David Meiklejohn
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Suffering Slaves

1 Peter 2 v 18-25

Introduction - Prospect and Purpose

What do you want to be when you grow up? That's the question we all used to get asked when we were children. Some of you might still get asked that, maybe replacing "grow up" with "graduate". When we were kids we didn't know what sort of jobs were available. There was professional footballer, teacher, doctor, nurse, singer. These were the only careers we knew about. No kid ever said they wanted to be a marine biologist. Well, I know one, but that's another story.

If you're a bit older you have more of an idea. You might have a job you have set your eyes on, and there's a path you plan to follow to get there. When you start working there's another path. If you're ambitious you want to climb the corporate ladder, maybe become a team leader, a department manager, a vice president or even a chief executive. You have prospects and you have purpose.

But not everyone gets to be a CEO. In fact hardly anyone does. What if you have got to the highest position you're likely to be? Can you still have purpose if there are no prospects? Can you still thrive when the job is one long slog?

What if you were a slave? There are no prospects. No one chooses to be a slave. The most you can hope for in your wildest dreams is not to be a slave. How can you have purpose in that position? And what if you are slave to a bad master? What if your biggest hope is that your master doesn't beat you today.

And then you become a believer, a follower of Jesus. You are given new life, a new dignity, a clean slate, a family of brothers and sisters from all walks of society. But you're still a slave. What do you do? What is your purpose now?

Background

Peter is writing to Christians in what is now Turkey, living in towns and cities that are run by the Roman Empire. The world is hostile to them, they are being persecuted, and Peter wants to help them deal with the situation they're in.

In verse 9 he says:

> *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*
>
> *[1 Peter 2 v 9]*

Remember we said that not everyone can be a CEO? Well Peter is sort of saying we can. Actually he is saying they already are. There wasn't a career path, they have just been

catapulted straight into this position, by the grace of God. A chosen race: never mind the civilised Greeks and the powerful Romans. They are Christians, chosen by God. They are royalty and at the same time priests, able to come before the face of God. Talk about prospects? Higher than you could imagine! And a purpose! They are to proclaim the excellencies of God, the one who brought them out of darkness into light.

But that's all in the spiritual dimension. These Christians are still living among ordinary folk. They might be royal priests in a heavenly sense, but they're still butchers and carpenters and soldiers and many of them slaves to the people round about. How do they live now they have had their lives turned upside down? Stop the day job? Demand to be treated like a king? Peter's instruction is interesting:

> *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*
>
> *[1 Peter 2 v 11-12]*

So there's not to be a rebellion. No demands, no separation. Peter says you are just travellers now, this world is temporary, like the Jews in exile you are looking forward to going to your true home. So while you are here, live honourably. Show the locals that God is good.

Last week we learned that the Christians were to obey the authorities, show them respect, be good citizens. Why? To put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. We can see even today that leaders like to have a group of people to blame for all their problems. Very often it is others: maybe foreigners, or a certain class or race of people. In the time Peter is writing, Christians were blamed for all sorts of things, often for not being subject to earthly authority. And so Peter tells them to be subject, so that when they are accused others might say "But he's a good citizen, works hard, pays his taxes, he seems ok to me."

Slaves

But what about slaves? Surely we have freedom in Christ. How can we be subject to earthly masters if God has set us free? The first thing we might think about being a slave is how could we escape from this position.

The Bible maybe isn't as anti-slave as we might like it to be. At the time when abolition was being discussed in parliament, there were Christians who used the Bible to defend slavery, pointing out verses that allow for slaves to be owned for a period, and even become slaves for life. There are rules for limiting the time of ownership and also for treating slaves well. The abolitionists on the other hand pointed out that the Bible tells us we are equal, with the same dignity, and the same value to God.

What we can say for certain is that the Bible acknowledges that slavery exists and some people find themselves in this position. And Peter has some advice for Christian slaves:

> *Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect*
>
> *[1 Peter 2 v 18a]*

Not much wiggle room in that statement, is there? No protests. No breaking out of your chains. Not even an attitude. Be subject to your masters with all respect.

"But surely not the bad ones, Peter?"

> *not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.*
>
> *[1 Peter 2 v 18b]*

Shouldn't we be complaining? Appealing to authority? Striking back? No, Peter's answer to what to do when unjustly beaten is simple: suffer.

"This isn't what I signed up for. I thought Christianity was about joy and peace. What possible purpose could there be to suffering?" It's something we spend most of our lives avoiding, isn't it. We build houses so as not to suffer from the cold. We get ourselves a job so we don't suffer from hunger. We brush our teeth so we don't suffer from toothache. We take every step possible to avoid suffering.

And yet even the secular world knows there can be reasons to suffer. If we push our bodies hard in exercise it can make us stronger and fitter. If we work hard it can give security for our children. If the surgeon cuts us open he can fix a problem inside. What is Peter's reason for accepting suffering from an unjust master?

> *For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.*
>
> *[1 Peter 2 v 19]*

That's an interesting term, isn't it? A gracious thing! We think of grace as coming from God, it is by grace we are saved. What Peter seems to be saying here is that us enduring unjust suffering can show some of that grace to others. Who would gain from seeing this? Other slaves in the household? The abusive master? Fellow Christians? We're always being watched and whatever we do is a witness of who we are.

Peter wants it to be clear though that it's not the suffering itself that gives this grace. If we suffer because we did something wrong then the punishment just reflects justice:

> *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.*
>
> *[1 Peter 2 v 20]*

Being beaten for doing wrong is just a reflection of the law. But suffering unjustly is a reflection of grace. Because we're taking a punishment that isn't due to us, and that is a picture of Christ:

> *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.*
>
> *[1 Peter 2 v 21]*

Have you ever seen anyone wearing a t-shirt that said "What Would Jesus Do?"? Or a wristband with the letters WWJD. I don't know how much thought they've put into that

because the answer to the question is quite simple: suffer. Suffer unjustly for sins he did not commit. And Peter is calling us to do what Jesus did. But let's not pretend that will be easy.

Isaiah talked about the Messiah as a "Man of Sorrows" in Isaiah 53 v 3, and in the next few verses Peter uses the words of Isaiah 53 to paint a beautiful picture of Christ.

A Portrait of the Suffering Servant

Let's look at these verses one by one and cross reference them with Isaiah.

We start with the purity of Jesus. Peter tells us that he was without sin, pure in heart and in word:

> *He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.*
>
> *[1 Peter 2 v 22]*

These words echo Isaiah 53 v 9:

> *And they made his grave with the wicked*
>
> *and with a rich man in his death,*
>
> *although he had done no violence,*
>
> *and there was no deceit in his mouth.*
>
> *[Isaiah 53 v 9]*

We live in a time of lies, don't we? It has been said that a lie can travel round the world before the truth has got its boots on. Ironically wrongly attributed to Mark Twain. But if you're exposed at all to social media you'll have seen that. A story gets made up in one small town and within minutes has been heard not just in neighbouring towns but on the other side of the world.

But Jesus was no liar. There was no deception in his words, only truth. There was no violence in his actions, only goodness.

Even under persecution Jesus display patience rather than protest:

> *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.*
>
> *[1 Peter 2 v 23]*

This verse points us to Isaiah 53 v 7:

> *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,*
>
> *yet he opened not his mouth;*
>
> *like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,*
>
> *and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,*
>
> *so he opened not his mouth.*
>
> *[Isaiah 53 v 7]*

It's only natural to want to defend yourself. Even if rightly accused we tend to jump in and try to justify our actions. And yet Jesus didn't say a single word in his own defence. Think about how astounding that is. Those accusing him knew that they were false accusations, they surely expected him to have some defence, some reply. Jesus saying nothing must have had an effect on many who watched the scene.

And this is what Peter is urging slaves to do isn't it? He wants them to endure unjust punishment rather than fight back. In the next verse he makes it clear that there is purpose in Christ's suffering:

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.

[1 Peter 2 v 24]

And again he's mirroring a verse from Isaiah:

But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

[Isaiah 53 v 5]

It's interesting that Peter uses the word "tree" rather than "cross". The cross was made of wood of course, but calling it the tree points us all the way back to Genesis. It was from a tree that the fruit was plucked that brought sin into the world. And now we see that it is on a tree that the Man of Sorrows is lifted up to pay the price for that sin, and the sin of every person since Adam and Eve.

That price is the key to the purpose of the cross. Jesus' suffering was to pay for our sin, and to give us new life. We are now dead to our sin. It has no power over us because it is a debt that has been paid. And we are to live to righteousness.

And the purpose of us enduring unjust suffering? To point people to Christ. As simple as that.

Finally Peter looks at the new prospect we have because of Jesus:

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

[1 Peter 2 v 25]

I'm not very good at memorising verses of scripture, but this references the very first verse I memorised, and is the one that has always stayed with me:

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

[Isaiah 53 v 6]

We've gone from slaves to sheep. Is that any better? Does it seem like a bit of an insult to be called a sheep? It's often used that way, accusing people of blindly following someone. But that's what we're like. Isaiah and Peter acknowledge it, but also point out that the problem we had was in wandering off in our own direction. And what Jesus has done is to bring us back into the safety of the fold, under the protection of the Good Shepherd, the Overseer of our souls.

Conclusion

So what is Peter asking of us? None of us are slaves. But we do suffer injustice sometimes. Unlike the slave of Roman days we do have some avenues to take our case to a higher power. But there will still be cases where we're stuck. It doesn't seem fair that we're being treated like this but there doesn't seem a way round it. What does Peter suggest?

We should endure with patience and grace. Because that's what Jesus did. And our response to suffering will speak much more loudly to our family and friends than our response to everything going well.

What is our prospect in this world? We may be training to be a doctor or a lawyer. We could be a plumber or a road sweeper. We could be retired with our career in the past. But as Christians our prospect is Glory. We are just sojourners here, passing through to reach our real destination.

And what is our purpose? Fame, wealth, power, security? For the Christian it is to *proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*

He was the suffering servant, the man of sorrows. But also the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. Let's tell the world about him.