

Stand Firm. Be Holy.

Sermons from 1 Peter 1-2 Sermon 1

1 Peter 1:1-9, 14-17, 2:11-12, 5:6-7, 10, 12

April 25, 2021

The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” ¹⁷ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. ⁶ 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. ¹⁰ 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. 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. (1 Peter 1:1-9, 14-17, 2:11-12, 5:6-7, 10, 12, ESV)

Imagine you have an adult child in their early thirties, a few years into a career and with a young and growing family. He or she, however, is in the midst of a very hard season. Complications at work, challenges with parenting, tension in the marriage, all are making them weary. On top of this, they're having health issues and just had a blow up with their passive aggressive next-door neighbor. They're overwhelmed and tempted to walk away from it all. Being the wise older parent that you are, you sit down to write them a letter. *What do you say to them? What should you say to them?*

Drawing from your own more seasoned perspective, your letter takes on two themes:

Life is hard, you admit. There may be moments of ease, but don't expect easy. You need to face its challenges without abdicating your responsibilities; and this will take great resolve.

But that's not all you tell them.

Life's hardness doesn't mean it's not good, or joyless or that you've necessarily done something wrong. These hardships may be a sign you're right where you are supposed to be; you're opened yourself to the needs of others, embraced responsibilities, ventured into a competitive workforce. Real life is what happens inside this web of people, commitments, and unexpected turns, where pressure and pain forge character in you. Keep lifting up your eyes to the bigger picture, to the person God is calling you to be.

In short, you avoid platitudes and tell your child the truth:

Life is not a vacation. It's an arduous journey with ups and downs. But it is in embracing the narrow path, knowing you're moving toward the celestial city, that you truly begin to live.

Stand Firm. Keeping Walking.

Change the scenario from the challenges facing a weary child to the challenges facing beleaguered Christians, and from a wise parent to a wise Apostle, and you're nearing the message of 1 Peter. First Peter is written to five churches located in what is now Turkey, and most likely during the first years of Nero's reign as Roman Emperor. The Church is small but growing and gaining attention. Some good. Some bad.

Across the Empire, hostility was growing towards Christians. Social rejection, ridicule, and marginalization were happening. And while violence against Christians was not the norm, there were outbreaks of it. First Peter suggests that the more following Christ meant a life that differed from the values, norms and practices of surrounding society, the more it was becoming costly. Christians were facing the double danger of threat from without but also the weakening of resolve within. *Would they walk away from the faith when things got hard?*

Peter writes in response to this tension, and his letter aims to firm up his weary children-in-the-faith and refocus them on the bigger picture. Again and again, he reminds them that the Christian life is hard—just as Christ's life was hard:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings (1 Peter 4:12).

They are not to give up, however, but "**stand firm**", as his final command implores: "[T]his is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it" (1 Peter 5:12). In fact, he wants them to know that these hardships are performing a necessary work of refinement upon them, which is preparing them for a glorious future:

... now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6–7).

Like a wise and godly parent, Peter writes this letter to weary and fearful Christians with the message:

The Christian life is not a vacation; it's an arduous journey. But lift your eyes up. See the example of your suffering, yet triumphant Lord; see the hope and joy that are yours. And remain faithful.

Stand Firm. Keep Walking, Peter says. ***You're precisely where God wants you to be.***

We will be spending this spring and much of the summer in the letter of 1 Peter. In the time remaining, in what I'm calling an "Introductory and Overview Sermon," I want to tell you two things: Firstly, *why* we are looking at 1 Peter now. Secondly, I want to share four things I am praying God does in us through this portion of Scripture.

I. Why Study 1 Peter Now?

First Peter speaks more directly to the relationship between Christians and a non-Christian society than any other book of the Bible.¹ This makes it extremely relevant today. While there is a lingering religious atmosphere in much of America, it's clear we have moved into a post-Christian period. Any sampling of messaging from major media, the academy, large corporations, or the entertainment industry, make plain that our cultural gatekeepers are now decidedly secular.

This does not merely mean pluralism, where culture is comfortable for people of any and every faith. It means increasing ridicule and hostility towards the values and practices that emanate from an integrated Christian life.

Now, before we say more about challenges Christians may face, we would do well to recognize failures we've made. Recognizing that Christians increasingly experience soft forms of persecution is not to say they've stewarded their long-held perch as the religious majority with immunity.

Whether in active or passive ways, American Christians have not always lived up to the biblical vision for human dignity and justice. Many Christians have, indeed, led the charge for abolition, education, or anti-trafficking efforts, but many of us have not. This we can only lament. Perhaps, even more pervasively, Christians in America have been lured into a form of consumerism that has turned certain expressions of Christianity into self-help triumphalism. Churches became more about the seeker than the Gospel, more about the American Dream than discipleship of the crucified Lord.

Under the guise of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," we have asked far too little of our people and presented a Christianity that is too often weak and worldly, rather than an announcement of Good News that sounds like thunder from the heavens, and not only saves, but demands absolutely all of you.

This is not a blanket critique of Christianity in America. Rather, it's an attempt to take seriously the danger of suffering-for-the-wrong-reasons, which Peter alerts us to: "It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil" (1 Peter 3:17). If in days ahead Christians experience a squeeze upon economic opportunities or access to positions of power, and this elicits pain, let us be sure our suffering is due to our love for Christ, not our love of money and power.

Keeping this larger and complex picture in mind, 1 Peter is a most relevant book to study because the situation of its first recipients is not unlike our own: a world where Christians will likely face suffering in the forms of social rejection, loss of opportunities, hatred, slander, and, very possibly, imprisonment. But its relevance lies not only in a shared situation; it's relevant because it offers instructions on how to engage such a society.

Avoiding Two Pitfalls

There is an array of opinions about how Christians should posture themselves in relation to the society around them. These postures, moreover, change based on what culture or society we are talking about: Christians engage an empire differently than a republic, an Eastern culture differently than a Western.

But standing on the far sides of the various ways we might engage, are two pitfalls we must avoid, and 1 Peter helps us navigate these.

1. Withdrawal

Whether due to rejection or fear of negative influences, Christians can be tempted to withdraw entirely from society. We'd prefer to form a castle of sorts, impenetrable by the world and safe for cultivating Christian life within. But this does not square with 1 Peter, which envisions Christians engaging with the world around them in many ways:

- Keep your **conduct** among the Gentiles **honorable**, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may **see your good deeds** and glorify God on the day of visitation (1 Peter 2:12).
- But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may **proclaim the excellencies of him** who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).
- **Honor everyone.** Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:13,17).
- Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, **bless**, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For 'Whoever desires to love life and see good days ... let him turn away from evil and do good; let him **seek peace and pursue it** (1 Peter 3:9–11).

Conduct yourselves honorably. Proclaim the excellencies of Christ. Bless those who revile you. Seek peace and pursue it. This can't happen if you hide behind walls. No, Christians cannot withdraw from society.

2. Assimilation

On the other hand, there is the danger of assimilation. Being swallowed up by the world without realizing it. Letting the world slowly dictate what you value, how you think, and how you live. First Peter will not allow this, either:

- As obedient children, **do not conform** to the passions of your former ignorance (1 Peter 1:14).
- Live for the rest of the time in the flesh **no longer for human passions** but for the will of God (1 Peter 4:2).

Withdrawal, no. Assimilate, no. *What should we then do?*

A Holy Presence

As we study First Peter, what we will learn instead is an engagement modeled after the life of Jesus: a holy presence.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, **you also be holy in all your conduct**, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:14-16).

Holiness means being **set apart from** that which is unclean, false, sinful. But holiness also means being **set apart for**, and in this case, it means being set apart for the purposes of God. And just like God sent His son into the world for the sake of the world, so too He sends us.²

There is a character that appears often in Greek and Russian Orthodox literature known as the holy fool.³ A holy fool is someone whose passionate embrace of Jesus Christ so consumes them, that their lives cease to make sense to the world around them. They are persons with a treasure the world has never known, a love the world cannot at first understand.

The brilliant novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tells the story of three brothers who are part of a horribly dysfunctional family. The youngest, Alyosha, is one such holy fool. He’s a young novice in seminary whose spiritual father orders him back out into the world, away from the cloistered life of the monastery. To the world around him, Alyosha comes across as a naïve simpleton. His love of God and neighbor make him incredibly open to others and sensitive to their needs. But this, in turn, makes him extremely vulnerable to ridicule and even abuse. Alyosha’s holiness does not remove him from the world, rather, it makes him open to it in an entirely new way. Though never immune to temptation, his heart’s posture is not a lusting to take from the world, but a humble desire to graciously give.

In a scene that exemplifies the power of holiness, Alyosha, fresh from the monastery, is lured by a friend to the home of one of the novel’s most notorious characters, Grushenka. Grushenka is a tease who lives to torment a succession of men with her affections. But when Alyosha treats her as a sister, rather than an object, she is unsure how to react. She finally collapses in tears, feeling both shame and joy. His pure and humble way of life challenge her own deeply ingrained brokenness. This unpolluted affection towards her communicates a love she has never known.

The power emanating from Alyosha is holiness. This is more than merely what he says or does, it's *who he is*. Holiness is the totality of a person, the force of their collective life. Its power lies not merely or mainly in that it convicts, but that, like beauty, it allures. **Holiness is the character of God conveyed through the life of His people—and the world finds itself strangely drawn to it.**

First Peter will instruct us that engagement with a non-Christian world must take the form of Holy Presence. We will have much time to unpack what this means in the weeks ahead. As I've studied this letter, four themes have turned into four prayers that I am carrying into this series.

II. Four Prayers

1. Rightly Shape Expectations

First, I am praying that through 1 Peter, God reshapes our expectations—what we assume our life and future here will look like. American culture tutors us to expect a type of heaven on earth, and to avoid hardships at all costs. Peter, to the contrary, speaks of a heaven that lies before us. A hope rooted in **“an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...”** (1 Peter 1:4), which will be revealed to us in the future. Peter says that while we should not expect it here, we can live with the assurance of it in the future.

Here, however, Peter says, **“we should not be surprised by fiery trials, as though something strange were happening to us”** (1 Peter 4:12). Having the right expectations is crucial for living life well.⁴ This is not to say we can't expect joy, fun and peace here and now. Rather, it's to say we shouldn't be tricked into thinking the present is our permanent home, and all our deepest longings will be met if we just get the right set of circumstances. We are more like travelers setting out on a glorious but arduous journey. And it will be hard. But it will be worth it.

2. Strengthen Our Resolve

Secondly, I am praying that this book strengthens our wills, our resolve; that it emboldens us to follow hard after Christ. Peter calls us **“to prepare our minds for action”** and **“to set our hope fully on grace”** (1 Peter 1:13).

This speaks to a people with a backbone who are focused. They've fixed their eyes on Jesus, who models for them a resolve, who shows them how to "set their face like flint" upon the call and will of God. Rooted in the grace of God and filled with the love of God, I want us to be a tough church. I am praying for the strengthening of our will.

3. Posture Us, as a Holy Presence, Toward the World

As I've already noted above, I am also praying that we take the right posture toward our world—a posture not of withdrawal nor surrender, but of a holy presence.

We will need great character and wisdom for this. And our posture will need to be carefully augmented for engaging different issues. *How should we engage in conversations about justice? Sexuality? How should we reject or embrace certain uses of technology? How should we engage politically?*

Each one of these areas will require our best thinking, concerted prayer and humility. And I am praying that most of all, God will foster in us a posture of holiness in how we engage.

4. Reinforce Our Need for Each Another

Finally, I am praying that through this letter you will see more deeply that you are not called to do the Christian life alone.

Peter says, **"you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood"** (1 Peter 2:5).

The title "living stones" would have called to mind an ancient temple, where each stone, hand cut and uniquely placed, fit alongside many others. And only together did they form what they were made for—a building, where the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

Living stones—that's how Peter views Christians. God is uniquely shaping—gifting and equipping—each one of us to "fit" together in a community. **And only together do we become ourselves, and become God's holy temple right here, and right now.**

A word as I close to those who may be listening who aren't sure if they're a Christian, or even feel quite skeptical towards it. I want to invite you to listen during this series and suggest one thing to you as you do:

It may be the case, that this strange life of hardship, hope and future glory, which Peter sets before us, makes explicit something you've known you wanted for a long time but haven't been able to put words to. It may be that you know, deep down, that you don't want easy; *you want meaningful*. It may be that you already know in your subconscious that a life of writing your own story and marching to your own beat won't satisfy. It may be that you've always hoped there is some purpose to all this, that you have a Maker who calls you out of darkness into light, who gives you the dignity of telling you that you are made to embrace an arduous journey and are called to something glorious.

Perhaps, you will hear something like the voice of God, when Peter, encouraging his beleaguered friends, speaks of **"the one who called you to his eternal glory," who "will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you"** (1 Peter 5:10).

Endnotes

1. See Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," in *Ex Auditu*, page 16.
2. E.g., "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21).
3. Eugene Vodolazkin, a medievalist who has done much work on this motif in Russian literature, explains that a holy fool is such a man "by day he laughed at the world, but wept for it by night." ... The fool for Christ is not merely an eccentric. In its highest manifestation, yurodstvo [holy-fool-ness] is a kind of sanctity, but one that shuns any recognition and to this end dons a grotesque mask. It may indeed comprise eccentricity, but this is superficial. It was said of one such man who "by day he laughed at the world, but wept for it by night." See, Rod Dreher "What is a Holy Fool?", *The American Conservative*, December 4, 2015. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/what-is-a-holy-fool-dostoevsky-vodolazkin-laurus/#:~:text=Dostoevsky%20might%20have%20enabled%20him,a%20man%20who%2C%20like%20St.&text=Laurus%2C%20like%20The%20Brothers%20Karamazov,to%20remain%20unchanged%20by%20it>. Accessed April 24, 2021.

4. Possible illustration: E.g., If you're traveling to a foreign country to which you've never been, and wrongly expect that it's a warm climate, only to arrive and realize its seasons are opposite your own and that it's the middle of winter, you won't be at all prepared for life there.