In Suffering: Humility, Resistance, Christ
1 Peter 5:6-14

We're taking our last look at Peter's first letter. A letter that, as we've seen repeatedly, was written to Christians facing growing hostility for their faith. Their faith is beginning to cost them. They're facing criticism from friends and family and wider society. And after a while, criticism can get you down, can't it? But their problems weren't just psychological. In their day, business and trade depended on your networks, on who you knew. So if people are withdrawing from them, they were likely also suffering financially. It wasn't just friends they were losing but money. They weren't just looking at their agendas and wondering 'why is no one inviting me to dinner any more?' but looking at their order books and bank balance and wondering 'how am I going to get through the month?'

And just one of those, feeling left out or socially isolated or fearing for your reputation or facing an insecure future, would be enough to leave you feeling anxious, but put them together and they're a toxic combination.

Which is why Peter ends this letter by highlighting 3 responses we might have when life becomes hard. Holding On to Anxiety; Giving In to Pressure; and Hoping In God. And only one of those is good.

Holding On to Anxiety
Look at v6, 'Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God.' Imagine you've got a friend who's facing serious difficulties in life - they've lost their job, or have major health problems, or are being heavily criticised for their beliefs and they go see a therapist because it's weighing on them, and their therapist says, 'You know what your problem is? You're proud. You've lost your job, or your health, or your reputation and that's shaken you. Well, you need to become more humble.' What would you think? We'd probably all go, 'That therapist has totally missed the point. Talk about lack of compassion! You need to find another therapist.'

Except, here is Peter, who knew personally all about suffering, ending a letter to suffering people by telling them 'humble yourselves.' Why? Well, look at that word, 'therefore'. Because that tells you Peter's already said something that explains *why*. And it's there in v5, 'For, "God opposes the proud *but gives grace to the humble*."

And when you're facing some major life challenge, or a brick wall in your career, or the snarky comments of friends on campus or colleagues in the office, what you need is more of God's blessing in your life, you need more grace. What you really don't need is God joining the opposition against you. So, Peter says, humble yourself. Because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

But what does *humble* mean? You see, one of the most odious characters in Charles Dickens' books is Uriah Heep, from David Copperfield. And Heep is a man famed for his humility: 'I'm a very 'umble person… I've always been 'umble, Master Copperfield.' And his mother Mrs Heep says, 'Umble we are, umble we have been, umble we shall ever be.' But in reality Heep has been using his supposed humility to climb the social ladder and work his way in to people's confidence; to deceive them. That's not what Peter's got in mind! He's not suggesting you handle criticism by pretending you're someone other than you are, by hiding what you really believe. Or that you respond to difficulties in life with a *faux* humility that is actually self-pity.

Look again at v6: 'Humble yourselves, therefore, *under the mighty hand of God.'* Now, the symbol of a raised and clenched fist is a potent and defiant one, isn't it - whether it's socialism or Black Power or Black Lives Matter. But in the Old Testament, God's mighty and outstretched arm was a symbol of salvation: Deuteronomy 26:6: "And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." So while Peter's *not* saying pretend you're ever so 'umble to avoid being attacked, hide your true self, he's *also* not saying, raise your own fist and attack back. He's saying 'trust that the Lord knows how and when to deliver you.' Because he's not just powerful to defend you, but powerful to lift you up. Verse 6 again, 'So that *at the proper time he may exalt you*.'

Now when life's not going the way we want, when do we tend to think is the proper time for God to do something about it? When's the right time for the criticism to stop, or this difficulty to go away, or for God to give me a partner, or for me to have a break and go on holiday? Now? Or at least when I want. But to humble yourself under God's hand is to say, God, I trust you to change this situation when *you* say 'now is the proper time'.

Except, Peter doesn't actually write 'at the *proper* time' but at *the time*, in the *kairos*. And both Peter and the other New Testament writers use *the time, the kairos,* for the end of time, *the* appointed time. So when Peter says, humble yourself and leave the timing of your vindication to God, he's saying 'and that may not be until eternity.'

Can you wait that long? I don't know if you've seen that video of the marshmallow test on kids. But the researcher takes a child, one by one, into a room which has a table and a chair and on the table is a marshmallow on a plate. And the researcher tells each child, 'I'll come back in a while, and if you haven't eaten the marshmallow you can have another one.' And then you watch as child after child fights the urge to eat the marshmallow.

What is that? It's a test of delayed gratification. Can they hold out long enough, knowing that something better is coming?

And Peter's saying, humility is trusting God and holding out for something better - for *him* to exalt you. I got a call a few weeks back from a friend who told me he had a colleague at work who was seriously undermining him. And he didn't know whether he should just leave it or go on the attack. Should he tell him to back off or try and engage with him? And I just encouraged him to leave his battles for God to fight, because God makes a much better job of it than we do; and instead, as much as possible, to show love and care for his colleague. So he invited him out for a coffee and just tried to get to know him better. Two days later that colleague rang him to say, he was really sorry that they wouldn't be able to get to know one another better, but because of a job elsewhere he'd be resigning and moving away. And my friend texted me and said 'wow'.

You see, when we're facing opposition, or difficulties, it can be very tempting to try and exalt ourselves. But Peter says, humility leaves it to God and his timing.

Now maybe you hear all that and think, I wouldn't be so crass as to claim to be humble, but pride's not really a problem of mine. Ok, but do you worry or get anxious about anything? Does it ever bother you what people think of you? Like you'd never talk about Jesus in the office, because they'd think you're weird. Or do you worry about the future or how something might turn out? Because those were the kind of anxieties these guys were having.

Verse 6-7, ‘Humble yourselves… casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.’ So to be humble is to cast all your anxieties and fears and worries on God. Which means to be proud is not to do that. It’s to hold on to your anxieties.

Now, why is worry or anxiety a sign that we might be proud? Isn’t it the opposite? Isn’t it saying, ‘this problem’s too big for me; I’m not sure I have the power to solve it.’ Isn’t that humble rather than proud?

Well, except, it also doesn’t believe *God* has the power to solve it. Or it doesn’t trust the goodness of his timing, or his knowledge of the situation. And so our anxieties and our worries tell us, we think God is not up to this: his power, his goodness, his foresight, his timing are suspect. And that’s not humility, that’s pride, because it’s us thinking we know better than God and that, ultimately, my life, and my happiness, depend on me, not him.

You see, how would you define anxiety? Isn’t it that gnawing, even choking sense that all is not well, that all is not safe, that danger is lurking, that change is happening too quickly and the ground is giving way? Which is why Peter is working off Psalm 55 here: ‘Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; *he will never permit the righteous to be moved*’ (v22). And David wrote that when he was being attacked and threatened, so he doesn’t mean ‘live a good life and all will be well’ because it wasn’t going well for him. He means that when everything else is shaking God has hold of you. And so Peter’s saying, humility isn’t holding on to all your cares and worries about what others think or about the future, it’s casting those cares upon God because you know he cares for you.

But if holding on to worry is wrong, so is giving up.

Giving In to Pressure.
Look at v8, ‘Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.’

So, Peter says, when you’re up against it, it’s not just your anxieties inside that you have to reckon with, but an enemy outside. And that enemy’s the devil.

Now, you might think, ‘That’s a bit primitive, isn’t it? Believing in the devil.’ Maybe, but not everything primitive is wrong. Breathing is pretty primitive but I’m a personal believer in it. In fact, a belief that’s old, and held by the vast majority of people, across multiple different centuries and different cultures, might just be right. And if you don’t believe in the devil and demons you’re going to end up demonising something, or someone, because you’ve got to explain the reality of evil. And so the existence of evil in the world is not a problem for the Christian world view but the secular. Because why does the existence of evil in the world bother you? Isn’t it just the strong triumphing over the weak, and the survival of the fittest? And how can you even say there is such a thing as evil if there is no God and no moral absolutes. But you know somethings are evil. So how do you explain that if there is no God and no devil?

It’s why Peter warns us not to be blind to the nature of the battle we’re in when we’re suffering. ‘Be sober-minded; be watchful.’ Be alert to the *real* threats you face in this moment, which may be different from the ones you think you’re facing. You see, what’s one of the problems of being drunk? You misjudge threats and dangers. That lamp post isn’t really there, so you walk straight into

it. Or it is, but it's your arch enemy wielding a weapon, so you try and take it down. You imagine enemies that aren't there, and fail to see dangers that are. Instead, Peter says, be sober-minded, because while you shouldn't imagine enemies where there are none, you do still have an enemy.

Look how Peter describes him: 'your adversary.' It's a term used for an opponent in the law courts. The one who speaks against you and slanders you. How does the devil do that? By whispering: 'look at you, you're such a failure.' Or, 'no one else understands do they? You're all alone.' So, while God wants to carry your burdens for you, the devil wants to heap more on you.

But secondly, Peter says he 'prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.' God wants to lift you up, the devil wants to take you down.

And how does he do it? Verse 9: 'Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that *the same kinds of suffering* are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.'

So the active and passive hostility these guys are experiencing is the devil's roar. And that means that if they only see their suffering in terms of the loss of friends or financial security, they're only seeing half of it. Because in reality this is spiritual not just social or financial. And it's an attempt to see their faith crumble. "How could God let this happen to you if he's supposed to love you. Or maybe he doesn't even exist. But even if he does exist, is your faith really worth this? Because you've only got one life and this isn't much of a life."

And it's knowing that predictable line of attack that Peter says, 'Resist him, firm in your faith.' And as James writes, if you do, 'He will flee from you' (James 4:7). Because, as Hilary of Arles, the 6th century French bishop wrote: 'There is a world of difference between God and the devil. If you resist God, he will destroy you, but if you resist the devil, you will destroy him.'

So how are you supposed to resist him? By being firm in your faith, Peter says. You see, true humility is not saying, 'oh I'm just little ol' me, and I'm such a failure, what am I supposed to do against the big ol' devil.' Humility is trusting in God not yourself; in his character and promises and word. It's why Paul says that when we face an evil day we're to take up the shield of faith, Ephesians 6:16, 'with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one'.

Imagine a Roman soldier, standing across from the enemy in the field of battle. And suddenly the enemy archers unleash a volley of flaming arrows at them. And they can see them coming, arcing up into the sky, and reaching their peak, and the soldier knows that within a second or two those arrows will be raining down. What does he do? Does he stand there, saying, 'I deserve this'? Or, 'the enemy has a point'? He does, thousands of flaming points and they're coming right at him. Or, 'I'm just not up to this.'? No. He and his mates lift those great rectangular Roman shields, and the arrows rain down, but the attack is blunted.

So, take up the shield of faith, Paul says. Stand firm in your faith, Peter says.

Or think of the day when the devil prowled around Jesus in the wilderness. How did Jesus resist him? By repeatedly quoting God's words back at him. It's why Paul says that in the evil day we are to take up 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Eph 6:17). Because to stand firm in your faith means you put more trust in what God says about you and your suffering than what anyone else says.

And while Jesus stood alone in the wilderness, we don't. Look at v9 again, we can resist the devil 'knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world' (v9). That tells you two things. Firstly, you're not alone in suffering. Secondly, you're not alone in *your* suffering. Because if you're a Christian, across the world your brothers and sisters are also suffering, because to suffer for being a Christian and to suffer as a Christian, is the normal Christian life. But you're also not alone in *your* suffering. You may feel isolated, you may feel alone in a wilderness, but you're not. You have a world-wide family lifting up their shield of faith beside you. So, stand firm in your faith, Peter says.

But what can make you want to do that?

Hoping in God
Verse 10, '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.'

So, it's not just kids with marshmallows who have to learn to wait. We all do, because 'after you have suffered *a little while*' does not mean, 'hey, hold on because your suffering is going to be over by Wednesday.' No. While that may be the case, what Peter's saying is, 'while suffering may mark you as a Christian in this life, this life is short in comparison to the endless eternity of glory to come. So fix your eyes on that glory.'

And as you do, 'the God of all grace… will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.' Now, if you read the commentators, they have a hard time distinguishing how restoring, confirming, strengthening and establishing you differ from one another. And that's because they don't. Peter's not trying to give you four different things God is going to do for you in your suffering, he's telling you the same thing four times. When you are suffering, but you trust him, he will strengthen you, and strengthen you, and strengthen you, and strengthen you. And he'll make your foundation firm, and make it firm, and make it firm and make it firm.

You see what Peter's *not* doing is giving you a self-help manual to get you through the hard-times of life. He's *not* saying, here are The Four Keys to strengthen yourself and help you become a better you. He's saying God is 'the God of all grace' so look what he will do for you. Because look what he has done for you.

Verse 10 again, he 'has called you to his eternal glory *in Christ*.' And that means that if you're a Christian, regardless of what your circumstances are saying, regardless of what your critics are saying, regardless of what your adversary the devil is saying, regardless maybe of what you're saying, God has called you and called you to glory. And if that's what God's called you to, that's what's going to happen. That's how it's going to end. And if the marathon runner knew that he just had to keep putting one foot in front of the other and he would win gold, he'd keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Except the race is not yours to win, because Christ has entered the race and endured the pain and won the prize for you. You've been called *in Christ*, Peter says. And when you see that Christ gave up his safety and humbled himself for you, you'll want to humble yourself under his mighty saving hand. Because he didn't just humble himself by coming, he humbled himself by suffering. And he didn't have mates on his right and his left. He went into the battle the wilderness alone, and resisted

the devil for you. And in the Garden of Gethsemane, as his hour of darkness came, he was sober-minded and watchful, sweating drops of blood in prayer for you. And at the cross he took all our sin and sorrow upon himself and it was there, Paul says, that he defeated our adversary and triumphed over him and made a public spectacle of him, because it was there that the hold of the devil, of sin and death and accusation and condemnation was broken. And satan's lion's roar may be fierce, but his teeth have been pulled. It's why one of the elders around the throne says, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, [the true Lion] the root of David, has conquered." (Rev 5:5).

And your adversary might speak against you, but Jesus never does. And if he is for you, who is going to condemn you? And if he suffered for you, he's not going to let go of you in your suffering.

So, see what he has done for you and you'll want to humble yourself and trust his perfect timing and cast your anxieties on him. And you'll be sober-minded and resist the enemy and say no to the pride and self-pity that can tempt us in suffering, and instead you'll stand firm in your faith. As Peter says in v11, 'To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.'