

An Encouraging Word In A Discouraging World

by Ron R. Ritchie

Several young people from our Careers ministry visited me at my home yesterday. It was a significant day for me, as I had just put my pen to the final words in my study in the first letter of Peter. As I have been working on that letter for year, finishing my work was a very exciting and thrilling experience. There are certain sections of it that I didn't particularly like, as they seemed to strike home in a rather personal way. Although I struggled with these, I submitted to them, learned through them and found that the book was altogether a very encouraging word for me.

As I shared my excitement with the young people who were visiting, I noticed that one woman had tears in her eyes. She asked if I could answer some questions she had, and we went inside to talk. Her heart was breaking because she was struggling with the tension we all experience, described by the apostle Paul in his words in Romans 7, "...the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish" (Romans 7:19). She so much wanted to be a godly woman, but it seemed to her that the Lord wasn't working fast enough in her life; she had been a Christian for only a year. She desires to have a proper relationship with both her physical family and her spiritual family. I had a wonderful time pointing out to her from the Scriptures some things to encourage her heart--things that the Holy Spirit has taught me. As she listened, I watched her whole countenance change. Her tears dried up, her heart of thankfulness was restored, and life and joy came back to her eyes as her fears were swept away. I felt privileged to have been used by God to use His Word to further that process.

This perhaps was how Peter--at this time an older, wiser, more loving and mature apostle--felt as he wrote this letter of admonishment, instruction and encouragement to the Christians in Asia Minor, the flock that had been allotted to him by Jesus Christ, in 64 A.D. To this second generation of Christians, distressed by political, social and spiritual trials even as they sought to do the will of God, Peter says that this is normal Christianity. This is God's will for them, so that "...the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7). Suffering is part and parcel of participating in God's plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. The trials they were suffering were part of a purification process. God was turning up the heat in their lives, as a goldsmith turns up the heat under his crucible so that all the impurities would rise to the top and be scooped off. As God looks into the crucible of the Christian's life, He wants to see a perfect reflection of himself. That process takes the heat of suffering. He wants us to grow up, to mature and to become pure, as He Himself is pure.

We have seen that this letter breaks down into four sections. From 1:1 to 2:10, the theme is that Christians are "...born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Secondly, 2:11 through 4:11, Peter urges that Christians, as "aliens and strangers, abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul." Christians are merely passing through this world, so they should be careful to see that they behave in a righteous way before the eyes of the world. Here the apostle taught us how to live like that. Thirdly, in 4:12-19, Paul says that Christians should not be surprised at the "fiery ordeal" which comes among them, because through such circumstances, they share in the sufferings of Christ. As He suffered in an unrighteous generation, so will Christians suffer as they shed light in an evil world. Christians are to be salt and light in society, bringing flavor, arresting corruption and shedding light. They have a ministry of reconciliation, bringing people into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

In this last section which we will study together (1 Peter 5), Peter will instruct Christians to stand firm in the word of truth as they walk in humility in the world. In these closing remarks, the apostle thinks through some of the everyday tensions facing the members of the various house groups to whom he is writing. This section breaks down into three sub-sections, each of which contains three different steps, namely, a word of admonishment, a

word of instruction and a word of encouragement. Let's begin with the first paragraph, found in 1 Peter 5:1-4.

The Chief Shepherd will reward you

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow-elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed. Shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion sign, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

As we have seen, the body of Christ in Asia Minor was undergoing a "fiery ordeal," a time when God was turning up the heat and suffering was on the increase. Here Peter turns to the elders of the various house churches of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia to encourage this second generation of Christian leaders to maintain faithfulness to their shepherds' task among the sheep mentioned in 4:19--those who were suffering "according to the will of God."

"Therefore, I exhort the elders among you," the apostle writes. He is admonishing the elders to pursue a certain course of action. An elder is one who is mature in wisdom and knowledge. In Old Testament times, elders were the gray-bearded seniors who headed up the tribes and the communities. The position of elder was continued in the early church, and this time, the emphasis and qualification required of an elder was spiritual maturity. In Paul's address to the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20), he used the term elder to describe the office, and overseer and bishop as the work of an elder. The function of a New Testament elder, after he is chosen by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by spiritually mature men in his community, is to use his spiritual gifts of pastor/teacher to direct the spiritual affairs of the local church by seeking the mind of the Lord, much of which is already made known in the Scriptures. One of our interns, Blythe Swanson, dropped into a PBC elders' meeting last week. I asked her for her impressions, and she told me that she compared the meeting to a concert, in which all the young men were speaking and all the older men were listening. As the older men spoke, she said, she noticed that there was great courtesy and patience among the board members. It was a marvelous way to spend an evening, watching men whom God has chosen to be elders seeking the mind of the Lord, and not their own hopes and desires.

Peter then goes on to encourage the elders of the churches, saying that he is their fellow-elder; they are equals, in other words. The motivating factors which kept him faithful right up to the time of his writing this letter are, first, what he witnessed in the sufferings of Christ, and, second, what he will someday partake in, which is, "the glory to be revealed." As a "fellow-elder," Peter and the other apostles were called by Jesus to guide His church on earth. They were commissioned by the resurrected Lord to preach the gospel to every nation, baptizing them and teaching them all that He had taught them. But, far from commanding these elders, Peter expresses himself with an attitude of humility, identifying himself as a co-worker, a fellow-elder whose only desire was to reveal truth already known. What a wonderful way to help and instruct people! Peter is saying, "I'm with you. As a fellow-elder, I understand the problems you are facing."

Secondly, Peter refers to himself as a "witness of the sufferings of Christ." Here he compares himself to a courtroom witness, giving firsthand evidence to the second generation of Christians--30 years removed from the life--the teachings, the suffering, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He admonishes them that all they had been taught is true. "We were there!" he explains. Jesus suffered for us because of our sin and because of His righteousness; and you too will suffer injustice for doing what is right because you desire to follow Him. And not only did Peter witness the sufferings of Christ, as a study in the Book of Acts will reveal, but he also participated in much suffering because of his witness for the Lord.

But, thirdly, Peter is also "a partaker of the glory that is to be revealed." He saw Jesus suffer, but he also saw Him in His glory at the transfiguration. Further, he had spent 40 days with Jesus in His resurrected body; he saw Him ascend into heaven and he heard the promise of the angels that Jesus would return again; He left in glory and would return in glory. Here Peter says that he will partake one day in that glory; thus he could say to the apostle Paul, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be

revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). So here we have the apostle's word of admonishment.

Then he shares a word of instruction with the elders: " shepherd the flock of God among you. You have been called by the Holy Spirit to the office of elder; now function as a pastor/teacher," Peter charges. Elders were to feed and strengthen the weak, heal the diseased, bind up the broken, gather the scattered, seek the lost and know them by name, be tenderhearted toward the young and feeble, and guide and protect the flock from wolves. All of these instructions would have been quite familiar to men of the soil and of the pastures, as they would have been accustomed to the sight of lone shepherds in the hills and valleys of Asia Minor. Further, Peter makes clear that the flock they were charged with shepherding was not theirs, but God's. So in reality, they were under-shepherds and stewards of God, responsible to care for His flock.

The apostle then goes on to list three negative characteristics which as shepherds they were to avoid, and three positive characteristics which they were to seek to develop and maintain. First, their service was "not under compulsion." They were not to serve against their will, out of a sense of false guilt or fear, or to please men. Rather, positively, elders should serve "voluntarily, according to the will of God." They were to serve out of a heart of love, gratitude and joy, and out of a desire to please God--to know His will for the church.

Secondly, their service was "not for sordid gain." That is, they were not to be motivated by money or material advantage. They were to flee the temptation to love money. Rather, positively, they were to shepherd "with eagerness." They were to shepherd with an attitude marked by a keen interest, an enthusiasm, with a readiness for action. I am reminded of John Mitchell, of Portland, Oregon, who is now 92 years old. Every time I hear his preaching, delivered in his Scotch/English accent, his love for the Lord, for the Word of God and for people comes shining through. His excitement for the Scriptures is so infectious, that he makes me feel like a Christian teenager who has just got a new Bible! I hope I will maintain in the years left to me the same kind of excitement he demonstrates as he teaches.

Thirdly, Peter says that shepherding is not "fording it over those allotted to your charge." Shepherds have no power other than the power to serve. Servanthood, not lordship, was the issue. Elders, rather, should seek to prove to be "examples to the flock." The most profound way in which they could influence their flock was their own Christ-like lifestyle. They were to lead, not drive the sheep; to protect, not frighten them; to care, not neglect them. Thus we have Peter's first word of instruction.

He follows with a word of encouragement: "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." From the early days of Biblical history, righteous men from Jacob to David, through the prophets, recognized that Jehovah was their personal and national Shepherd and that they were his sheep. Following the death of David, God promised His people that His Messiah would be a shepherd like David, and that he would feed, guide and care for them in the strength of the Lord. Israel experienced the fulfillment of these prophecies in the person of Jesus, when they heard Him say, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." But the nation rejected the Good Shepherd, so He turned to the Gentiles, when He said, "I have other sheep which are not of this flock. I will bring them also and they shall hear my voice and they shall become one flock [Jew/Gentile] with one shepherd. For this is the reason the Father loves Me--because I lay down my life and take it up again." Jesus died physically on the cross for the sins of humanity. He was spiritually separated from the Father, was buried, but He rose again. And at this very moment, He is the invisible, eternal Shepherd and Guardian of our souls (1 Peter 2:25), and Chief Shepherd over His spiritual flock.

So, shepherds were to be faithful in the midst of unjust suffering; and the Chief Shepherd, the Owner and Ruler of the allotted flocks who would be aware of that faithfulness unto death, would reward them with "the unfading crown of glory." Unlike the fading olive wreath which was awarded athletes at the ancient Greek games, this crown would be unfading. God was the one who would reward their faithfulness. They were not to look to the flock for their rewards and compliments and a sense of victory. Many elders and pastors struggle with believing these words. I know I do. I would like to have the crown right now. But God continues to confirm his word, "Trust me. I will give you the unfading crown of glory--a share in My glory--following all of this suffering."

I once heard Earl Palmer, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, speak on how to be a good shepherd of the flock. He said that it was his experience that flocks of sheep usually had one shepherd who had a lot of under-shepherds, which were dogs. Some were good shepherd dogs, while others were bad dogs who ran around a lot and barked at the sheep, making them nervous and neurotic. But the good shepherd dog was the one who kept his eyes on the shepherd and only chased after the lead-sheep, which had a bell around its neck. The dog knew that the only things the sheep could give him were problems, which he didn't need, and wool, which he couldn't use. He kept his eye on the shepherd, therefore, the only one who could reward him for his work. We can learn a lesson from that: the Chief Shepherd is the only one who can reward us; therefore we should keep our eyes on Him.

Having said this word to elders who were ministering in a discouraging world, Peter now turns to the members of God's flock, to whom he says,

The Mighty God will protect you

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.

Again, in this section Peter opens with a word of admonishment: "you younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders." The issue of submission has already come up several times in this letter. The apostle asked the church to submit to the government, slaves to submit to their masters, and he has dealt with the issue of submission in marriage. Now he moves on to relationships within the body of Christ. Apparently, the younger men in the various house churches to whom he was writing were struggling to submit to their godly, appointed elders, especially in this time of political and social suffering.

I can understand their feelings. For many years as a "younger man," I thought the various elders in my life were dumb, blind, and deaf--out of touch with reality and insensitive to current needs. I regarded them as part-time servants who had a variety of other interests, other than that of the flock of God. In all my zeal, of course, I thought I was right in my estimation. After all, didn't I have the twin spiritual gifts of arrogance and pride? Further, wasn't my generation the first, if not the only one ever, to be blessed with so much wisdom and knowledge? But what I as a younger man, together with so many of my younger friends, failed to realize was that the Chief Shepherd picked our elders to shepherd His flock, and they in turn were to submit to Him. Likewise, Peter says, as elders model their submissiveness to Christ, so should younger men submit to those who are placed over them by the Chief Shepherd. Make a conscious choice to trust them, in other words. They are there to protect and guide you. As Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders [in other words, 'suffer oneself to be persuaded'], and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." I think through my years I have caused much grief, but as an older man, I am learning submission.

Then Peter says that not only younger men, but "all of you," everyone in the body, make a conscious choice by the power of the Holy Spirit to "clothe yourself with humility toward one another." Adopt a lifestyle of service toward one another, in other words. This attitude is best illustrated by Jesus who, on the night before He was crucified, laid aside His garments and washed the disciples' feet. In the sight of God, to be humble is to have no semblance of pride, power or desire for position in our hearts; it is to be totally dependent upon God for everything; it is to have an attitude of service for good toward one another. To be humble is to have a desire to wash one another's feet, as it were, in a multitude of spiritual, emotional and physical ways; seeking to do good to each other.

Next, quoting Proverbs 3:34, Peter issues a warning: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." God sets His face against arrogance in the body of Christ. If we have an arrogant attitude toward our elders or toward each other, God will resist that, because by such behavior we are actually challenging God Himself.

Peter again follows his word of admonishment with a further word of instruction: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God." He instructs that Christians should make a conscious choice to totally depend on the Lord during their season of suffering. God will be with them through it, and His hand is mighty. No enemy is too powerful for Him--not even Nero with all the power at his command; neither are the social pressures from their neighbors, their friends or their masters. Trust the Lord to deal with those enemies. God's hand was behind all their circumstances; He was in control of them.

Then comes the apostle's word of encouragement: "that He might exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you." In other words, he is saying, "Humble yourselves that God might exalt you at the proper time." God has a plan--a timetable for the ages--but arrogant, prideful man doesn't want to take God's counsel to heart. As Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in a man's heart; but the counsel of God, it will stand." Humble yourselves, therefore, and God will open the door of service to a greater degree of service, leadership and authority for His namesake. At my son's high school football games, I am always amused when I see the clean-shined substitute football players milling around the coach, suggesting to him that it's time to put them into the game. Their anxiety to play is perfectly understandable, but the coach is the one who really knows the right time to play certain athletes; he makes the final decisions, and those decisions are always made for the good of the entire team. In the same way, individual Christians are part of the body of Christ, and God has a perfect time and place for them in His plan. Our part is to keep growing, keep practicing and keep serving. God will use us in His time.

Secondly, by way of encouragement, Peter says, "...casting all your anxiety upon Him because He cares for you." Don't worry when your fellow Christians fail to notice you, your place or your rights in the body of Christ. As the apostle Paul has written, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

So here we have the three-fold promise of this section: God cares for us; He will protect us; and He will exalt us. All other religious systems seek out ways for God to care for them, but Christianity is founded on the fact that God cares in a very personal way for each and every one of His sheep. He knows and cares about even the most intimate details of all of our lives. Ken Working is a friend of mine who is now a pastor in Yakima, Washington. Before he became a pastor, we had a conversation once and he began to talk about going to seminary. I said to him, "Ken, you'll be 35 by the time you graduate." But he said, "I think God will have work suitable for a 35-year-old man at that time." He knew that God had a plan and a time exactly suited to his age, his gifts and everything else about him. By way of contrast, I remember another young man who came to talk with Ray Stedman and I once in Oregon. He sat down in our motel room and proceeded to list for us what he thought were excellent assets he possessed for the ministry: his good looks, his various talents, his warm personality which attracted people, etc. "What do you think?" he asked Ray. Ray responded, "Your assets sound to me like a lot of liabilities." "What do you mean?" the young man asked, totally devastated. We spent several hours ministering to him throughout that weekend, and I think he grew out of that mindset.

Peter follows now with the third encouraging word to a discouraging world,

The Gracious God will perfect you

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. And after you have suffered for a little, the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Again, Peter begins with a word of admonishment: "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Here he calls upon Christians to make sober, righteous choices in the power of the Holy Spirit. First, "Be of sober spirit," you elders, so you will not be drunk

with power; do likewise, you young men, so you will not be drunk with power, pride and anxiety. These things blind men to the spiritual realities behind what God is doing in His church and in the world.

Secondly, "Be on the alert." We are involved in a spiritual battle. Know the enemy and his characteristics. Be aware that this is a life and death battle and the pressure won't let up. The name "devil" will help us know his characteristics. He is a slanderer, a false accuser whose main work is to sow discord among God's spiritual family, accusing God against man, man against God and man against man with false charges. He is our personal adversary, our enemy, who, Peter says, "prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Someone has said, "Some of you are already lying on his dinner plate, and the sound you hear is the licking of his lips." In the immediate context, the devil's plan for suffering Christians in Asia Minor would be to get them to deny Jesus Christ.

The apostle follows this word of admonishment with a word of instruction: "But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world." How do we resist the devil? We must make a conscious choice to resist him by the power of God. Ephesians 6 instructs us to "put on the full armor of God" and stand. James says that if we do that, the devil will flee from us.

Secondly, Peter says, "be firm in your faith." When the devil attacks us with lies, slander and false charges, review who you are in Christ. And Peter has already told us exactly who we are: we have been "chosen by the Father," "redeemed by the Son," "sealed by the Holy Spirit," "born again to a living hope," "protected by the power of God;" we are "aliens" passing through this world, we have a "hope in God," we are "living stones," "a holy priesthood," a "holy nation," a "people of God." Stand on that and refuse to believe the lies of the devil. Review who you are in Christ because that's exactly who you are; everything the devil brings to your mind and heart is a lie. And thirdly, realize you are not alone. Other brothers and sisters all over the world are suffering injustice, not through blind chance, but as part of God's plan throughout the ages to call out a people for his namesake. All this suffering will end when God's purpose is accomplished.

Now comes the apostle's word of encouragement: "And after you have suffered for a little, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen." Peter is saying, "Your suffering for righteousness' sake will continue for as long as God wills it. But let me promise you this: the God of all grace, the God who called you before the foundation of the world to His eternal glory in Christ--this one and only Living God will personally do four things for you which you subconsciously desire as a lifestyle. God will "perfect" you. He will restore you as a physician restores a broken bone. So if you humbly accept suffering from the hand of God, you can by God's grace have your weakness of character healed, and the greatness now missing but deeply desired in your life will be added to you."

Secondly, Peter says, God will "confirm" you. He will make you as solid as granite and enable you to stand against the fiery ordeal and the storms of life. Thirdly, He will "strengthen" you in spiritual, emotional and physical ways to stand despite these trials. He will use all the injustice you suffer to His honor and glory. Fourthly, God will "establish" you. He will lay in your lives a foundation of truth--a new set of values. In 2 Corinthians 1, the apostle Paul wrote that suffering produced in him the knowledge that he should not trust in himself, but in God who raises the dead.

As we look back over Peter's three admonishments, we should realize that they have come from the hand of a once young and proud, but now humble apostle who himself had once failed in all of these three areas. Now, however, he desires that others who follow after him not fail, so he gives them a word of encouragement in a discouraging world. In the first paragraph, he encouraged the elders to "shepherd the flock," a task he himself lost at the cross and had to be reminded of by the resurrected Lord by the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus asked him, "Do you love me? Then feed my sheep." In the second paragraph, Peter encouraged young men to gird themselves with humility for service toward one another, a truth he himself lost sight of at the last supper when in pride he did not want Jesus to wash his feet. In the third paragraph, he encouraged all to be aware of the devil and his power, because he himself was told in his pride by Jesus, "Behold, Peter, Satan has asked permission to sift you like

wheat. But I shall pray for you so that when you return you can strengthen your brothers, but you shall deny me three times." What a gracious shepherd was Peter! He was willing to display out of the ashes of some of his experiences, failures that had occurred some 30 years earlier in his life as a Christian. Rather than keeping these to himself, he now shared all with his flock in an effort to encourage them. God is alive and well! He cares for His flock! He is moving among us, doing something which we all are partaking in, and we will all share His glory when He comes again.

Peter closes with another encouraging word,

Stand firm in the Grace of God

Through Silas, our faithful brother [for I so regard him], I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it! She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and so does my son, Mark. Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace be to all of you who are in Christ.

What is Peter's encouraging word in a discouraging world? Suffering is the name of the game. It's normal--part of God's plan to call out a people for His namesake. Meanwhile, remember that the Chief Shepherd is aware of your faithfulness and He will reward you. The mighty God will protect you because He desires to exalt you and because He cares for you. The gracious God will perfect you by conforming you to the image of His Son in the midst of your present suffering. Therefore, stand firm in the true grace of God.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

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