

## Following The Risen Jesus: Living with Suffering

We continue this week to look at Peter's letter to the early church in Turkey. And today's passage is a real pivot. Up to this point Peter has reminded them of their salvation, and as a result he has reminded them that they are a chosen people as Pastor Steve preached on last week. This week Peter gets down to the nitty gritty. Because they are saved, because they are chosen, because they are living stones, now what does this mean for their everyday lives? So we pick up where we left off last week. Starting at verse 11 of chapter 2.

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:11-25

<sup>11</sup> Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. <sup>12</sup> Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

<sup>13</sup> Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, <sup>14</sup> or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. <sup>15</sup> For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. <sup>16</sup> Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. <sup>17</sup> Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

<sup>18</sup> Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. <sup>19</sup> For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. <sup>20</sup> But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. <sup>21</sup> To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

<sup>22</sup> "He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth."<sup>[e]</sup>

<sup>23</sup> When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." <sup>25</sup> For "you were like sheep going astray,"<sup>[f]</sup> but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Peter begins this section by referring to the people in the early church as foreigners and exiles. Other translations use the word strangers. What does he mean by this? Are they literally from a different land than where they are originally from and Peter is referring to a specific group of

people that have immigrated? Probably not. This letter is going to be circulated to multiple churches in Asia Minor, so Peter is going to refer to their situations more generally than that. So when Peter calls them foreigners and exiles, he is probably referring to them as Christians living in a pagan world. And this makes sense if you consider the verses that Pastor Steve looked at last week. They have been chosen, set apart. Because they are now in Christ they are different. Different from the world they live in. That is why Peter calls them foreigners. As Christians they should stand out like a foreigner in the pagan world.

Charles Swindoll shares a story in his book about a missionary couple that spent 30 years serving in Africa. And after all those decades in Africa they returned to America by ship into the New York City Harbor. It so happened that they were on the ship with an important diplomat and when the ship docked a crowd of people gathered to meet the important diplomat. There were cheers and a band playing music and applause erupted when he walked down the gangplank. Behind him a little while after was the missionary couple. There was no attention given to them. No fanfare, no music, no applause. The husband looked at his wife and said “Honey, it doesn’t seem right after all these years that we would have nobody to greet us while that man got such a good reception.” The wife put her arm around him and said “but honey, we are not home yet.”

We are not home yet. This is true for all followers of Christ. We are foreigners in a pagan world and eternal citizens of another place. If we are in Christ, we are all foreigners and strangers. Calvin puts it this way: “And he so calls them, not because they were banished from their country and scattered into various lands, but because children of God, wherever they may be, are only guests in this world.” Did you ever think of yourself that way? As a Christian, wherever you may be this morning, are just a guest in this world. You are a foreigner in a pagan world and you are not home yet.

And then Peter says because of their exile status, “to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. <sup>12</sup>Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” In other words, live an exemplary life and do it for the sake of God, not yourself. Do the right thing, even when you are mistreated, because God can be given glory in that.

Now at this point it is worth looking at the world these early Christians were living in. They were in what was then part of the Roman Empire. Nero Caesar was in power. He was the fifth emperor of Rome. And he actually started out as a good leader. He made multiple reforms when he first came into power. In fact he eliminated capital punishment early during his reign. But as can happen with human beings in power, over time he realized he could do whatever he wanted and get away with it. And as time went on he became more and more corrupt. He became known for extravagance and debauchery. He became more extreme in what he wanted

and what he did. He eventually had his mother executed. Then he had his first wife executed because he liked someone else's wife and the list goes on. His popularity faded as his behavior grew worse. Then, in 64 A.D. there was a great fire in Rome and Nero was initially blamed for it even though he could not have set the fire because of where he was that day. Nero, even though not guilty of setting the fire, was anxious to shift the blame, so he said the Christians were guilty of setting the fire. This radical new group is probably to blame. Thus the need for distinction between Christians and Jews became necessary and persecution of Christians followed.

So it should come as no surprise that Peter is telling early Christians that no matter what their circumstance, they need to live honorably. They can't give anyone any reason to accuse them of anything. They have already been falsely accused. And the interesting thing is that one of the things they were accused of was following a "different king." The funny thing is that that is true. They do follow a different king. God is their king. However, Peter is also telling them to live honorably and honor all earthly authority. Don't give the pagan world anything to hold over them. Starting in verse 13, "<sup>13</sup> Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, <sup>14</sup> or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. <sup>15</sup> For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. <sup>16</sup> Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. <sup>17</sup> Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor."

So Peter is telling them to be different because they are in Christ, but be different in a good way. Be exceptional but not defiant. Be radical, but in a different way. Be radically good and obedient. I like verse 16 where Peter says "Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil." Live as free people. They are free, they are free in Christ. So basically he is saying, now that you know you can be forgiven, don't go and do wrong. That's not how people in Christ live. I have heard this argument when talking about being saved by grace, not works. People have argued well if I am not saved by anything I do, then I can do whatever I want. That argument does not hold up. And that is what Peter is saying. Yes you are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ, however, what you do very much matters. What you do needs to reflect and glorify the God that has saved you. And in verse 17 he sums up how we are to treat each other and those in the world around us. He writes "Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor."

Show proper respect to everyone. That is the first one. This sounds reasonable for sure, but how easy is this to do when some of those everyone's have wronged you? Or falsely accused you? Or are mistreating you? How easy is it to show them respect then? Not so much right? And especially in our culture where our individual rights are always worn on our sleeves. We

are quick to defend or even strike back when someone steps on our toes, shows us injustice, or crosses the line. One commentator noted that we can find a lawyer's phone number faster than we can find a passage of scripture. Ouch, that hit home. So showing proper respect to everyone sounds easy until we remember that everyone includes people that will treat us badly. But Peter is urging them to do this.

Then he says love the family of believers. The Greek word used for love here is agape. If you remember the Greek language had multiple words for love. There was a word for familial love, there was a word for brotherly love, and there was a word for romantic love. But agape is none of those. Agape is used when talking about the unconditional love of God. So within the family of believers here Peter is saying we need to have unconditional love for each other. Now that might seem easy right now because we are apart and we miss each other. But we are getting ready to start looking for a new senior pastor. And I know that we will not agree on everything. Differences of opinions will arise. But as a body of believers we are under the command to love each other. That command came from Jesus himself and Peter is reminding the early church of this.

And then in verse 17 Peter even tells them to "honor the emperor." A corrupt emperor. Back in that time Christians paid taxes that were used to build pagan temples. They were subjected to unjust laws. They were under the rule of corrupt leadership. Any of that sound familiar? Now, I am not going to get political here. And I am not referring to any particular leader. What I am saying is that in all time in human history, there has been corrupt leadership. This is nothing new. However, Peter's advice to honor leadership and obey the law is as timely as ever. Is Peter telling us to be doormats? No. As Christians we are called to oppose evil and seek justice. But Peter is reminding them that rebellion and violence and disobedience are not the way to accomplish God's goals. Those types of behavior will reflect poorly on Christians and will not build the church. Those kinds of behavior will just make Christians look like everyone else. And think about it, who was the greatest civil rights activist in history? The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. And how did he accomplish change? Through peaceful means. Through marches and speeches and meetings and writing. And he suffered for doing it that way. He could have picked up a gun and shot back, but he never did. Christians are called to honorable living and action. So we have to live in this tension where we live upright lives and at the same time, use the existing laws to oppose evil and effect change. We live in a tension as Christians and this is nothing new.

Peter goes on to encourage slaves to honor masters, even mean ones. Now before I go further here I want to remind you that slavery in the First Century was nothing like the slavery of colonial America and this verse should never be used to defend slavery. This verse has been terribly misused historically. But in the context of First Century Christian slaves, by asking them to honor their owners Peter is asking them to reflect Christ. Christ took on the position of

servant. And indeed as Christians, that is what we are supposed to do. He even says it in verse 16 to live as God's slaves. Reflect Christ and become like a servant to others and a slave to Christ. And that is why Peter then goes on to talk about the suffering of Christ for the rest of this passage. And Peter quotes Isaiah 53 which is the responsive reading we looked at earlier. This idea of suffering because of living for God comes up in every chapter of this letter. Suffering comes up in this letter by Peter proportionately more than in any other book of the Bible. And that is because Peter sees the suffering of Christ as a paradigm of Christian existence. He sees the example of Christ as a reason for the suffering churches to endure and do good while enduring.

Now, suffering is not a happy topic. Certainly not the Mother's Day message you were hoping for. However, do mothers know about suffering for the sake of something good? Sure they do. Pregnancy and childbirth. Did any of you moms out there suffer during childbirth? Of course you did. The fact is that suffering is part of life. And it is necessary for the Christian life. If we are to die and rise again with Jesus, we have to accept suffering. And we have to do it honorably. And there is suffering going on right now. But we need to remember that Peter is talking about the suffering of the church for the sake of Christ. He has also talked about people that are suffering for living the life of a Christian well. So, looking through that specific lens of suffering, I want to point out three things that we gain from suffering. Through the suffering of Jesus Christ we gained redemption, forgiveness. Now what do we gain from being a church that lives right in a secular world. These come from Tim Keller's book on suffering.

The first is that people who endure suffering and get through it are more resilient. Keller writes "once they have learned to cope, they know they can do it again and live with less anxiety." How does that apply to us as a church? Well, our world has been tossed upside down and we have had to work hard and finding new ways of being the church. First Pres if we can get through this and do it well and do it honorably as Peter reminds us we must, we can get through anything. And historically Christ's church has and will continue to do so. The persecution of the small early church should have ended it. But persecution only caused it to grow. We have the chance to show Salt Lake City and beyond that we can be the church even when we are losing jobs and ordered to stay home. We can live with less anxiety when we know we can get through this. I think the anxiety about finding a new senior pastor is going to go way down. That was a high anxiety topic a year ago as Pastor Mike retired. Now, it is just on a list of challenges. We will come through this more resilient and less anxious.

The second thing Keller points out that we gain from suffering is that it strengthens relationships. Once people bond amidst suffering they have deeper friendships and family ties that last for a long time. Is this pandemic causing you to deepen any of your relationships? For those of you with young children I bet you are spending way more time with them than you were in December. And you may be getting on each other's nerves, but this time is also a gift. You and your children will never forget this. When your kids are 50 years old they will still

look back and say “remember when we were all together for months?” This suffering is also a gift to your relationships. And for those of you who do not have kids at home any more or live alone, how important are your friends and neighbors and family ties to you now? Who have you talked to way more than you did a few months ago? My cousin and I talk so regularly now. She is back in Philadelphia and has cancer and it used to be a challenge for me to find 15 minutes to talk with her on a normal work day. Now it is easy for me to put work down and just talk to her for an hour. I have just as much work but I don’t feel rushed by it or prohibited by it. My time with her on the phone is so valuable to me now, especially since I can’t go be with her right now. So suffering deepens relationships.

With those relationships deepening we are also longing to care for each other more. We got the results of that check in survey that we did last week and the most striking result was that on a scale of 1 to 10, the level on which people felt a deepened sense of calling to serve was an average of 7.7. This experience has made us want to relate more and want to serve more. This is something that we have gained from suffering.

And lastly, the third and probably most significant thing we gain from suffering is a change in priorities and philosophy. If the Christian church has the right priorities, which would be a right relationship with God and the sharing of the good news and the serving of others, if we have that right then suffering is not a threat. If we stay in the priorities of the world around us which are personal achievement and happiness, suffering will push that aside and change those priorities. Keller puts it this way: “Efforts to seek God, deeper relationships, and the good of society sometimes can be directly enhanced by suffering, but our freedom and comfort never are.”

So if our priorities as a church are where they are supposed to be, suffering will only enhance them. And I think that is one of the reasons Peter is telling the early church that their suffering, although not pleasant, is a good thing. It points to them being the church that Christ is calling them to be.

I think this time that we are in makes us very open to the advice of Peter to the early church. We need to live honorably, even when mistreated or oppressed. We need to be willing to be foreigners in a pagan world. We need to be willing to be different rather than fit into it. And we need to do it the right way, through good. Being obedient and treating others with respect and loving each other unconditionally. And lastly, we need to see suffering as an opportunity for gain for the church and the kingdom of God. Suffering for the sake of something good, because that is what Jesus Christ did for us. In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.