

1PETER 2:18-25 CBC 14.6.2020am

How do you react to being treated unfairly? Most people experience unjust treatment at some point in their life, and sometimes it's so grievous it leaves lasting wounds. Sometimes the pain may still be felt many generations later. Slavery is a case in point, as we've been reminded lately by Edward Colston's statue being torn from its plinth in Bristol and dumped in the harbour.

But even in less dramatic ways, the wrongs done to us by other people can eat away at us, consuming our thoughts. Perhaps that's your experience today. Your mind runs over and over the hurts you've suffered, or are still suffering. You want to pay back those who are responsible.

If you've ever wrestled with these feelings, then Peter has good news for you. He's telling us that the gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to transform our lives in any circumstances – even if our life is cruel, harsh and grossly unfair.

He speaks to an extreme situation: that of Christian slaves, whose lot in life we would certainly consider unfair. Rightly, we view slavery with abhorrence. We can hardly imagine a worse condition than slavery. And for many of Peter's readers, this wasn't theory – it was their life. But Peter tells them that it's possible to be a slave even with a cruel master and yet have your life totally transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ, because the gospel works anywhere – even in situations we would consider intolerable.

Of course, we ask why Peter didn't argue for the abolition of slavery. And the short answer is that he didn't live in a democracy. We do – and we have a responsibility as Christians to speak up for the powerless and the oppressed, to pursue social justice. But there wasn't a democratic discussion in which Peter could join, and any attempt by slaves at rebellion met with a brutal response. Peter's concern is to help Christians live for Christ under circumstances they couldn't change. To show them that their circumstances didn't bar them from living for the glory of God.

And nor do ours. Many of us have sold a slice of our week to someone who for that time is our master. And some are no more sympathetic to the gospel than were those pagan masters long ago. You may have an employer or manager who exploits their power over you and makes your life miserable at work. And Peter says you can be a Christian in your circumstances too, because the gospel has power in your life in any situation.

And what Peter says is v.18: "*Submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.*" What? Does Peter mean we should do nothing about workplace bullying? The questions rush to our mind. So many details in our situation are different: we have grievance procedures, employment tribunals – things Peter didn't have. And we need God's wisdom to know how best to respond to different situations.

But if legal protections have changed, the human heart remains the same. There are still bad employers as well as good ones, and there are plenty of situations that grind on us that will never make it to an employment tribunal – personal treatment that may not be illegal but that's unpleasant and demeaning. And our natural tendency is to be resentful and perhaps to retaliate. And Peter says NO. Submit to your boss, and if they are bad, do them good. He learned that straight from the lips of Jesus who taught us to love our enemies. *This didn't come naturally to Peter. Remember how he lashed out with his sword in Gethsemane – retaliate! But Jesus told him to put his sword away. And now Peter says the same to us.*

But how? We want Peter to tell us the secret he's learnt.

1. LIVE BEFORE YOUR FATHER'S FACE vv.18-20

v.18: “in reverent fear of God”; v.19: “conscious of God”; v.20 “commendable before God”. What’s Peter’s point? Simply this: that if we’re a Christian, it means we’ve already taken the biggest step of submission. We’ve submitted to God. All other submission is secondary. We don’t retaliate, not because we fear the boss, but because we love our Father and want to please Him. And that means bearing patiently with others as God has borne patiently with us.

And it means honouring God with our trust that nothing that happens to us is outside His sovereign control and His wise plan for our lives. This includes the acts of people who intend to harm us. You may be victimized, but you can never ultimately be a victim (*Genesis 50:20*).

God is always working for the good of His children. Do you believe that? God uses those moments of unjust suffering to grow us – to expose the bad things that still live inside us. To show us who or what we really worship. To get us to let go of our idols and learn to rely on Him alone for our peace and security. He’s teaching us to trust Him.

Sometimes when we cry out for grace, we don’t realize we were already getting it! But it’s not the grace of release; it’s the grace of rescue and transformation, because that’s the grace we really need.

And even while God is working IN us He’s also working THROUGH us. That person who treats you badly – God has put you in their lives so that you can be an instrument of His grace to them. God has a purpose that’s bigger than just you! When you’re willing to return good for evil for the sake of Christ, your life is preaching the gospel. Are there ways in which God is calling you right now to preach the gospel by the way you respond to unjust suffering? NB: v.21: “*To this you were called*” - *Oh, what a calling!*

Live before your Father’s face. Do everything to please Him. When we look beyond our immediate circumstances and we look to God’s bigger story in our life, it’s liberating.

But we say, “*I don’t know how to do that!*” So Peter makes it clear and practical by pointing us to Jesus. That’s what the closing verses are there for:

2. FOLLOW IN YOUR SAVIOUR’S FOOTSTEPS vv.21-23

v.21: “*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.*” Those four words, “follow in His steps” tell us what it means to be a disciple. We’ve all seen little children trying to plant their feet in someone else’s footsteps. And because we’re all children in spiritual things, Peter says: When you suffer unjustly, be like a child trying to place your feet in the footsteps of your elder brother. You’ll be safe as you put your feet there.

Again we see how Peter has grown! When Jesus had spoken about the cross, Peter had said “*You’ll never do that!*” - and the real reason was that Peter was saying, “*I’LL never do that!*” But now he’s a different man. The Holy Spirit has taught him that he’s called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

So Peter reminds us of how Jesus responded when He suffered unjustly:

- **What He didn't do**

v.22: "*He committed no sin*". Suffering doesn't change the rules of the game. It doesn't give you permission to do things God has said not to do. Do you tell yourself it's OK to react badly because you're being treated unfairly? Peter says NO. Even through torture and death, Jesus didn't sin.

v.22: "*No deceit was found in His mouth*" - Jesus never sought refuge from suffering by compromising the truth.

v.23: "*When they hurled their insults at Him He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats.*" He didn't seek to hurt those who were hurting Him. He could have called legions of angels but He was unwilling to do that.

- **What He did do**

v.23: "*Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.*" The Greek omits the word "Himself" - Jesus entrusted the entire situation to God the Father. Why? Because He believed in the justice and wisdom of His Father. He didn't believe this world was chaos, but that everything that happened was under the control of a good and sovereign God. Do you believe that? You don't show your YES by nodding your head, but by how you respond when you're treated unjustly. That's very convicting!

The only way to fight the temptation to retaliate is to trust God, who judges impartially. If we believe He'll right all wrongs, we've no need to take justice into our own hands.

Jesus didn't run on the mental gerbil wheel going over and over in His mind the ways He'd been badly treated. Rather, he entrusted himself to the justice of God the Father. He was at peace.

And Peter says, Jesus is your example in suffering. Follow in His footsteps.

Does this seem too hard? I think that's why Peter finishes by reminding us that Jesus is not only our example, He's our Redeemer:

3. REST IN YOUR REDEEMER'S GRACE vv.24-25

v.24: "*He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross ...*" Praise God, we're not saved by following Christ's example, because each of us would stumble over v.22: "*He committed no sin.*" That's not us! Sinners need a Saviour, not simply an example.

So the sinless One (v.22) became our Substitute (v.24), because God knew from the beginning that our deepest problem is not our suffering but our sin. Our sin always compounds our suffering by our wrong reactions. But worse, our sin does what our suffering can never do: it separates us from God. And Peter says the biggest need we could ever have has already been met by the cross of Christ.

That's not only where you find forgiveness when you fail, it's where you find grace to change: (v.24) "*so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness*" - because a person joined to this Saviour will *want* to follow closely in His steps. You're motivated because He died for your sins. Because He's set you free from the deepest enslavement and brought you forgiveness and freedom and purpose. Because He's given you kingdom values.

And more than that (v.25): He's been raised from death and lives to be your watchful Shepherd. You're not on your own! The unsaved world is watching us to pull us down, but the Shepherd in heaven is also watching over us, so we have nothing to fear. We can submit to Him and know that He will work everything together for our good and His glory.

Do you see? Christ is so much more than an example to us: He's our Redeemer, and He'll never let us go. There's our hope when we feel weak.

CONCLUSION

- Live before your Father's face
- Follow in your Saviour's footsteps
- Rest in your Redeemer's grace

Perhaps you've been treated unfairly and it's eating you up. You're trapped on the mental gerbil wheel, thinking over and over about what happened. The more you think about it, the faster your thoughts run but you're still going *nowhere*.

You can't afford to stay there! However much you've been hurt, if you give in and allow your mind to spin your grievances over and over, they'll eventually destroy you. You won't find relief by constantly reviewing what happened. Bitterness and anger will wear a rut in your heart and soul.

But how do you get off the gerbil wheel? It takes a greater love to supplant a lesser one. You'll get off the gerbil wheel when your heart is captured by a love that's greater than the affection you currently feel for nursing your hurts. The greater love will set you free. And that greater love is Christ.

It may not be an easy or quick victory. More likely, it will involve a daily resolve to focus again on Christ rather than on ourselves and those who hurt us. But the more we fix our eyes on how much Jesus has loved us, the more we'll want to share that love with others, even those who've wronged us, and our bitterness will begin to melt. Jesus' love will set us free.

And perhaps even our tormentors will begin to ask the question, "*What is it that empowers this person to live such a beautiful life despite the way I treat them?*" And when they find it's because of Christ they'll ask, "*How do I find my way to your Saviour too?*"

PRAYER: Father, help us by your Spirit so to survey the wondrous cross that our heart is melted by the love of Christ. May we walk in His footsteps for the salvation of others, for your glory's sake. AMEN.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- What unfair situation have you given too much power in your life?
- Where do you need to stop avoiding our Lord's footsteps, and begin walking in them?
- How does this passage help you to prefer Christ over comfort?