

# The leadership and life of the exiles

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Preacher: Rev Gareth Regan

[ 0 : 00 ] So we've journeyed from the beginning of Peter all the way to the end and there's some certain! commonality across the whole of the letter. Those of you who have been here week by week will know that! the motif of suffering is one of the ones we regularly come back to and today is no different.

You will also know that this idea of there being order and people separated in jobs and roles. We saw at the beginning of one Peter the idea that we as Christians are holy and set apart for his work and here we journey through some ideas about church leadership and things like that. And in many ways Peter is coming to the end. You notice that chapter five starts and there's a sense of as we journey through this that we hit that amen at the end that this is almost Peter's prayer for his people that these people would understand what it means to be a Christian more fully. So we're going to have a look at a little bit of it. For those of you who are all about names and people like that, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I'm not going to worry too much about verses 12 and 14. The final greetings, that's a bible study thing about who is the person in Babylon and what does all that mean. We're going to focus on the stuff that I think actually has an impact on our lives tomorrow rather than the bible study questions of who is it he's talking about and who is Silvanus or Silas and all that kind of stuff.

So we're going to deal with the main stuff today. And so the first thing I want to say is that for those of you who haven't journeyed through the whole of the five chapters of Peter that suffering is really hard.

There'll be people who are here today who are suffering. You are going through some stuff. You are experiencing difficulties and challenges. And I know as somebody just stood up at the front of a church talking some stuff, it may feel like, well that's all right for you Gareth, but you don't know what I'm going through. And I might not know what you're going through, but we're going to be talking about a God who does know what you're going through. So I want you to hold on to the fact this is God's word for you, not Gareth's thoughts for you as some kind of blind platitudes. I'm just sharing with you what God has to say about suffering through Peter. But Peter starts with an interesting thing really. He begins by talking about the elders among you. Now we're the Anglican Church. For those of you who have been born and raised in the Anglican Church, the way we order ourselves will have meaning to you. Those of you who have come to us from other denominations or just latterly new to faith, you're like, what's an elder? How does that work? I've never heard of an elder. Some of you are like, oh you see the Baptist that's had it right all along. This word elder is broadly translated as presbyter. And it's the word that the Methodist Church used for their ministers. And it's the word that the Anglican Church, and this is a debate, used to talk about priests. So in many ways this is the level of being in front of a church and guiding a church. However in Peter's terms, none of that ordination and ministerial stuff had been worked out yet. So he's just writing to people who are in leadership in a church environment. So it's not just me with a collar. That's anybody who has some kind of leadership.

Wardens, PCC members, running junior church, looking after home groups. People who have taken a role in leading something who have set themselves in that place. This is who he's first talking to.

[ 4 : 19 ] And he says to those people, as a fellow elder, notice he doesn't claim his apostleship at this point. Peter doesn't say, as an apostle of Christ, somebody who's above you, talking to the elders. He says, as a fellow elder, somebody else who's in leadership in a church, somebody else who's leading God's people.

Let me tell you some stuff. And a witness of Christ's suffering. We'll come back to Christ's suffering in a little bit. Who will share in the glory to be revealed. He says to these people, be shepherds of God's flock, that under your care, watching over them. It's interesting that watching over them, the

word there has a sense of looking over everything. Other translations use the word overseer. And I think that's probably a better translation than watching over.

And overseer has that sense of broadness of seeing everything that is going on. So if you're in leadership, you should be seeking to see everything that's going on, to be over everything and looking after the people. We're reminded in the reading from Matthew that they're like a shepherd, like a flock without a shepherd. The reading of Matthew helps us understand that when people don't have people watching over them, we all go a little bit awry. And the encouragement is that I and other leaders like me should be watchful over the flock so that you don't aimlessly wander through life.

So we help you discover purpose, keep you on the straight and narrow, make sure that you are getting the best out of life and not finding yourself wandering into lands where there are wolves and things that would come and eat you. Why do we do this? Not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be. That's a really interesting thing as a leader, isn't it?

I think the church is full of rotors. Every church I've ever been in has abundance of rotoring going on. Who's doing what, when, where, how and all that kind of stuff. And I think there's a temptation to say, I'll do that job because nobody else is doing it. And, but actually God wants people who are willing to serve his people. It really reminded me when I was reading this earlier this week, about my change of job. So when I went from working for B&Q; as a store manager, where I worked a similar number of hours a week, maybe a few less on quiet weeks, maybe a few more on really busy weeks.

[7:13] But a 12 hour day wasn't unknown to me and it's still not unknown to me now. Now, I still deal with people. I still try and persuade people. In one world, I was persuading people to buy screws and nails and the odd kitchen. And in this world, I'm persuading people that Jesus Christ is important in their life. One has monetary value, the other has ultimate value. But they're still the same thing. I'm still trying to persuade people of things. Every day that I woke up and went to work for B&Q.; I woke up and I looked at my watch and thought, how much longer can I spend in bed before I absolutely have to be there? And when I was there, I was like, can I get off on time today?

And if I didn't, I'd be like, how soon can I get away? Because being in that place was not a great place. Doing this job, the job that I'm really willing to do, because you know, B&Q; wasn't my life's dream.

It might be strange to hear that, but B&Q; wasn't my life's dream. And doing this job, actually, I wake up and no matter what challenges and difficulties and things like that, actually, I don't wake up in the morning and go, what's the last possible moment I can get to St. Paul's. And when I finish, I don't think, how quick can I get away before somebody notices that the vicar's gone? Because I love what I do. And I do it willingly because God has called me and gives me all of the skills and ability. And so this is the next challenge though. When you're doing something you love and hopefully, maybe one or two of you like what I do, and it says then, not to pursue dishonest good, and not lording over those entrusted to you, but being an example to the flock. And this is a real challenge in church leadership. And this is where the reciprocity of our relationship is important. We all know that it's really easy to put your vicar on a pedestal, to say, ah, he's really good. And to imagine that I'm better than you are, to imagine that my home life is all heavenly, full of angels, whispering around the house. And me and my children and my wife, you know, waking up in the morning and saying our prayers and everybody is beautiful all day.

If you came and hung out with me for very long, you'd find out that's a lie. Because I am a human being like you. I sin like you do. I suffer like you do. I live the life that you live. Only I'm trying my best to try and help you and me understand what God wants for us. That's my role in this. I'm trying very hard to be an example to you. The problem is, there are times when the example will fail.

There's times when I'll say something unkind. Because I'm just tired. Because I wasn't thinking. Because I'm just angry. There's times when I'll fail to deal with your emails properly. Because I've decided that you're the person I'm disappointing today. So I don't disappoint somebody else.

There's all those decisions going in my life, which means if you followed me, you said, ah, I'm going to follow the cult of Gareth.

We will all get lost. We'll end up in those dodgy places that the good shepherd doesn't take us. Because if you follow me, I actually don't know where I'm going. I may be just like a few paces in front of you, just about to be able to see around the corner and know whether we should go there or not.

[11:17] And occasionally I'm going to get things wrong. So the first thing we need to do is make sure that you don't let me get above my station. That means occasionally you have to let me do the washing up. And there's been times recently where I've gone to the kitchen and go, I'll do some washing up. The bureau, you can't wash, but I like that. I've got hats. They work. And that's part of me doing the right thing of being a servant to you. And you need to make sure that your leaders, not just me, because you know, eventually I'm going to leave, and you'll have another leader.

Leaders should be showing you this sense of being one of you, not lording over you, not doing things that says, actually, I'm more important than you, but being an equal.

In the same way, you who are younger, now this I found really challenging when I read this, because I know that often I'm in congregations that I drag down the average age of the congregation.

And so we're going to assume what Peter actually means here is that there's those who are elders and those who are sat in the congregation. And we're going to call them the younger. So all of you get to be called the younger today. That's a nice thing, isn't it? The younger.

Submit yourself to your elders. And this is a real challenge, I think, sometimes. Because sometimes you want to say that, you know, I don't like what he's doing. And that's fine to say it. But then, you know, we have a PCC for a reason. We have church structures for a reason. So that when we make a decision, my hope is that you say, okay, I might not like the decision, but I'm going to follow the leadership because I believe the leadership has been chosen by God. However, all of you, so that's you and I, the elder and the younger, all of us are to clothe ourselves in humility towards one another. Now, that's a really important thing. And that means that you and I have a shared wardrobe. I don't mean actually a shared wardrobe. I mean, if you'd like my jacket, you're welcome to borrow it. But it's not an actual shared wardrobe. But it's a general attitude that we choose. And Peter says here, it doesn't say, all of you be humble to what he said, clothe yourself in humility. That means wear it in the way that it doesn't come off. It's something that you do, you choose in the morning to put on humility, and you choose to wear it all day when you're out and about doing what you do. And we both do that. It dictates then how we speak. It dictates how we listen to one another. It dictates how we deal with forgiveness. It dictates how we follow.

[14:15] That if we do humility well, it changes our life. And helpfully, Peter, drawing on another proverb, says, God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble. Now, pride is a really challenging thing. Because I think the real challenge with pride is that what pride does says that it's all about me. It's all about me. It's all about how I do it, how I look, how I sound, what I know, what I don't know. Pride is all about me. And therefore, if pride is all about you, and what you can achieve, oh, look at me. I did well in that test.

Oh, look at me. I did well in that activity. Oh, look at me. I did well when I led that church. One of the really challenging things about church leader is pride, because we love to have a full church. But actually, the thing we love more than a full church is when we can go and meet with other vicars who don't have full churches and tell them how our churches are full. That's a problem with our pride. Because we think that our church is being full. It's about me as a church leader, but it's not. It's about God.

Because my pride fights God. And your pride fights God. Whereas humility opens us up to receive him.

Because you notice the next verse, verse six, humble yourself. So we put on the clothes of humility. We've understood that our pride is a barrier to God. And therefore, we choose. Notice God doesn't force us to be humble.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand. Peter wrote that very, I think, well. He didn't say under God's hand as a first action.

[16:16] Be humbled. Instead, he said, humble yourself. So make that choice. Therefore, you are under God's mighty hand. And that could feel like pretty oppressive, couldn't it? If you imagine God squashing you down under his hand.

Those of us who have pets, often, if they're doing the wrong things, we place them under our hand. We grab hold of them. And we say, stop scratching the furniture, would you? But this is different. We choose to humble ourselves. And therefore, so something happens, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

So the humbling isn't a bad thing. The humbling is allowing God to work in our lives, that our lives may be different, and therefore we can be lifted up.

And I don't know which one of you would rather try and do it all on your own, or have the option to humble yourself and allow God to lift you up. I think if I had the choice, and it seems like I do, I can allow God to lift me up.

[ 17 : 29 ] And that's a choice. And how do we do that? Well, we start by casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you. Pride says, I'm going to work through my anxieties on my own.

Pride says, I'm going to get through my suffering on my own. Pride says, I'm strong enough and I can do it on my own. Pride says, I'm strong enough and I can do it on my own. Pride says, I'm strong enough and I can do it on my own. It's that cult of self. Self-improvement.

Self-help. Do it yourself. Self-care. It's all about self. Do yourself first. I think there's only one place in the world where I'd say that the whole mantra of self is really important and that's if you're in an airplane and those funny masks drop from the ceiling.

Absolutely. Self first then. But in almost every other situation, self is not the most important thing. Because yourself can't do much as a human being.

We're not great at working through problems and things on our own. We need something bigger and better than us. And so if we give God our anxiety, we're saying that we know that we're not in control.

[ 18 : 47 ] Because I think anxiety and worries tells us we must hold on to everything together. I think anxiety says, I need to solve it.

I can't share weakness. Because if I share weakness, then people will poke and prod at that weakness. And I want to be the strong one. I know there will be people out here today who if I asked you for a favour, would absolutely go out of your way to deliver that favour.

If I phoned you up and said, I just need you to do, you would say, I'm there for you, Gav. But I also know that of those people, there is a group of you who when asked, if you had a problem, wouldn't go to anybody else.

Would say, actually, I'm going to deal with it because I just have to. I don't ask for help because I'm strong enough. Today we're saying, cast your anxieties, all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.

Not in denial, but because we know that God can and does work. Casting care, I think, is an act of faith.

[ 20 : 03 ] It brings us closer to God. It gives us an opportunity for God to act in our lives. If we spend our time trying to do it all in our own strength, then God has no option, no ability to show us that he's turned up, does he?

He has no opportunity to deal with things. This last week, I had one of those situations where I've been trying to work out how to send an email to somebody who is higher up the food chain in the Anglican church because there's something going to happen and it may affect me, it may not, and I wanted to work out whether it would or not, but it's not in my gifting to force this person to come to a decision, but I wanted to email them to ask them what might happen.

And I was trying to work out, what's the best way to write this email? And I was getting all like, and so instead I prayed about it. I said to God, God, would you help me to write an email that kind of doesn't come over too needy, it's rightly worded, has the right tone and stuff like that.

But because God is bigger than I am and better than I am, he did something that I completely wasn't expecting. The next morning, I'm sat still trying to like, not really worry about this email that I should be sending, want to send, and the phone rings and it's the person that I should be sending the email to, wanting to talk to me about the exact subject that I was going to email them about.

And I was like, oh, turns out prayer works. Turns out when I give an anxiety to God, he doesn't just help me understand how to write a nice email, he gets the person to call.

[ 21 : 48 ] It's really easy to believe that's coincidence. It's really easy to believe that. But actually, I think that's God at work. Because that wasn't the only thing that day.

I'd had a whole like, Monday morning of casting my anxieties on God. Because I started doing reading for a sermon that I was going to preach on Sunday and I realised it was for me before it was for you. And so I was doing some casting my anxieties on God and God was saying, yeah, let me give you some stories you can tell on Sunday.

Because it works. It makes a difference. So I think there's three responses to suffering. The proud response says, I must manage this alone.

The despairing response to suffering says, no one cares. I'm just going to wallow in it. We know some people like that, don't we? Who are suffering and all they do is just remind you of how they're suffering and you try and support them in their suffering and they just push you away because they're just happy living in their suffering.

they've decided that's who they're going to be. But then there's the third response, the humble response. The response that is closed in humility that says, Father, you care for me so I bring you this.

[ 23 : 09 ] Not just some of it. Not just part of it. Not just the bit that people know about. I bring you all of it. I bring you all of it. Every bit of my desires, my worries, my anxieties, I bring to you knowing that you care for me.

And so if we do that, we know who God is. We can spot when God isn't around.

We can spot when the devil is trying to poke at us and might find a way in. Because verse 8 reminds us that if we are living in God, if we are living under his hand and under his control, we can see the black and white of evil.

We can see that because if we're alert and a sober mind, we can see that the enemy, the devil, is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for something to devour.

Notice Peter is really leaning into the shepherd thing here. That we are the sheep, the flock. He is the good shepherd. That Jesus is the good shepherd.

[ 24 : 14 ] And that there is a lion that's after taking you if you step outside of what the shepherd says to you. And notice here that it is an active thing.

We are called to be alert. We are called to stand firm. We are called to be people that does not abandon God because we think that we're going through suffering and therefore God has abandoned us.

Instead, we are people who are going to lean into God to look to come more under his hand. We're also reminded in this that we're not alone in suffering. I think often when we're suffering it can feel like that.

It can feel like nobody else understands. Nobody else has ever gone through this. My daughter had a knee injury playing rugby and annoyingly it was a big game and the knee injury happened in the warm-up so she didn't even get on the pitch and it turned out that she had dislocated her kneecap. It had gone all the way to one side and pinged back again. She's still struggling a bit now with it but she was like oh it's all awful and why did this happen to me?

[ 25 : 35 ] And I was like you're not the first sports person to face an injury. You're not the first person to not be able to play rugby for the rest of the season. And I found a YouTube clip of a sports psychologist talking about dealing with sports injuries.

I said see this is something that top people struggle with. You're not alone in your suffering. And as Christians we sometimes forget that we're not alone in our suffering. But by the way suffering isn't a competition and I think sometimes we make it that.

There are Christians all over the world suffering. some of us who pray for persecuted Christians can fall into the trap of saying because of the suffering of the North Korean Christians, because of the suffering of the Chinese Christians, because of the suffering of the Nigerian Christians, I need to deal with my own sufferings on my own.

Because their sufferings are worse than mine, they're suffering more than me and therefore I should just deal with my own stuff. That's a lie. That's the devil saying to you your stuff isn't important and your God isn't big enough to deal with China and North Korea and Africa whilst also looking after you.

It makes God smaller in some way when we say we can't bring our suffering to him because we're worried about him not having time for other people. How small do we think our God is if we can't deal with all of the suffering in the world?

[ 27 : 07 ] How small do we think God is? So we come together to acknowledge that. Suffering is real but often it is temporary.

My wife and I every time we went through a new phase of our children whether it be not sleeping, not eating, whatever whatever it was we would say to each other it's only a phase.

This is just a phase but we just don't know how long this phase is going on for. It could be six days, six weeks, six months, six years but it's only a phase and we'll get through it and suffering is the same as that.

We recognise that we don't restore ourselves it's God that restores us and so we have to live with him. We have to come into him because he himself can restore strength and confirm and establish us.

That's what he does. We don't have to grasp hold of control because God is the final word in restoration. He's the one that is there and in many ways this will seem trite to those of you who are going through difficult suffering but suffering on this earth is for a period and then we get to enter heaven where there is no more tears, no more sadness and stuff like that and that is entirely eternity.

[ 28 : 31 ] forever and ever and ever. And so whatever we're suffering now is small compared to what we are going to go through in the next life.

And so that for some people can be a real great joy. I want to come back to the beginning of the letter now as I finish. Peter when he was writing said I appeal to you as a fellow elder and as a witness of Christ's suffering.

There's a reason why he writes that and then goes and does all this stuff on suffering. And it made me think how do you close out this sermon session and help people understand about suffering really well.

There's reminder sounds of Jesus' suffering. It's reminder sounds of what he went through. That he lived a perfect life.

That he was put on trial for crimes he didn't commit. That he went to the cross and he died the death of a sinner. But not only did he die the death of a sinner he then went to hell and faced all of hell for us.

[ 29 : 43 ] Breaking open the gates of hell that you and I might know life and life in all its forms. That we might know life in eternity. He did all of that and then rose and ascended into heaven.

We've just been through Trinity Sunday and so we know don't we that God is one God but in three persons. And those three persons all know each other intimately.

Which means Christ knew suffering and suffering beyond any of the suffering that we are going through. Which means God knows suffering. Which means God knows your suffering.

He knows how much it hurts you. He knows how challenging it is. He knows how to fix it. And so you can come to him with your sufferings. Because it's not something that's new to God.

It's something that he knows intimately. It might feel like a bit of a paradox. But leading, relating, suffering, waiting humbly is often counter-cultural in our world.

[ 30 : 50 ] But actually it is deeply free because God gives us grace to be humble. none of us can really understand God's hand. None of us can understand what he's doing from beginning to end.

But what we do know, what we can always trust in, is his mighty power and his caring heart. Let us pray. Lord, when we are proud, give us repentance.

Where we are anxious, suffering, help us and teach us to cast our cares on you. Where we are suffering, remind us today that you care and that we are not alone.

And through all of this, make us alert, steady and faithful. Restore, strengthen and establish us in Christ. the one who is the perfecter and author of our faith.

Amen. Amen.