

Hold Your Ground until Glory

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Date: 27 February 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we have come, haven't we, to the end of Peter's first letter to the churches. We've spent eight weeks learning from Peter how to live for Christ in a world that does not love him.

And this final section feels a bit like the final scene before the big battle, doesn't it? The king or general rides out before the army and gives the rallying cry, urging his people on before sending them out into the fray.

These are Peter's final words to us before he sends us out to go and live and suffer and perhaps one day die for Christ in a rebellious and sometimes hostile world.

And so these words are designed, aren't they, to ring in our ears as we leave this letter that we might follow Christ and continue to do so, come what may, in the weeks and the months and the years ahead of us.

Words designed, as he says in verse 12, to encourage us, to steady us, to root us deeply in the grace of God as we live faithful lives with the day-to-day pressures that living in this world brings.

[1 : 2 1] And so as we close this letter, I'm going to quote three kings who will help these words to stick with us as we go from here, to prepare us to stand firm and to press on to glory.

And we're going to spend most of our time this morning looking at our first point because it's the most surprising and I think the easiest to lose sight of in the battle.

It would be easy to miss this, wouldn't it? Humble yourselves, says Peter. Our first point, humble yourselves. Now, you say that's not very inspiring.

No king or general has ever said to his forces before battle, humble yourselves. But that is how this battle is fought, says Peter, because ultimately it's not us fighting.

Luke verse 5, he says, all of you clothe yourselves with humility towards one another because God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time.

[2 : 3 1] In other words, he's saying the battle belongs to the Lord. And so, as the battle rages on, we are called, aren't we, to hide and take refuge in the one who fights for us, to humble ourselves under his almighty hand.

And so, firstly, supremely, I guess there's that vertical spiritual Godwoods humbling that Peter's calling us to here. But there's also, notice, a horizontal and practical and human humbling, which is his real focus in these verses.

And so he starts, doesn't he, at the top, so to speak, in verse 1, to the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and witness of Christ's sufferings, who also will share in the glory to be revealed.

Shepherd God's flock under your care. Now, this is really important, isn't it? God loves to speak truth to power. We've seen that before in this letter, back in chapters 3 and 4, where he said, Submit yourselves.

Submit yourselves to governments, to bosses, to husbands. But he didn't call for tyranny. He didn't say to those rulers, submit people to you, did he?

[3 : 54] In fact, we read right here, God opposes the proud. God never, ever gives a green light to any who would wish to submit others under them, to bend the will of others into line with their own will, either in the world or in the church.

And so, yes, God calls us to submit ourselves to our leaders. But first of all, he calls our leaders to humbly submit themselves under Christ, under God.

And that's the big difference here, I think, from those other kinds of submission Peter called for earlier. There he was speaking about submitting ourselves mainly to non-Christian authorities.

Whereas here, he's speaking about authority in the church, Christian authority. And as we'll see, it's authority used very, very differently. Now, this authority is exercised by elders, says Peter.

Now, the Greek word for elder here is *presbyteroi*, or *presbyteros*, from which we get the word *presbyterian*, which is a word that describes how Bon Accord is governed, how this church works.

[5 : 06] Now, not all of you had a presbyterian upbringing. Neither did I, for what it's worth. Not all of you were raised coming to church or as Christians.

Some of you are not Christians. And sometimes, you know, thinking about church leadership or hierarchies can feel a bit strange, a bit kind of off-putting.

But the Bible tells us, actually, that church leadership is really simple. Okay, local churches are led by elders. Elders are men in the church who are recognized as having a mature faith in Christ and sharing his character in a way that's really clear and obvious to everyone.

Paul gives more detail about that in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and Titus chapter 1. But at Bon Accord, we have 10 elders who the members here have all recognized as being faithful to Christ, meeting the standards of being an elder and being fit to lead his church.

And you'll know who the elders here are, because they're the guys who lead us in prayer on a Sunday, lead our neighborhood fellowships, our prayer meetings, who lead and serve in all kinds of ways throughout the week.

[6 : 23] And the elders from our church, they get together with elders from other churches regularly to make decisions for our churches together. And that's it.

Okay, that's church leadership. There's no kind of complicated hierarchy or endless titles to grapple with. Really helpfully in verse 2, Peter speaks there to elders who are also, he says, shepherds, shepherds, which is where we get the word pastor.

And he calls them overseers, who are to watch over, which is where we get the word bishop. So biblically speaking, being an elder, being a pastor, being a bishop, that's not three things, that's one thing.

So it's really simple on paper, church leadership. But it also means that's a lot of responsibility to hold that position. Now, speaking personally, I'm really thankful to be one of 10 elders who share that responsibility, who serve and lead this church together.

Because with power comes responsibility. And God holds us to that. And Peter wants us as your elders to know how to lead like Jesus.

[7 : 37] He described Jesus earlier in chapter 2 as the great shepherd and the overseer of our souls. So now he says, lead like shepherds.

Watch over God's flock carefully. But also look, verse 5. He wants you all to know, us all to know, how to be led like Jesus.

You see that? But in the same way, in the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. And so Peter's saying, the way that we as elders lead and the way that you are led is one and the same.

Because we are ultimately all following Jesus together. And therefore all called to humble ourselves before each other, before him. So then how do we humble ourselves as a church, a whole church?

Well, one way, verse 2, says Peter, is to lead and be led, not because you must, but because you are willing as God wants you to be. Now we all know, don't we, how frustrating it is to have unwilling leaders.

[8 : 52] And Peter's concern, I guess, is that in a time where being a Christian isn't going to gain you a lot of popularity, well, stepping up to be a Christian leader is going to make you even less popular.

And so church leadership in a secular world might be tempted to kind of shrink back or grow weak. Now, maybe you're thinking, who wouldn't want a chance to step up and lead?

But if the pressure comes on our church, whether it be from our society, from an interest group, from a nosy government, who's going to bear the brunt of that pressure?

It will be your elders. And folks, this happens. It's happened in Scotland today. Planning permission denied for a new church building because the neighbours have decided that the beliefs of the church are too backwards and too outdated to permit them to build a new church building.

Now, as leaders, what do you do then? Do you keep preaching the gospel? Do you keep getting people to come on a Sunday and be known as the people who go to that church?

[10 : 08] Do you keep getting people to follow Jesus, even though it might mean getting your name dragged through the mud in the paper? Can you imagine the pressure of preparing to preach God's word, knowing that every word you say is going on the internet?

Do you soft-pedal the hard bits? Do you water it down? Don't bother, says Peter. Don't bother. Lead willingly.

Lead willingly. Don't try to get away with the bare minimum. Don't do it half-heartedly. Don't do it out of a sense that it has to be done and someone has to do it.

Because if your heart's not in it, you won't lead as God wants you to lead, says Peter. And that's why leading willingly takes humility. Humility, because it means it's no longer about me and my image, but God and his image.

And so, church, application. Please pray for your elders. I need your prayers. And speaking for our elders, we need your prayers to lead faithfully for Christ, willingly, in a challenging time.

[11 : 23] And in the same way, says Peter, be led willingly. Be led willingly. This is why I'm always asking you to say what you think about what we're doing. Give feedback.

Tell us. Ask questions. Follow your elders' lead proactively. You might not always 100% agree with what we decide, and that takes humility.

But if there are things that you don't understand or agree with, well, come and ask about it. Because we want you willingly involved. We want a back and forth with you.

Another way Peter gives us to humble ourselves, there in verse 2, is not pursuing dishonest gain, but being eager to serve. Now, this can be a really subtle temptation in church leadership.

Dishonest gain. After years, maybe the pressure starts to build and to grow. And you start thinking, oh, this is hard work. Surely it can't be wrong for me to want something just for me out of this.

[12 : 29] Or even, if it keeps me working hard, then it's okay. The work's still getting done, and I'm getting what I want.

Everyone's happy, aren't they? Everyone wins. Well, friends, that tempting logic has led church leaders to commit fraud and to bully people and to have affairs, and the list goes on.

Because a leader starts to think, I deserve a bit more money, a new relationship, a bit of a power trip. Peter's saying here, don't even think about it.

Don't pursue dishonest gain. Be eager to serve. He's saying, don't look for what you can get out of it, but for what others gain from your service, and therefore do it gladly.

Not for you, for them. Now, that's not to say that leaders don't need a break, or pay, or friendships, but in God's book, that is honest gain.

[13 : 37] And we need those things. None of us is like God who doesn't need anything. He's the only one who doesn't need anything. That's different from thinking we deserve what God has not given us, or wouldn't give us if we asked him.

And so again, pray, please. Pray for me. Pray for your elders. Pray, please, that God would keep our hearts from coveting what he has not given us, and what isn't ours, and leave us free to serve him, to serve this church eagerly, willingly.

And again, share that attitude yourselves. Perhaps the temptations are a wee bit different, but we can all feel sometimes, can't we, like we deserve something for what we're doing.

It's recognition, influence, appreciation, responsibility. But whether that's right or wrong, don't go looking for that, says Peter.

It's nice when someone appreciates what you're doing, but don't do it so that people appreciate you. That's not why we serve. You know, lots of you serve so, so well, and in so many unseen ways, and that's why this is such a good reminder, isn't it?

[14 : 58] Because it's so tempting when we serve to pursue dishonest gain. That's keeping serving one another eagerly, and not for ourselves. And finally, verse two, we humble ourselves not by lording it over others.

Now, I don't know about you, I think these are some of Jesus' most underrated words in the gospel. This is Mark chapter 10, where he says, you know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their officials exercise authority over them.

Not so with ye. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. We love that last verse, don't we?

But we miss the run-up. Reminding others who is in charge, putting people in their place, pulling rank. Jesus says, not so in his church.

[16 : 11] Those things are not to go on among you. Not if you're an elder in the church. Not if you head up a rota program or team.

Not if you've been here a bit longer than someone else. Not if you've got a good free church heritage. Okay, whatever it is, don't lord it over others, says Peter.

It says Jesus. But be examples to the flock. You think with this one, he's speaking specifically to elders here. And we do have to be careful, and we as elders do work really hard to try to not make an inner circle or any kind of hierarchy in this church.

Because the irony of Christian leadership, the big twist, is that the best leaders are not the strongest leaders, but the humblest leaders. The greatest leaders, says Jesus, put themselves last, bottom.

Because only then are we leading others into the character of Christ. Who though he was first and he was highest, made himself last and lowest to serve us forever and ultimately, that is why he hung on the cross, not to be served, but to serve us.

[17 : 35] And so, brothers and sisters, how do we learn to humble ourselves before God? Well, we learn that humility here in the classroom of the church.

Where is it that we learn together to submit to God's plans even though they are not what we would choose? Well, we learn to do that as we submit to each other in ways that without Christ we would not choose to do.

And so, says Peter, in that spirit then, humble yourselves, verse 6, under God's mighty hand so that he may lift you up in due time.

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. You're living under pressure for Christ. Living in Scotland in the year 2022 is not the time, brothers and sisters, for strong heads and hard hearts.

It's time for humility, for soft hearts between us before God because whoever we are, we are together led and upheld and protected by God's mighty hand.

[18 : 49] This is an invitation, isn't it, but also a promise of God that he can carry our anxieties and cares and burdens and that he wants to shoulder those things for us.

What a relief. Our God will take our anxieties off us when we come to him. We don't know what the coming months or years hold, do we? What pressures that we might face as a church, what difficulties we might go through as believers for following Christ, but if we take refuge under God's mighty hand in that suffering, well, he promises to lift us up at the right time.

And so, to quote our first king, this is George VI, speaking on Christmas Day in 1939, right at the start of the Second World War, he shared these lines with the nation.

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown. And he replied, go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand.

[20 : 16] Our second and briefer point that Peter leaves us with, it might feel a bit like it's pulling in another direction. Because he says next, steal yourselves.

Steal yourselves. Notice that in verse 8 there. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him.

Resist, says Peter. Stand firm. Hold your ground. Keep your guard up. Now, that might sound like the opposite of humility. But notice the direction of that firmness.

He's saying, don't put your guard up against each other. Don't put your guard up against God. Put your guard up against the enemy. Whatever you do, don't be humble before him.

Now, perhaps, it's possible, isn't it, throughout this whole sermon, you felt like this idea of a battle is a bit un-Christian. It's not very Christian to think of ourselves as at war.

[21 : 21] But here we see who our enemy is. And when the veil is lifted, we see that it's not our friends, our family, our neighbors, our colleagues, but the devil.

The enemy is not a human enemy, but a spiritual enemy. As Fiona read to us earlier in our service from Ephesians, our struggle is not against flesh and blood, says Paul, not against human beings, but against the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

We have spiritual enemies, and they are the enemies in the Bible. Okay, and not a kind of slapstick, red-horned devil, okay, in the popular imagination, but the real thing, okay, a powerful, evil spirit who hates God and hates his people.

Notice we're still in the world of sheep and shepherds here. Christ is the chief shepherd, and his leaders are under-shepherds, and we together are the flock. Well then, we have a lion hunting us.

The devil is a lion. In first century Palestine, lions eat sheep, don't they? Lions are the shepherd's nemesis. And so, Bonacord, be on guard, resist him.

[22 : 46] How do we resist the devil? Well, I think what Peter has in mind isn't some kind of mystic rituals or secret prayers that he wants us to pray, but instead, all that he's been teaching us all along in this letter.

That's how we resist, surely by holding on to Christ, by denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him, sticking with the chief shepherd.

He who is able to protect us and defend us and keep us, rather than being torn away from him by the suffering that we go through for him. It's a reminder to us, isn't it, that the devil has a lot of tools in his tool belt.

Yeah, demon possession, occult practices, evil ideologies, those are the tanks and missiles. But others are more sneaky, aren't they? They have a steady persecution, the drip, drip of opposition, making following Jesus us feel shameful and lonely and different.

In those ways, he can sabotage our faith and peel us away from Christ slowly. And that is the kind of attack that we are facing in Scotland in the year 2022.

[24 : 07] That is exactly why Peter wrote this letter, isn't it? To prepare us for that spiritual struggle in our everyday lives. As we face it, as we come up against it in the lecture theater, in the workplace, over the garden fence.

And so everything that Peter has taught us about living for Christ in this world is therefore our handbook for resisting the devil and standing firm in our faith. He says as much himself in verse 12, I've written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God.

Stand firm in it. Stand firm. And so, I think this just adds perspective to us, doesn't it? How important then, how important is it to obey Jesus in public life, in our work, at school, at university, at home?

How important is it to drink down his word like pure spiritual milk? How important is it to love one another from a deep love from the heart, as Peter's instructed us?

Not doing those things, says Peter, is like letting the flood defenses wear down. Watching the sea wall crumble into the sea, watching the riverbeds fill up with silt and sludge and mud.

[25 : 34] And then the storms come and the waves crash in and there's nothing to stop the floods of opposition sweeping over us, sweeping us away. So, says Peter, keep those defenses strong.

Keep building them up. Keep holding your ground. Obey Jesus all the way in every direction. Don't give the devil an inch to play with in your life, in your church, in your home.

And if you're a Christian, you are your brother's keeper. Okay, that's a responsibility we have to each other, isn't it? You've probably seen on TV how lions hunt, that they pick off, don't they, the stragglers, the young one, the weak one.

What they want is to separate that one from the herd. And that is how the devil hunts too. And so, love one another, encourage each other, build each other up, help your brother, your sister in a difficult season.

When they are feeling weak and vulnerable and lonely, help that brother, that sister to resist them. Stand with them. Build them up in the grace of God.

- [26 : 54] And remember that however hard that gets for us, we are not alone in that. Never. Because you know, verse 9, that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

the devil does not simply strike in one place and at one time. His hostility makes this battle a universal Christian experience.

Everyone who follows Jesus will face this. but if the opposition is universal, well, so is verse 10, Luke. That the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ after you have suffered for a little while will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.

Here's his promise. If we suffer for Christ now, God will bring us into his eternal glory then. If we humble ourselves now, he will lift us then.

He promises the cross is for a short time, but the crown is forever. Which means, brothers and sisters, that fighting this battle together against this enemy is fully worth it because it holds the promise of glory.

- [28 : 14] So to quote our second king, here is Henry V in the words of Shakespeare going into battle. We few, we happy few, we band of brothers, for he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother.

Be he ne'er so vile, this day shall gentle his condition, and gentlemen in England now in bed shall think themselves accursed they were not here, and hold their manhoods cheap while any speaks that fought with us upon St. Crispin's day.

Suffering together now will mean glory together then. So steel yourselves against the enemy. And finally, and still more briefly, says Peter, unite yourselves, unite yourselves in love.

Now this has been something Peter's shown us over and over throughout this letter, isn't it? that we obey Jesus and follow him together. And as Peter signs off, he's keen to leave us on that note of unity.

She who is in Babylon, verse 13, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, so does my son Mark, greet one another with a kiss of love. So Peter's probably writing from Rome, he calls it Babylon, the proverbial heart of darkness where God's people went in exile in the past.

- [29 : 46] And not only did Peter stress, he's not writing to them as, you know, the head honcho, A-list celebrity, but as a fellow elder, a fellow elder with them.

Well, now he sends greetings from she, that is the church in Rome, chosen together with ye. So these guys receiving this letter we've seen were scattered all over what is now Turkey.

That must have felt like far, far, far away from anything meaningful. But Peter wants them to know they are not forgotten or sidelined. They are not in the backwaters because the Christians in the heart of the empire want them to know that they are loved and chosen and precious to you.

And the Christians in the churches he's writing to are also to love one another, greet one another with a holy kiss. And so there's this unity between Christ's followers from top to bottom, from east to west, north to south.

And Peter's final encouragement for us is to keep it that way. Keep it that way. You know, I spoke earlier about the ways the devil tries to break us away from Christ.

- [31 : 04] Well, one of his favorite ways is to break us away from each other. Here in Scotland, he's had a field day, hasn't he? It's virtually a denomination for every Christian.

And so here's the encouragement. Keep these bonds of love strong and close with Christians in other churches, with brothers and sisters here at Bon Accord.

You ask how you can pray for each other's faith and faithfulness and pray for each other and better still, pray with each other. There's no better time to pray than here and now.

See where each other's needs are. Reach out to help to meet them. Most importantly, encourage each other in Christ. Share an encouraging word, a verse that's encouraged you recently.

Spend 10 minutes just reading a wee passage, talking about it, praying for each other because we find strength and unity as we stand fast together in the grace of God.

[32 : 09] And so as we close this letter as a church, we can do no better, can we, than to hear the words of our one true King, Jesus Christ, as he sends us out into the world.

I've said these things to you, says Jesus, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world.

With those words in our ears, let's pray together. Let's pray. God, our Father, how we thank you for Jesus, he who for the joy that was set before him endured at the cross so that we might gather together in his name and stand firm in your grace.

We thank you, Father, that we didn't have to pay to get here, that we didn't have to work our way in, but we simply looked upon Jesus and trusted in his finished work.

And so we pray, our Father, that in your grace you would keep us walking, keep us following him. Lord, on the really hard days when it is sorely tempting to walk away, Lord, we pray that under pressure you would keep us standing firm.

[33 : 36] Remind us, our Father, that we stand firm not against human beings but against the devil. and Father, we pray that you would undo his work. And Lord, how we pray that you would keep us together, give us an ever-increasing love for one another, that this is what you would have for us here at Bon Accord.

And so we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.