

# “The God of All Grace”

## The Twelfth and Final in a Series of Sermons on 1 Peter

**Texts: 1 Peter 5:1-14; Proverbs 3:21-35**

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What do you say to Christians who have been displaced from their homes by a cruel and cynical act of a pagan emperor? How do you comfort a persecuted people who see no relief in sight from their troubles? What do you say to people who are reviled and cursed because they profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Creator, redeemer, and Lord, and refuse to worship Caesar or the pantheon of pagan gods? How do you comfort a people who are mocked because they follow the teaching of Jesus, and therefore refuse to indulge every bodily urge simply because those urges exist? If you are the Apostle Peter, you tell them the truth. The reality is that fiery trials come with being a Christian in a pagan environment. Yet, these trials are also the means through which God strengthens our faith. Just as it was with Jesus—that the cross of Good Friday precedes the empty tomb of Easter—so too it is with Christians. Suffering precedes the glory yet to be revealed. Peter also tells them that despite their troubles, God has not cast them off. Regardless of how they feel, those who believe in Jesus are his elect exiles, his spiritual temple, possessing a heavenly citizenship which guarantees all the blessings of eternal life and a heavenly inheritance. Peter also tells them, that Christians must strive to humble themselves before God, and learn to cast all of their cares and worries upon the sovereign God who is also their loving father. As they do so, Christians begin to live in the hope of the eternal glories yet to come.

With this sermon, we wrap-up our series on 1 Peter. Last time, we devoted our attention to several of the points raised by Peter in the final section of this epistle (vv. 1-14 of chapter 5)—specifically Peter’s reference to the office of elder, which functions as a bulwark against the schemes of the devil, the adversary, who is looking for struggling Christians to devour. This morning, we will cover the same ground, but focus upon two different themes in the text—humbling ourselves before God, while at the same time learning to cast all of our cares upon him. This will bring our series on 1 Peter to an end.

Peter wraps up his lengthy series of exhortations (imperatives) to suffering Christians—the elect exiles of the Diaspora of Asia Minor—by directing his audience’s focus away from those external circumstances under which Christians are struggling, to internal and pastoral matters. Before extending greetings to several individuals and concluding his letter, Peter addresses those things the churches and their leaders ought to be doing so as to persevere through difficult times. As we saw last time, Peter begins with an exhortation to the elders of the churches receiving this letter. In verses 1-2, he writes, “*so I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you . . .*” Jesus is the chief shepherd of his church, and he calls church officers (“elders” and ministers) to shepherd his flock as “under-shepherds.”

The reference to Christ’s church as a “flock,” is a metaphor widely used throughout the Old Testament in reference to those instances where sinful individuals are likened to sheep because of the tendency of sheep to wander away from the flock and place themselves in peril. A sheep which is separated from rest of the flock is completely helpless and likely to become an easy meal for any of the common predators in the area—wolves, jackals, coyotes, or even lions. Apart from a shepherd, who leads and protects them, the sheep are lost, they know not where to go, nor what to do.

Another sense in which the metaphor of sheep and flocks is used throughout the Old Testament is in reference to God's people, Israel, who are often identified as God's "flock" which requires his care, nurture, and protection. The metaphor of the sheep and shepherd is well-known enough in Israel that in John 10, when Jesus speaks of himself as the "good shepherd" who lays down his life for his sheep, virtually everyone hearing him knows exactly what he means—YHWH was Israel's shepherd, therefore Jesus is claiming to be one with YHWH.

In reminding the elders of the churches in Asia Minor of this very point, Peter stresses that it falls to the elders of the church to protect Christ's flock from predators, in this case the chief predator, Satan. In verses 8 and 9 Peter informs his readers that the devil prowls like a mortally wounded animal, seeking to devour any helpless Christian who wanders away from the protection of the shepherds of God's flock. By speaking of the church as "the flock of God" Peter is also reminding the under-shepherds that the flock is not theirs—it is God's, having been purchased by the shed blood of Jesus. God calls the elders of the church to protect its members from being devoured by the devil—which, as we discussed last time, is likely a reference to Satan using the power of the pagan state to oppress and persecute the people of God.

According to Peter's charge in verse 3, elders are to shepherd Christ's flock, "*not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*" This is a very important and highly practical point in light of the contrast Peter has set out throughout the earlier chapters of his letter between the way in which the Greco-Roman world understands the use of power (governors, masters, cruel spouses), with the way in which Christian citizens, Christian slaves, and Christian spouses are to respond to those who abuse them—in humility, by submitting to lawful authority in imitation of Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Following the example of Jesus and serving under his authority as chief shepherd, elders are to view their office as one of service and of bearing witness to Christ—who is the chief shepherd of his church. Elders are not to use their office for personal benefit or to secure gifts and take advantage of the people of God (acting in a domineering way). Elders, when called, are to serve eagerly, and not lord their authority over the members of Christ's church. Elders are to set good examples to the congregation, not as men who live above sin, but as men who deal with their sins properly, and who do not bring scandal to Christ's church. In verse 4 Peter reminds those who serve of the great benefit of doing so—"*And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*" That God will reward his people when Jesus returns, is one of the characteristic ways the Apostle seeks to give hope to a people in the midst of intense suffering and trials. Elders too are to take heart in the knowledge that their difficult duties are not conducted in vain, but are noticed by the chief shepherd, and they will be rewarded by the Lord of the church. Peter's focus upon eternal life is a point to which we will return momentarily.

If elders are to rule Christ's church as his under-shepherds, then the members of the church are to submit to the elders' rule. Peter exhorts the younger to submit to the elders in verse 5, when he states "*likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders.*" This verse can be understood in two ways. The first is taking Peter's imperative on its face, i.e., that younger people (in age) are to submit to those who are chronologically older—the elders in the church, indicating that church elders were typically older men. Yet, given the way Paul exhorts Timothy not to let people look down on his youth, Peter may be using the older/younger metaphor to mean that those new to the faith (younger) submit to those who have been Christians much longer (elders), and who may not be smarter, but are certainly wiser because of a lifetime of experience with the various issues and trials of life.

At the end of verse 5, Peter reminds this persecuted church that one of the ways in which Christians

distinguish themselves from unbelievers is in the fact that Christians are to “*clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for `God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*” As he does throughout this letter, Peter cites from the Old Testament, in this case from Proverbs 3:34, which is part of a larger section of chapter 3, vv. 21-35 of Proverbs (which we read as our Old Testament lesson) in which the wise parent encourages his son to seek wisdom and to make sound judgments. The idea is that those who are wise will seek righteousness, while those who are wicked behave foolishly.

In this particular case, the contrast is between those who are Christ’s (who have been sanctified by Christ’s blood and set apart to live holy lives) and those Greco-Roman pagans who tend to see humility as a vice, because humility was thought to be the attitude of a slave, not that of a free man who can exercise authority. Once again, Peter’s exhortation to these persecuted Christians is completely counter-cultural. A Christian’s conduct—following the example Jesus set for us of proper humility before all, even before those who hate us—is what sets believers apart from the pagans. We separate ourselves from the unbelievers around us not through visible or cultural distinctives, like a distinctive diet, or in Christian clothing, or even in withdrawing from the world. We distinguish ourselves from the pagans around us by our honorable conduct—in this case we clothe ourselves with humility toward one another because this is right, and this is the example set for us by Jesus.

Our conduct grows out of the fact that in a profound sense Christians are strangers and aliens in this world, because the elect exiles of Asia Minor hold a heavenly citizenship in addition to their Roman citizenship. As citizens of heaven, Christians wholeheartedly strive to submit to God and obey his will. We accept our place in God’s world since we know that we are totally dependant upon God for our very lives, for all that we are, and all that we have. We are supremely dependant upon God for the gift of eternal life freely given to us through faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ, despite the fact that we are sinful rebels who deserve God’s eternal punishment. Because Christians see the world in this kind of a way—with God as our heavenly father who decrees whatsoever comes to pass—we tend to be less impressed by worldly power and prestige (like the power of kings and presidents), because political power, no matter how great in earthly terms, completely pales in light of God’s omnipotence.

We know full-well that an emperor like Claudius, can issue an edict in the civil kingdom which unjustly takes away our property and homes, which disrupts our families and our livelihoods, and even threatens our lives and our freedom. At the same time, we know that the only way such things can happen to us is because God allows it—for reasons we may not like, nor remotely understand in this life, but which at the same time, are circumstances which God has promised to turn to our ultimate good. We also know that at the time of the end (on the day of judgment), when tyrannical leaders like Claudius are brought before the heavenly court, we will be called as witnesses against them and give testimony of their cruelty and injustice toward the people of God. We know that when God’s verdict against them is announced, they will be forced on bended knee to confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father. We also know that God will send them into eternity demonstrating that his judgments are altogether true and righteous. We have read the back of the book. We know what God will do to the proud.

In verses 6-7, Peter expresses the logic of the fact that Christians are to clothe themselves with humility because God humbles the proud, with a more general command coupled to a promise, “*humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you.*” Many have wondered if Peter has the beatitudes in mind here when he exhorts us to humble ourselves before God so that he may exalt us. At the end of that section of Matthew’s gospel (chapter 5) in which Jesus is dispensing covenant blessings upon the people of God, in verses 10-12 he declares, “*blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. `Blessed are you when*

*others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” There is, at the very least, an echo from Jesus’ words in the exhortation from Peter. The same thought is found in James 4:10. “*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*” In the face of Roman opposition to the gospel, humility in light of an eternal reward and promise of final justice was an important theme in the early church.

But what does it mean to humble ourselves before the mighty hand of God? Here too, we turn to the Old Testament for an explanation. The image of God’s mighty hand appears in texts such as Exodus 13:9, where we read that “*with a strong hand God brought [the people of God] out of Egypt.*” Likewise in Deuteronomy 3:4, we read, “*O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours?*” The imagery of God’s mighty hand is simply that of God exercising his mighty power to accomplish his sovereign purposes. As Charles Cranfield writes, “we are to recognize God’s hand not only in the joys that come to us, but also in the sorrows and afflictions that humble us.”<sup>1</sup> We humble ourselves by recognizing that God is sovereign over all things—whether that be the joys or the sorrows of life. We humble ourselves before God by acknowledging that God directs all things to reach their appointed ends. We must realize the very thing so many in our culture refuse to accept—that the world does not revolve around me and my momentary needs and wants. God directs all things to his ends, not mine. Realizing this is what it means to humble ourselves.

This theme is beautifully set out in questions 26, 27, and 28 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. **Q 26.** What do you believe when you say: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?” **A.** That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who of nothing made heaven and earth with all that in them, who likewise upholds, and governs the same by His eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ, His Son, my God and my Father, in whom I so trust as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul; and further, that whatever evil He sends upon me in this troubled life, He will turn to my good; for He is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing also, being a faithful Father.

**Q. 27.** What do you understand by the providence of God? **A.** The almighty, everywhere-present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

**Q. 28.** What does it profit us to know that God created, and by His providence upholds, all things? **A.** That we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father, that no creature shall separate us from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.

When Peter speaks of God’s mighty hand, he is referring to previous comments in verses 12 and following of chapter 4, and to that terrible persecution which the elect exiles of Asia Minor were then enduring. Previously, Peter told his readers/hearers that they should not “*be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice*

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<sup>1</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, The Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press 1960), 133.

*insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*" Now he is telling them this is the mighty hand of God working all things toward their appointed end, and for God's ultimate purposes. This, of course, is the hardest thing for any Christian to do in times of trial and suffering, to realize and trust that God's ultimate purposes are far greater than our circumstances, and however tough things get, God will never leave us or abandon us.

Lest we forget that this is the case, Peter issues another exhortation in verse 7 which flows directly from God's sovereignty. We humble ourselves, in part, by "*casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.*" The Apostle is quoting from Psalm 55:22, and may also be alluding to Matthew 6:25-34, where we read these words of Jesus, the creator and sustainer of all things: "*Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles [modern Americans] seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*"

The Apostle exhorts us to do the very thing so many American Christians miss, or otherwise refuse to do—trust in God's sovereign will and power. Far too many of our contemporaries are so busy trying to argue for human freedom over against God's sovereignty, that they fail to find the comfort in a sovereign God, who is as loving as he powerful, and who provides the very things that Jesus promises in Matthew 6. There are far too many of our contemporaries who really do believe that if God is sovereign this is a bad thing and necessarily leads to fatalism. They don't want God to be blamed for the terrible things that happen in the world (he's big enough to take such criticism, trust me), and many actually believe that the exercise of their own freedom will bring about a better outcome than God can bring about exercising his.

What does it mean then, to cast our cares upon God? It means to rely upon God precisely because he is sovereign and loving and because, through his Apostle Peter, he has commanded that we do so. The very realization that God is in control of all things is the sole reason why we should cease from being anxious! How can you cast all your cares upon a God who stands impotent before human free will? But once we humble ourselves before the mighty hand of God who foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, and who is a loving Father, who has promised to give us everything we need (not necessarily what we want), then it becomes much easier to cast our cares upon him, because we know that he already holds our future in his hands. The more we know about God's love and power, the easier it is to trust him in hard times. But it is very hard to cast your cares upon a "god" who might not be able to make good on his promises, because his creatures have the power to frustrate his plans and his purposes.

After exhorting his readers/hearers to be sober-minded and watchful for the schemes of the devil, and urging Christians to resist him, in verses 10-11, Peter brings to body of this letter to a close. After urging Christians to humble themselves before God and cast all their cares upon him, Peter comforts them with the reminder that the sufferings which arise from earthly trials, will seem brief and insignificant in light of eternity. Says Peter, "*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.”* Peter’s words echo the comments of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18, where Paul encourages the Corinthians, “*so we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*” Peter and Paul are on the same page.

The “little while” of verse 10 does not mean that Peter is promising the Christians of Asia Minor that their troubles are soon to come to an end, but rather, he’s reminding them that the eternal glory yet to come endures forever. This is why our earthly trials and travails will seem short and as preparatory for the four things (expressed in four verbs) which Jesus will do for us, and now spelled out by Peter.<sup>2</sup> Jesus will restore us—that is, he will bring us to the goal for which we have been set apart by him and for his purposes. Jesus will confirm us in our faith—he will ensure that we continue on in faith unto death. Jesus will strengthen us—that is, strengthen our faith, through the means of fiery trials. Finally, he will establish us—Jesus will ensure we stand firm to the end. These four verbs remind us that our salvation is not our work, but Christ’s, and this is why this verse is quoted as part of God’s promise to all those who make a profession of faith and publically identify with one of the Reformed churches. In fact, the very consideration of this glorious truth, moves Peter to offer words of doxology as a conclusion to the body of his letter—“*To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*”

But there are final matters of business which are addressed as Peter concludes his letter. In verse 12 he writes, “*by Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God.*” The language here tells us that Silvanus is likely the professional secretary who composed the actual letter, at Peter’s instructions. Silvanus will also be the messenger delivering the letter to the churches of Asia Minor. Because Peter is exhorting his hearers with apostolic authority, he reminds them that since this word magnifies the grace of God, all who hear it are to “*stand firm in it.*”

In verse 13, Peter speaks of “*she who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings,*” which is very likely a reference to the church in Rome (where Peter is) and not to an actual unnamed woman whom the Christians in Asia Minor would have known. The church is the bride of Christ, so to speak of the church as a woman is not a surprise—John does the same thing in his second epistle (2 John 2:1). Reinforcing the idea that the unnamed woman is the church in Rome, is the reference to Mark, whom Peter calls “*my son.*” Christians have long believed that this particular Mark is the author of the gospel bearing his name, seen in the fact that Mark’s Gospel often reflects the perspective of Peter. Peter’s final words reflect the standard ancient greeting to close associates. “*Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.*” The Apostle sends his affectionate greeting and reminds his audience of the peace which is ours through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. With this, the Epistle of First Peter comes to a close.

What does an Apostle tell suffering and persecuted Christians? First, their suffering (a fiery trial) should not come as a surprise. The pattern of the Christian life is that suffering proceeds glory—the path taken by Jesus is the path to be taken by all. Second, Peter tells the Christians of the Diaspora that their suffering has a purpose—to strengthen their faith, and prepare them for eternal glory. Although judgment

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), Logos, 5:10.

begins in the house of God, God is not punishing them retributively (i.e., that they have done something wrong), but that God is working out his larger purposes which will be completed on that day when Jesus Christ returns, and God's glory will be revealed. Third, these persecuted saints are God's elect exiles—they are citizens of heaven while sojourners upon the earth, set apart by the blood of Jesus to live holy lives, and Jesus himself will guard their faith in him and ensure that none will be lost—he will *restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish* them. Finally, through a series of imperatives, Peter exhorts these persecuted saints to identify themselves as citizens of heaven through their honorable conduct before the Gentiles around them. They are to be good citizens, faithful servants, and devoted spouses.

And like Peter's readers, as we humble ourselves before God—and rest in his sovereign purpose—more and more we will be able to cast our cares upon our loving and all-powerful heavenly father who is the God of all grace. *“To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*