

Living Under Discipline

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[0 : 00] He was given a chance to step out of the fire. The Roman consul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Jesus, worshipping Caesar to save his own skin, or to continue to embrace Jesus to his death.

Swear, said the proconsul, and I'll set you at liberty. Reproach Christ. The Christian replied, Eighty and six years have I served him, and he's done me no wrong.

How can I blaspheme my king who saved me? The Roman soldiers approached him and prepared to tie him to the stake to be burned. He shouted, Leave me as I am, for he who gives me power to endure the flame will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved, even without the security you will give by the tithes.

And with flames flashing about him, the man prayed, O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved child Jesus Christ, I bless you that you have granted unto me this day and hour, that I may share among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life.

And that was on the 23rd of February, A.D. 155. He died, and he went to heaven. His name was Polycarp.

[1 : 26] He was the Bishop of Smyrna, Smyrna in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. If you join Paul and the rest of the gang and Lindsay Wilson next year, on the Bible study tour, there's brochures on your way out.

You can visit Smyrna and the rest of this great area of Asia Minor. This was the area that the Apostle Peter writes to, to these scattered, suffering Christians.

Remember back in chapter 1, verse 6, he recognises that these Christians are suffering various trials. So Polycarp, last week, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, are these just isolated cases that stand out like peaks in church history?

Well, the Christian organisation, The Voice of the Martyrs, estimates that around the world, about a thousand believers every day on average, die for their faith in Christ.

Imagine, if you will, about twice the population of Australia. If you're thinking of that number, that's the number that have died for their faith in Christ since the time of Pentecost.

[2 : 35] And about 75% of that number has died in the 20th century and just as we've gone into the new century. So how do we respond to those sort of occurrences?

Of course, the number is actually vastly higher if you think about Christians who've suffered in various ways but short of physical death. It might be abuse, humiliation, economic privation, physical injury, psychological torture.

As we look through church history, we see that the suffering for a Christian, unjust suffering, rarely is constant through a believer's life. It manifests itself in different places at different times around the globe.

In the early centuries of the church, the killing of the Christians in fact varied. You might have a 10 to 15 year period here and then at another time, another part in the Roman Empire.

But even when people were not suffering in the form of physical death, in those early centuries, the Christians were regarded as killjoys because they shunned the popular forms of Roman entertainment, whether that was chariot races, gladiatorial contests, risqué performances in the theatre, sexual promiscuity.

[3 : 59] And on top of all of that, of course, the Christians refused to acknowledge Caesar as Lord. So if you add all of that up, it's not a surprise that none of them were probably nominated for the annual Roman of the Year award.

Well, Peter has advice to such Christians in his fourth chapter and he has advice to each one of us here today, living as aliens and strangers in the world, living for Christ our Lord in the world but not

of the world.

You recall from back some weeks ago now, back in chapter 2, from chapter 2 verse 11 all the way through to the end, in fact, of our passage today, Peter's been speaking of just one big topic and that's simply, as Christians, as God's people, we must live godly lives.

The big topic from 2:11 to chapter 4 verse 11 and within that big topic, he's had a very particular focus and it started about halfway through chapter 3 and the focus has been believers suffering unjustly for the name of Christ and you'll remember that we spoke some weeks ago that suffering for Christ is no sign of weakness, it's no sign of defeat and in fact, at that end of chapter 3 verses 18 to 22, Peter demonstrated that suffering was the pathway to triumph and glory for Christ and so now, as we come to chapter 4, Peter links chapter 3 with 4 and in our passage today, it just nicely breaks into two sections.

verses 1 to 6, as a follower of Jesus, Jesus the suffering servant, prepare yourselves to suffer.

That's his point in the first six verses and then verses 7 to 11, as a Christian, live your life, that is, live this earthly life, live it in the perspective of the end, the end being Christ's return.

[5 : 57] So let's then look at that first section, verses 1 to 6. At the end of chapter 3, Paul is reminded his suffering Christian brothers and sisters scattered throughout this area of Asia Minor that Christ, in verse 18, if you can follow the text with me, in chapter 3, suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.

And then he rose from the dead, he ascended to heaven in triumphal victory over sin, death, the devil. And in verse 22 we read, Jesus has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels' authorities, powers made subject to him.

So as we now come to chapter 4, Peter directly connects with what he's just been saying, with that little word, therefore. Peter, you see, he draws a lesson from what he's been saying.

Because Christ was prepared to suffer in his flesh, in his earthly existence, we too, as followers of Jesus, must be prepared to accept unjust suffering.

Well, how do we do that? Peter gives a strong exhortation. It's a strong command. He writes, arm yourselves with the same intention.

[7 : 17] And what Peter's doing here is he's using a metaphor of going out to battle after you've put on your armour. And the armour is the same mental disposition as the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just as Jesus suffered in the flesh, so too each one of us as his followers must resolve, must be prepared to suffer for him.

And when we do suffer unjustly because of our faith in Christ, we're demonstrating, in fact, that we've done with sin. Not that we've become sinless, but that we've done with sin by choosing obedience, even if that means suffering.

As we think about the earthly life of Jesus, we just see time and time again, consistently, that he chose to obey his heavenly Father, even though it meant suffering all sorts of trials, being misunderstood, being rejected and finally torture.

So Peter, back in chapter 2 in those wonderful verses, tells his readers, if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you've been called because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you should follow in his steps.

[8 : 41] The story is told about the baptism of King Iyengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the 5th century. And it was sometime during the baptism rite that St. Patrick leaned on his sharp, pointed staff and inadvertently he stabbed the king's foot.

And after the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood and realised what he's done and begged the king's forgiveness. Why did you suffer this pain in silence?

He asked. And the king replied, I just thought it was part of the ritual. Friends, it's critically important that we keep a right perspective on suffering.

C.S. Lewis writes appropriately, pain is not good in itself. What is good in any painful experience is for the sufferer his or her submission to the will of God.

And so, the choice that was before Peter's readers and the choice that's before each one of us here today is exactly the same. You see, we can either, on the one hand, simply take the easy route.

[9 : 49] The easy route, the path of least resistance. We just simply go along with the values, the norms, the practices that are acceptable and expected by the world in which we live.

or we can be obedient to God and in so doing suffer the consequences. They might be strange looks. They might be barbed comments, perhaps humiliation.

It might be criticism from unbelieving friends or family. Perhaps being treated as social outcasts. And the reality for the great majority of Christians throughout the world, but not in the West as yet, even physical abuse and injury.

Peter's call is to live a life of discipline, obediently following Christ, arming ourselves with that same mental disposition of the Lord Jesus in his obedience to the Father.

Well, choosing to suffer rather than to sin means that whatever is left of our earthly life, we as Christians aren't to be motivated by ungodly desires, but motivated by God's will.

[11:00] Remember what Peter wrote back in chapter 1. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct.

For it's written, you shall be holy for I am holy. And now, like a good preacher, Peter comes back and he makes the same point in some slightly different words. Have a look at verse 3.

You've already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. And of course, Peter's using that expression Gentiles there to refer to those who don't follow the Lord Jesus.

God is concerned about how we use our time. Before we came to Christ, if you like, we had enough time, lots of time. We spent lots of time in worldly pursuits.

And the first five descriptions there in verse 3 just, if you like, fall under that umbrella expression. Lusts of the flesh. And they all share a common feature, a lack of self-control, destructive to ourselves, destructive to others, and in violation of God's standards.

[12:20] So, having repented of our sins, having trusted in the Lord Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, having been given a new birth into a living hope, as Peter writes about in chapter 1, the rest of our lives then should be devoted to doing the will of God.

And that simply applies whatever our station in life is. Retiree, corporate executive, tradesperson, housewife, mother, ordained minister.

Regardless of what our station in life is. Peter's readers needed to be reminded of the need for obedient living, for godly lifestyles. And that's no less true for me.

I need to be reminded of that. And as followers of the Lord Jesus, each of us needs to hear and heed the Holy Spirit's word, live our earthly lives by the will of God.

Well, Peter goes on in verse 4 and he reminds his readers that the world will respond negatively to them as they devote themselves to the will of God. the non-Christian friends that we have, our associates, our colleagues.

[13:34] Have a look at verse 4. We'll be surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation and so they blaspheme. Because this is the reality for all Christians through all of church history.

By seeking to live a life that's pleasing to the Lord, often those around us will be antagonistic. Why? Because our very lifestyle makes them feel uncomfortable.

I recall Cheryl and myself attending quite a large corporate function. There was an entertainer who came on after dinner. The entertainer purported to be a comic.

This was not humour at its best. It was somewhat equivalent to the smutty jokes by schoolboys behind what used to be known in my day as the shelter chairs at the primary school.

But the presentation was actually more than smutty. I mean it was just simply lewd. The performance was met by great mirth by some in the audience. Others smiled, looking a little embarrassed.

[14:37] Cheryl and myself sought to not make an exhibition of ourselves and we discreetly tried to disappear under the tablecloth. And it was about a week later that my boss chastised me.

He says, Rod, listen, you need to lighten up. You need to have some fun. I noticed that you, that's right, Brendan. I noticed that you didn't join in the laughter at the function. Listen, Rod, we're out having a good time entertaining clients.

You need to be part of it. It's kind of interesting. There was no concern as to whether, in fact, the entertainment was appropriate. But over the width of actually what was quite a large function room, Cheryl and myself were being observed, we were being judged, as to our lack of endorsement of such crudity.

Remember back at the end of chapter 2 in the message preached by Rob, we're called to remain within the social structures of our society.

That is, we're not to be isolationists. We're not to withdraw into a holy huddle. And if we follow Jesus' example, we will be in the world, but different to the world.

[15:48] And it's important to remember that our aim isn't to encourage hostility or set out by a very manner to be offensive. Someone reminded me a couple of weeks ago the words of the commentator who said, as Christians living in the world, we must not by our approach add offence to the very real offence of the cross.

Well, those who blaspheme God by maligning Christians for their righteous living will have to give an account of themselves to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead.

That's what Peter says in verse 5. You see, human responses are not the last word. Human judgments aren't the last word. The last word will be with God.

He's already prepared to judge the living and the dead, every person. And that's a universal truth. It applies to all people in all times, in all places.

No one escapes that judgment, that examination. And there's just simply two outcomes of it. There's either acquittal or there's condemnation.

[17:07] And the factor that determines that is just simply our response to the Lord Jesus Christ. Have a look with me particularly at the way that verse 6 starts.

Peter writes, For this is the reason. For the reason that there's judgment coming, the gospel is preached. Because a day of reckoning is coming, the gospel of God's forgiveness is being proclaimed to make us ready to meet our maker.

people of course always respond to the gospel, don't they? They always respond to it. They either accept it or they reject it.

And then there comes a day when the physical body dies. Physical death doesn't somehow avoid the reality of God's judgment. Physical death doesn't nullify the effectiveness of the gospel for those who've embraced it.

Not at all. The gospel is preached because judgment is coming so that people can repent and live in the spirit as God does, that is eternal life in the presence of God.

[18:19] That's what Peter is saying to the people in Asia Minor. And that's what the Holy Spirit says to each one of us today. So if I'm speaking to anyone this morning and you know in your heart that you've never accepted God's gracious gift of salvation, then this morning, this minute, can be the start of new life, can be the start of eternal life.

Turn from your rebellion and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. He offers complete forgiveness to all who come to him. He is indeed the only saviour.

God's grace. But for the great bulk of people gathered here this morning, those who are followers of Christ, Peter's message is actually very simple.

Be prepared to suffer unjustly for your faith in Christ. The reality is it's extraordinarily easy, isn't it, to compromise our faith. Just bit by bit, assimilating little parts of the world's values, its morals, just a little bit of pluralistic theology.

Every day we're bombarded by so much stuff, which is the polar opposite of living a life set apart to Christ. Verses one to six would have been, I suspect, quite a challenge, quite an exhortation to these suffering Christians.

[19:42] I found them a significant challenge in bringing them to you this morning with any degree of authenticity. Polycarp, I suspect, loved this letter, 1 Peter, because in the few writings that we have left of Polycarp, he makes a number of references to Peter's first letter to scattered, suffering Christians.

Well, in the last five verses of our passage, Peter urges his fellow Christian and brothers to live their lives, live this earthly life in the perspective of the end, that is, when Christ returns.

You see, what we believe about the future does indeed shape today, how we live today. And we, as was exactly the case for Peter's readers, we live in the last days.

The last days were inaugurated when Christ rose and ascended to heaven, and they'll end when Christ returns. We live in the last days.

And the New Testament makes it abundantly, extraordinarily clear that the end will come just that suddenly. It will happen.

[20:57] We can absolutely trust God's word. He's totally faithful. He keeps every promise. And so our behaviour, our day-to-day lives, need to reflect the reality that the end of all things is near.

And so Peter concludes this section, started all the way back in chapter 2, verse 11, and he concludes it with just four very practical ways to live out Christ's victory, to live out Christ's victory within the Christian community.

And these four practical ways obviously apply outside of that community. But they're verses that have a great application within the body of Christ, the church. So look with me at verse 7.

It's the first practical way. We're called to think rightly and be clear-minded so that we can pray.

What a contrast that is to the ungodly behaviour described in verse 3.

The reality of living in the last days must motivate us, should motivate us to live a self-controlled life, to keep the right perspective, notwithstanding in fact that you may be being treated unjustly in this life.

[22 : 08] Keep a realistic view of the world. Keep alert and pray. Don't give up on prayer. You might be tempted to think that prayer is futile depending on what's happening in your life.

Live in light of the end. That's the Lord's message. Christ is victorious and one day that victory will be manifest to all. Think rightly, be clear-minded so that we can pray.

Then his second point in verse 8 is simply hang in there with love for one another. Right through the letter, chapter 1, chapter 2, chapter 3, Peter's been emphasising that love is the controlling factor and needs to be the controlling factor in all of our relationships.

verse 9. We get the third practical point. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. You see, a particular example of showing brotherly love and sisterly love within the body is our hospitality.

Reminded of the story of a family who was entertaining the pastor and his wife for Sunday dinner and it was a hot and blistery day. And when they all finally got seated, the man of the house turned to his six-year-old and said, Johnny, I want you to give grace.

[23 : 23] But Daddy said, Johnny, I don't know what to say. Oh, just say what you've heard me say, the mother chimed in. So, Johnny, immediately he bowed his little head and he said, oh Lord, why did I invite these people here on a hot day like this?

Well, one commentator has rightly said, in a hostile world, the church must be a place of safety and well-being for its members, a place where common beliefs unite us much more than differences divide us.

It's great advice, isn't it? Be alert, self-controlled, pray, love one another, be hospitable without complaining and then finally and fourthly, serve one another with gifts of grace that we've each received.

You see, when we're saved, the Holy Spirit sovereignly and graciously gives each one of us one more spiritual gift. And the purpose is for building up the body, building up fellow believers, building up the church.

And so we read in verse 11, we serve one another with the strength that God supplies. We serve one another for the ultimate purpose that God may be glorified.

[24 : 38] Our praise is directed to God, not to the person exercising their gift, their gift that in fact was graciously and sovereignly given by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the body.

And all of our praise takes place through Jesus Christ. He is the only mediator for sinners needing forgiveness. He is the faithful and merciful high priest for every believer.

And so Peter concludes with his great benedictory words, to him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. God calls each one of us that's here this morning who love and follow the Lord Jesus Christ to live godly lives, to live in a hostile world, being prepared to suffer unjustly for the cause of Christ.

That's his call to us. That's his call to me. God has left us here for a purpose. We're here to demonstrate, in fact, what it's like to be as a member of another country, to have citizenship in another land.

If you like, to create a desire amongst others to emigrate to that land. We're called to live out Christ's victory in an unbelieving world.

[26 : 06] We're called to live out Christ's victory within the church. God has left us here for a