

Standing Fast in Hard Times

With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. (1 Peter 5:12 NIV)

It was a tough time for the church. The society around didn't know anything much about Jesus, "living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry" (1 Peter 4:3) and they were increasingly antagonistic towards Christians - even when they were only doing good things. It could have been worse (in time it would be), but there were insults, mockery and unjust punishments. To be a Christian was to be despised rather than respected. That was how it was in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) when the apostle Peter wrote to them.

Perhaps that sounds a little familiar to now. Once we might have thought we lived in a Christian country, but things seem a little more like 1 Peter 4:3 in the UK now and bit-by-bit we seem to be seeing Christian truths and ethics undermined, dismantled and even legislated against.

How does Peter respond?

Be Encouraged

First, Peter wants them to be encouraged by his writing. It is easy in the midst of hard times to lose hope and to give up. Peter wants them to keep going and so he writes to encourage them.

We all need encouragement. I've been trying to get fit recently using some NHS podcasts that help you start running when you've not been fit (they're called Couch to 5K). All the way through, the person on the recordings is telling me how well I'm doing, often at just the point when you're feeling most tired and like giving up.

How much more do we need to be encouraged to keep going as Christians, especially when it's hard work and people may be looking down on us for it? Throughout his letter, we find Peter lifting our eyes to the wonderful things Christ did for us and the amazing future we have in him. That's better than the encouragement to get fit!

If you're finding it hard to keep going as a Christian at the moment or perhaps you've pretty much given up, then 1 Peter is a great book to read to refocus you and to encourage you to keep going.

Know the Gospel is True

Second, Peter wants his readers to know that his message is true: "that this is the true grace of God" (1 Peter 5:12 NIV).

If you've ever been out hiking you know that you need confidence in your map. If you're getting tired, the terrain is hard and the path is hard to discern, then you want a map in your hand that you know is right. You want something that both tells you where you are and where to go.

Peter is saying that the message these Christians have believed about Jesus is true. They know where they are now, even if it's tough going and they know where they're going. Peter emphasizes throughout the letter that already they stand forgiven because of the work of Christ, that they're part of God's people in a world that doesn't understand or want them and God will keep them and their inheritance for them at the end.

We live in a world that doesn't really believe in truth any more. The truth we have seems to be based mostly on what people want or feel. But the truth we have is God's gracious gift to us - a gift that

includes forgiveness now and hope for the future. This is a truth that is certain, because it's from God. So it's a truth that encourages us and it's a truth we can stand firm on.

Stand Fast

Third, Peter comes to the command. He's encouraged with the certain truth of the gospel, but how should his readers now live? They should, "Stand fast in it. (1 Peter 5:12 NIV)." That is, they should keep holding onto that truth and living it out - however hard it might be!

Rudyard Kipling's poem "If" starts:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you

Kipling's point is simply that under pressure the risk is we lose our heads and start to fight with each other. This can so easily happen to Christians and the church. We can so easily give up or twist the faith. We can so easily be reduced to in-fighting. Peter knew that and called his readers to a different path. They were to keep their heads and stand fast in the gospel. Whatever came along, they must not change the message of be moved from it because it is the truth from God.

Later in September we're going to be looking together in more detail at the this letter of Peter. The goal will be to encourage us in the true grace of God so that we can stand fast whatever we face. Why not have a read through 1 Peter in preparation.

Stephen