

# THE MIGHTY HAND OF GOD

SERIES: FLOURISH: HOPE IN A STRANGE LAND



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1 Peter 5:1-11  
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*1 Peter 5:1-11*

There have been more than enough developments in 2020 to raise our anxiety levels: first the pandemic, then the racial reckoning, then the fires, and then the election, with various and sundry other disturbances thrown in for good measure. Who knows what's next? It's enough to make the even some of the stoutest followers of Jesus go a little wobbly.

As God would have it, we come in our study of 1 Peter to a text in which the apostle tells us what do with our anxiety. With his words, Peter paints pictures. Therefore, to benefit from his words, we will have to use our imaginations. Among other images, Peter will show us “the mighty hand of God.”

First, Peter addresses elders, spiritual leaders in the church. In our leadership structure at PBC, we have what we call elders, who serve as shepherds of the flock. We also have what we call pastors, who also serve as shepherds of the flock, under the leadership of the elders. Most of the elders are not paid. Those who are paid also serve on the pastoral staff. Most of our pastors are also paid. All those who are paid earn their living from your generous giving.

It can be a little confusing, but our structure represents our effort to be faithful, in a contemporary setting, to what the New Testament prescribes for church leadership.

Although Peter addresses elders in verses 1-4, inasmuch as elders are shepherds, his words for the most part apply to anyone who is charged with shepherding responsibilities regardless of what title they go by. Children's ministry leaders and youth ministry leaders are shepherds. Small group leaders are shepherds. Every parent is a shepherd.

## Shepherd the flock

**1 Peter 5:1-3:**

**So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ,**

**as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.**

Suffering, which is featured in the previous context and in multiple places in this letter, challenges everyone. Especially in light of suffering, Peter addresses the elders, the spiritual leaders among the churches, whose leadership is especially needed in times of suffering.

Although he's an apostle, Peter identifies with those he's addressing, calling himself a “fellow elder,” speaking as a peer. He also wants them to know that he both witnessed Christ's sufferings and partakes in Christ's glory—that is, Christ's glorious reign—which has already begun but is yet to be consummated. The elders too are witnesses of Christ's sufferings, insofar as they suffer as followers of Christ, and likewise partake of Christ's glory, reigning with Christ even now while anticipating future glory.

Peter wants the elders to find motivation for their calling as witnesses of Christ's sufferings and partakers in his glory. Christ suffered. Christ will come. Therefore, get on with it. Get on with shepherding the flock. Peter is instructing the elders to do what Jesus told him to do (John 21:15-17).

## Teach the Scriptures

Shepherding the flock—that is, a church composed of people, who are likened to sheep—consists of “exercising oversight,” which involves feeding the flock spiritual food and protecting it from spiritual harm. When Jesus saw a crowd, he had compassion on those in it, “because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” What did he therefore do? “And he began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34). Before Jesus fed the crowd, he taught the crowd.

Mark's description of Jesus made a searing impact on me when I went to Bulgaria in the summer of 1992 to teach the Scriptures to new churches there. The believers I met in Bulgaria were excited about Jesus but were confused because they didn't know the Scriptures very well. They were largely untaught. I felt compassion for them. So I taught them the Scriptures.

Upon my return from Bulgaria, I wrote this to the elders of the church that sent me: "The long-term effect on me, I think, will be an increased appreciation for the necessity of biblical understanding and teaching. I am more motivated than ever to study God's Word and feed his sheep. And I am more excited than ever to see how he will use that desire." Twenty-eight years later, he's still using that desire.

People are nourished by the Scriptures and protected by the Scriptures insofar as they are able to understand and apply the Scriptures. Therefore, teaching the Scriptures, and ensuring that the church is taught the Scriptures, so that people both understand and apply the Scriptures, is the primary way in which elders shepherd the flock, exercising oversight (1 Timothy 3:2). Among the gifted people God gives to the church are "the shepherds and teachers," or the "shepherd-teachers," whose shepherding involves teaching (Ephesians 4:11).

Anyone who becomes an elder at this church must know the Scriptures and have the ability to teach the Scriptures. As elders, we desire to teach others, who will then "be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).

## Examples to the flock

Peter then outlines how elders should go about the work of exercising oversight.

First, elders should serve "not under compulsion," because they have to. They must not be on a guilt trip. Instead, elders should serve "willingly," because they want to. To serve because you want to is only possible "as God would have you"—that is, because God wants you to serve. You serve willingly because God wills that you serve. The big question for elders and potential elders to ask, then, is, "Do I sense that God wants me to serve?" If the answer is yes, then you will serve willingly, because you want to.

Second, elders should serve not for "shameful gain"—that is, just for the money. They must not be on a money trip. Biblically, it's permissible for elders to be compensated, but compensation must not be the

motivation. Instead, elders should serve "eagerly," as if the work itself, because of the meaning God assigns to it, is reward enough.

In order to serve willingly and eagerly as a shepherd, one has to love the sheep. One of the questions we as elders ask, when considering whether to invite someone to become an elder, is, "Does he love this church?" I can assure you that the elders of this church love this church.

Finally, elders should not serve in a "domineering" way, bossing, nagging, and threatening. They must not be on a power trip. If they are, they might be able to manipulate the sheep, at least for a while, but they won't have a flock of healthy sheep. Instead, elders should be "examples to the flock" of what it looks like to know and follow Jesus.

If elders are called to be examples of what it looks like to follow Jesus, then it follows that their primary task is to nurture their own relationship with the Lord. At our church, both elders and pastors are evaluated every two years. When we do these evaluations, our first priority is not to consider an elder or pastor's "performance" per se but to consider his or her relationship with the Lord.

Peter further incentivizes elders by encouraging them to peer into the future.

## The unfading crown of glory

**1 Peter 5:4:**

**And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.**

Peter looks forward, as he does throughout this letter, to the future coming of Christ, this time in connection with what Christ, as "the chief Shepherd," will do for elders and others who have shepherded their flocks. Although all believers will receive "the crown of righteousness" and "the crown of life" (2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:12, Revelation 12:10), shepherds will receive what Peter calls "the unfading crown of glory."

Are these the same crowns? Will we receive actual crowns? Will we wear them around? I don't know. I don't care. What I care about is meaning of the image.

In the Greco-Roman world, leafy crowns, or wreaths, were awarded in recognition of either accomplishment or status. Leaves fade. Crowns of glory do not.

The future picture Peter paints is inspiring. Especially if you are a shepherd of some kind, picture the scene. Christ, the chief Shepherd, appears. You approach him, and his face is beaming. You know it has to be beaming for him to do what he's about to do. You bow before him. He leans over and places a crown—the unfading crown of glory—on your head. Now, do you think you can shepherd the flock, exercising oversight, for another day?

It's important for elders to shepherd the flock because, as we will see later in the passage, there's a lion on the loose.

How should the flock respond to the elders?

## Be subject to elders

### 1 Peter 5:5a:

**Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders**

Why does Peter urge only those who are “younger,” not everyone in the flock, to be subject to the elders? He doesn't say. Perhaps the younger people at that time—and perhaps at most times—in particular need such a reminder. In any event, Peter wouldn't have us believe that only young people should be subject to the elders.

To be subject to someone, or in this case, a group of people, as we have seen elsewhere in 1 Peter, does not equate to unqualified obedience. It means, in this case, receiving the oversight of the elders—unless, of course, the elders are themselves being disobedient to the Lord.

Having addressed elders and the young, Peter turns his attention to everyone in the church.

## Dependent and needy

### 1 Peter 5:5b:

**Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”**

Peter wants all of us to “clothe” ourselves “with humility toward one another.” Humility has to do with recognizing first that you're a creature, dependent on the creator, and second that you're a sinner, in need of the redeemer. If you're dependent on the creator and if you're in need of the redeemer, then there is no reason to feel superior to anyone else.

Steve Young, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback, could never win the big one. In fact, as great as he was, he never even got to the big one—the Super Bowl, that is. He lived in the shadow of the great Joe Montana, who preceded him.

Then, in the 1994 season, he not only made it to the Super Bowl, he also won the Super Bowl. He not only won the Super Bowl, he did so in convincing fashion, throwing six touchdown passes, a Super Bowl record. He was named Super Bowl most valuable player. And where do Super Bowl MVPs go? They go to Disneyland (now it's Disney World).

The day after the Super Bowl, Young was riding down Main Street in Disneyland, sharing a float with Mickey Mouse. Young describes the scene:

*People are going crazy, “You're the man! Steve, you're the man! Joe who? You're the greatest!” And I just remember for about four minutes, I lost my mind. It's like, “I am the man! I am the greatest!” I just lost my mind. And I just remember at the end two little kids are sitting down there and the younger one, maybe eight, six years old, looks up and says, “Mickey Mouse!” And he starts to come toward the float and his brother grabs him and pulls him back and says, “You can't get near him. The big guy won't let you”—meaning me. So it was a classic for me: “I'm the man! You're the greatest! Yeah!” And twenty seconds later, I'm Mickey Mouse's bodyguard. It just goes to show, you can put the flag on top, but then you've got to climb down, and life goes on.<sup>1</sup>*

Indeed, life goes on—and in life, whether at the top of the hill or the bottom of the hill, we must clothe ourselves with humility toward one another.

## Clothe yourselves with humility

Again, consider the imagery in 1 Peter. Knowing that there's every reason for you to be humble, imagine yourself putting on humility, like you were putting on clothes. When you clothe yourself with humility, you allow others to see not yourself but the creator and redeemer. If we concerned ourselves with clothing ourselves with humility as much as we concern ourselves with clothing ourselves with clothes, we would relate to each other in a healthier way.

To incentivize us to clothe ourselves with humility toward one another, Peter tells us that God “opposes” the proud and “gives grace” to the humble. Pride involves asserting one's independence from God, which amounts

to rebellion against God. Of course, then, God opposes the proud, not least because pride is self-destructive.

The humble, on the other hand, recognize that they need God's grace—that is God's favor, which they don't deserve—and God gives it to them. God gives us his grace not least by humbling us and showing us that we need his grace.

Peter wants us to clothe ourselves with humility toward one another, but in order to do that, we first have humble ourselves before God, recognizing our dependence on him and our need for him.

## The mighty hand of God

### 1 Peter 5:6-7:

**Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.**

Especially in light of suffering, we might question the power and goodness of God and hesitate to humble ourselves before him. There's more than a little evidence, both in our own lives and in the world, to suggest that God is neither powerful nor good. Again, Peter helps us with some powerful imagery.

In the exodus, God rescued his people from Egypt by his "mighty hand" (Exodus 3:19). The New Testament informs us that God has effected, and is effecting, a new exodus, not from any human oppressor but from evil itself: Satan, sin, and death. We should therefore humble ourselves "under the mighty hand of God," recognizing our need for redemption.

What does God do with his mighty hand, when we humble ourselves under it? He exalts us, or he lifts us up, at the proper time, finally to reign with Christ when he returns and possibly in part before then, when God sees fit to grant us victory over suffering.

On the one hand, suffering may cause us to question God's power and goodness. On the other hand, we may be more likely to recognize our dependence on God and our need for God when we're suffering, especially when suffering causes us anxiety. One of the ways that we humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God is by casting all our anxieties on God.

You take stock of everything you're anxious about. Then you take all your anxieties and you throw them on the back of God. You let him carry your anxieties. You can do this, and you know that he will take your anxieties, because "he cares for you."

In these verses we see both the power of God and the goodness of God. If he were only powerful, with his mighty hand, we might question what he would do with his power. Is he a tyrant? If he were only good, even if he cares for us, he might wonder whether he's able to do anything to help us. Is he impotent? God is powerful: he has a mighty hand. God is good: he cares for you. He lifts you up with his mighty hand because he cares for you. God is powerful *and* good.

The biblical imagery, and our imaginations, makes God's abstract attributes concrete. Picture yourself coming under the mighty hand of God. Picture being lifted up by his mighty hand. How does it feel? Picture yourself casting your anxieties onto the back of God. Picture him carrying your anxieties. How does it feel?

Listen to Jesus, who makes use of similar imagery: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

It's especially important to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand and to cast our anxieties on him because we have an adversary.

## Like a roaring lion

### 1 Peter 5:8-9:

**Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.**

As he has elsewhere in the letter, Peter calls those of us who live between the first coming of Christ and the final coming of Christ to spiritual sobriety and watchfulness (1 Peter 1:13, 4:7). Again, Peter knows whereof he speaks, for Jesus told him and the other disciples in Gethsemane, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Mark 14:38). Peter and the others, however, fell asleep.

Such sobriety and watchfulness is imperative because we have a spiritual adversary, the devil, along with his demons, and we do not want to be “ignorant of his designs,” as the apostle Paul says (2 Corinthians 2:11). Indeed, Peter likens the devil to a lion that both prowls round stealthily, unbeknownst to potential victims, and roars in order to demonstrate his supposed power.

On the one hand, with his roar the devil wants to make us think that he’s more powerful than he is so that we become obsessed with him. On the other hand, with his stealth he wants to make us think that he doesn’t exist so that we will be easy prey. Thus Peter highlights two common errors concerning postures toward the devil: obsession and ignorance.

Scholar N.T. Wright comments on the second error: “[O]nce you get rid of God you get rid, too, of the devil; and then you yourself, and your friends, or your party, or your country, take the role of God, while your enemies take the role of the devil. And that leads to disaster.”<sup>2</sup>

Although Christ in his death, resurrection, and ascension dealt the devil a death blow, he’s still thrashing, so to speak, within God’s sublime purposes. Through stealth or intimidation, he is “seeking someone to devour,” in order to convince people that faith in Christ is baseless.

The devil would have us believe that God isn’t real or that God isn’t powerful or that God isn’t good. He is only too happy, if it can be said that the devil is ever happy, to remind you of the evidence that would seem to suggest that God isn’t powerful or good—that he’s indifferent at best or against you at worst.

The devil wants you to think such thoughts: Why humble yourself before God? Do you actually think you can trust him? Why cast your anxieties on God? Do you actually think he cares for you? Why not try a little pride? How else are you going to make your way through life?

Writer Brent Curtis grew up for a time with his father and then with other father figures, all of whom left. He said this experience gave the devil “a pernicious story line to work with”:

*“You are on your own. There is no one to fall back on. You’d better figure out how to handle this. There’s something wrong with you. Other fathers don’t leave. It’s all going to end badly. You’re going to end up invisible and alone. Why don’t you just give up this foolish idea*

*that God cares and at least enjoy life in the ways you know you can.”<sup>3</sup>*

Is there a pernicious story line in your life that the devil has been working with?

## Resist the devil

Peter wants us to resist the devil in two ways. First we resist the devil by being firm in our faith—that is by actively assenting to the truths of the gospel, which counteract the lies of the devil. Second, if suffering is causing us to doubt God, we resist the devil by recognizing that suffering is the common lot of the “brotherhood.” Indeed, as we have seen in 1 Peter, God uses suffering in the lives of believers (1 Peter 1:6-7, 2:19, 4:13).

You don’t have to outgun the devil; you just have to out-truth him. Thank God he’s given us the Scriptures!

As one of the shepherds of this flock, I’m here to tell you that God is powerful and that he is good. I’m here to tell you that God is powerful and good for you. I’m here to tell you that you do not yet fully see God’s power and goodness. I’m here to tell you that one day you will.

Therefore, believe! I know it’s hard, but you have to believe. Everything is going to be all right. It’s going to be better than all right; it’s going to be awesome!

I’m here to tell you to do what the apostle tells you to do: Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, and he will lift you up at the proper time. Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

What else do I have to tell you? What Peter tells you in verses 10-11.

## What God will do

### 1 Peter 5:10-11:

**And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.**

Whether you suffer for one day or one hundred years, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you need to know that your suffering will last only “a little while.” If

the suffering lasts one hundred years, those years will seem as nothing, less than nothing, when God's work in you is complete.

Right now, God is working to “restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish” you. By use of these four verbs, Peter emphatically makes the point that one day, God's work in us will be complete. In his power and in his goodness, he will finish what he has started.

Indeed, the God of all grace, who gives grace, has called you to his eternal glory in Christ: he has called you, through the gospel, to reign in the new and eternal creation with Christ. He will lift you up. And if you can get in your mind's eye a vision of Jesus placing a crown on your head, he may lift you up even now.

Peter concludes the body of his letter by attributing “the dominion” to God for all eternity. He reigns even now, in power and goodness, and he will reign forever, in power and goodness. Amen.

## Endnotes

- 1 “Steve Young: A Football Life.” YouTube Video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nE2WnD6\\_Rlk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nE2WnD6_Rlk).
- 2 N.T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John, and Judah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 96.
3. Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 115.