

1 Peter 5:6-11 (NRSV)

⁶Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰And 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, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Philippians 4:8-13 (NRSV)

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Life's anxieties can be pretty overwhelming, even in good times. But in tough times, we surely need to bear Peter's call to cast our anxieties on God and, as Paul puts it, be content with whatever we have, for such is a fearless faith.

This week, we complete our series on restoring hope in tough times. Peter has had much to say to believers in Asia Minor who are suffering alienation, ostracism, economic hardship, persecution, and perhaps even prison and death. Peter has lifted their eyes and hearts upward, reminding them that they have a living hope in Christ, that they have been chosen by God to proclaim his mighty acts. Peter has urged them to turn outward and resist the temptation to circle the wagons. He has pushed them toward one another, reminding them of the psalmist's call to do something good and to seek peace. Now, as he closes this letter, Peter confronts the anxieties that burden these believers and the need to remain steadfast and fearless in their faith.

Just Breathe

Next week, we'll begin a new five-part series: *Just Breathe: Stories of the Spirit*.

The series will begin the week of Pentecost, which celebrates the arrival of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. In this series, we'll be taking a look at five pivotal stories from the book of Acts. In each, it is God, in the *person* of his Spirit, who is the key player, driving events forward.

The Holy Spirit is often given short shrift in our churches. Tragically, among Americans who consider themselves to be Christian, 38% strongly agreed and 28% somewhat agreed that the Holy Spirit is "a symbol of God's power or presence but is not a living entity." Shocking. It says a lot about the abysmal state of biblical and theological education in the present-day Christian church.

The book of Acts dramatically demonstrates both the power of the Holy Spirit and his work among all people. It is the Holy Spirit (aka the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ) who is God's empowering presence among us even now. It is the Spirit *who* comforts us and guides us, *who* strengthens us and encourages us.

“Cast all your anxiety on him”

Anxiety has always been part of the human condition. In Peter’s day, people were no less anxious and stressed out than we are now, even when times were good – much less than when they were bad.

Excellence and the Virtues

Have you ever wondered what God thinks of baseball? Personally, I think God enjoys a well-turned double-play! Here is what I mean.

In Philippians 4:8, when Paul urges the Philippians to dwell upon the things of “excellence,” he uses a Greek noun that he never uses in the rest of his letters, *arete*. In the NT world, the meaning of *arete* was very broad, encompassing all virtues, all excellence, and all goodness. It was a word that certainly conveyed moral excellence, but also more and I think Paul uses it for that larger sense.

God is good – indeed, God defines it in his very being. All the goodness and all the excellence and all the virtues in God’s creation point us toward God; it is all to God’s glory. In the goodness of this world we can glimpse the kingdom of God. This is why Christians seek excellence in all we do – a well-done project at the office, a well-delivered lesson in the elementary classroom, a well-prepared meal – all this glorifies God. Will we actually *be* excellent in all we do? At least speaking for myself – of course not! But there is great joy in seeking after excellence and this is the path to which Paul points us.

The Greeks certainly advocated the virtuous life. The Greek philosophers urged people toward honor and truth and justice and purity and goodness. They understood that such virtues were essential to a truly fulfilling life. They would speak of the supreme Good and the importance of humans resembling the Good.

We, of course, speak differently. We proclaim that God is not only the Good, but also personal and fully revealed in Jesus Christ. We don’t talk about our resemblance to the Good, but we do talk about our own desire for Christlikeness. When we dwell upon the virtuous, we are dwelling upon God and the things of God. N.T. Wright had this to say about raising our eyes, “How are you going to celebrate the goodness of the creator if you feed your mind only on the places in the world which humans have made ugly? How are you going to fill your mind instead with all the things that God has given us to be legitimately pleased with, and to enjoy and celebrate?”

For the ancients, the heavens were populated with countless gods and goddesses, any of whom might take a disliking toward you or your neighbors on a whim. The pantheon of the gods was like one big soap opera, far removed from any human control. The gods would do what they wanted, when they wanted. People coped with the whims of the gods in different ways. Some, like the Epicureans, decided that since they couldn’t control their capricious gods, they’d simply grab all the pleasure and happiness they could in life.¹ Others, like the Stoics, sought to make themselves immune to anxiety by learning a detached self-sufficiency, which they called “contentment.”²

Far from promoting some sort of detached self-sufficiency, Peter urges the Christians to throw their anxieties and worries upon God, for it is God who cares for these believers. It is as if Peter writes, “let go and let God.” It is God who will “restore, support, strengthen, and establish” the believers, even as they discipline themselves and stay vigilant against the work of Satan. Peterson paraphrases Peter this way: “this generous God . . . will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does.”

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul uses the language of the Stoics. This is the only place in his letters that Paul refers to himself as “content” (*autarkes* in the Greek). Paul would often use the language and vocabulary of his audience when he

¹Epicurus taught that since we have no life other than this one, the good life is the life bringing the most pleasure and happiness now. It is unfortunate that “Epicureanism” has come to be associated with a profligate and luxurious lifestyle. This is not what Epicurus had in mind. He led a simple, honest life, believing that justice, honesty, and simplicity were the truest paths to a happy and pleasurable life.

²For Stoics, humans become virtuous through knowledge, enabling us to live in harmony with nature and achieve a profound sense of happiness, freedom from emotion, and detachment from the turmoil of life – to be content and self-sufficient in all things.

spoke to them about Jesus Christ.³ But Paul always meant something different too; there was always a Christian perspective. For the Stoics, contentment was all about being independent, needing no one else. That way, the “content” person couldn’t be harmed by the emotions or slights or needs of others. Obviously, Paul means something quite different; it is resting in the Lord whatever comes.

Paul, you see, is writing from prison and he knows that he may soon be executed. Nonetheless, his letter to the Philippians is filled with joy. He has learned to be content in all things, even facing imprisonment and execution.

How has Paul learned this? What is his “secret”? Paul has learned that he can do all things – such as being content in all circumstances – through God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety. Paul’s secret is that he has come to understand and truly embrace the psalmist’s portrait of God as the good shepherd. Though Paul languishes in prison, he will “fear no evil,” confident that God will lead him to green pastures and still water. Paul’s cup will always overflow – in all circumstances. He knows that he will dwell in God’s house forever, because nothing – “not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38-39). Such confidence in God and the strength he provides is the basis for Paul’s joyful contentment . . . and Peter’s . . . and our own.

Unlearning “self-reliance”

Both Peter and Paul point us in the same direction – toward God. Peterson renders 1 Peter 5:6-7 this way: “So be content with who you are, and don’t put on airs. God’s strong hand is on you; he’ll promote you at the right time. Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you.”

I was taught to be self-reliant, always ready to “pull myself up by the bootstraps.” Many of us are. Understood correctly, self-reliance is a good thing. Paul supported himself with his skills as a tent-maker rather than relying on others for financial support. He was committed to his ministry and knew that he couldn’t stand by and leave it up to others. He knew that he was God’s agent, not God’s puppet. “Contentment” for Paul and Peter did not mean just laying back and waiting for life to run you over.

But as we are inclined to do in all things, too often we turn a healthy self-reliance into an unhealthy self-sufficiency. We forget that we actually need others. We forget that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. We are not independent of others, we are dependent upon them to help us realize our purpose and to teach us about love. God does not call us to some sort of self-sufficient isolation, but to fellowship.

More even than that, we are dependent upon God. Indeed, much of the biblical story is devoted to shaking us out of our misguided self-sufficiency and self-centeredness. The long story of God and his people makes us realize that we are dependent upon God, that it is he who strengthens us and enables us to accomplish all that we do, even as our own work and efforts are necessary.

Restoring hope in tough times takes a renewed commitment to celebrate God, to embrace the purpose to which God has called us, and to let ourselves fall into God’s arms. As Peter writes to close his letter: “Peace to all of you who are in Christ.”

³For example, Acts 17 tells the story of Paul’s appearance before a council of Greek philosophers in Athens. There, Paul talks to them in their language, speaking to their issues. The Greeks had always questioned the nature of “being.” Paul told them that it is in the Lord God that we live, move, and “have our being.” He talked to them about Jesus, but in their own words and ideas. Paul knew that all truth is God’s truth; that, in God, the Greeks could find the answers they had long sought.

Suffering, Peace, Patience, and Hope

Peter's letter has much to say about the reality of suffering and about enduring it. Many ethicists today see all human ethics as being about the minimizing of suffering. Thus, it seems odd to us that Peter would say "But rejoice [celebrate] insofar as you are sharing in Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:13) or that Paul would talk about "boasting" in suffering (Romans 5:3-4 for instance, where, in the NIV, the translators use the word "rejoice"). How could we possibly rejoice in suffering?!

Yet, Paul sees that suffering produces endurance (perseverance or patience) and endurance produces character and character produces hope – and that our hope will not disappoint us! (Romans 5:3-5) Why can we be so sure that our hope is not in vain? Because God keeps the promises he makes and he has promised a day when "he will wipe every tear . . . death will be no more . . . mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Revelation 21:4). This is the divine logic of the Bible. This is why we persevere, in hope and peace, through all the troubles and misery that can plague our lives. We do this because the Holy Spirit has poured into our hearts the love of God (Romans 5:5).

In reflecting on Paul's comments on suffering, N.T. Wright notes that when suffering rather than separation from God, is seen by our culture as the worst of evils, we should not be surprised that we live in a society so often without hope, so beset with anxieties and worries. The sad reality of our broken world is that suffering of one sort or another never seems to be very far away. As Wright puts it, "Those who believe in Jesus the Messiah are called to model communities, families, and personal lives in which the sequence of faith, peace, suffering, patience, character and hope is lived out, sustained by the Holy Spirit's work of enabling us to know God's love and to love God in return."

Suffering will pass . . . even the grave is not the end of our story, not yours and not mine . . . for "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). This glorious and thrilling statement of our assurance in God's love must always rest firmly alongside the undeniable realities of suffering. The peace and hope, even during suffering, enjoyed by God's people is the love of God embodied in the death of Jesus Christ and the life-giving leading of God's Holy Spirit.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Here is the bottom line – why is it so hard for us to shed worry and anxiety!? What makes us cling to our worries if they are precious possessions? Make a list of reasons. What can we do to learn (truly learn and apply!) what Peter and Paul learned about relying upon God's strength and care? How can we help each other in this? How do we truly become content and joyful in all circumstances, knowing that God's riches are all we really need? Do we even really believe that God's riches are all we need? This is the time for honesty!
2. Looking back over the entirety of Peter's letter, what did you find most helpful in surviving or even thriving in our present tough economic times? What do you think Peter would say to us today about the tough times many people and households are experiencing?
3. There is nothing distinctively Christian about Paul's list of virtues in verse 8. These are qualities that were honored throughout the pagan world. Greek philosophers had been pointing people in this direction for centuries. What does this have to say about the relationship between Christians and the "secular" world? Should we honor and admire these qualities regardless of where we find them? What can we learn from Plato or Buddha? What can't we learn?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings we are taking a look at some passages that bear on this week's reading from 1 Peter.

<p>Monday, 1 Peter 3:13-17 Suffering for doing good.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Peter 4:12-19 Suffering in joy and hope.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Timothy 6:2b-21 Notice how Paul puts contentment and godliness together in v. 6</p>	<p>Thursday, Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus teaches his disciples that they are simply not to worry -- not about money or clothing or even what lies in store tomorrow!</p>
<p>Friday, Luke 10:38-42 Seeing that Martha is distracted and worried about all that she must get done, Jesus reminds her that, in truth, only one thing matters. What do you think he is referring to?</p>	<p>Saturday, Hebrews 13:1-17 In these exhortations to mutual love, the writer points us toward contentment (v.5)</p>

