

1 Peter 1:6–7, 10–16; 5:6–7 (NIV)

⁶In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. ¹²It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

¹³Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. ¹⁴As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Philippians 4:10–13 (NIV)

¹⁰I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

We live in such an anxious time. Turn to the Lord.

Ready for this. An important 2010 study¹ looking at key psychological scores for American college students from 1938 to 2007, found that 85% of recent college students score above the 1930’s-1940’s average on measures of psychopathology. More anxiety, more depression, more feelings of alienation – all are on the rise, often dramatically. The authors of the 2010 study argue that consumer culture and individualism have raised the bar of expectations so high that mental health suffers as a result. This view draws support from research finding that people pursuing extrinsic goals such as money, looks, and status are more likely to be anxious and depressed. Clearly, we 21st century Americans know a thing or two about anxiety.

“Cast all your anxiety on him”

Anxiety has always been part of the human condition. In Peter’s day, people were anxious and stressed out even when times were good – much less than when they were bad. 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

¹ Birth cohort increases in psychopathology among young Americans, 1938–2007: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the MMPI,” Jean M. Twenge, Brittany Gentile, C. Nathan DeWall, Debbie Ma, Katharine Lacefield, and David R. Schurtz, *Clinical Psychology Review* 30 (2010) 145–154.

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.² Others, like the Stoics, sought to make themselves immune to anxiety by learning a detached self-sufficiency, which they called "contentment."³

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 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 spoke to them about Jesus Christ.⁴ But Paul always meant something different too;

Persecution of the Christian Church

Contrary to what many Christians believe, there was no empire-wide persecution of Christians until about 250AD. Instead, in the first centuries of the church's life, persecutions were localized and varied in intensity from time and place to place. Even the horrific persecutions of Nero in the mid-60's were limited to Rome.

Still, most Christians, at one time or another, were persecuted and ostracized (1) their disdain for the pagan gods and goddesses, and/or (2) their "anti-family" philosophy, and/or (3) their strange religious practices.

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.

²Epicurus 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.

³For 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.

⁴For 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.

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,

The Suffering of Christians

In his commentary on 1 Peter, David Bartlett examines Peter’s teaching on the suffering of Christians.

We cannot be sure whether the suffering that Christians undergo includes actual judicial proceedings, but certainly it includes slander, innuendo, and abuse (see 2:12; 3:17; 4:14). We also cannot be sure whether the “fiery ordeal” of 4:12 is a new and more threatening example of opposition that calls forth the strong response to be brave and to rejoice or whether, as the letter draws to a close, the rhetoric takes on even greater passion.

What is clear is that in this epistle the issue is not why bad things happen to good people. Rather, the issue is how to interpret the suffering Christians undergo as a result of their conviction and confession. First Peter interprets the suffering of Christians in at least these ways:

- (1) Suffering can provide for the refining of faith. As Achtemeier suggests, in 1 Pet 1:6–7 there is a comparison between the lesser and the greater: If fire can purify gold, then how much more can the fire of suffering purify the faith of those who are steadfast? There is the implication that the suffering may be sent from God and the promise that the value of faith tested by hardship will be revealed at the end (see also Matt 5:11–12).
- (2) The one who suffers imitates Christ, who also suffered unjustly, not only as Christians’ redeemer but also as their example (2:21–25; 3:17–18; 4:13; 5:13).
- (3) Suffering is not only the result of human bad will but also is a consequence of the power of the devil (5:8).
- (4) Nonetheless, part of the power of Christ’s resurrection was his power to proclaim victory over the forces of evil (3:18–20). Therefore, by implication, Christians know that those who cause their suffering will also finally be judged and defeated.
- (5) Suffering for being a Christian is itself a sign that the end of history is at hand (4:12–16).
- (6) When Christ does return, those who have suffered for their faith will receive the reward of eternal glory, and the Spirit, which is the firstfruits of that glory, already is given to the faithful who suffer (1:7; 2:11; 4:13; 5:4, 10–11).¹

¹ David, B. L. (1994–2004). The First Letter of Peter. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 12, p. 252). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

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 the midst of anxiety 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."

Daily Bible Readings

These readings are usually a sample of related passages. During this series, try reading 1 Peter in its entirety each week, followed by a psalm on Saturday.

Monday, 1 Peter 1 A living hope

Tuesday, 1 Peter 2 A chosen people, called to serve

Wednesday, 1 Peter 3 Living as exiles, part 1

Thursday, 1 Peter 4 Living as exiles, part 2

Friday, 1 Peter 5 Tending God's flock

Saturday, Psalm 56 Trusting in God even under persecution

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of the book of Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Paul's letter to the Romans

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. On your mobile device, you can download the Podbean app at Apple's App Store and Google Play. The recordings are also available on Apple Podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle."

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *The Destroyer of the Gods: from Pagan to Christian*

Starting next week: *Questions to All Your Answers*

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy