

Prayers

To God

Great and mighty God, it is our great joy to welcome You;
We give You glory, honour and praise!
Christ, You have redeemed us and there is nothing we need now fear;
We love You and will follow You whatever the cost!
Holy Spirit, You are with us and we rejoice in Your awesome presence;
We receive Your wisdom and trust You with our lives!
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we worship You! AMEN

For myself

Pray in joy and thanks for the many precious things that have happened to you in recent years. Some of these things may be forgotten, but all of them count towards the sum total of your life.

For others

Weekly theme: the beauty of life

Pray for artists and creative craftsmen who work to bring beauty into our lives. Pray that society will value the work these people do for the benefit of all

Meditation

Lord God, Almighty Father, Rock of ages,
Inventor, Designer, Composer and Artist.

Flood all my senses with the ecstasy of life,
And overpower the torrid pain of death.

Irradiate me with the brilliance of light,
And absorb the darkest evils of self.

Energise my enthusiastic soul with love,
And purge the dismal paths of gloom.

Stretch my mind with the intricacies of truth,
And burst the selfish myth of supremacy.

Lord God, Almighty Father, Rock of Ages,
Principal, leader, colleague and aide.

Excite me by how much I truly need You,
And colour me with the hues of godliness.

Bible Passage

1 Peter 2:18-25

¹⁸ Servants, submit to your masters with all respect, not only those who are good and understanding, but also to those who are perverse. ¹⁹ It is grace indeed when someone endures the pain of unjust suffering because of knowing God, ²⁰ for what credit is there in enduring a beating for doing something wrong? But if you endure suffering because of doing good, this is grace in God's eyes.

²¹ You have been called to this because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. ²² *'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His speech;'* ²³ When He was cursed He did not reply with curses and though suffering He made no threats, but He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. ²⁴ He took the burden of our sins Himself in his own body on the cross, so that we might live in righteousness and have no dealings with sin! By his wounds you have been healed! ²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

Review

This passage of scripture begins with a comment that we find rather difficult, about servants and masters (2:18-20). However, Peter goes on to speak with simplicity about the work of God in Christ, leaving us thinking about the mysteries of redemption and wanting to know more about what Christ has done for us on the Cross (2:23-25). But we cannot forget that Peter begins all this by speaking to slaves, and this is the key to our passage.

There is evidence that in early days, the church spread amongst slaves of Roman officials who travelled across the Empire. Slaves were bought and sold and came from Britain, Gaul, Northern Europe, Persia, Ethiopia and other parts of Africa. Because of this, when Peter preached to baptised converts, many may have been servants or slaves who knew the rigours of service and the perils of bad and the advantages of good masters. So Peter speaks here directly to connect the experience of slaves to his points about the redeeming work of Christ on the Cross.

Peter does not hold up for these people the hope of a better life (2:18), or tell them they should be liberated from their slavery. Certainly, we might think it right to advance their human rights before anything else, but Peter takes a different approach. Their salvation and baptisms is of prior importance! So he movingly tells them that they are the closest thing to the example of the living Lord Jesus on earth; *'You have been called to this because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps'* (2:21). Twice Peter tells them that their servitude is *'grace'* to them (2:19,20) for as they bear this suffering they testified to Christ through their forbearance, in good times and bad. Speaking to people he knew suffered daily, the message of the Gospel becomes even clearer, leading to Peter's most stunning explanation of the Cross of Christ, *'He took the burden of our sins Himself in his own body on the cross ...'* (2:24). In this, Jesus was indeed like a true servant of both God and humanity. His service has won our freedom; *'by His wounds (we) have been healed!'* (2:24).

Peter's words are remarkable, and we perhaps res[pond] to them most when we suffer, for one reason or another. Today, although slavery is generally outlawed, no-one can escape the problem of suffering. Peter's message is that it is far better to suffer for doing right than wrong (2:19,20), and we should be ready to accept our share in the sufferings of God's people throughout history, and also the sufferings of Jesus Himself.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

- V18 *The last word, 'perverse', describes the worst kind of master. This translates the Greek 'skoliois' meaning 'crooked'. Some versions translate this as 'harsh', but the word conveys more than this, hence my translation 'perverse'.*
- V19 *This sentence is coloured by how the translator deals with a phrase not found elsewhere in scripture 'dia suneidesin theou'; which means literally 'through consciousness of God'. Most translations have 'mindful of God' or similar, but the grammar suggests more, perhaps each person's part in the church's consciousness of God. Consequently, my translation makes it clear that the suffering mentioned in the verse comes as a result of being a Christian. It is persecution, no less.*
- V22 *The Greek word 'stoma' normally means 'mouth', and is the last word of this verse in most translations. It can also mean speech, which seems preferable here.*
- V24 *Most versions of the Bible have 'having died to sin', but the Greek 'tais harmartiais apogenomenoi' makes no reference to death, but rather means 'having no part in sin'. My translation of 'have no dealings with sin' retains this idea.*

Further Comments

Slaves and servants

Some have wondered whether it was possible for servants or slaves to be baptised individually and hence be recipients of Peter's great sermon! In answer, firstly, many would have been baptised together with entire households. It was accepted in those days that if a man of means was converted and became a Christian, then his whole household was baptised, and our ideas of baptism reflect a more individualised society. Certainly, the jailer at Philippi was baptised 'he and all his family' (Acts 16:33). We should not dismiss those who came to faith in this way, because the positive attitude was 'if it is good enough for the boss, then it is good enough for me'. Certainly the early eighteenth and nineteenth century missionaries found this when they evangelised the South Sea Islands and other regions of the world. When a king was converted, for example, his servants and other dependants followed! Further, it was the servants and others who proved more persistent in the faith than many of the kings who were 'converted'!

Secondly, it is highly likely that baptism services were no big events organised in churches, but secret ones arranged in the courtyards and private rooms of the people involved, and if a group of slaves or servants were to be baptised in secret by a visiting apostle, one can imagine the electric atmosphere! Peter's sermon fits this setting very well.

It remains true that when we read this passage today, we are concerned about slavery, because it is still practiced quite heinously today. We would be cautious about the advice 'slaves/servants submit to your masters ...' (2:18), especially when dealing with those who live with 'perverse' masters (2:18). We would wish to fight slavery and liberate slaves in order to convert them rather than tell them to stay in slavery. However, the social conditions

and nature of slavery are different now than in Peter's day, and although the ownership of people has always been a dreadful immorality, it was not the most pressing social concern for people of the first century. Future generations may well lambaste us for failures to deal with social problems to which we sit lightly today (such as the oppression of the poor), just as two thousand years ago, they sat more lightly to slavery!

Grace

In both verses 19 and 20, the word 'grace' appears, rather surprisingly. The Bible tends to use the word to mean God's grace or favour, and in a Christian sense this favour is made available to us through Jesus Christ. It is difficult to see how this meaning can be found in the sentence 'It is grace indeed when someone endures the pain of unjust suffering because of knowing God' (2:19).

However, if we think of 'grace' more broadly as a physical manifestation of God's blessing on people, then this picture fits the picture better. The enduring of suffering, persecution or tribulation is something foretold by Jesus and spoken of throughout the New Testament. It does not mean that those who endure such things cannot benefit from other aspects of life, but it does anticipate that people will suffer for being called Christian. One can almost imagine the situation in which an arrogant master found out that his servant had become a Christian, and subsequently mistreated the servant because of the discovery. When Peter says that this is 'grace', it is not to condone such suffering but to give it meaning. Most of us will understand that if there is no escape from suffering, we can be strengthened by knowing that there is meaning to what happens to us. Peter tells the servants that their unjust suffering is a manifestation of God's blessing, because they have acted justly by becoming Christians, and by their suffering they are brought closer to Christ, their saviour, who suffered unjustly for them (2:20). Indeed, they 'walk in His steps' (2:21).

No cursing

The picture of Jesus presented by Peter in verses 22 and 23 is derived from the famous prophecy of Isaiah in chapter 53; 'although he had done no violence, there was no deceit in his mouth' (Isaiah 53:9). The words are not the same as our version of Isaiah 53 because Peter was quoting from the 'Septuagint' (the Greek Old Testament available in Jesus' day which is a little different from our 'original' Hebrew text). Peter then added the description of Jesus not replying to curses (2:22). He could have meant that when Jesus was hauled before the Sanhedrin and the temple guards, he did not respond (Matt 26:63, 27:30,31).

What is more likely is that Peter was sensitive to Deuteronomy 21:23 which was well known in the days of the early church, and says 'if a man ... is put to death, and you hang him on a tree ... you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.' Jesus was cursed by the death of 'hanging' on a tree, but still refused to curse others Himself. Peter knew this personally, because he out of all the disciples bore the guilt of having abandoned Jesus on the Cross, and yet discovered afterwards that Jesus forgave him (John 21:15f)! Out of Jesus' suffering came love, and that remains the highest example for all.

Bearing our sins

This led Peter on to the famous verse 'He took the burden of our sins Himself in his own body on the cross ...' (2:24). Remembering that Peter was speaking to servants whose work was normally physical and required great endurance, done solely for others and not themselves, this passage comes to life. Peter did not so much quote Isaiah 53, but use the primary idea of vicarious suffering found in verses 4,11 and 12, to describe the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. It is also possible that Peter conjured up a picture of the sins of humanity as like the great 'cross-beam' of the Cross which Jesus had to carry through the streets of Jerusalem (until helped by Simon of Cyrene – Matt 27:32), a weight to which he was bodily strapped until it was raised above Him at the site of crucifixion and from which he hung until death.

How easy it would have been for any servant or slave to say 'no-one has suffered as much as I' and give an example of some horrendous mistreatment; so it was to stop such sentiments in their track that Peter graphically reminded his listeners of the awfulness of the physical injustices done to Jesus.

No wonder then that the last part of v24 emotively rejects sin; it has no place in the life of righteousness. When we dwell on the horror of what Jesus carried for the sake of our sin, and when we have responded to Jesus' love and turned to Him in repentance, is it possible that anyone can knowingly continue in sin and imagine that somehow it does not matter?

Discipleship

Application

Bearing sufferings and burdens

There is no doubt that this letter is incredibly powerful at this point, and if we can enter into the scene of Peter addressing a group of baptised converts, mostly servants and slaves gathered in a convenient courtyard of someone's house, then we can see how this passage works in a unique way.

For us, the message remains that whatever the burdens and suffering we endure, and even if it does not measure up to the horrors of servitude in ancient times, then through endurance we receive God's gracious blessing. The reason this is so is because we experience a little of what Christ experienced for us, and if we are spiritually aware then we will be led deeper into the things of God, despite what we suffer. Sometimes there is no meaning in suffering more than this. We want to try and find the meaning of suffering, as if we will be made tougher or find solutions to problems for example. However, suffering and pain frequently have no reason or purpose, and we can only make it meaningful by identifying with Christ. Personally, I do not know how some people endure suffering without the help and example of Christ!

The consequence of Christ's work on the Cross is our salvation and our healing. There can be no greater consequence to the suffering of anyone, and the more we keep this in mind, the more we will find that sin has lost its power over us. Who can continue to knowingly and casually sin when the Cross of Christ is before their eyes?

Ideas for what to do

- Sit or lie down for half an hour, perhaps instead of watching a favourite television programme, and think about this passage, reading it over several times. Let God use it in you for good and for revelation.
- Research the subject of slavery on the internet and discover what kind of slavery is happening in the world right now. You may be surprised and horrified, but the issue cannot be avoided. Christ has a message for all servants and slaves ...

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Who are those today who are the equivalent of the servants and slaves of Roman times? can they become the powerhouse of evangelism now?

2. What does it mean in real terms to 'suffer unjustly'? Have you experienced this for yourselves?
3. Do you find it easy or hard to think of Jesus bearing your personal sins in Himself on the Cross? How should we react to this spiritual fact?

Final Prayer

It is our greatest treasure to know the truth of Your saving grace, Lord Jesus Christ. May we give you our thanks by honouring what You have done and by keeping close to You in every activity of our lives. Through Jesus Christ we pray; AMEN