

On the Cross: Our Supreme Example

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- [0 : 00] And then please keep those words open before you. Let's pray for God's help. Father, we do thank you again for Christ our shepherd, the overseer of our souls.
- ! He who leads us in green pastures and besides still waters. He who bore our sins in his body on the tree and who is risen in glory and power.
- And our Father, we pray as we look at your word and hear it together that you would lead us again to him to see the marvel of the cross and that you would teach us to live in its shadow.
- For this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I don't know if you do this or someone you know, but sometimes Christians wear a cross, perhaps on a necklace, maybe on a pin, on their lapel, on their lanyard, because they want to discreetly identify themselves as a Christian. And they do that by displaying a cross.
- Now, that might seem quite normal to us. We see it maybe quite often. But when you think about it, it's really quite strange that the universally recognized symbol for the largest religion in the world is an ancient torture device.
- [1 : 20] An instrument that was designed to deliver the maximum humiliation and suffering to the sufferer before slowly suffocating them to death.
- Why wear that? Why indeed think about that? Isn't it too much for us to even consider, let alone to be the symbol of our faith?
- But brothers and sisters, I hope, as we've considered the cross over these past few weeks, we understand why it is the symbol of our faith.
- Because of what Jesus accomplished for us when he suffered the painful and shameful death of the cross. There he redeemed us from death by dying in our place.
- There he canceled the debt that we owe to God by paying our way for us. There he atoned for all our sins by his perfect sacrifice.
- [2 : 22] As we've taken in the truths of the cross, I hope we've seen how transformative it is for us as his people. How it shapes our faith, our worship, it remolds our whole life.
- But our final passage this morning in our series shows us, perhaps most clearly of all, how we wear these truths to whack. Or how we put them on at home or at school or at university.
- How we live out of Christ's death in our day to day. Because Peter here says that his death upon the cross is our supreme example of how to live in a world where we suffer as Christians.
- Now, of course, the cross is far more than an example for us. Peter knows that. He says clearly in verse 24, He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree. He carried our sins.
- Or verse 21, Christ also suffered for you. He took our punishment. But Peter says in doing so, he left you an example so that you might follow in his steps.
- [3 : 35] So friends, how can you take what you've seen on the cross with you as you go? How can you wear a cross, so to speak, not in jewelry, but in your friendships?

In your parenting, in your work, in your study, in your worship? Or to put it another way, what does it really mean when Jesus says, If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me?

Well, here's one way to carry, to wear Christ's cross, says Peter. By responding like Christ when you suffer unfairly.

Because no one has ever suffered so unfairly or so faithfully as him. It's a gracious thing, brothers and sisters, to suffer Christianly, because Christ suffered perfectly for you.

That's Peter's big point here. We're just going to break it down into two points this morning as we finish our series. Seeing firstly that it is a gracious thing to suffer Christianly.

[4 : 43] In verses 18 to 20. Now, to get the background to Peter's letter, he's writing to Christians in different places who were suffering because of being Christians.

Now, if we imagine that, maybe we think of being put in prison, something like that. Well, this is not state persecution, so much as social persecution, being singled out.

So things like not being invited to the night out because you never take part in the drinking games. Being teased at school for wearing your uniform correctly out of respect for your teachers.

Your business being boycotted, perhaps, because you worship Jesus on a Sunday instead of going to the pagan festivals at the temple. So into that situation, after assuring these suffering Christians that they are safe in Jesus and have everything that they need in him, Peter then turns in our section of the letter to guide them in how to live under these conditions.

So chapter 2, verses 11 and 12, if you just glance down there, they act as a kind of headline or a summary of what Peter's going to be saying. Just have a look. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul.

[6 : 09] Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

So his big point in this section is that even though they're feeling the heat of hostility from the outside, actually their real battle is still against their sin on the inside.

Because ultimately, he says, living godly and upright lives is what will win over your neighbors in the end. Brothers and sisters, when we keep trusting God and living for him, even when we suffer for it, it's a really powerful witness to the world around.

And Peter then applies that big point to people in three different situations, to citizens, to servants, and to spouses.

Which brings us into our verses this morning as he presses this teaching home to servants or slaves. So see how he does that in verse 18.

[7 : 17] He says, servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

Now we might cringe a bit to hear the Bible speaking and instructing slaves to kind of quietly get on with it when they're being mistreated. Nowhere in the Bible does it call slavery good, but it does speak into it as a reality in those societies.

In lots of places, it condemns those who mistreat slaves. Paul in one place says that if you're a slave and you have the chance to be free, you should take it. He also says at one point to a Christian slave owner that really he should let his slave go free now because they are brothers in Christ.

But here Peter is speaking to Christians who were slaves and couldn't be free to teach them how to trust God in that situation.

Even if you're a slave, he says, you can still be a wonderful Christian and a witness to the household that you serve by keeping living for Christ when you are wronged.

[8 : 44] And that can grate against our consciences, can't it, that are steeped in fighting for my rights? Yes, but Peter is not as interested in the rights and wrongs of society as he is in what pleases God.

The big boss you have to defeat, he says, isn't your earthly master, even if he's a violent brute. It's the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul.

So whether your master is gentle or unjust, he says, you are called to be the master of your own sinful feelings and desires.

Because it's a gracious thing or displays God's grace at work in you. When mindful of God, you endure sorrows while suffering unjustly.

And friends, for all that's changed, much for the better since those days, we have to admit that suffering because of unfairness or injustice or abuse is still as much a part of life now as it was back then.

[9 : 54] None of us are slaves, but no doubt we can all relate to the experience of unjust suffering. From the neighbor who puts angry notes through the door because of the slightest inconvenience.

To the boss, perhaps, who works you to the point of exhaustion with very little recognition or reward. Or the parent, the child, the spouse, who makes ordinary life at home a hardship.

There are countless situations like that, aren't there, that we could scarcely imagine unless we had lived through them ourselves. It's not the kind of stuff that makes the news, is it? But if we collected all the stories of unfair, unprovoked suffering, even in this room, I'm sure we would have days of tearful reading between us.

And Peter is speaking into how we respond to that. When I'm wronged, will I wrong back? Or will I trust God and do what's right, even when I'm wronged?

And even if doing the right thing makes it worse, verse 20, for what credit is it 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.

[11 : 18] How we suffer says everything about us as Christians, says Peter. Think about it. If you do wrong and bring suffering on yourself, there's no honor in that.

I knew a young guy once. He started uni and he became a Christian. When he finished uni, though, he got into some trouble with the police and had to spend some time in prison.

And his reaction to that was to complain about the kind of food that he was given there. But if you've done wrong and suffer for it, says Peter, you can't really complain.

What grace is there in putting up with a punishment that you've brought on yourself? I think he's saying the same is true if our response to unfair suffering is then to sin.

Friends, the Bible is clear that suffering is never an excuse to sin. How often do we use a genuine struggle, a real difficulty in our lives, as a cover for indulging the passions of our flesh, i.e. just doing what we want.

[12 : 29] But doing wrong because we have been wronged can never be a gracious thing in God's eyes. If we suffer like that, says Peter, there's nothing Christian about it at all. Rather, there is great honor and credit, he says, in the sight of God when we suffer for no good reason, but because we trust God, keep living for him and doing good, even to those who cause our suffering.

When we are cursed, we bless. Those who hate us, we love. Those who persecute us, we pray for. Jesus said those things.

Now, that is a humanly impossible thing to do, especially if, like Peter's first readers, those things are the very reason why we're suffering. If people are making life really hard for you for being a Christian, the hardest thing of all to do is to keep treating them as a Christian would and loving them.

But Peter's saying it's a gracious thing to God when we do because we couldn't do it apart from his grace. So our choosing to suffer in a godly way acts like a kind of trophy display case.

Maybe you've got one of those at home. You look through it and you see what? Glimmering gold. Because it shows off not our work, but his work in us, his grace at work in our lives.

[13 : 53] Because, friends, we cannot suffer Christianly apart from Christ. Which is where Peter turns now. It's a gracious thing to suffer Christianly.

He says, because Christ suffered perfectly for you. Brings us on to our second point. Just look at verse 21. For to this you've been called, point one, because Christ also suffered for you.

And as we turn to think about what Christ has done on the cross, Peter gives us three interconnected ways that Christ's suffering and death enables and empowers us then to suffer like him.

The first and biggest way for Peter here, I think, is that Christ suffered as an example for us. So if we read to the end of verse 21, for to this you've been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

Of course, in so many ways, Christ's suffering is unique, and we'll come to that in a moment. But in a few ways, Christ's suffering is a perfect model for us to follow of how to suffer injustice.

[15 : 10] And Peter tells us in what ways, verse 22. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 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 Jesus did not sin, but he did suffer.

So of all people who have ever lived, Jesus has the most right to say, in his suffering, it's not fair. None of his suffering was justified.

He had no sin. And that's the situation, isn't it, Peter's been speaking into, when suffering isn't fair. And now he says, friends, Jesus suffered in exactly that way.

He knows better than we do what it's like to be unfairly attacked and slandered, beaten, made fun of. He was condemned to death after the judge had declared him innocent and said that he had done nothing wrong.

[16 : 19] What a comfort that must have been for slaves to be reminded of, that their Lord and Savior could sympathize with them in their unjust suffering and unprovoked beatings and unfair tellings off, because he had suffered in exactly that way for them.

What comfort for us, too, if we are being mistreated, to know that Christ has been where we are, but even more so.

He did no wrong. He was perfectly sinless, yet he was flogged and crucified. Jesus didn't sin, yet he truly suffered.

And Jesus truly suffered, yet he did not sin. It works both ways. And inasmuch as the first comforts us, the second compels us to do likewise.

The biggest temptation, of course, when we feel we're being mistreated is, what? To want to get our own back. To want in some way, perhaps inside of us, to hold that grudge, to hold on and nurse that grievance against somebody, to insult them with our words, that harsh dig.

[17 : 39] Or maybe to threaten them in different ways. Yet, verse 23, look at Jesus, the perfect sufferer. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return.

When he suffered, he did not threaten. He did not try to get even. He did not want to, but instead continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

In other words, Jesus did not take justice into his own hands, but instead he appealed on every single occasion to the highest court of perfect justice, God his Father.

He didn't turn his heart inwards and let it curdle into anger and hate. Neither did he turn his heart outwards and let it burst out of him in insults or threats.

Rather, he turned his heart upwards and left it in the hands of the one who knows what to do with injustice and is powerful to set it right.

[18 : 44] He gave over his suffering to the one who judges justly. I think this is a remarkable insight into the heart of Christ.

He was not untouched or unaffected by what he went through. Peter doesn't say he didn't react because he didn't really care or it didn't really bother him.

In fact, he says not if, but when he suffered. Friends, Jesus truly suffered. It hurt him emotionally, mentally, physically to be mistreated.

But again and again in the Gospels, we're told that Jesus went away to pray. And Peter is giving us to understand that part of what Jesus spent time with his father praying about was the way in which he was mistreated as he entrusted himself to his father's faithful protection and committed what he suffered to his just judgment, not least upon the cross.

Remember what Christ prayed from the cross. Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing. He committed it to his father.

[20 : 00] And brothers and sisters, as we look at Christ in his suffering, Peter expects us to learn from his example and suffer like him. So how can we do that? We begin by trusting God like Christ to be the just judge that he is.

We know, don't we, that even the best court in the world, the most experienced judge or the closest friend or most trusted authority in the world can get it wrong and can fail to act in the right way.

None of us are totally impartial. None of us know all the ins and outs of every situation. None of us instinctively knows the right outcome of any case.

But friends, lest we despair, that does not mean that there is no hope for true justice being done. There is one who sees all things, knows all things, nothing is hidden to him and he never gets it wrong.

He always knows what is the right outcome and he will see it done in his time. Christ entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

[21 : 13] And if we follow Christ, let us entrust our suffering to him as well. We do that, secondly, I think, by praying like Christ, turning our suffering upwards and handing it over to God in prayer, which is a challenge, I think, and a reminder to pray when we suffer unfairly and not just talk about our grievances with other people.

But also, I think, when we pray, not only to pray for the outcome that we would prefer or for our situation to change, but rather for God to hold us in our pain, take the burden of it off our hearts and do what he sees to be right in our situation.

Remember, another of Christ's prayers from the cross, into your hands I commit my spirit, or in the garden, not my will, but yours be done.

They're wonderful prayers that teach us, don't they, how to pray in our pain so that, thirdly, we can behave, then, like Christ without sinning by being overcome with anger or lashing out or getting revenge or speaking harshly or holding a grudge or doing wrong to others or wishing to do wrong to others when we're wronged.

Why? Because we trust God with our suffering and have given our heart over to him. If we begin by trying to change our behavior, we'll fail.

[22 : 45] But if we begin by following Christ's trust in God and praying like him, we will find that we do have freedom, then, to follow his example in speech and behavior when we are under pressure.

It's no coincidence, I think, that as Peter writes this particularly to suffering servants, he draws on an ancient song about a suffering servant.

That line, neither was deceit found in his mouth comes straight from that song of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 to illustrate the injustice of his punishment.

So, Christian servants, says Peter, as you suffer, you are to look to and learn from the suffering servant who is our supreme example, Jesus Christ.

Now, if this is sounding like a high bar, I mean, who can really be like Jesus, not least in his death? Well, Peter now brings us back to the uniqueness of Jesus' death on the cross in our place.

[23 : 59] It's a reminder, isn't it, that if we thought that the cross was only or even mainly an example for us to follow, well, that example never ever comes to us apart from his finished work on our behalf.

just have a look at verse 24. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree. We've hit a lot of highlights in our series.

This is absolutely one of them, isn't it? A verse that expresses ever so clearly why Christ went to the cross for penal substitutionary atonement.

our sins were laid on him. He carried them in his body and he carried them to the tree, to the cross, there to receive the punishment for our sins in our place so that we could be one with God again.

Now, Peter touches on that in passing here. It's not his main point, but it says a lot, I think, that he feels the need to bring it up anyway just in case we're thinking that he's been giving us another way to get right with God.

[25 : 07] Friends, he hasn't. Can I get right with God by following Jesus' example? No, says Peter. He had to bear your sins in his body to the tree for you to be right with God.

You can't possibly balance the books one good deed for every time I've got it wrong. You can't even give it a good effort and God will accept you just because you gave it a good go even if you didn't quite meet the target.

No, friends, the only way for us to be right with God, says Peter, is for Jesus to have gone to the cross for us, not us taking up a cross for him.

We pick up a cross because he picks up a cross for us. Indeed, we need him, don't we, to have died for us for all the times that we fall short and fail to follow his example as we continue to do.

So, especially if you're not yet a Christian here, please don't mistake what I'm saying this morning as a call for you to play the part or kind of play up to it, to live a better life, be a better person.

[26 : 20] Yes, Jesus' life is really an attractive example. Truly, he teaches and models the best living in the universe because he met God's perfect standard.

You'd be right to think that following him is the good life and the right thing. But, friend, you can't follow Jesus' example until you put your trust in his death for your sins.

Only once you have clung to his cross can you take up a cross of your own and follow him. Rest your faith in what he did for you on the cross today and you can set out today on his path and follow him.

Because, very finally, Christ suffered perfectly for us not only as an example and in our place but for our repentance and renewal. In other words, his death is what gives us the power to live in his way.

So, verse 24 and 25, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

[27 : 28] By his wounds you have been healed for you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

So, Christ's death alone is what enables and empowers us to change, to turn and follow him or, in other words, to repent.

Now, often when we think about repentance, we think about it as something that we do for God to pay him back or please him at least because he forgave our sins in Christ.

Now, Christ's death is a very good reason for us not to want to sin any longer but there's a phrase in our confession which captures so nicely what Peter's saying which is that repentance repentance itself is a gospel grace or an evangelical grace.

In other words, we can only repent or change because of God's grace to us through the gospel of Jesus' finished work.

[28 : 36] It's only through his death that we can die and it's only through his resurrection that we can live. And brothers and sisters, that's what God wants for us, that change, to die to sin and live to righteousness such that he sent his son to die on the cross to make it possible for us to do.

Our ability to repent and to be spiritually renewed then is something that the cross therefore provides for us. By his wounds you've been healed.

Again, Peter's quoting directly from Isaiah's Song of the Suffering Servant, this time to highlight what the servant's suffering achieved, which is the making new of our heart, the healing of our sin-broken hearts.

We confessed together earlier, we all like sheep have gone astray. But this is our assurance if our trust is in Christ today that though we were straying like sheep, says Peter, we through his finished work have returned to the shepherd and overseer of our souls.

The good shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep and he has taken it up again. And so today he is our shepherd who leads us if we're his in paths of righteousness for his name's sake and restores our souls.

[30 : 10] Friends, this is what Christ's death has done for us, returned us to him, caused us to repent, renewed us, restored us so that we can now follow him wholeheartedly with our lives.

And so as we set ourselves even today to live and to suffer by his example this week, we do so not in our own strength or by our own willpower, but rather clinging to the suffering servant, our good shepherd who is risen and to his cross.

In his strength, then, brothers and sisters, take up your cross, put it on at home, wear it to school, to work, to the party, to the play group, and follow him.

We started our series a few weeks ago with a question. What do you see when you look at the cross? What do you see? Friends, at the end of our series, I pray that you would look and see there your redemption, your payment, your atonement, your supreme example, your hope, your forgiveness, your life.

In a moment, we're going to sing these words, beneath the cross of Jesus, I find a place to stand and wonder at such mercy that calls me as I am.

[31 : 35] For hands that should discard me hold wounds which tell me, come, beneath the cross of Jesus, my unworthy soul is one.

Would that be true of each of us as we go, that we are found beneath the cross of Jesus, from which God's eternal blessing flows down to us in the shed blood of his Son.

Let's pray for that together. Our Father, we want to say from the bottom of our hearts thank you for the cross.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the cross. For what you endured and suffered there for us, the wrath of the Father against our sins, as human mockery and scorn.

How we thank you, Lord, that you took our sins and bore them in your body on the tree so that we might belong to you forever. How we thank you, Lord, that we have nothing now to do, to bring or to offer, that we might be right with you, but only cling to your cross by faith.

[32 : 51] And so we pray by your Holy Spirit, grant us that faith today. If we have never as yet trusted in you, grant us, we pray, that we might do so now. And if we do, Lord, keep us going, keep us putting on and taking up the cross of Jesus daily and following him.

Lord, you know the situations and circumstances that each of us is in. Lord, you know what weighs upon our hearts. Lord, grant us the power by your grace to entrust it to you and to turn from our sin and to follow Jesus this week.

For this we pray in his name. Amen.