

Chapter 7: Humble Yourselves Under God's Mighty Hand

1 Peter 5:1–14

As Peter concludes his letter, he gives special attention to significant features of life in the church. First, he addresses the work of elders who will have charge for shepherding the flock of God in the church. Second, he gives a final summary statement of the primary message of his letter: that believers must trust the Lord in the midst of suffering (here, he attributes our suffering to Satan) as we await the Lord's provision for our needs. As he concludes this great letter, then, Peter urges us to *humble ourselves under God's mighty hand*.

Humility in Leadership (1 Pet. 5:1–5)

In some ways, Peter seems to take a major deviation in vv. 1–5 from his subject matter up to this point in the letter. Whereas he has focused on questions about sober-minded and self-controlled living for the whole church (especially in the midst of suffering), he now directly exhorts the elders about their responsibilities. In fact, this is not a deviation or a digression from that subject. Instead, Peter's subject matter provides important context to help us to understand the specific significance of his instructions to the elders of the church. Namely, Peter writes to the elders to encourage them in their leadership *for the sake of* the church who needs to live sober-minded and self-controlled in the midst of suffering.

So, Peter exhorts the elders “among you” (ἐν ὑμῖν; *en humin*; v. 1a). Although the elders are charged with “oversight” (ἐπισκοποῦντες; *episkopountes*; v. 2), the elders are not “over” (ἐπί; *epi*) the church, but “among” (ἐν) the church. In other words, the oversight functions of leadership do not elevate the persons to some kind of position above the rest of the church. Rather, elders are to move among the sheep, like an actual shepherd.

Next, Peter identifies himself in three descriptors: “(1) as a fellow elder and (2) a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as (3) a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed” (v. 1b). As a “fellow elder,” Peter exemplifies the attitude of shepherds that he just described by not exalting himself as *over* the elders, but positioning himself *among* them. Then, in the next two descriptors, he connects the two ideas that Peter has held in tension throughout this entire letter: the contrast of suffering and glory. Here, Peter speaks of his being a witness to *Christ's* sufferings, even as he will be a partaker in the future glory of Christ's return. Peter therefore connects his own apostolic ministry as a witness to the sufferings of Christ (cf. Acts 1:22; 2 Pet. 1:16) with his hope of Christ's ultimate return. Yet, it is highly significant that this is the same tension that Peter has called all Christians to observe. The point seems to be, then, that elders (including Peter, a “fellow elder”) have a particular responsibility to lead believers to put to death the passions of the flesh in order to prepare to receive the glory that is to be revealed.

Thus, Peter exhorts these elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight” (v. 2a). Peter calls elders to the task of *shepherding*, which he further describes as “exercising oversight.” The function of a shepherd is to *feed* the flock with the Word of God (Ps.

23:1; Ezek. 34:2), a responsibility of which Jesus reminded Peter personally three times (John 21:15–17). The function of an overseer is related, but deals particularly with the responsibility “to oversee the church and superintend it.”¹ These are the two primary aspects of the office of elder, and Paul also links these ideas together during his final speech to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:27, 28).

Peter then gives three warnings to elders. First, he warns elders to serve “not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you” (v. 2b). By this, he rebukes laziness, negligence, and formalism among elders, calling them to do their work with all their strength from willing hearts. God is pleased by this kind of wholehearted effort “to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Second, he warns elders “not for shameful gain, but eagerly” (v. 2c). By this, he exhorts elders not to serve for gain (whether gains of finances, reputation, influence, power, status, or whatever). Third, he urges elders not to be “domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (v. 3). Several ordination vows for new pastors in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) echo these concerns specifically (BCO 21-5):

5. Have you been induced, as far as you know your own heart, to seek the office of the holy ministry from love to God and a sincere desire to promote His glory in the Gospel of His Son?

6. Do you promise to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the Gospel and the purity and peace and unity of the Church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto you on that account?

7. Do you engage to be faithful and diligent in the exercise of all your duties as a Christian and a minister of the Gospel, whether personal or relational, private or public; and to endeavor by the grace of God to adorn the profession of the Gospel in your manner of life, and to walk with exemplary piety before the flock of which God shall make you overseer?

These vows require sober and somber reflection on the heart and motivations of a minister before he enters into his charge.

Although the Lord puts serious responsibilities on elders, Peter tells us that elders stand to gain a reward for their labor: “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (v. 4). As throughout the letter for the whole church, Peter here exhorts elders to faithful and diligent service in view of the day “when the chief Shepherd appears”—that is, at the return of Christ. This “crown” (literally, a *wreath*) “was a garland of leaves, often used as an award, more prominently the victor’s wreath in athletic settings (also used in military settings and for other honors or celebrations.”² What is important, though, is that this wreath would be “unfading”:

¹ Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 233–34.

² Keener, *1 Peter*, 371.

Peter uses a similar word for *unfading* in 1:4; here, their victors' *wreath* of honor, like their inheritance, will never fade away. This imperishability contrasts with the perishable wreaths awarded physical athletes; Paul had offered a similar and more explicit contrast (1 Cor. 9:25). The unfading garland also contrasts with the flower that falls and the grass that withers (1 Pet. 1:24); it is more like the word of the Lord, and those born from it, who endure forever (1:23–25).³

This promise is important, since, as Calvin observes, pastors and elders face “innumerable hindrances which are sufficient to discourage the most prudent.”⁴ The work of elders is full of the kinds of trials that Peter has acknowledged throughout this letter as existing in the life of the whole church; however, the rewards are far greater than what we lose through our suffering along the way.

There has been substantial debate about Peter's meaning in the next verse: “Likewise, 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’” (v. 5). It is possible that he is shifting meaning from elders as officers to elders in terms of age, thus coming “from the particular to the general.”⁵ Or, it is possible that Peter may use “younger” as a description for the rest of the church, in contrast to the “elders.”⁶ I personally think that the strongest explanation does not change the meaning of *elders* from the officers, but that does understand the “younger” people as truly young in terms of age.⁷ Younger people characteristically charge forward with “vim and vigor” in ways that often challenge the leadership of those in authority. They especially need to be reminded of the importance of living in subjection to the elders who have been appointed in authority over them.

Peter closes this section with an exhortation for the whole church toward humility: “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (v. 5b). In part, this is a reminder that the elders are not given unlimited authority to domineer over the flock. As Peter has exhorted in this section, elders must steward their authority wisely, for the benefit of the flock. Thus, the authority of eldership must be accompanied by a special kind of humility. Additionally, those who are “younger” also need humility to submit to the authority of the elders. Neither group gets a free pass at arrogance, but both are called to care for the others.

Humility in Suffering (1 Pet. 5:6–11)

Peter, then, has more to say about humility that extends beyond the questions of authority and submission within the church: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (vv. 6–7). Calvin notes the very different operations of God's “hands” in this verse, where, on the one hand, God's mighty hand humbles the proud, and, on the other hand, God's hand exalts the humble:

³ Keener, *1 Peter*, 371.

⁴ Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 146.

⁵ Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 147.

⁶ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 289.

⁷ For this position, see Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 184; Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 238.

We are to imagine that; God has two hands; the one, which like a hammer beats down and breaks in pieces those who raise up themselves; and the other, which raises up the humble who willingly let down themselves, and is like a firm prop to sustain them. Were we really convinced of this, and had it deeply fixed in our minds, who of us would dare by pride to urge war with God? But the hope of impunity now makes us fearlessly to raise up our horn to heaven. Let, then, this declaration of Peter be as a celestial thunderbolt to make men humble.⁸

This is yet another way of talking about what Peter has discussed throughout this letter: namely, that we must live with an eye on eternity, especially by giving attention to the warnings of final judgment.

It is interesting, though, that Peter gives a specific exhortation regarding humility by urging us to cast our anxieties upon the Lord, who cares for us. How does Peter relate pride and anxiety? Schreiner writes, “Worry is a form of pride because when believers are filled with anxiety, they are convinced that they must solve all the problems in their lives in their own strength. The only god they trust in is themselves. When believers throw their worries upon God, they express their trust in his mighty hand, acknowledging that he is Lord and Sovereign over all of life.”⁹ Furthermore, it is through bringing our anxieties to the Lord that the Lord uses the fiery trials that we face in life to sanctify us: “he knowledge of divine providence does not free men from every care, that they may securely indulge themselves; for it ought not to encourage the torpidity of the flesh, but to bring rest to faith.”¹⁰

The dangers we face as we bring our anxieties to the Lord are real, even if we cannot always see them: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world” (vv. 8–9). This new call to be “sober-minded” connects back to the previous exhortations to be sober-minded (1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7). Rather than following the passions of the flesh that wage war against our souls, we must be watchful for the ferocity of the devil, who seeks to devour us through sin and suffering. Yet, we should not be surprised by this suffering (1 Pet. 4:12), since such suffering is the common lot of believers throughout the world. As Lenski notes, the awful work of Satan was fast approaching Peter himself as he wrote this letter: “At this very time, under Nero, the roar of frightful persecution was being heard by the poor Christian victims. In October of the year 64 the storm broke. Peter himself became a victim of it.”¹¹

Yet, believers are not left to their own resources as they resist the devil: “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. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (vv. 10–11). In contrast to the short-term suffering that we endure in the here and now, the

⁸ Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 148.

⁹ Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 241.

¹⁰ Calvin, “The First Epistle of Peter,” 149.

¹¹ Lenski, “The First Epistle of St. Peter,” 225.

Lord provides his eternal, spiritual resources to strengthen us for this life, and into eternity (“forever and ever”; v. 11). This exhortation to turn to the Lord for his strength and power is a fitting conclusion to the letter, before the concluding greetings that Peter sends.

Humility in Exile (1 Pet. 5:12–14)

Ancient letters followed different conventions than we do today. Whereas we might conclude with the signature of the sender of the letter, the ancients began with them (1 Pet. 1:1). Further, whereas we might offer greetings on the front end of a letter before getting into the main purpose for writing, Peter withholds those greetings until the very end. He begins by acknowledging the role of Silvanus: “By 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” (v. 12). Some have made much of the word “by,” suggesting that Silvanus was either Peter’s amanuensis (e.g., the one who wrote down what Peter may have dictated) or that Silvanus was actually the author of this letter, having written this as a “pious forgery” in Peter’s name. Michaels argues that the word “by” or “through” cannot likely mean that much: “More likely it indicates that Silvanus was the bearer of the letter, at least to its first destination in Asia minor.”¹²

Then, Peter concludes with a reference to “Babylon” and to Mark: “She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son” (v. 13). Babylon, as the capital of the great empire who persecutes God’s people, stands as a symbol for Rome that connects back with the imagery of exile that Peter has used since the beginning of the letter (1 Pet. 1:1).¹³ As Paul called Timothy his “son” because of their close partnership in the gospel (Phil. 2:22), so Peter calls Mark his “son” here. Finally, Peter concludes with an exhortation to “greet one another with the kiss of love,” and a final benediction: “Peace to all of you who are in Christ” (v. 14). As Peter had recently written of “your brotherhood throughout the world,” he conveys the close connections that believers have, even when separated.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of Peter’s describing the elders as “among” the people (vv. 1, 2)? What stands out to you about the way that Peter characterizes his role as a “fellow elder” but also as a unique “witness of the sufferings of Christ” (v. 1)? What does it mean to “shepherd the flock of God” (v. 2)? How do elders “exercise oversight” rightly (v. 2–3)? What is the “unfading crown of glory” (v. 4)? What does Peter mean by his exhortation in v. 5?

¹² Michaels, *1 Peter*, 306.

¹³ “Peter drew on Old Testament tradition, where Babylon represents those opposed to God (cf. Isaiah 13–14; 46–47; Jeremiah 50–51). In this instance, as in Revelation (17–18), Babylon designates Rome itself, the enemy of God. The mention of Babylon constitutes another reminder that believers are exiles in their present situation, and the allusion to exile under the dominion of Babylon constitutes a bookend between the beginning and end of the letter.” (Schreiner, “1 Peter,” 251.)

2. What does Peter mean when he urges us to humble ourselves “under the mighty hand of God” (v. 6a)? What is “the proper time” at which God would “exalt” us (v. 6b)? How is humility connected with casting our anxieties on the Lord (v. 7)? What does Peter warn us about the devil (v. 8)? How do we resist the devil, practically speaking (v. 9)? What comforting promises does Peter give to those who must suffer as they resist the devil (v. 10)?

3. Who is Silvanus (v. 12a)? In what sense has Peter written to these believers “by” Silvanus (v. 12a)? Given all that Peter has written in this letter, what does he mean by “the true grace of God” (v. 12b)? What might it mean for you to “stand firm” in that grace in your life right now (v. 12c)? Why does Peter describe the church in which he finds himself as “at Babylon” (v. 13). What does Peter mean by the “kiss of love,” and how might we apply that today (v. 14).

4. What has stood out to you in this study of 1 Peter? How does Peter’s instructions about suffering address anything you are struggling with right now? In what areas do you need to grow in sober-mindedness and to abstain from the passions of your former ignorance? How does the death and resurrection of Jesus empower you to live according to the grace of the Holy Spirit until Jesus returns in all his glory? What is one thing you want to take away from this letter?