

After a Little While

I Peter 5: 6-11

**First Presbyterian Church
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On this Thanksgiving Sunday, I'm so grateful for Peter. This fall, I've been struck again by the depth of his insights. Peter's letter remains as vibrant for a church in the 21st century as it was in the first. Let's walk through our passage.

First, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you." Humble yourself. Bow the knee, bow the head, bow the heart. Submit to your Lord. Those words don't often go over well with us. But how I need them! I was struck by this recently during our time of silent confession. What do you usually think about when we have those moments for reflection? The score of the Tiger's game? The fight in the car? The tasks of the week ahead? Many times I just start listing the seven deadly sins to see how many resonate. Pride, greed, lust, anger, envy, laziness, gluttony. Most weeks it's 7 out of 7 in 20 seconds of reflection. But a couple weeks ago, all that came to mind was "Wah, wah, wah! Me! Me! Me!" I didn't even get to specifics. Just whine, whine, whine. About me, me, me. Showered in blessings, I am ungrateful, complaining about a tiny thing. Empowered by the Spirit and sent on a divine mission, I am nevertheless mainly focused on me. My grandmother used to name it, "Thinking only of self."



I need Peter's word, "Humble yourselves." That doesn't mean "Think poorly of yourself." It means, "Think less often of yourself." The path to joy runs through humbling myself under God's mighty hand. I recognize that his hands formed me. I belong to my Maker, and he has fashioned me for his mission and glory. I acknowledge that his is the kingdom, the power and the glory. I trust his hand to guide me, even through seasons of trial. I also take comfort in

the fact that God's mighty hand is now nail-pierced with his suffering for us. And I can relax into his promise, "Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Is. 49: 16). The one to whom I submit is the one who submitted himself to death on a cross to secure my life.



Next Peter tells, “Casting all your anxieties upon him, because he cares for you.” I’m interested to learn that this word translated as anxieties comes from a word that means “parts” or “fragments.” Anxieties fracture our sense of peace. Worry scatters our coherence. We can’t get our thoughts together because anxiety keeps

driving them apart. You try to put worries aside and they leap back on you. Our minds divide over the dozens of things calling us to worry over them.

Peter here draws from Psalm 55: 22 which urges us, “Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you.” Throw those worries onto the God who cares for you. Great idea. But how do you actually do that?

First, it’s important to be as specific as possible about the anxiety. Worry often seeps through us as an emotion that doesn’t land anywhere. It just makes us anxious. I find it’s very helpful to ask, “What are you worried about?” Then to answer the question as concretely as possible. And to name that answer before my Father in heaven.

So often, I wait to pray because I think I can solve whatever issue it is. Finally, when I turn to prayer, I think I need to have the right answer for what God should do. After all, I don’t want God to have to work too hard, so I’ll just give him the solution! Then I worry if he’ll answer the way I asked. And I’m right back to worrying. Recently, though, I’ve found it’s more much fruitful just to name the anxiety to my Father in heaven. To trust that he cares for me. He wants to hear it. And I don’t have to solve it.

For example, “Father, I don’t know see the solution to untying this knot. Father, I am worried about what to say to this person. Father I’m nervous about what this person will say to me. I don’t know how hard to push or release. I don’t even want to deal with this. I fear I won’t be able to meet the expectations people have of me, I don’t think I have the stamina for these demands. I just can’t figure out this situation.” Just name it in his presence, trusting that he cares. Don’t try to solve it. Don’t tell God how to solve it. It has been wonderful to discover how naming anxiety specifically in my heavenly Father’s presence, nothing more, reduces anxiety and shifts the burden from me to him.



Next, Peter returns to the instruction we heard a couple weeks ago: be sober-minded. Be focused and intentional on the purpose God has given you. Peter urges them to stay vigilant over their lives. What's new in this teaching is that Peter reminds them that Christians have an enemy. "Your adversary, the devil, prowls

around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." There is a spiritual force that wants to consume you. He is personal and malevolent. He entices us through our desires, promising fulfillment and leaving us empty husks. He delights in addicts lying in doorways and businessmen despairing over the emptiness of the wealth that has demanded their souls. He relishes despoiling innocence, sexualizing children, and mutilating bodies. Just as much, he lusts to keep parents running their families breathless with activities. He's happy to keep people busy enough to stay away from worship, financially extended enough to be unable to care for the poor, and flattered enough to pursue physical beauty and social standing more than depth of character. You'll rarely see this devil as he appears in horror movies, but you'll hear his voice when he prompts someone to accuse you with half-truths. You'll hear his voice when such terrible things come out of your own mouth. He's the slanderer. He encourages pride. He puffs up egos. He entices with shiny objects. He lies about you and your loved ones. He wants you to think all your striving after Christ is vain. He pretends that evil will win in the end and you should just quit.

Peter replies to all this curtly. "Resist him, firm in the faith." Stand against him. See the deceptions for what they are. Name them as you would anxieties. Expose the evil and say No. But not in your own strength. "Stand firm in the faith." I don't know why the translation we read says "your" faith. The word is "the." Be firm in *the* faith. My faith wavers. My faith doubts. My faith wilts. But *the* faith is the faith once for all delivered to the church. The faith that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. The faith expressed in the Apostles' Creed. The faith revealed in the Scriptures. I don't stand on me. I stand on the Rock that is Jesus Christ the Lord, as he has been confessed in the faith of his people through the centuries. Look the lion in the face and say, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

Then Peter adds a very crucial aspect of strengthening us: our solidarity with other believers. "Knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced

by your brotherhood throughout the world.” If you’ve ever watched nature videos, you know that predators like lions hunt prey that have been isolated from the herd. They prey on the weak, the lost and the inattentive. The devil is the same way. Get a Christian out of fellowship. Make a Christian feel like he or she is the only one going through this pain. Isolate through shame or distraction. Keep them away from other believers. Then eat them alive. So Peter reminds these Christians that they are not alone in their sufferings. All Christ’s people are exiles in the world, and anyone seeking to live faithfully in Christ and for Christ will feel out of step with the world. We will experience rejections, misunderstandings and maybe even oppression. That’s when it’s so helpful to know our brothers and sisters throughout the ages and throughout the world are right there with us.

James Stewart recounts the trial in 1666 of young Hugh Mackail for his Presbyterian faith. He was condemned to die in four days time. As they led him from the courtroom to the prison, people wept along the streets to see such a fine young man approach such a terrible fate. “But in his own eyes no tears were seen, no trace of self-pity or regret on the radiant, eager face...’Trust in God!’ he cried out to them, and his eyes were shining. ‘Trust in God!’ Then, suddenly, catching a glimpse of a friend among the crowd, ‘Good news,’ he cried, ‘Good news! I am within four days’ journey of enjoying the sight of Jesus Christ.’”¹

Are we likely to go to the scaffold? I don’t think so in the near term. But I take comfort in hearing that the faith, the faith of Jesus Christ, holds firm even in such final, horrible hours. Hugh Mackail witnesses to us that the treasure of Christ is worth any price. Literally millions of persecuted believers around the world today give us that same assurance. They’re ahead of us in terms of suffering for Christ. They send back word, “It’s hard, but it’s worth it. Christ will sustain you. You will know joy as you trust him. We’ll see you at Home!”

Finally, then, Peter gives a wonderful assurance. “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.” Once Peter denied Jesus three times. But no more. He writes like a veteran of suffering for Christ. I think 2 minutes under the dentist’s drill is a year of suffering, let alone being beaten or jailed for Christ. But, Peter assures us, this is only a little while. Whether the little while is the remainder of this brief life or just the remainder of this short season in our current lives. It will not always be this hard.

Even your suffering will be used for glory. Used for joy. This is the witness I hear over and over from you who have suffered. “I would not wish this on my

worst enemy. But neither would I trade this pain for any treasure. It has brought me so close to Christ.”

This week, as you sit down to a feast, give thanks above all that you have received the faith once for all delivered, the truth upon which eternal lives can be built. Give thanks for all God has brought you through. Give thanks that the season of your suffering will not endure forever, maybe not even for much longer. The Father, Son and Spirit himself has undertaken to restore you, confirm you, strengthen and establish you. I will give thanks for you, dear ones. Your faith and love are a shining witness and constant encouragement. And may we all say with Peter, even as the turkey gets carved, “To Christ be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

¹James S. Stewart, “God’s Glory in the Morning,” from *The Strong Name*,” (New York: Charles Scribner, 1941), p. 250.