, it's no accident that all those restaurants run their commercials during supper time, right? So, what's the difference between the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes?

Well, in the Old Testament, when people were said to do things that were right in their own eyes, that meant they were living according to what made sense to them instead of what God's Word told them to do. It therefore seems that the lust of the eyes has to do more with the desires of the mind than the desires of the body. The lust of the eyes involves living according to our own reason, our own experience, according to what we think is right.

Now, before we go on, can we all admit that we do indeed have a problem here? Don't we all make most of our decisions according to what makes sense to us? Aren't we all most interested most of the time in what we can see and feel and taste, things that will make us happy, things that will bring us pleasure?

But John doesn't stop there, for verse 16 also condemns the boastful pride of life. And once again, Eve was no stranger to this. She desired the fruit so that she might be wise, so that she might be like God, knowing good and evil. Adam seems to have shared this sin as well, as he intentionally rejected God's command, choosing to join his wife in her sin rather than to follow the commands of his creator. By eating that fruit, both of them were thus declaring their independence from God, preferring the physical world to the spiritual, making decisions according to their own reason, according to their own will.

And we still have a problem with this sort of pride, don't we? For pride isn't just thinking that we are better than other people, or thinking that we are somehow better or more powerful than God. Pride can be expressed in the same sort of stubborn willfulness Adam and Eve expressed in the Garden of Eden, can't it? "Yes, Jesus said I should love my enemies, but that just doesn't make sense. Why should I let other people make a chump out of me? Yes, Jesus said if we want to follow Him we must deny ourselves and take up our cross, but I'd much rather live a comfortable life. Jesus said that if He was persecuted, those who follow Him should expect the same thing, but doesn't it make more sense not to rock the boat? Yes, Jesus said I should love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, but shouldn't I keep some of my love for myself? Shouldn't my needs and the needs of the people I choose to love come first?"

Sure, all that makes sense to us. Sure, we want to cling to the physical, material things of this world. Sure, we place our confidence in the things and the relationships we already have. But whenever we make choices based on our self-interest or based on what makes sense to us, whenever we live for ourselves rather than for the glory of God, aren't we really pushing God off the throne of our lives and clambering up there to take His place?

So, how can we fight against these worldly desires? Well, we've already seen part of the answer – to keep our present wants and possessions in a heavenly perspective, to see them in the light of the coming Day of Judgment. Given what both Peter and John are telling us, does it really make sense for us

to focus so much of our time and attention on things that are eventually going to be destroyed? And given that God is our great King and Judge, doesn't it make more sense to prefer His will to our own?

But let's face it – until Christ comes again, the things we can see and feel and taste, the material things in the world seem to be so much more real than spiritual things, don't they? So, while we go on living in this world, while we wait for the coming of Christ, how can we maintain a heavenly perspective? Well, it seems that in the poetic first three verses of this passage from John's letter, in which he addresses children, young men, and fathers, he gives us some ideas.

Now, before we dive in, we need to avoid a potential mistake. We don't need to just skip to the part of the passage that corresponds to our chronological age. After all, John may be referring to our spiritual age – to those who are new Christians and those who have been Christians for a long time. Moreover, when you get right down to it, all of these ideas are appropriate for people of any age or experience, and all of them will be helpful to all of us as we fight against worldly temptations.

But let's begin where John does, with the children. To them he says, "Your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake." This is where the Christian life starts, and one of the first lessons we learn in Sunday School, isn't it? It's also one of the best ways to combat the boastful pride of life – to remind ourselves that we are nothing more than forgiven sinners. But at the same time, knowledge of our forgiveness is essential for us to confront the lust of the flesh and the eyes. For it is only when we are certain that Christ has paid the penalty for our sins that we can have the courage to confess how serious they are and to turn away from them.

And why is that? Because of what John tells the children in verse 13: in Jesus Christ, they know the Father. Because Christ has revealed the loving, forgiving, welcoming nature of the Father, we can draw near to Him in faith. And the more we know the true nature of our God, the less likely we will be to want to disappoint Him by focusing on the gifts instead of the Giver.

But that's only the beginning of the journey. For just as Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, all sorts of temptations are inherent in the Christian life. So as we grow from infants in Christ to young men and women, we need to add a disciplined, conscious struggle against temptation. And we can be sure that this fight can and will be won because John tells the young men that we have overcome the evil one. After all, the cross of Christ didn't just bring forgiveness to all His people – it broke the power of sin and death over all who trust in Him.

And how does this victory apply to us? In verse 14, John says that the word of God abides in us. This of course can mean two things. As we grow from children to young men and women in the faith, we learn more of God's Word, and thus have more tools at our disposal to fight off the temptations that come our way. After all, every time Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He responded, "It is written." The Word of God is our best defense against sin.

But the Word of God can have a deeper, a more personal meaning as well. John often called Jesus "the Word," and thus he reminds us that the Spirit of Christ Himself lives within all those who trust in Christ. That means that the power of Christ, the power necessary to conquer sin also lives within us. That's how we can be strong enough to overcome the wicked one – in the power of Christ.

So, what is the lesson for those who have become fathers in the faith? Those who have lived a long time have seen lots of changes in the world, many of them not good. As our disappointments and

griefs pile up we might be tempted to lose hope, especially if we keep expecting God to make this world perfect, a world we have already been told is passing away, destined for destruction.

Instead, we are encouraged to focus on the One Who is from the beginning, on God Himself. In the face of all the changes around us, we must keep our eyes focused on the One Who does not change. In the beginning He brought all things into existence. And as both John and Peter have reminded us, He will also bring about the end of all things.

So, how can we avoid worldly temptations? How can we keep a heavenly perspective? It turns out that the answer is the same at both the beginning and the end of life, whether we are little children or growing in faith or very old: it is knowing the Father that matters most. For what love could possibly match a love which forgives all our sins? What power could possibly overcome a power which defends us from evil and raises us from the dead? And what certainty can stand in the face of His coming judgment of the wicked? From a heavenly perspective, what on earth can possibly compare with God?