

“The Guardian of Our Souls”

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1Peter 2:19-25

For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

²² “He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

²³ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

²⁵ For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

A FIRST CENTURY LETTER

We need to keep one thing in mind when we read our passage for today. It was a letter written to people in Asia Minor in the first century. This was not a letter written to people in the twenty first century.

Now don’t misunderstand what I’m saying.
Peter’s first letter is a part of the Bible.
It is Scripture. It is important to us today.

But, in order to clearly understand what this letter might say to us today, we have to consider the difference between the circumstances that faced Christians in the first century and our circumstances today.

In twenty first century America, we live in a democracy.

We have a bill of rights.

We live under the rule of law and not under the whims of a dictator.

We have outlawed slavery.

All of these things were not true for Christians in the first century.

Caesar was considered to be a kind of demigod.

In order to show their loyalty people had to say, "Caesar is Lord."

Roman citizens may have had some rights.

But, those under Roman occupation had very few rights.

If they spoke out against the emperor, they would be severely punished, even crucified.

Slavery was a common.

Women and children were treated like possessions instead of people.

But, an amazing thing happened in the Christian community.

When they received the Spirit of the risen Christ they developed a whole new way of living.

The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians,

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

This is an absolutely amazing thing to say in the first century.

Society in the first century was based upon everyone knowing their place and staying in their place.

But, now we have a group that not only challenges that notion; they put this radically new way of life into practice in their own community.

We have evidence in the New Testament that slaves, masters, men and women all worshipped together. And sometimes the leaders in those early churches were not the men who normally led in the greater society.

Sometimes a prominent woman like Lydia, the seller of purple took became the leader of the church. Sometimes a slave was a leader in a church where the master also attended. Sometimes masters set their slaves free. (See Philemon)

In the twenty first century we say,
 “Of course they did. It’s obvious.
 We shouldn’t discriminate in the church.
 We’re all one in Christ Jesus.”

But, that’s not how people in the first century looked at things.
 They said, “These Christians won’t pledge allegiance to Caesar.
 These Christians put women in charge and free their slaves.
 These Christians are a danger to society.
 They don’t follow the rules.”

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

The Christians in Asia Minor had one more strike against them.
 They were foreigners.
 They were strangers in a strange land.

Who knows what these strange Christians might do?

They were viewed like many view undocumented workers in our own society.

Who are these people who live among us?
 Are they terrorists?
 Are they promoting a way of life that is immoral and destructive?

Peter has already alluded to the fact that these “exiles” were subject to prejudice and persecution.

Yes, they were God’s people.
 They had been chosen by God.

But, in the eyes of society they were no people.
They were nobodies.
They had no rights and no reason to be in that part of the world.

They practiced a way of life that was radically different from the rest of society.
They faced deep suspicion and outright persecution.

MODEL CITIZENS

How could these Christians defend themselves in such a difficult situation?
The verses that precede our lesson for today give the answer. (1 Peter 2:11-18)

Peter said that since they are “aliens and exiles” their behavior needs to be beyond reproach.
They need to be model citizens.

Their only protection in such a precarious situation is to live a righteous life.

In some cases folks will see their good deeds and reconsider their viewpoint.
Who knows? There may even come a time when these guys will praise God on account of their witness.

Peter went on to say that they should not challenge Caesar.
They should honor everyone ... including Caesar.
Sometimes even a bad government is to be preferred over anarchy.

They don't do this because they believe Caesar is Lord.
They do this because they believe that God can, in the long run, do good things even through someone like Caesar.

And besides, they have no choice.
They don't get a vote.
Anything but righteous behavior will bring reproach upon the whole Christians community and get “exiles” kicked out of the country ... or worse.

DEALING WITH PERSECUTION

But, what happens if this doesn't work?

Suppose folks believe the lies about the Christians community instead of noticing their righteous behavior?

Suppose the persecution ramps up?

How should these exiles respond to this mistreatment?

Peter gives an example.

What's a slave to do when he's mistreated at the hands of his master?

He (or she) claims their own humanity and worth by relating their suffering to the suffering of Christ on the cross. (1 Peter 2:18)

One of the most powerful hymns in our hymnbook is also a very simple one, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" The mournful tune and the response of that hymn makes you feel the sacrifice and the drama of that moment.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

O sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Who wrote that hymn?

African American slaves in the 19th century.

They knew what it meant to be mistreated.

They knew what it was like to suffer.

They knew what it was like to be in a situation that offered no hope.

But, when they considered the suffering of Christ, they were given hope.

Yes, the suffering of Christ caused them to tremble with fear.

But, it also caused them to tremble with expectation.

If God could give the world hope through the crucifixion, then God could give them hope as well.

The story of the crucifixion gave them a new way of looking at the world.
Their response to slavery was to put themselves into the biblical story.

Were you there?
Yes, indeed they were there.

But, they knew the rest of the story.

They knew that the sun refused to shine.
They knew that the earth began to shake.

And that same earth shaking story would free them as well.

HIS STORY AND OUR STORY

I wonder.

Can we put ourselves in the story?
Can we go there?
Can we go to the cross?

What does the unjust suffering of Christ mean to us?
Does it cause us to tremble?

And, more importantly, does it cause us to reevaluate our life and our values?
In this passage the cross is presented as God's nonviolent way to resist injustice.

Christ is our example.

He was innocent of any wrongdoing.
But, when he was abused, he didn't return that abuse.
When he suffered, he did not threaten.

Instead, Jesus trusted that the worst this world could do would not block the plans of God. Peter tells us that Jesus entrusted himself to God, "to the one who judges justly".

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said to his heavenly Father,

“Not my will but thine be done.”

When Jesus was murdered by the people he loved and had come to save he said,

“Father, forgive them.

They don’t know what they are doing.”

And these words of forgiveness from the cross caused one of the very ones who crucified him to say,

“Surely this man was the Son of God.”

Words of forgiveness from the cross did what no military action could ever do.

It turned an enemy into an evangelist for the gospel.

Were you there when that happened?

Does that cause you to tremble?

And does that cause you to change how you approach others?

Can you forgive those who mistreat you?

Can you let the sins and the struggles of the past go for the sake of God’s future?

Can you let God’s will be done in your life even when it puts you in conflict with others?

THE CHALLENGE OF AMAZING GRACE

The example of Jesus is a challenging one.

When measured against the forgiveness of Christ I’m afraid we all come up short.

I know what to do, but quite often I do the opposite.

I heard someone say of the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, “He’s an eye for an eye kind of guy.”

I’m afraid that all too often I’m the same kind of guy.

In practice my example seems to be Putin instead of Jesus.

I want to get back at those who wrong me.

But, the story of Jesus keeps calling me home.

The story of Jesus reminds me that I don't know what I'm doing.
The story of Jesus reminds me of God's forgiveness.
The story of Jesus reminds me of how he confronted injustice with the un-
stoppable power of God's amazing grace.

And when I become a part of that story, the words of the prophet become a
reality in my own life.

"By his wounds I am healed."

My desire for revenge crucifies the Lord all over again.

But, his cry from the cross reminds me of his love and forgiveness.
He is faithful even though I am not.
He is forgiving even though I am not.

And so his sacrifice on the cross heals my wounds.

He understands that I don't know what I am doing.
He asks His Father to forgive me.
And that changes everything.

No longer am I consumed by fear and guilt.
Instead of being led by my worst instincts, I am led by the grace of God as
revealed by Jesus.
I am freed from my sins and enabled to really live.

In Jesus Christ I become a new person.

THE GUARDIAN OF OUR SOULS

The Bible tells us that we are like sheep.
We tend to wander off into the wilderness and get ourselves into trouble.

We tend to accept the evaluation of the "wolves" who still live in our world.

The wolves say that we are nobodies.
They prey upon our fear and lack of confidence.
They say that we are unimportant, that we don't belong.

This is one thing that is as true today as it was true of those first century Christians to whom Peter wrote this letter. And the great danger is still the temptation to believe the false story.

If we believe what they say to us, it drains the life from our soul.

It is not the suffering and persecution that we should fear. It is the false narrative that the suffering and persecution tempts us to believe.

I'm reminded of line from a song by James Taylor,
 "They'll take your soul if you let them, but don't you let them."

How can we prevent the soul draining world from defining us?
 Christians believe that we learn to tell a different story.

I ran across a good example of how this works in the autobiography of Howard Thurman.

Howard Thurman faced the persecution of racism in America in the early twentieth century. And in his autobiography he told a story about the time he took his little daughters to Daytona Beach, a place where he had grown up. He wrote,

"We sauntered down the long street from the church to the riverfront. This had been the path of the procession to the baptismal ceremony in the Halifax River ... At length we passed the playground of one of the white public schools.

As soon as Olive and Anne saw the swings, they jumped for joy.
 'Look Daddy. Let's go over and swing.'

This was the inescapable moment of truth that every black parent in America must face soon or late. What do you say to your child at the moment of primary encounter?

'You can't swing on those swings.'

'Why Daddy?'

'When we get home and have some cold lemonade I will tell you.'

When we had had our lemonade Anne pressed for an answer.

‘We’re home now, Daddy. Tell us.’

I said, ‘It’s against the law for us to use those swings, even though it’s a public school.

Only white children can play there.

But, it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of the white people in the state of Florida—it takes all of these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings.

That is how important you are!

Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how much power people are willing to use to keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls.”

(For those of you who may not know, Howard Thurman was a Baptist minister, college chaplain and writer. In particular his writings on non-violent resistance, influenced Dr. Martin Luther King.)

So, there was a reason Thurman wouldn’t accept the story that the world told him.

He would not let unjust laws define him or his daughters.

Why?

He knew a greater story.

He knew that he was a child of God.

He knew that he had been ransomed and set free.

He had heard the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Unjust laws had taken a lot from him and his family.

But, his faith would not let them take his soul.

It really hasn’t been that long since the struggle for civil rights.

It really hasn’t been that long since black children were barred from a public playground.

We like to act like that’s all behind us, that we now have a different story to tell.

But, I believe the anger and division in our country today is fueled by people who are trying to get us to believe a false narrative, a false story that is not all that different from the racism of the past.

They tell us that our problems are due to those “other people” ... those Republicans or those Democrats ... those religious people ... or those irreligious people.

They tell us that our problems are due to those exiles, those aliens among us.

Those false stories (and many more like them) keep us from really hearing each other.

And those false stories are soul draining.

James Taylor had it right.

They will take your soul if you let them.

But, how do you keep that from happening?

Peter reminds us that we have a different story.

It is a story based upon radical forgiveness.

It is a story of God’s grace told from the cross.

We have a shepherd.

He calls us by name.

He leads us to green pastures and still waters.

And even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we don’t have to be afraid.

The Lord walks with us.

That’s our story, and we’re sticking with it.

No matter what happens they won’t take our souls.

For the Bible tells us:

The Lord is the Guardian of our souls.

And that makes all the difference.

Amen.