

A Visit with the Spiritual Back Specialist

1 Peter 5:6-7

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Preface

I don't have to tell you too much about the context, since a couple of recent Sunday mornings have been spent in this territory, where Peter has been dealing more broadly with the church under siege, with waves of persecution and suffering coming upon these early Christians—not a strange thing, he says back in 4, with the implication being that it's strange if we can live out our Christian faith in a cozy, favorable environment. Christians, generally speaking, you see, as long as it's this life, are on the bottom of the totem pole. And, unless you're humble, you're going to have a hard time coming to terms with that. Peter, though, as we move into chapter 5, more narrowly deals with the duties of Christ's under-shepherds and what it means for the sheep. And this too calls for humility, on the part of all, on the part of the leaders and on the part of everyone. And he isn't done hammering home the need for humility, as we're about to find out.

Scripture Reading

[1 Peter 5:6] 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.

Introduction

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I have some among my family members and relatives who have back pain, in some cases chronic back pain. That does not make me an expert on how to care for and bring relief to and strengthen one's back, but I do listen when they talk about chiropractors and therapists, how helpful they can be—at least sometimes. Well, Peter here is presenting himself as a doctor along such lines, complete with a diagnosis and prescription for back troubles of a sort that if they aren't dealt with can leave one hunched over, perhaps severely disabled. They might even be downright back-breaking.

The Spiritual Back Specialist

Covenant Presbyterian, here's what he is providing for those originally on the receiving end of this letter, and for people like us by extension. He is providing: *A Visit with the Spiritual Back Specialist*—and because we tend to have bad posture and be weighed down by many things, we need to listen and follow directions. He basically lays down two directives, and we'll examine the second one first and the first one second, and that way see how they hang together. And from his directives, we can infer what the underlying problem is, underneath the symptom.

I. First, Peter Says, Lose Some Baggage

Brothers and sisters, listen again to v. 7, where Peter instructs Christians to do what? Cast “all your anxieties upon him [that is, God], because he cares for you.” You see, this can be our default mode, where we carry around the weight of the world, bearing it upon our shoulders that aren’t as strong as we might think. And we get weighed down. Imagine this first generation of Christians, facing the specter and threat of opposition within and opposition without. Everything from no advantage in being Christian to harsh and outright persecution, physical persecution, including torture and death in some cases. Pretty much everyone would be going through that, being somewhere on that continuum. Imagine being pastors and elders, seeking to encourage your beleaguered congregation, with some tempted to walk away from it all. You might very well become anxious. You might very well worry, about everything from your own skin to the well-being of the flock, of your people. And, if you’re a member of the church, you might be having trouble listening to your leaders who continue to call for faith in Christ, for a life of obedience to him as Savior and Lord. And, as much as they may model such a life, you’re worried too. Not all of your family is Christian. And one of them could turn you in to the authorities, at any time.

And we’re no different, though our circumstances might be a little different. As the culture we find ourselves in becomes more hostile to Christ and Christianity, to Christian faith and Christian standards of righteousness, we may wonder about how our future. We may worry about that, along with everything else. We may worry about finances too, about our physical health, about the well-being of our families down the road, into the future. You and me both may worry about the church. We’re not numerically growing by gangbusters. We’re not exactly in vogue in this spiritual climate. We’re not seeing revival. What’s going to happen? It can be an all-consuming thing, as we fret over every little thing, as anxiety sets in, as worry takes over.

Now there can be a physiological component to anxiety, or to worry. So don’t take this as condemnation of such things as taking medicines and the like. That’s not the point here. And yet Peter does treat this as something for which we are spiritually, morally responsible. He says to cast your cares upon God. And he sounds a lot like his contemporary, the Apostle Paul, who issues the command in Philippians 4: “Do not be anxious.” And both Peter and Paul echo Jesus, who commands in Matthew 6: “Do not be anxious”—or, depending upon your translation, “Do not worry.” In other words, “Stop it!” Enough with the anxiety and worry! I say it to myself, as well as to you. Get rid of all these things you’re carrying around. Travel light. Unload them onto God—unload them through prayer.

And, you know, until we do—until we entrust them to the God we know in Jesus, the Father who, Peter says, cares for us—we’re like the character Robert De Niro plays in the movie *The Mission*. Carrying the arduous backpack of armor up the mountain. It’s tiring just watching it!

II. Second, Lose Your Illusion of Control

Beloved brothers and sisters, this is where Peter moves from the symptom to the root, underlying cause, the real problem. Remember that v. 7 is actually a clause starting with the participial verb “casting.” It’s actually modifying v. 6, which supplies the main verb and says this: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you.” Christians, I’ve noticed, spend a bit of time memorizing v. 7, but v. 6 needs to be known and internalized, because it is the key. You see, whether it’s Peter’s generation or me and you, the reason we carry the weight of the world around is because we think we’re God! At least—we act like it. We want to be at the helm, at the steering wheel—or we think we do. And we chaff against it when things don’t go according to our plans. And Peter, in effect, is reminding us that we are not the sovereign Lord of the universe—we are not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is in charge—completely, utterly. He is directing the affairs of our lives, ordering everything, including the suffering that comes our way.

Would you rather have suffering be outside of his control? We need to reconcile ourselves to this, and rejoice in it. He’s just gotten done saying that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, in v. 5. So he says here, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God.” You’re not in control—he is—and it ought to make you and me glad. Let’s not fight that, which is what we’re doing when we are anxious, when we’re playing the worry-wart. We’re pridefully saying that we want to be at the controls, not God. We’re saying we’re not so sure he is good, and up to something good. When his hand is what kind of hand? A mighty hand! This is alluding to the Exodus, as Peter employs the kind of language you find Moses using when he describes God’s awesome deeds of power unleashed as he would deliver his people from their Egyptian oppressors. Moses would rehearse it in Exodus 32:11, speaking to God, about God, saying, You brought your people “out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand.” He would be rehearsing what God would say at the very beginning of the Exodus, in Exodus 3:19-20, where God tells Moses, “But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.” You see, God works by his mighty hand for his glory, and his glory in the good of his people. Which we chiefly, supremely see in Christ, through his death and resurrection, through all of his saving work. Something Peter has been proclaiming through this letter, from the living hope Christ’s resurrection imparts, which he speaks of in chapter 1, to the healing from sin that comes through Christ’s wounds, which he speaks of in chapter 2—just to name two examples.

In other words, submitting to this God through prayer will lead to blessing. Peter goes on to add what to “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that” what? So that “at the proper time he may exalt you.” The “proper time” translates the Greek word *kairos*, meaning the appointed time. Which may not be in this life. It might lie exclusively in the life to come. But, while we can act like we’re God and try to climb the little molehills that we build, toiling away and tiring ourselves and killing our back while we’re at it, we are called to take the lower seat, taking our rightful place

before God, that he might lift us up—and when he does it will be the apex of glory, a share in Christ’s glory. Which we foretaste now, as we let this God that we know in Christ be God. Our backs, spiritually speaking, begin to heal, and we can walk upright again, ironically as we get down, on our knees, in prayer—as we make that the position of our hearts—as we let God be God. Entrusting our future to him, from our livelihood to our families to our church. Keeping on even in the face of, sometimes, antagonism. Knowing that this God is not about to let his kingdom just crumble. So that we can do more than just guard the gate but by faith go on the offensive and live boldly for his glory, bearing witness to Christ.

It’s like when we were living in Connecticut, when I locked us in. Yes, you heard me right. The deadbolt lock broke when I locked the front door for the night. Not good, as it was our only exit, on the lower level. Thoughts went through my head. “What if there’s a fire, or Miriam has an asthma attack? How will the kids go to school in the morning?” So I feverishly worked at trying to loosen it for a few frustrating minutes. Until I put my tools down and prayed, “Okay, God, you win. I need help.” A few short minutes later, I managed to dislodge the deadbolt. That illustrates virtually my entire life, and maybe yours too. Let’s be compelled to entrust it all to him, as pride gives way to humility, as with it anxiety gives way to assurance, confidence, joy, peace, and his strengthening.

Amen!

Prayer