

1 Peter 5:6-11 “Restore, Support, Strengthen”

Progress is inevitable. It's part of the natural evolution of the created order which, by the way, includes the human species. And as beings created in the image of an infinitely creative God, it's natural that we humans come up with ways to progress in order to improve our living conditions. Like learning to harness and contain fire. The invention of the wheel. Metallurgy. Applied mathematics. Gun powder. Good things, for sure, but each has the potential for misuse. I imagine in all these examples, something disastrous happened right after someone said, “Hey y'all! Watch this!” And as the quality of life is made easier by these discoveries, people then have more time to come up with *new* ideas and new inventions, especially when new needs arise. But it seems like we've been on a runaway train of rapid change since the industrial revolution. Some might say we lost our ability to say, “Just because we *can* doesn't mean we *should*.” Take social media for example. On the good side, it's a great tool for outreach and getting our name and purpose “out there.” That's why we're encouraging folks to sign in on FaceBook when they come to church. You never know who will see it and say, “Huh ... if so-and-so goes to this church, it might be worth giving it a try.” On the down side, social media has given rise to problems that I'm sure even the developers never imagined. It's definitely changed the way we communicate. The great thing is that I have better access to family and friends than I ever did before social media. I didn't even know where some of my old friends lived. Now I do. Social media re-connects us so we can keep up in ways we weren't able to before.

The not-so-great thing is that electronic communication changes the nature of *how* we interact with each other. I was reading a very thoughtful and well-written article comparing two Christian views on how to achieve and maintain peace. It was well researched. I felt it presented both sides of sticky subject fairly and equally. The author gave a good critique of both sides and highlighted the strengths and deficits of each platform. It gave me a lot to think about and it

challenged a lot of assumptions that I had. In other words, it was a great article. And if this article appeared in a print-only publication twenty years ago, there may have been two or three responses from readers featured in the next issue. Maybe one congratulating the author for a job well done, or one favoring one position, and one favoring the other position but all chosen by an editor who took the time to read through and select the very best responses from a pool of letters. With articles that are posted on the internet, though, *anyone* can respond *immediately* after reading the article. And maybe “respond” isn’t the right word because a response requires time to digest the article. It requires reflection. It may even require a second or third reading. I think “react” might actually be the better word. In the comment section of this article, right out of the gate people on both sides of the issue started calling each other names. They questioned each other’s salvation or their right to even call themselves Christian. Many wrote responses that were just as long if not longer than the actual article complete with book-by-book, verse-by-verse examples from scripture detailing *how* and *why* someone is doomed for eternity because of their particular stance on the issue. And this is what drives me crazy about articles like this! Pretty soon, people are so busy calling each other names and condemning each other that the subject of the article isn’t even on the table anymore. And by the time someone has actually submitted a thoughtful, respectful, well-written response, people have already thrown up their hands in disgust and said, “I’m out of here!” That, my friends, is one of the challenges of social media.

And I know ... people have disagreed on the interpretation of scripture and the intricacies of religious faith and practice for as long as recorded history. In fact, we have some *great* ancient examples of writings and commentaries of rabbis debating and even arguing over the interpretation of scriptures. In fact, most sects of Judaism *require* that you engage in healthy debate about scripture. It shows that you take it seriously and are actually engaged in the text. Is the debate always civil? Of course not. But civil debate is the *expectation*. When a healthy debate collapses into an *unhealthy* fight, it’s usually because one

or both parties are under intense stress or they feel threatened. Their rational human brain checks out and the fight-or-flight lizard brain takes over. And again, that's what's going on with this community of faith in First Peter.

These people are facing persecution. Times are changing in the Empire. And these Christians are being questioned about why they would claim that, "*Jesus is Lord and Savior*," when everyone knows that the correct answer ... the patriotic answer ... the answer that will keep you out of trouble is, "*Caesar is Lord and Savior*." They're being mocked for following a guy who died because of his opposition to Rome and to top it all off, they're claiming, "Oh he really isn't dead! He's alive!" No one else outside these groups seem to be able to see him! People don't want to do business with them. People don't want to hear about these far-out claims they make. In fact, they don't even like these Christians living among them because they end up stirring things up and pretty soon they draw others into their drama and things get bad for everyone. Next thing you know, they gain new followers and all of a sudden you have more of them to deal with. If we wanted to use a Starbucks example again this week, these are people who might very well be denied a frappuccino because they follow Jesus. "No shoes, no shirt, no Christians." *That's* persecution.

I imagine on good days they felt like outsiders or outcasts and on bad days, they felt scared because they never knew when someone with authority might come along and shut them down the hard way. When you put people in a pressure-cooker like that, the potential for a blowup increases. And I'm not just talking about pressure from external forces either. There were probably internal pressures as well. Maybe there was some fighting among the ranks. In a *church* if you can believe that! So this letter from Peter, as we've said, is a letter of hope and encouragement for people who may have been ready to throw in the towel.

So at the close of this letter, Peter is telling the people to remain humble and bring all their anxiety to their mighty and caring God who simply wants to lift them up. The key to getting through these tough times is to stay alert and be disciplined. Why? Well here's what y'all have been waiting for ever since you heard Glen read this. Because the *devil* is prowling around like a lion looking for someone to devour. (Show SNL church lady slide.) Or in the immortal words of Dana Carvey's character Church Lady, "Could it be ... *Satan*?" Well ... let's take Church Lady's question seriously.

Could it be Satan? Satan. The Adversary. In both the Old and the New Testament this ... being ... this character ... this persona ... whatever you want to call him has been used to describe the King of Tyre in Ezekiel, a prosecuting attorney of the heavenly court in the book of Job and 1 Chronicles. In Hebrew, you'll always see a definite article in front of the word so it's "Ha-Satan," or "*the* Satan" which suggests it's a title rather than a name. Literally "Ha-Satan" means "The Accuser." But that's not the word we're looking at here in 1st Peter. We're looking at the word, διάβολος which we translate "devil." But even still the writer of 1st Peter treats the devil like a role more than a person by saying, "Your adversary the devil." Compare that to some of the names that people came up with long after the Bible was written. Like "Scratch" or "Nick" or "Mephistopheles," or my personal favorite "Old Booger Man."

So here's the question I'll lay on the table this morning. Knowing what we know about this persecuted bunch of Jesus followers in Rome, who was their most obvious adversary or enemy? Who was actively prowling around stalking them and seeking to devour them? The Empire. What does Peter tell these Christians to do in the face of the adversary? Resist. Oh, do you mean like "resist temptation" in the way that *we* in the 21st century American Church think of resisting temptation? "Don't smoke, don't drink, don't chew, and don't go out with people who do?" No ... *resist*. Period. Resist the enemy ... the one who seeks to devour you ... the one who tries to push you over the

edge ... the one who chips away at you slowly and tries to get you to just give up. Resist by holding firm to the steadfast faith that you have in the Risen Christ. Hold on to the hope that you have brothers and sisters all over the Empire who are going through the same trials as you. Hold on to the hope that they stand in solidarity with you even though they're suffering too.

Here's something that we have going for us today. For the most part, we know who the other "resisters" are when we're faced with an enemy or an adversary who stalks us and tries to devour us. It's not like we're holed up in the basement of someone's house because we're afraid to be too public about our faith. No, we know who and where the other followers of Jesus are. We know the ones who are the real deal ... they're the ones whose lives are marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We know the ones who aren't too ... the ones whose lives are marked with anger and bitterness. The ones who magnify themselves rather than Jesus. The ones who demonstrate greed and jealousy and boastful pride. Ones whose lust for power and wealth and turn their backs on anyone who doesn't fit their ... *mold*. Ones who claim to worship Jesus but are willing to harm or silence those who seek to live like Jesus.

Again, this is where the message of 1 Peter applies to us ... to Christians living in a different time and a different place: Resist. Be steadfast in your faith. No matter the trials you face now, God will restore you, support you, strengthen you, and establish you. To God be the power forever and ever. Amen.