

Hope and Humility (1 Peter 5:1-14)

As Peter finishes his letter to the scattered and under pressure small Christian communities, he reminds them of the living hope that they have in the resurrected Christ and calls them to lives of humility, because "God gives grace to the humble."

What would be your top tips for living the Christian life?

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It's a big and important question and one that our passage today really helps us with!

This is the last of our series on the letter of 1 Peter. As we have seen it is a letter written to Christians living in scattered small Christian communities amongst a very pagan population, that often made life difficult for the Christians.

So, how does Peter end the letter? What are his top tips for living the Christian life? Especially for those under pressure because of their Christian faith and in a very weak and vulnerable position?

Well, I want to suggest he focuses on two things: hope and humility.

Our Living Hope

Firstly, our living hope. This is where he started the letter. Because of the resurrection of Christ, we have a living hope. A hope that guarantees a far greater future. The whole thrust of the letter has been: now it may be tough to be a Christian, but soon you will experience the full glory of a life with Christ.

Normal and Abnormal Times

In our present times we talk a lot about 'getting back to normal.' I guess many of us had hoped that things would be back to normal by September. In many ways things are much better the lockdown restrictions have been eased greatly, children are returning to school and so on. Yet, we know that we have not reached normality. At best the social distancing restrictions in place are likely to last months until we have a vaccine and at worst there is still the real prospect of a local or national lockdown because of a resurgence in cases.

We live in an abnormal time. Yet we look forward with hope and confidence to a Covid-19 free world. To a return to what we consider normal.

This is similar to how we see time as Christians. The problem with our world is not a virus, but sin - humanity's rejection of God and all the evil and wickedness that stems from that. Sin makes our world abnormal - it is not as God created it to be. The biggest marker of that is that we will all one day die.

But the resurrection shows that God has a cure for sin. Jesus came back from the dead, he gave his life to overcome the world's sin. Those who take the vaccine of faith in him, will one day be able to join him in that far better normality of a world without sin, but fully with God in his glory.

Have you taken that vaccine? Have you come to trust that Jesus can indeed save and put your hope in him? Have you realised that following Jesus is the most precious thing, no matter how much it might cost you in this life? If so, you have the living hope of glory in God's normality, free from the abnormality of this world of sin.

Worse to come, for those who reject God - 4:17

In the previous few verses, Peter has told us that suffering for being a Christian is normal. It is in a way God's judgement on his people.

In the same way those who long for a Covid free world are willing to accept restrictions on their lives and the suffering that causes because of hope of a Covid free world. Restrictions imposed by a government with the same aims. So as Christians we are willing to face the pressures of being a Christian because of our hope of a sin-free world.

But, just as failure to follow restrictions will lead to the worst consequences of Covid-19, so Peter warns, that for those who reject God and His Son Jesus, the ultimate fate will be far worse than any suffering we may face as Christians. No matter how hard being a Christian is now, it is worth holding on to our faith, in order to be saved from the far worse consequences of rejecting our creator and saviour.

The Glory to come, for those who trust in Christ - 5:1, 4, 10

In our present passage, in contrast, Peter keeps reminding us of the glory that we have coming, when we trust and follow Jesus. Three times he mentions our glorious future:

In verse 1 he says:

" one who also will share in the glory to be revealed:" (1 Peter 5:1)

In verse 4 he says:

"... And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away." (1 Peter 5:4)

In verse 10 he says:

"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." (1 Peter 5:10)

We often think of our heavenly future in a vague, wishy, washy way, as floating around on clothes. It gives the impression of something vague, unsubstantial and fleeting.

But, that is the complete opposite of the Biblical vision of heaven. The very word for glory, in the Old Testament language, means something weighty, important, substantial.

In these verses Peter says, that our future crown of glory in contrast to something fleeting, is something that will never fade away.

And in verse 10, he talks about restoration, strength, firmness and steadfastness.

The glory we look forward to is permanent, substantial, secure and strong.

Just as Covid-19 has made our world more uncertain and our economy more insecure, so sin brings, confusion, insecurity and ultimately makes everything futile, because of our death.

For those who trust in Jesus, our future is solid, secure and wonderful. The glory to come, far outweighs even the worst suffering of this life and brings us joy even in the midst of that suffering!

Our Life of Humility

So, the first key tip Peter gives us about our faith is to rejoice in our living hope. But the second key tip is to be humble. But, why is humility so important? And what has humility to do with hope?

Humility and Hope

Peter ties the two ideas together with a quote from Proverbs:

"God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble."

(1 Peter 5:5b, Proverbs 11:31)

Who receives God's grace? God's gift of eternal life? Who can have hope?
Not the proud, they are those who set themselves up against God,
who think they know better than God!

No God gives grace to the humble. In other words we can only have a living hope, by living lives of humility. As Peter says in verse 6:

"Humble yourselves, therefore under God's mighty hand,
that he might lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:6)

And actually, although chapter 5 seems to have a hodgepodge of different instructions and tips for life, the theme of humility runs throughout bubbling under the surface.

So let's look quickly at the four key areas of teaching.

Humble Leadership - 5:1-3

First of all Peter tackles humble leadership in verses 1-3. And he sets himself up as an example of humility. Rather than setting himself up as the guy in charge, an apostle writing to mere church elders (a word referring to leaders within the church, rather than old people), he humbles himself and puts himself at their level. He is a fellow elder and witness. He is just one of them and with them, he will share the glory.

And the attitudes he encourages in leaders are fundamentally those of humility.

Christian leaders, as shepherds are to see themselves as under Jesus, the Chief Shepherd. They are to see those they lead not as belonging to them, but as God's flock that they have to care for.

They are not to do things for their own benefit, either to avoid guilt or pressure for something they or others make them feel compelled to do or to use it as a way of gaining money or prestige for themselves or as a way of bossing people about. None of that is humble leadership.

As C.S. Lewis said,

"True humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less."

Instead leaders are to lead for the sake of God and others. Serving them enthusiastically and eagerly and offering a helpful example of others to live the Christian life. This is about building up others and God's kingdom, not about building up yourself. It is humble leadership.

Humble Membership - 5:4

So Peter, teaches first of all the leaders to be humble.
But, this is not just a quality that leaders are called to.

In the same way he says in verse 4, you who are younger should submit yourselves to your elders. 'Those who are younger' probably is a reference to those who are church members and not elders or leaders. Just as the leaders are to be humble and submit to Christ in eager service, so church members should be humble and submit themselves to the elder's leadership with eagerness.

Being willing to submit to the leadership of others, often goes against the grain, but it is a mark of humility.

Humble Prayer - 5:6-7

Thirdly, Peter calls us to humble prayer. Prayer is fundamentally an act of a humility. It is saying to God, I can't do it I need your help.

The phrase, "God's mighty hand" in verse 6, is a phrase that comes from the Exodus story. That is a story about God rescuing the humble from the proud by his mighty hand.

Israel, were slaves in Egypt, their position was weak and vulnerable compared to the might and power of the King of Egypt. But in their humility, they cried out to God for help and God heard their prayer. God came and by his mighty hand he sent plagues on Egypt and forced Pharaoh to release them from their slavery.

In the same way, Peter encourages us in prayer to cry out to God. Trusting not in our power, but God's strength to save us. This is what is meant by humble prayer.

Humble Resistance - 5:8-9

Finally, Peter encourages us to humble resistance of the Devil.

Peter knew from bitter experience the dangers of personal pride, that thinks you can stand firm for Christ in your own strength. When Jesus told Peter and the other disciples that he was about to be arrested and that they would be scattered, Peter was indignant! "I'll stick by you, even if I have to die for it!" Jesus, knew Peter was wrong and told him that he would deny Jesus three times before the cock crowed early the next morning. Jesus was proved right. Peter's pride came before his fall.

Rather in humility he should have realised that he needed to stay alert and pray for God's help not to fall into temptation, not to be caught out by the devil.

In the same way he warns us to be humble and realise that we can't in our own strength avoid the traps of the devil. We need to be alert to temptation and pray for God's strength to resist it.

What would be your top tips for living the Christian life?

Top tips for Christian living? Hope and Humility may not be the total answer, but they have to be two key elements.

Let's celebrate all the more our living hope as we seek to live lives of humility before God, knowing that:

""God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble."
(1 Peter 5:5b, Proverbs 11:31)