

According to Amazon, the most highlighted passage in all books read on Kindle (as of November 2014)—highlighted almost twice as often as any other passage—is from the second volume of *The Hunger Games*. The highlighted passage says this: “Because sometimes things happen to people and they’re not equipped to deal with them.”

University professor Mark Shiffman comments on this: “It’s easy to see why *The Hunger Games* is the novel of a generation. The trilogy depicts adolescents rigorously trained by adults for desperate but meaningless life-or-death competitions. The story resonates with students’ worry that they’re all honed up with no place to go. They rack up majors, minors, certificates, credentials, and internships to keep them in the running for what they feel to be an ever more elusive success. They’re driven by fear. They clothe themselves in an armor of achievement that they hope will protect them against uncertainties—of the job market, of course, but also deeper uncertainties about their status, their identities, their self-worth. They’re trying to gain more control over an uncertain future.”

I think all of us can relate to the fear and worry and anxiety over the possibility that things can happen to us that we’re not equipped to deal with—the uncertainties of life; all the “what ifs.”

We’ve been looking at the first letter of the apostle Peter to the churches in Asia Minor. This is very much what those churches were feeling. Throughout this letter Peter has warned them that difficult times are ahead. He said we shouldn’t be surprised by suffering; Christ suffered and so will we. He even said we can have great joy in the midst of suffering because it actually accomplishes something in us and through us.

Hearing all that, any normal person would wonder, *Am I equipped to deal with this? How will my faith hold up in times like that? Do you ever wonder about that? Do you ever ask yourself that question?*

As we come to the close of this letter, Peter wants to address these fears and anxieties. He wants to bring some encouragement to believers who are facing some of the hard realities of being a follower of Christ in this world. So he finishes this letter by encouraging them in several ways. We can divide this closing paragraph into three sections. In the first section he says look up, in the second he says look out, and in the third section he says look in.

Look Up

“God opposes the proud

but shows favor to the humble.”

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:5b-7).

Peter just finished in the first part of verse 5 telling younger believers to submit to the elders of the church. Then he says, “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another.” He may be thinking of Jesus at the Last Supper and how he clothed himself with a towel and washed the disciple’s feet. The Master served the servants. Someone said, “Humility is living with the right understanding of who God is, who I am and who you are.”

But he’s also thinking of how God hates the sin of pride and so he turns to the Old Testament and quotes Proverbs 3:34, **“God opposes the proud and shows favor (gives grace) to the humble.”** There are so many examples of this in the Bible. It was pride that turned Lucifer to Satan. It was pride, the desire to be like God, that caused Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. It was pride that caused Peter to fall asleep rather than watch and pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. And it’s pride that keeps people away from embracing the gospel which says we’ve sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. On the other hand, you look at the lives of people like Joseph and Daniel who suffered unjustly and ended up in slavery, but God showed favor to them and used them in powerful ways.

But we can never clothe ourselves with humility towards one another unless we first humble ourselves before God. We have to look up. That’s where it all starts. And so Peter says, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he might exalt you.” I love what Karen Jobes says, “True humility, as opposed to contrived, self-degrading humiliation, flows from recognizing one’s complete dependence on God and is expressed by the acceptance of one’s role and position in God’s economy.”

It’s very interesting that Peter mentions “God’s mighty hand” because this very phrase is used repeatedly in the book of Exodus. The people of Israel were suffering the yoke of slavery in Egypt and God says to Moses, **“Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country”**

(Ex 6:1). So, here in 1 Peter, humbling ourselves before God's mighty hand means we trust him in the midst of suffering. We accept whatever he brings. We follow our sovereign Lord when things are smooth and when the road gets bumpy. We don't try to manipulate people or events. We don't hurry things to conform to our own timetable. We allow God to orchestrate events at his own tempo. We trust that he'll exalt us in due time. This isn't easy. We live in a sin-marred world where bad things happen. The oppression of Pharaoh wear us down. But God is able to deliver. To humble yourself under God's mighty hand isn't hiding from reality or hoping that things will work out; it's an active faith that God is strong enough to deliver from even the most oppressive adversary. It's entrusting ourselves to God who will one day make all things right.

It sounds like this is kind of a gut-it-out strategy. You know, just put your head down and plow ahead. But the reality is there's no way we can live like this unless we do what he says next, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." That verb "to cast" literally means "to throw upon." It's a decisive act on our part. It's not passive or partial. When we cast all our anxieties on him we're again looking up; we're humbling ourselves under his mighty hand; we're surrendering all our anxieties and questions to him. Notice it's not like we don't have anxiety; the assumption is we do. In fact, the word "order" in the Greek places the words "all your anxiety" first. So it reads, "All your anxiety, throw it on him!" Why? Because "he cares" for you. Isn't that wonderful? He's not some kind of distant, remote, unfeeling God; he cares for each of us. He cares about our cares.

This week I had a chance to listen in to some of the end of the year sharing in Women's Bible Study. I was so moved by one woman's story. Here's part of what she shared:

Last August, my 3-year-old daughter Emily passed away after a long hard battle against cancer. At 19 months old she was diagnosed with a rare pediatric cancer difficult to cure. Emily fought hard for her life, and though we prayed so earnestly for her healing, God in His sovereign plan, called her Home.

My world turned upside down after Emily passed away. I've never experienced such pain and grief, a cloud of darkness overwhelmed me every day. And though I knew Emily was in a better place, the sadness consumed my heart and I wrestled with so many questions to God. Looking back, I realize that in the darkest moment of my grief, God in His sovereignty led me to WBS, not to find all the answers I wanted to make sense of my suffering, but to simply know Him more. Because in knowing Him, we can find incredible peace, comfort, hope, and joy even in the midst of deep pain and loss.

I remember the encouragement to ground our confidence in the certainty of God's sovereignty when things are out of our control. To trust that there is nothing outside God's sovereign

rule, and for me that meant even cancer and the death of my 3-year-old child. Though I will never understand God's mysterious ways on this side of eternity, I have grown in my trust of Him, knowing that God in his unfailing love for me always works all things, even pain and suffering, for my good and His glory... At times this truth is hard to see through my grief, but through faith in His sovereignty I can see it more clearly.

I've learned that time will never fully alleviate the pain when you lose someone you love. The pain just becomes a part of who you are... Though this burden is heavy to bear each day, KNOWING JESUS is what comforts the pain and eases the burden, just enough so that you learn to bear it, to press on and still live for Him... And what gives me strength to carry on is knowing that in God's sovereign plan, there will come a day of true healing and restoration, the day when Jesus returns and makes all things right. The day I will see Emily raised from the dead and finally be with her again. The day I will see our wonderful Savior face to face and worship Him for all eternity. That is the day I long for and live for.

That's what Peter is talking about. That's looking up amidst our pain and suffering and humbling ourselves under God's mighty hand, casting all our cares on him, trusting that he cares for us.

Look Out

But you can't just look up, you also have to look out. Look at what Peter says next.

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings (verses 8-9).

Look out for what? Look out for the devil! I find it very interesting that this is the first time Peter mentions the devil in this letter. With all his talk of evil and injustice and suffering I find it surprising that he hasn't mentioned our spiritual enemy once. It strikes me that Peter isn't one of those hyper-spiritual Christians who sees a demon behind every headache, flat tire and rent increase. He doesn't give too much credit to the devil. But at the same time he doesn't ignore or underestimate him either. And here he uncovers the reality of spiritual warfare in the opposition we experience in the world. He calls him, "Your enemy, the devil." The term "enemy" makes us think of the name "Satan" which comes from the Hebrew word for "adversary." The word "devil" means "slanderer" because he falsely accuses God's people. In Revelation 9:11 he's called "Abaddon" and "Apollyon" which both mean "destroyer." So he's a destructive deceiver who slanders and accuses God's people at every opportunity.

Peter says there are two ways to deal with him. First, we must "be alert and of sober mind." Three times in this letter Peter

exhorts us to be sober minded. In 1:13 he said, *“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.”* In 4:7 he said, *“The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray.”* So this is the third call to be alert and of sober mind. Notice he gives the reason: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” If you were wandering in the wild savannah of Africa, I guarantee you'd be alert and sober minded! The lion quietly lurks in tall grass, stalking our every step, waiting to catch us off guard. Trust me, Satan stalks you. He knows your weaknesses and strengths. His way is to prowl and to pounce when you least expect it, which is why you must be alert and fully sober.

Second, he says, “Resist him, standing firm in the faith.” When you're standing nose to nose with our adversary, don't panic, don't run, and don't surrender. Resist him—not in your own strength because you're overmatched, but rather “standing firm in the faith.” This points to a crucial weapon in defeating the enemy. Remember how Paul talked about our spiritual armor in Ephesians 6 and he said to use the *“shield of faith”* and *“sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”* That's what he's pointing to here. That's how Jesus stood up to the devil when he was tempted in the wilderness. He fell back on the Word of God, not as a magic formula, but as truth to stand on and expose the lies of the enemy. He's also a liar, you know. That's what Jesus called him—a liar and a murderer! So when the devil accuses you, our faith says, *“There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Rom. 8:1). Stand on that! When the devil discourages you, our faith says, *“We are more than conquerors through him who loved us”* (Rom. 8:37). Stand on that!

And here's something to remember as you do that: you don't stand alone. That's why he adds as a reason to stand firm: “because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” I guess it's true that misery loves company, but more importantly this stresses the solidarity of the Christian family. You're not alone in your suffering or in fighting the devil. The temptation is to think you're alone, but that's also your greatest danger. The devil wants to separate you in order to devour you. The crouching lion doesn't wait to pounce on the herd, but he waits for one animal to fall back from the pack. But Peter says you're not alone. Others are standing firm so we can stand firm, and we must stand firm so they can stand firm. We're connected—arms locked together. So when you look out, don't just look out for the enemy, look out at your brothers and sisters in Christ who are also standing firm.

Look In

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. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen (verses 10-11).

Lastly, Peter tells us look in. These are some of the most hopeful words in all the Bible! Imagine feeling defeated and discouraged, beaten down by the enemy, and then you hear these words and they wash over you like cool water on a blistering hot day. Yes, there will be suffering, but look at the benefits that the God of all grace will produce in you:

- He will restore (perfect) you
- He will make you strong
- He will make you firm
- He will make you steadfast

These are the things God does **in** our times of suffering and desperation. Recently our family experienced a little crisis. As I was getting ready to drive home from the gym I saw a text from my wife telling me to call her right away. So I called and she was in a bit of a panic because as she and our daughter sat in the backyard our 21-month-old grandson walked into the house and locked the door! They had no way to get into the house, and although at first they heard him crying, after a few more minutes he went silent. They couldn't even locate him through the windows. So they called me, and of course I was very calm, and I told them to call 9-1-1. By the time I got to the house the fire truck had come, busted down a door, and found our grandson sitting in the dark garage. Of course, he was quite happy to be set free into the wide expanse of his backyard!

I think that's how we sometimes think the Christian life is supposed to work. When we get stuck somewhere, all we have to do is shoot a 9-1-1 prayer up to God and he'll hear our cry and unlock the door to all the blessings we desire. Sometimes he does that. But the older I get the more I realize the Christian life doesn't always work that way. So often he doesn't break down the door right away—like when a marriage doesn't heal, or when rebellious kids still rebel, or when a friendship continues to go south, or when a financial crisis or a health crisis gets worse, or when loneliness intensifies and depression deepens.

Sometimes what God does instead of breaking the door down and setting us free is he climbs through a small window into our dark room. He doesn't let us out. Instead, he sits down on the garage floor and says, “Come sit with me! I want to meet you right here.” He seems to think that climbing into the garage to be with me matters more than letting me out to play. We don't always see it that way. “If you love me, you'll break down the door!” But, the choice is ours. Either we can keep asking him to give us what we think will make us happy—to escape our dark garage and run to the backyard of blessings—or we can accept his invitation to sit with him, for now, perhaps, in darkness, and

seize the opportunity to know him better and represent him well in this dark world.

Notice there are a few things Peter says that will help us as we sit in the garage. First, he's the God of all grace. Grace is God's unmerited favor. When you're suffering, remember, he's not punishing you; he's the God of all grace. Second, it's only for a little while. It doesn't seem like a little while, but compared to the "eternal glory" he's called you to, compared to the billions of years you'll spend with him in the new heavens and the new earth, it really is just a little while. And third, remember all power (dominion) belongs to him, for ever and ever! Whatever powers seem to be controlling your life and circumstances right now, all power and all dominion belong to God Almighty!

Remember those words from *The Hunger Games*: "Sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them." So we ask, Am I equipped to deal with what God sends my way? How will my faith hold up? Peter says, "Look up. Humble yourself before God's mighty hand and he will lift you up, casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you." He says, "Look out. Stay alert for the devil as he prowls around. Resist him, stand firm in the faith and know that you don't stand alone." Finally, he says, "Look in. He's doing a work in you. He will restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

Final Greetings

With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. Greet one another with a kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ (verses 12-14).

Peter closes this letter in typical fashion with a salutation. Peter isn't alone. He's written this letter with the help of Silas, who will also likely be the one to deliver the letter and see that it's

distributed to the churches of Asia Minor. He also sends greetings from the church in Rome where he was writing from; that's what he means by "she who is in Babylon." Babylon is codeword for Rome. Then there's his son Mark, who was not his natural son but his spiritual son. Sometimes he's called John Mark. He's the one who wrote the gospel of Mark with Peter's help and also traveled with Paul on his first missionary journey. In a way, this is Peter's family, and he wants these believers in Asia Minor to treat each other like family as well as greet each other with a kiss of love, experiencing the peace that comes from knowing Christ.

The thing that strikes me most about this salutation is how he says, "I have written you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it." It's that idea of encouragement that stands out to me. Encouragement that we are equipped to deal with what God sends my way. Look again at all the encouragement Peter has ended his letter with:

Encouragement #1: He will exalt me in due time. That might happen in small ways in this life, or in the next. So I can humble myself before him, accepting what he has for me.

Encouragement #2: He cares for me. I can cast all my cares on him because he cares for me.

Encouragement #3: I'm not alone in my suffering. I can resist the devil because others are standing with me and our arms are locked.

Encouragement #4: The God of all grace will use all these things to restore me, make me strong and firm and steadfast.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.