

In the Land of our Sojourn: A New Way to Suffer

1 Peter 2:18-25

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on August 31, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ The way we live our lives can be a powerful witness to the truth and beauty of the gospel. An authentic, faithful Christian life is a very persuasive testimony. **Yet a more powerful and persuasive witness is not just the way you carry yourself in everyday life but the way you carry yourself when confronted with suffering and death.**
 - When life is going well, when “*the sun is shining down on me, when the world is all as it should be*”, and you keep trusting and following Jesus – I think the non-believing world might take notice of the fact that you still believe in God even in a fast secularizing society, but that probably won't raise too many eyebrows.

- ❖ Yet when you're on the road marked with suffering, and the world sees you holding on to Jesus while bearing up under hardship, suffering, and the threat of death – then not only are their eyebrows raised, their mouths are dropped and their tongues are silent. They don't have an answer for that. **The most puzzling yet powerfully persuasive witness for the gospel is a Christian who is patiently enduring suffering, especially unjust suffering.**

- ❖ Ernest Gordon spent three years in a Japanese POW camp during WWII. He, along with his fellow prisoners, endured cruel, inhumane treatment as they labored day in and day out to build the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai.¹ In his biography, he tells about a fellow prisoner named Dusty Miller who nursed him back to health after he first arrived to the camp on the verge of death. Dusty went to great lengths, even giving his own meager rations of food to help Gordon regain his strength. He was totally unaware of this sacrifice until one day Dusty fainted and ended up in the infirmary himself due to starvation.
 - As he tells his story, Ernest Gordon entered that POW camp an agnostic, but he came out a believer, largely in part by Dusty's firm Christian faith in the face of savage, even sadistic, treatment at the hands of their captors. According to Gordon, Dusty never lost his faith and never retaliated. He never fought back or lashed out in anger.
 - At some point, the two men were separated and lost contact. Upon liberation, Gordon sought news of his friend's fate and was horrified to learn that Dusty was executed two weeks shy of the war's end. Dusty had caused a particularly cruel guard to “lose face” because no matter how much or how hard he would beat Dusty, he never broke. So in an attempt to mock his Christian faith, the guard killed Dusty by nailing him to a tree outside the camp.

- ❖ This is what happens. **When the world is confronted with a real Christian and a real witness to the gospel, rarely do you get a tepid, indifferent response. People tend to be either attracted or repulsed.** Persuaded or left puzzled and sometimes provoked to violence.
 - Real Christians tend to draw out pretty strong reactions. Paul says we are the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To one a fragrance of death and to the other a fragrance of life (2 Cor. 4:7-9; 2:15-16).

¹ He chronicled his experience in the book *Miracle on the River Kwai*, which inspired the movie, *To End All Wars*.

- ❖ Ask yourself this: ***What kind of reactions do I trigger with my life, with the way I live out my faith?*** Do nonbelievers tend to react with tepid, indifferent responses? Or do I elicit strong, polarizing reactions? Are they conflicted? Are some attracted to the quality of my life and faith? While some are turned off by the same?
- ❖ Peter's point in his letter is that a real Christian will draw out both reactions. We are "*sojourners and exiles*" in this world, so there's no surprise when we're seen as strange. This present world is not home. **And yet, Christian faithfulness calls us to be the best possible citizens in our cities of residence – in hopes of avoiding any unnecessary harassment and possibly clearing up any gross misrepresentations of the Christian faith.**
 - So starting in chapter 2:12, Peter exhorts us to to keep our conduct honorable. He argues that the good you do in public will be observed and – *who knows?* – some watching unbelievers may be won over to Christ in large part by your conduct.
- ❖ **Peter then goes on in a section spanning 2:13-3:7 where he connects this honorable conduct with the way in which Christians deal with authority.** We are a free people (v16) and yet that means a freedom – not to slough off authority – but to freely submit to proper authority, that which God has established in our lives.
 - Peter gets practical and addresses various relationships of authority that are common for Christians. In vv13-17, he talks about how we ought to subject ourselves to all ruling authorities *for the Lord's sake*. It's not submission for submission's sake. It's for the sake of Christ our ultimate Ruler and Authority and for the sake of our mission to proclaim his gospel and make disciples in his name.
- ❖ Now in chapter 3:1-6, he talks about the authority of husbands over wives. But in our text, he's addressing the authority of masters, which in the Roman household is the husband. **Peter's point is that honorable conduct for Christian slaves – in view of their master's authority – would be to respect that authority even when it's abused.** Endure suffering especially if it's unjust suffering at the hands of unjust masters. This is a gracious thing. This is honorable. This will be viewed as good in the eyes of God and a watching world.

A Word on Slavery in the Bible

- ❖ Now before we go further into that exhortation, I need to speak a word about slavery in the Bible. A lot of people get tripped up when the Bible appears to speak approvingly of the practice or at least fails to outright condemn it. Our initial reaction is to picture New World slavery, which left an ugly blight in American history. **But we shouldn't read New World slavery into the New Testament situation.** There were significant differences.
- ❖ **The biggest difference is that slavery in NT times was not race-based.** You couldn't tell someone was a slave simply by looking at the color of their skin. People often became slaves for reasons such as war. Prisoners of war became slaves to serve within a Roman household. Yes, you'd rather be free, but it was a better fate than execution because at least now you were a member of your master's household, and he was obliged to care of you.

- **It was also common to sell yourself into slavery.** People actually chose to become a slave. It was a means of employment where you agreed to serve under the will of another for a set period of time. This was comparable to what was later known as indentured service. Some sold themselves into slavery as a means to pay off a debt, and some used slavery as a way of obtaining Roman citizenship.

- ❖ **Another difference is that a 1st-century slave could reasonably expect eventual freedom.** Under Roman law, slaves could be and were often set free. Rarely was it a lifelong sentence.
 - **Greco-Roman slaves were also granted significant rights by their masters.** Slaves could own property, which they could invest and eventually use to purchase their own freedom. Some slaves even had slaves of their own.
 - **And many slaves were domestic servants.** This is the word Peter uses here in v18. He's addressing an *oiketes*, a household servant, which was a specific category of slave (*doulos*). A large percentage of them were educated, some more so than their masters. They functioned as clerks, artisans, architects, physicians, administrators, teachers, and soldiers.

- ❖ So again, 1st-century slavery was not racially motivated, it was rarely life-long, and it was viewed as a viable means of improving your socio-economic position. You could accrue wealth and property and perhaps Roman citizenship – all of which you keep when released.
 - But having said that, in no way am I trying to justify the practice or deny the abuses that certainly took place. Slavery is morally evil. To treat anyone more as property than as person is inherently wrong.

- ❖ **But what I want you to see is that the 1st century slave-master relationship bears striking similarities with the modern-day employee-employer relationship.** Think about it. Many of us work because we're in debt. A lot of us don't like our jobs. We'd rather do something else, but due to whatever circumstances we have to work because we owe money.
 - And some of us have indentured ourselves into contracts of a set length. Your company paid for your training or graduate degree, and now you're obligated to work for them to "pay off" that debt, if you will. So when Paul addresses Christian slaves in relation to their master, I think it's appropriate to apply it to our workplace context.

- ❖ But I have no doubt that some of you still wish Peter was more outspoken for the abolition of slavery. You find his silence quite troubling. But remember, there's a big difference between endorsing a practice versus regulating it within a particular historical and cultural context.
 - **The household was the most basic and foundational unit of Roman society.** Stable households were considered crucial for a stable society. For that reason, any new religion or philosophy introduced to Greco-Roman society was judged in large part by whether it strengthened or subverted household relationships. **Any religion deemed to be destabilizing to the proper order between masters and slaves or husbands and wives would have been severely criticized and rejected.**

- ❖ Most estimates suggest that, in NT times, nearly a quarter of the Roman Empire consisted of slaves. Slave revolts were not uncommon, but they were quickly and brutally put down. **So early Christian leaders were careful not to confuse the Christian faith with a socio-political movement that seeks to overturn all social order by force of will.**
 - But that's not to say NT writers like Peter weren't subversive. He didn't call for revolt and attempt to dismantle the entire institution of slavery. But in a passage like this, Peter certainly laid a seedbed for the institution's eventual demise.

- ❖ For example, the fact that he addresses slaves directly (in the vocative tone) is paradigm-shifting. **Peter is treating slaves as responsible moral agents.** That was unheard of. If you had something to say to a slave, you would always talk to his master. You wouldn't communicate with the slave directly. That would convey personhood. *Exactly Peter's point.*
 - **Another point of subversion is the way Peter rejects the cultural expectation that a slave must worship his master's gods** (or a wife and her husband's gods). Clearly he believes a slave – by virtue of being his or her own person made in God's image – can and should embrace Christ and reject his master's gods.
 - But nonetheless, it doesn't look like the condemnation of slavery was Peter's main concern. He seems more concerned with the moral conduct and gospel witness of the Christian slave regardless of his or her status in society.

The Charge to Suffer Well

- ❖ So let's consider Peter's main point. Here we see in vv18-20 that **he's charging Christian slaves to suffer well even while suffering unjustly.** Read v18 again, "*Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.*"

- ❖ A significant portion of the early church was comprised of slaves. A gospel that preaches freedom in Christ, endows believers with dignity as children of God, and offers a living hope beyond the trials of this world would definitely find a warm reception among slaves.
 - **But it appears that some may have thought their new found freedom meant they're free to throw off their status as slaves to their masters.** Perhaps they were thinking, "*I'm a child of God now. Why do I still have to serve this unrighteous, unbelieving master? I have a heavenly master now.*" Or perhaps in their zeal for prayer or bible study, they were ignoring their duties as slaves.
 - So these nonChristian masters are now discovering that their once dutiful slaves are becoming more disrespectful and more distracted after becoming Christians. **Their insubordination could easily be misinterpreted as a natural extension of believing in the gospel.**

- ❖ Knowing all that is at stake, Peter insists that freedom in Christ does not entitle slaves to rebel against or simply disregard their master even if he's an unjust crooked man. Peter says to be subject to him *with all respect*. So just as it didn't matter who the emperor is – it could be a ruler as wicked as Nero – Christians are called to submit and to respect the authority of the office.

- ❖ In military circles you might here someone say, “*Salute the rank, not the man.*” What that means is even if you can’t bring yourself to salute the man because his character is so deplorable, you still salute the rank he holds.
 - In the same way, Peter is instructing slaves to respect your master simply because he’s the master. **He may be a total pagan and an immoral, wicked little man, but you still have to obey him.** Now since he has no morals, there will be times when he demands obedience that you just can't give because you're mindful of Christ your true and better Master. In those situations, you should respectfully refuse. And yes, you can be certain a vicious beating is coming. But this is a gracious thing.

- ❖ Look at v19, *“¹⁹For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰For 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.”*
 - When Peter says *“this is a gracious thing”*, it literally says, “this is grace.” What is grace? Submitting to proper authority even while suffering unjustly at their hands. That is grace. That means such conduct is not only honorable in the sight of man but commendable in the sight of God. Yet it also implies that it's God's grace resting on the believer that enables such commendable conduct.

- ❖ **I know some of you have a hard time submitting to and respecting your boss.** You’d agree it's definitely going to take the grace of God. Maybe you don't like your boss. You wish he were a Christian. You wish she shared your values. Instead, your boss is rude and demanding. He shows favoritism. She cares more about her own career advancement. Bottom line, you feel like your boss treats you like property. You’ve often felt like a slave.
 - You're thinking, *“I see where you're going with this, but seriously you don't know my boss. He's a total jerk. And he cheats. He cooks the books. He's not worthy of respect.”* Or some of you students, who don't have a boss, do have parents (the proper authority God has put over you right now), and you're thinking, *“My parents are totally unfair. One or both may not even be Christians. They're not worthy of respect.”*

- ❖ Well good! That's going to make your gospel witness even more powerful and more persuasive when you still submit to them with all respect, when you subject yourself to their God-ordained authority for the Lord's sake. **Friends, it is a commendable and powerfully persuasive thing when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.**
 - But having said that, let’s be sure not to misapply Peter's instructions. There’s nothing here to suggest that it’s wrong for Christians to seek fair treatment by working within their company’s policy for raising and redressing grievances. Or to seek justice in society by working within the legal system.
 - Remember, Paul demanded an apology from the authorities in Philippi when the wrongly beat him and Silas (Acts 16:35-50). Even Jesus objected to being unfairly struck in the face by a temple officer during a formal interrogation by the high priest (Jn. 18:22-23).

- ❖ **So it would be a misapplication to conclude that Christians should just be doormats that absorb every injustice thrown at them, even when there are legal options and remedies available at their disposal.** *What does that mean?* It means it's okay to file a grievance with HR regarding the unjust practices of your supervisor.
 - You can speak up. You probably should and not just for your own sake but for the sake of your colleagues who are enduring the same unjust treatment. But Peter's main point is this: **Even if after airing your grievances through the proper channels, the company or civil authorities decide to stand on the side of injustice, then that is when we must avoid retaliation and reviling in return.** That is when we should resolve to endure the suffering rather than soak in bitterness and rage.

The Exemplar of Suffering Well

- ❖ This was Jesus' experience and that was his reaction, his resolve. This leads to our third point. **Jesus is the exemplar of suffering well even while suffering unjustly.** Let's read v21, "*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.*"
 - Notice how Peter transitions into v21 with the key words "*for*" and "*because*". He just gave the exhortation to suffer well and now he explains why it's reasonable to demand this of Christians. **Suffer well even while suffering unjustly for you were called to suffer for Christ in this way because Christ also suffered for you.**
- ❖ Vv21-25 are so important. As we've said, Peter's assumption is that to suffer well will be viewed by nonbelievers as honorable and good. Stoic philosophers would likely teach the same thing. They'd advocate the same behavior.
 - **But the difference is that Peter's exhortation to suffer well is firmly rooted in Christ and the gospel.** Jesus is our pattern of patient endurance. He's the exemplar, the perfect example. But not only that. He's also the provider of all we need to obey. Not only does he lay down a pattern. He provides us with power to obey.
- ❖ In v21, Peter calls Jesus and his suffering an example (*hypogrammon*) for us. The Greek word there refers to a pattern of letters that parents would use to teach children the Greek alphabet. My wife actually does this for our daughter. She'll use a highlighter to write out the alphabet, thereby leaving a pattern, an example, for her to trace over.
 - So we're talking about the closest of copies. Not just copying a pattern placed next to your paper but right on top. **Jesus and his willing submission to unjust suffering is that pattern, that example, over which you and I are to trace out our lives.**
- ❖ Let us then consider Jesus. Look at v22, "*22He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*"
 - Peter's point is that Christian slaves are called to this kind of submission because their own Master, their true and better Master, made himself nothing taking on the form of a servant (*doulos*), a slave (Phil. 2:7).

- ❖ Jesus dignified the lowest in society by becoming like them in his Incarnation, and he set the pattern as he endured unjust suffering, eventually dying a slave's death as he was nailed to a tree (cross). Roman law reserved crucifixion for only the worst of criminals, the most violent insurrectionists. And only for slaves and foreigners.
 - **Which explains why Peter saw it fit to compare Jesus with Isaiah's Suffering Servant/Slave found in Isaiah 53.** In v22, Peter alludes to that famous chapter in Isaiah that predicted the future sufferings of the Messiah (cf. Isa. 53:9).

- ❖ Jesus embodied servanthood and embraced suffering, even unjust suffering. Peter says that's the example he left us that we might follow in his steps. *So what does it mean for us to follow in the footsteps of Christ – in society, in the workplace, in the home?*
 - **For one, it means when you suffering unjustly, you do not commit sin in response – just as Christ committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth (v22).** That means you don't try to get out from under unjust suffering by means of deception or any stretching of the truth.

- ❖ **It also means, like Christ, you don't revile in return or issues threats.** Mark 14 recounts Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin. It says, "*many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.*" (14:56). They were making false accusations against him. Jesus could've have easily shot back.
 - It's so tempting to respond to accusations and accusers – especially when you know they're wrong – by casting them in bad light, speaking harshly towards them, issuing your own threats.
 - Yet we read in Mark, "*But he remained silent and made no answer.*" (14:61) He did not retaliate. He did not go down to their level. He did not fight fire with fire. He did not revile. He did not threaten.

- ❖ **Now when the world looks at Jesus' silence in the face of his accusers, many will despise it as a sign of weakness.** He looks like a pansy, a doormat. He can't stand up for himself. As I said earlier, the world will rarely respond to this kind of behavior with tepid indifference. So some are going to despise Jesus for what they see as weakness.
 - **But others will be drawn to this man.** They'll be attracted by such strange behavior. They're the ones who come to realize that his was not the silence of passive resignation, of throwing in the towel. **His was the silence of patient confidence.**
 - Peter says at the end of v23 that Jesus, "*continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*" He had the strength, the wherewithal, to keep his mouth shut because his faith and hope was in his Father who judges justly.

- ❖ The only way you'll have the strength to refrain from retaliating against those who wrong you is by likewise entrusting yourself into the hands of the Just Judge of the universe. **But a Just Judge is of no real comfort and a source of no real confidence unless he is also to you God and Father (1:3).** This Just Judge needs to be your Just Father. A holy Father who loves you, who is totally for you.

- ❖ **If you hope to suffer well, you need a rock-solid promise that God is working all things together for good, including unjust suffering.** You need that kind of hope. And that's the kind Jesus came to bring. That's why he endured his suffering. *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”* (3:18)
 - Through Christ's suffering we are reconciled to God. Look at v24, *“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.”* **Because Christ has suffered for you, bearing your sins on the cross, you are healed.** Through faith in this Savior, you are fully forgiven and fully accepted by the Father.

- ❖ Think about what this means for you. **This means you no longer have to prove yourself to anyone. The Just Judge of the Universe approves of you because now you're in Christ.** He has made his ruling and it stands forever. The court of public opinion means nothing now.
 - Think about what this means for your career. Your identity is no longer found in your job title, or how much money you make, or how much respect you get. Your identity is now in being a child of God.
 - The same could be said of Christian students. Your identity is no longer found in your GPA, your achievements, your degrees. You are an elect exile of the dispersion (1:1). **Do you realize you don't have anything to prove to anyone?**

- ❖ So while everyone else gripes and complains about your boss or your professor being a jerk, you can walk away and go right back to your work – knowing that Christ has given you everything you need. Even if you don't get the respect or fair treatment you hope for from a supervisor or teacher. You know you have everything you need in Jesus.
 - **When you suffer well, following in the footsteps of Christ, you prove to the watching world how powerful the gospel really is to make you the kind of person you really are.**

- ❖ Peter concludes in v25 with this, *“For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”* Peter ends by reminding us that at one point we were all lost, wandering like sheep. But by the grace of God in the gospel, we've been returned to Jesus our Shepherd and Overseer – our Protector, Provider, Leader, and Guide.
 - Like any good shepherd, Jesus leads and his sheep follow in his steps. **Peter's whole point is that if your Shepherd has led you onto a road marked with suffering, it doesn't mean you've strayed.** It doesn't mean you're off the path. No, you're on the right road, the same road your Shepherd once took – the Calvary road. Yes, there's a cross to bear and a death to die along the way, but there is praise, glory, and honor waiting at the end (1:7).