

West Valley Church
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On This Rock

Part Eight

1 Peter 5:1-14

This has been an emotionally and spiritually exhausting week, hasn't it? I hope you were able to read the statement that we sent out last week about what our position is as a Church of the Nazarene, and about how we can respond with sensitivity and confidence. If you didn't get that, then please – contact us through email or calling the office, or now if you are watching this on “church on line” you can contact your host or use the “connect” button. It's important for us a church to be united in our love for Christ, our love for each other, and as we love and serve those around us, especially people of color who suffer from injustice, and as we seek to change systems and structures that keep people oppressed.

Today we continue in our sermon series called, “On This Rock – Peter and the Church.” So far we've been going through Peter's first letter, and then last week on the day of Pentecost we sort of took a break and looked at Peter's life overall as an example to us to be Spirit filled. Today we are finishing up Peter's first letter by looking at chapter 5, before next week when we start into 2nd Peter.

Chapter five talks about the life of the Church, with instructions for leaders and for members before Peter makes his concluding comments.

Today we honored our graduates and we saw photos of some of our church family. These are reminders to us of the things we have together as a church, especially while we are all separated and still quarantined, but I don't have to tell you that these are very difficult days for the church, as we come face to face with our society's deep needs and issues. I remind you that Peter wrote this letter to the Christians who were scattered and not able to worship together due to hardships, suffering, and persecution. So as we look at this chapter, we can easily connect to the context of it, can't we?

Structurally, this passage is easily broken down into some topics that I want to reflect on, starting with Peter's instructions to...

1. Leaders

Let me read this part of the letter to you, and then I want to talk about it a little bit. This is verses 1-4 of chapter five:

“To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but

eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.” (1 Peter 5:1-4, niv)

Peter is giving clear direction to leaders, and I pray that as you read that, those are characteristics that you see in me, in our pastoral team, and in our Leadership Team – the Church Board that you elected back in February when we were able to be in church together (seems like a long time ago, doesn't it?).

So who are these “elders”? Well he's not referring to age as much as spiritual maturity. Those with Jewish background understood it: there were twelve tribes of Israel, and every tribe had its elders. It started when God saw the burden was too great for Moses, so he placed the Holy Spirit in the lives of other leaders to help Moses lead the people (Numbers 11:16-30). In Egyptian and Greek cultures, “elders” were like city council members and judges at the same time – sort of like how Andy Griffith was the Sheriff and the Justice of the Peace at the same time! In the New Testament church, elders were like our pastors are today. For instance, every time Paul planted a church, he raised up and appointed men and women to be pastors or elders after he left.

We don't know for sure how much administrative organization there was in the church by the time Peter wrote this, but it's obvious that there *were* clearly identified leaders – among whom Peter recognized himself, because he called himself a “fellow elder.”

Peter also says he was a “witness to Christ's sufferings,” which is a little confusing because, like we talked about last week, Peter denied Christ and ran off and hid – so he was *not* there to see Christ suffer. It's possible that Peter *did* see Jesus crucified, but it had to have been from a distance, because the Gospels mention who *was* there, and Peter is not on the list. Most likely what Peter means is that he identified with Christ in *His* suffering and he, along with the other elders, suffered “in Christ” because they were Christians. So as a result, Peter and the other elders shared in the same hope – that those who suffer for Christ will certainly share in the Glory of Christ in the last day.

And then Peter mentions this image of being shepherds to the church, and of Jesus as the Great Shepherd.

The Bible is rich with this image in both the Old and New Testaments (Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 23:1-4; Ezekiel 34:1-31; Matthew 18:10-14; 26:31; Luke 12:32; John 10:1-18; 21:15-17; Hebrews 13:20), so it was an endearing and comforting metaphor. Literally, Peter is saying that the elders are to shepherd the “flock,” or the church, like God shepherds us – with loving leadership.

Then, Peter reminds leaders what their attitudes should be: first because they *want* to, not because they have to, second, not to be greedy for money but eager to serve, and then third, not lording it over anyone but by being a good example.

Let me quickly respond to these: First, you need to know that as your pastors, we are very, very grateful for the way you take care of us and our families. We know that we are well-loved. We also know that we must work hard, because you sacrifice for us; it is out of your giving that you take care of us. We don't take that lightly and we are incredibly grateful. We know we are accountable to God and to the church board for that. You also need to

know that every one of your pastors are highly capable people and could be doing something else besides ministry for much more money, but we trust God to take care of us, and any rewards we might have will be someday in Heaven. We serve you because we love Jesus, we love each other on the team, and we love you, West Valley Church, and we love all the people of our community of West Valley – of all colors. I hope you know what a great team of pastors you have; I thank God every day for the privilege of serving alongside them as I pray for them. And all your pastors know that we have an enormous responsibility to be an example in our teaching and with our lives as we serve you. And “serve” is a key word. Real pastors do not demand obedience. I’ve known many abusive pastors, and I bet you have too. You see, ultimately, all abuse is about control – whether it is physical, emotional, sexual, racial, or even spiritual – all abuse is about one person controlling another person or group or race of people. Listen: only God gets to have ultimate control, not us.

By the way, in the United States, the whole point of our republic is to ensure no *one* person has all the power. Unfortunately, many have corrupted the system, which is why we are in the middle of so much unrest – because it’s not right.

Spiritual abuse can be just as damaging as any other kind; it is when a pastor demands that people obey him or her, or give him money, or whatever. It’s most obvious in cults, but it happens in many seemingly normal churches too. It can be overt, or it can be subtle, like passive aggressiveness or guilt or shame manipulation. That kind of leadership misrepresents God and burns people out and turns people away from God and leaves horrible emotional damage in its wake. Your pastors at WVC are very aware of this and make sure we humbly and willingly serve you. I can’t tell you how many Christians over the years that I’ve had to provide counseling for because they suffer from guilt or shame or inferiority or confusion or lack of faith because they were spiritually abused by a leader in their church.

But Peter’s point is that, when you have healthy shepherd-leaders in your church, then there is an appropriate response by...

2. Members

We find those instructions in verses 5-11, and I’d like to read those to you now:

“In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (1 Peter 5:5-11, niv)

Here’s what Peter is saying: when you have leaders like he describes, then there can be mutual trust and respect within the church community, between pastors and people. I’ll tell you, one of the things I’m grateful for in our church is the healthy relationship we have between the pastors and the church board – our leadership team. It’s healthy because we have mutual respect, trust, and love for each other.

And Peter says this is especially important during times of suffering or persecution because without it, those pressures would doom the church community.

Peter says specifically that there are three things that will bind us together all the time, but especially in times of struggle, suffering, and persecution. The first is *trust with humility*. It is a humbling thing to allow God to work in our lives *through* struggle and suffering instead of trying to avoid it. That’s what Peter’s been talking about all along. When we are willing to face suffering with humility, trusting God and each other, God can do amazing things in us and through us.

And life itself is a humbling experience. So Peter tells us to put on our humility as if it were the clothes we put on every morning; we should be ashamed to go out in public without it. That’s why God opposes the proud, and it is that kind of humble person that God lifts up.

The second important part is that God cares for you. The term “cast all your anxiety on him” literally means to “throw it on him” – it’s the same phrase that was used to describe the garments thrown on the back of the donkey for Jesus to ride on at Palm Sunday. That means your anxieties do not have to be yours – you can put them on Jesus. He’s happy to take them because he cares so very much for you! This is also very important, especially when we are struggling and suffering so much that we are overwhelmed or feeling crushed.

Trust with humility, God cares for you, because third, “The enemy wants you.” Mark this, my friends; humankind has an enemy, the devil, and he is a hungry, drooling lion that will look for every opportunity to devour you. His hunger to destroy is evident all around us in these days of diseases of the body and of society. The spiritually-sighted today can see the enemy in both the racism as well as the chaos and anarchy of the violent, thieving mobs. The enemy’s breath is felt in the senseless killing of people simply because of the color of their skin. The enemy’s DNA evidence can be found on the outbreaks of violence. His teeth are bared anytime he senses in us pride or a lack of trust in God’s love and authority. My friends, we must be vigilant; we must be sober and alert. We must trust in God’s love, care, and authority.

I saw a viral video the other day of a young boy who was hiking, only to discover he was a few feet from a giant brown bear. Instead of attacking the bear, thinking he could beat it, and instead of running in fear – both of which would’ve killed the boy – the boy slowly turned, and slowly walked away as calm as could be. That’s a picture of how we must be: we must avoid the enemy, but be aware of his presence, and when we encounter him, we resist him and can calmly trust God to care for us.

Peter uses several phrases to describe what God will do for us: first, *he will restore you*, which is like resetting a broken bone. This implies that we are going to get beat up sometimes, and we are going to experience some pain and brokenness, but it's not forever. God will restore what is broken, either here, or in heaven, or both. Next, *God will make you strong*. This means he will strengthen and support you. You don't do the heavy lifting; he does! Third, *God will hold you firm*. This means that he will also make *you* stronger through each trial. Finally, *God will keep you steadfast*, which is like a building with a firm foundation. These are promises; God will do these things for you when you humbly trust in his care for you.

Lastly, Peter gives us...

3. Final greetings

That's in verse 12-14. You might think it should be final *goodbyes*, but they're not. Here's what he says:

“With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.” (1 Peter 5:12-14, niv)

The New Testament letters usually end this way; with a greeting, some comments about the messenger, a statement of the purpose of the letter, and a blessing or prayer. That's why these verses are Peter's final *greetings*.

The Silas that Peter refers to is the same Silas that was Paul's missionary partner in Acts. Peter dictated while Silas helped write the letter, and then Silas personally delivered it to the various communities.

The purpose of the letter is this: to remind believers of the true grace of God that they must stand fast in – especially during unrest, suffering, and persecution.

When Peter says “She who is in Babylon,” he's referring to the church that was in Rome (Rome was often referred to as “Babylon” – watch for that as you read Revelation). His “son” Mark is his son in the faith, not his biological son. This is the same Mark that wrote the Gospel of Mark. That's why Mark's gospel is sometimes considered Peter's gospel, because Mark wrote down what he heard from Peter.

Then Peter tells the believers to greet each other with the kiss of love. This was a customary greeting of deep love and respect; usually a kiss on the cheek or both cheeks or the hand. Well obviously, they were not dealing with the Corona Virus!

If you and I are both wearing these (a mask), I *might* consider greeting you with a kiss; but even then, not until we have been in phase four for a very long time!

But then Peter ends with this prayer: “Peace to all of you who are in Christ.” And that, my friends, is my daily prayer for West Valley Church – the same prayer I pray for you now:

My dear friends, this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it – trust it and live it out. Peace to all of you who are in Christ; peace in your heart as viruses surround you. Peace in your mind as you pray for both the oppressed and the oppressors in our society. Peace as together we seek to make peace in our society. Peace as you remain alert and sober. Stand fast in this grace.

To Him be the power forever and ever. Amen.