



As we continue our series on 1 Peter, we're going to consider the question: How do we live in the midst of unjust suffering? How do we respond in those moments of life when you have done everything right, but you receive wrong in return?

These are some of the most difficult situations in which to live well—when we've done nothing wrong, but receive wrong. I have a brother who's two years younger than me. Growing up, we fought as most siblings do. When we were young, we would fight and our parents would punish both of us. But somewhere along the way, a transition occurred: fighting and getting in trouble wasn't fun, so we learned how to start a fight but get the other person in trouble. So my brother would whisper something out of earshot of my parents, or hit me when my parents weren't looking. I would retaliate, and our parents saw my retaliation and I was punished. Or something would break and we would blame each other. In that moment of punishment, I would cry out what every kid cries out, what you cried out if you were in those situations: "But, I didn't do anything!" The frustration was deep and agonizing because I was being punished for something that I didn't do.

We still have those moment as adults. The reality of a sin-marred world means that life doesn't always work the way that it should. It means that sometimes we receive wrong though we do everything right. How should we respond in the face of unjust suffering?

Peter is going to show a new way of responding to unjust suffering. If we live in the way that he describes, this type of response has the power to transform us and the people around us.

Dignity in Submission

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 (1 Peter 2:18).

Immediately in reading the text, we have questions. The questions center on two words: slaves and submit. In addressing slaves, the Bible is not supporting slavery (though some have twisted the Bible for evil purposes). Rather, Peter is speaking into a socio-political dynamic of ancient Rome. Ancient Roman culture was organized in a class structure. At the bottom of the structure were slaves. From 1-in-4 to 1-in-3 people in ancient Italy were slaves. Slaves did the labor of a culture that valued luxury. However, slaves had no rights, no sense of justice, and

were valued on the same level as cattle and vehicles. They were property to perform a task. As a Biblical scholar put it, "The dominant fact in the life of a slave was that, even if he was well treated, he remained a thing" (Barclay).

The early Christians, in contrast, said something very different about slaves. The early Christians treated slaves and all people with dignity. They were people for whom Christ died. We see glimpses of this dignity in our passage: Peter speaks **to** them directly, not **about** them as a class. Peter believes they can have a personal relationship with God, and Peter will refer to their suffering as unjust. In addition, slaves held prominent places in the church. As early as the second century, slaves were leaders in the church. A third century bishop in Rome was a former slave, and in the biblical book Philemon Paul mediates a conflict between a slave owner and a slave and exhorts the owner to receive the slave back as a brother (v. 16). The early Christians spoke dignity to people on the margins and to one another.

With that in view, Peter commands something that seems the opposite of dignity: he calls for slaves to submit to their owners. Our modern-day culture views submission as docile, weak, doing whatever is told. The original word in Greek means to be subject, append (to put yourself under). It carries an idea of making an intentional choice to put yourself under the leadership of another.

The reason that slaves should submit is out of reverence for God. They are not to submit because of the character of their master, but because of the character of their heavenly Father. There is dignity in submission. But that opens up questions. At the least, what should happen if a slave listening to this instruction were to face unjust treatment from their owner? How should they respond? Look at what Peter says next.

This is Grace

For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. 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 (verses 19–20).

For it is "commendable"—in Greek, it is *charis*, grace—if someone endures unjust suffering because of their God-consciousness, out of awareness of and allegiance to God. Peter then draws a contrast between two life situations. I'll paraphrase these situations

through our modern-day context. Situation Number One: you do wrong and receive just consequences. For example, you leave here this morning, driving down 101 with your phone to your ear while driving. A police officer pulls you over and writes you a ticket. You may be upset that you're receiving a ticket, but, if you can hold faith in God as the ticket is written, no matter how you may feel, that is good. But that's the not the best thing you could do.

What would be better and more difficult, and what Peter wants to teach is Situation Number Two: you do good, you are faithful, obedient, live as you should, but what you receive in return is wrong. If you can trust God in those situations, that is an opportunity for grace to reign in the world. But those situations are also the most difficult.

I worked in corporate banking for six years and often faced the challenge of receiving wrong for the good that was done. One situation that was especially difficult: during a particularly stressful season of work, my boss asked me to train a coworker. I spent several weeks training, giving my time, energy, and resources, but, as the weeks went by, this person couldn't complete the work. The time came to say that this isn't working out. In that conversation, my coworker made false accusations about me and my value system, and made implicit threats. It was a painful, stressful experience. Not necessarily because of the accusations (both my boss and I knew they weren't true), but it was painful because I received back wrong despite all of the time and energy that I had given.

Maybe you have faced situations like that in your role as an employee, a boss, or a parent—where you did everything that you should, but you received back wrong. Peter says if your good is returned with evil, yet somehow you can bless them, though they ridicule you; if you can forgive them, though they punish you; if you can pray for them, though they slander you—that is grace. In fact, verse 20 ends the same way that verse 19 begins: it is grace. He doesn't want us to miss that: how you treat those who mistreat you is a pathway for grace to enter the world.

Peter then uses the platform of slaves in ancient Roman culture to talk to everyone about unjust suffering.

Follow the Example

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

“He committed no sin,

and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats (verses 21–23a).

We are called to endure unjust suffering by following the example of Jesus. The Greek word for “example” refers to a writing

or drawing that a student reproduces. When we were children learning to write, we had paper that had the letters written on the page. We were meant to trace the letters so that we could replicate it. That is the idea of what it means to follow Jesus. It is not simply an intellectual assent, but to follow Jesus means you trace His way of living until it is your way of living. In Peter's words, you walk “in the steps.”

Using Isaiah 53, Peter lays out the example of Jesus for us to trace. Jesus committed no sin (Isaiah 53:9). He was fully in the right, yet he received insults and suffering. How did Jesus respond? He did not retaliate (Isaiah 53:7).

Jesus did the opposite of what you and I tend to do when we are wronged. When someone speaks poorly about us, we insult them. When someone mistreats us, we look for a way to get back at them. That is the premise for the past decade of action movies. We retaliate at every chance we can because we think that if we don't defend ourselves, no one will. But Jesus responded differently. How could Jesus respond the way that He did?

Entrusted to God

Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly (v. 23b).

Jesus responded to unjust suffering by entrusting Himself to His heavenly Father. He could be silent, He could pass up the opportunity for retaliation, He didn't have to threaten because He believed that His Father was the source of His care and protection.

God the Father judges justly. Jesus didn't need to fight for His reputation, He didn't have to fight His own battle. He believed that the Father was working to set the world right. To entrust yourself to God means that you trust the character of your heavenly Father over the character of those who mistreat you. It means that you believe that God is good and works for your good.

Several years ago in France I went on a zip line course. We arrived at the starting area, where our instructors gave us a brief demonstration. What's important to know about France is that, when it comes to safety training, French culture takes a Darwinistic approach; i.e., if you die, it's your own fault! Our training on that day reflected that philosophy. They put us on a large rock next to the start and had us do a test run (not much higher than the stage to the floor). Then we were sent off on our own over a massive course, high above valley below (and no nets). It was a lot of fun until I got to the last station. On the last station, I stood on a small platform barely large enough for my feet. Below was an 80 foot drop to earth. I was to hook on and zip down a 100-foot line to the end. I got really nervous. Not because of the height or distance, not because I had an intellectual discussion with myself regarding the merits of a zip line course; I got nervous because I didn't trust our instructors. On the biggest drop, when I most needed to know that I could take

the step, I didn't trust that they had given us the best training and protection.

We all face moments in which life doesn't work the way that it should. Our fear and frustrations takes over. Could it be that our anxiety in that moment is due to our lack of belief that God is good and has good for us? It's easy to say "trust God." It's far more difficult to come to a place where you truly believe that God is good and His good is good enough for you. That's what it means to entrust yourself to God.

Unjust Suffering as Redemptive

"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." For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls (verses 24-25).

When Jesus entrusted Himself to His Father, something amazing happened. The unjust suffering that He received became redemptive. What the world celebrated as victory, Jesus turned for God's redemptive purposes.

By enduring unjust suffering, Jesus bore our sins. He died so that your sin could die. He was raised to life so that you can finally live in the way that you were created to live. His unjust suffering led to your undeserved benefit. The Bible speaks of that benefit as being healed. In a sin-marred world that often brings pain, we long for healing. And Peter, echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah, says the healing that we desperately need is found in Jesus.

In this healing, we return to God, who is Shepherd and Overseer (or Guardian). Both are interesting terms because both carry elements of submission: sheep to the Shepherd, and workers to the Overseer. Submission is seen in light of what Jesus has done for you. Jesus died as an atonement for your sin so that you could have a personal relationship with the God who shepherds and guards you. So that you can surrender yourself to the God who is good and will be good toward you. That is what Jesus accomplished because He endured unjust suffering.

Two Questions

As we experience unjust suffering, how can we trace the steps of Jesus to live as He did? I want to challenge you to ask two questions the next time that you face unjust suffering.

How can I create space to entrust myself to God?

Several modern-day writers use this idea of creating space between the experience and our response. In that space, we choose

how to respond. For example, one of the common tools used as a power play in my corporate experience was the CC line in an email. If someone didn't like a decision I made, they would email me their complaint and CC my boss (or higher) rather than coming to me directly. I would often react immediately, crafting this elaborate, multi-paragraph argument. I fell into the trap that we discussed earlier: I thought I had to fight for my reputation on my own. Those emails never went over well with my bosses, even if I were correct in my argument.

Instead of reacting immediately, I learned to create space between the email received and my reply back. I would write my fiery response, but instead of hitting send, I would choose a little used email function: "Save as Draft." I left it unsent to allow my frustrations to recede. By creating that space, I took my frustrations to God and asked Him to defend my cause.

A passage of Scripture that helped me in my temptation to fight my own battles is Isaiah 50:7-9. The temptation to fight your own battles is a call to leave your fight to your Father.

How can this experience be redemptive?

Jesus leveraged His unjust suffering for your redemption. That means our suffering is not meaningless. Our suffering can be an avenue for grace to enter the world. Listen to Martin Luther King Jr.'s powerful words on this topic: "As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation...I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive."

Could it be that you are facing what you are facing so that God could use you as the means to extend grace to your world? They need to see that grace of God that will come through your life. We need that grace so that we can better see and believe that God is good. It is grace that is proclaimed at the Cross: Jesus endured unjust suffering for your undeserved benefit.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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