

Final Words

1 Peter 5:12-14

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Today we conclude 1 Peter with the last few verses, often called final salutations. Most of the apostles' letters follow this format which was also the common way of concluding letters at that time. We may say, "sincerely" or "respectfully." The ancient world was more verbose and flowery with their final words. Here is how Peter ended.

Peter's Final Words in 1 Peter

"By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ." (1 Peter 5:12-14 ESV)

"By Silvanus." Silvanus is the Greek version of the name Silas. Silas was a common traveling partner of Paul and Barnabas and here with Peter. Peter is writing this letter from Rome, so Silas was there with him. Now what does it mean "by" Silas? Either he was Peter's secretary and wrote this letter down or he was Peter's mailman delivering this letter to Asia Minor. We don't know.

Peter says, *"I have written briefly to you."* The writer of Hebrews says the same thing at the end of his letter. What's that about? Neither Peter nor Hebrews would be considered a short letter. I don't know that I have ever written a letter even close to as long as Peter much less Hebrews, and I have a computer and printer.

Most likely it is Peter being polite. Letters were expected to be brief. Ever get a text message and you are scrolling down and down, and you think, this isn't a text, this is a book. The expectation with a text is that it is shorter. So, there is a little acknowledgement of cultural expectation here, although to us it sounds a bit odd, given its length.

Verse 13 has more insights into the heart and life of Peter. *"She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son."* Churches are called "she" not "he" because the Greek word is in the feminine form. This fits the picture of the church as the bride fulfilling the feminine side of the marital parable.

"She who is at Babylon." That could be confusing in terms of world history. The Babylonians overtook the Assyrians centuries before. By the first century of this letter, there was no real Babylon. So, who is Babylon?

Babylon became a descriptive slang for a place of power and decadence. It's like we use "The Big Apple" to refer to New York's prominence or we say something is "Vegas style," meaning glitzy or decadent. The ancient Babylon was both prominent and decadent. Centuries later, that was Rome, the very city Peter is writing from. *"She who is at Babylon"* was cultural code for the church at Rome, sends you greetings. Here we see the fraternity of Christian churches. They send their greetings. They cared about them. They cared about their sufferings. No doubt, they prayed for each other.

There's a good lesson for us there. It's easy to become provincial in our perspective at Bethel because we have so much going on across our campuses. Do we "greet" other churches who are gospel-preaching churches? Do we see them as sister churches? Pray for them? Celebrate their wins and successes? Hurt with them too?

"And so does Mark, my son." Mark is another story. He's also known as John Mark. Remember that Paul and Barnabas had their friendship split over this guy. He apparently had abandoned them at some point and Barnabas wanted to bring him back on the team, Paul didn't. These two heroes of the faith parted ways over that decision about Mark. By the time Peter writes, all had been restored and Mark aligns with Peter. The gospel of Mark was written by this same Mark who most scholars believe was the pen of Peter's account of Jesus. They were so close that Peter calls him, *"my son."*

Standing in Grace

"I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it." (1 Peter 5:12)

This is Peter's summary of the whole letter and what he himself wanted to accomplish. Grace is God's overflowing favor and kindness to us. Grace gives us what we don't deserve—and everything God has given us, we don't deserve. Salvation is completely by grace, meaning it is entirely a gift apart from any human effort or merit.

"This is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it." What? Stand in grace? What does that mean? How easy it is to receive the grace of God to save us, but trust in something else to get us through our trials—money, talents, our own grit and determination. We *start* in grace, but we also *stand* in grace.

Paul writes in Galatians 1:6, *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel."* In this case, they were returning to obedience to the Mosaic law as the grounds for their salvation. It is easy to be saved by grace and try to stay saved by law or something else. We do this when we look to Jesus to be saved and look to Moses to stay saved. We were saved by grace and that same understanding of God's extension of salvation to us apart from my performance and circumstances is the grace I must continue to live by.

This is like the escalator at a large mall or airport. An escalator is something you get on and it takes you up or down. But they often have a set of stairs next to them. There's always that person in a hurry or into fitness who wants to show the slackers on the escalator that they can do it themselves faster and better. Up they go huffing and puffing.

If I may draw the analogy, Peter says, grace is like the escalator. The strength to go up is provided by God. Partway up, don't think, I think I'd rather do this in my own strength; I prefer the stairs of human effort. Stay on the escalator of grace. Continue to trust God's strength, not your own.

I have no clever transition to Peter's next point.

Kissing in Love

"Greet one another with the kiss of love." (1 Peter 5:14)

It is a command. We should put this into practice, shouldn't we? So, let's all stand up. Come on. Everyone up. Now, on the count of three, I want you to turn to the nearest person behind you, and with all the emotion and love of Christian brotherhood, I want you to...*shake their hand!*

This is one of those fun verses in the Bible. It is a command to kiss, which is repeated often.

"Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss." (1 Thessalonians 5:26)

"Greet one another with a holy kiss." (1 Corinthians 16:20)

"Greet one another with a holy kiss." (2 Corinthians 13:12)

"Greet one another with a holy kiss." (Romans 16:16)

Here, Peter calls it the kiss of agape. The kiss of love. If you haven't traveled cross-culturally, you may not realize that not everybody expresses friendship the way that we do in Midwest America.

Years ago, our church did a trip to Israel, and some of us went on a little side trip to Egypt. So, we got to Cairo and we went walking around and the men are all holding hands with each other, the women are holding hands with each other, and we're kind of thinking, *well, that's different*. And they kiss in Egypt.

It was explained to us that it's even more complicated than that. There's Upper Egypt and there's Lower Egypt and the kissing practice is entirely different in those two parts of the country. I don't remember now which is which, but in one you kiss one cheek, other cheek, that's it. In the other part of the country, you kiss cheek, other cheek, and back to the first cheek. Apparently, it is highly offensive if you kiss the wrong way in the wrong area. So, it's important that you keep that all straight. I've been in other places where their expressions are similar.

And that's what it was like in the first century. You have to understand the culture of the day. Kissing was a culturally acceptable way to show brotherly/sisterly type affection. The kissing was on the cheek. It was always man to man and woman to woman. Never on the lips and not erotic.

Our cultural practice is obviously different. We may shake hands. We may do a man hug or a side hug. If someone greets you in church with a full body front hug, that's awkward. Kissing here is awkward. So, we have to apply the principle in our cultural setting. The truth behind the principle is that we are to love one another deeply.

"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart." (1 Peter 1:22) In a healthy Christian community, what does that look like? Tea at Downton Abbey? *So good to see you my dear chap*. Stiff and formal?

No. We are a family and the assumption is that we as Christians are in relationships with other Christians within this family with whom we want to be kissee-kissees. The spiritual affection and commitment shows itself in appropriate physical expressions. This is culturally defined, but don't let cultural questions stop your gospel expressions. We are physical beings and Christian love is appropriately expressed physically.

May I give some practical suggestions? *Yes, please, Pastor Steve, draw some lines for goodness sakes, I don't like how the person next to me is looking at me...*

In our culture we are less about the kiss of love than we are about the handshake of love, the fist bump of love, or the side hug of love. Part of love is taking the person's feelings into mind.

One of my family's favorite stories took place in the church I grew up in. We had a man in it who was not all there mentally. Church cared for him but understood the situation. One day my mom ran into him at the store. He went up to her and kissed her square on the lips. I don't think my mom has licked her lips since.

I've had plenty of awkward moments especially with dear sisters in the church who want to give the pastor a hug and do so with a little more closeness than I would want. So how about this, let's be affectionate with one another in brotherly and sisterly ways. I will do a man hug with my brother, hug my sister in a sisterly/innocent way, but always making sure that it is expressed appropriately where there is no question that this a holy hug and nothing more.

On the other hand, some of you need to ramp this up. You are as cold as the other side of the pillow and you haven't touched a fellow Christian since the flu bug of '84. Others of you probably could stand to back down on this a little.

So, show it. Show it physically in appropriate ways. Show it with acts of kindness. Show it with words of encouragement. Show it in gifts and service. But just make sure that you show it and you will be known around the church as a good kisser.

Final Thoughts on 1 Peter

Here are two summary takeaways from 1 Peter that I hope linger with us in the years ahead.

Suffering is good for us, embrace it by faith

If there is a repeated theme in Peter, it is trial and suffering. We have seen it over and over again. How do you feel about that? None of us like trials. I don't. Yet the Bible says that God loves us enough to regularly bring times of testing into our lives.

Peter's exhortation, *"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* (1 Peter 1:6-7)

The suffering itself may be evil or the result of evil. We shouldn't call that good. But a sovereign God is always working to use evil and pain and suffering for his good purposes. Even Satan, the roaring lion, and all the destruction he produces, is fulfilling God's deeper purposes. As Martin Luther once said, *"The devil is God's devil."*

We must have a right perspective of pain and suffering because it is coming. Peter wanted this Asia Minor church to understand God's purposes in it for what they were going through. Part of every good pastor's job is to prepare his people to suffer and to suffer by faith.

So, when your family suffers in some way or you experience a pain or loss, you're ready to go through that experience with faith in a good and sovereign God. To stand in that grace.

To come through it with your faith in God intact. Peter has helped us with this and I'm thankful.

Bethel Church, keep it weird

This is a hard truth to swallow in American Christianity where we have for some time enjoyed a certain level of cultural privilege. We like to think that if only our privileges were greater or we had Christians in higher political office, Christianity would really thrive.

History would say the opposite. Christianity is at its best when it is the minority, when it is on the margins. When it is strange in the society. Why? Because from there real Christianity shines brighter in contrast to the prevailing culture. It's like the moonlight. When does the moon shine brightest? When it contrasts with the darkness around it. Christianity is most effective when the light of the gospel shines in the dark.

*"By remaining faithful to its original commission, by serving its people with love, especially the poor, the lonely, and the dispossessed, and by not surrendering its doctrinal steadfastness, sometimes even the very contradiction of culture by which it serves as a sign, surely the Church serves the culture best."*¹ (Walker Percy)

I read a fascinating article² recently by Paul Carter where he takes 1 Peter as the church's guide for effective kingdom work in our increasingly secular and anti-Christian society.

He makes these points:

1. Don't Exaggerate Cultural Opposition
2. Be Active and Obvious in Doing Good
3. Do Not Be Afraid
4. Set Apart Christ As Lord
5. Be Prepared
6. Inspire Questions
7. Be Gentle and Respectful
8. Keep Your Conduct Honorable
9. Endure Slander and Mischaracterization
10. Honor Everyone

His point is that in a non- or anti-Christian environment, this kind of living will be weird. From a dominant Christian culture, weird is bad. But when Christianity is not dominant, *weird is good*.

We need to keep our Christianity weird in Northwest Indiana. Not to accommodate the culture around us. Not to try and conform to the world around us. Rather, by living authentically Christian, our weirdness will be appealing and will cause the unbelieving world to think, what is it with those people?

Like the Christian wife married to the unbeliever in chapter 3. She wins him without words by the character and nature of her life observed within that marital relationship. Over time, the unbelieving husband can't deny there is something real to it.

I've told the story before of the woman in our church whose unbelieving husband I confronted on his death bed saying, *"You can deny Christianity but you can't deny it in your*

¹ Walker Percy, as quoted by Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy*, p. 474.

² Paul Carter, "The Bithynian Option," www.adfontes.ca, September 17, 2015.

wife." As angry as he was at me, he turned with a tender look at her and said, "Nope, you're right, she's one fine cookie."

As we live in our community and love our community, as we love our spouses and remain committed to our covenants within our family, and deal honestly in business, and care for our culture's throw away children, and practice a Christian sexual ethic, and care for our neighbor without publicity, all that is weird in a world without God. But it speaks powerfully.

Would that this community would say about Bethel Church, "*She's one fine cookie.*" Weird is good. Weird inspires spiritual curiosity. So, my final word on 1 Peter is, Bethel Church, keep it weird.

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)

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