

Thriving Despite Injustice

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[0:00] So 1 Peter 2, verse 18. This is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed, for you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. Amen.

Well, last week in our last study, we closed with a quote that I think will be a helpful place for us to begin today. The quote was from David Helm, and it goes like this.

It's helpful. Submission defines the Christian's ways because being like the Savior describes the Christian's goal.

[1:46] Submission defines the Christian's ways because being like the Savior describes the Christian's goals.

And of course, that quote came in reference to Peter's instruction in verses 13 to 17 for Christians to submit to the rule of law, to every human institution or every human ordinance, whether it be the emperor as supreme or to those as sent by him to deal with evil and to praise the good.

But the truth of that statement, the weightiness of that statement, really is seen most clearly in the context of the passage that is now before us this morning, here in 18 to 23 especially.

Peter's thoughts here are narrowing. They're narrowing from the broader category of Christian citizens who are to rightfully and properly submit to their human authorities.

He's narrowing that perspective to the particular circumstances of Christian slaves. But it isn't the situation of slavery in particular that is the focal point of the text.

[3:04] Rather, as Peter progresses step by step, it becomes clear that foremost in his mind here is the real and common circumstance of suffering at the hands of a wicked master for doing what Christians know to be good and right.

As we dig in, we find that this really isn't about slavery and it's really not about slaves. It's about suffering for doing good. It doesn't take long for Peter to turn our eyes once again to the example of Jesus.

No greater injustice has ever been perpetrated than that which was endured by Jesus, the sinless Son of God. And at the same time, no greater model for righteously enduring injustices has ever been displayed than what we see in the endurance of Jesus.

So then, returning to that statement, proper submission to authority and godly responses to injustices when they come from those very authorities define how Christians live their lives.

And they define how Christians live their lives because following in the steps of Jesus as his faithful disciples describes the Christian's sincerest goal.

[4:34] What is it that we want more than anything else or at least what we should want more than anything else? To be like Jesus. To be a disciple is to literally follow in his steps to mimic what he does.

And he has left us an example. So when we begin to look broadly at what Peter is doing here in this section, we see he's pointing our eyes directly at Jesus to say, Look what Jesus did.

Look what Jesus endured. Look how he responded. And now you do the same as his disciple. Let's step back and consider how the passage fits in the larger sense of the letter.

Peter has described the Christian experience as one of exile, suggesting that hardship on account of our faith and obedience to God should be expected and it will not be unusual.

And the source of our sufferings we're learning may routinely come from those to whom God has commanded us to humbly submit.

[5:46] Remember last week, what was it that was the primary principle that Peter was issuing? That as Christians we have a responsibility to submit to the rule of law, to those human institutions and human authorities that God has ordained.

And yet Peter says that and he writes that to churches who lived underneath the cruel reign of the emperor Nero in the first century. An avowed hater of Christians who persecuted after the great fire of Rome nearly a thousand of them for the entertainment of the crowds.

And Peter writes and he says, How do we reflect the glory of God?

What does it mean to thrive when facing serious injustices? Those are the questions that Peter is answering here for the churches in Asia Minor to which he wrote.

The structure here is simple. It's similar to the previous text. He's first going to lead with a pertinent principle. He's going to follow that with a particular motivation.

[7:26] And then he's going to finish with the perfect model. So if you're interested in following along in the outline that we have, that's the flow that we're taking following Peter's lead. He's going to give us a principle to begin with.

And then he's going to give us a proper motivation for fulfilling that principle. And then he's going to show us who is the perfect model of fulfilling that, which of course is the Lord Jesus. Let's start with the first thing, a pertinent principle, which we find again in verses 18 and 19.

Look at it with me again. Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.

For this is a gracious thing when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. So verse 18 then is a specific application of the principle that Peter underscored in verses 13 to 17.

He's dealing broadly with proper submission. And he starts with citizens. And now he's giving a very specific application to that. And he's drawing our attention to a very specific group of people in the churches.

[8:36] Using the same term for submission as he did in verse 13, he addresses those Christians in the churches who were living as slaves in the Roman Empire. Or as bond servants during that time.

And he's instructing them to properly submit to their earthly masters. Whether those masters treat them fairly or whether they treat them unjustly, he tells them that being subject is what is their first responsibility.

Is anyone else bothered by that? Passages like this, they cause us to squirm a bit, don't they?

Because we would actually rather Peter just outright denounce the entire enterprise of slavery, even with all of its differences and nuances in the Roman Empire versus what we have known in American history.

We would just rather him just come right out, not address the slaves and try to instruct them, but just outright denounce the enterprise, wouldn't we? But he doesn't do that. He instructs those who are caught up in such terrible circumstances.

He addresses those who are Christians and tries to help them understand how despite their circumstances, from which it's very likely they will be freed from, how can they honor God in that circumstance?

[10:02] That's what Peter's doing here. And that bothers us, doesn't it? We want him to do something different. And yet he doesn't. And yet this is the word of the Lord, isn't it?

God has given us this text as it is for his glory and for our good, and we need to keep that in mind. And we need to be careful not to force modern ideas of activism back on the historical context of the apostles and these early Christians.

Revolution was not their aim. Revolution was not the apostles' aim. Frankly, revolution is not the church's aim. Leading Christians to thrive in this time of exile.

That was Peter's aim. How to properly represent Jesus in a broken and fallen and terrible world.

That was Peter's aim. And that's what we see coming forth here in this text.

And that's the reason for it. But one key consideration that we have to deal with, we have to sort out, is why does he address slaves at all? Why does he choose this group at this particular time to deal with this issue?

[11:14] I mean, surely he could have chosen all kinds of different people to address, but why does he choose them? And I think that the answer is that they represented the Christians in each church who were most vulnerable to and likely to face severe injustices on account of their faith.

Their whole lives are wrapped up in a system that completely ignores the dignity of their humanity. They are by far the most likely of all the people in these churches to routinely face persecution on account of their faith. I think that's why Peter is highlighting them in particular.

Because fundamentally, this section isn't about the circumstances of slavery. It's about suffering for doing good. And no one understood that situation better than the Christian slaves who gathered Sunday by Sunday with these churches across Asia Minor.

And worshiped the same God that you and I worshiped. Were redeemed by the same Jesus that you and I were redeemed by. Who were just as free in Christ as any other Christian who has ever lived.

[12:29] And yet, their experience in this life was probably much more difficult than anyone else's. And here's the point. If it's necessary, impossible, for even slaves to faithfully follow Jesus.

And represent him well in such terrible conditions. Then everyone else in the church would have to do that as well. I think that's why Peter addresses them.

So what begins as an address to slaves as it continues really becomes a lesson on suffering well. A lesson that is fit for all of us.

Thus, it's necessary that we take seriously what the text instructs. Now, I want you to notice the emphasis that Peter uses here in the first phrase. He tells us that servants are to be subject to their masters.

And then he adds this other phrase that needs a little explanation. With all respect. Literally, in all fear. But who exactly is it that Peter means that these Christians needed to fear and to respect?

[13:38] Is it the masters that he's telling them to be subject to? Or is it in the fear and respect of the Lord? And I think the context indicates that it's not their masters that he has in mind with this phrase.

It is the Lord God himself. Now, just look at the previous verse in verse 17. He gives us those four quick statements. Memorable, pithy statements, doesn't he? Honor everyone.

Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. A distinction is intentionally being made here, isn't it? By Peter in this verse. While we are to obey our authorities, we are not to disobey God in the process.

We are to submit to them but not fear them in the way that we fear God. Therefore, if there is a contradiction between what our human authorities are asking us to do and what we know God has commanded us to do, we fear God above everything else.

Now, when we look at the following verse to this as well, in the context in verse 19, we find that this unjust suffering is being born out of a situation when these slaves are acting being mindful of God.

[14:50] So I think when we come back to verse 18, what we find being clear in the text is what Peter is saying is, be subject to your human masters in so far as what they ask you to do is not in defiance to God and not in disobedience to God.

Servants, be subject to your masters in the fear of God. So the principle Peter is emphasizing is that slaves were to be subject but in the fear of the Lord.

They may be servants of men in this world, but they are first and foremost servants of God. No human authority in this life trumps God's authority.

And they were to live in the fear of God while doing everything possible to properly submit to their authorities. And as you might imagine, this presents a unique and significant problem.

Because Peter tells us in verse 18 that many of these masters are unjust, not just in the way that they treat their slaves, but it means crooked. They are wicked people.

[16:03] Just as Nero was a wicked emperor, so were the people that were ruling directly over some of these people at Christians' lives. They were wicked. And what was it that the slaves were responsible largely to do in their households?

Oversee the business. Manage the house. Teach the children. That's what they were responsible for. These masters would have likely instructed their slaves to act in ways that would be sinful in God's eyes.

And what were they to do when their masters instructed them to do his business in a way that was dishonest? Do they obey their master for fear of the consequences that would come if they don't? Or do they face the consequences willingly and obey the Lord instead? What if the master's demands were immoral and hurt others? Peter says in such circumstances the Christian was to disobey that order, living in the fear of God instead.

And as you can imagine, the result would have meant the unjust beating and mistreatment on account not of doing wrong, but directly for doing good.

[17:22] And that's the point. Suffering for doing good. Well, that's the principle for the slaves who gathered on that Lord's Day and heard this letter read in their church service.

What is the principle for us? None of us are slaves. None of us are likely to ever be slaves. Do we just dismiss it? No, I don't think so.

There are probably a hundred ways that we can draw parallels and applications here, but let's think especially of our places of work. Most likely all of you have a boss or someone closely, directly related to you in your place of business that is not a believer.

How many times have Shane and I had conversations about unbelieving people that are over him who act like unbelieving people as they exercise their authority? All of us know what that's like.

There's going to be times when you're instructed by a superior to do something that you know is sinful. You're going to be asked to cheat the system. Lie to a client in order to get more money.

[18:36] Mistreat a co-worker that doesn't deserve it. Or sweep some unethical or immoral act under the rug in order to protect those who want you to game the system.

What are you going to do when saying no to that boss means he's going to make your work life miserable? What if it means that you'll be overlooked for the promotion that you've been working so hard to achieve all these years?

What if it costs you your job? What if you lose those clients? Peter's instruction is that in such circumstances we represent God in the world we live in his fear rather than man's.

Knowing that in exile there's always going to be conflict. That our lives of obedience and being faithful to Jesus and faithful to the word of God will almost always be in conflict with the people who are around us who are not Christians.

And what will we do when faced with the ever occurring circumstance to go against our co-worker or our boss or our teacher or our coach or the chain of command and the marine reserves?

[20:04] Whatever it is. What do we do when that means disobeying God? Well we honor those authorities as best we can. That's what Peter's saying. We be good employees.

Good students. Good athletes. Whatever your situation may be. But we do not sin against God in the process even if the punishment is unjust and severe.

That's the point. And after facing mistreatment from those very authorities what are we to do then? Be subject to them. Live honorably.

In the things that aren't disobedient to God. And what does that prove? The true good of the kingdom of God. That's what that proves.

Isn't that the point from the last passage we studied last week? Verse 15. For this is the will of God that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. All of those people who say Christians are just up to no good live in suspicion of us.

[21:09] This is what it proves. The goodness of God. The goodness of his people. And the glory of his kingdom. Well that's the particular instruction.

That's the pertinent principle that Peter provides to us here. Let's move on now to a particular motivation. What possibly could motivate us to live this way? Look at verse 20. What credit is it if when you sin and are beaten for it you endure?

But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure? This is a gracious thing in the sight of God. Let's think about the temptations that we often face.

There is no question that the temptation to disobey or disbelieve God will be strong when facing suffering on account of our faith and living faithfully as a Christian.

We're often tempted to live as if the easier thing is just to seek God's forgiveness after the fact knowing that he's a merciful God than it is to be obedient to him in the first place and deal with the repercussions that may come from the wrath of men.

[22:19] How many Christians think that way? Think well God's merciful. It's just easier to ask for his forgiveness than to have to deal with this trouble. Surely God just wants me to be happy and comfortable.

And that's not what he's concerned about. No, he's concerned with our holiness. He's concerned with our obedience. What then could possibly motivate the Christian to live this way?

And for Peter the answer is simple and it's actually quite straightforward. The motivation for this endurance is simply the smile of God. For we know that God blesses those who suffer for doing good.

It's simply the smile of God. This is a gracious thing, he says, in the sight of God. And when I was growing up, Ashlyn's here.

Maybe she's heard Papa say this. Our niece Kate is with us today too. She might have heard Papa say this at some point. But when I was growing up, Papa used to always remind me that even though he doesn't see me and know everything that I'm doing, there is one who does see me and knows everything that I'm doing.

[23:28] And typically that was followed up with and the Holy Spirit typically has a way of letting me know what's going on in your life. Now, Dad always said that from the negative perspective. He assumed Jared was doing something that he ought not to do.

And he wanted me to know that even though he doesn't see it, God sees it. And he wanted me to live in the fear of the Lord in that sense. And of course, that's true, isn't it? But the positive side of that equation is also true.

And I think that's what Peter is emphasizing here. No one else may see and understand the ways that you faithfully love and obey the Lord.

No one else may see and understand the ways that you are mistreated on account of that faithfulness to the Lord. But God sees it all. He knows.

And he is with you. And he sees you. And he understands you. And in his sight, your patient endurance is a gracious thing.

[24:29] When he watches you obey him despite the cost, he smiles on you. What exactly does it mean that this endurance is a gracious thing in the sight of God?

Well, Peter gives us a contrast here to help us understand it, doesn't he? Look again at the verse. Here's the first part of the contrast. What credit is it if when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?

In other words, what reward is there for you if you face punishment for something that you did wrongly? Not that it was good, but it was sin. And you face the proper consequences of that sin. What credit is that to you, he says? In contrast to that then is what he follows up with. But if when you do good and everything you do is right and you still suffer on account of that and you endure that suffering, this is the gracious thing in the sight of the Lord.

There's this contrast. It's helping us give a sense of what Peter means to say. There's no reason to expect applause when you suffer for doing wrong. But when you endure suffering for good, you will receive the blessing in favor of God.

[25:46] Let me give you three other passages that make this exact same contrast. The first one is Matthew 5, 11, and 12. This is the end of the Beatitudes. You remember them.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, Jesus says, for your reward is great in heaven.

For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. What is Jesus saying there? He's saying the same thing Peter is saying here. He's saying when that happens, it's a gracious thing in the sight of the Lord.

Great is your reward in heaven. Let me give you a second one. Matthew 5, 43 to 46. Jesus says, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Here's the blessing. So that you may be sons of the Father who is in heaven. And here's the contrast. For if you love those who love you rather than your enemies, what reward do you have?

[26:54] What credit is it simply for that? The contrast. Third, Luke chapter 6, 34 and 35. Jesus again.

If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? He's talking about being a generous person without expecting something in return.

What credit is it if you lend to those that you expect just to give it right back? Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount, Jesus says. But love your enemies and do good and lend, expecting nothing in return.

And here's what he says. And your reward will be great and you will be the sons of the Most High for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

In each of these three passages, the contrast is meant to emphasize that there is no reward for doing wrong or simply doing what everyone else finds comfortable to do. No, but there is a great reward in heaven for those who love and obey God.

[27:59] And that's Peter's point here. Doing good and suffering for it provokes the favor of God. It provokes the smile of God. And great is your reward, not in this life.

Because in this life, we face nothing but troubles. Great is your reward in heaven. And the question for us is simple. It's this. Is the smile of God enough for you?

Is the smile of God enough for you? Is bringing glory and pleasure to Almighty God, your Heavenly Father who has redeemed you, is that enough motivation for you to do good, even when it costs you something?

Thriving despite injustice means seeking the smile of God above your own comfort and ease and really everything else.

The pleasure of God is why we exist. His glory is our very purpose. And it is always good for us to desire that smile and to live in such a way as to provoke it.

[29:25] Well, is there possibly a model or an example of this that we can see? What does this actually look like practically? Fortunately for us, there's a model.

And it's not just a model. It's a perfect model. Look with me at 21 to 23. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

He committed no sin. Neither was deceit found in his mouth. And when he was reviled, he didn't revile in return. When he suffered, he didn't threaten.

But he continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. Do you see what Peter's now doing? It's a gracious thing for Peter to do this, isn't it?

He leads us to lift our eyes from our present circumstances in order that we might place them fully on the Lord Jesus, who is our perfect example in enduring injustice and suffering for doing good.

[30:38] And notice the language of calling. He says, it is to this, suffering for good and being submissive anyways, it is to this that you have been called.

Now, what does he mean by that? Well, calling in the New Testament is never about vocation. We use that term, we impose that term often in the Christian conversation. But the New Testament never speaks of calling in the sense of your gifting or of your vocation, even though there is a sense in which we might understand God is sovereign and he gives us in particular ways and calls us to certain things.

Certainly that's true. When the Bible uses the term calling, it's always in reference to the call to salvation. Always. And what is it that Peter means for us to acknowledge about this calling here?

The call to salvation is simply the call to follow Jesus. And Jesus willingly suffered in part to show us how we might follow him in that.

How we might live faithfully as he lived faithfully. In other words, suffering well means walking in the steps of Jesus. And that's what we've been called to as his disciples, to walk in his steps.

[31:50] Which means it will be inevitable that we will be facing suffering on account of our faith. And what is it that we are to do? We are to endure. We are to endure with joy in our suffering.

Why? Because that's what Jesus did. And we are following him in all things. And we will return to 22 to 25 next week. Again, looking at the sufferings of Jesus.

I feel like it would be useful for us just to take a week just to think about the atonement and what Peter says about that here. But in 22, Peter doesn't only mean that Jesus was sinless in his suffering.

Notice what he says. He committed no sin. Neither was deceit found in his mouth. Peter doesn't simply mean that as he suffered, Jesus did not sin. He's going to make that point in verse 23.

Verse 22, he's saying he had no sin that made it necessary for him to suffer in the beginning. He was sinless in every way. In every possible way.

[32:53] That's what Peter means to say. And yet when he was reviled, he did not revile in return. As he suffered as the sinless son of God, he did not threaten those who were responsible for the injustice.

He did the opposite. He prayed for them. Father, forgive them. They don't realize what they're doing.

It didn't make their actions any less sinful. But in that moment, he does not say, you guys are going to regret this later. No, he says, Father, forgive them.

And he faithfully endured the cross for our sake. And Peter says in verse 21, he did this so that we might have an example to follow when we're in the same circumstance.

Maybe it won't be a cross, but it will be suffering in some sense. Rather than retaliate or respond with threats of future retaliation, as all of us would be prone to do, Jesus instead continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

[34:15] What does that mean? What does that mean? It means that Jesus demonstrated what it means to trust God for our vindication and to trust that God will judge our enemies the right way.

The scriptures repeatedly affirm the instruction, vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord. Jesus taught in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount against the idea of retaliation, against those who do us wrong.

I don't think that he means to suggest that if there are processes in our human systems by which we can seek justice, that we ought not pursue those processes.

Of course we should. Paul himself did that clearly in his path to Rome. But the point is, we are not to be retaliatory in our spirit.

Why? Because Jesus wasn't retaliatory in his spirit. And of all of us, he's the one who had the right to be. As in everything, we need only to look to Jesus when we're uncertain about how to respond in any given circumstance.

[35:34] We're to constantly be asking the question, what does it mean to follow Jesus' example? And in this case, it means refusing to fight sin with sin. It means refusing to be consumed with vengeance or the pursuit of retaliation.

It means trusting that on the last day, God will deal decisively with those who perpetrate such injustices and will reward those who suffer for his sake.

It means submitting in the fear of the Lord, even to those who unjustly use and mistreat us. That's what it means to follow Jesus.

And faithfully following Jesus is what it means to thrive in exile. You don't have to be a slave for this text to matter.

That wasn't Peter's intention anyways. He addressed them to give us the weight of this principle. To show the most vulnerable and the most subject to abuse.

[36:42] And to say, if they must still follow Jesus faithfully in their suffering, so should we. And we must submit to those human authorities in the fear of the Lord.

Seek the pleasure of God in response to injustices. Seek his smile. Seek the pleasure of God in response to the Lord. And then above all things, keep our eyes on Jesus.

The author and finisher of our faith. Who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame.

And is now seated at the right hand of the Father. Do you know what that's a picture of? That's a picture of the blessing that you have in Christ as one of his own.

For the joy set before you, be willing to suffer for his sake. Knowing that in the end, you'll be seated with the Father. And you will receive his smile.

[37:46] And your inheritance will come. You may not receive it here. You probably won't. But you will receive it there. And for that reason, we can rejoice even in our sufferings.