

Mens Fellowship

To the Elders and the Flock

⁵ 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: ² 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; ³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

⁵ 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.”^[a]

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

⁸ Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Final Greetings

¹² With the help of Silas,^[b] 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.

¹³ She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. ¹⁴ Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

Steadfast resistance

Stand against Satan

Why Does Peter Exhort the Elders Here?

The text begins in chapter 5: "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you." If we ask, "Why did Peter feel the need to exhort the elders here at the end of his letter?" we get a clue to the answer in the word "therefore." Something is happening . . . "Therefore, I exhort the elders." (Again I build half my message on a word that the NIV simply chooses to drop!!! Look to the NASB or RSV.)

Warnings of the Coming "Fiery Ordeal" of Judgment

Peter has been warning the church about the "fiery ordeal that is coming upon them for their testing" (4:12). He says (in 4:13) that the Christians may share the sufferings of Christ for a season and then exult in the glory of Christ when he comes. This is what Peter says about himself in 5:1 when he calls himself a fellow elder with the elders he's writing to. He says he is a witness to Christ's sufferings and a sharer in the coming glory. This alerts us that this "fiery ordeal" (4:12) probably has something to do with the elders in chapter 5.

This gets even clearer in 4:17. Peter explains why this "fiery trial" is coming on the church. He says (v. 17), "For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (18) And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?"

These verses have to do with the whole church. The fiery ordeal that comes as punishing condemnation on unbelievers hits the church first as fires of purification and refining (cf. 1:7).

The Background of Ezekiel 9

But what about the elders? Is there anything special for them in this? There are two Old Testament background texts that suggest there is. One is Ezekiel 9. God's own people have committed abominations and God resolves to judge his own city. God says to his angel (v. 4),

"Go through the midst of the city, even through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst." [Like blood on the doorpost at the Passover.] 5 But to the others He said in my hearing, "Go through the city after him and strike; do not let your eye have pity, and do not spare. 6 Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark; and you shall start from My sanctuary [same idea and words as here in 1 Peter 4:17]." So they started with the elders who were before the temple.

So if Peter has in his mind the way God once began his judgment from the house of God—especially from the elders—he may well see a special need to exhort the elders in view of the fiery ordeal that is coming.

The Background of Malachi 3:1–3

The other background text is Malachi 3:1–3 where God says that his messenger is going to come to his temple—to his house or his people as Peter says (in 2:5):

2 But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. 3 . . . He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness.

The "sons of Levi" are the priests. Now it's true that in 1 Peter 2:5, 9 all believers are priests. But it is not easy for a leader to read this and fail to see that the refining fire of judgment has a special reference to leaders. The fire purifies the leaders first.

The Judgment of God Begins with Elders

So when Peter says in 4:17, "It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God," it is easy to see why he would say in 5:1, "THEREFORE, I exhort the elders among you . . ."

So my answer to the question, "Why does Peter feel the need to exhort the elders?" is that this "fiery ordeal" in 4:12 is a judgment from God that begins with the house of God—and in the house of God begins with the elders, the leaders.

It is a fearful and wonderful thing to be an elder in the house of God. If the elders lead the church into strength and glory, they will also lead the church into the refiner's fire of God's purifying judgment. They will not stand above the church or outside the church giving suggestions for how to cope with fire; they will lead the church into the fire.

Peter Practices What He Preaches

So when Peter calls himself in verse 1 a "fellow elder," it's not that he is laying claim to an exalted title (he could have called himself an apostle!); he's expressing a willingness to suffer in the refiner's fire along with the rest of the elders. In fact I think this is what he means when he calls himself in v. 1b a "witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed." I think "witness" here means more than, "I was there and I saw them." I think he means, "I bear witness to them by my words and by my life. I am with you in the struggle. I am with you in the fire that purifies and refines the elders of God's people."

In other words he is practicing what he preaches in verse 3—that elders lead by example not by lording it over the flock.

So Peter believes that the elders need a special exhortation here at the end of his letter. Fire is painful; judgment is serious. It is coming on the house of God; and on the elders first. In this situation elders need warning and they need hope. Peter gives both.

Three Warnings for Elders

Three warnings. Warnings against three typical failures in the eldership. A warning against laziness; a warning against greed; and a warning against pride. The lust for ease, the lust for money, and the lust for power and prestige.

1. A Warning Against Laziness

First, a warning against laziness—the lust for leisure and comfort and ease. Verse 2: "Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God."

He warns them against drifting into a lazy or distracted pattern of ministry that requires some kind of external "compulsion" to overcome. Don't be sluggish and unconcerned. Don't be like the mule that has to have a bit and bridle. Be willing.

Or it might be that it's fear he is warning against here and not laziness. It might be fear that makes an elder unwilling to serve. Don't be fearful of doing what you are called to do. Do it voluntarily.

This is why we do not want to pressure anyone into the eldership at Bethlehem. God wants men who want the ministry, not those who act out of external compulsion.

2. A Warning Against Greed

Second, Peter warns the elders against greed—the lust for money. Verse 2c: "Shepherd the flock . . . not for sordid gain, but with eagerness." This would apply especially to us who make our living in the ministry. Do not begin to look on your eldership merely as a means of making a living. Watch out for the temptation to make "godliness a means of gain," as Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:5.

Rather do your ministry with "eagerness." That is, love your work. Find joy in your work. Remember, as Paul said to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:35, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." And remember what Hebrews 13:17 says, "Let [the elders minister] with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

3. A Warning Against Pride

Third, Peter warns the elders against pride—the lust for power and prestige. Verse 3: "[Shepherd the flock . . . not yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock." Pride is the failure to realize deeply that without Christ we can do nothing. And so the proud heart starts to feel that it can be self-reliant. And then it begins to feel that it is indispensable. And then it starts to act that way and exalt itself and seek the praise of men.

But Peter says to the elders, don't exalt yourselves like that; lead—you must lead (as v. 5 implies)—but lead with servant lowliness; lead by example.

When the fiery trial comes to you first, lead by example. You don't escape it or run from it. You walk through it with the sheep.

Those are the warnings we need. A warning against living for ease; a warning against living for money; and a warning against living for power and prestige and praise.

Hope for Elders

But in this fiery situation elders also need hope. This is what Peter gives them in verse 4: "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

Yesterday in the seminar on the urban poor Viv Grigg referred to the words of Jesus in Luke 14:13-14 about ministry to the poor. Jesus holds out the same kind of hope Peter does here:

When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

In other words there are ministries we should do that may be thankless in this world. If we need a lot of strokes, we will probably not do what Jesus calls us to do. It's too hard and there's not enough reward here and now.

But if we really believe that we will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous, if we elders really believe that "when the Chief Shepherd appears he will give us the unfading crown of glory," then we will have motivation and strength to do what he calls us to do.

There may be times when our elders feel like the refining fire is too hot. We may feel that, if it takes this much fire to burn away our sloth and our greed and our pride, then it's not worth it. But that would be because we have taken our eyes off eternity, and off the all-satisfying Chief-Shepherd, our Lord Jesus.

Tom Steller is going to come and say a word about the pastoral care eldership at Bethlehem. My prayer as he comes is that God would cause gifted and qualified men at Bethlehem to sense the call of God on your life. There is a great work to do. A great fiery battle to be fought. And a great reward beyond all measure

You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because he cares for you.

Introduction on Humility

Humility is not a popular human trait in the modern world. It's not touted in the talk shows or celebrated in valedictorian speeches or commended in diversity seminars or listed with core

values. And if you go to the massive self-help section of B. Dalton's or Barnes and Noble you won't find books on humility.

The basic reason for this is not hard to find: humility can only survive in the presence of God. When God goes, humility goes. In fact you might say that humility follows God like a shadow. We can expect to find humility applauded in our society as often as we find God applauded—which means almost never.

In September (12th) the *Star Tribune* carried a guest editorial that captured the atmosphere that asphyxiates humility:

There are some who naïvely cling to the nostalgic memory of God. The average churchgoer takes a few hours out of the week to experience the sacred . . . But the rest of the time, he is immersed in a society that no longer acknowledges God as an omniscient and omnipotent force to be loved and worshiped. . . Today we are too sophisticated for God. We can stand on our own; we are prepared and ready to choose and define our own existence.

In this atmosphere humility cannot survive. It disappears with God. When God is neglected, the runner up god takes his place, namely, man. And that by definition is the opposite of humility, namely, pride.

So the atmosphere we breathe is hostile to humility. And this text is utterly foreign to our times and utterly necessary. If what is said here doesn't take root in our lives, we will not be a Christian church; and we will not be salt and light for a perishing world.

Humility Is Essential to the Christian Life

The main point of this passage is that we Christians should be humble people. Three times the command comes in one form or another.

1. Verse 5a: "Younger men, be subject [i.e., be humble toward] to your elders."
2. Verse 5b: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another."
3. Verse 6: "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God."

So the main point is plain in these three verses: humility is essential in the life of a Christian. It is a defining mark of a true Christian.

Four Incentives for Humility

So Peter also gives reasons or incentives—at least four.

1. Verse 5b: "God is opposed to the proud." Nothing could be worse than to have an infinitely powerful and holy God opposed to you. So don't be proud.
2. Verse 5b: "God gives grace to the humble." And nothing could be better than to have an infinitely powerful and wise God treat us graciously. He does that to the humble. The

reason is not that humility is a performance of virtue that earns grace but that humility is a confession of emptiness that receives grace. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

3. Verse 6: God will use his mighty hand to exalt the humble: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time."
4. Verse 7: God will use his mighty hand to care for the humble: "Casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you."

Be a humble person because, if you are proud, God will be against you in your pride, but if you are humble he will give you grace, exalt you in due time, and care for you along the way so that you don't have to be anxious.

Two Questions

That's the basic message of the text. Now how shall it take root in our minds and hearts and make a powerful difference in the way we live to God's honor? Let me try to make it sink deeper into us by asking two questions:

1. What is pride and humility?
2. What is the connection between humility and not being anxious?

How Do Humility and Not Being Anxious Relate?

I'll start with the second one. Did you notice (in the NASB) the grammatical connection between verses 6 and 7? "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, 7 casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you." It's not merely a new sentence. It's a subordinate clause. "Humble yourselves . . . casting your anxieties on him." I think this means that casting your anxieties on God is an expression of humility. It's like saying, "Eat politely . . . chewing with your mouth shut." "Drive carefully . . . keeping your eyes open." "Be generous . . . inviting someone over on Thanksgiving."

"Humble yourselves . . . casting your anxieties on God." One way to be humble is to cast your anxieties on God. Which means that one hindrance to casting your anxieties on God is pride. Which means that undue worry about your future is probably a form of pride.

Now there is more to say about that. But to feel the full force of it we need to answer the first question, and then come back to this connection between pride and anxiety.

The Full Force of 1 Peter 5:6–7

Now we can see clearly and feel the force of 1 Peter 5:6–7,

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time . . .

How? In what way shall you humble yourselves? Answer (v. 7): by "casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you." In other words, the humblest thing in the world is to do what 1 Peter 4:19 says, "Entrust your soul to a faithful Creator." Casting your anxieties on God means trusting the promise that he cares for you and has the power and the wisdom to put that care to work in the most glorious way.

That trust is the opposite of pride. It's the essence of humility. It's the confidence that the mighty hand of God is not over you to crush you but to care for you just like the promise says. Don't be proud, but cast your anxieties on him because he will care for you.

Whenever your heart starts to be anxious about the future, preach to your heart and say, "Heart, who do you think you are to be afraid of the future and nullify the promise of God? No, heart, I will not exalt myself with anxiety. I will humble myself in peace and joy as I trust this precious and great promise of God—he cares for me

The Dominion Belongs to the God of All Grace

1 Peter 5:8-14

Why Is the Lion Roaring?

Let's jump right into the struggle here with this lion that is roaring in verse 8. Peter says that the devil is an adversary that walks around roaring seeking to devour Christians. Now why is this lion roaring? If a lion wants to eat someone, you'd think it would sneak up on them instead of roaring. In fact that's the way the devil is described in other places: he's like a snake. It's subtle. It can fasten onto your heel before you know its there. It doesn't roar. It hides and slithers.

The Devil's Power to Cast Suffering on Believers

The devil is like that. He's dangerous sometimes because he is subtle and quiet and hidden. But that's not the case here. He is dangerous for other reasons. A lion is dangerous not mainly because it sneaks, but because it's so strong. Even if you know it's there, you're a goner unless you have some power more than your own—like a rifle, or a gigantic net, or God.

So Peter's point here is not the devil's subtlety or craftiness, but his power. What power specifically? Verse 9 tells us: "resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world." What this says is that the roaring jaws of the lion are the suffering of believers. Read it carefully and you'll see this: "Resist him . . . knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world." "Same"—same as what? "Resist the lion because the same suffering . . ." The same as you are facing in the lion. Resist this lion because Christians everywhere are in this fight—of suffering. The roaring jaws of the lion are the sufferings of the saints, designed by Satan for their devouring.

He Can Only Kill You

We see a clear picture of this in Revelation 2:10, where Jesus says to the church in Smyrna,

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

In other words Satan will throw some in prison so that some die there. But if they are faithful unto death (thus, "resist him firm in their faith"), they will live forever—or as Peter says here in v. 10, they will be "perfected, confirmed, strengthened and established."

Which means that successfully resisting the devil does not mean that he can't kill you. It only means he can't do you any ultimate harm. He can only kill you. And he can't do that without God's will (1 Peter 4:19).

Satan as a Snake and Satan as a Lion

Now you can see the difference between Satan as snake and Satan as lion. His snakelike-ness is his indirect sneakiness. But his lionlikeness is his direct attack in suffering. The hardest thing about suffering is not usually that it sneaks up on you (though that can sometimes make it harder, cf. 4:12). The hardest thing about suffering is that it can overwhelm your faith with fear and pain. It can destroy your faith that God cares, or has any power to help, or even exists. That's exactly what Satan wants to happen, and that's why Peter says the lion is roaring. The roaring of the lion's jaws is the power of suffering to destroy our faith.

So the point of saying in verse 8, "Be sober, and be on the alert," is not because the lion might sneak up on you. He's roaring! The point is that when you fight a lion, roaring with hunger, you better not be drunk or distracted. You need all your spiritual faculties.

Who Causes the Suffering?

But this raises some important questions. For example, didn't I say in the past sermons that the suffering of the Christians is the judgment of God? 1 Peter 4:16–17,

If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God.

So the suffering of Christians is God's purifying judgment. It's a refiner's fire as 1 Peter 1:6–7 says.

But now I am saying that suffering is Satan's attack. Well then, which is it: the judgment of God or the jaws of the lion? The answer is: it's both. This is not new. It was both in the life of Job (cf. Job 1:12, 21; 2:7, 10), and it was both in the life of Paul. Paul says his "thorn in the flesh" was given to him to keep him humble (implied, by God). But he calls it a "messenger of Satan" (2 Corinthians 12:7). If God is sovereign over all things, including Satan, which he is (!), then God

has a different sovereign design in all the designs of Satan than Satan does. When Christians suffer, the devil's design is destructive pain; but God's design—in the same suffering—is constructive purification and holiness and power. The devil aims to devour. God aims to empower and purify and prepare for glory.

Is This War Just a Game?

Now that raises another important question. Can Christians be devoured? Peter says in verse 8, "Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." So the devil's aim is to devour. Devour is not scratch or maul or wound. It's to chew up and swallow. I don't think there is any way to make this mean anything less than bring to ultimate ruin. The devil aims to take people with him to the lake of fire.

Now Peter says this is the reason we should resist him. Verse 9: "But resist him, firm in your faith." He's trying to devour you, so resist him. Now what shall we make of this? Is it just a charade? No devouring is really possible? Christians can't get eaten by the devil? They can't go to hell? It's sort of like war games? The bullets are all blank? But let's fight like their real?

I don't think so. Devouring is real. And resisting is real. And what is at stake is heaven and hell. Being devoured in hell versus being merely mauled in prison followed by glory.

Can True Christians Be Devoured by the Devil?

So can true, born again, Christians possibly be devoured by the devil? No they can't, because true born again Christians resist the devil firm in their faith. That's the meaning of being true born again Christians; they have the Holy Spirit inside moving them to fight the fight of faith.

If God says—which he does say in 1 Peter 1:5—that he will keep us eternally secure by his power through faith, then it is foolish and presumptuous to say, I am eternally secure without a life of faith. The promise stands sure in many wonderful passages of Scripture (Philippians 1:6; 1 Corinthians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24; Hebrews 13:20f., Romans 8:30): God will bring us safely through the jungle of this world and keep us from being devoured by the devil; and he will do it by his power through faith. Therefore the person who says, I believe I am eternally secure, and so I don't need to resist the devil firm in my faith is contradicting God and throwing away the warrant of his assurance. Those who are called by God do not do that. They fight to the end. And that is their badge of being born of God.

Where Is Our Assurance Found?

Verse 10 shows us where our assurance is really found.

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

What this verse promises is this: if God called you to his glory, he's going to get you to his glory. A little suffering in between is not going to stop him.

The meaning of being a Christian is that we have been effectually called to eternal glory (cf. 1:15; 2:9). This is Peter's way of saying what Paul said in Romans 8:30: Whom God calls he also justifies, and whom he justifies he also glorifies. Peter simply says, The One who called you to his glory will get you to his glory: he will perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. It's a promise. You can take it for yourself if you will have it and believe it and bank on it this morning.

And I urge you to take it. When Peter says that "the God of all grace" makes this promise, he wants to help you believe that it's for you. You may say. It can't be for me. I'm not qualified. I'm not spiritual. Peter says, you don't start with being qualified. You start with the God of all grace. Grace precedes qualification. You may have this promise freely, if you will believe in this God of all grace.

And he gives one last encouragement to believe it in verse 11: "To Him—to the God of all grace—be dominion forever and ever. Amen." Dominion means superior strength. God has dominion over the devil. He is stronger than Satan. Therefore when he promises to successfully get us through the jungle of this world and bring us to glory, he can do it and will do it. Dominion belongs to the Lord.

Resist the Devil Firm in Your Faith

So when Satan roars with his suffering in your face and threatens to devour you, don't say, "O, I'm eternally secure, this is no real threat." Rather say, "The God of all grace has called me to his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, and after I have suffered a little while from your claws and fangs, he will perfect and confirm and strengthen and establish me. He is a God of all grace. He is a God of absolute dominion. You can maul me. And you can even kill me. But you cannot devour me. He has called me to glory and he will get me to glory."

That's how to resist him firm in your faith. Take this promise this advent season. Believe it. Be saved by it. Rest in it. Fight with it. Persevere with it. It's yours free from the God of all grace.