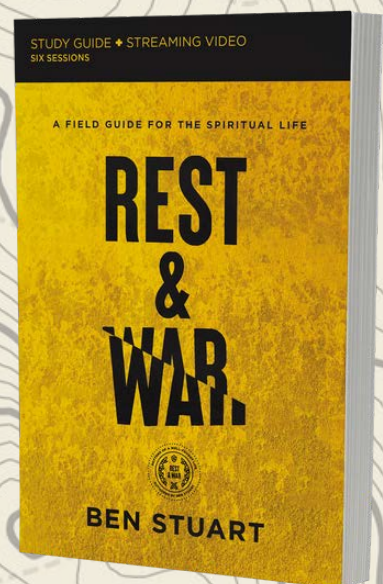




REST & WAR.

Six sermon outlines to lead a church through rhythms of a well-fought life.

**Based on Ben Stuart's video Bible study
Rest & War: A Field Guide for the
Spiritual Life.**



FREED TO FIGHT



A. Introduction

You don't have to live very long before you realize life is hard. At some point you may have said, "You know, I'm going to launch out with a swell of optimism and I'm going to use the gifts God gave me to change the world." And yet, when you get out there, you realize there are difficulties without and discouragements within.

And yet here's the good news: we have a Savior who loves us, and we have a shepherd who wants to show us the ancient pathways that will lead to rest for our souls. The Word of God helps us learn how to navigate the world God made for his glory and our good.

B. Teaching

Navy SEALs participate in a particular parachute training called HALO School. HALO is an acronym that stands for "high altitude, low opening." All branches of the military can take this training, but it is intense. These guys spend about half a day in a classroom, and then they're being thrown out of airplanes.

The first jump out of the plane can look a bit silly as participants experience the force of the air, the absence of traction to aid in maneuvering, and the sensation of falling. And yet with each successive jump, they learn some new skill—how to turn their bodies, how to tack at extreme speeds—and with each jump, they look less and less funny and more and more impressive. By the end of their training they aren't buddies taking a skydiving class for fun, they are warriors preparing for a mission to be inserted behind enemy lines. It is high altitude so the enemy can't hear the plane, and low opening to spend the minimum amount of time as an open target. They're descending through the night to rescue those who are in jeopardy and to wreak havoc upon the oppressors.

This reminds me of what Jesus did when he was born into this world. 1 John 3:8 says, “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (NASB). Jesus came to destroy what is keeping you captive. And liberation requires destruction.

There is a spiritual world influencing ours. There is no other explanation why something as beautiful as humanity will do such inhumane things to each other—genocide, war, exploitation, callous indifference. God created the world to work according to his established laws so that all can flourish in the abundance of life, but the devil has been trying to upend all of that from the beginning. Our first parents believed his lies and rebelled against their maker and the world broke. We broke, and all of our foolish hearts went dark. But God did not leave us in that place. He created a solution for our sin through the Savior. From the beginning God planned to send a boy to save us and our hope is in this hero (see Genesis 3:15).

In the gospels we see Jesus’ arrival as a landed invasion. Herod is threatened by the arrival of the new king and slaughters babies (see Matthew 2), and at Jesus’ baptism where God declares, “That’s my son,” Satan immediately pursues him and tries to get Jesus off course as he tempts Jesus in the wilderness (see Matthew 3:16–17; 4:1–11). Jesus fends Satan off with the power of God’s Word.

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus declares that he is fulfilling God’s plan to set captives free (see Luke 4:18–21). He stepped out to push the darkness back. He came to women who were captured by shame, and he washed their shame away. He brought redemption to men who had broken and fractured every relationship. In Luke 11:21–22 Jesus describes himself as the one who came to destroy the strong one, the devil, and set captives free.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he said, “Now the ruler of this world will be cast out” (John 12:31 NASB). Jesus destroyed the works of the devil, not by perpetrating violence, but by taking violence upon himself. Jesus took the weapon out of the devil’s hand by taking on the same flesh that you and I have, by taking on the death that we were held captive by, and by defeating it and rising. Jesus took all the poison of our just condemnation so we might be set free. He nailed our just condemnation to himself on the cross, and in doing so he disarmed the rulers and authorities and triumphed over Satan (see Colossians 2:13–15).

C. Conclusion

When Christ is your victor and your King, when he comes to rescue you, he implants his very seed in you and you become something else. The very nature of God permeates you and you begin to become like him. What he destroyed, you no longer revel in; you become and live something new. It doesn't need to rule you anymore or determine your destiny. You are loved by a holy God and victory is your destiny. Boldly pursue the victory he's purchased for you, and when Jesus makes his final appearance, he will wipe away the very presence of sin.

AWAY AND TOWARD



A. Introduction

When you survey a battlefield, it's important to assess your situation before you can implement a successful strategy.

In the Christian life, we are in a battle to resist the devil but also to build intimacy with God—to manage the chaos of distractions such as rival thoughts, addictions, and competing lusts as we try to do good while struggling with the evil that tries to thwart our efforts. We need a strategy for the spiritual life where we are equipped to be successful.

B. Teaching

One Navy Seal training exercise simulates a situation where enemy combatants are holding hostages are in a house. The Seal team, using paintballs, are tasked to eliminate the threat, rescue all hostages, and establish peace in the situation. It may be a simulation, but many elements feel very real—the paintballs fly fast and hard and hurt, the sounds and smoke assault the senses, and people are running everywhere.

At first the situation looks like chaos, but if you watch carefully there is a beauty in the Seal's strategy. They are aggressive yet patient, purposeful and graceful. They eliminate targets while never themselves being one. Within seconds there is peace where there had been chaos.

The Christian life is like this, or it's meant to be. The pursuit of intimacy with God occurs in the context of adversity. The spiritual life is hard and many of us get discouraged by the situation.

We thought that when we came to Jesus, it would be easier—evil desires and addictions would be uprooted and discouragement would flee—and we’re discouraged.

Some of us realized early on that the Christian life would be hard. We know words like war, fight, and struggle would be part of it, but we need a strategy to move the spiritual life that is more like a Navy Seal. When you came to Jesus, you were set free, but not free from the struggle. He’s freed you to struggle. Before you were just a victim, now you have the opportunity to be a victor. It will be difficult, but we have to engage in war in order to find rest. This war isn’t about trying harder, it’s about learning to struggle well.

The spiritual life for the one who has tasted the grace of God through faith in Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is one movement with two parts: away from some things and towards others. Second Timothy 2:22 says, “Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (NIV). As we flee some things and pursue others we are part of the movement that theologians call sanctification. To sanctify something means to make it holy, and the word holy means set apart. The definition of holy has two parts: set apart from some things and for other things. This sanctification is more than moving away from the devil and over to God’s side. God is not waiting over there for you to get your act together. When you come to Christ, God says, “I will never leave you. I will never forsake you” (see Hebrews 13:5). He will always be near you.

There are times you may feel far away from God, but God is still with you. You may need to uproot ways of thinking and living that isolate you from intimacy with God, but God is still there. As you cultivate, move towards, ways of thinking and living that promote intimacy with God, you will enjoy his presence.

You could call this movement the big no and the big yes. Some people only see faith in Christ as a bunch of nos, but that is only part of it. We say a no in order to enjoy the true and better yes. I release what is thin and flimsy and fragile and temporary to embrace what is beautiful, robust, and soul satisfying. There can be progress, but there will be struggle.

Progress begins with ripping out the weeds in our lives. Then we can till up the ground, fertilize it, plant seed, and watch the good seed begin to grow. Progress comes over time. Others may only see a snapshot moment and not see the progress and judge you. You don't know in a moment what God is doing in a human life.

C. Conclusion

If the Spirit of God is in you, you now hate the sin you used to love and you begin to love the things of God you used to hate. That's one of the great evidences that you're really his. You will struggle, you will stumble, it will be imperfect, but over time the things of God will grow in your life. Pray and ask God to show you things in your life that need to be uprooted and killed. Also ask God what things need to be planted and cultivated to breathe life into your relationship with him.

DOWNSTREAM AND UPSTREAM

A. Introduction

In Jesus' life, the wilderness was a place where he overcame temptation against the devil and where he cultivated devotion with his Father. When we are in wilderness places, we need to learn how to identify and overcome temptations.

B. Teaching

At the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, after he was baptized by his cousin John and the Spirit of God descended on him as a dove, Jesus went out into the wilderness and endured a 40-day fast. In that moment when "he was hungry" (Matthew 4:2 NIV), Satan tempted him and Jesus put Satan in his place.

Because Jesus Christ has disarmed the rulers and authorities, because he's made a public spectacle of the devil, you'd better believe he hates Jesus. And if you've aligned yourself with King Jesus, he hates you and he's coming for you. He'll use the tactic he used with Jesus and wait until you are vulnerable and weak.

Trials trigger temptation, and trials are inevitable (see James 1:2–15). When you are hungry, or angry, or lonely, Satan offers sweet release that comes with a cost that you really don't want to pay. If we know the enemy's strategy, we need to consider having our own. If his goal is to get us to sin and take us away from intimacy and enjoyment with God, he's going to make sin look attractive. He knows you, how you're wired, and what you're inclined to be tempted by. He's watched the game film on you.

James 1:14 says, “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” (ESV). Lured speaks of the mind’s attention and enticed speaks of the heart’s affection. And then, when you enact the will, you sin and take a step in a direction you are never meant to go. There are lures specific for each of us, so be a student of yourself.

There are four things we can do to respond to the strategies of the enemy. First, we eliminate the moment. Draw your battle line where you know you are tempted (see Matthew 26:41). If Satan can kickstart a cue to start up your craving, you’re more likely to give in to it. And so, one of the ways to stop that is to become an architect of your environment. Romans 13:14 says, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (ESV). If one moment always leads to that moment of sin, you need to eliminate the moment. Get it out of there. Don’t wait. Don’t see how you’ll fight.

The second strategy we need to use is to look downstream. If a temptation is coming at you, pause and consider what will be the outcome. Where will it lead? James 1:14–15 says, “Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (NIV). When temptation is triggered, it will end in destruction, the absence of life.

Before you consummate with desire, look downstream and see if it will give birth to a consequence you want. If you don’t like the outputs in your life, consider your inputs.

The third strategy we need to use is to look upstream and see what causes us to want to engage in a temptation. If I look downstream and see death, I need to look upstream and see deception. Temptation speaks lies. It tells me that what I’m about to do will alleviate a discomfort and will be good to me. I need to look upstream and see what lies or discouragements are messing with me. Satan will start with some disappointments, frustrations and setbacks, then he’ll kickstart some resentments. After these build up a sense of discouragement, the pull of enticement will come when you are primed for a fall. Wisdom calls us to look upstream and strike at the root of sin before it begins to grow the fruit of destruction.

The fourth strategy is to remember that the greatest defense is a good offense. Every good gift comes from God and God does not tempt anyone (see James 1:13–17). The lie that launches a million sins is that God is not a good Father who loves you. The best way to resist the lure of the devil is to have a healthy, thriving intimacy with God, to enjoy the love of your God, and bask in the immensity of it.

C. Conclusion

Take a moment and consider, “How does the enemy get to me?” Be a student of yourself. And then take the challenge to forsake the deceptive streams and go and feast and enjoy the inexhaustible fountain of living water in your Father.



CONSISTENCY AND CREATIVITY

A. Introduction

Jesus would often slip away into the wild places to pray. And often when God wanted to shape his saints, like Abraham, Moses, the nation of Israel, and David, he would carry them away out into desolate places to get them away from distraction and to cultivate their devotion.

B. Teaching

We resist the lure of the enemy by enjoying the love of the Father through the cultivation of devotion. This devotion dislodges temptation by replacing it with a more beautiful thing—the love of the Father.

The story of Hosea is a beautiful example of the redeeming love of the Father. God calls Hosea to marry a woman named Gomer. She forsakes her husband and indulges in the pleasures the city has to offer, but like so many of us who have indulged in temptation, it offers to give so much but ends up taking more than it gives. Gomer ends up feeling used, is stripped naked, and is being sold on an auction block. God tells Hosea to buy his wife back at full price and uses Hosea and Gomer's relationship as a picture of God's relationship with his wayward kids—of the salvation God offers us. (See Hosea 1:1–11 and 3:1–5.)

So many of us have gone down all kinds of wayward roads for satisfaction, and it's taken more than it's given. Modern technology has made that allure as close as our phones. All the distractions the world offers mitigate against intimacy with God and work against human flourishing. Intimacy used to come in the quiet moments in our cars, and the quiet moments at home lying in bed—it was just us and God. And as we would speak to him, that moment of reflection led to insight and innovation about our lives.

We must now go to war to find rest. We can set our minds on thoughts of God to stir our affections with a love for God to take actions that cultivate the intimacy with God we were made for. God often calls us to the wilderness to cut through the world's distractions and cultivate a love for him. We have to war for a rhythm of rest. Jesus helps us, because Jesus developed that kind of rhythm in his earthly ministry. Jesus had three years to change the world, and yet he never neglected a rhythm of moving into the city for intensity of ministry and then out into the wilderness to cultivate intimacy with his Father (see Mark 1:32–35 and Luke 5:15–16).

Just as Jesus developed that rhythm, we need to do the same. The best fight against deception and temptation is to cultivate devotion. To do this, you need to think in terms of consistency and creativity. You need a consistent rhythm of loading your mind with thoughts of God. As you do this, your affection for God is fired up and you are driven to pursue the glory of God in the world. Find a time and a place you can sit with the Lord and prepare yourself to face what your day brings. You need a time when you will be undistracted, a place where you won't be disrupted, and then you need a plan to connect with God and His Word. As you focus on the thoughts of God, your heart and mind will change and the way you live and move in the world will change.

Along with consistency, you will need to do it with creativity. Find different ways to enjoy God through enjoying all that he's made. Go on a date with God outside of your normal devotional time: go to a park, or spend time contemplating the brevity of life in a graveyard as you pray, walk as you pray, listen to an audio version of the Bible on your drive to work. Be creative and find out what draws you closer to God. Find what works for you.

Cultivating and enjoying a devotion to God is the surest protection against the allure of sin. Saint Augustine wrestled with sexual addiction when he contemplated conversion to Christianity. When he realized that he believed who Jesus says he is, he understood that he needed to know him. By placing his faith in Jesus and pursuing intimacy with him the temptation to sexual addiction in his life was dislodged. He replaced the addiction with a more beautiful thing. There is nothing in existence more beautiful and soul-satisfying than your God.

C. Conclusion

Load your mind with thoughts of God so your heart will be stirred with affections for him, and then run in the paths of his commands because he set your heart free. How can you harness your time and energy to pursue devotion to your King? Make a list and then execute it for his glory, and for your good.

FOCUS AND UNITY

A. Introduction

The Spartans were an ancient warrior culture. While there's much to not emulate about the Spartans, there are two things they had going for them. Number one, they were a very focused people. They were entirely focused on warfare and they had perfected a method of battle that would devastate enemies. They would form up in ranks, and then the men in the back would put their shields in the lower back of the man in front of them. When the signal was given, they would all commence running in unison. This had the effect of creating a massive human battering ram that would decimate any army. Along with their focus, they had unity.

B. Teaching

One of the greatest gifts God has given us is us, one another, because true spirituality is always worked out in the context of community. Wherever you have a group of people who are focused and unified, you have a very dangerous crew. Why? Because cultures change when the community of faith has focus and has unity.

The book of Philippians describes a group of people that had a common focus. They knew what it's like to be forgiven of guilt by God's grace and to love God (see Philippians 1:3–7), but they lacked unity. They had trouble getting along like many Christians today.

The Bible says that God gives each of us gifts and roles to use for one purpose: to work together to grow into maturity so that we look like Christ. We can't look like Christ without each other (see Ephesians 1:11–13). You are to "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27 NIV) because your citizenship is in heaven (see 3:20).

You have the ultimate hero who fought for you. You have the ultimate savior who rescued you, so live in a way that's worthy of him. What does that look like? It looks like unity. We love the people he fought and died for (see Philippians 1:27). Because true spirituality works itself out in the context of community, we need each other. We help each other stand firm in one spirit when the onslaught of pressure from the world comes. We can link arms with our brothers and sisters who will fight alongside of us, hold us up, and protect us from temptation.

You may have sin—the things you struggle with—that you don't want to confess to anybody. You want to handle it on your own and you may be able to for a time, but when you're weary and discouraged an opportunity is likely to lead to failure. Many of you have lived in that cycle your entire life and God is giving you a way out. It's called us.

Yes, Jesus forgives your sins when you confess them to him, but do you want healing? You need us for that. James says, "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (5:16 esv). You can have the perception of holiness on the outside and act like a good Christian, while inside you're struggling and getting beat up in the dark. Don't you want to have the same integrity behind closed doors as you do in public? According to James, we need "one another" to confess to. We have to want holiness more to take the risk to confess to one another.

When this happens, we must hit our knees and pray for each other. Freedom, strength, and rest come as we make war on each other's behalf. We need each other for more than keeping sin off of us; we have a mission in front of us for the glory of God. We need to motivate and help one another to run in the paths of the commands of God. The Spirit of God has scattered his gifts among us. No one has them all, so we can each use ours to build one another up. We each have a place where we can be fully ourselves in the context of community.

As we stay focused, God will bring unity. You may have to turn away from discouraging voices and bad advice. You may need to build an inner ring of friends who want to know God in order to flourish in your faith and reach out to those who don't know Jesus. The inner ring you build, the people you stand with and strive with, need to be people who flee youthful lust and pursue righteousness out of a pure heart along with you. They need to strive for the glory of Christ along with you.

C. Conclusion

Stay focused and ask God to bring unity. The most effective way we can make war—the most effective way we can rest—is to run together with the saints God gives us. One of the greatest gifts God has given us is us. True spirituality always works itself out in the context of community.



KEEP IN STEP

A. Introduction

A popular pastime in mountainous and wide-open spaces is hang gliding. Novices can pair up with an instructor and be pulled up into the skies by a cable that unclips when they become airborne. The ride along the cable is bumpy and nauseating, but once it is released the glider is one with the sky and the ride is peaceful with only the wind and the birds for company. With the help of a thermal, the glider can ascend to such heights that cars on the ground look like little toys. There is something thrilling about ascending to heights unreachable on your own because of the power of the wind. And that's so much like our desire to be spiritual.

B. Teaching

If you look at surveys today, almost everyone will say they want a spiritual element to their life. They want an unseen force to lift them to heights of human existence they cannot reach by their own power. But what does it mean to be spiritual? According to scripture, to truly be spiritual we need to be rightly related to the Spirit of God. We need the wind of God to elevate us to where we cannot reach on our own—the power of God's Spirit working through our lives.

In the Old Testament, the word spirit is the same word as wind and breath. It is a sign of life as described in the Spirit's presence at creation (see Genesis 1:2). God is separate from his creation, but he's intimate with it, hovering right over the surface. God enacted his will upon creation and began to form it into an environment conducive for life. In Genesis 2, God took the dust of the earth, formed it into a man, and breathed life into him (see verse 7).

When people sinned, we became just dust. God's Spirit was gone. The closeness of God was now distant, yet God didn't give up on his people. In the Old Testament God gave them the law through Moses, and the law is good, but people are powerless to keep the law. The empowering of the Spirit of God is not there. Through the prophet Ezekiel God predicted the coming of his Spirit to his people (see Ezekiel 36:24–27). That's the great hope of the Old Testament—that one day the wind will return.

When John the Baptist arrived on the scene he said that the God's Spirit will come with his Son, Jesus (see John 1:19–34). And when Jesus gave his first sermon he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Luke 4:18 ESV). Jesus came to bring the wind back. Jesus said to Nicodemus that "the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8 NIV). Do you hear the analogy? You can't control the wind, but you need it. You need the Spirit to blow, to bring you to life. Jesus, to his everlasting praise, went to the cross, took on our sin and shame, and it buried him in the dirt. And when he rose victorious over the grave, he came to his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22 NIV).

Jesus returned the wind that we had lost by removing the barrier that was in the way. The cross of Jesus Christ wasn't just about removing sin; it was about getting sin out of the way so the Spirit could return the intimate animating presence of God inside his people again (see Galatians 4:4–6).

If we put faith in Christ, the Spirit lives in us, a deposit guaranteeing what's to come. It also means we can walk by the Spirit. He leads us and he empowers us. He leads by showing us truth through scripture. Scripture is inspired by his Spirit (see 2 Timothy 3:16). It is literally the breath of God on a page—the Spirit of God inspiring the Word of God. You will know what the Spirit says when you know the words that he inspired. We also know we are walking by the Spirit when we have unity with other believers for God's glory and for our good.

We are empowered by the Spirit of God when the fruit of the Spirit is evident in our lives (see Galatians 5:22–23). If you want the fruit, you go to where the fruit is. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians he says, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit” (5:25 esv). Being empowered by the Spirit is a step-by-step process of dependence on him to provide what we can’t do on our own. Fruit like love, joy, and peace are the result.

C. Conclusion

The only way we’re going to war and rest with success is to have the Scriptures in our minds, the saints around us, and the Spirit of God breathing life through us. We need all these strategies and tactics to make war. We need the Spirit of God, his intimate animating presence, to blow through our lives—and he will if we live by the Spirit.