

**Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church**  
**Knoxville, Tennessee**  
**Dr. Jay Howell**  
June 21, 2020

**“When Going Gets Tough: Piece by Piece”**  
**1 Peter 5:6-11**

Today we wrap up our five-week series in 1 Peter. First, a short word about what we'll be starting next week. Next Sunday, we'll be starting a really in-depth look at one of the most consequential chapters in all of Scripture, and that's Genesis chapter 3, in which Adam and Eve succumb to temptation, commonly known as the Fall, but could just as easily be titled “How We All Got into This Mess.” Many thanks to Pastor Mark for outlining this series. So much in this chapter sets the stage for the arc of Scripture, the arc of God's story with humanity, God's story with Israel, and most importantly sets the stage for the grace shown in Christ Jesus. It tells how something innocent, something pure was lost, but at the same time it plants the seeds for how God brings us back. So if you've ever found yourself wondering, how did we ever get into this mess, and how God gets us out of it, tune in starting next week.

As for this series, when we started 1 Peter last month, our hope as we went through the letter was that by the end of it you might have a better idea of what the whole letter was about—a particular thanks to Pastor Rachel for her work in putting this series together. But more importantly, our hope was that you would be encouraged by the message Peter was writing, which is all too timely, because he's writing a message of hope to a people that's enduring quite a lot. And as he draws his letter to a close, he offers some very specific instructions that he hopes would point them to restoration. Will you pray with me?

**Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.**

Do you ever get mesmerized by the most random things? Something that if you even admitted it to someone, they'd think you were weird? Well, I'm going to admit it to y'all.

Happened a few weeks ago. It was Memorial Day Weekend, and we were eating dinner outside on the little deck we have in the backyard, and we had some chips. But Jack wasn't really eating as much as throwing them at the dog. So, we had a bunch of chip pieces on the deck. And this is where I started to get mesmerized.

Some ants, some of those tiny little ants, found the chips, and in the way that they do, letting all the other little ants know about it, before too long there were a bunch of little ants around. Now, what you're thinking is, “Jay, do you want ants? Because that's how you get ants.” I should've swept them off the deck, but I couldn't, I was weirdly mesmerized by this, because piece by piece, each of these little ants was taking away just a little bit of a chip, and the chip got smaller and smaller, until there wasn't much of it left. And I watched this happen.

And for some equally odd reason, that image, that image of ants nibbling away at a piece of a chip, came to mind as I've been considering this passage.

V. 7 reads, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” I mean, goodness, just an encouraging verse to begin with, calling us to take whatever anxiety we have and to *cast* it on the Lord. It's that action of casting it out and laying it down. That's how Peter tells us to deal with all our anxiety.

The Christians Peter was writing to had no shortage of reasons to be anxious. You'll remember from the past few weeks that Peter's writing mostly to Gentile Christians who were enduring the first major wave of persecution, put into motion by the Roman Emperor Nero. And in the first three chapters of this letter, Peter is largely talking about how Christians should act in response to institutions that mistreat them, then he turns to talk about how Christians should treat each other, because isn't that how it typically works out? When something external is really weighing down, we can sometimes bring it home, so to speak. We can let it impact how we respond to each other.

For example, there are a lot of external anxieties, external factors that might be weighing on us right now. There's anxiety even in normal times. There can be issues at work, or caring for a friend or a family member, or grieving the loss of a loved one, and it brings up tension. It sits on your shoulders. That's in normal times. But these days, on top of that, we have a climate of social unrest, ongoing debate on racism and racial inequality. We have a general election campaign starting to pick up, which always brings out the very best in people. And then, just to top it off, there's a global pandemic, the effects of which are being felt socially, financially, just overall uncertainty. It brings disruption to even the simplest of tasks, makes going to the grocery store a little more complicated, makes even the notion of gathering as a church a complicated thing. And that's not to mention of course the threat to public health with millions infected and hundreds of thousands dead. That's a lot. That's a lot that can gnaw at you.

So here's a question. How many of us have brought it home? How many of us have carried that anxiety and in turn been short with a friend, or a spouse, or a child, or a parent? I know I have. It can gnaw at you. Take pieces out of you.

The word Peter uses for "anxiety" here has an interesting history, or at least I find it interesting. Its translated most often as "anxiety" or "care," but its root is closer to a "division" or a "part," to the point that in other sources it describes a distraction, something that divides your attention. And that's not to say that an anxiety is just a distraction, nothing more, but it does speak to an anxiety taking a piece out of us. It can dominate our thinking, to the point that bit by bit we find it hard to think about anything else.

That's where that image of ants nibbling piece by piece at a chip on the ground comes to mind for me. It takes a little bit out of us, piece by piece.

Peter uses slightly different language here. Rather than being nibbled at, he talks about how we might be devoured. In v. 8: "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." I guess that's one way he might do it: devour us, swallow us whole, but I wonder if the smaller bites, from the enemy's perspective at least, might be just as effective. That is, I wonder if the small bites, the nibbles, might be how the enemy, how evil takes pieces out of us.

Some of you might know the story *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. If you've never read it, really not that complicated a story. See, there's an old man, and the sea. Santiago is an aging fisherman who's down on his luck, so he goes far out into the ocean to try to get one big catch, and he gets one. He gets a huge marlin on the line, but it takes him days, *days* to reel it in. Finally, he's able to reel the marlin in. But because it's so big, he can't just hoist it up into his small boat, so he has to tie it to the side. But then the sharks start coming. He's able to fend off a few of them, all while he's trying to, you know, sail the boat, but while he's coming into shore, more and more sharks come and start taking nibbles and bites out of the marlin on the side of the boat. Finally, by the time he gets back to shore, there's nothing left of the fish but the parts the sharks didn't like, and Santiago is left with nothing.

And I wonder if that's how our adversary, how evil works on us. I wonder if that's how anxiety works on us sometimes. That's not to equate the devil or evil with anxiety or vice versa; I just wonder if that's how they work sometimes. Sure, there can be the overwhelming force of something that might devour us, but I wonder if taking bites out of us, piece by piece, could be just a devastating, leaving us with nothing.

I believe that's what Peter is calling on Christians to guard against. When the going gets tough, that's when we're most exposed, that's when we're most vulnerable, that's when we're most likely to let pieces of us get nibbled away.

And that's why, for Peter, it's imperative that the church share these burdens.

This is likely a point I'll share more than once, and some of you I know have heard me say this, but I am of the opinion that the English translators of the Bible do us a disservice by not using the word "y'all." When you read a translation, in English "you" and "your" can refer to one person or more than one person, but when we read it, and who knows what this says about us, we tend to read it as singular. That's not such a huge deal, but in places it can turn a passage like this one, "Cast your anxiety on him, because he cares for you," into sounding like an individual self-help. Not the worst advice in the world, to individually cast your anxiety upon the Lord, but it misses the bigger point Peter's making. All the you's here are plural, so it should be, "Cast all y'all's anxiety on him, because he cares for y'all." It's a bit funny sounding, but the point is, this is for the whole church, for the church as a whole to lay its anxiety upon the Lord, for the church as a whole to discipline ourselves and to resist evil. You know the only time Peter goes to the singular here? When he talks about the devil devouring someone, meaning when someone is separated from the pack, when someone's off on their own, unsupported by the care of the church.

That's the importance of solidarity in anxious times. Without it, we're off on our own, exposed, vulnerable.

It's no surprise that as Peter starts bringing his letter to a close, he shares in v. 9, "for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering." It's this message both of encouragement, that there are others enduring the same things you are, bearing the same anxieties you are, but it's also a call to stand with others around the world suffering.

Think of what it would look like if the opposite were true, if each Christian were just in it for him- or herself. What would it look like if there were cries from some of our international mission partners, missionaries serving the gospel in countries around the world, and they said, "We are suffering here," and other Christians just said, "Eh, it's probably not that bad." What would it look like if brothers and sisters in Christ in communities of color around the nation cry out, "We are suffering here," and other Christians just said, "It's probably not really like that?" What would it look like if within our very congregation, there were those crying out, "We are suffering here," and other Christians just said, "Eh, they'll be okay?"

What would it look like? Peter tells us. "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." That's what it looks like when the church doesn't stay together, when the church doesn't stay in solidarity.

But what would it look like if, when the going gets tough, that's when the church pulls together even more? Peter tells us that too. As we resist evil, as we are steadfast in faith, as we stand in solidarity with each other, there's the assurance that restoration is coming: "The God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." Same gig here as earlier, all the you's are plural, so what Peter is

saying is that God will restore all of us, God has called us to eternal glory in Christ, God will himself support, strengthen, and establish us.

And if you want to catch a glimpse of what it looks like in real time, right now, let me offer a few snapshots. It looks like folks like Kent Koebke and the rest of the Missionary Support Committee, passionate about showing our solidarity for Christ's servants around the world. It looks like the Session, our elders, two weeks ago engaging in a hard, hard conversation about race and racism and our church and admitting, "We don't know exactly what should come next," but acknowledging that it shouldn't be nothing—as one of our elders Cynthia Foster shared with me, "Praying for God's guidance, humility, truth, and justice"—and then three other elders, Anna Dale, Lisa Oglesby, and Hugh Bright, raising their hands to continue the conversation and look hard at how we as a congregation might learn to listen better and even repent—they weren't the only three, they were just the first three to volunteer. It looks like our Deacons, our Stephen Ministers, our entire congregational care ministry keeping their collective ears to the ground to seek out those in our church who are hurting but because of decreased face to face contact it's harder to know where that care is needed.

Those are all glimpses of what it looks like for the church to be what Peter is saying we need to be. Because when the going gets tough, when the church cares for each other, there is hope for restoration.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**