

# STAND FIRM IN BABYLON

SERIES: FLOURISH: HOPE IN A  
STRANGE LAND



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1 Peter 5:12-14  
Final Message  
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*1 Peter 5:12-14*

When I was 15 years old, I moved from a small town in Connecticut to Houston, Texas. When my father told me that we were going to have to move, I was devastated. All of my memories were in Connecticut, I had developed a close group of friends in high school, and I was intent on graduating from the same high school as my sister and brother.

I think it was a work of the Holy Spirit because I adjusted pretty quickly to the idea. The Holy Spirit and the fact that I negotiated two things from my parents: cable TV and a pool.

Those first few weeks were so strange. Starting at my new school and showing up without a single contact, living in a brand new neighborhood and figuring out where to go and what to do.

Many of you know that feeling. You don't know anyone, and you're in an unfamiliar place. You don't know the customs. You don't know what to expect. All you know for sure is that you don't belong.

We're wrapping up our series this morning in 1 Peter. Our tagline for this series has been "Hope in a Strange Land." Peter begins his letter addressing cities throughout Asia Minor. He is writing to people who feel like they don't belong. They are scattered around in places that aren't their home.

Peter tells them they are right—they don't belong. But he wants them to understand that believers in Jesus never fully belong here. It's the new heavens and the new earth that will finally feel like home.

As Peter wraps up his letter, he gives a few closing encouragements. We'll take those same exhortations for ourselves. After a book that has talked a lot about suffering during a year where we've seen a lot of suffering, we need what they needed in the 1st century. We need to remember to stand firm in Babylon.

We'll talk more about what Babylon means in a few minutes. For now, I'd like to invite you to think about

the place where God has you. Here we are. Most of us are in the Bay Area. Some of us are spread out around the country and even the world. God has put each of us in a particular place. The question that we'll be focusing on this morning is what it looks like to be faithful where God has you.

At the end of this letter, Peter returns to two big ideas to encourage his readers. These ideas are no less significant two thousand years later. I want to make it simple for us to hear what this book has for us. First, when you suffer unjustly, God is present with you in a unique way. Second, even when you feel like you don't belong, pay attention to the place that God has put you.

It's not a long passage this week. There isn't much in the way of complicated interpretation, so it's a great week to settle into two simple ideas and see what God has for us in them. We'll see how Peter communicates these ideas; we'll consider them for ourselves, and I'll close by telling a few stories of how I've seen these things lived out in our community.

## True grace of God

Peter wraps up his letter by summarizing his thoughts in an interesting way.

**1 Peter 5:12:**

**By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.**

Silvanus is probably the same person referred to as Silas in other parts of the New Testament. He is likely the one who carried this message throughout the region, delivering it to the churches. Peter summarizes the message by saying "this is the true grace of God." We have to ask what exactly he is referring to. What's the "this"?

It's probably a way of referring to the whole of what Peter has written in his letter. In particular, Peter had a dominant theme to which he kept returning. He talks

about it in 1 Peter 2:19 where he says, “For this is grace, when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.”

The true grace of God has to do with faithfulness in the midst of suffering we don’t deserve. We saw this over and over again as we studied this book.

— 1 Peter 1:6, “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.”

—1 Peter 3:14, “even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed.”

—1 Peter 4:13, “rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

The true grace of God is when you’re able to suffer unfairly in the presence of God.

We’ve said it over and over throughout this series. It’s the heart of the gospel story of a Messiah who suffered the greatest evil and turned it into good. And it has been our experience in so many ways.

I always find it incredible to talk with Jesus followers who have gone through immense suffering. Catastrophic events and pain. When I’ve asked them, “Would you change the trajectory of your life?”, most of them say “No.” Even walking through the deepest pain they’ll say that it is their suffering that has made them who they are.

This is why Peter’s summary exhortation in his letter is to stand firm in this kind of grace. These are powerful words for us today. Stand in grace.

This year has seen so much loss. The message of the presence of God amid suffering has been critical for me. A few weeks ago, I was very discouraged. There has been so much loss this year. It feels like everything is just more complicated. I had had some difficult interactions that day, and I went to bed, overwhelmed with sorrow and anxiety.

As I sorted through the day and my feelings, I lay there in the dark. I held onto the cross that I wear around my neck, and I thought of Jesus, suffering on the cross. I thought of how all my suffering—everything that I was feeling—he was feeling with me: my pain, the pain of the world, all the people involved in the situations that I was facing. All of that pain was felt by Christ on the cross.

The entire weight of sin and death and anger and injustice, crushing the Messiah on the cross, for our sakes, to free us from that weight—that’s the true grace of God.

Because of Christ, we can stand in grace when we suffer because our suffering is his suffering. His glory will be our glory. Standing in grace gives us hope, the hope of what is to come.

2020 has been a tough year for so many of us. Things are bad right now, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Talk of vaccines in the next few months is encouraging. I want to encourage us that as we come out of this crisis, it will be critical for us to continue standing in this grace. Lots of people have been muscling through all the pain of this year. When the pressure lets up, there will be a tremendous need to process everything that has happened.

We need to be prepared for that. We need to stand in the grace of suffering in the presence of God so that we can help others get to that place. Our communities won’t look the same. Our economy won’t look the same. Our companies won’t look the same. If this pandemic will have taken a year away from our lives, it will take several years to rebuild.

We have a precious gift—the true grace of God. We know how to suffer well in the presence of God. We need to be prepared to offer this to the world.

This need is universally true for Christians all over the world. But I think there is something unique to our calling at PBC which makes it even more so. Peter’s next words allude to it.

## **She who is at Babylon**

### **1 Peter 5:13:**

**She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son.**

This is one of those greeting passages, but there is a unique twist to it. Peter refers to “she who is at Babylon.” It’s an odd phrase, and Bible commentators have tried to figure out to whom he’s referring. The reference to Babylon is almost certainly a reference to Rome. Most people think that Peter was writing this letter from Rome, and there is a tradition in the New Testament of referring to Rome as Babylon.

The “she” is most likely the church—the gathered group of believers—in Rome. A few verses earlier in verse 9, Peter talked about “your brotherhood throughout the world.” He actually used a feminine form of that word so it makes sense that here he’d refer to “she who is at Babylon” in the same way.

But why doesn’t Peter say “the church”? Why this strange phrase, “she who is at Babylon”?

Remember that Peter is trying to encourage followers of Jesus spread out in distant parts of the empire. He’s writing to them from the center of the empire. This isn’t just any empire, it’s the Roman empire. This is the empire which executed Jesus, persecuted the Jews, and continues to make life difficult for believers in Christ.

For Peter to say that there is a brotherhood, a family of believers in Rome—in Babylon—means something powerful. It means that it is possible to live this life of flourishing even when you live in the belly of the beast. It is possible to suffer well and submit to your authorities and have an attitude like Jesus and follow Jesus even in your home. If this group of people can stand in the true grace living in Babylon, then surely Peter’s readers can do the same where they live.

Now here’s the interesting part for us. If we try to find ourselves in Peter’s letter, it wouldn’t be in the faraway places scattered around the empire. For us, living here in Silicon Valley, in the Bay Area, a much better analogy would be that we are the ones who live in Babylon. We are “she who is at Babylon.”

I’ve made this point before: that Silicon Valley is the closest thing to Rome in our day and age. The largest empire in our world is no longer a country or political power, but a technological one. The kinds of decisions which are made in our backyard have a far greater influence on the everyday lives of people on this planet than any government or politician in history.

Listen to this interview from TechCrunch with Anand Giridharadas, a former New York Times correspondent.

*Silicon Valley is the new Rome of our time, meaning a place in the world that ends up deciding how a lot of the rest of the world lives. No matter where you lived on the planet Earth, when the Roman Empire started to rise, it had plans for you one way or another, through your legal system, or your language, or culture, or something else. The Roman Empire was coming for you.*

*Silicon Valley is that for our time. It’s the new Rome [in] that you can’t live on planet Earth and be unaffected, directly or indirectly, by the decisions made in this relatively small patch of [the world].<sup>1</sup>*

Let that sink in for a moment. You probably don’t think of yourself as living in the center of the greatest empire the world has ever seen, but you do. We are at ground zero. We are “she who is at Babylon.”

That means that we have a unique calling. Peter wanted to encourage those living around the Roman empire by speaking of the church in Rome. We’re that church in Rome who can encourage others. We need to be prepared to stand in the grace of suffering, but we also need to be the church in Babylon.

It is tough to live in Silicon Valley. There are so many reasons that it is true: the cost of living, the commuting, the challenge of raising a family here. We’ve lost a lot of good people lately. Many have moved away in the past year because of the pandemic.

But we need followers of Jesus here in Babylon. It is a special calling to be here at this time. I know that some of you feel that way. You’ve thought about moving back near family. You’d rather raise your children in a different environment. But you feel that God has called you here to be a part of this community for his purposes.

By the way, that’s one of the things that struck us as we started the conversation with Lucas about coming on as our worship pastor. He had opportunities to serve in ministry in other parts of the country, but their family felt called to Silicon Valley. That was important to us. It is something unique to be in ministry here.

Be prepared to minister out of the true grace of the gospel, and take our unique calling seriously to be the church in Babylon.

## Greetings

Peter wraps up his letter with a few final greetings.

**1 Peter 5:14:**

**Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.**

This is a fairly standard greeting for the end of a New Testament letter. There’s one difference I want to point out. Peter encourages people to greet one another with a

“kiss of love.” We’re going to have to find a different way to do this during COVID; not that we really followed this advice before the pandemic. The idea behind this command is to express affection for each other.

In most of Paul’s New Testament letters, he refers to a “holy kiss”. Peter talks about the “kiss of love.” This has a deep sense of family. Peter is talking the kind of greeting you would give a family member—someone with whom you share a deep connection.

That makes sense. In a letter so focused on how to deal with suffering, we’ve also seen a big emphasis on our connection with each other. We suffer in the presence of God, but we also suffer in the presence of each other. That’s just as important.

One of the greatest privileges of being a pastor at this church is simply to have a part in the lives of the community. We have incredible people here. You are incredible. Watching you stand in grace is inspiring. Watching you be the church in Babylon is exciting. So I thought I’d tell a few stories to wrap us up. Consider these like the greetings section of a letter.

A few months ago, one of our Road Crew men moved away. He’d been around for several years and had gone through a series of incredible tragedies: a near-fatal car accident, an alcohol addiction, losing his marriage, criminal charges, losing his professional license, a series of job losses, nearly facing bankruptcy and more. All of this played out over several years. He’d share with us on Wednesday mornings, and it was as if every time he got up to speak a new crisis had descended.

Just before he moved, he shared one last time, and he told story after story of how the men in this church came alongside him. Job help. Financial help. Friendship. Support. I didn’t know all of what had happened. The community just came around him.

As he left, he told the community at Road Crew that this church had been just what he needed in different seasons. When he needed to show up and be anonymous, that was okay. When he needed to get involved in a deeper way, there were opportunities for that. When he hit rock bottom and needed men to come alongside him, that’s what happened.

Greet one another with the kiss of love.

A few weeks ago, I met someone else as I was coming in to preach on a Sunday morning. He was helping to set

up for the Step Closer Recovery service. He told me how two weeks earlier, he had finally put his faith in Jesus. After years of hanging around and being one step away, he finally trusted God.

It happened at a dramatic moment when he was in a street fight with someone else. He was near to killing the other man when God intervened. Seconds before he decided to take another man’s life, everything clicked into place, and he knew he needed Jesus. One of our faithful women in the church walked alongside him as he gave his life to Christ. This man was glowing with the new presence of Christ in his life. And I get to meet him on a Sunday morning to hear his story and celebrate with him.

Greet one another with the kiss of love.

After our remodel, we included a shower in one of our buildings. Shortly after the pandemic began, one of our deacons asked why we weren’t letting unhoused individuals use that shower. No one had ever set it up. So she did.

Now we offer showers three days a week with towel service and a friendly shower attendant. Unhoused residents can sign up for a time and come to get clean. That’s a huge deal if you don’t have somewhere to live. It’s a simple thing, but a huge blessing.

Greet one another with the kiss of love.

We’re not only offering showers. We set up our PBC patio set on Sunday evenings to serve food from our new kitchen to unhoused residents in our community. We are poised to be the church in Babylon. We are in such a unique position—to care for our vulnerable, but also to influence the powerful. God is at work here.

Greet one another with the kiss of love.

## Conclusion

Think back one more time to how it feels to move to a new city. I felt that when I moved to Texas the summer before my tenth-grade year. I know others of you have felt that at various times.

In some ways, that is just what it feels like to follow Jesus. We always feel somewhat out of place.

But as we finish up this passage and this series in 1 Peter, we’re moving into the celebration of Christmas.

The Christmas season looks different this year. But it's still Christmas. There is a bunch of incredible stuff going on. We have a unique chance to encounter the Christmas story in new ways this year.

The last phrase of this book sets us up perfectly. Peter closes with "Peace to all of you who are in Christ." What better way to welcome in Christmas? Christmas brings the peace of Christ to earth.

Next week, Andy Burnham will be preaching one last time before he retires. The following week we'll have a special Christmas worship service with the theme "Peace on Earth."

Stand firm in the true grace of God. Be the church in Babylon. And may God bring peace to all of you who are in Christ. Amen.

## Endnotes

- 1 Connie Loizos, "Writer Anand Giridharadas on tech's billionaires: 'Are they even on the same team as us?'" *TechCrunch*, September 24, 2020, <https://techcrunch.com/2020/09/24/writer-anand-giridharadas-on-techs-billionaires-are-they-even-on-the-same-team-as-us/>.

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