Courageous Confident Endurance
1 Peter 2:18-25

We're looking at Peter's first letter, and the part of the letter where he's seeking to help early Christians handle the attacks they're facing for being Christians.

And as we saw last week, he wants them to do that in ways that leave at least some of their attackers attracted to Christ. But, again, as we saw last week, that kind of attractive life begins with addressing our hearts, before working out in a disposition to submit to and honour others, *including* those in authority - the very people who were probably being hostile to them.

But now, in today's passage, Peter moves from the public square to the privacy of the home. Because, according to philosophers like Aristotle, who shaped their culture, the home, the household, was *the* building block of the *polis,* the city, the society. And right order in the household, with the father, the head of the house, at the top, was *the* basis for a strong, prosperous, stable society.

But what happens when members of that household become Christians, and stop worshipping the gods of the head of the household, the gods whose favour was crucial to the well-being of the household? And what happens when those household members start refusing to do some things the master of the household tells them to do, because they conflict with their newfound Christian beliefs? And what if those household members are slaves - the very bottom of the household?

The answer's simple, isn't it. They're going to face trouble. Trouble for being Christians. Trouble for doing or saying what's right.

But what's that, the plight of first century slaves, got to do with you? Well, think of any relationship of yours where there's an imbalance of power, like with your boss or supervisor or coach. Or a situation where you find yourself in a minority.

And if you refuse to worship the gods of the age, because you're a Christian; or whether or not you're a Christian, you refuse to do something you know is wrong because of your beliefs or your sense of integrity, you can also find yourself on the receiving end of hostility.

Hostility from those with a measure of power over you. How are you supposed to handle that?

The Reality of Injustice

Look at v18: 'Servants, be subject to your masters.' And that word for *servants* is the word for household slaves. And slavery in the Roman Empire was clearly different from that practised by the British and Americans in the 17-1800s. It wasn't race-based, and roles we now consider professional, like managers, doctors, teachers, musicians, were often done by slaves. Plus, it wasn't uncommon for some slaves who had the money to buy their freedom to choose not to because staying in a household gave them some measure of protection.

And yet, slaves were still the property of their, with no social capital or independent existence of their own. They could be beaten, branded and physically or sexually assaulted. And if they were, it was considered socially acceptable. Children born to slaves were the property of their master, not their parents. And while slaves *could* technically buy their freedom, few had the means to do so.

And yet here is Peter saying, v18-19: 'Servants, *be subject* to your masters' And 'not only to the good and gentle *but also* to the unjust.'

And you could read that, and go, ‘How could he say that? To tell slaves to submit to injustice, just prolongs the injustice! And it’s texts like this that were used to defend race-based slavery and we should just dismiss this as a historical relic not model our lives on it.’

So why listen to Peter rather than dismiss him?

Well, firstly, Peter clearly understands that his friends are being beaten for doing the right thing and refusing to do the wrong. Which means, when Peter tells them to be subject to their masters, he does not mean, ‘just do everything they tell you to do’. If that was the case, they wouldn’t be being beaten. It’s precisely because Christian slaves *were* refusing to do what was wrong that they were being abused.

And so Peter’s point is *not* to address the role of slavery in society. It’s to help slaves, who have no power, to personally handle injustice when they’re on the receiving end of it.

Which is something we all need to know.

When I was a junior doctor, I was on-call one night in the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit and I was looking after an infant who had had complex cardiac surgery but who, despite us trying to do all the right things, was getting more and more sick. And I made repeated calls to the cardiac surgeon, trying to get his advice and ask him to see the child, but couldn’t get hold of him. Until I finally did and asked him to come in. And when he did - in front of my colleagues and the nursing staff he absolutely chewed me up and spat me out. It was the most humiliating experience. And as a cardiac surgeon, he was at the top of the tree and I was at the bottom. All the power lay with him and he absolutely went for me.

Now, was I his slave? No. But was there an imbalance of power, and I was being treated unjustly? Yes. And might my response to that potentially impact my future career prospects? Yes.

Or think about your own situation. Are you your boss’s or supervisor’s slave? You might say, ‘yes!’ ‘But the truthful answer is ‘no'! But you might still experience unjust treatment at their hands. Or if, as a Christian, you speak up on campus, or with your colleagues, for something like a Christian understanding of sexuality, could you get mowed down, and potentially humiliated, because you find yourself in a minority and there seem more against you than for you?

And how are you supposed to handle that kind of treatment when the power lies with those opposing you?

But secondly, if you think Peter should have said more, and outright condemned slavery, do you see just how counter-cultural what he says is? And how it doesn’t just challenge their culture but ours.

You see, Peter is speaking to slaves *directly*. No one else did that. Before Christianity came along, any direction on how individuals within a household should behave was directed to the head of the household. No-one addressed slaves, because they had no independent existence. But Peter speaks to them as free moral agents in their own right. As people responsible for their own moral conduct. With a value and a dignity equivalent to everyone else he addresses. And that was a serious subversion of the cultural norm.

But he also says they're suffering *injustice*. 'So what?', you might say, 'that's obvious'. Really? You see, Aristotle made the point that slaves could *not* suffer injustice. They were their master's property and so their masters could treat them as they liked. A slave could never claim, 'you can't treat me like that' because concepts of justice and injustice didn't apply to them. But Peter is saying, 'yes they do, and you can, and are, being treated unjustly. You should *not* be treated like this.'

But of course that's why what Peter also challenges our own secular culture. Because why shouldn't they be treated like this?

You see, today, talk of injustice, or the need to correct historical injustice is everywhere. But where secularism comes unstuck is being able to say why something's unjust. Because if the answer is, 'because we say so', or 'because public opinion - the majority - now says so' or 'because we can shout louder and longer than you', isn't that just as much a power play as a first century master shouting at, or beating his slave? A version of what Tocqueville called 'democratic despotism'? And if what's right or just is determined by public opinion, what happens when public opinion decides it's ok to wipe out a minority, like the Jews?

But of course we'd all say, 'no, some things are always wrong, like beating an innocent slave, or wiping out a minority, whatever the culture.' But that means there must be such a thing as universal justice that transcends culture. Which means there must be a universal law, and a universal law-maker, to whom all can be held to account.

But of course, secularism can't say that and so cannot tell you why injustice is injustice or even why you want a world free of injustice. But Peter can. So, if you're not yet a Christian, ask yourself, which makes more sense of your desire for justice and the fact that deep down you know there is such a thing as justice - secularism, which can give you no grounds for it, or Christianity, which can?

The Response to Injustice

So, how should a first century slave, or a twenty-first century *you* respond to being treated unjustly?

Imagine you've done something you know was the right thing to do, or you've spoken up on something you know is true, even though it's not popular, and all hell breaks out. Maybe, as happened to a friend of ours, you're told to clear your desk, or your boss makes a threat about your future. Maybe you feel yourself sidelined at work or you come under pressure to row back your comments and apologise.

How should you respond?

Peter's friends had two possible responses: Rebel or resign. Rebel, rise up, against the injustice, or resign themselves to it.

And the desire to rise up and fight the injustice might have been particularly strong for these new Christians because, as Peter told them in v16, they should 'live as people who are free.' 'Slave' is no longer your identity. God's chosen you and loved you and called you, and set you free in Christ. And they could hear that and hear a licence to rebel against their masters.

But slave rebellions did not go well for slaves. And a hundred years before Spartacus had led a slave revolt that ended with thousands of slaves being crucified along the Appian Way into Rome. It was done to warn slaves, don't think about doing that.

Now, you don't have a slave master to physically rise up against. But when you're treated unjustly, you can still become angry, or retaliate, or make your own threats, even if that's just try trashing the person's reputation behind their backs.

The problem is, getting your own back ends in a never-ending cycle of name calling, or vengeance. And, history tells us, the danger of revolutions is that the oppressed soon become oppressors, because sin just multiplies.

Ok, but what about the second way to react? To resign yourself to injustice, for a slave to think, 'this is my lot and I just need to suck it up.' And that was what was expected of slaves: you're a slave, that's your position, don't think of being anything else. Plus, as the Stoics taught, the way to react to any suffering is to stay detached. To not get involved emotionally. To let it wash over you.

Now, you may not read the Stoics, but that might still be your response. Not least, if you're not yet a Christian, because it has strong parallels with the Buddhism that appeals to many in our culture today. The problem is, it doesn't deal with the injustice.

But Peter calls them and us to a third way, and it's neither active rebellion or passive resignation. It's courageous confident endurance.

Verse 18 again, 'Servants, be subject to your masters *with all respect*…' When you're shouted at, or beaten, and treated wrong for doing the right and, v19, you '*endure* sorrows while suffering unjustly' don't retaliate. Submit to it, endure, but do so *with all respect*.

What does Peter mean by that? Does he mean that the danger in submitting is that you do it *dis*respectfully? You take your beating, but inside you're seething with anger and outside you soon let others know? Maybe. But the word for *respect* here is the word for *fear*. And while Paul talks of slaves obeying their masters 'with fear and trembling' (Eph 6:5), in the passage before this Peter reserved fear for God, even as we submit to and honour others.

In other words, what Peter's saying is, be subject out of deep, awe-filled, respect for God, not your master. It's why he says in v19, 'For this is a gracious thing, when, *mindful of God,* one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.' So this is not cowering in fear before an unjust master, this is standing tall and wanting to glorify God in the midst of your suffering because you know he loves you, even though others say you're nothing. This is courageous, confident endurance.

You see, you can endure sorrow but *not* be mindful of God. But that's the resignation of the Stoics and Buddhists. But to endure sorrow while being mindful of God is to keep going and keep doing the good because you know he sees what's happening. Verse 20 'when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing *in the sight of God*.'

So, when God sees you persisting in doing good when others are treating you bad, and instead of retaliating, you honour and seek to serve and and show kindness to those doing the opposite to you, God sees *you* putting *his* character on display. They've treated you as you don't deserve to be

treated - unjustly. But, in response, you treat them as they don't deserve to be treated - which is grace. And when God sees that, he goes, 'that's my child'.

But it's also deeply counter-cultural. Look again at v18. 'Servants, be subject to your masters… *not only* to the good and gentle *but also* to the unjust.' And the word *unjust* is the word *skolios,* which you might have heard of, as in a *scoliosis*, a curvature of the spine. Because it means crooked, bent. And in our current culture, you are bombarded with the message that you're your own master, the master of your own destiny, and the only people you should honour, let alone submit to, are those who think and believe and affirm what you do. In other words, the good and gentle. But to honour those I think are out of line, the crooked or bent? No way.

But listen to what Jesus says, "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same… But love your enemies, and do good… and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and evil." (Luke 6:32-35).

But how can you do that? And why should you do that?

The End of Injustice
Look at v21, '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.'

So, to embrace unjust suffering, and to submit and serve and show grace to those who don't deserve it, is not an optional extra, Peter says, it's your calling as a Christian.

Why? Because it was Christ's calling, and he's our example, Peter says. In fact, the word he uses for *example* is *hypogrammon*. Imagine a classroom full of first-century school children, and they've got a sheet of parchment, with all the Greek letters, from alpha to omega on it, and to learn their letters they're tracing over and copying them. What they're copying was called the *hypogrammon*. And Peter's saying, Christ is your *hypogrammon*. He's not just one example you could follow among many. When you are learning, not just your letters, but your life, he's *the* example. It's not like, well there's this other guy who's really taking the battle to those woke liberals, or those conservative nut jobs he's my example. No, Peter says, Christ's your *one true* example. Follow and copy the lines of his life.

I don't know if you've ever gone ski-touring, but on the ascent, one person takes the lead and everyone else lines up behind, following their traces. And Peter's saying, when it comes to handling unjust hostility, Christ's made the path, there are his traces, his footprints, follow in his steps.

And as you do, it'll transform your response. Verses 22-23, '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.' And from here on down, Peter's repeatedly quoting Isaiah 53, where Isaiah describes the Suffering Servant of God, led like a lamb to the slaughter, but who opens not his mouth.

And he's quoting it because Peter had watched Jesus do it - how he was put on trial, and beaten, and mocked and crucified, though he had done nothing wrong, but how, in response, he didn't threaten or revile in return. And so as Peter looks at Jesus footprints walking through unjust suffering, he knows where they lead, and it's not to proving yourself right, or getting your own back.

And yet, the urge to do so can be so strong, how can we respond like Christ?

Verse 23, where Peter says, Jesus 'did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.'

Ask yourself, what happens when people either don't know, or don't believe, or maybe have forgotten, that God is on the throne, and sovereign over everything? We think we need to get even, or strike back, or answer hostility with hostility, because no one else is on our case.

But listen to what Paul says, Romans 12:19, 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord".' In other words, you don't need to take vengeance, God will make a much better job of it than you will.

But someone might say, 'Belief in a God who judges, who takes vengeance, is so primitive, and it just feeds the cycle of violence.' But Peter and Paul would say, 'Nope, it's the failure to believe in an ultimate judge that feeds the cycle of hostility because you think, 'I've got to get my justice now, I've got to get my own back, cos no one else is going to do it for me.'

But when you know, 'God's the judge and I can entrust my case to him', you don't need to get bent out of shape by unjust judges, or out of line masters. But you also don't need to resign yourself to injustice. Instead you can entrust yourself to him and continue to do good with confidence, whatever comes your way, because one day you know justice will be done.

But isn't that a double edged sword? Because if others are going to face judgement, what about us? What about those times when I don't walk in Christ steps, or when I treat people unjustly? It's fine if God's a partial judge, and favours me over others, but that's not what Peter's saying. So where's the security in divine justice?

Verse 24, Christ '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.' And at the cross Jesus carried our sins and all our failures, and was judged in our place.

And crucifixion was considered so horrible a death that it was reserved for the lowest of the low. For slaves. And Peter is saying, Jesus took that place for you. He's the ultimate suffering slave.

And when you know he's treated you with grace, better than you ever deserve to be treated, you'll treat those who treat you worse than you deserve with that same grace. It's what Peter means when he says that because of Christ's death, 'we might die to sin and live to righteousness.' Die to hating our enemies, die to reviling those who revile us, die to trashing others' reputations, die to answering hostility with hostility, and instead bless.

Verse 25, 'For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.' So Jesus is not just the good shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep. He's the shepherd who goes in search of the sheep - in search of those lost in the mire of hating enemies and returning fire with fire.
You see, worshipping a God who was crucified like a slave, out of love for his enemies, has far greater power to bring about a far greater revolution than any revolt ever could. Because it's a revolution that begins with his resurrection and the transformation of our hearts.