

Christians, suffering is never easy. And suffering as a Christian is in fact harder still. Because we might suffer for any number of reasons, really, but most often in the world, the reason why we suffer is because of something that we did. Something that we did wrong and so we are simply receiving the consequences of our actions. But everybody in the world suffers in that way. There's no difference between us and anybody else. But suffering as a Christian is something different, because suffering as a Christian means that you're suffering as if you did something wrong when in fact you hadn't. Suffering as a Christian means that you are being punished by the world for something that God wanted you to do. And that can be very hard for us to deal with. Hard because we want to run away from it. We don't want to suffer at all. But suffering in this way is part of what it means to be a Christian. And that's what Peter wants to tell us in our Epistle lesson for today.

Because this reading actually begins just a few verses earlier in chapter 2. Peter has been talking about what it means to live as a Christian, especially in his society, up to this point. But now this section that we're looking at, verses 18 to 25, is where Peter is talking to slaves. Slavery was very much a part of his world. And a Christian slave was stuck in that position. Becoming a Christian didn't mean that he just quit being a slave. It's not like he could just walk away from it and not have anything to do with it at all. He had a master that he had to answer to, someone that he had to deal with on a daily basis, and more often than not, that master was not a Christian. So what was he supposed to do in that situation? How is he supposed to relate to his master?

Peter says, verse 18: "Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust." So he says, "Listen to your master. Do what he wants you to do. And not just for the good master, either, the kind of master that even the world would like to have, but also for the bad one, for the master who mistreats you, the master who is unjust to you. Listen to him too." Of course, we might say, "Well, that's not fair. The slave shouldn't have to put up with this. Why is he dealing with this situation? He hasn't done anything wrong. Maybe he should just run away or not listen to his master or do anything like that. Anything but listen to this man!" But Christians, this is the point. Peter says that we are supposed to deal with this as Christians, that this is what it means to suffer as a Christian.

And he goes on to say in verses 19 and 20: "For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endure sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God." So yes, it is a gracious thing to suffer as a Christian. Because there is nothing special about being mistreated for something you did wrong. There's nothing special or different about that. The slave who is beaten because he did the wrong thing is just like the world. But the slave who gets beaten because he is a Christian? That's something different. That's something extraordinary. Something that the world will never understand, and if we're being quite honest, we probably struggle to understand too.

Because part of why we don't understand it, Christians, is we don't live in the same situation that Peter does. We don't have masters. We are not slaves. Slavery is not a part of our world. If we were putting up with a situation like this, we in most cases could simply walk away. We could just leave and not put up with it at all. That's how we could deal with this. But Christians, there are still plenty of times that we can't walk away. There are still plenty of relationships that we

just can't quit, relationships where being a Christian causes us problems. To use an example, maybe you are living paycheck to paycheck. You have a good job. You're providing for your family, but that's what you need in order to be able to provide. You can't simply quit, because if you quit, you're not sure if you'd be able to find a job in time. So you're kind of stuck. But maybe your boss in that case is treating you a little differently because you are a Christian. Maybe he's not letting you go to church, even though you've asked him time and time again to do so. Or maybe he's passed over you for a promotion simply because of who you are. What do you do in a situation like that?

Or maybe you're dealing with coworkers who are constantly pestering you, who are constantly harassing you because you are a Christian. They're not doing anything illegal. They're not doing something that would make them get fired. But they keep gossiping about you. They keep making your life miserable. What are you going to do in a situation like that?

Or maybe it's a family member, somebody who's not a Christian and who causes problems for you because you are a Christian. It's not like you can just stop being related to them. You can't just walk away. So what are you going to do in that situation? How are you going to deal with this when you can't walk away?

Well, we might be inclined by nature to not put up with it, right? To do something to get even. Whatever it takes, even if it means stooping down to their level. We're going to show them that we're not going to be pushed around! We might lash out with our words. We might insult them. Treat them a little bit differently, even a little dishonestly. We might even be petty towards them, do some petty little thing just to make their life a little bit more miserable. To treat them like they've treated you! Because that way, we figure, we can at least feel like we've done something. We can at least feel like we're kind of in control.

But Christians, is that good? Is that what it means to suffer as a Christian? When we act in this way, how are we different from the world? We're doing exactly what they would do. And that's nothing extraordinary. That's nothing different. That is nothing gracious in the sight of God.

Rather, what we are called to do, Christians, is to live as Christians, even in the midst of our suffering. Not to just let things happen. That's not what the Bible is telling us to do. But to strive to be a Christian even towards the one who has hurt us. To do good even to the one who hates us, like the slave doing good for his master who abuses him. Proverbs 25 tells us: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you." But do you see the difference here, Christians? Do you understand what God is trying to say? He's not saying let your enemy run over you. What he's saying is, when your enemy treats you poorly, treat him like a brother. If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat, even though he has abused you. If your enemy is thirsty, give him something to drink, even though he has hurt you. As Paul says in Romans 12: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

And when we live in this way as Christians, we will heap a burning coal onto their head. Either because they will see what they are doing and repent of it, and you will gain a brother in the process, or because it will be held against them at the judgment, that they met such good with

such evil. Either way, Christians, it means meeting evil with good. And it means putting all of these things into God's hands. Because God will deal with it far better than we ever could.

But maybe we still want to say: "But that's so hard! That's so hard to do. It's so hard to treat that one person who hates us like a brother. It's so hard to treat that person who annoys us as a Christian." And that's absolutely true. It is hard. It is hard because suffering is never easy. And suffering as a Christian is the hardest thing of all, to suffer even though we haven't done anything wrong. But Jesus shows us, Christians, what it means to suffer. Jesus shows us how to live as Christians. Because he has given us an example.

And Peter actually uses a very beautiful word here to describe what this looks like, to help us to understand. The word which is "example" in verse 21 of our reading literally means something like a penmanship book. It literally means something like "writing under," like copying an example. So the picture that Peter is using then is of a child learning how to write by copying the letters over and over again. They're learning how to shape them. They're learning how to move their hands. And they're following the example that has been given to them. Of course, that takes time, even for the best student. It takes time to really learn how to write. It's not an easy thing to do. And at the very beginning as they learn how to write, those letters are sloppy. They're all over the place. Sometimes they don't even look like the letter they're supposed to be doing. But with practice they learn how to write. They continue in persistence and learn time and time again.

Christians, Jesus is that example. We are learning how to "write" by copying him. We are learning how to suffer by imitating his example. Jesus, when he was sinned against, did not sin. He didn't lash out. He didn't try to get even. He wasn't petty towards those who hurt him. Rather, Jesus put all things into his Father's hands. He knew that the Father would take care of him. He knew that no matter how much he suffered, the Father would make all things right in the end. When we follow his example, Christians, we will learn these things too.

But Jesus did not only leave us an example, as if we were off by ourselves struggling how to learn. Jesus bore our sins on the tree. Jesus died so that we would be set free from sin. Jesus died so that we would be different from the world. In other words, Jesus is not only our example. He is also our leader. He is also our teacher. Jesus has given us the Spirit to guide us, given us the Spirit to hold our hands as we learn how to write, as we learn how to suffer. And through the midst of all of it, Jesus suffers with us. As Peter says in verse 24: "By his wounds you have been healed." He's quoting Isaiah there, of course, Isaiah where he's talking about Jesus suffering for our sins. But just as we were once sheep wandering leaderless, without an example, Jesus has now become our Shepherd, the one who is guiding us, the one who is teaching us every step of the way.

So Christians, in that situation that you can't get away from, don't turn to sin. Don't meet evil with more evil. That's not the way of Christ. But rather meet evil with good. Treat that person who annoys you as a Christian. Because Jesus suffered all things for you. And Jesus continues to suffer all things with you. And suffering in him is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to forgive us our sins. Help us always to follow after his example, that we may do what is pleasing in your sight. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.