

To the Shepherds

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Peter, chapter 5, verse 8, page 219 in the back of the Bible. We come to the last passage in this first letter of the Apostle Peter.

And as Peter rolls towards the end, he says in verse 8, Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, resist him, firm in your faith.

Now, many of us come to church just trying to keep our head above water, overwhelmed by what's happened last week and what's coming up this week and in the future, fretting about our children or our parents or our friends or our future.

And what we really want, I think, is a positive word, don't we? We want something uplifting. The devil is probably the last thing on your mind as you came to church this morning, although it was raining hard, I admit.

Here is the Apostle Peter writing to Christians who are living in a culture that is starting to grow hostile to their Christian faith. Nasty things are being said about them.

[1 : 1 7] They are now being treated unfairly simply because they're Christians. And surely at the end of this letter, Peter, surely you could give us a warm, fuzzy, inspirational ending.

But he doesn't. He says, watch out for the devil. He's prowling around and literally he wants to find someone to devour.

The word is to drink them down. Lurp, lurp, lurp, lurp. Just drink you straight down. It's not a pleasant picture. And it's probably not the way you and I would end a letter of encouragement to a church in difficulty, is it?

A couple of years ago on Christmas Eve, after I'd been to the last service, I went home and I sat down on my lounge and I was sitting there and it became obvious to me that the floor that the lounge was on had an incline.

It had a slope on it. I'd never noticed it before. Now, I'd been to a lot of church services that day and a lot of them had been Holy Communion and it was 1.30 in the morning and I started to think to myself, I'm losing, completely losing my mind.

[2 : 2 9] So, I decided to do what I usually do about these things and I ignored it. A couple of weeks later, I was speaking to someone who knows about these things and he said, well, you better go downstairs underneath in the crawl space and check out what's going on.

And I discovered that the beams under our lounge room floor were almost completely rotted through and the whole thing was close to collapsing, which would have been an interesting experience on Christmas Eve.

However, for about six weeks in that summer, we had no lounge room floor. Carpet was pulled back, floor was pulled back as the beams were replaced. And that's what Peter is doing.

Comes to the end of this very moving book, speaking to real people, real problems, following the real Jesus. And he pulls back the carpet and he pulls back the floorboards and he takes us under the surface to see what the real problem is.

And the real problem, he says, is not last week or next week or next summer or last summer. It's the spiritual reality of the devil himself. And I know as soon as I mentioned the devil, we're open to ridicule this morning.

[3 : 41] The way we deal with the devil in our culture is mostly by comedy. Pitchforks, capes and horns and that sort of thing. And I don't think there's anything wrong with making the devil the butt of humour, actually, as long as we recognise that there's a real, intelligent, personal, spiritual being of massive, vicious power and force behind it.

And you know, the one person in all of Scripture who taught us most about the devil was Jesus Christ himself. And you can't say, well, I love what Jesus says about love and about positive spiritual things, but I just can't accept, I can't accept what he says about these negative spiritual forces.

You can't pick and choose in Jesus' teaching or you just end up with your own prejudice. C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful book and I'm sure many of you have read called The Screwtape Letters.

These are imaginary letters from one under-devil to another devil. In the introduction, Lewis says this, there are two equal and opposite areas into which our race can fall about the devils.

One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. You know, the devil's behind every problem we've got.

[5 : 03] He says, the demons are equally pleased with the materialist and the magician. Very helpful. And I think if we take the issues that are in our hearts today, the issues that we brought with us, you know, the issues that keep us awake at night, what Peter is saying to us is that there is an invisible spiritual dimension behind them all.

In fact, if you're trying to follow Jesus Christ, there is a demonic dimension. And if you ignore it, you're just going to fall through the floor one day. The Bible is very clear.

There is a devil. He is a personal, spiritual being of great power. And Peter says here, he stalks us. And his aim is to obliterate our faith and to drink us down.

Are we encouraged yet? Not yet. It's coming. But I think what Peter is doing is a great help. Because he finishes this letter, what he's doing is he's exposing what's really going on.

And what he does in this chapter, chapter 5, which I wish we had more time on, is he wants to expose the devil's two main strategies in our lives, privately and publicly.

[6 : 16] And these two main strategies are very slippery and they look different in people's lives. And so what Peter does in the first few verses is he says, he says, what do these strategies look like in the leadership of the church?

Verses 1 to 3. Let's look at those together. He says, 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 to be revealed tend or shepherd the flock of God that is in your charge.

Now listen to these three contrasts. Not by constraint, but willingly. Not for shameful gain, but eagerly. Not as domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Throughout the Bible, God reveals himself as a shepherd. He defines himself in relation to us, his people, as the one who guides and guards and feeds and provides and leads.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. And that means, of course, that we are a bit like sheep, which you know already because we said it in the confession this morning, which is not complimentary and it's not meant to be.

[7 : 35] And the older I get and the longer I am in pastoral ministry, the more accurate a description that is, I think. And we wander around and we bleat and we follow each other.

And what we really need to do is we need to hear the voice of the shepherd. And we need to hear the voice of the shepherd leading us into the good pasture. That's right.

And one of the ways that God cares for us, his sheep, is he takes one or two of the sheep or half a dozen of the sheep in each flock and he says, you can play shepherd for a while.

You'll be under shepherds of the big shepherd and God will appoint you as a leader in his flock. And Peter uses three words to describe the under shepherds, elders, from which we get the word priest, shepherd, from which we get the pastor, and the word charge, which is from the word we get bishop.

And of course, priest and pastor and bishop are all the same thing in the New Testament. And the role of the leaders in the congregation is to tend the flock, shepherd the flock, feed the flock, lead the flock into God's pasture.

[8 : 46] The point that Peter is making here is that it's not a spiritually neutral job. There is a personal spiritual dimension to congregational leadership completely apart from the public role of shepherding and this spiritual dimension is quite dangerous.

And it's very helpful, you know, because Peter is writing this knowing it's going to be read out in front of the congregation. There are the leaders sitting in the congregation. It's read out so that the congregation knows what Satan is trying to do with their shepherds.

Because there are unique temptations and pressures. When following Jesus becomes unpopular in the culture, there are unique temptations for the shepherds.

Satan really wants to get at the flock. And the way he does it is to try to destroy the effectiveness of the pastor, of the shepherd. And Peter says, the way Satan does it, he puts it in three contrasts.

He says, shepherd the flock, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not domineering but by being an example. Let me just take the three of them.

[9 : 54] The first temptation, not by constraint but eagerly. You see, when the faith is mocked and ridiculed, the shepherd wants to stop being a shepherd and wants to go back to being a sheep because being a shepherd makes you a very good target.

And Peter says, don't shepherd out of constraint. Don't be reluctant in your leadership. Don't be reluctant in feeding the sheep. Don't draw back. That's what Satan wants.

And of course, if you enter the ministry with a desire to be popular, when the gospel becomes unpopular, the first thing you do is to become anxious and then a coward.

Peter says, the flock deserves shepherds who are willing, active, energetic, just a little bit happy. So, the first temptation is to just be a sheep.

The second temptation is to fleece the flock. Not for shameful gain but eagerly. Peter is not saying clergy should not be paid. Just want to get that clear.

[11 : 06] That's for another sermon. He's talking about dishonesty, shameful gain. The shepherd who looks at the sheep and sizes them up by the richness of their fleece.

It's a kind of entitlement thinking that also comes from arrogance and anxiety. Peter wants to know, wants the flock to know this is a temptation for shepherds. And the third temptation is domineering, lording it over.

Actually, it's lording down. It's being a little dictator. And this comes from insecurity, which is another form of pride, of course. Instead, Peter says, the shepherds are to be an example to the flock.

Now, you may well be saying, that's all very fine and academic. Why don't you do this as a Bible study with the clergy and the other leaders of the parish and let's get to the juicy part of the passage.

But you see, Peter wants us to know this. Peter wants, he wants to reveal the temptations in the shepherd ministry, not for your academic interest, but because this is where Satan often enters the church.

[12 : 09] It is in the attitude of the congregation to their leaders and in the attitude of the leaders to their congregations. Do you remember the Apostle Paul says this?

He says, Brothers and sisters, respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

The writer to the Hebrews says, Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Obey them so that they will do their work with joy, not as a burden.

So, Satan wants to get into the leadership of the different flocks and he does this through the attitude of the flock and the attitude of the shepherd. And the way that the devil works is through our own heart's sin and what Peter is doing is he is exposing the two strategies of Satan which are pride and anxiety.

Maybe I should have said that earlier. And he showed, this is how pride and anxiety works in the leadership and now he turns and he speaks openly about both these strategies, pride and anxiety.

[13 : 25] Let's look at pride first, shall we? Verse 5b. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God that in due time he may exalt you. Now, the way that we deal with Satan is to deal with our sin.

What Peter is saying is that there's more to sin than meets the eye. There's a demonic dimension. We are like pianos, each one of us. You know, a piano has strings with a dampener on it.

When you push the sustained pedal and the dampener comes off, if you sing a note next to the piano with the strings loose, the string inside the piano will vibrate to the note that you sing.

That is a great picture of temptation. Satan comes to us and he works with the sin in our own hearts. He sings a note and it resounds with a tune in our own hearts and that's nowhere more true than it is with pride.

[14 : 36] Pride is like a spiritual cancer. It eats away our ability to love. It eats away our ability to be content. It means I'm going to refuse to forgive that person.

I'm going to hold on to my grudge and as I do that, I open myself to the power of evil, to Satan himself. There's a great author by the name of William Gurnall who wrote a book, I think it was finished in 1662.

It's called The Christian Incomplete Armor. Actually, the title has about 150 words in it and when I was a teenager, the test of spiritual devotion was whether you could say the title off by heart.

He says this, If men hear a noise at night, they cry, the devil, the devil, and they run for their life. But they carry the devil around in their hearts all day.

For if you have a proud spirit or if you have resentment or anxiety, you are under his power. He is setting you in a precarious place. My friends, why don't you run from your pride, crying, the devil, the devil.

[15 : 46] Why don't you run from your resentment, your grudge, yelling, the devil, the devil. Run from them in terror. You see, we do not battle against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against unseen spiritual forces.

And my pride and my arrogance, they have a demonic dimension which is beyond any counsellor to soul. And Peter said, God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble.

Because pride, at its root, is resistance to God's grace. It says no to God's grace. It refuses the work of grace in my life.

God opposes the proud, gives grace to the humble because grace cannot flow to the person who is proud. By its very nature, pride is anti-grace.

And pride comes in two flavours and you see them both in the way we respond to the gospel. The gospel comes to us and says, you're a lost sheep.

[16 : 51] You've followed your own desires. You've wandered away from the fold. You're in great danger. Left to yourself, you cannot find your way home. The gospel says, but the good shepherd has come out and searched for us.

He's looked for us. He's laid down his life for us. And he's found us and he offers to put us on his shoulder and to take us home. It doesn't matter how far we've wandered.

It doesn't matter what we've done. If we trust in him, he places us on his shoulder and he brings us home. It's all of grace. And the first kind of pride says, I'm too good a person for that kind of gospel.

I'm not that bad. I'm a good person who's made some mistakes. That's pure pride. God opposes the proud.

He gives grace to the humble. And the other form of pride doesn't say I'm too good. It says I'm too bad for God to forgive. I need to clean up my act before God can give me his grace.

[17 : 50] You know, I've done things I just cannot forgive myself. Which means, of course, what Jesus has done is not enough and that is pure pride. And God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble.

See, pride will always bring us on a collision course with God. Because God is much bigger, infinitely bigger than we are. The mark of pride is I'm always going to have hurt feelings.

I'm always going to be an irritable person. I'm always going to be self-righteous. I'm always going to be envious because I keep comparing myself with other people. And Peter comes to us and he says, clothe yourself with humility.

Because the first step to dealing with pride is to acknowledge you are a proud person. Because only then can we take the humility that God gives us and put it on all over us. It's not something that will just happen to you one day automatically.

What we need to do is to bring the grace of God to bear on our pride. To wrap ourselves in the grace of God. And you know it's grace when it thrills you and frees you.

[19 : 01] And you know it's pride when you're resisting God's grace. You see, that is Satan's first strategy. It's pride. And the second is anxiety. Verse 7.

Cast all your anxieties on him for he cares about you. He cares for you, literally. There's a spiritual dimension to anxiety as well.

This was, it's the same strategy that Satan used in the Garden of Eden. You remember with Adam and Eve? It's the same stale old lie where Satan says, God does not really care about you.

You're too small. He's too big. You're, you know, my circumstances are too difficult. God just cannot care for me. And anxiety is a form of unbelief.

I look at my anxiety and I look at God and I say, this is the thing that's more, this is the thing that's going to be more important to me. I'm going to believe this. I'm not going to believe this. Now, it's interesting.

[20 : 04] Peter speaks about anxieties, plural. Because there are some anxieties that just come from what you've eaten or what's happening physically for you or from weariness.

And Peter recognises there are different kinds of anxieties. Not all of them are unbelief. But it doesn't matter where they come from. His concern is that we cast them all on God.

All of them, he says. Past, past damage, future fear, present pressure. And if we don't do this, what we do is we keep developing strategies to deal with anxieties ourselves.

And that's what I think lies behind our boredom. That constant nagging feeling that I'm not having my needs met. And I take my anxieties everywhere but to the one place where God can deal with them.

And the devil wants to devour us through our anxieties. And all of us have escape mechanisms with regard to our anxieties, don't we?

[21 : 10] Instead of facing our anxieties, we'll avoid intimacy or we'll develop behaviours that mask the difficulty and mask the pain for a short time only to make things more difficult further on.

Peter says, cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you. And that is when he says, your adversary, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.

Resist him, he says. And you might think, well, that's a very tall order to say, Apostle Peter. How can I possibly stand up to this personal, supernatural, powerful being?

And I think the key for us in this passage is that the way we deal with Satan is indirectly. We deal with the two strategies by dealing with the two sins.

So, he gives us two commands. He says, verse 6, humble yourself under the mighty hand of God. We need to begin by recognising that we are very proud indeed.

[22 : 12] If I'm anxious and if I'm worried, it's because I need to humble myself. Because anxiety stems from an overconfidence in my opinion. I've decided what ought to happen.

I'm a slave to my opinion. And the mighty hand of God is the hand of God that God rescued his people out of Egypt with from their slavery. And Peter is saying, it's the only rescue from slavery.

It's the mighty hand of God. And we say, Lord, I don't know what you're doing. The circumstance looks, it just looks so frightening. I know you care. It doesn't look like things are right.

I know you care. Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God. And second, the second command, cast all your anxieties on him. There's only one person who is sufficient to bear our anxieties.

There's only one person who's up to the task. And he is the one who said, come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, burdened, weighed down with anxiety.

[23 : 13] And I will give you rest. See, he's a very, he's a very powerful shepherd. He's able to pick you up and put him on, put you on your, put him on, put you on his shoulder.

And your anxieties, they just come along for the ride, you see. And the things that are most anxious to me and are most anxious making for you are of no weight to him whatsoever.

And the way to humility, I think, is to do this. It's to cast my care on him because humility and casting, they're connected. And the word cast is used when they saddle up the donkey in the gospel.

You carry the saddle, it's heavy. You come to the donkey, you put it on the donkey. It's something we have to do. And his promise is that he will carry them because he cares for us.

And this is what it means to resist the devil. And this is what it means whether you're a leader in the congregation, a sheep in the congregation, or thinking about wandering away from the fold.

[24 : 17] To stand against him does not mean to do some astoundingly worldwide famous spiritual act. It's this. It's to cast your anxieties onto him to know that he cares for you.

It's to humble yourself under the mighty hand of God. Resist him, Peter says, firm in your faith because it's by faith that we resist him. It's our faith that keeps assuring us that Jesus is up to the task and wants to do the task and enables us to humble ourselves.

See, how else could we live out one Peter? How can we live in a hostile world? How can we deal with people who say nasty things about us unfairly?

How can we hold unfailing our love for one another, forgiving one another's sins? How can we rejoice in the fiery trials except by casting our cares on him and humbling ourselves under his mighty hand?

It's a wonderful, it's a wonderful thing, you know, and it's unique to the Christian faith. There is no other God who has come from heaven and has died for us. There's no other God who's risen from the dead and that says, cast your cares on me.

[25 : 28] And there's no other God who's coming at the end of time bringing glory and majesty with him. And so I think that's why Peter finishes in verse 10 and 11. He says, 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, establish, and strengthen you.

To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. Amen.