

In the Land of our Sojourn: A Charge to Humble Sheep

1 Peter 5:6-14

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on October 26, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Lately Christians in our country have been on the defensive. **We feel under attack.** Whether in the federal courts or the court of public opinion, our Christian morals and values are being repudiated. And Christians who are public about them are being skewered.
 - ▶ Recently our city officials issued a subpoena demanding five local pastors to submit any written correspondence related to petition that aimed at getting a referendum on a controversial ordinance recently passed onto the November ballot.¹ It's over an anti-discrimination ordinance related to homosexuals and transsexuals.
 - Now because the five pastors were not even party to the lawsuit and because the original subpoena included any of their sermons that happened to mention the ordinance, the mayor, or the pastor's views on homosexuality or gender identity – that raised quite a storm. **Many Christians are concerned that our religious freedom, our First Amendment rights, are being threatened.**

- ❖ **There are a lot of God's sheep out there crying wolf** – on the news, on blogs and social media, around the water cooler. Now whether or not you think the wolf is really there in this case is something we can debate. It's an opportunity for discussion. But I think it's getting harder to argue that religious liberties in our country are not, to some degree, being restricted.
 - ▶ I just think back over the past couple of years, and I can easily recall news about Christian florists², bakers³, and wedding photographers⁴ being fined or charged with human rights violations for refusing to service a same-sex wedding on the basis that it would violate a deeply-held religious conviction.
 - Just this past week, I came across articles about seven churches suing the state of California because of a recent mandate that requires all insurance providers to offer full coverage for elective abortions.⁵ That forces churches to include elective abortions in their group plans. And we're not just talking about the "Morning After" pill. We're talking about surgical abortions.

- ❖ This is no joke. This is happening and *to our churches*. **There's a sense among many Christians that our religious freedoms are being curtailed or outright denied.** A lot of people feel like the Church is under attack.
 - ▶ Now I concede that some of this could be a figment of our imagination. Threats to religious liberty can be like a boogie man. It may not be real but it's real good at frightening people. And scared people are real good at increasing your pageviews or your listenership or giving lots of money to your organization. So it's true that some commentators or news agencies are just out to scare you.

¹ <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Mayor-Parker-to-revise-narrow-subpoena-request-5829455.php>

² <https://www.alliancedefendingfreedom.org/arlenes-flowers?referral=I0514ARLF1>

³ <http://www.adfmedia.org/News/PRDetail/8700>

⁴ <http://www.alliancedefendingfreedom.org/page/elane-photography/scotus>

⁵ http://www.worldmag.com/2014/10/churches_sue_california_over_abortion_coverage_mandate; <http://thefederalist.com/2014/10/22/california-orders-churches-to-fund-abortion-or-else/>

- ❖ But whether or not they're grounded in anything substantial, you can't deny the fear and anxiety exists. Whether you think the threats to religious liberty are real or overblown, the reality is there's a perception right now, among Christians, that sees Christianity under attack.
 - ▶ And when that happens, when we feel like we're under persecution, our base instinct is to react with fear, with anxiety, and maybe even with retaliation. **But from a biblical standpoint, fear and anxiety is never the right response for Christians when it comes to these things.**

- ❖ Our tendency to worry, to act like the sky is falling, to demonize our opponents, or to respond with harshness and militancy are all sub-Christian responses. **Christians – who are described as God's sheep – can cry wolf (or lion) if the threat is really there. But under the care of their Chief Shepherd, sheep have no need to fear the wolf, to fear any threat.**
 - ▶ That's the whole point of today's passage. I'm of the opinion that there are legitimate threats to religious liberty. I believe we will face more and more opposition and humiliation for being a Christian. But don't fear, don't worry. Rather humble yourself and cast all your anxieties on God, standing firm in his grace to you.

Recognize God's Mighty Hand

- ❖ What I want to do this morning is to offer four observations from this text on how to respond when you face persecution for being a Christian. **First, you need to recognize God's mighty hand in these trying circumstances.**
 - ▶ This is in v6 but before we read it again, recall with me the trying circumstances that Peter's readers found themselves in. We're at the end of 1 Peter, but let's go back to the beginning where he addressed his audience as "*elect exiles of the dispersion*" (1:1)

- ❖ **What he's doing is drawing a comparison between his Christian readers and the Jewish exiles of the Babylonian captivity.** That was one of the most pivotal events in Israel's history – the seventy-year exile that God's people spent in Babylon far from home.
 - ▶ If you noticed at the end in chapter 5:13, Peter mentions Babylon. "*She who is in Babylon, who is likewise chosen*" is commonly understood as a veiled reference to the church in Rome. He's sending greetings from the members of that church.

- ❖ My point here is that with Peter's mention of Babylon and calling Christians "exiles" – you can tell that when he tried to compare the Church to Israel, he didn't picture Israel in the Age of Kings. That was an age of prosperity. God's people had political power and cultural sway.
 - ▶ No, what came to mind was **the Exiled Generation**. Like the exiles, the Church doesn't have political power or cultural influence. Like the exiles, we now exist as a countercultural community living under secular authority and within a hostile culture.

- ❖ And just as the beliefs and practices of the Israelites were considered strange, were ridiculed and rejected by Babylonian culture, our Christian beliefs and practices are treated similarly by our culture. Peter's already mentioned being spoken against (2:12), being slandered and reviled (3:16), being maligned (4:4), and insulted for the name of Christ (4:14).

- ❖ So these are the trying circumstances that his reader's are in. They're facing opposition and humiliation. **They're being pushed down and kicked around, and their fleshly instinct is to rise up and retaliate.** Which is why Peter has to say in v6, "*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you*".
 - ▶ And as I just stated, the first response we ought to have when facing persecution for Christ is to recognize God's mighty hand and what he's doing with it. **And to be honest, it often feels like he's using that hand to crush us.** Humble myself under his mighty hand? So is it on top of me trying to squeeze the joy out of my life? Because that's how I feel when I'm marginalized or humiliated for my faith.

- ❖ But that's not how that phrase "*the mighty hand of God*" is used in Scripture. In the NT, the phrase only occurs here, but it shows up a lot in the OT, in books like Exodus and Deuteronomy (Ex 13:9; Deut 3:24; 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:26). **And it was always in the context of God exercising great power on behalf of his people.** Far from trying to crush you, God's mighty hand comes to deliver you just as it delivered Israel from Egypt – the Exodus event.
 - ▶ So to humble yourself under his mighty hand really means to accept your humiliating circumstances, to accept your humble lowly status in society – not as God's punishment – but as his means of delivering you.
 - We've already seen that God puts his people into the furnace of Christian suffering as a way of purifying them (1:7; 4:17-19). The fire is not intended to consume you if you're genuine. Instead it'll refine you. So being under the mighty hand of God is actually a good thing. It's for your good.

- ❖ That's why Peter says to humble yourself now, "*so that at the proper time he may exalt you.*" If you accept humiliation now, you'll be exalted later. And the “proper time” is the time when Christ returns. When Jesus comes back to bring final judgment, final vindication, then all creation will recognize the last to be first and the first to be last.
 - ▶ **In other words, you who live humbled under the hand of God will be lifted up and exalted by that very same hand.** That's the way God works. Humiliation is a necessary precursor to exaltation. It doesn't work the other way around. If you seek to exalt yourself now, to avoid humiliation, to lift yourself up now, then be ready to be knocked down at the proper time. The first shall be last. The last shall be first.

- ❖ You see this principle play out in the Exodus event, the Exile event, and most notably the Christ event. **Jesus humbled himself, took on the form of a servant, embraced the shame of the cross, submitted himself under the hand of God and actually let it crush him.** But his cross was the necessary precursor to his crown. Humiliation came before exaltation.
 - ▶ This is what it comes down to: **If you and I seek to follow in the steps of Christ our Chief Shepherd, if we want to live as Christians, then we'll have to take up our cross before we get our crown.** We'll have to endure humiliation before exaltation.

Repent of Your Proud Anxiety

- ❖ But as we've said, everything in our flesh resists this. We resist humility. Instead we get puffed up, self-righteous. *"How dare they subpoena our sermons! We don't deserve this kind of treatment. We deserve better. We deserve the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion!"*
 - ▶ No, actually we don't. We are wretched sinners and deserve no good thing. **Rebellious creatures can't claim any rights before their Creator.** We forfeited all rights when we rebelled against our God and King.

- ❖ So the fact that we happen to live and worship in a free democracy is not because we deserve it. We have a Bill of Rights but God is not beholden to it. **No, the fact that we enjoy freedom of religion in this nation is owing to his mercy.** In his wisdom and grace, the American church has this privilege. We *should* be grateful for religious freedom, and we *should* seek to preserve it so long as we can. It's a great boon for advancement of the gospel.
 - ▶ **But it is not a necessity for the gospel to go forth, for a church to carry out its mission to make disciples.** Just ask our brothers and sisters in China or in Islamic nations. So before we get carried away about our rights and what we deserve, let's humble ourselves and consider our next response to persecution. **Second, we need to repent of our proud anxiety.**

- ❖ Look at v7. Peter is telling his readers to humble yourselves, *"casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."*
 - ▶ I think it's interesting that he makes this connection between pride and anxiety. The participle *casting* modifies the verb *humble yourself*. So how do you resist pride, how do you humble yourself? By casting all your anxieties on God.
 - So there's a sense in which anxiety is a form of pride. Did you realize that? **Anxiety from the Bible's standpoint is a sin.** That may come as a surprise to Christians, especially to type-A, high-achieving, workaholic individuals like so many of us. Anxiety/worry is a sin? But it's so natural, so common!

- ❖ So is pride but no one denies that's sinful. And the fact is they're related. **You see, anxiety at its core is a refusal to believe God's word – a refusal to see how much he loves you and cares for you.** When you find yourself gripped by anxiety, what's happened is that you've convinced yourself that you're the only one really watching out for you – that you have to look out for yourself and take care of your own problems.
 - ▶ God has promised in writing to be *for* his people (Rom. 8:31). To have his mighty hand actively at work for their good. He's promised throughout this letter to guard his sheep by his own power and to exalt them at the proper time (1:5; 5:6).
 - So when you, as a Christian, worry and fret over persecution – over the loss of status, the loss of respectability, the loss of friendships, the loss of freedoms, perhaps the loss of your livelihood or even worse the loss of your life – **when you're anxious over these things even in light of what his Word promises, you're basically suggesting that his Word is not good enough.** That *you* know better. And that's a form of pride.

- ❖ Anxiety is always rooted in an overconfidence. Thinking that you know how things ought to go. That you know better than God. Anxiety is not some innocent thing. **Worrying is not a morally neutral act. It stems from an overconfidence in your evaluation of things and a lack of confidence in God's.**
 - ▶ This is why the call to cast your anxieties on God comes right after a command to humble yourself under his mighty hand. If you can't say to God, "*Lord, I don't know where this country is going. I don't know where my life is going, my career, my family, etc. But I do know you care for me. And even if things aren't going as I planned, I know they're going according to your plan, your good and perfect will.*" – if you've never said that, then you've never humbled yourself under the mighty hand of God.

- ❖ John Owen, the famous Puritan theologian, once said, "**The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him is *not to believe that he loves you.***"
 - ▶ When one of his sheep is fearful and anxious, it's as if God says, "I crushed my Son for you. I let him die on that cross for you. I took care of your greatest problem at the expense of my greatest love. And now you're worried I won't care for you, that I won't handle these lesser problems that vex you?"

- ❖ That's Paul's logic when he wrote in Romans 8, "*If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*" (8:31-32)
 - ▶ How do you respond to that glorious truth? **You repent of your pride and cast all your cares on God – because he cares for you.**

Resist the Devil's Schemes

- ❖ When this Gospel truth sinks in, when you realize how much God loves you and cares for you at the cost of his Son, your old fears and anxieties no longer feel natural or normal. Like an old jacket that no longer fits, you feel like casting it off and never wearing it again.
 - ▶ **But just because you're free from anxiety doesn't mean you should throw all caution to the wind.** No, Peter goes on to tell us to be sober-minded and watchful. *Why?* Because there's still danger out there. Nothing that we ultimately have to fear because God is for us, but it's something (someone) we should take seriously.

- ❖ This leads to our third observation. **In our response to persecution, we need to resist the devil's schemes.** Read v8 again, "*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. So in keeping with the shepherd-sheep metaphor, Peter describes the devil like a lion on the prowl.* That means shepherds and sheep can't slumber but have to stay sober and alert. There's an enemy out there, an adversary, who seeks to devour you.

- ❖ **Peter's point is that, as a Christian, you have to realize that in all the opposition you'll face as a Christian, there is a diabolical scheme in the background.** The devil is at work. But *not* in the way it's typically understood.
 - ▶ **It's very typical for Christians, when persecuted, to demonize our opponents.**

The see the devil in them – whether it's that liberal politician or that activist judge or just that bully who teases us for being a Christian. We see the devil in them.

- ❖ But that's not Peter's point. Remember, he just warned us about pride and anxiety, and then the next thing he says is, "*Your adversary the devil is prowling around seeking to devour.*" Is he suddenly changing subjects on us?
 - ▶ No, he's saying the same thing as Paul when he warns us not to let the sun go down on our anger to "*give no opportunity to the devil*" (Eph. 4:26-27). Or when he tells Timothy not to appoint a recent convert as an elder. *Why?* Because "*he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.*" (1 Tim. 3:6)
 - **So what Peter is suggesting here is that to deal with your sin – your anger, your pride, or your anxiety – you're going to have to deal with the devil.**

Because the devil is working his diabolical schemes through your sin.

- ❖ **So instead of always seeing the devil at work in everyone else, we need to see the devil in our own sin.** Here's a great quote from another Puritan named William Gurnall who wrote a book on spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6 called *The Christian in Complete Armour*.
 - ▶ He writes, "*If men hear a noise at night they cry, 'The Devil, the Devil,' and they run for their life, but they carry the Devil around in their very hearts all day. For if you have a proud spirit or if you have resentment or if you have anxiety you are under his power. He is setting you in a precarious place. My friends, why don't you run from your pride crying, 'The Devil, the Devil'? Why don't you run from your resentments and your grudges yelling, 'The Devil, the Devil'? Run from them in terror.*"

- ❖ *Do you see his point?* The devil wants to devour you. He wants you to falter, to deny the faith because you feel the furnace is too hot. He's active in the world. But the thing is – you won't find him prowling around disguised as a politician, a judge, or a bully. No, you'll find the devil at work in your own sin. **He'll take your trying circumstances, and playing off your pride and anxiety, he'll try to convince you that God doesn't really care for you.**
 - ▶ That's exactly what he did to our first parents. Adam and Eve failed at the very point when they needed to be sober-minded and watchful as the serpent slithered around seeking someone to poison with his lies – his lies about God not truly caring for you, not having your best in mind.
 - I know whenever you're opposed or humiliated over your faith, the doubt has crossed your mind, "*Does God really love me? Does he really care for me?*" That's the devil talking.

- ❖ Those are the kind of attacks, the kind of lies, we need to resist. Your adversary is not flesh and blood. It's not "those people" that we're tempted to demonize. No, the adversary is our own sin and the devil himself. Resist him, v9 says. Be firm in your faith. Look at v9, "*Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.*"
 - ▶ **Peter is telling us to draw comfort from the solidarity we share with other believers around the world.** Being persecuted for the faith, being ridiculed and marginalized for your beliefs, should not come as a surprise. It's not like something strange is happening to you. You're a stranger to this world, and so are all your brothers and sisters around the world experiencing the same kinds of suffering.
 - But the truth is the American Church has it pretty good compared to the Church in hostile places like Syria or Iraq. I have no issue with American Christians complaining real loud if our religious liberties are truly being threatened. But let's at least keep things in perspective and thank God and his mercy that (at least for now) our very lives are not in threat.

Rest in the Grace of God and His Gospel Promises

- ❖ There's one last observation to make. **When we're faced with persecution for the sake of Christ, we should rest in the grace of God and in his gospel promises.** That is, all the promises in this letter – and throughout the rest the Bible – that find their Yes in Christ. That are now true because of Christ and what he accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection.
 - ▶ And one of those promises is found here in v10. Let's read that again, "*10And 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. 11To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*"
- ❖ Notice how Peter mentions suffering for "*a little while*". He's not suggesting that the persecution will only be temporary. No, his whole point is that suffering for Jesus is the mark of those who are saved in Jesus.
 - ▶ This "*little while*" should be understood in comparison to the eternal glory we will share in Christ. **The God of all grace, in that grace, promises that Christ will one day return, and on that glorious day he will restore all things back to the way they were meant to be.** He'll finally put things right.
 - Right now we live in a Genesis 3 world where it's natural for Christians to suffer simply for being Christians. But that will not always be so. One day we will be witnesses to a Revelation 21 world, a new heavens and a new earth.
- ❖ **And that's the day, as Tolkien liked to put it, when everything sad comes untrue.** When everything is restored the way it was meant to be in the beginning.
 - ▶ It goes on in v10 to say that God will, in and through Christ, confirm us, strengthen us, and establish us. He'll lift us up, stand us up on our feet, and secure us on the firm foundation of his Son.

- ❖ There seems to be some pretty ominous developments happening in our country today. And if you scan the horizon it doesn't look any better. **It looks like it's going to become increasingly difficult to be a Christian in this country.** Christians who seek to faithfully live by the Word of God will likely be continually pushed to the margins of society. We'll be seen as a backwards, fringe group with non-intellectual, intolerant beliefs.

- ❖ *Friends, are you ready to stand firm in your faith?* It sounds daunting, I know. **But remember, as Christians, we can stand firm on the Son of God, the offspring of Eve, the Last Adam.** Who, unlike the First Adam, remained sober-minded and watchful. He did resist when the devil tried to poison him with lies, when the lion tried to devour him.
 - ▶ The devil said to Jesus, "If your Father really cares about you, then why would he ask you to take up a cross? If you want the crown, to reign as King of these people, there must be another way. A way without suffering, without persecution, without a cross."
 - To that Jesus replied, "Begone, Satan! Get behind me!" (Mt. 4:8-10; 16:23) **And then he set his face like a flint towards Calvary and for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising its shame** (Heb. 12:2). And now he is exalted in glory seated at the right hand of the throne of God.
 - Jesus bore his cross so he gets his crown. Humiliation before exaltation. So take up your cross and rest in the grace of God to exalt you and crown you at the proper time.