

# Under Pressure

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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In last Sunday's sermon on Psalm 96 and the sovereignty of God, I confessed that "royalty" language in the Bible doesn't really resonate with me. It's not a set of metaphors that I am drawn to when thinking about the nature of God and how God rules.

This morning, I'm going to confess that the heading that precedes the first part of our scripture reading in many bibles has always sat awkwardly with me as well.

"Suffering for Being a Christian."

In the church contexts I grew up in, these kinds of passages were not always used well. Not necessarily in my *specific* church, but in the broader evangelical waters we swam in and whose resources, youth conferences, etc. that we utilized.

There tended to be this laundry list of things we were supposed to avoid. You know, the usual sex, drugs, rock & roll. R-rated movies. Smoking, drinking, swearing. Playing sports on Sundays. There were others I'm undoubtedly forgetting.

In addition to all these things *not* to do, there were also things *to* do. Share your faith with unbelievers in school. Defend Christianity against those who mocked it (and expect some mockery yourself). Try to get people to come to church.

If one were to have the temerity to question any of this, you could probably expect to have a passage like 1 Peter 4:14 quoted in your direction:

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

This could be supplemented by a reference to Jesus' own words in the Beatitudes:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven... (Mat. 5:11-12).

Strangely, hearing all this didn't always make me feel any more glorious or blessed.

I didn't want to stand out. I wanted to fit in. And I didn't really want to be reviled or to share in Christ's sufferings.

On top of all this, there was the problem of whether any of my relatively mundane inconveniences and annoyances really counted as "suffering."

I could be a pretty self-absorbed kid, but I had heard a few missionary stories and read a few publications like "The Voice of the Martyrs."

Even I could see that missing the occasional hockey game or getting teased at school because I wouldn't watch a horror movie didn't really compare with what Christians endured in other places in the world, where threats of physical violence and all kinds of other more brutal persecution were everyday realities for many.

At times, it felt like we were trying to shoehorn our experience in relatively comfortable twentieth century Canada into the categories and language of the Bible and the much different first century contexts into which letters like 1 Peter were written.

If suffering couldn't be discovered, perhaps it could be created. Because if we weren't suffering for our faith, we must be doing something wrong, right?

Perhaps some of this resonates with your experience. Maybe it doesn't. But the question of how we should think about suffering for being a Christian remains an important one.

(And this is leaving aside the entire history of those in power who used texts that seem to glorify suffering as a way of keeping suffering people in their place!)

What *should* we learn for our own context from this letter written to a church two thousand years ago?

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Well, the first thing that we can say about the church Peter was writing to is that it was clearly under pressure.

Scholars are divided on the specifics of what the community Peter is writing to was facing.

Some say it was more a kind of “social persecution” —verbal derision, mockery, being looked down on, etc. Others suggest it could have been more official and brutal forms of persecution from Rome.

There are hints of both in the letter, but it’s not conclusive. If nothing else, it’s given scholars something to argue about for years and years, which I suppose is important.

Whatever the source of the pressure, Peter is clear that followers of Jesus should expect to feel out of step with the broader culture.

“Do not be surprised,” Peter says. “This isn’t something strange. This is what happens when the way of Jesus bumps up against the way of the world.”

I wonder if this is a word that we need to hear, even if our context is different.

We do not face the same pressures as the church Peter was writing to. But I think every culture then and since finds itself at odds in some ways with the way of Jesus.

And so how should we, as Christians point to a different way in our time and our place? For what might we expect to be if not “reviled” then at least looked at with some bewilderment by those around us that want little to do with Jesus or his way?

Well, here are a few options.

Our insistence that it is God and not the subjective individual self that determines reality puts us at odds with the broader culture. At least it should.

Our conviction that our identity is rooted and anchored in the life, death, resurrection and future return of Christ and not in the identities that we can construct for ourselves and weaponize against others puts at odds with a broader culture. At least it should.

Our insistence that it is the peaceable kingdom that prevails puts us at odds with a culture addicted to violence. At least it should.

Our desire for real justice anchored in truth puts us at odds with a culture that often settles for justice as revenge or performance. At least it should.

Our commitment to mercy and forgiveness puts at odds with a culture that is starved of grace and can be punitively (if selectively) moralizing and self-righteous. At least it should.

Our hope in a future beyond what we can secure for ourselves puts at odds with a culture that is often fearful and anxious and terrified of death. At least it should.

And, much as I think that some forms of evangelicalism have an unhealthy obsession over very specific forms of private morality (sex, drugs and rock & roll), I think that our personal conduct puts us at odds with the broader culture. At least it should.

Earlier in his letter, Peter says this:

For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you (1 Peter 4:3-4).

Yes, some forms of Christianity focus too much on these sins and not enough on broader, more structural, and systemic issues. But that doesn't mean they don't matter.

Any or all of these things (and more) may make us objects of mockery or revulsion in the broader culture. We may be seen as naïve, ignorant, out of step, unenlightened.

So be it. We are to rejoice. We are in some mysterious sense, in however small and partial ways, “sharing in the suffering of Christ.”

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I want to transition from the suffering specific to being a Christian to the more generalized suffering that is part of the human condition.

As I read the passage this week, my attention zeroed in, repeatedly, on verse 7:

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

*All your anxiety.* Do we have any anxiety in the room this morning?

Stupid question, right? Of course, we do. We live in anxious times. We are all under pressure in various ways.

On Tuesday morning, I was driving to Claresholm for a MCA pastors meeting and the smoke got heavier and the wind got stronger the further I drove. When I got to Claresholm, the sky was grey, the temperature had dropped five degrees, and the wind was screaming.

I felt this heaviness in my chest as I thought about these fires and about my son Nick in the middle of them up north.

I had just read our passage from 1 Peter before I left. *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.* Yeah, easier said than done, God!

We all have our own anxieties. Indeed, anxiety seems to have taken over our culture!

I have had a number of conversations recently about the deep sadness that seems to have settled over many in the West, particularly the young.

These conversations have been with people who would represent the full breadth of the racial, socioeconomic, political and ideological spectrum.

Often, they are parents of teenagers and/or young adults. It's a familiar litany by now. Anxiety, depression, addiction, mental illness, suicidal ideation and self-harm, deaths of despair.

A general rootlessness and purposeless drifting. Listless scrolling and binging on junk entertainment rather than engaging with the world. It's a well-worn road by now.

There are, of course, many causes. There's the pandemic and our collective responses to it, obviously, which did all kinds of damage to the young.

There is concern about the future of the planet. There is angst about the seemingly limited economic opportunities to attain a life similar to that of their parents.

There's secularization and the evacuation of shared meaning.

There's the advent of the smartphone and its increasingly widespread use which has been catastrophic for mental health.

This last one is, I think, among the most important ones. The performative incentives of social media, the relentless judgment and comparison, the fear of missing out, etc. all lead to a profound decline in mental health and an increase in anxiety.

At the risk of over-simplifying what is a complex issue, it seems to me that so much of our determination to pursue habits (technological and otherwise) that we are quite certain are not good for us (as individuals or as a culture) reduces to two basic human desires.

**We are desperate for connection.** This is what drives us on to social media. This is what keeps us tethered to our devices. We want to connect with friends, to find our tribe, to belong.

**And we long for affirmation.** We want to know that we are measuring up and keeping up. We want to know that we are liked, that someone is impressed by us or something we've done, shared, written, sung. We crave evidence that we are approved of.

These two desires—for connection and for affirmation—send us down all kinds of anxious and destructive paths.

It leads some to identify with unhealthy groups and ideologies simply because being part of a group—any group—is better than being alone.

It leads others to post and share frantically, seeking constant reassurance that we are enough.

It drags many into this hyper-competitive space where we're constantly trying to outperform one another online. Who's going on the best holidays? Who's doing the best at mid-life?

Who's on marriage number three and who's still madly in love (if only in the pictures that get shared)? Whose kids are hitting it out of the park? Who has the best job, the coolest church, the most glittering resume? On and on and on it goes.

And if the adults in the room are kind of struggling to negotiate our digital world in healthy ways, how on earth would we expect teenagers and young adults to do it?

So, into this reality—and I think we all see it, if not in ourselves then in our kids and our grandkids—we hear the words from 1 Peter again.

Cast *all* your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

He cares for you. He really does.

God meets those needs for connection and for affirmation. God is the one who made us, who loves us, who forgives and accepts us, who gave his life for us, who calls us to lives of health and wholeness.

God is a safe place to cast our anxieties.

This is not a one and done kind of thing. It is a lifelong practice.

On Tuesday morning in Claresholm, I took a deep (smoky) breath, offered a quick prayer for Nick to God, and said, “I can’t change this. I’m leaving it with you.” And then I walked into my meeting slightly less burdened.

But I will have to do this next week, too. Perhaps the anxiety will have a different source. And I’ll have to do it the week after that and after that and after that.

It is a habit, a spiritual discipline, a deliberate and persistent act of trust. It is a defiant insistence that God, not my or your anxiety, not any suffering that we endure has the last word.

It is to say that if we humble ourselves, and discipline ourselves, and resist the enemy that lurks at our door (to the best of our abilities), that God himself will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

“Restore,” “support,” “strengthen,” and “establish.” That’s an impressive list of verbs. And the important thing to note is that they point to God’s action, not ours.

God will restore, support, strengthen and establish us.

All our anxieties can be cast upon God. Because he cares for us. He really does.

I want to close with a quote from Timothy Keller. Some of you may know him. He was an influential Presbyterian pastor who had a thriving ministry in secular Manhattan. He's written a number of very good books, my favourite being *The Prodigal God*, which is among the best reflections on Jesus' story of the prodigal son that I've come across.

I say "was" because Tim Keller died this week of pancreatic cancer at the relatively young age of 72. I read a number of tributes to him yesterday, one of which included this quote from Keller's last book, *Making Sense of God*, where he wrote of:

Christianity's unsurpassed offers—a meaning that suffering cannot remove, a satisfaction not based on circumstances, a freedom that does not hurt but rather enhances love, an identity that does not crush you or exclude others, a moral compass that does not turn you into an oppressor, and a hope that can face anything, even death.<sup>1</sup>

This is indeed what Christianity offers.

And to that impressive list I would add, "a God to whom we can turn in all our suffering—whether for our faith or simply as part of the pain that is the price of admission for existence.

"A God upon whom we can cast all our anxieties. A God who cares."

Amen.



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<sup>1</sup> <https://blog.ayjay.org/tim-keller/>