

Part 13: The Church as God's Survival Toolkit

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We are nearing the end of 1 Peter, and we will continue in two weeks into the book of 2 Peter. But if you've been with us the past few weeks you've noticed that the theme of suffering has taken center stage in Peter's first letter.

Peter talks about three places where Christians will encounter suffering. You might suffer because you are a Christian. We saw this last week and this has been Peter's primary point. You might suffer in the community of Christians, there might be interpersonal tension in the church. And lastly, you might suffer in the heart of a Christian. We will look at this next week as Peter talks about the battle of temptation in our own hearts.

In other words there is potential hostility inside of us, outside of us, and around us. In light of this reality Peter calls Christians in chapter one, "elect exiles," and in chapter two as, "sojourners and strangers."

To belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ is to find yourself in a world where at times you can feel alone and isolated. It's like those Discovery TV shows where the helicopter drops off some survival man in the middle of the arctic, or a desert and says: "Let's see if he survives."

But if you've seen those shows, you know that there is always a saving grace. A backpack. In the backpack there's an assortment of things that any hiker would have. Maybe a pocket knife, a map, a granola bar, and some tape or twine. As the show goes on we see how those essential items are key to their survival.

As Christians, Peter is making the point that though Christians have the glorious hope of heaven, we are not yet there. We live life in what is sometimes an inhospitable world with threats abounding. But God in his mercy gives gifts to his people. He has given us a backpack of essential items which prove to be far more than a novelty when life gets hard.

So far Peter has shown a number of these gifts. He's reminded believers of the Holy Spirit which indwells them and empowers them. He holds up for them the power of God's word which caused them to be born again by faith in the gospel. But today he holds up another gift for the sojourner.

This resource isn't divine like the Holy Spirit, and it's not inerrant like God's word, but it is a divine gift purchased at a great cost. This last tool might be the last thing you'd want to find in the bottom of your survival backpack because at times it can be awkward, it can fail to work properly, and it can be cumbersome. But despite all of its failings, God has chosen to make it effective for the purpose he chose to create it for.

What is this final tool for Christians in a hostile world: the local church. Peter is going to talk about the church by talking about those who make up a church. He's not talking about the universal church of all who follow Jesus, he's going to talk about elders who are among a specific flock, and flocks who among them have specific elders.

Our passage today is 1 Peter 5:1-5, and in it the first four verses will be targeted at the elders, or pastors, of the church, and the final verse will speak to the broader flock, or members of a church.

We have eight elders at our church, based off my count there are more than eight people in here today. So to any of you who are not part of those eight individuals why is this text important for you to listen to as well?

Let me give three quick reasons before we move on as to why it is important for the whole church to hear verses 1-4. Number one: As a Christian you will have elders. We already saw this in 1 Peter 2, but it's a common theme in the New Testament, to be joined to Christ is to be joined to his church. There's no category for Christians apart from a local church. Therefore if you are a Christian, you will have pastors.

Number two: As a Christian you get to choose your elders. The New Testament shows that the church as a congregation of saved individuals gets the important task of calling and confirming their own elders. Part of the member's responsibilities at Sovereign Hope is to vote in and affirm new elders from their body. So this passage should frame your own eyes and expectations for such moments.

Number three: You will need elders and elders need their flock. When suffering comes our hearts often turn inward, but the gospel turns us outward to care for each other. Elders help care for us when things get difficult. This is what the church is meant to do: care for each other under the glory which awaits us in heaven.

The big picture we will see today is that the church works humbly to serve each other because of our hope in God. We are going to see this in two ways: **Elders humbly lay down their lives for their sheep**, and **The church humbly lays down their rights for each other**.

So let me begin by reading the first portion of our passage today: **1 Peter 5:1-4**.

Here we see our first point this morning, **Elders humbly lay down their lives for their sheep**.

Peter shows this point by reminding elders of two things: their role and their posture. In terms of their role Peter calls this group of men "elders."

Now if you've attended church here before, you've probably seen men introduce themselves as elders and as pastors. Sometimes I'll introduce myself as a pastor, sometimes as an elder. It might lead you to think that we have a bit of an identity crisis.

But this text in 1 Peter is key to helping us understand better who and what an elder is. Their title of elder is defined by their role. Peter speaks to elders, which in the church setting is an official office not just an older man, and he calls them to oversee the church. The word for overseer in Greek is the word where we get the term bishop from.

But the primary command he calls elders to is to shepherd the flock. The word shepherd is where we get the term pastor from. A pastor being one who tends to the sheep of the pasture.

Elder, pastor, bishop, overseer are all describing the same position. Elder is the title, to oversee, and to shepherd is the description of the position. To talk of elders is to talk of pastors, to be a pastor is to be an elder.

The apostle Paul uses the same three themes to describe the elders in the church of Ephesus in **Acts 20:17-18a, 28**.

We also see Paul talk about how essential the establishment of elders were in the early mission's movement. As the apostles and evangelists went and preached the gospel, the next step was to equip these new gospel communities, called churches, with elders: **Titus 1:5** and **2 Timothy 2:1-2**.

The church is God's plan for making disciples of all nations and he has given specific offices to his church which help it fulfill its mission of disciple making.

The role of these elders in the good and in the bad is to oversee the church by shepherding the church, caring for the flock.

Our world today cringes at authority because we have seen authority be misused. The church itself has misused authority at times, which is why we ought to heed these passages. Because if the elders of the church are willing to apply this, and the members of the church are eager to appoint and hold elders to this, then we are in the safe place of God's grace trusting that he knows what's best for us.

This is because while the role of an elder is to shepherd and oversee, the posture of an elder is to do so like Christ has done for his church. Peter tells us that there is a chief shepherd, and it's none of us. It's Jesus. So these under-shepherds must fulfill their role of shepherding in a way that reminds the other sheep of their one true shepherd.

To do this, Peter gives the elders three posture checks. First, ***elders are not to lead begrudgingly but willingly***. **1 Peter 5:2**.

Elders are not any persons who have leadership ability. 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 give moral, spiritual and functional qualifications which elders must possess. And look at the tension which the New Testament speaks of concerning these offices: **1 Timothy 3:1, James 3:1**.

There is this tension and weight that comes with the office of elder, it is a joy, but it is a burden. Which means that the elders of God's church realize the nature of a broken body. They themselves are broken leaders, and the shepherd broken sheep. But instead of begrudgingly leading, they recognize that God has appointed them for this task and given them specific gifts which the congregation has asked them to use. Remember what Paul said of the Ephesian elders: **Acts 20:28**.

Elders willingly move towards sticky and difficult situations because they want to be obedient to their call to shepherd God's church as God would have them. Because that's how Jesus came for us. Jesus didn't come begrudgingly to die for our sins, he came willingly because he loved us. Elders are to have the same heart towards their own churches.

Secondly, ***elders are not to be focused on gaining but giving***. Peter continues and says, "not for shameful gain, but eagerly."

I felt called to ministry in what was the height of the celebrity pastor movement. With the prevalence of YouTube, Podcasts, Amazon and streaming, those who wanted to be movie stars or sports stars realized that they could get a similar level of fame by pursuing the pastorate and having a successful church.

But the elders of God's church do not shepherd for their own glory or gain. Another way to interpret the word is "not for gain, but freely." Elder's don't shepherd because they need to have their egos inflated or their skills validated. They are free from those things because they recognize that they have been justified by the chief shepherd himself. They don't shepherd because they want something from the flock, they shepherd because they eagerly want to love God's flock. In fact an elder knows that a good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

I once heard it said that a good shepherd knows that when a wolf comes into the pen that at the end of the struggle there will either be a dead wolf or a dead shepherd. Pastors seek to protect their sheep from dangerous teachings and lifestyles even if that means they must become crushed in the process.

And lastly, ***elders are not to steer from the back but lead from the front.*** Peter says this in **1 Peter 5:3**.

I read one pastor this week who said, "The elder-shepherd is not like a cowboy, driving his flock like cattle. He leads them as a shepherd would, walking on ahead."

Part of the reason we rotate our elders through as service leaders at the church is because we believe that you should know your elders. Part of their leadership is to lead by way of example and that requires being known.

Our elders, myself as the chief example, know how dangerous sermons are. Because everything preached from this pulpit is expected to be modeled, applied, and championed first and foremost by our elders as an example.

Remember the context in which Peter is speaking to elders and churches is the context of suffering. Which means a large part of what Peter wants you to see is how your elders suffer.

None of our elders take this lightly. We know that if persecution would come to the church, it would in all likely hood begin and end with us. But even when that kind of suffering is, by God's grace, absent we want you to be able to look at your elders and see what costly obedience looks like even when life is hard in ordinary ways.

Watch how our elders wrestle and fight against sin. See how they manage the loss of loved ones or sickness. What does their heart cling to when the economy crumbles? How do they respond to unfair attacks or accusations? In all these things elders are to be above reproach and distinct.

But I want to warn you that when you look, you might find things that don't look perfect. In fact I guarantee it. But look at the hope held out for me and you in **1 Peter 5:4**.

What's interesting is that Peter doesn't introduce himself to his churches as an apostle, which would have been normal at time. Instead he introduces himself as a fellow elder. And following this introduction he begins to articulate the unique posture these elders should take.

And here is why this is such an important and heartfelt message for Peter. If you remember, Peter denied Jesus three times before his death. But in a wonderful moment of redemption, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Peter while the disciples were fishing and Peter swam to the shore to meet Jesus and look at this encounter: **John 21:15-17**.

Peter understood the weight of the shepherd role because Peter knew that it was only this chief shepherd of Jesus Christ who could bring a wayward heart like Peter's back into grace.

Elders might shepherd, but they shepherd first from the posture of a sheep. Jesus as shepherd did more than lay down his life for his flock, he took the full weight of our sins while we had left the pen. He died to bring us back, and did so with joy. If you've never experienced the love of this shepherd, I invite you to do that today.

Brother elders, I want to speak to you, God has called us to lead in hard and often stretching ways. We will one day give an account to this Shepherd King for how we cared for his sheep, but at every step of the way he draws near to help us and give us hope when we feel the nearness of our own weaknesses. We must be the first to apply this text and cherish this hope. I pray that we might do this well.

And church, we pray that our limitations and our strengths remind you of the chief-shepherd who is not limited in his care for his flock. In light of this, I think there are three ways you can apply this text.

First, pray for your current elders that we grow more and more in these areas. Second, look among yourselves and keep an eye out for those whom God might be calling to serve in this role in the future. And lastly, willingly subject yourselves to these imperfect men saved by grace.

Just as elders are called to humbly lay down their lives in light of the crown of glory, so too in light of the same crown and same shepherd is the whole church to act towards each other, **1 Peter 5:5**.

This is our second point today: **The church humbly lays down its rights for each other.**

In this section Peter first speaks to those, who like our present culture, might look to run towards autonomy. Autonomy in the present always promises life. But history shows us autonomy and rampant individualism often ends in anarchy. And the Bible shows us that autonomy is the mindset of the fool.

Yet we long for it still. We want to be captains of our own souls. But by default a Christian, pastor or not, finds themselves under the authority of Jesus who is a good and kind shepherd worthy of all our trust.

And if we are under his authority, we must obey where he calls us to obey. Peter shows that obedience looks like submission and humility together as the church.

Peter here calls out the younger men in particular who might want to ignore the eager pleas of the elders to turn from sin and instead choose to live how they want to live. But I think we would be naive to assume that such temptations are exclusive to young men, for we all feel the pull of autonomy.

But Peter's command is that if you are one who also wants to receive the crown of glory and the commendation of the good shepherd, you will seek to participate in the life of the church in a way that is humble and faithful.

The author of Hebrews puts it this way: **Hebrews 13:17**. Nowhere in scripture does Jesus call you to be subject to, or to obey anyone, because that person is innately worthy or perfectly trust worthy.

Jesus calls us to submit to governments, employers, masters, and pastors not because they have perfectly earned your trust but because you trust Jesus who calls you to obey in this way.

Now in all things we obey God, not man. But just as the paper money in our wallet is worthless without the guarantee of the treasury which stands behind the note, so too our posture towards human authority is a functional way where Christians trust ultimately in Jesus himself.

What does it look like to be subject to your elders? It looks like praying for them, listening to them, caring for them, partnering for ministry with them.

And in different contexts this looks differently. In cultures where nominal or cultural Christianity let's lots of people think they are Christian because they went to church once, this submission looks like church membership. What does church membership do? It acknowledges that I am one of the flock among you, and you are one of the flock among me, and we are mutually responsible for helping each other follow Jesus.

Peter isn't telling you to submit to all the elders, he says the elders among you. Which means membership is a way for elders to know their sheep and for sheep to know their elders and to say to each other: "We're doing this. Jesus has given us a mission in a hostile world, and we are the people who are going to help and hold each other in the process."

Peter is calling Christians to link arms in three distinct ways in this text, and it's these three relationships which form our membership at Sovereign Hope. Peter stresses the elder's responsibility to the flock, the flock to the elders, and also all members to all members.

We summarize the scope of these relationships in three ways. Church membership humbly agrees to serve as the church together by believing together, belonging together, and becoming together. As a church we believe the same core truths about the gospel and a right response to it. We belong together realizing that the primary metaphor the New Testament uses for the local church is that of a body. We belong to each other for mutual good and service. And lastly we become together more Christ-like as we hold up for each other the goal of holiness in all things. We aim to become better disciplers and evangelists and in so doing become a better representation of Jesus to our city and neighbors.

If you're interested in membership please talk to one of the elders or a community group leader. But membership is not the primary application of Peter's call to the church. It is a practical place where the primary point is functionally lived out. But the main point of his challenge to the whole church is that all of them would clothe themselves with humility towards one another.

Spoiler alert, the church cannot be a church without humility. The church cannot love without humility. The church cannot make disciples and share the gospel without humility. This has been a primary point of application for Peter so far: **1 Peter 1:22, 3:8, 4:7-9, 5:5**.

The church will only serve its purpose of caring for Christians and proclaiming the gospel to the lost if individual believers are able to humbly love each other more than themselves. Elders are called to this and members are called to this. How are we able to do this? We look to our chief shepherd who has

promised to care for us in ways personal preference and autonomy cannot. Jesus provides all that pride promises in full.

This week I had the privilege of showing off our new building to some ladies who have been members of this church since its start in 1968.

Fifty-two years, five locations, five senior pastors, and three names later they are still here. In each interaction with these women I was humbled. I was served. I was led to worship God for his faithfulness. They helped me worship.

But you know what, I bet there were lots of times where they wanted to run from the church, or people in the church. Karol Lincoln's husband Lee came to church with earplugs in when we started playing louder music. But both Lee and Karol stuck it out, Lee died happily serving the church, and Karol is still here faithfully brining her grandkids today.

What kept them here was an ability to be humble: to realize that staff and pastors will make dumb decisions, or go ways that might not be their preferred way, they will be sinned against intentionally and unintentionally by other members.

But fifty years later they have a legacy of gospel grace which causes a whole church of primarily younger families to see the value of cherishing the people of God over personal preference. Humility assumes that you learn to live life with people who are not like you.

I pray we have more men and women just like this. Lillian was the age of you GCF girls when she became a member of this church in '68. Curt who, helped secure the larger property, was ten years old when he started coming to this church.

Grace keeps them and humility protects them. It takes a fearlessness to stick it out in God's church. Humility says I don't need to fear losing out on joy by deferring to others because I trust that in Jesus I have all the hope and comfort I need, and one day, one glorious day, it will all be sorted out.

You see as God's church we can only endure what might stand against us when we realize that in our humility God is for us. Trusting God, submitting yourselves to his church, laying down your preferences, and obeying Jesus only makes sense when you believe that God gives wonderful satisfying grace to those who humble themselves and trust him.

The church is not perfect, but Jesus died to one day perfect it.

Which means that as we encounter the suffering from within and without, we ought to learn to use the church as the wonderful means of grace God gave us. Faithfully serving others inside of it for our good and for the glory of God's greater mission.