

## How to Survive the Testing of the House of God

1 Peter 5:1-11

In the year 1631, the English printers Robert Barker and Martin Lucas released a new printing of the King James Bible. Unfortunately for Barker and Lucas, they made a small error and accidentally left out one word. Readers of the new Bible must have been startled to discover, when they came to Exodus 20:14, that the seventh commandment given to Israel was, “Thou shalt commit adultery.” About a year later, the printers were fined a sum equal to about \$65,000 today, and most copies of “The Wicked Bible” were destroyed, though a handful of them are still around today in museums.

The word “not” is such a small word, and yet when left out of Exodus 20:14, it makes a massive difference. Sometimes little words are very important. I think the passage before us today contains one such little, yet massively important, word. If you look at the beginning of verse 1, you can see it in the English Standard Version (but not in all translations). It is the word “So.”<sup>1</sup> It’s a word that connects what Peter says here to something he has said before. Peter is not launching into an unrelated discourse on the nature of eldership here. Far from it. Instead, he is wrapping up the body of this letter with final instructions on what we should do in order to endure the suffering that comes from the world’s opposition to us. The word “so” in verse 1 connects back to 4:17, where Peter has just written, “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.” When I preached on that passage, I argued that the judgment Peter speaks of there is the testing of persecution, which has the effect of refining and purifying the church by causing many who are not true believers to fall away from it. Persecution has the effect of winnowing the church, separating out the wheat from the chaff and revealing those who are true believers vs. those who are not. *Because it is time for that winnowing process to happen in the church*, Peter now gives final exhortations to elders, to church members, and to all of us together, telling us what we must do in order to survive this time of testing with our faith intact.

We need God to speak to us words such as these because it is not our natural tendency to prepare ourselves for the testing of our faith. If we don’t expect suffering and opposition to come, if we don’t expect that the enemy of our souls will ever attack us, we leave ourselves open to being caught off guard. And if we are caught off guard, we are far more likely to be shaken to the core of our faith when times of testing come. So hear me when I say this: you cannot coast through life as a Christian. You cannot follow the pathway that Jesus has opened for us without intentionality. On May 19, 2001, I became a husband. That wasn’t a one-time commitment that, once made, I could then mostly forget about. No, it’s a commitment I made in the past that affects the way I live every single day of my life since. It’s a commitment that requires intentionality on my part day in and day out, until death do us part. And the same is true for the path of discipleship. For the refining fire of judgment has begun at the house of God, and we do not want to be burned up in it. So what must we do to survive this testing with our faith intact? Peter closes out the body of his letter with three words of instruction.

First,

### **I. Let us live according to God’s ordering of the church (vv. 1-5).**

Peter addresses three groups in these five verses. In verse 1, he addresses elders. This word does not refer to an age group but to an office, which we also know as the office of “pastor” or “overseer.” In fact, Peter will use all three words in the first two verses. Notice he addresses “the

elders,” and he commands them to “shepherd the flock” (v. 2)—which means to pastor—and then says they are to do so by “exercising oversight.” So the words “elder,” “pastor,” and “overseer” all refer to the same church office, which is the authoritative teaching and shepherding office of the church. Peter addresses another group in the verse part of verse 5: “you who are younger.” It seems that he is speaking more with respect to standing in the church here than he is specifically to age. It would normally be the case that elders would be appointed from among older men in the church, making most of the rest of the congregation younger, but of course there are exceptions in both directions. Bottom line: it looks like Peter addresses the elders of the church first, followed by addressing everyone else in the church. And then later in verse 5 he addresses everybody together.

What is striking about Peter’s instruction here is that Peter tells us that the way we order our churches, with—offices, polity, structure, and all that stuff that many Christians find boring and irrelevant—is a key factor in our survival of the judgment that is coming upon the house of God. God has ordained the institutional structure of the church as a means by which he will keep us in the faith through suffering and bring us to our final salvation. So let’s go through what that looks like.

For elders, Peter commands in verse 2, “shepherd the flock of God that is among you.” Notice that Peter speaks of the flock “of God,” but also the flock “among you.” Every church is God’s church, and every church is a local church. Elders are stewards of the particular church that God has entrusted to them. And so Peter commands them to act as shepherds. In his commentary on 1 Peter, John Calvin pointed out that elders may be particularly prone temptations toward laziness, greed, and lust for power. Peter addresses those three temptations here. He says in verse 2 that elders should exercise oversight “not under compulsion but willingly.” The pastoral call should not be performed merely out of a sense of obligation, but should be pursued with joy. Men who carry out this task simply because they think, “Somebody has to do it,” will be prone to laziness in the task of shepherding. Peter also says that elders should shepherd “not for shameful gain, but eagerly.” Elders should not be in it for the money but, again, for the joy of the calling itself. Peter also says elders must exercise oversight “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” Domineering elders delight in the exercise of power for its own sake, but by contrast, Peter calls upon elders to hold themselves to the same standards as their church members and live as examples. Elders are called to be model church members.

Now, if you think about each one of these contrasts, you don’t want to push them too far. Pastors should feel a sense of obligation to their work. Churches should take care of their pastors financially. There is an inherent authority in the office of elder that we men who hold this office must not be afraid to exercise. But Peter summons us to a calling here that is about more than obligation, money, and power. It is about loving and serving God by caring for his precious flock. What an incredible privilege! One of the greatest privileges of my life is to oversee this church together with the four other men who share that calling with me and who oversee me in the process.

So I exhort the men who pastor this church with me, and I exhort all men here who may serve in the role of an elder someday, either here or at another church, to heed Peter’s call to shepherd from pure motives, and to do so specifically in view of the reward that Peter says awaits us. Look

at verse 4: “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” The chief Shepherd is, of course, Christ. At his coming, he will reward those who have been faithful shepherds of his church with a reward that will never fade. Is Peter speaking of a literal crown here? No, I don’t think so. I think he is speaking of the joyful outcome of seeing the sheep you have loved, prayed for, taught, guided, walked with, and counseled, enter into eternal life, while hearing the chief Shepherd say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The work of those who steward God’s church is a work that endures into eternity.

Peter then addresses church members in verse 5, and he gives them a very simple command: “be subject to the elders.” These instructions can be hard to swallow in an individualistic, anti-institutional culture like ours. In our cultural moment, the very idea of authority has come under suspicion, and commands like this one to submit to elders of the church can come across to a certain mindset like a kind of power grab. Is that what Peter is up to here: grabbing after power for the sake of church leaders so that they can abuse the sheep under them? No, not at all. Keep in mind, Peter has just told the elders not to domineer over those under their charge but rather to be examples to them. This is not a command motivated by lust for power. It is an acknowledgement that God has established a particular order in his churches, and elders have been charged with the task of leading. As such, church members are called to submit to their leadership.

Practically speaking, there are really two categories of matters that come into play here. On the one hand, elders lead by telling the church what God has said. We don’t make it up out of our own imaginations. Rather, we open the Bible and seek to apply it to our church and to your lives as faithfully as we can. Insofar as we are faithful to the Bible, we are not speaking on our own authority. We are speaking with God’s authority, and your submission to such instruction is simply submission to God. In those kinds of matters, we want you to check our teachings by Scripture and make sure we are not leading you astray. On the other hand, there are numerous issues we face in the church that are simply matters of wisdom because the Bible doesn’t tell us directly what to do. How much money should we budget for this vs. that? How should we organize our Sunday School program? What time should we gather for Sunday morning worship? The list goes on and on. We make many of these kinds of decisions, and we do so with an openness to hear from you. There have been many occasions when conversations with church members have led us to rethink something regarding a decision in this category. But what does submission look like in this area for you? I think it means that you as church members have a basic disposition to trust our wisdom so long as we are not clearly violating Scripture. In the seven years that I have served as an elder here, I have been blessed to receive a high level of trust from this congregation in the decisions that we make as elders. I want you to know how much we as elders appreciate your willingness to obey this command of Scripture. The trust you have placed in us one of the key elements that makes Cornerstone a wonderful church. When the elders of a church love God and love their people, and when the members of the church trust their elders, life is good together.

So Peter has told elders to shepherd the flock, he has told church members to be subject to the elders. He then addresses everyone in verse 5: “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’” Elders and church members alike, clothe yourselves with humility toward each other. Pride destroys

churches. It turns us all inward, oriented toward ourselves rather than toward the good of others. Prideful elders will lose the trust of their congregations. Prideful church members will hinder the leadership of elders. What is the result? Prideful people cannot walk together, helping each other toward the Celestial City. And if we are not walking together, we are more vulnerable to the attacks of the lion that Peter will mention in a few verses. He thrives on those who are isolated and unprotected.

The bottom line for us is this: the institutional structure of the church is God's plan for your perseverance in the faith. That means you ignore or minimize the church to your own peril. Do you have elders who are overseeing your soul, men who know they will give an account for you to the Lord, and thus are driven to help make sure you persevere in the faith to the end? If you don't, why would you possibly deny yourself that benefit? Join a church where you will have shepherds to oversee you. You need that. For those of you who are members of this church, I hope this passage helps you understand better what it is we as elders are doing when we check in on you. We are seeking to obey this passage (among others) as we care for your souls. God has given us this stewardship, and we desire to obey him. It is to your advantage to be as open and responsive to us as possible. This is God's plan for your good, so that you might survive the testing that is coming upon the house of God.

That's the first word of instruction. Here is the second:

**II. Let us pursue humility before God, especially through prayer (vv. 6-7).**

Have you ever known someone who walked away from the faith as a result of some kind of suffering that he or she faced? I'm sure that we could tell numerous stories to that effect. What is it about suffering that can have that effect on us? It is because suffering presses our hearts toward what is real to us. If God is real to us, suffering presses us toward him. If he's not, it pushes us away from him.

This is why humility before God is so important. Peter commands in verse 6, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you." Keep in mind that all of Peter's instructions here are tied to his larger point about the testing of persecution that is coming on the house of God. So what he commands here should be viewed in light of the suffering that we as Christians face due to the opposition of the world to us. Peter says we should humble ourselves before God in the face of this suffering. What would it look like not to humble yourself before God when suffering? It would look like becoming bitter at God, accusing him of wrong, and closing off your heart to him. In short, it would be to assume that you are entitled to a life that is free of suffering. That would be a prideful response to God's sovereignty.

But the promise of Proverbs 3:34, which Peter has just quoted in verse 5, is that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. And so he encourages us with the promise that, if we humble ourselves before God in our sufferings now, God will exalt us at the proper time. The "proper time" is the final judgment, when God will raise us from the dead and publicly vindicate us before the world the opposes us. No, we are not entitled to a life free of suffering now, but we can hold on to the hope through suffering that God will exalt us in the end.

However, I don't want you to misunderstand me. Yes, we should not rise up in bitter accusation against God in times of suffering, but neither should we just "grin and bear it." The Bible teaches us to lament to the Lord, crying out to him in times of need from the depths of our hearts. Lament is raw and honest, and that is a good thing, because it shows that in our time of need we know where to run: to God rather than away from him. And that's exactly what Peter says we should do in verse 7: "casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." Peter virtually defines humbling ourselves before the Lord as casting all of our anxieties on him through prayer.

When you put verses 6 and 7 together, you can infer that holding on to your anxieties rather than bringing them to the Lord is a prideful act. Living in fear and constant worry are signs that you think too highly of yourself and not highly enough of God. So you must take intentional steps to give over your anxieties to God. Release your worries to him through prayer, daily, or even moment-by-moment if you have to. This is how you humble yourself before him.

Peter tells us that we can cast our anxieties upon God "because he cares for you." Isn't it interesting that Peter makes this statement after what he has just said in 4:17: "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God"? Or after what he said in 4:19: "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will..."? Peter attributes the sufferings that come to us through the world's opposition ultimately to God's sovereign will. If God ever wanted to remove this suffering from us, he would in a moment. And yet, it continues, which indicates that God has willed it. But that doesn't mean that he doesn't care for us. On the contrary, it is one of the indications that he does. For his purpose in bringing this testing upon us is, as Peter says in 1:7, so that the tested genuineness of our faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. God cares for us, and his purposes are always good, though the sufferings of the moment certainly are not. So humble yourself before him, casting all your anxieties upon him instead of pridefully holding on to them for yourself.

A third and final word of instruction that closes out the body of Peter's letter is this:

### **III. Let us pursue vigilance against the devil (vv. 8-11).**

The world's opposition to our faith pressures us to compromise our stance. In our day that challenge is coming mainly with regard to issues of gender and sexuality. When the world makes it hard on you to live as a faithful Christian, the devil seeks to pounce and pull you away from Christ. Peter compares him to a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, in verse 8. In light of this threat, what must we do? Verse 8 tells us: "Be sober-minded; be watchful." Sober-mindedness is simply clarity of thought. It's guarding your mind from being intoxicated by the things of the world so that you can keep what truly matters—Christ and his kingdom—in view. Being watchful is simply being on your guard against the temptation to compromise.

I recently had the experience of riding in one of these new Tesla electric cars, owned by one of my family members. The car has the capability to drive itself. I think it is almost certain that in the future, all cars will be self-driving. You will get into your car, enter in your destination, and then sit back and read or check Facebook while you wait for the self-driving car to get you where you're going. If there's any main point Peter is making in these verses, it is this: there is no self-driving version of the Christian life. You cannot sit back and coast. You must be intentional. You

must build habits and practices into your life that orient your mind to God's Word and intentionally expose the enemy's lies that begin to take root in your heart. You will hear those lies 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You can't help but hear them. They are everywhere in our society. Without intentional effort to return, again and again, to God's interpretation of reality, you will be prone to believe the devil's lies, and when you do, it's game over. The lion has you.

So Peter tells us in verse 9: "Resist him, firm in your faith." How do you resist the devil? Do you have to know the right words and techniques to perform an exorcism? No. It's very simple, Peter says: you resist the devil by standing firm in your faith. God has given us very ordinary means to strengthen our faith: the preaching of the Word, the ordinances of the church, prayer, fellowship with other believers. If you are not prioritizing these things in your life, the devil has you marked for attack, and when he comes, your faith may not be strong enough to hold. So resist him by standing firm in your faith.

Peter then gives us three words of comfort in the rest of verse 9-11. Read verse 9 again: "Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world." His first word of comfort is that our sufferings, and the temptations we face to compromise because of them, are not exceptional or unusual. When we suffer, we are not experiencing an especially bad version of the Christian life, all the while being entitled to something better. No, this is common to believers throughout the world. It's simply normal, and there is comfort in knowing that. And then in verse 10 we read, "And after you have suffered a little while..." That's the second word of comfort, namely, that by comparison to the age to come, the sufferings of this world are short by comparison. We can endure, because next to an unending future, the few decades we have here are nothing. Now read all of verses 10-11: "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen." The third word of comfort here is that your sufferings will not overcome God's purpose of grace. He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6).

Peter closes out the main section of his letter, having called us to vigilance against the devil, by reminding us of God's promises and power. Our perseverance in the faith is actually God's preservation of us in the faith. Our salvation is not partly our responsibility and partly his. It is all his, including our own responsibility. The Bible never assumes that our responsibility to act limits God's sovereignty, nor does it assume that God's sovereignty cancels out our responsibility to act. Here in the space of a few verses, Peter calls on us to vigilant action, telling us that our final salvation is at stake in our resistance of the devil, and then he reassures us at the end with God's promise to preserve his children. Therefore, rest in the powerful grace of God, knowing that your perseverance in the faith does not ultimately depend on you, but on him.

I have said repeatedly that we must be prepared for increasing opposition to our faith. David Gushee, former professor of ethics at Union University, who has now indicated his support for the redefinition of marriage, made the same point in an article he wrote in 2016. I quote: "It turns out that you are either for full and unequivocal social and legal equality for LGBT people, or you are against it, and your answer will at some point be revealed. This is true both for individuals and for institutions. Neutrality is not an option. Neither is polite half-acceptance. Nor is avoiding

the subject. Hide as you might, the issue will come and find you.”<sup>2</sup> Although he is on the other side of this issue, I think Dr. Gushee is right. The issue will come and find you. It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God. So decide now that you will stand firm then, no matter what the cost. And prepare yourself to survive the coming judgment by devoting yourself to the church and the oversight of your elders, by humbling yourself before God, casting your anxieties on him, and by vigilantly guarding your mind against the lies of your adversary. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek word is *oun*, which is missing in some manuscripts of 1 Peter. However, the oldest and most reliable manuscripts include the word, which makes it seem most likely that it was original to Peter’s letter.

<sup>2</sup> David Gushee, “On LGBT Equality, Middle Ground Is Disappearing,” *Religion News Service*, August 22, 2016; available from <https://religionnews.com/2016/08/22/on-lgbt-equality-middle-ground-is-disappearing/>.