

A humble church

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[0 : 00] The reading is from 1 Peter, chapter 5, verses 1 to 14, which you'll find on page 1222 of the Church Bibles.

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, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exhort you, casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.

Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

[1 : 33] And after you have suffered for 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. 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.

Stand firm in it. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

Thank you.

Peter writes earlier, All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.

[3 : 01] Heavenly Father, we praise you that the Lord Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and therefore his word remains unchanging, and remains forever likewise.

We pray, Heavenly Father, that in our world where everything is changing, we pray this morning, please would you open our eyes to behold wonderful things from your word, and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Now, I've reached the stage of life where I have to make a choice, either to be able to see my notes clearly, or to see you clearly. So, I'm afraid we're going to have to do that.

It does mean that I can't see people nodding off, which I normally can, and I, you may have noticed if you've tried to nod off in the past, I try and eyeball you. I can't do that anymore.

So, if you notice your neighbor is nodding off, then this is what these are for, okay? So, just kind of sharp elbows is the answer, but that is now your responsibility, and it's not my responsibility. Now, aside from learning not to nod off in sermons, I wonder what it is you'd like to learn to do.

[4 : 11] Perhaps over the summer, you've seen Tom Cruise in Top Gun, and you thought to yourself, you know, I just love to learn to fly. Like that. Or perhaps, on holiday, you decided, actually, I need to learn a language, rather than sort of sounding like Mr Bean, and floundering around instead, with your worst efforts at speaking whatever it was.

Or perhaps you went to a coffee shop in Lordship Lane, and you treated yourself to a delicious, although somewhat extortionate, piece of cake, and you thought to yourself, do you know what? I really want to learn to bake, so I can enjoy this, at a fraction of the cost.

Or perhaps after a rather bad-tempered start to your holiday, you decided, I'm going to learn that old-fashioned art of map reading, rather than actually learning to rely on my smartphone.

Well, here's another suggestion. If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, how about learning that suffering is normal?

I suspect that is something we need to learn as Grace Church Dunwich. It is at the heart of 1 Peter. I wonder if you've kind of grasped that as we've been following through 1 Peter over the summer.

[5 : 27] You'll know that every Bible book is written for a reason, a purpose. Flick back to 1 Peter chapter 1, verse 1. We're told that Peter is writing to this group of churches in northern Turkey.

They are geographically scattered, but they are also spiritually scattered. They are exiles. This perishable world is not home.

They are heading for an imperishable heavenly inheritance. And Peter is writing to prepare them and us for the inevitable suffering and hardship that comes to every church and every Christian.

One of the key verses of the letter we just had read, chapter 5, verse 12. I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God.

Stand firm in it. Stand firm. Now, there are two ways in which it's possible to stand firm. You can stand firm in a kind of defensive way, or you can stand firm in a front foot offensive, being on the offensive way.

[6 : 40] And it's that front foot, let's be on the offensive, serving the Lord Jesus way, that is throughout this letter, proclaiming Jesus, living distinctively, and with it, of course, all the inevitable suffering comes as it came to the Lord Jesus himself.

And yet, if you're anything like me, so often we are so risk-averse that we stop far short of suffering, or being scorned, or mocked, or risking that friendship, or we get in their tears about what they'll say or what they'll think.

And so instead of being front foot, we keep a low profile instead. And so this final section of the letter, 1 Peter chapter 5, it's all about the values and culture that a church needs to cultivate if we're going to be front foot, proclaiming the Lord Jesus, and taking the suffering that comes with that.

They are the values of humility and watchfulness. Now that may surprise us. It may be that actually they don't sound particularly significant, and yet they are of the most enormous significance.

And to grasp their significance, we need firstly to understand the pattern of the Christian life. And may I just say before we get on to that, I'm conscious that you may well be here this morning, and you are simply, you're more of an interested observer into Christian things, rather than a definite Christian.

[8 : 17] And I hope you'll enjoy being with us this morning, if that is the case. And I hope too that you'll see as we look at 1 Peter 5 this morning, something of what it looks like to follow Jesus, and something of how wonderfully attractive a local church like Grace Church Dulwich can be.

So then firstly, the shape of the Christian life. Now who can tell me what this is? Any, I mean, just shout it out? Nike. Nike, exactly, that's right.

Now in the ancient world, the goddess Nike was the personification of victory. You might call upon her for victory in sports, or business, or politics, or whatever your thing was.

It's a clever name for a sports brand. And while there is great victory for Christians to come in the future, there is also suffering and hardship in this life.

In other words, looking at that Nike tick, you have to go down the tick before you then go up. That is the shape of the Christian life.

[9 : 23] We see that throughout this letter. Turn back to chapter 1. If you close your Bible, do open it again. Turn back to chapter 1. Look at verses 5 and 6.

Chapter 1, verse 5. Christians are those who, by God's power, are being guided through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you've been grieved by various trials.

Do you get it? Down the tick, now various trials before going up at the last time when Jesus returns.

Or look at chapter 4, verse 13. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Again, the Lord Jesus suffered in this world, rejection, mocking, ultimately crucifixion, crucifixion, down the tick before ultimately being raised up.

[10 : 30] And that pattern is all over our passage this morning. Chapter 5, verse 1. It's the pattern for the Apostle Paul. 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.

Both sufferings down the tick and future glory. But not just for Paul, for every Christian. Verse 6. Humble yourselves, therefore, unto the mighty hand of God, down the tick, so that at the proper time he may exalt you.

Up the tick. Finally, verse 10. And after you've 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. Now, I take it at one level this is very simple to understand. Or at least it is as a concept or as a diagram.

It means that suffering, hardship, and persecution, not feeling that we belong here, far from meaning there's been some kind of glitch in God's plan or some glitch in our Christian lives that something's gone wrong, is actually normal Christian experience.

[11:45] It is normal Christian experience. Whether you live in Dulwich or whether you're one of our mission partners in Streatham in Ireland or Naples or Johannesburg or indeed any Christian across the world.

And it's this pattern which helps us to see why our two values of humility and watchfulness that we're going to be thinking about this morning are so important.

So let's move on and think then about a humble church. And firstly, humble leaders. Humble leaders. Look carefully at how chapter 5 starts.

Verse 1, so. It's a link word. It follows on from what's gone on previously where the emphasis on suffering has been particularly strong.

Chapter 4, verse 12. Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. Verse 16, if anyone suffers as a Christian let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in that name.

[12:50] Verse 19, therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good. So, how do we make sure chapter 4, verse 12 that we're not surprised when opposition comes our way?

How do we make sure chapter 4, verse 16 that we're not ashamed of Jesus but glorify him? How do we make sure chapter 4, verse 19 that we keep entrusting our souls to a faithful creator?

answer, we need elders. We need church leaders, verse 1. Because that is how the Lord Jesus who is described in this chapter as the chief shepherd, that is how he shepherds us.

In other words, at the moment we come under the leadership of the chief shepherd and put our trust in him, we also put ourselves under the leadership of under shepherds.

Those whose task is to shepherd the flock primarily by teaching God's word. Because you see, when times are tough, it's vital that we listen to the right people.

[14:09] We know that's the case in any aspect of life. And it's certainly the case for those who are followers of Jesus. Not just any kind of shepherd elder, but the right kind of shepherd elder.

In other words, not like the school nativity play where when you get to it in December, the star roles, we know that the star roles are Mary and Joseph and of course every ambitious parent wants their child either to be, you do, you really do, you want your child to be either Mary or Joseph.

It's a bit disappointing if they get one of the second tier roles, which of course is the wise men, but frankly, anyone can be a shepherd as long as they're able to wear a teetown on their head and wear a dressing gown and that kind of thing.

But not any kind of shepherd when it comes to the spiritual realm. So have a look at verses 2 to 3. Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion but willingly as God would have you, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge.

But being examples to the flock. Now elsewhere, the New Testament puts the spotlight, if you like, on an elder's ability to teach. But here, it's their character which is under the spotlight instead.

[15:32] Not under compulsion but willingly. Not because someone's got to do it, so I better do it, I better volunteer. not doing simply what is the bare necessity, what is barely the absolute necessity but rather humble, sacrificially, desiring to serve others.

Otherwise, of course, when opposition comes, when hardship comes, then the elder will give up. Not for shameful gain but eagerly. Those who serve as elders can do so from all sorts of wrong motives, power, position, reputation, the desire to be needed perhaps and wanted by others.

In some contexts, it's the money. Again, these things, they are the very opposite of humility. And finally, verse 3, not domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock.

those greedy for power will seek to domineer. Sadly, there have been well-publicized examples of that in recent years. Instead, humble leadership won't lead by intimidation or power play or threats or political force.

Now, I guess all this, doesn't it, it begs the question, well, who is it who fulfills this teaching elder function at Grace Church Dulwich? Well, I guess perhaps most obviously myself and Andy and Benji.

[17:07] The elder role among the women being delegated to Fiona and Patasha on the staff team. But to some extent, this elder role is also delegated to growth group leaders as they shepherd those in their groups.

It's also, again, to some extent, delegated to jam leaders as they shepherd those in our youth group and likewise Sunday club leaders as they shepherd those who are in their Sunday club group.

And what enables these shepherds to serve in this way? Well, it's going back to our Nike tick pattern. Have a look again at verse four. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

we serve the Lord Jesus Christ. In the first century Roman world, the crown of glory was the public recognition that would be given to a Roman general after some great conquest.

And yet it would fade. Compared here with the unfading crown that every follower of the Lord Jesus Christ will receive when he appears.

[18:22] Do you see how important the Nike tick pattern is? Why wouldn't we serve him willingly when we know that the Lord Jesus himself, the chief shepherd is going to appear?

Why do you need gain now when you know there will be great gain on that future day? Why domineer the flock when the one to whom the flock belongs is on his way?

Now if you're someone who kindly prays for me, then do please pray that verse 4 would be increasingly true, that my focus would be on the Lord Jesus and his future appearing. And may I say to those leading a growth group or Sunday club or jam, it may well be the case that at some stage over the course of the next few months or so, it may just get too much.

Perhaps you'll find yourself thinking, do you know what, back in July when the days were longer, this seemed like such a good idea and now it's kind of, oh, it's January and, you know, it's just such hard work.

Or perhaps you'll resent just the hard work, the slog it is, teaching the Bible to others week in, week out. Or when that happens, remember Peter's words.

[19:44] we serve willingly, not because it makes us feel good, not because of the thanks we get from others, but because in our hearts we long to serve the Lord Jesus, the chief shepherd, the one who will appear.

Our focus is on that day and the crown of glory that is to be received then. Humble leaders. But also humble members, humble church members, elders.

Verse 5, likewise you who are younger be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another. For God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Now this may be addressed literally to those who are younger in age, speaking I guess to the arrogance of youth. Or Peter may simply be speaking to the non-elders.

Personally I think that is more likely. Do come and chat to me afterwards about that if you would like to. We are to be subject to the elders God has put over us. Because in a world of spiritual danger, in a world where we are spiritual exiles, where every Christian faces opposition, they are a great blessing to us.

[20:58] Yes elders are to be humble, but they are not to be weak as if they have no authority in the church. Quite the opposite says the Apostle Paul.

Be subject subject to them. Now I'm conscious that culturally this is a very strange thing to say. And it's a very uncomfortable thing to hear.

The idea that having others in authority over you is a blessing. Why do we feel that's uncomfortable? Well I guess in part because of our sin.

But also because many of us would have experienced leadership that is exercised wrongly, badly, or abusively and selfishly. Perhaps in the workplace or we see it in politics or you see it in the world of sports and sadly in churches.

It means of course that many of us will face the temptation not to put ourselves under elders at all. And yet humble leaders are God's blessing in the midst of persecution and opposition.

[22 : 07] In other words, Peter I think is warning us against having a kind of take it or leave it attitude to the elders that he has put over us. In other words, we take it when we like what they say, we leave it when they don't.

We take it when they encourage us, we leave it when they challenge us. That is not the humility is it that Peter is talking about.

and a church certainly won't stand firm continuing to declare the message of Jesus Christ in the face of opposition if it is not humble and sitting under the teaching of its elders.

And notice too, not just humility in the way we relate to elders, but actually humility in the way we relate to others. that word in verse five, clothe, is an echo of the Lord Jesus in the upper room with his disciples the night before his betrayal and his arrest.

As he laid aside his outward clothing, as he took on the garment of a servant and as he washed his disciples' feet. That kind of humility was just as countercultural in the first century as it is in the 21st century.

[23 : 30] A church that is humble like this, I take it, will remain united, loving, serving each other, and proclaiming the message of Jesus, doing so in a united way despite the opposition that inevitably will come.

And notice too, it's talking about a humility before God. Verses six and seven, humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.

You see, I wonder how we think about suffering. How do you think about suffering for the Lord Jesus when it comes your way? Inevitably it will if we are front foot with the gospel.

But how do we think about it? I guess we might simply say well I know God's sovereign, I know he's in charge and leave it at that. But have a look again at verse six because verse six is saying a bit more than that isn't it?

This is the humility that says God's mighty hand can and will do whatever he wants to do and I'm okay with that and I'm okay with that because I'm in safe hands.

[24 : 58] To accept that what the Lord is doing through hardship and opposition confidence that his hand is mighty. In the Old Testament of course it's God's mighty hand that rescues and delivers his people from Egypt and takes them to the promised land.

Just as for us it is his mighty hand, that same mighty hand, that will exalt those who belong to the Lord Jesus when he returns. The up part of the Nike logo.

A humble church. Humble leaders, humble members, humble members towards each other, humble members towards God. Finally, a watchful church.

Verse eight. Be sober minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, resist him, firm in the faith.

You and I to be sober minded, realistic and watchful because every follower of Jesus has an enemy prowling around waiting to devour us.

[26 : 11] I guess many of us will have been down to the Shatteling Barn in Kent, perhaps for a church away day or a jam or eagles weekend away. It's where we're going to be going for our weekend away in a couple of weeks time.

You may have been surprised to hear the roar of a lion in the distance. You think to yourself, I'm not quite sure if there are lions prowling around in Kent.

It's fine. Don't not book in for the day away because they're not prowling around, but there is a zoo very close by. Occasionally, if the wind's in the right direction, you hear this roaring of a lion.

Even though it's a little bit far away and it's in a cage and all that kind of thing, it does send a shiver down your spine. Be watchful, says Peter.

Literally, wake up. The devil is looking to devour you, to capture you for himself, to take you away from the Lord Jesus. Jesus. That is true of each one of us in this room.

[27 : 16] The implication, as Peter writes, of course, being they've fallen asleep. They're not paying attention. They're blissfully unaware of the reality, of the spiritual reality, that the devil is prowling around.

I wonder if that might describe some of us this morning. Blissfully unaware, perhaps because life is so busy, we're unaware, or perhaps because life is so good, or perhaps because life is so hard.

We've lost sight of the fact that the devil is prowling around out to get us. We need to resist him. But how?

Verse 9. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of sufferings are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. We remain firm, you see, by understanding the devil's tactics.

Suffering and persecution are the very things he will try to use wherever you are in the world to destroy his church. It's why suffering is normal for Christians throughout the world.

[28 : 22] And the fact that it hasn't been so normal in recent history in the UK shouldn't blind us to what is normal. Whenever we hear of Christians suffering for their faith in the Lord Jesus, we need to say to ourselves, that is the devil at work.

that is the means he is using to try and draw people away from Jesus. I was reading recently of two Christians in Pakistan who have been sentenced to death for posting blasphemous content online of a group of Christians in Algeria imprisoned for gathering in what was an unauthorized church service, a massacre of 50 in a church in Nigeria, 15 imprisoned in Vietnam.

You and I shouldn't be surprised when we read about and experience suffering and persecution as follows of Jesus, however low level it is in our context compared to so many across the world.

But notice too that the waiter is this the devil, yes it's by understanding his tactics, opposition and persecution, but it's also by remembering the pattern of the Christian life that we started with, the Nike tick, suffering now, glory later.

Focus in on verse 10. And after you've suffered for 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.

[29 : 57] You see the devil wants us to forget this pattern. He'd love us to forget the downside of the tick, that suffering and opposition and persecution in the Christian life are normal, such that when we experience them, we think to ourselves, help, I must have done something wrong, or I'm not very good at speaking to people about the Lord Jesus, or we just find ourselves being perplexed or discouraged, or we doubt God's goodness.

He'd love us to forget the downside of the tick. He'd also love us to forget the upside of the tick, that our eternal future glory in Christ is secure.

And that is the thing that keeps us going. That is the thing that reminds us of where we are headed.

And notice verse 11, it is all certain.

To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. To him be the rule. he rules over all things, the devil, opposition, and persecution.

Well, I guess as we come to an end to 1 Peter, the question to ask is, what kind of church, what kind of local church is going to stand firm?

[31 : 17] It is the question of the letter, not kind of in a defensive way, hunkering down until things are safer and the flack has gone, but in a front foot, standing firm way?

What kind of church will stand firm like that? Or perhaps to push the question a bit deeper, will Grace Church Dunwich be a standing firm, front foot church over the next year or so, proclaiming Jesus Lord, living with Jesus Lord, such that people ask questions, such that people put their trust in him, and all in the face of the inevitable opposition and suffering.

The danger, of course, is that we just assume that as a local church we are in the right place already. I mean, isn't that the danger?

That we don't really take the warnings of the letter seriously, that we just kind of assume we must be okay? In other words, that we're passive and complacent. Instead, we need to cultivate these values of humility and watchfulness.

And I hope we've seen this morning that actually each one of us in this room has a role to play in that. Humble leaders, humble members, all of us being watchful.

[32 : 49] Each one of us has a role to play in that. Let's have a few moments quiet for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. This is the true grace of God.

Stand firm in it. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for 1 Peter. Thank you for the wonderful privilege we have had of hearing the words of the Apostle Peter over these last few weeks.

We long to be the kind of local church that stands firm, not in a defensive way, but being front foot with proclaiming the Lord Jesus, living distinctively for the Lord Jesus and all in the face of the inevitable suffering and hardship which will come in our direction.

And we pray therefore, please would you help us to keep, to be persuaded that suffering is normal, to learn to suffer for the Lord Jesus.

And we pray that we would be persuaded and convinced with our eyes clearly focused on that future day when the Lord Jesus will return to restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish his people.
[34 : 04] And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen.