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Sermon Title: *Standing Together in Difficult Times*

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Standing Together in Difficult Times

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to our text, as we come to the end of our series of sermons from the first letter of Peter to the believers scattered throughout Asia Minor. The Apostle of Hope has encouraged the church facing hostility and mounting persecution to be steadfast in their faithful witness for Christ as “strangers in the world” (1:1) that neither understands nor accepts their way of life as God’s distinctly different people (2:9).

As we noted last Sunday, Peter gives a special charge to the elders, including all the leaders of the church, to be faithful under-shepherds of God’s flock during these difficult times. He also urges everyone else in the church to practice good, supportive followership, and all of the church to cast all their anxiety upon God, who cares for his people. In the closes words of this letter, Peter gives one final admonition to these believers to stand together in difficult times. Follow as I read verses 8 through 14, but our focus will be on...

1 Peter 5:8-12.

In these five verses Peter uses the verb “to stand” twice, admonishing the church to stand firm (9) and to stand fast (12). This expression is used throughout Scripture as an image for being strong, resolute and unyielding in the face of challenges to us as God’s people.

As Solomon graphically expressed it,

“When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone,

but the righteous stand firm forever” (Proverbs 10:25).

The one who trusts in the Lord is able to stand, to be strong and resolute in the strength of the Lord, who enables the believer to withstand life’s storms and also to take a position of loyalty to Christ and trust in his presence and power. Both the Apostle Peter and Paul are fond of using this imagery of standing strong in the Lord.

I think particularly in these closing verses Peter is emphasizing our interdependence as the people of God. Just as we noted last week how leaders and followers need to give mutual support if the Body of Christ is to be healthy, so we’ll note today how important it is that we stand together, helping one another to stand firm and to stand fast against challenges that would attack and try to topple us in our faith in and loyalty to Christ.

In this final word of encouragement and exhortation, Peter says that standing together demands first that we...

Watch out! *Standing firm* in faith (verses 8 & 9)

Although the *NIV* in verse 9 speaks about “the faith,” which sounds like a doctrinal position, the better translation appears to be “your faith,” which speaks more about a personal trust through a relationship with God through Christ (*ESV, NLT, NASB, etc.*).

Be awake

When Peter wrote that the church must be self-controlled he no doubt must have remembered the words of Jesus when he warned Peter about his pending denial of his Lord (Matthew 26:31ff), and when Jesus asked Peter and the rest of the inner group of disciples to watch and pray with him in Gethsemane (26:38ff). In this hour of Jesus’ great crisis before his arrest and crucifixion, he needed the support of these disciples’ prayers, and also they needed to be watchful against falling into temptation (26:41). Because Peter failed to stay awake in prayer, he was unable to stand firm in his faith, yielding to the temptation to deny his Lord (26:69ff).

Now as the restored under-shepherd, Peter urges the church to be awake, like a soldier who is standing guard and cannot afford to be asleep (Davids, 189). In these

difficult days facing the church, when the Enemy seems to be working overtime in the suffering church but also here in this country and also in our personal lives, we must remain spiritually awake and not be guilty of laziness, lethargy or somnolence.

Reminding the church that we are children of the light but living in a world of darkness, Paul says, “So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled” (1 Thessalonians 5:5f). We must be awake and self-controlled to be vigilant, and we must also...

Be alert

Because our enemy, the devil, is on the prowl like a roaring lion, seeking to devour us, we must be alert. In portraying the devil as a prowling, roaring lion, Peter must be referring to the image he gives in the previous passage of the sheep, the under-shepherds and the Chief Shepherd (1-4). In order to stand firm in our faith, we must be alert that the devil, although dealt a mortal blow by Christ in his death (Luke 10:18), is nevertheless still alive and trying to do as much damage to our lives and faith as possible.

Before the devil, in our strength alone, we are absolutely helpless. He has been the liar and deceiver since the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), and he cleverly disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). As CS Lewis makes graphically clear, the devil’s most effective tactic is to convince the modern materialist that he doesn’t exist, or to lead the “magician” to an “excessive and unhealthy interest in him” (Lewis, 3). Many are led to think that the devil and his demons are behind every bush, and that he has inordinate power over their lives.

The truth is that the devil is real and his power is at work, and we cannot face him and his demons alone. But through Christ, who has defeated him on the cross and with his resurrection, we are given the superior power of the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:4). But we must be wary of his schemes (2 Corinthians 2:11), that he is always at work to destroy the souls of the unconverted; to discourage the hearts, destroy the testimony and divide the unity of God’s people.

In ourselves we are helpless before the devil; but we are not defenseless. We are given the Holy Spirit and also the full armor of God and the covering of prayer. So, as he describes the armor of God, Paul tells us how we can take our “stand against the devil’s schemes” and stand our ground on the evil day of our greatest trial and test of faith (Ephesians 6:10ff).

We see in Peter’s thought a “mysterious tension” (Jobes, 314) between what Peter says earlier about God’s redemptive plan and sovereignty over our circumstances of suffering (4:19), and now what he writes about our suffering and testing being at the hands of the devil. “Looking behind the scenes” of God’s heavenly court in Job 1 & 2, we can see, in the words of Martin Luther, that the devil is God’s devil. All evil and suffering come at the hands of the devil and his cohort fallen angel/demons, and can

come to us only by God's sovereign permission. In this fallen world, God allows evil and suffering as part of his plan of refining our faith, strengthening our trust, drawing us deeper into his love and joy, and developing our character (Romans 5:1-5; 8:28f; James 1:2-5). In other words, the devil is actively against God's people, but he's on a tether that's in God's hands.

John Bunyan's great classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, describes "Christian on the Hill Difficulty terrified by the roar of lions. He feared to go on and thought of turning aside. But on going up he found a lion on each side *chained*. They could only roar" (AT Robertson, *PT*, 39. Also for text see Bunyan, 196).

As we stand together in difficult times, we can be victorious in spiritual warfare, and confident that God has even Satan under his sovereign control. We can and must stand firm, equipped with the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:11). The devil is the accuser, trying to convince us we're unworthy of God's love and also that God cannot be trusted that he knows what's best for us. He's a liar and deceiver, who offers us any way but the way of the Cross, and usually, disguised as the angel of light, offers us the way of compromise, immediate gratification, and the promise of success and popularity. He even turns religion and church into his "workshop," where we do good things for the wrong reason and in the wrong spirit, resulting in our discouragement or discord in the Body of Christ.

As we watch out and stand firm in the faith we must also...

Be aware

Peter explicitly indicates the need for us to stand together, not only with those in the local Body of Christ, but also with our fellow believers "throughout the world" (9). Things may yet become more difficult for us and we are likely to see a growing hostility toward followers of Christ in this increasingly secular culture. But Peter reminds us that whatever we might be called upon to suffer, we're not alone. We have the "cloud of witnesses" throughout biblical history that surrounds us (Hebrews 12:1), but also those in church history and our contemporaries. Never before has the persecution of followers of Christ been more widespread than it is today. I receive notices daily from news media, secular as well as Christian, reporting severe persecution of Christians throughout the world.

We need to stand together with these fellow believers, and as we do, we ourselves find encouragement and strength. Just as we have done this weekend, we need to continue to support the persecuted church with our prayers and through financial support of ministries like Open Doors and the Barnabas Fund, who provide aid for those who have suffered great losses for their faith.

Paul knew the importance of intercession, as he urgently pleaded for the prayers of the church for his making known "the mystery of the gospel," which was the reason

for his imprisonment. He realized his need for intercessory prayer for him to make the message of Christ known fearlessly (Ephesians 6:19f).

Whatever difficulty you're experiencing, whether it's abuse and mistreatment for your witness for Christ, or other painful trials, such as illness and distressing circumstances, you can be sure that you're not alone. You have a brother or sister in Christ, somewhere in the world, and possibly right here at IBC Brussels, who is going through a similar trial and is remaining faithful to the Lord Jesus. You're not standing alone, and need to be aware that others, like fellow soldiers, are standing with you.

Standing together in difficult times demands also that we...

Hold out! *Standing fast in grace* (verses 10-12)

Peter's conclusion (12) is really a summary of his entire letter, in which he has been exhorting and declaring the true grace of God. "The entire Christian life is one of *grace*—God's daily bestowal of blessings, strength, help, forgiveness, and fellowship with himself, all of which we need, none of which we ever deserve" (Grudem, 201). We must hold out for and stand fast in grace because...

God's grace has saved us

As Peter says, "And the God of all grace" has called us to salvation (10). The Apostle Paul notes that we have been justified through faith and given peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, "through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Romans 5:1f). By God's grace and through our faith in Christ we have been saved and we continue to stand fast in his grace.

Salvation begins with God's call into his eternal glory in Christ (10). We were lost, condemned sinners until God called us to himself and gave us the faith to believe in Christ and trust him as Savior and begin to follow him as Lord (Ephesians 2:8f). Early in this letter Peter gave a doxology to God, who "in his great mercy...has given us new birth into a living hope" (1:3).

Eternal life is a present reality and we, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, participate in the resurrection life of Christ. We are Kingdom-of-God people and have become part of God's chosen people, belonging to him forever (2:9).

We are saved by grace but also we continue to stand in grace because...

God's grace is saving us

Salvation is more than a one-time experience that guarantees that we'll go to heaven when we die. Grace through faith in Christ draws us into a love relationship and allows us to participate in the resurrection power of the life of Christ in us. As Peter

says, though we have not seen Jesus in his flesh, yet we by grace through faith love him, believe in him and are “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for (we) *are receiving* the goal of (our) faith, the salvation of (our) souls” (1:8f).

Returning to Paul’s description of our new life of peace and joy by grace through faith, we’re reminded that we continue to stand in God’s grace, “which is needed throughout the Christian life, not just the beginning” (Romans 5:2; Moo, 1,900).

We’re kept by God’s grace, which enables our trials and suffering to be faith-refining and character-building experiences, for our eternal good and God’s glory (1 Peter 1:7; Romans 5:1-5; 8:28f; James 1:2ff).

Because we are in Christ and Christ is in us, no experience in life is ever wasted on us. Suffering is a momentary experience during this brief earthly pilgrimage, and we can trust that God will in his time, as well as for eternity, restore us and make us strong, firm and steadfast (10). In this 10th verse of our text, using “four nearly synonymous verbs,” Peter gives a “rhetorical crescendo” to describe how God will eventually put things right in our lives and finish the process of our being made like Christ (Jobes, 316). Every trial and every victory of faith and trust we experience will make us stronger and better prepared for the next challenge and will make us more fruitful in our witness for Christ.

The grace of God is at work restoring us (10), from the Greek verb *katartisei*, meaning “to mend,” used of the disciples’ mending their nets (Mark 1:19, ESV; A T Robertson, *WPNT*, 134). The grace of God mends our broken lives and prepares us for useful service now and eternal glory to come. This word “restore” also means “to put in order, to make right,” and may be used for a surgeon setting a broken bone (Clowney, 218). God takes our brokenness and by grace restores us to wholeness and usefulness. Peter knew this work of grace in his own life, having been restored after his dismal failure in denying his Lord.

And as we continue to stand...

God’s grace will finally and completely save us

The believer in Christ is secure in him and need never question his or her final salvation. The Father holds us in his hand and will never let go of us (John 10:27-30), yet we must prove the validity of this work of grace by our perseverance to the end (Mark 13:13). As we noted, God allows the testing of our faith through trials, as we experience the judgment of God in determining true from false believers, who fall away due to a mere profession and not a true possession of faith (4:17).

In hope we look forward to the final consummation of our salvation, when this process of becoming like Christ will be completed (1 John 3:2). We will then be finally delivered from the nagging afflictions of sin, the sinful flesh, and the devil. And all suffering and sorrow will be erased and every tear wiped from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).

Peter reminds us that our present suffering is for only “a little while” (10). It does seem at times that sufferings on this earth are endless, but we need to realize they are in fact “only momentary compared with the glorious eternity that believers will spend with God” (cp. 1:6; Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Moo, 2,131). If we could add up all our suffering and weigh it against our future glory, there would be no comparison. That’s true for our brothers and sisters who are experiencing terrible ordeals of suffering, and it’s certainly true for us with our lesser degree of suffering.

We can trust that God’s grace will finally and completely save us. We are people of Good Friday, called to follow the way of the Cross. But as people of Good Friday we are also people of Resurrection Sunday, and believe that we are more than conquerors through Christ, who is coming again and will vindicate all who have suffered for his name and will consummate his reign on a renewed heaven and earth.

Conclusion:

Peter gives a closing benediction to God, for his power (11), which is better translated “the dominion” (*ESV*). The mighty Roman Empire was the dominant political power, and seemingly held dominion over all people throughout the empire. How weak and insignificant the tiny Christian community must have seemed by comparison! By their own strength, these scattered strangers called Christians didn’t have a prayer. But they had a strategy, not just for survival but for victory, which was to trust in and humble themselves under the One who has all dominion over heaven and earth (6, 11; Jobes, 317).

With the awareness of Christ’s victory, we are called to stand together, firm in the faith and standing fast in grace. We live now in our Babylon (probably a code word Peter uses for Rome, as we see also in Revelation 18. Moo, 2,131), which is our earthly city, whose days of dominion are numbered. As long as we are on our earthly, brief pilgrimage to the City of God, we need to stand together. And we need to remember that we belong to a world-wide brotherhood of a shared, well-grounded hope (Michaels, 304).

We need each other, as a true fellowship of love and peace, as Peter reminds the churches in his closing greetings (13f). We need to stand together as the Body of Christ so that when one falls, the other can help him up (Ecclesiastes 4:9f). As we prepare to share the Lord’s Supper together, let’s be mindful of our communion with Christ and with one another as his unified body of love and peace.

And we all need Christ, and we need to stand firm in our faith and stand fast in his grace, whatever happens to us during the “little while” of our pilgrimage. The real battle with the evil one, the devil, is not “out there” somewhere, but is within us, since Christ himself is within us as our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).

Even if we have to stand alone and it seems others have mistreated us or deserted us, as Paul experienced, we too can trust that the Lord is standing with us to give us strength and to deliver us from the “lion’s mouth” (2 Timothy 4:17). Especially do we need to be aware that the Lord is standing with us and through the Holy Spirit is standing up within us.

I’m reminded of the little girl who, being angry with her parents who had unfairly punished her, stood up to leave the dinner table. When her father demanded she sit back down, she did so, but defiantly. With her arms folded across her chest and with squinted eyes she said, “I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside!”

You may feel knocked down on the outside, with all sorts of troubles, difficulties and threats from this fallen world of the devil. But we can all together stand up on the inside, and stand firm in our faith and stand fast in the grace of our almighty Lord Jesus Christ.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What do you think is communicated by the biblical image of “standing” in faith and grace?
2. Why is Jesus’ warning (Matthew 26:41) to his disciples about watching and praying against temptation important to us? Why would this warning of Jesus have brought back painful memories to Peter?
3. CS Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* spoke of the two tactics of the devil and his demons as getting people to disbelieve there is a devil and influencing others to attribute too much to his power and influence over their lives. How have you observed this assessment from people you know?
4. Martin Luther said that even the devil is God’s devil. What do you think he meant by this, and how can we think about God, in his perfect wisdom, power and love, giving the devil certain freedom to initiate evil in this world?
5. What provision has God given us to ward off the devil's attacks and to be victorious over his influence?

6. Salvation is a dynamic term, with a past, present and future dimension. What does it mean for you to say, "I have been saved, am being saved and will be saved?"
7. Spend time in reflection and prayer, thinking of your present trials and struggles and then ask God to help you gain a stronger perspective of faith and hope, realizing the relative brevity of earthly suffering in the light of eternity. Think also of those you know who are suffering similar trials and those in the persecuted church, and pray for God to enable them to stand firm in their faith and to stand fast in God's grace.

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