

*Acts 2:25–28 (NRSV)*

- <sup>25</sup> For David says concerning him,  
    ‘I saw the Lord always before me,  
    for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;  
<sup>26</sup> therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;  
    moreover my flesh will live in hope.  
<sup>27</sup> For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,  
    or let your Holy One experience corruption.  
<sup>28</sup> You have made known to me the ways of life;  
    you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

*1 Peter 5:6-11 (NRSV)*

<sup>6</sup>Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. <sup>7</sup>Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. <sup>8</sup>Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup>Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. <sup>10</sup>And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. <sup>11</sup>To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

*Philippians 4:8-13 (NRSV)*

<sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

<sup>10</sup>I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup>Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup>I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. <sup>13</sup>I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

*Where can we find some confidence in this Time of Virus?*

It was nearly the festival of Pentecost. What must Peter have thought when he looked back on that terrible night when Jesus had been arrested and hauled before Caiaphas, the high priest. During their last meal together, Jesus had foreseen Peter’s weakness, his cut and run attitude when things would get their toughest. Peter, in his unthinking enthusiasm, had told Jesus that he was ready to go with him to prison and even death . . . but Jesus knew better. He told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed at sunrise.

In the garden, Peter had slept while his Lord prayed in anguish over the ordeal that lay ahead. When the priests and soldiers arrived, Peter had stood on the outside, withdrawing from the crowd, distancing himself from the unfolding tragedy. As Jesus was led away, Peter had kept his distance, an observer only, neither a participant nor a defender.

And then, to his great everlasting shame, Peter had denied Jesus three times in quick succession. Each time, someone had said that they recognized Peter as one of those

who had been following Jesus. Each time, Peter quickly and vehemently denied it. And he had wept bitterly over his weakness and his shame. Great rivers of tears had flowed in those early morning hours. But they hadn't helped. He had just walked away and stayed away until the women had come to find him on Sunday morning with their astonishing story of angels and an empty tomb.<sup>1</sup>

Now, despite Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Peter's guilt and shame remained with him. In Jerusalem, he sat with the other believers waiting for . . . well, he wasn't sure, but Jesus had promised that there was yet more to come.

Suddenly, God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, was present with them, empowering and strengthening them all. Peter felt himself moved and when some of the gathered crowd began to accuse the believers of drunkenness, he rose to speak. The world would never be the same.

*Where did that come from?*

Surely, many in the crowd drawn by the commotion that Pentecost morning knew all about Jesus, his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. And they had undoubtedly heard the claims and rumors about Jesus' having been resurrected. How could they not have heard? Two decades later, Paul would repeat the early claim that 500 people had seen Jesus post-resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15). And, at least some in the crowd would have known that Peter was a fisherman from Galilee, one of those rustic rural types, perhaps illiterate and uneducated. And it is even possible that some had heard stories of Peter's denial of Jesus. It is doubtful that the three people who confronted Peter would have kept those stories to themselves. It wasn't every day that a self-professed Messiah was put on trial by Caiaphas and Pilate.

So, it isn't hard to imagine the shock and awe on the faces in the crowd, as Peter rose to speak. This fisherman was telling them that the believers were certainly not drunk. Rather, the long-awaited Day of the Lord had arrived, as promised by God through Joel and the prophets. And not only did Peter make the seemingly silly claim that the Day of the Lord had arrived,<sup>2</sup> he proceeded to claim that his fellow Jews had killed God's Messiah: "this man . . . you crucified and killed . . . Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

I wonder which part of Peter's sermon drew the strongest reaction from the crowd. His claim that Jesus, who had been humiliatingly crucified, was Messiah and had been resurrected by God, or his charge that Jesus' blood was on the crowd's hands. The onlookers had to be standing there in slack-jawed amazement. They had never witnessed anything like it in all their lives. Surely they asked themselves, "Where did *that* come from?" They would soon learn.

God. Jesus. The Holy Spirit. What else could explain the transformation of Peter? Nothing would be the same and that meant Peter too. He spoke the truth, God's truth, with a confident boldness. The Spirit of Christ now dwelt in him and the Spirit dwells in every believer, even today.

*"Cast all your anxiety on him"*

Anxiety has always been part of the human condition. With the onset of this new virus, there is an overabundance of anxiety, even fear. In Peter's day, people were no less anxious and stressed out than we are now, even when times were good – much less when they were bad.

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<sup>1</sup>In Luke's account, Peter disappears from the narrative after his three-time denial of Jesus. He is not mentioned in any of Friday's events and doesn't reappear in the narrative until Sunday.

<sup>2</sup>For the Jews of Jesus day, the Day of the Lord was to be the BIG day, when God put the world right, raised all the dead, showed the world that the Jews had been right all along, and ushered in his kingdom to be ruled by God's Messiah. But on that Pentecost morning, the world looked nothing like that. It was just another Festival day in a long line of such days.

For the ancients, the heavens were populated with countless gods and goddesses, any of whom might take a disliking toward you or your neighbors on a whim. The pantheon of the gods was like one big soap opera, far removed from any human control. The gods would do what they wanted, when they wanted. People coped with the whims of the gods in different ways. Some, like the Epicureans, decided that since they couldn't control their capricious gods, they'd simply grab all the pleasure and happiness they could in life.<sup>3</sup> Others, like the Stoics, sought to make themselves immune to anxiety by learning a detached self-sufficiency, which they called "contentment."<sup>4</sup>

Far from promoting some sort of detached self-sufficiency, in a letter written long after the Day of Pentecost recounted in Acts 2, Peter urges the Christians to throw their anxieties and worries upon God, for it is God who cares for these believers. It is God who will "restore, support, strengthen, and establish" the believers, even as they discipline themselves and stay vigilant against the work of Satan. Peterson paraphrases Peter this way: "this generous God . . . will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does."

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul uses the language of the Stoics. This is the only place in his letters that Paul refers to himself as "content" (*autarkes* in the Greek). Paul would often use the language and vocabulary of his audience when he spoke to them about Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> But Paul always meant something different too; there was always a Christian perspective. For the Stoics, contentment was all about being independent, needing no one else. That way, the content person, the confident person, couldn't be harmed by the emotions or slights or needs of others. It is resting in the Lord whatever comes.

Paul, you see, is writing from prison and he knows that he may soon be executed. Nonetheless, his letter to the Philippians is filled with joy. He has learned to be content in all things, even facing imprisonment and execution with confidence, for, as he says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

How has Paul learned this? What is his "secret"? Paul has learned that he can do all things – such as being content in all circumstances – through God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety. Paul's secret is that he has come to understand and truly embrace the psalmist's portrait of God as the good shepherd. Though Paul languishes in prison, he will "fear no evil," confident that God will lead him to green pastures and still water. Paul's cup will always overflow – in all circumstances. He knows that he will dwell in God's house forever, because nothing – "not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:38-39). Such confidence in God and the strength he provides is the basis for Paul's joyful contentment . . . and Peter's boldness.

### *Unlearning "self-reliance"*

Both Peter and Paul point us in the same direction – toward God. Peterson renders 1 Peter 5:6-7 this way: "So be content with who you are, and don't put on airs. God's

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<sup>3</sup>Epicurus taught that since we have no life other than this one, the good life is the life bringing the most pleasure and happiness now. It is unfortunate that "Epicureanism" has come to be associated with a profligate and luxurious lifestyle. This is not what Epicurus had in mind. He led a simple, honest life, believing that justice, honesty, and simplicity were the truest paths to a happy and pleasurable life.

<sup>4</sup>For Stoics, humans become virtuous through knowledge, enabling us to live in harmony with nature and achieve a profound sense of happiness, freedom from emotion, and detachment from the turmoil of life – to be content and self-sufficient in all things.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Acts 17 tells the story of Paul's appearance before a council of Greek philosophers in Athens. There, Paul talks to them in their language, speaking to their issues. The Greeks had always questioned the nature of "being." Paul told them that it is in the Lord God that we live, move, and "have our being." He talked to them about Jesus, but in their own words and ideas. Paul knew that all truth is God's truth; that, in God, the Greeks could find the answers they had long sought.

strong hand is on you; he'll promote you are the right time. Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you."

I was taught to be self-reliant, always ready to "pull myself up by the bootstraps." Many of us are. Understood correctly, self-reliance is a good thing. Paul supported himself with his skills as a tentmaker rather than relying on others for financial support. He was committed to his ministry and knew that he couldn't stand by and leave it up to others. He knew that he was God's agent, not God's puppet. "Contentment" for Paul and Peter did not mean just laying back and waiting for life to run you over.

But as we are inclined to do in all things, too often we turn a healthy self-reliance into an unhealthy self-sufficiency. We forget that we actually need others. We forget that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. We are not independent of others; we are dependent upon them to help us realize our purpose and to teach us about love. God does not call us to some sort of self-sufficient isolation, but to fellowship, even if it must be virtual for a time.

More even than that, we are dependent upon God. Indeed, much of the biblical story is devoted to shaking us out of our misguided self-sufficiency and self-centeredness. The long story of God and his people make us realize that we are dependent upon God, that it is he who strengthens us and enables us to accomplish all that we do, even as our own work and efforts are necessary.

Restoring hope in tough times takes a renewed commitment to celebrate God, to embrace the purpose to which God has called us, and to let ourselves fall into God's arms. As Peter writes to close his letter: "Peace to all of you who are in Christ."

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### **Monday Evening Class**

A study of Matthew's Gospel

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

A study of Genesis

Meeting on-line at 11:45am Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle".

#### *About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at noon on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle".