

## First Peter No. 29 “The Brotherhood”

1 Peter 5:12-14

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### Text Comment

- v.12 Silvanus and Silas are two forms of the same name, Silvanus the Latin form of the Greek Silas. We know from Acts 16:37 that Silas was a Roman citizen. [Jobes, 321] This is the Silas who is mentioned frequently in connection with the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

Silas may well have served in a similar role in connection with some of Paul's letters, where he is sometimes mentioned as a co-author. Here Peter probably means either that Silas took down the letter as Peter dictated it to him – functioned as a kind of secretary – or that he wrote the letter under Peter's general supervision and with its final draft approved by the Apostle. More skeptical scholars have often thought the Greek of First Peter too good for a Galilean fisherman and imagine that Peter used Silas to ensure a more stylish letter. Then Peter attached his own handwritten coda to the letter. But, of course, we don't actually know if Silas wrote the letter, even as a secretary. The language here could mean little more than that Silas carried the letter to its destination. In any case, it is clear that for all intents and purposes it is Peter who stands behind the letter.

“This is the true grace of God” i.e. what Peter has told them in the letter, viz. that their suffering will lead them to eternal glory and that God is present with them in and through it, so that while they may not feel like their present circumstances are full of grace, they really are. Because what Peter has written to them *is true*, the encouragement he offers them *is real!* [Clowney, 223]

- v.13 Some have supposed that Peter is referring here to his wife; we know that she travelled with him on his apostolic journeys, but, in all likelihood, “she who is in Babylon” is the Christian church in Rome, where Peter was when he wrote the letter. Remember, Peter referred to his readers at the beginning of the letter as “exiles” and as “the dispersion” or “the diaspora.” As the Jews were sent to Babylon as exiles and as the Christians were exiles from their homeland of heaven, living, as it were in a foreign land, the capital of the empire was naturally associated with Babylon in their mind.
- v.14 The “kiss of love” which Paul, in several places in his letters calls the “the holy kiss” and, like Peter, urges upon the brethren as a form of greeting, became, at least by the middle of the 2nd century a part of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, for Justin Martyr in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century mentions it in his description of the Christian worship service. This was a culture, as it is today, in which kisses were exchanged between parents and children, brothers and sisters, masters and slaves, even kings and their clients. You'll see still today politicians from some parts of the world kissing one another on the cheek as they meet on the tarmac for some diplomatic event. This familial kiss probably forms the background to the practice we find in the NT, for Christians regarded themselves as brothers and sisters. Apparently, it was normally given on the cheek, the forehead, or the hand. You find it in the Lord's teaching (Luke 7:45; 15:20) but, interestingly, there is no evidence of it as part of the service of the synagogue or temple. It is something to think about it, isn't it? Should we reinstitute

the kiss of love as part of our worship? That isn't the same thing as turning to the one next to you, shaking hands, and greeting them. Many churches have turned the "kiss" into a way of seeming friendly. Not the same thing. If we were to plan that next week I would tell you to kiss the person next to you, we could see how it would work out and, more than that, we would see who would be sitting next to whom!

There are other such customs mentioned in the Bible that derived from the customs of the culture – not all cultures, not even Jewish and Greco-Roman culture together – that the church has largely considered culture specific, that is, they continue to be entirely appropriate in some cultures but would be difficult to introduce to others because they are neither familiar or meaningful in those cultures. Examples would include foot-washing, which might still be appropriate in places where sandals are worn on dusty roads and streets or the wearing of veils by women – which, for example, was not a Hebrew or Jewish custom but was in the Greco-Roman world long before and during the advent of the Christian mission. Wearing a hat, by the way, is not the same thing as wearing a veil. In our culture a hat is a fashion statement, it is not a sign of authority or of any other spiritual principal. A similar custom would be that of dance in worship, to which mention is made in the Psalms. But modern western dancing is not *that kind of dancing* and it would be difficult for us to create a culture of liturgical dance that was meaningful to us in the same way Japanese Christians would be horrified to be told that they were to kiss the people sitting next to them in the pew. John Stott referred to such alternations in practice from those of biblical times – again only in some cultures in biblical times – foot-washing, veils, and dancing – as “cultural transpositions.” That is, the principle in each case was adjusted to the practices of the culture, so as to be expressed in a way that was meaningful in that culture. The principle is unchanging, the cultural expression varies from time to time and place to place. We understandably do not wash one another's feet in a place where shoes and socks are worn and where people walk on sidewalks or lawns.

One of the genuinely charming things about the Bible is the way in which it pays honor to ordinary and undistinguished people. You don't find this in the holy books of other religions. If you stop and count them up, such people make a multitude in the biblical narrative. One of the genuinely wonderful things about the gospel of Christ is the way in which it gives very ordinary people an extraordinary life to live and a legitimate path to genuine greatness. There are many great figures in the Biblical history, of course. The grace and the gifts of God regularly produced men of a heroic mold. Abraham, Moses, David, Paul and Peter are only a few of those enshrined in the biblical hall of heroes. But around them and among them is a much greater number of ordinary people, as the world measures such things – hardly movers and shakers – people who live, nevertheless, from the vantage point of God and the gospel, noteworthy lives. You did not have to be a man or woman of extraordinary ability or accomplishment to get mentioned in God's book, even to be singled out for praise in God's book!

Think of some of these people. Abraham's faithful old servant Eleazar to whom the patriarch entrusted the responsibility of finding a wife for Isaac. Sad but praying Hannah, the mother of Samuel. The good woman who was so hospitable to Elisha the Prophet. Mary, the Jewish maid and mother of our Lord. Baruch, Jeremiah's aide and secretary. The woman who anointed the Lord with very expensive perfume in the house of Simon the leper, of whom Jesus said that her act would be remembered wherever the gospel was preached throughout the world. Phoebe, Paul's benefactress about whom we know very little apart from the fact that she was a trusted aide of the great Apostle

to the Gentiles. And, then, there are these two mentioned by Peter here: Mark and Silas. And, in a way, no doubt many of the Christians in the churches to which the letter was being sent, are represented by these two men.

Mark is a most interesting man and his story is, in an unusual way, a most comforting one. You remember Mark. He was there, as a young man, perhaps even a teenager, in Gethsemane the night of our Savior's betrayal. No one can be sure, but many have wondered if he hadn't overheard something, learned of Judas' treachery and had gone straight from home late at night to warn Jesus, which would explain why he was there and was wearing nothing but the single linen garment, as we read in Mark 14:51. In any event, when the soldiers came to make their arrest, they grabbed him too. Mark was terror stricken and forgot everything except his own safety. He ran, pulling out of his clothing as he made his escape naked into the night, a moment he must have remembered with shame for the rest of his life, but for honesty's sake he recorded the event as virtually his signature in the Gospel that he wrote many years later.

If you've read any of the many accounts of the Normandy landings on D-Day you know of the terror of those first minutes and hours at Omaha beach, where men were being slaughtered by the hundreds and could find no protection anywhere from the machine gun and mortar fire. There were many men on that beach that day who were simply paralyzed by fear. They couldn't move; in some cases, they couldn't speak. Mark no doubt very soon thereafter wished he had shown more courage in Gethsemane, but he had been overtaken by terror.

Well, we are willing to be merciful. But, apparently, at another key juncture in New Testament history, Mark did a similar thing. His cowardice made a fugitive of him again, this time from the difficulties and the dangers of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey. He had begun with them, had gone through Cyprus with them, as we read in Acts 13, but as they made their way onward up into the highlands of Galatia, Mark quit: the going became too difficult for him in some way. He decided to go home though, no doubt, he was urged to continue by Barnabas and Paul. We know that is what happened because Mark's quitting later became an issue between Paul and Barnabas. Sometime later Barnabas wanted to give Mark a second chance – Mark was, after all, his relative – but Paul, because Mark had deserted them once – that is how it is put in Acts 15:38 – thought it unwise to take the younger man. The last thing he needed on a missionary tour – dangerous and difficult as it was certain to be in many ways – was a colleague he would have to drag along. And, in what is surely one of the most surprising developments in the NT, these two great, godly, brotherly, gentlemanly, and peace-making men had such a sharp disagreement that they parted ways. Imagine that! Mark was the cause of the breakup of that first, fabulous Christian missionary team: Paul and Barnabas. We wonder if ever during that sharp discussion between Paul and Barnabas Mark himself urged them not to separate on his behalf, not to allow him to become the cause of such an embarrassing breach between two of the principal leaders of apostolic Christianity. It is all the more interesting a piece of history because when Barnabas went off on his own with Mark, Paul needed to find another partner, and he chose Silas, the very same Silas who is mentioned here in the same breath with Mark!

In any event, Mark's first two appearances in the New Testament are far from glorious – two instances of cowardice, the latter the cause of a fateful split between two wonderful men. But Mark is later found with Paul again as one of his assistants and, as much as we would love to hear the story of their reconciliation and Mark's rehabilitation as a worker in the entourage of the great apostle to the Gentiles, we are delighted to know that it happened, however it did. What is more, we

know from the information of early Christianity that Mark also had a most important role in Peter's ministry, finally writing, under Peter's supervision and with Peter's authority, the Gospel that bears his name.

That, by the way, is itself an instance of Peter's remarkable magnanimity – to allow his Gospel to go out into the world under Mark's name. It is at least possible, of course, that Paul has already been martyred at this time and that is why Mark was serving Peter instead of Paul.

*And then there is Silas.* His first appearance in the New Testament record is in Acts 15 where he is chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch, bearing the decision of the Jerusalem Council. He is there described as a leader among the brethren. He was also a prophet and was a great encouragement to the saints in Antioch through his preaching. He later, as we said, became a colleague of Paul and accompanied him on his missionary journeys, was jailed with him in Philippi – must have had a good singing voice because he and Paul sang hymns that night in the jail – was sometimes left behind in cities that Paul had evangelized in order to establish the work, and is mentioned by Paul as a co-author of some of his letters. And now, after years spent in the company and the service of the Apostle Paul, we find Silas or Silvanus assisting Peter in his work and being given some credit for another letter that would find its place in Holy Scripture. What a man! What a life! What experiences! And, yet, there is no question that he lived it in the shadow of much greater men! He is a minor character in the Bible, like many others, but in that, surely, there hangs a tale.

For it has been so through the centuries since. The story of Christianity is also the story of its “minor characters.” The great men have all had their assistants whose names are known to historians but to no one else. The history of early Christianity especially, but of all Christianity, is very much the history of its great men. We don't have much information about the ordinary Christians, even Christians on the level one below the great men. Even of some of the principal ordinary Christians in the New Testament's narrative we know precious little, however much we might love to know more. When and how did Joseph die? What kind of father was he? When and how did Mary die and what was the character of her later life? What did she do with the years that God gave her after the death and resurrection of her son and his ascension to heaven? We know precious little about her as a mature woman. She disappears from the narrative after Acts 1. Indeed, of the 12 Apostles, we really have reliable and significant information about only three, Peter, James, and John, and little enough regarding James apart from the circumstances of his death narrated in Acts 12. History tells us that Thomas went as far as India in his evangelistic travels, but we know nothing of those travels or precisely how he founded the church in South India. Were those nine other apostles impressive men, powerful men, influential men or were they men of more ordinary gifts and graces? We cannot say, so little information as we have. And the same sort of questions may be asked of literally hundreds of interesting people mentioned in the Bible, including Jabez concerning whom we have a single sentence, sufficient however to be the basis for a multi-million-dollar best seller a few years ago.

The Bible is the history of the kingdom's heroes, not because they were the only important players in the gospel history, but because their larger than life experiences and accomplishments made them the most instructive examples of a life that was also being lived by multitudes of more common, unexceptional folk, men and women, who served the Lord faithfully, loved the brethren, bore witness to the gospel, and added the immense weight that lay behind the assault on the unbelief of the Roman world by the great thinkers, writers, orators, and leaders of the Christian church. No one had a conversion quite like that of the Apostle Paul – so dramatic, so life-changing – so

understandably we learn about what conversion is in Paul's personal history. But, of course, there were thousands upon thousands of conversions in those early days and the lives of those people were also changed root and branch if not so spectacularly. We have just some of their names, the Marks and the Silases of early Christianity, who represent that vast multitude of more ordinary Christians.

And so, it has continued to be throughout the history of the church. Wherever you read in the history of Christianity in the world you come across a Mark or a Silas. Augustine had his Possidius, Chrysostom his Palladius. Luther had his Jonas, Calvin had, among a company of others, his Louis Bourgeois or Theodore Beza. Thomas Boston tells of a godly elder in his church who "always had a brow for a good cause." Here is Alexander Whyte speaking of a late member of his church, James Stewart, who worked in the cab office at Dean Bridge, and who used to sit in the front row and to follow the sermon with great attentiveness, and who loved Walter Marshall's great Puritan classic on the Christian Life, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*. Indeed, on his deathbed he told his pastor, "O! that Blessed Third Direction!" Do you know what the Third Direction is? That is the way Marshall wrote his great book. Each of its chapters is headed by a "direction" and the third one is this:

"The way to get these endowments [that underlie a holy life] so as to be able to practice [that holy life], is, to receive them from Christ's fullness, by union and fellowship with him."

A life lived in union with Christ, the actual daily practice of union with Christ, is what this man loved, and in which had found his strength and hope and love. And many people remembered him for that and loved him for the life of love to Christ he lived. But who remembers him now?

Or, think of Joseph Passmore who met and became Charles Spurgeon's friend when they were both in their teens at the New Park Street Church, and remained Spurgeon's fast friend and became the printer of his sermons, a venture that eventually became a huge business all by itself, as thousands of them, hundreds of thousands of those sermons were eventually printed every week and sent to the far corners of the world.

Or, E.T. Rees, the secretary of the Mission Hall in Aberavon, Wales, who first asked a young physician to come and preach for them on a November Sunday in 1926 and heard the young doctor by the name of Martin Lloyd Jones, who had scarcely preached a dozen times in his young Christian life, say to him that Sunday morning, "I hope you don't expect anything great of me." From that time the older Rees was Lloyd-Jones' assistant in the work that almost immediately began to enjoy a great measure of blessing from God.

And I have known such people myself, as you have. I remember and will with great fondness to the end of my days, Mr. Gordon Ross, the organist for decades at Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen, where Florence and I worshipped for three years in the 1970s. I can hear the thick Scottish accent. I can see the very thick eye-glasses through which he looked to see the music he played at that wonderful organ in the church. I can remember his fervent prayers at the Prayer Meetings on Saturday nights, even a Bible study he once gave in the pastor's absence on a Wednesday night. I can't remember the subject, but I remember one line: "We are all made from the same mould; but some of us are mouldier than others!" Many will remember the pastor, William Still, for at least another generation. Many fewer will remember Gordon Ross.

Or Edith Ingraham, the Mr. Still's secretary for so many years. Unmarried, as so many of the women of her generation were, having lost the men who might have been their husbands in the Second World War. A Christian woman of grace and goodness who found it in her heart to be interested in anyone who was interested in the kingdom of God. Familiar with so many who were laboring in the gospel all around the world, keeping up with their comings and goings with a true interest; faithful as much as anyone to that three-hour long prayer meeting on Saturday night that had been going since just after the end of the Second World War. Long after we had left Scotland, when Parkinson's' disease made it necessary for her to leave her home of so many years to go into a nursing home, she sent us a gift, a lovely set of little shrimp forks, -- she was getting rid of her earthly possessions and wanted them to go to folk she loved. Her house was on Murray Terrace in Aberdeen, whence the name of our first dog, Murray! A way to remember a wonderful saint! But the number of people who remember Edith today must be very small.

And I could go on and on. Telling you about the Marks and the Silases that I have known. The English pastor, Ian Tait, known to some in this congregation, had his Bruce Hyatt, a bachelor secretary who was himself a very learned man. My father had his Rudy Schmidt. Rudy was a wonderful Christian man whose labors were largely performed behind the scenes, but he was an essential factor in the founding of Covenant College and Covenant Theological Seminary. And you could tell me your stories about such men and women. And I could go on and on about some such people in this congregation. Not great as the world measures greatness; not even great as greatness is measured in the history of the church. But great nonetheless, great enough to get them mentioned in Gods book, had they, like Silas or Mark, lived in the right place at the right time. Great enough, surely, for them to be known as "a faithful brother" as Peter said Silas was, or great enough for any famous Christian of real spiritual worth, as Peter undoubtedly was, to want to call him "my son," as Peter called Mark.

Those of us who are older can now hardly aspire to be a Peter or Paul, a David or Abraham, a Jeremiah or a John the Baptist, an Augustine, Calvin, or Spurgeon, though some of you younger people should be thinking of what, by the grace of God, you might accomplish for the kingdom of God if you apply yourselves to the cultivation of the gifts God has given you. Still, the great men of the church's history are likely to be beyond the reach of any of us. We were never given the gifts or graces to make our lives as consequential as theirs. Perhaps we cannot even aspire to the place of a Silas or a Mark. Perhaps they would tell us that it was living in the presence of such men as they were privileged to know and serve -- Paul and Peter especially -- that made them so much more than they otherwise might have been. To live in the shadow of great Christlikeness and spiritual zeal is a magnificent privilege for anyone who has the grace of God in his or her heart!

*But, brothers and sisters, we ought all to aspire to high and holy things.* Those things may come to us in a measure determined by the will of God and appropriate to our station in life, but we have here and at many other places in the Bible the encouragement to believe that true godliness and goodness and hard gospel work of even very ordinary people is pleasing to God and of great benefit to the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

I am glad to say that we have such people here. I am very grateful to God for them, a goodly number of them. There are certainly people in this church who are loved, admired, and appreciated for their cheerful labor for the Lord, for their kindly interest in others, for their support of the church's life and work. I want to urge them on and I want all of us to consider how we might

ourselves be more like these ordinary folk, like Silas and Mark, whose names the Spirit of God saw fit to include in his Holy Scriptures when he might just as well have left them out. They're not essential to the story in one respect, and yet God thought it important for us to know who they were, know their names so that we could remember them.

You may never be, I will never be a great man like Paul or Peter. But, you can certainly become someone others instinctively call "a faithful brother!" You can certainly be the kind of person another older, more experienced, more practiced Christian would want to call his spiritual son or daughter. Surely you can. The grace of God can make you such a person, as it has made a vast multitude of others such people. The question is: do you aspire to be such a person?

I suspect that many of us know what the problem is; why we might not rise to the stature of a Silas or a Mark. They were men of like passions with us – remember Mark's cowardice – so it is not that we have sins and weaknesses and they did not. They surely did. They too had to go to the throne of grace daily to seek forgiveness for what they had done and failed to do. They too, like even Paul himself, knew the bitterness of Christian failure: "O wretched man that I am; who will deliver me from this body of death?"

No, the difference, if there is a difference, lies here: they aspired to be more and better for Christ. Mark left some things in his past behind because he was not content to be a coward all his life. They were willing to undertake challenges for the sake of Christ's name in their lives – in Silas' case, even to risk life and limb for the sake of spreading the gospel.

Whereas far too many of us are not really, not if the truth be told, following as hard after what we know is not yet in our Christian lives. There are things in our lives – and you know what they are – that we ought to have left behind long ago, and we have not done so. Maybe we think it isn't that big a deal because our lives are small, and they don't count for very much. Here's a text to disabuse us of that excuse. We are not seeking it with tears daily from God's hand. We are not practicing gospel holiness with a vengeance in our lives. We may have practiced it zealously at some earlier time in our lives, but we are not now. We are sullen and critical in spirit and we know we are, but we are not repenting of that pride and anger and instead putting on a cheerful spirit of compliment, appreciation, and kindness to others. We are lazy and indifferent to the work that lies before us to contribute to, but we are not repenting of that indolence and selfishness and instead applying ourselves to any and every worthy work we can lay our hands on. We are lustful after the pleasures of this world but are not repenting of our lack of faith in a world to come and a judgment day and a very short stay in this world in which to love and serve our Redeemer. We are angry and hard in our relations with others, perhaps even our own children, but we are not repenting of all of those ways in which we exasperate others when we ought to be devoting ourselves to spreading cheer and practicing kindness. We are glum and moody but are not repenting of our lack of Christian joy and seeking to be happy in Christ and to make others happy, which is virtually the same thing! And so on.

No, my brothers and sisters, there is more for us to become and more for us to do. We ought to think of that every day of our lives. Be a Mark, be a Silas and have a name in the estimation of Christians who know what real goodness is and how to measure it. Aspire to be like them, these ordinary believers whom God saw fit to name and remember in his Holy Book. And, then, who knows: in a church full of people aspiring to be Mark or Silas, perhaps the Lord will also find a Peter or a Paul!