

## Introduction

New City Church turned fifteen on April 24. For fifteen years I’ve had a front row seat to see what God has been doing in the lives of his people. It has been an amazing journey. There have been bumps and bruises along the way, of course, but as we’ve been seeing in 1 Peter, pain is inevitable. Suffering is part of life in a fallen world. Suffering is not final, however.

One of the things I get to do occasionally, as a result of New City being a church, is speak to pastoral residents at Calvary Church. As you know, I was a pastoral resident at Calvary. Will came to us as a pastoral resident at Calvary.

When I meet with them, they often begin asking questions, in part because I’m further along the road of vocational ministry to the church, and in part because I was once where they were—though where they are today is far more organized than when I was a resident! I usually tell them they’re asking at the wrong time. If they have questions about ministry or church planting, they should have asked me fifteen years ago, back when I knew everything!

I recall reading a book or an article years ago. I don’t remember the medium, but I remember the story. A bright young man was called by a church in a medium-sized town. The church began to grow and expand its ministries and programs. His dreams and aspirations and ambitions were all seeming to be fulfilled in real time. He and the church were creating quite a buzz in the community.

The story is told by an older, more experienced pastor in that town. A group of them had been meeting together for quite some time and decided to invite the young man to join them. As they got to know him, they quickly discovered that he had not yet faced any adversity. They knew. They had once been there. They weren’t jaded. They weren’t cynical or callous. They recognized that all his outward exuberance had been untested, and they knew that such exuberance would not be the thing that could sustain him when adversity would strike. And *it would*.

There’s something about suffering that tests you. It proves you. As Peter says, judgment—which is God’s evaluation of people—begins in the household of God, among his people. Suffering, not ministry “success”, is what proves the genuineness of faith. Peter began his letter by writing of the various trials in life that reveal the genuineness of our faith. He returns to that idea—albeit indirectly—in verse 6 of chapter 5.

<sup>1</sup> Pet 5:6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,<sup>7</sup> casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. <sup>8</sup> Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. <sup>10</sup> And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ,

will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. <sup>11</sup> To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 5:6–11

## Humble Yourselves

Let's quickly summarize what Peter has written. Their suffering should not be a surprise to them for they have been called to share in the sufferings of Christ. This suffering they experience is not because God has forgotten them or because God does not care. Rather, their suffering is part of God's judgment that begins with his people. Rather than punishment for sin, judgment is God's evaluation of them. Their participation in the sufferings of Christ demonstrates God's evaluation: they are in Christ for they suffer for Christ. Their suffering for Christ is evidence they are in Christ.

This is why his warnings against suffering for sin or for meddling are so strong. They're going to suffer; they should be sure they suffer for faithfulness to Jesus and not because of evil they do. To help them remain faithful to the Lord he says God has given elders to a church, men who will shepherd the flock of God by being examples to them. This includes suffering in the same ways they suffer and therefore showing the church *how* to suffer well.

Each one should clothe themselves with humility. That is, they must not think highly of themselves but ought to regard themselves accurately. This doesn't require self-loathing, but it does mean each one will recognize he or she is not the most important person in a room. There is simply no room for self-centeredness. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Then we come to our text. Humility is thinking low of one's self. Again, this is not the same as self-doubt or self-hatred. It is not the refusal to accept one's skill level or giftedness. Several times in Scripture believers are commanded to think rightly about themselves. Romans 12 says no one should think *more highly* of himself than he ought. Instead, we should have a proper self-assessment.

Humility is our posture toward one another. We clothe ourselves with humility, which is to count others more significant than ourselves. It isn't to see ourselves as *insignificant*, but to count others as *more significant*. In verse 6 Peter issues a closely related command, though the scope of the command is quite different: humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God.

In Scripture the references to God's outstretched hand or his mighty hand all have to do with the display of his power and might. God is *omnipotent*. There is no limit to his power. He created the universe with a word; there is nothing he cannot do with his universe. No one can force his hand and no one can stop his hand. Peter says to humble yourselves under his mighty hand. Humility is a proper understanding of who we are in relation to God.

There are exactly two things every human being needs to understand, and when I say every human being, I include Adam and Eve because they seemed to forget or even ignore these two truths. First, there is a God. Second, you are not him. If you grasp this, then everything else will begin to fall into place, for you will be able to receive God's self-revelation.

This is the faithful response to suffering. It is the acknowledgment that God could end it any time of his choosing and if he has not yet ended the suffering, he has good reasons that are beyond our comprehension. To humble yourselves under his mighty hand is to recognize

that he is Lord and you are not. It is to surrender your entire being to him, acknowledging he is good even in the midst of suffering.

To humble yourself is to choose to walk the path God has laid out for you. That path is long and winding, full of obstacles and difficulties. Rather than fret and moan and whine about the path, to humble yourself is to walk that path in faith, knowing that even though you walk in the valley of the shadow of death, you will fear no evil. Why? Because God is with you.

Peter gives a reason for this self-humbling: so that at the proper time he may exalt you. At the proper time God *will* exalt you. He will lift you up out of that valley of the shadow of death and he will place you on the mountain. In light of this knowledge, humble yourself under his mighty hand. This self-humbling is the means God will use to bring about that exaltation, for only his people will humble themselves.

This is getting back to Peter's point that judgment begins at the household of God. God is, right now, judging. This judgment, or this *evaluation* is God separating the sheep from the goats, his people from those who are not his people. His people are those who humble themselves. The outcome of this self-humbling will be the exaltation of his people. They will be lifted up and out of suffering and placed into eternal blessing and prosperity.

How does one humble one's self in the face of such suffering, though? Yes, the proper motivation—future exaltation—is given, but how? Peter says you humble yourself by casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. One New Testament scholar explained:

Many anxieties result from professing faith in Christ in a polytheistic society that is hostile to the exclusive claims of the gospel. The loss of status and respect, loss of family standing, loss of friends, perhaps even loss of one's livelihood and, in extreme cases, of one's life—these are real possibilities for the Christians of Asia Minor. Peter instructs his readers to cast these anxieties on God (5:7), another way of saying they must entrust themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good (4:19). Jesus taught that anxiety about life is one of the impediments that can choke out God's word (Mark 4:19). For God's word to be fruitful, there must be a self-forgetfulness that is based on trust in God regardless of circumstances. "Worry, anxiety for oneself and striving to secure one's own life, which are marked by fear, is lifted from those who are called to faith," lifted by knowledge of God's personal care and concern for them (Goppelt 1993: 359). God is neither unaware nor unconcerned about what his people are going through in order to remain faithful to Christ.

Karen H. Jobes, BECNT

Throughout this letter Peter has been reminding them of the gospel of our Lord Jesus, how he has done everything necessary for life and salvation, how he loves and demonstrates that love. He reminds them that their present circumstances are not evidence God has forgotten or does not care. Rather, their future, which is secure in Christ, is the evidence that even in their difficult present circumstances, God is working to bring about the fullness of their salvation. The right response to this is humility.

## Be Right-Minded and Resist

In verse 8 Peter issues his second command: be sober-minded and be watchful. He said the same thing back in chapter 4. To be sober-minded is to think rightly. It is the idea of thinking in a well-balanced way. You're not given to one extreme or the other. You're not so overwhelmed by suffering that you weep and wail all the time and you're not so oblivious to your suffering that you act as though nothing were wrong. You have clear thinking about your situation *and* about the Lord.

Part of this clear thinking is watchfulness. Readiness. Wakefulness. On the alert. Prepared. For what, exactly? He says your adversary—your real, true adversary, the devil—is prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

Remember the cause and source of their suffering. This was not official governmental persecution, but a soft persecution. They were losing friends and business associates. Because they would refuse to participate in the social activities that were widely believed to be in the public interest others began to see these believers as hostile to the public good. They began to accuse them of being filled with hate toward their fellow man.

Believers would not participate in the meetings of the trade guilds as these were filled with sacrifices to various gods, drunkenness, immorality, and such. They would not participate in various civic activities that involved sacrifice to idols. They gladly loved their neighbors and remained as involved in their communities as they could, but because they worshiped Jesus and only Jesus they were being rejected by others. The problem wasn't that they worshiped Jesus, but that they worshiped Jesus *alone*.

It's important to note that Peter here indicates another reason why they should not meddle: their neighbors and business partners and such were not their adversaries. Those who were speaking ill of the followers of Jesus were not the enemy. The devil is the enemy. Again notice the profound agreement between Peter and Paul. Paul wrote:

Eph 6:12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12

Part of clear thinking is recognizing who the enemy is, and your enemy isn't your neighbor who has a very different set of values and ethics than you. It certainly isn't your neighbor who votes for that *other* party. The *other party* isn't your enemy! Rather than the enemy being ordinary human beings, the enemy is a spiritual being, or rather an entire group of hostile spiritual beings who are opposed to God and his gospel. These beings are directly influencing entire nations and are stirring up those nations against the followers of Christ, yet the people in those nations are not the enemy.

The real adversary is the devil, the one who stands opposed to God. Peter says you must be sober-minded and watchful. These are states of mind. You must be aware. You must recognize the present state of things. There *is* an enemy, but your neighbor ain't it! Those who slander you are not truly the enemy. Those who mock you or call you names for your faithfulness to Jesus may well be participating in the devil's antics, but the devil is the adversary. We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, and your neighbor is flesh and blood. Therefore we do not wrestle against our neighbors.

Remember the central point to this letter: keep your conduct among the nations honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. If these believers completely withdraw from unbelievers, their conduct would not be *among* the nations, and would not be visible. Even though unbelievers may be the immediate source of the hostility, they are not the enemy. The adversary captures many victims in his attempt to destroy God’s work in this world.

Having properly identified the real enemy by calling them to be sober-minded and to be watchful, Peter issues his third command: resist him. Resist the devil. This resistance is only possible by being firm in your faith. Those who humble themselves under the mighty hand of God are those trusting him. Their faith shields them for they are surrendering to God’s care and protection.

To resist him is to guard your thoughts. Here he doesn’t mean guard your thoughts from sin, whether envy or lust or anger. Yes, do that, but that’s not what he means here. We must guard our thoughts from vain imaginings—from thinking that is detached from the truth of God and therefore thinking that is oriented away from God. It’s one thing to be *mistaken*; it’s quite another to indulge wrong thinking. We must resist him by guarding our thoughts.

We must be sober-minded and be watchful. Being sober-minded and watchful, resist the enemy of God who seeks to lie and distort and deceive. Remain firm in your faith, thinking straight—that is, knowing who God is and what he has done for you. Having the right perspective on this world is a necessary component to resisting the evil one.

Peter adds yet more context. Resist the real adversary by trusting in the Lord and by knowing that “the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world”. Remember what he said back in chapter 4:

1 Pet 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

1 Peter 4:12

Don’t be surprised that God’s path for your life includes suffering! It isn’t a strange thing for “your brotherhood throughout the whole world” is experiencing the same kinds of suffering. This suffering is the sufferings of Christ, shared by his body on earth. This suffering is a shared suffering, even if your path through this life is different from his or from hers or from theirs. If you suffer for faithfulness to Christ, your suffering is a shared suffering. Studies have shown that shared suffering creates deeper and longer-lasting bonds than shared prosperity. God knows what he is doing. We share in our sufferings with all believers.

Be sober-minded. Think clearly about this. Resist the devil. Have God’s perspective on your suffering. What is that perspective? Without minimizing the pain and without suggesting it’s not really all that bad, he says in verse 10 that after you have suffered *a little while*, God will rescue you. A little while.

All suffering believers experience is temporary. It’s only temporary. This is the right perspective. This doesn’t mean you’re not hurting. It doesn’t mean the pain doesn’t last a really, really long time. In perspective, you will suffer *a little while*. The comparison isn’t to this life; the comparison is to eternity.

## The God of All Grace

What happens after a little while of suffering? Peter says the God of all grace, the very one who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will rescue you. Think of what that means. Clement of Alexandria said,

He is called the God of all grace because he is good and the giver of all good things.

Clement of Alexandria, Adumbrations

The word “grace” means gift. God is the God of all gifts—all good things. As James says, every good and perfect gift comes from his hand. Remember the significant and profound gift that Peter began his letter with.

<sup>1</sup> Pet 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup> so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:3–7

In the moment no suffering feels like a gift, yet through that suffering comes God’s profound gifts. God causes us to be born again, granting us eternal life. God promises us an inheritance that does not depend on us and is therefore kept secure for us. God is guarding us through faith—his gift to us—for the fullness of salvation that is yet to be revealed. Notice again how he says “though now for *a little while* you have been grieved by various trials. It won’t be long, church! Suffering has an expiration date, and when that date comes the fullness of God’s promises will be here.

Peter says the God of all grace, the giver of all good gifts, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. These words are all closely related concepts. God will restore us by putting all things right and by eliminating the source of our suffering. The time is coming when death itself will die and we will put on immortality. This restoration is the complete transformation of their character.

God will confirm us. That is, he will cause us to become firm and unchanging in belief and action. How many times has each one of wondered when we will just *get it*, when we will stop struggling? How many times have you and I wondered why we keep going back to the same ol’ sins that we *know* can never satisfy? How many times have we longed for the day we stop this foolish cycle? That day is coming, for God will confirm us!

He will strengthen us. He will make us *strong*. Whereas their weakness was demonstrated through their suffering, one day this weakness will be made real strength. No longer will they be trampled upon by others, but they will reign with Christ forever and ever. Finally,

God will establish them. They will be placed on an immovable foundation and they will never again stumble and fall. They will be immovable.

What is profoundly interesting and deeply encouraging is that Peter does not use the optative here, but the indicative. Normally when you wrote a closing in a letter, you'd write something to the effect of, "May God strengthen you and cause you to be firm"—something like that. The optative mood in Greek expresses wish or potential. Daniel Wallace, who *literally* wrote the book on Greek grammar, says the optative expresses "an *obtainable wish* or a *prayer*" (Daniel B. Wallace, "Greek Grammar"). If Peter had used the optative—a thoroughly legitimate way to communicate—he would have been expressing his desire for God to do these things. He does not use the optative mood but the indicative mood.

Peter *indicates* this *will* happen. This is no wishful thinking on the part of the apostle. It is his prophetic declaration that this is what God *will* do. It is a promise, a sure declaration. Imagine being in Asia Minor suffering for your faith. Then Peter's letter is read to the church one Sunday morning. A native Greek speaker would catch the significance of the indicative when the optative would be expected. The God of all grace *will certainly* restore you. The God of all grace *will certainly* confirm you. The God of all grace *will certainly* strengthen you. The God of all grace *will certainly* establish you.

While these verbs are indeed future tense, there is a real sense in which God is doing this *now*, in the present. Peter Davids writes this about the timing of these verbs:

While the verbs involved are future (not the optatives found in most closing blessings), it is clear from their content that some of this is taking place even within their present suffering; that is, God is producing their good out of their enemies' intended evil.

Peter Davids, NICNT

God is presently active in their lives—God, the *God of all grace*. He himself will do these things, both in the resurrection and now in this life. The fullness of the promises are future, yet God is actively working to bring these things about even in their present circumstances. Yes, they are suffering, but even in the suffering God is at work, bringing about his purposes. His purposes involve the blessing of his people.

This means that even in the midst of suffering we experience blessing. Even in the midst of sadness we experience blessing. Even in the midst of sorrow we experience blessing. We may not be able to see it in the moment, but this doesn't change what is true. This only means we are temporarily blinded by grief; God is still at work, still pouring out blessings, still causing all things to "work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose".

## Application

How interesting that Peter ends his letter the way he does. He still has a closing paragraph, but verse 11 is the end of the letter proper, and it's a doxology—a word of praise. In light of their present suffering, in light of future suffering that all will experience, in light of their ongoing struggles of life, *To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

This doxology is yet another call to faith, to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. The word for “dominion” means the “ability to exhibit or express resident strength” (BDAG, *κράτος*). To God be the ability to exhibit or express his very real strength. God has the ability to demonstrate his power at any time of his choosing.

We humble ourselves under his mighty hand when we acknowledge that the time of his choosing may not match our desired time for such a display. Humility is our surrender to his wisdom and love, understanding fully that God has already demonstrated his love when he sent Jesus to die for us. Our present circumstances do not erase the fullness of this demonstration of love, now matter how long it seems to take for him to demonstrate his power over our circumstances. Both are true.

To close a letter written to encourage believers to faithfully endure suffering while remaining faithfully present in a foreign land that is increasingly hostile to them and to Jesus, Peter expresses joy and gratitude and love and worship to the one in whose hand is the ability to express his power. He ends his letter in *praise* to Almighty God.

What Peter has been urging these believers in Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia to do is to continue trusting the Lord. Remain faithful to him. Trust that his mighty hand can act at any time to change their circumstances, in complete faith that he will.

We live in the in-between time. The Lord has conquered death. He is seated at the right hand of the Father. He is currently reigning over this ever-growing kingdom. One day he will return and will bring about all that he has promised by finishing the work he began in his resurrection. On the day his glory is revealed, all will see him and all will recognize he who he is. That promise, the promise of the full and complete revelation of Jesus, is the power you and I need to make it through the day. Karen Jobes put it so succinctly.

Resources for living life today are found in the knowledge of the ultimate end.  
Karen H. Jobes, BECNT

The ultimate end is the full revelation of Jesus. That is the moment he chooses to reveal the extent of his mighty power. That is the moment he raises us from the dead and we put on immortality with him. That is the moment he chooses to exalt his people who will reign with him forever and ever. That is the moment he will wipe away every tear from every eye, and death will be no more.

That moment is coming. It isn't here yet, but he is working among us. He is, even now, restoring us, confirming us, strengthening us, and establishing us. That moment will be here in an instant, when the Lord Jesus returns. On that day, even those who reject him in this life will see his glory. On the day of visitation *everyone* will see and acknowledge his glory.

Those who see it and acknowledge his glory in this life will be glorified with him. They will participate in his eternal kingdom and there will be joy evermore. Until then, let us continue to praise and worship our God. Let us continue to guard our thinking by rejecting any thoughts that are contrary to God's path set out for us. Let us align our thinking to God's way of thinking and respond to him in faith.

We have no idea what the next fifteen years will bring. We do not know God's path for us as individuals, let alone as a church. My deepest desire for New City Church and for each person who is part of New City is that we remain faithful and steadfast, come what may.

We have seen the Lord show up time and time again, and we know he holds us firmly and securely in his grasp.

In the words of the Anglican prayer book, “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”