

Good morning. Today we are going to conclude the sermon series on 1 Peter that you've been going through for the past few weeks by looking at 1 Peter 5. Let's turn there.

¹So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:¹

The context of chapter five (the 'why' of the exhortation)

Peter is a lot like Paul in how he writes. He reasons. He doesn't just say, 'Such-and-such is the truth, now obey it,' but he reasons. He says, 'A is true, and because A is true, B must be true, and since that is the case, C follows from that' - and so on. That means that we can't ignore the first word in this verse: 'So'.

Peter is about to tell the elders to do something - but he's telling them *for a reason*, and so we need to ask: what is the reason? Why is Peter exhorting the elders? The answer, I think, is: because of suffering.

The theme of suffering runs throughout 1 Peter. Peter was probably in Rome when he wrote this letter, and Nero was probably emperor. In 64 AD, a great fire broke out in Rome. It burned six days and seven nights, and consumed about three quarters of the city, and people began to say that Nero had deliberately started the fire. Tacitus, a Roman historian, wrote about what happened in his *Annals*.² He calls Christians makers of mischief. That sounds harmless enough, until you see that he's saying Christians were people who brought something horrible and disgraceful to Rome, people guilty of a terrible crime, of hating the human race, and deserving to be punished with death. He reports how Nero rounded up Christians, tortured them horrifically into confessing who their brothers and sisters in Christ were, dressed them up in animal skins and set the dogs on them to maul them to death, or crucified them, or set them up on poles, covered in oil, and set fire to them to serve as illumination in the evening. It was regarded as a kind of sport, a sort of entertainment. That's the background to 1 Peter. When Peter writes about suffering, that's the kind of thing he means. He doesn't mean the washing machine not working, or the car not starting. He means being hoisted up on a pole and set alight for the amusement of others - because you confess Christ.

In chapter one, Peter tells his readers that what gets them through this - in fact, what allows Christians to rejoice *even though they are going through these horrors and even though they genuinely feel these horrors* is this: that if you are a believer, then you have been born again to a living hope, through Jesus' resurrection, and God has an inheritance for you which never perishes - and God himself is guarding you, through faith, for salvation. God is keeping your inheritance, which is undefiled and unfading, and God is keeping you so that you receive it. In other words, Peter is saying, 'You're saved! And you will spend eternity with God.' And he's saying that that can be such a vast source of joy that it allows you to get through unspeakable suffering. He's not saying that the suffering isn't suffering 'really'; he's saying that the gospel gives a joy which remains even in the face of suffering.

Peter says that this suffering serves a purpose: it *tests the genuineness of our faith*.³ This suffering isn't meaningless. It refines your faith - it gets rid of all the dross, and what's more, Peter goes so far as to say that this suffering *can be necessary* to that end.⁴ In other words, sometimes the *only* way our faith can be refined, and become what it must become, is through suffering.

Then, in chapter four, we read this:

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵But let

¹ 1 Peter 5:1 (ESV).

² Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

³ 1 Peter 1:7 (ESV).

⁴ 1 Peter 1:6.

none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.⁵

Peter makes a similar point here to the one he makes in chapter one: trials test us. And he says: rejoice. You are sharing in Jesus' sufferings. You have fellowship with him. If people insult you, or persecute you, it is because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. You will only choose to suffer for Christ if the Holy Spirit dwells within you and is shaping you to choose the things of God. So if you choose to be obedient to God, and people insult you for it, rejoice! Rejoice, because it means God is truly at work in your life - he is truly shaping you to love him more than you love yourself! He is truly transforming you to look more like Jesus! That's why you're being rejected by man - because the Spirit of glory is on you, leading you to God.

But you have to beware. We aren't always insulted because we are glorifying God. People aren't always put into prison because they are glorifying God. If you suffer for doing evil - if the people around you despise you because your sin is so great that it goes beyond what even our society calls 'normal'; if you suffer because you are a murderer, or a thief - then don't confuse that with suffering as a Christian. You're suffering for your sin, and there is nothing about that suffering which glorifies God. When you suffer because of your sin - when you're locked up in prison for murdering someone - that doesn't say to the world, 'God is so glorious that I will suffer for his sake.' It says, 'I couldn't resist my temptation and gave in, instead of choosing God. Sin was more attractive to me than God.' But when you suffer for the sake of obedience to God, you say, 'Do with me as you will. Having God is more to me.'

And then, at the end of chapter four, Peter says this:

¹⁷For it is time for judgement to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸And

"If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

¹⁹Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.⁶

Suffering is, in this context, a form of judgement. Now, here, 'judgement' does not mean 'punishment'. Peter is not saying, 'It is time for the household of God to be punished.' He is saying that it is time for the household of God - his church - to be tested, for the genuineness of our faith to be tested, proved. And if we who are saved are going to have show that our faith is genuine by holding on to God in the midst of our suffering, by continuing to do good deeds even though those deeds may be *why* we are suffering - if even we have to show that, then how can those who are not saved, and who do not obey God, have any hope of coming through judgement safely?

So this is the context of 1 Peter 5: there is Christian suffering. There is suffering that occurs simply because you are a Christian. That suffering tests and refines our faith; in fact, it may sometimes be the very thing that ultimately allows us to stand before God, because it allows us to see what really matters and what doesn't, and to choose him even though that choice may kill us bodily.

We can now turn back to chapter five:

¹So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ²shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³not domineering over those in your charge, but being

⁵ 1 Peter 4:12-16 (ESV).

⁶ 1 Peter 4:17-19 (ESV).

examples to the flock. ⁴And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.⁷

The 'what' of the exhortation

Peter says: so. Because of suffering; because it is time for judgement to begin with the household of God; because this testing and refining is coming, I am exhorting you elders. And as an aside for you elders in the room this morning, there is an argument to be made on the basis of Ezekiel 9:3-6, which I shall not go into now, that judgement of the household of God begins with the elders. In any event, Peter says, 'Because this judgement of God is coming, I exhort you: shepherd the flock of God that is among you. Shepherd them for your own sakes, so that you come through judgement and don't fail, and shepherd them for their sakes, so that they come through judgement, too. Look after the flock, so that when suffering comes, they will persevere.'

We see three ways in which this shepherding is to take place:

1. Not under compulsion, but willingly.

Elders: we should not need to be compelled into shepherding the flock. We shouldn't need to be forced into doing it.

If there is no willingness in us to do the things eldership requires of us - to lead, to look after, to shepherd, to guide and to guard, to visit, to challenge and correct, to encourage and exhort, to preach, to teach, to take responsibility for the welfare of the church - if we only do those things because something makes us feel that we must, and whether that compulsion is necessary because we are fearful of leading, or lazy and it doesn't fit in with a life of ease, or whatever it may be - if that is the case, then something is wrong, and Peter exhorts us: do it willingly.

And if the truth is that there simply isn't any willingness in us, then the first thing we should do is pray. Ask God for the will to shepherd the flock. Ask him to give you the heart for the church and to allow shepherding to matter to your heart. We're not being asked to lead independently of God, but in total dependence upon him! And if this is an issue for any of you elders in the room, can I encourage you to speak with your fellow elders about it, so that you can pray together and encourage each other? Willing elders are an enormous blessing to the church.

2. Shepherding is to take place not for shameful gain, but eagerly.

Again, this is about what is going on in our hearts. I don't know whether elders are remunerated in this church, but if you are, then don't let that be your motivation. Don't let eldership be a means to money, or to some set of perks. It misses the point of eldership, as we will see in a moment.

3. Not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

As elders, our role is not to lord it over the church. We have no business domineering - trying to get power and prestige for ourselves. Our primary goal is to help other people stay on the narrow path and, eventually, to cross the finish line. Our goal is to help make sure that as many people in our congregations as possible can say, with Paul,

⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.⁸

The purpose of eldership is not to look good in front of others. I don't mean that we shouldn't respect our elders and seek to honour them - but receiving respect and honour is *not* the purpose of eldership. The purpose of eldership is to look after people, to help them grow in Christ, to help them choose Christ in the difficult and the good times - and we are to do so,

⁷ 1 Peter 5:1-4 (ESV).

⁸ 2 Timothy 4:7-8 (ESV).

and to lead them through fiery trials, by example.

What this means is that we elders are to endure suffering for the sake of Christ - suffering for doing good, as Peter says.⁹ We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.¹⁰ We are to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than ourselves.¹¹ We are to look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others.¹² We are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.¹³ If we as elders want our church to look a particular way, then we have to be examples. If we want our churches to reflect Biblical truth, then our lives must reflect Biblical truth. Do you want a generous church? Be generous. Do you want a gospel-spreading church? Spread the gospel. Do you want a worshipping church? Worship God. Do you want a church that confesses sin? Confess sin - and so on.

And if at some point this seems like too much - because laying down your life for the flock, which is the model of shepherding that Jesus teaches,¹⁴ is *hard*, and suffering is *hard* - then Peter has an encouragement for you:

⁴And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.¹⁵

God wants to give you an unfading crown of glory; to exalt you; for you to hear the words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'¹⁶ Paul says that we will receive our praise from God,¹⁷ and encourages us through patience in well-doing to seek for glory, honour, and immortality and says that God will give people who do that eternal life.¹⁸ And this is not just true for elders, by the way. On the day that Jesus is revealed in glory to all, he will turn to us who have kept faith with and in him, who have not tired of doing good deeds, who have trusted him and stayed true to him in suffering, and he will say to us, 'Well done, good and faithful servant,' and we will share in his glory - forever.

Relating through humility

Peter continues,

⁵Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.¹⁹

Do you see how we're told to be subject to our elders - that is, to make the task of elders possible by submitting - and then Peter moves straight on to humility, as if to say that that the two things were connected? And I think his point might be this: being subject to other people requires us to exercise humility. This is especially true of Christians, because we know that *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and so, in that sense, there is no difference between us. So really, why should I be subject to anyone?

Moreover, not every decision other people make - and that includes elders - will always be right. And since that is the case, why should I be subject to them? They're no better than me. They're sinners, like me. In fact, sometimes, chances are that I actually know *more* than they do, and could do the things they're doing better than them.

⁹ 1 Peter 2:20.

¹⁰ Matthew 22:37-39.

¹¹ Philippians 2:3.

¹² Philippians 2:4.

¹³ 1 Timothy 6:18.

¹⁴ John 10:11.

¹⁵ 1 Peter 5:4 (ESV).

¹⁶ Matthew 25:23 (ESV).

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 4:5.

¹⁸ Romans 2:6.

¹⁹ 1 Peter 5:5-6 (ESV).

And so pride starts to creep in. 'I'm just as good as they are; in fact, perhaps I'm better. Why should I do what they say?' - and so on. And you can see how that could fundamentally undermine the idea of eldership. Before we know it, we're like Aaron and Miriam, speaking against Moses because he has married a Cushite woman, and saying, 'The Lord doesn't just speak through Moses. He speaks through us, too.'²⁰

God didn't choose Moses to lead his people because Moses was perfect. He was a murderer who didn't always trust God - but the Bible tells us that Moses was the most humble man on the face of the earth,²¹ and I can't help but think that that is why God chose him: Moses knew how much he needed God, how little he could do on his own, and in that, he glorified God. In his neediness, he made God look glorious, he made God look like the one who could supply all his needs. And that, I think, is probably why God chose him.

Similarly, congregations might sometimes wonder why their elders are elders - but we should be very slow to think that God didn't know what he was doing, and very quick to humble ourselves. If I am not an elder, then it is not my place to say, 'But I have *far* more expertise in this area than so-and-so; what a stupid choice to make *him* an elder!' If you have expertise, then humble yourself and help. Church doesn't need big cheeses. It needs people who will love each other and in humility serve one another and advance the cause of the kingdom. It doesn't need competitiveness. It needs humility.

Likewise, if you're an elder, be humble. Don't pretend you know everything. You don't. You need God just as much as everyone else - and you also need your brothers and sisters just as much as everyone else. If you lead an area of ministry, don't act as if you didn't need others, or as if they had nothing to say that might be of value. Encourage them, and listen to them.

We are to be humble in our dealings with each other - all of us, whether we're elders or not. And we can make that happen, says Peter, by casting our anxieties on God, because he cares for us. Have you ever noticed how much smaller your pride gets the more secure you are in the knowledge that God loves you? I find that the more secure I am in that knowledge, the less I need to prove things to other people. And I believe Peter is saying: cast your anxieties about being humble on God. Cast your fear of losing face on him. Cast your fear of wounded pride on him. Cast your doubt on him. In that moment when you are faced with the option of being humble or being proud, *trust* that God cares for you. Trust him with the thing that worries you.

And finally, he says,

⁸Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

¹²By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. ¹³She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. ¹⁴Greet one another with the kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.²²

Peter closes his letter with this exhortation: don't give up. Don't give up your faith in God. Don't stop being obedient to him. Don't stop doing good. Don't stop submitting. Don't stop understanding each other. Don't stop being humble. Don't stop confessing Christ. The devil will try to find any way he can to devour your faith, and the very suffering which, we're told in chapter

²⁰ Numbers 12.

²¹ Numbers 12:3.

²² 1 Peter 5:8-14 (ESV).

one, can refine your faith, can also be the thing the devil seeks to use to rob you of your faith, and so of your Christ and of your salvation. Resist him. God himself will, in due course, restore you, confirm you, strengthen you, establish you. You are not alone in your suffering: your brothers and sisters throughout the world suffer, too, and God is with you in the middle of it.

Since this is the final sermon in this series, I would like to say a final word about 1 Peter more generally. I said at the beginning that the theme of suffering runs throughout 1 Peter, and I imagine that for many of us, reading this book is therefore a completely alien experience. What suffering do we really experience as Christians, after all? When did you last *suffer* because you're a Christian? When did you last suffer a serious setback, suffer hurt, *because* you're a Christian? I don't mean that no one here ever suffers - but really, in all honesty, I think most of us need to ask ourselves: when did I last suffer for the sake of the gospel? When was I even last insulted for the sake of the gospel?

These are questions we need to ask ourselves, because yes, it's true that Jesus, Peter, and Paul lived in a different time, and that confessing that Jesus is Lord was fundamental challenge to how societies perceived themselves - but it's *still* a fundamental challenge, and while we might hope today, for various reasons, for a greater willingness on the part of the people around us to hear that message and at least tolerate it, we need to ask ourselves: is the reason why I don't suffer because I look almost exactly the same as the world around me? Is the truth that I do exactly the same things as the world around me does, so that they would never malign me in the way Peter describes, would never insult me, would never persecute me, because in reality, there's no difference between me and a non-Christian? Is the truth that I never tell anyone about Jesus except other Christians anyway, and so I pose no challenge to the world around me? We don't need to go out looking for suffering - suffering for suffering's sake is not holy or good - but Jesus, Peter, and Paul all took it for granted that being a Christian would, as a matter of course, inevitably, lead to suffering. And if we never suffer, even though we believe a great many things which are profoundly offensive to a lot of people, I think we need to ask ourselves: why?