Hi,

Today’s updates:

* **I’m going to take a bit of time off, so my classes won’t meet next week (9/20, 21, & 22). Tomorrow will be the last Hope in Christ email until Friday, September 25.**
* My noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet today on [my Facebook ministry page](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

Today’s email is the last in this series on 1 Peter and restoring hope in tough times.

***1 Peter 5:6-11 (NRSV)***

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

***Philippians 4:8-13 (NRSV)***

**Finally, 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. Keep 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.**

**I 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. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

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.

*“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.

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

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 spoke to them about Jesus Christ. 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 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 are 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 were. 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.”

*A bit more on 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.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott