

Mistreatment in Exile (2:18-25)

Well, hey church family. Thanks once again for listening in to this week's teaching. If you have a bible, turn with me to 1 Peter 2. After a brief hiatus due to the Coronavirus pandemic, we are hopping back into our series through the book of 1 Peter, that we titled *Life in Exile*. **So to jog our memory a little, the overall purpose of this letter was to help ancient followers of Jesus learn how to relate to the society around them.** That's Peter's primary goal. The people that he writes to were followers of Jesus, living in a world that did not much like Christians, and often were very suspicious of them. So he's trying to coach them up on how to live in light of all of that.

So where we left off back, just over a month ago actually, **Peter was talking about specifically how they should relate to governing authorities and political figures in their society.** If you missed that, feel free to go back and grab the podcast. It was a lot of fun—I made everybody on both sides of the aisle mad, and then we decided to never have in-person Gatherings ever again after that Sunday. But that was what we talked about: how we relate to governing authorities and political figures of our day. And today, he's going to get into another specific application of all of this. But this one is going to require that we do some *work* before we can apply it to our society today.

So let's just dive into the passage. I'm actually going to read the whole thing for us, and then we'll work our way through it, little by little. Pick it up with me in v. 18:

[18] Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. [19] For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. [20] For 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. [21] 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. [22] He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. [23] When 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. [24] 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. [25] For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

So Peter starts off with “servants [and the most literal translation of that is actually ‘bondservants,’ or ‘slaves’], be *subject* to your masters.” So obviously, we’ve got our work cut out for us with this passage. **The fact that the bible brings up the idea of slavery and says anything about it other than “abolish it entirely” is really difficult for most modern Americans.** And understandably so. After all, it is passages like this one that early colonial Americans used to justify the African slave trade. People who were Christians (or at least claimed to be) would point to passages in the bible like this and said “see!?! God is totally okay with slavery, because here, the bible says that “slaves should be subject to their masters.” Now, we’re going to see here shortly how that is a very shallow, very *uninformed* reading of these passages. But on the *surface* at least, when reading the words in this passage, you can see where they got that from. So this is a difficult passage for us—no doubt about it.

So to start off, we need to ask the question, *does the word “slaves” mean the same thing to Peter that it means to us?* That’s really important to understanding what Peter is and isn’t saying. **We can’t assume that a word in the bible always meant the same thing to its audience that it means to us, because there are usually cultural differences between their society and ours.** To illustrate that with a really silly example: there’s a verse in Luke 17, we read that Jesus “traveled” from Nazareth to Jerusalem. Now, the shortest route between those two places was about 64 miles. So we *could* assume that when it says Jesus “traveled” that distance, it *means* what it means to us today: that Jesus hopped in his energy-efficient Prius (because everybody knows that Jesus would drive a Prius), put on his Chance the Rapper playlist on Spotify (naturally), and zoomed about an hour up the road to Jerusalem. Because that’s how you and I today would probably *travel* 64 miles. That’s what the word “travel” means to us. But that’s not what the word “travel” meant back then. Back then, they traveled by foot or by animal—not by Prius. And it wouldn’t have taken him an hour, it would’ve taken the better part of a day, or maybe *multiple* days.

Now, you guys are smart people, so you would never assume something silly like that about the word “travel.” But it illustrates the *point* that **we can’t assume a word meant the same thing to *them* that it means to *us*, because there is a lot of cultural distance between our two worlds.**

So in a *similar way*, **we can’t read the word “slaves” in 1 Peter and assume that the word *slavery* means the exact same thing to them that it means to us *today*.** We read the word “slavery” and immediately picture in our heads the early American slave trade: primarily *wealthy, white* or *European* Americans, sending ships to African

countries, capturing millions of human beings there, and then forcing them into a life of hard labor in America. But that isn't what Peter is referring to (*one* reason being because that happened approximately 1500 years after Peter wrote this). Really, **if you want to know what God thinks of *that* type of slavery—the kind of slavery in early America—you don't really have to look much further than Exodus 21:16**, that says this:

Whoever steals a man and sells him [which would be pretty much an *exact description* of what American slave traders did...whoever does *that*...] **and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.**

That type of slavery, God says, is punishable by the *death penalty*. So I'm gonna mark God down for a vote of "against" to "strongly against" as far as early American slavery goes. As we would *expect*, since **God is and always has been opposed to injustice in all its forms, and especially injustice of that horrific magnitude**. That type of slavery was thought up by a group of men who had completely severed their consciences from any influence of the Scriptures. Because the Scriptures *clearly* speak out against it. And **so unless Peter, a Jewish man steeped in the Old Testament books like Exodus, had just forgotten about verses like *that* one we just read** (spoiler alert: that's not what was happening), **it must be that he is talking about an altogether *different* type of slavery here in his letter.**

So, to help us here, what can we piece together about the difference between slavery as *we know it*, and the kind *Peter* is referring to? I think it's helpful to highlight a few significant differences:

- First, and maybe most *significantly* to us, **people of any and all races were slaves**. It wasn't limited to any one ethnicity. So it was not an inherently racist institution, like early colonial slavery was.¹
- Second, **slaves performed all types of work, not just physical labor**. Slaves were just as likely to work as doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, and agents as they were to work blue collar jobs. A lot of slaves during this time were actually *better educated* than their masters were.²
- And third, **slavery was usually *financially* motivated**. So in Peter's day, you weren't *captured* and forced *into* slavery, you generally sold yourself *into* slavery. For some people, it was because a life of consistent work, food and shelter was preferable to scrounging around constantly for odd jobs. For other people, it was

¹ S.S. Bartchy, *Slavery (Greco-Roman)*, 66.

² K. Hopkins, quoted by S.S. Bartchy in *Slavery (Greco-Roman)*, 69.

because they had incurred enormous amounts of debt that they could not ever feasibly pay off. So the options for them were either be put in prison indefinitely, leaving their family to starve to death, *or* to sell themselves into slavery—which meant you and your family would be *provided for* while you worked to pay back whoever your benefactor was.

So I know that all is *very* brief. And if you're interested in looking into all of that more, shoot me an email and I can point you to some resources. But I just wanted to briefly help us see that **Greco-Roman slavery and early American slavery are actually two very different concepts**. And that's not to say that we should be *proponents* of *either* type, but it does help us more accurately understand what Peter is saying and not saying in this passage.

But all that said, while the type of slavery Peter refers to was vastly *different* from the American slave trade, there were still a *few* similarities between the two. You *were*, after all, still someone else's *property*. That part was the same. You *were* indebted to them so far as your financial obligations went. And specifically according to our passage *today*, it would seem that some masters still committed physical violence against their slaves.

Now in *today's* world, if someone commits any type of physical violence towards us, we, generally speaking, have legal recourse we can take, right? So we can have them charged with assault, or domestic violence, or harassment, or whatever the charge might be. And let me be very clear: we *should* take that sort of action in those scenarios. **If anyone tries to tell you that verses like *this* in the bible mean that you should endure physically abusive behavior and just be quiet about it, not only are they very bad at reading the bible in context; they are a dangerous *human being*, and you should respond accordingly. Hopefully that's clear to everybody.**

But that being said, we have to keep in mind that Peter is writing to a society that *did not have* the same type of legal recourse we do for this. People who were *slaves* in his day did not have the same types of *rights* that their *masters* did, so they couldn't just appeal to the authorities on it like we can. So, it's not a perfect parallel, but try to imagine telling Jewish people living in Nazi Germany that they should call the authorities to report being mistreated. That just wasn't a thing—it actually *was* the *authorities* who were *doing* the mistreating. That wouldn't do any good. And while the ancient Roman empire wasn't Nazi Germany, it was similar in the way that **these people in slavery often did not have any formal legal recourse for being mistreated. So they had to come up with other types of responses. And *that* is what Peter is trying to help them with.**

So with *all of that* unpacked, let's work our way back through this passage, and look at how Peter instructs these followers of Jesus in those types of scenarios. We'll spend a bit unpacking what he says, and then we'll talk some towards the end about some ways this might apply to us today. Take a look with me in our passage with me, starting in v. 18:

*[18] Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, **not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.***

So that word “unjust” there is describing the moral *bankruptcy* of the masters. **The situation Peter has in mind is when a slave who is a follower of Jesus finds themselves working for a master who is *not* a follower of Jesus.** And *because* the master isn't a follower of Jesus, he doesn't have the ethical framework that would prevent him from mistreating others. Peter is saying “if you find yourself in *that* type of scenario, where there's no way out,” here's how you should think about it. Continuing on in v. 19:

*[19] For this is a **gracious thing**, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. [20] For 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.*

Peter says it is a “gracious” thing to endure unjust suffering. Now, just for clarity, **he doesn't mean it's a good thing to be mistreated.** He doesn't mean you should seek *out* unjust suffering. He doesn't mean you should *try* to *put yourself* in situations where you'll be treated that way. And he *also* says you shouldn't *invite* mistreatment by doing *sinful* things to other people. But he *is* saying that **if you find yourself in that type of scenario, where you are being treated unjustly for doing good, and there's nothing you can do about it, that it isn't purposeless.** That God can still work *through* it. And then he unpacks *why* he believes that—look at v. 21:

*[21] 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.** [22] **He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.** [23] **When 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.***

So the reason it is a *gracious* thing to suffer unjustly, is because that is precisely what **Jesus did during his time on earth**. So Jesus himself was mistreated throughout his entire life, but specifically in the days and hours leading up to his death on the cross. Peter says *Jesus also* committed no sin deserving of the treatment *he* received. He didn't lie to anybody, he didn't wrong anybody. And *yet* when *he was mistreated*, he didn't retaliate. When he was beaten, he *chose* not fight back.

And by him choosing that route, God actually *accomplished* something. Look at v. 24:

[24] 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. [25] For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

So the historic Christian understanding is that when Jesus was mistreated and beaten and mocked and then executed, it wasn't just one more example of someone dying unjustly. There was actually something deeper going on. That **by Jesus enduring what he endured, he was actually bearing the weight and the justice due all of our sins**. That in some way, the rulers and authorities that mistreated Jesus were actually *channeling* God's *justified* anger towards *our* sin. All the frustration God has towards the things that corrupt his good design for the world. And so when Jesus hung on the cross, he was actually *intercepting* all that on our behalf. So **even though the rulers and authorities were acting unjustly and sinfully, God was accomplishing something through it: the healing each of us needed from our sin**.

So Peter unpacks all of that for his audience in this passage, hoping that they will connect the dots: that **if God could accomplish something good through Jesus' mistreatment, he may also be able to accomplish something good through their mistreatment**. That by them enduring unjust suffering, God might be accomplishing something behind the scenes that they're unaware of.

So what type of thing would that be, exactly? Well back in v. 11-12 in chapter 2, Peter said that **followers of Jesus should live honorable lives towards the world around them, in hopes that God might use that to draw people to himself**. So it seems that Peter is saying that when Christian slaves endure mistreatment, that God might *use* that endurance to expose the injustice of their masters, to convict them of it, and maybe—just *maybe*—to draw those masters to the way of Jesus as a result. Maybe that's what Peter means when he says that enduring mistreatment is *gracious*—he means that it extends

grace to those mistreating you. Because we are, in a Jesus-esque way, *absorbing* their wrongdoing into ourselves—which may give them an opportunity to receive *healing* for their sin. For them to be rescued into the family of Jesus.

I've always loved the way that Martin Luther King, Jr. once put this. He said it this way:

*I have been arrested five times and put in Alabama jails. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of a near fatal stabbing. **My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering.** As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to **transform the suffering into a creative force.** I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that **unearned suffering is redemptive.***

“...that unearned suffering is redemptive.” Did you hear that? That’s precisely what Peter is saying. That **not only can mistreatment be endured, but that God can work through it to accomplish beautiful things.**

Now, let me just acknowledge how difficult this idea probably is for most of us. It’s so difficult for us to imagine that we should *ever be* mistreated, much less that God might accomplish something good *through* it. But that’s what Peter lays out. And before you start thinking that that is some sort of radical, far-fetched idea, I would encourage you to consider something with me. Consider, that almost without exception, **the places where the Church is growing the most, where people are coming to Jesus by the thousands or even millions, are the countries where Christians are most persecuted.** I’m talking about places like China and Iran,³ places like North Africa—places where the government is doing their best to stomp out the growth of Christianity through persecution and prison sentences, and the Church is growing *lightning* fast as a result. So it would *seem* that Peter is onto something here: it would appear that God really does work in incredible ways through his people being mistreated.

³ Details [here](#).

And **inversely**, isn't it *interesting* that in societies where Christianity is very socially acceptable and *isn't* persecuted much at all, the Church is actually in **decline**? Now obviously, that's not me saying that I *hope* we get *persecuted* more—I quite *appreciate* not going to jail for my faith. It's just a general observation that proves Peter knows what he's talking about: **God often uses the mistreatment of his people to draw people to himself**. So if nothing else, this is all food for thought, right? The undeniable pattern from Scripture and from church history is that by *enduring mistreatment*, we actually have an opportunity to put on display Jesus, who also endured mistreatment. And that God might *use* all of that to draw more and more people to himself.

So all of that unpacked, let's wrap up by talking about what all of this might mean for *us*, today. Given that we probably aren't in the same cultural situation as Peter's audience—at least not most of us—how should we think about all this? As I said earlier, the point of this passage definitely *isn't* that we should be pro-slavery. The point *also* isn't that we should *invite* physical violence against us, *or* even that we should *endure* things like violence or harassment or abuse without reporting it to the authorities. But **we can learn some things from this passage about how we should respond to being mistreated as followers of Jesus**.

I think for most of us, our knee-jerk response any time we are mistreated at all is to assert our *rights*, and then bail. If people are mean to us at work, we call it a “toxic work environment” and we quit. If a friend offends us, we call them an “unsafe person” and stop hanging out with them. Now listen: there is such a thing as a “toxic work environment.” There *is* such a thing as “unsafe” people. But **if we use terms like that just to describe every time we're in a difficult situation, those terms eventually start to mean nothing at all**.

And, **if that's how we respond to adverse situations, we will never learn how to navigate adverse situations**. We will go from job to job, friendship to friendship, relationship to relationship, always baffled as to why people don't treat us as well as we think they should. But the truth is that **we need some adversity in order to grow as human beings**. Best-selling author Greg Lukianoff puts it like this. This is long, and to be honest, very blunt, but I think it's so very good:

*From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated **unfairly**, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer **betrayal***

*because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be **lonely** from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted [a lesson some of us are learning right now during social distancing]. I wish you **bad luck**, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and **understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either**. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you'll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just **enough pain to learn compassion**. Whether I wish these things or not, **they're going to happen**. And **whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes**.*

The reality is that **we have to learn to endure adverse situations if we want to grow as human beings**. And more *importantly*, Peter says by *enduring* them, **we also gain the opportunity to put Jesus on display**. So what if we took Peter at his word? What if we began to ask the question, "is God asking me to endure occasional mistreatment as "a gracious thing in the sight of God"?"

Now at this point some of us may be thinking, "are we really saying we should *endure* mistreatment, rather than calling it out?" Like we should just *endure* things like sexism and racism, for God's sake—and not confront them? And the answer is *no, I'm not saying that*. And one reason I'm not saying that is because those two things are not mutually exclusive. You can endure mistreatment, and still insist on justice. Martin Luther King knew this as much as anybody. You could sum the themes of his preaching and speaking into two categories: demanding justice, and what he called 'suffering love,' or enduring mistreatment. He didn't think he had to choose between them—in fact, he saw them as two sides of the same coin. And I think the Scriptures would teach the same thing. **As followers of Jesus, we are called to speak up and speak out against injustice wherever we see it. But doing that doesn't exclude us from suffering under it**, as a way of following in Jesus' footsteps. And as a way of embodying the sacrificial love of Jesus.

So the question is, *where might God be calling you to do that*: to endure mistreatment, *even as you fight for justice*? Again, I'm not referring to abuse, I'm not referring to violence. I'm talking about situations where you are being mistreated in a legal, permissible way. I'm talking about someone being mean to you for no apparent reason. I'm talking about somebody gossiping about you behind your back. I'm talking about

someone taking credit for *your* work. I'm talking about you being excluded by a group of friends. I'm talking about a professor just having it out for you in school. In those types of situations, how might you demonstrate Jesus to the person or people mistreating you? In those types of situations, might it be that you *enduring* that mistreatment is a "gracious thing in the sight of God"? Might it be an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who endured what he endured, so that people might be rescued into God's family?

Now I say all this, keenly aware of the fact that some people who hear this have been mistreated throughout their entire life. Like, my worst fear is that someone would hear this teaching, and think it is telling them to remain in an abusive romantic relationship. That is not—I repeat, *is not*—what Peter is saying at all. And there are people who have endured things like that—abuse, violence, *horrific* things—*often*. And if that's you, all I want *you* to hear me say is that Jesus is with you, he wants that to *end*, and he wants you to tell somebody about it immediately. And one way or another, Jesus will see to it that those who did that to you are dealt with. *Nobody* escapes the justice of God, and you can *count* on that. So if you're in *that* category, I want you to find comfort in that, and take the appropriate steps.

But for the *rest* of us...for those of us who haven't really *experienced* all that much mistreatment, but who might experience some in the *future*, I'd love for us to consider where *this* might need to be our response to it when it comes. So we'll just end with one question: **where might God be calling you to "redemptive suffering"?** Where might he be calling you to endure mistreatment as a way of putting him and his grace on display? I want you to just spend a moment, cycle through your typical day, week, month—whatever it is—and ask, "are there ways that I am mistreated by people around me?" And if so, ask the Holy Spirit, "how might you have me respond to those in a way that represents Jesus?" I'll pray, and then once I'm done, just spend some time processing and maybe journaling through all that, before you move on to whatever's next in your day.