

1 Peter 2:18-23

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[0 : 0 0] Is the Bible irrelevant? The book you have in front of you, the Bible, is it irrelevant? Now, that may seem a strange question to ask people gathered at a church service, and I would imagine that most of you would reply, well, no, it's not irrelevant. But of course, we do recognize that for most of our fellow citizens, those we share this fair city with, that would be the view.

I would say certainly of many and possibly of most. It may be that people don't have any particular ingrained aversion to the Bible, but it's simply irrelevant or largely irrelevant. It's past its sell-by date. It doesn't connect with a modern world, with the real world, with an ever-changing world. It's simply out of touch. It may have had its place. There may be parts of it, some verses that we can still rescue as being useful, but largely irrelevant. Now, of course, some would be less charitable and would argue that the Bible is positively pernicious and peddles opinions that could only be categorized so they would claim as evil or wicked. Now, those of us who are of a different opinion do need to recognize that there are passages in the Bible that appear to give credence to such opinions, that the Bible is irrelevant or indeed that it is, on occasion, wicked.

And as we make our way through this letter that Peter writes, 1 Peter, we come to one example of such a passage. There are more dramatic examples, but I think this is one example of a passage, certainly instructions that many would categorize as irrelevant at best and wicked as worst. And I refer to what Peter says to slaves as he addresses them. He's writing to Christians scattered across the ancient world, and among them, of course, many were slaves. In the Roman Empire, there were millions, tens of millions of slaves. And in the believing community, of course, there were many slaves. And so, Peter very explicitly addresses himself to them. He addresses different groups of people, but among those groups, he addresses himself to slaves. And listen to what he says, Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. As I say, some people would read that and would say, well, at best, it's irrelevant. You know, what relevance does that have to us? Instructions to slaves. We're not slaves. We don't ask slavery today. Would that it were so, as slavery is alive and kicking in the 21st century. But all the same, people would say, well, it's irrelevant. And if it's not irrelevant, well, it's certainly not good. It's not good instruction. It's bad advice. Why would anybody submit to harsh slave masters? How could anybody be asked to do that? How can that be a good thing? Now, we do need to tackle this question of the Bible's teaching on and apparent toleration, some would say even support, of slavery. We do need to have an answer to that question, and I commit myself to tackling this subject in due course, but not this morning. This is a bullet that I've already avoided on one occasion, and I'm going to avoid it again today, but with this commitment that we will subsequently tackle it more on a thematic way. What does the Bible in the overall teaching teach concerning this matter of slavery? But as I say, we're not going to do that this morning, important though it is. What we're going to do this morning is to consider how Peter goes beyond the duties enjoined on slaves or servants to tackle the broader matter of unjust suffering, and how we are to respond to unjust suffering, where the instructions that he directs to slaves serve as an example for his original readers, a very practical and real example, but an example of a broader issue, that of unjust suffering and how to respond to it, that is intensely relevant to us as Christians today and ever will be, certainly this side of eternity. We're going to look at verses 18 to 23 this morning. This evening, we'll look at the final two verses, and the manner we're going to look at these verses is by identifying two things. First of all, we're going to identify what I'm calling a big ask, but then also identify a bigger answer. So, a big ask and a bigger answer. The big ask is the call made by God through Peter to endure, to bear up under unjust suffering, specifically in the original context directed to slaves, but as we'll see, we can legitimately broaden that to all of us. That's the

big ask, to endure under unjust suffering. And the bigger answer is the answer given to the question or to the questions, why and how, and the answers are given in this passage, why endure under unjust suffering, and how are we to endure or bear up under unjust suffering. That's the bigger answer. So, there's a big ask, but there's a bigger answer. Let's think of these two things. First of all, the big ask. And as we think about the big ask, there are two aspects to this. There is the particular case of slaves that is dealt with, addressed there in verse 18, slaves who suffer under the dominion of harsh masters. They are particularly vulnerable to this unjust suffering. They have harsh masters who deal with them harshly.

That's one aspect of this big ask. But then the other aspect is the broader application that Peter presents and develops from the example of the slaves. So, first of all, the case of slaves. As I've already said, we're not going to deal with the whole big issue of the Bible's view of slavery this morning, but just very specifically what is said here. This big ask that we are to bear up as Christians under unjust suffering. We're to endure unjust suffering. This big ask is found, or we're confronted with it, in the context of these instructions that Peter directs to slaves. These instructions are in the broader context of Peter's teaching on submission generally. We've already seen some of that in the previous verses.

[7 : 45] And the requirement of slaves specifically is to submit even to harsh masters, to use the language that we have there in the verse, to bear up under the pain of unjust suffering. Now, this is, I think we would agree, by any measure, a big ask that is being made of slaves. Now, we'll come back to that question, the broader question of slavery generally. But for the moment, just try and put yourselves in the shoes or sandals of a first-century Christian slave in the ownership of a harsh master. In this very letter, he's just heard words that would have been perhaps very liberating, very encouraging, when Peter has called on him as a slave, as on all believers, to live as free men. There in verse 16, live as free men. And then, having heard these very encouraging words, this bombshell, this big ask, slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, and also to those who are harsh. Well, that's a particular case of slaves. But we also have in this passage the broader application. You see, Peter uses the instructions he is giving to slaves as a launching pad to broaden the application, I would suggest, in two ways. Broaden it in the sense of broadening it to all believers, but also broadening it to all what we will call righteous suffering. And I'll explain what I mean by that in a moment. First of all, Peter broadens the application to all believers. Notice what he goes on to say in verse 19. He's given these instructions to slaves. That is his primary concern. I'm not for a moment suggesting that isn't his primary concern, or this is where his concern begins. But notice what he goes on to say in verse 19. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. This expression, it is commendable if a man bears up under unjust suffering. Does, I think, the application of the principle that is being established from slaves, who are obviously included and are Peter's primary concern, to all men, where, given the audience, all men refers to all believers. He's writing to believers. And what does he say? It is commendable if a man, any man, any believer, slave or free. It is commendable if such a man endures under the pain of unjust suffering. Now, slaves would be particularly subject to those circumstances, but Peter broadens it. He says, if any man, any believer suffering from unjust suffering, it's commendable if he endures such experience. Indeed, to make this very practical for ourselves, you can, indeed, you should replace that little phrase, a man, with your own name, there in verse 19.

For it is commendable if, put your name there, bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because you are conscious of God. So, Peter broadens the application in that sense, from slaves to all believers, but he also broadens it in the sense of broadening it from suffering that is the direct result of doing good to all righteous suffering. Now, what do I mean by that? I need to try and explain this hopefully clearly. In verse 20, where the example Peter gives of unjust suffering does have the plight of slaves in view. In verse 20, he returns very specifically. He's never left, really, but he certainly very specifically is speaking about slaves. How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong? Clearly, he has slaves in mind there. And then he goes and he contrasts receiving a beating or suffering for doing wrong with suffering for doing good. There in the same verse. But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. Now, the interesting detail is that the word for is not in the original Greek that Peter writes in. And while it might appear implicit, I'm talking about the for there, but if you suffer for doing good, there in the second half of verse 20, but if you suffer for doing good. That word for isn't in the original. As I say, it may well be implicit. If you suffer for doing good, you do good, and because you do good, you suffer. And he's saying that's commendable. But it isn't in what Peter originally says. And what I think that allows us to do legitimately is to broaden it to the idea if you suffer doing good. Now, that will include those occasions where directly as a consequence of doing good, you suffer, where there's a causal link. You do good, and because you do good, you suffer. We can think of Christians who are persecuted because they name the name of Jesus, because they're loyal to Jesus, they suffer. There's a direct causal connection between doing good and suffering. But what I think what Peter is doing here is he's broadening it, and he's speaking about all righteous suffering in the sense of when you suffer, doing good. Do you see the distinction? Do you see how that's broadening it? You see, the reality is that so often we do endure suffering where we can't immediately identify a cause and say, well, it's because of this. But it's real suffering, and we are genuinely and sincerely seeking to live righteous lives, doing good, pleasing God. So, there is a broadening here by Peter, both in the sense of broadening it from slaves to all believers, but also broadening it from that suffering that is a direct consequence of doing good to all suffering, doing good, or if you wish, righteous suffering.

To endure suffering for doing good is tough. To endure suffering doing good is also tough. And to be required to bear up or to endure such suffering is a big ask. It was a big ask for slaves to whom Peter was writing, and it's a big ask for us today. So, we have a big ask, but we also have a bigger answer.

I want to move on to the bigger answer that Peter provides for us. And this bigger answer is to the questions why and how. Why? You know, why would we endure unjust suffering? And if we accept that that is what we ought to do, how can we do that? That's the bigger answer that we want to look at. And I think we have a threefold answer provided by Peter in this passage. Let me just notice what the threefold answer is, and then we'll think about each aspect of it in turn. First of all, there is the reward we are promised. The bigger answer identifies a reward that is promised to those who endure unjust suffering.

But there's also, secondly, the call that we have received, and finally, and most importantly, the example we are given. We need all three answers to understand this bigger answer, and very especially the third, the example we are given, the example of Christ.

[15 : 49] This third aspect of this threefold answer is in many ways the foundation of the answer, and also its climax, if it can be a foundation and climax at the same time.

But let's think of these three things. This is the bigger answer to the big ask, and the first element of it is the reward that we are promised. In verse 19 and 20, there is this allusion or reference to a reward. In verse 19, it says, For it is commendable if a man bears up the pain of unjust suffering. Now, if that's all we had, the question that would arise, I would imagine, would be, well, commendable in what way? In what way is it commendable to endure unjust suffering? Or in the eyes of whom is it commendable to do such a thing? And, of course, the following verse answers that question explicitly. Peter says, But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. This is commendable before God. In other words, Peter is saying that God is pleased with His people when we endure patiently unjust suffering. Now, that said, we do need to be clear that God's commendation, God's delight in us, does involve two conditions. First of all, that our suffering be righteous. Peter's given the example.

What commendation is there? What merit is there in suffering for doing evil? If you're suffering deservedly, well, that's not commendable. But if you suffer for doing good or if you suffer doing good, that is commendable. So, that is one aspect. It's commendable. There is a reward when that is the nature of our suffering. I think that's clear enough. But perhaps more significantly, or in the sense that we haven't even thought about this yet, is a second, if you wish, condition. And that is that we are to endure such suffering conscious of God. That is what we read there in verse 19. It is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. Now, what does that mean?

To endure unjust suffering conscious of God transforms our endurance. And I want you to listen very carefully to this so that you have, I hope, a clear understanding of what is being said here.

It transforms our endurance from a stoic and passive and, in all probability, a grudging acceptance of our lot into an endurance that is grounded in a trusting awareness of God's near presence and never failing care, even and especially in the midst of suffering. When we endure conscious of God, what that means is that we're trusting in God. God is in the picture. We don't relegate Him or remove Him from our suffering and say, well, you've got nothing to do with this. I'm going to handle this by myself. No, we suffer and we endure that suffering conscious of God, trusting in God's care for us. That's one aspect of enduring conscious of God. But there's another aspect, and that is the conviction that however unjust our suffering is, as very clearly was the case for the slaves being addressed in this letter, that is the conviction and the assurance that our God will, in His time, make all things right. Indeed, this knowledge, this conviction that is implicit in the expression conscious of God, that God will ultimately right all wrongs, is essential to a Christian response to suffering. If we don't have that conviction that God will ultimately make all things right, then it becomes impossible for us to endure unjust suffering.

[20 : 07] When we endure unjust suffering conscious of God, understood as we've sought to explain it, this is, Peter tells us, commendable in God's sight. God is pleased with us, and this is our reward.

Is this not what we see in the Father's delight and pleasure in His incarnate Son, Jesus? The Father, on different occasions, looked down from heaven at Jesus as He walked the walk to Calvary, and He was pleased with His Son. So, too, with us. The Father is pleased as we walk, like Jesus, as enduring unjust suffering. And for the believer, the pleasure of God, the commendation of God is our great reward. So, in the bigger answer that Peter gives to the big ask, there is the reward we are promised, but there is also, secondly, the call that we have received. Notice what he says in verse 21, to this you were called, to this you were called. Now, what is he referring to when he says, to this you were called? Well, he's referring very clearly to the matter of enduring unjust suffering conscious of God. Peter is saying, to this you were called. You see, Peter is explaining to us it's not just that bad things happen, and, well, as Christians, we need to endure trusting in God, and it's just a random thing, and, well, that's just the way it is. No, Peter is saying, to this you were called.

Peter explains that as Christians we are called to suffer in this way. Now, we're not only called to suffer, but suffering is an integral element of our calling. It is interesting to note how the theme of our calling is a recurring one in this very letter that Peter writes, and we don't have time to go through all that, but just very quickly notice with me how Peter returns to this theme of our calling in the letter. In chapter 2 and in verse 9, in the same chapter, what has he just said? But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. We've been called out of darkness into God's wonderful light. In chapter 3 and verse 9, do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called, called to bless others. In chapter 5 and verse 10, looking ahead to what awaits us, and the God of all grace who called you to His eternal glory in Christ. After you have suffered a little while, notice even in the context of suffering, there's this reference to this call to eternal glory in Christ. And then, of course, what we have here in our passage in chapter 2, to this you were called, to endure unjust suffering. And we do need to come to terms with the reality that suffering is presented as the norm for believers. Suffering for doing good and simply suffering doing good. In this same letter, Paul relates how believers throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of sufferings his readers are enduring. And he sees this as something to be expected. In chapter 5 and verse 9, resist him, resist the devil, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

Jesus put the matter simply, in this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world. But why are we called to suffer? Is this not somewhat perverse? Now, if we try and answer that question, why are we called to suffer? No doubt we could identify different purposes in suffering, as we would trawl through the Scriptures. We can certainly identify the spiritual benefit that results from trusting and obeying God in the midst of suffering. Our faith and our obedience are deepened and enriched. We think of the language of being purified by fire that the Bible uses. But ultimately, the grounds for our call to endure suffering are to be found in the third element of the bigger answer, and that is the example we are given. From verse 21, this is what Peter does. He points the slaves, he points all the believers to look to Jesus. To this you were called because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps. And when we think of Jesus as the example that we're given, this is relevant to both the why we are to endure unjust suffering, and also to the matter of how we are to do so. We think, first of all, the why. Why? Well, God's ultimate purpose for us as believers is that we would be like Christ. Now, given that that is so, it is not surprising that we are called to follow Christ's example in everything, and that includes the manner in which He responded to pain and suffering. We are to respond like Jesus.

As a child traces letters on a page, so the Christian traces the path of Christ, the footsteps of Christ.

[25 : 54] And what can we say and learn from Christ's example, if you wish, the how? How are we to endure unjust suffering? Notice three things, and with this we've finished. Three things that Peter highlights.

First of all, that Christ lived without sin. Verse 22, He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth. Now, in many ways, this seems a strange thing to say immediately after telling believers to follow in the steps of Christ, and then immediately they're told to do something that they can't do. You know, they can't live a sinless life as Jesus lived it. It does seem, at one level, a strange thing to say immediately after calling believers to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. But of course, Christ's sinless life is the context of His own suffering. The suffering of Christ cannot be traced at any point or in any way to sin in Christ. Christ is the ultimate example of suffering for doing good, given that distinction we introduced a few moments ago. His sinless life was certainly lived for us. It was lived on our behalf, but it was also lived as an example to us of how we should live. We, too, are called to live sinless lives. We fall short, and we ever will in this life. But the call is a genuine one. The call is a real one. And it's relevant to this matter of unjust suffering, certainly to suffering for doing good. Jesus only did good and suffered.

So, we are presented with Christ as an example in this sense. He lived without sin, but then also he suffered without complaint. Verse 23, when they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. He suffered without complaint. Now, when we consider what is said here in this verse, what is said of Christ, just remember, just take a step back and remember who is giving us this testimony. Who's writing this? It's Peter. This isn't somebody who was told about this. This is somebody who saw with his very own eyes, perhaps more than any other of the disciples. He saw Jesus suffering right up to the very end. Very poignantly, he would remember what he saw as Jesus was insulted, and he did not retaliate, as he suffered and he made no threats. While Peter was denying him, he was seeing Jesus doing these things. And so, there's an added poignancy to what Peter is saying here. He speaks as one who had seen this with his very own eyes. He says, Jesus suffered without complaint.

Now, that's in stark contrast to how we ordinarily behave. It's interesting, the two things that are said about Jesus, that he did not retaliate and he made no threats, because these are precisely the two things we do depending on our circumstances. If we have power, we retaliate. And if we don't have power, we make threats. Now, I'm not sure, I'm not suggesting that Peter is drawing that distinction, but is that not so often how we respond? If we're able to get our own back, then we get our own back.

If we're not, because we're powerless against somebody who's much more powerful, then, well, we can at least have recourse to threats and to grumble and to mumble under our breaths and say, well, I'll get back eventually. And what Peter is saying, well, Jesus didn't do that.

[29 : 39] And he's saying, follow his example. This is the how you are to endure under unjust suffering. And here, very clearly, the example he given is of one suffering for doing good. How difficult to suffer without complaint. And yet, how Christ-like and how powerful a testimony to an unbelieving world.

So, Christ is presented as our example. He lived without sin. He suffered without complaint. And then, finally, he trusted in God. Then, in that same verse 23, we're told, instead, he didn't insult, he didn't retaliate. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. Now, we've touched a little bit on this in speaking about how we are to understand this phrase, conscious of God. But here, it's very explicit. Literally, Peter says that Jesus entrusted to him. It doesn't actually say he entrusted himself.

Again, it's probably implicit. But by removing the himself, it does allow us, again, legitimately to broaden things. I don't think Jesus only entrusted himself to the Father. He entrusted his enemies to his Father. He entrusted the whole situation to his Father. And so, we must do the same. When we are called to endure unjust suffering, we entrust ourselves to God. We entrust those who are opposing us to God. We don't retaliate. We don't insult them back. We entrust them to God. And the whole situation, however chaotic it may seem, we entrust it to God. And Jesus did so in the assurance that he was entrusting to God to the one who we are told judges justly. The one who will indeed right all wrongs. The one who will indeed in his own way and in his own time make all things right. And we are to do the same. And in practical terms, it is such a huge relief and such a huge comfort for us when we're able to do this.

You see, when we respond by insulting back, by retaliating, we do nothing for ourselves, nothing good for ourselves. But when we are able to entrust ourselves, yes, even those who oppose us, and the whole situation to God, it transforms our circumstances. It still hurts. Nobody's suggesting it doesn't hurt, but it transforms our response to certainly our circumstances. Well, we have to draw things to a close. Suffering for doing good for the believer. Suffering doing good is our bread and butter. We can't avoid it, nor should we try to avoid it. But what we are called to do is to endure unjust suffering, but to do so conscious of God or trusting in God. It's not easy, and precisely because it's not easy, we need to be clear concerning the reward we are promised, the call that we have received, and the example that we are given. It is a big ask, but God does provide a bigger answer.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You that Your Word is intensely irrelevant to us. As we consider this passage, that perhaps at a superficial level we might read and say, well, how irrelevant, and yet as we consider it more carefully, how it speaks to us in our own very real life, difficult circumstances.

[33 : 46] And we pray that You would help us to understand and to respond and to obey, that we would be given the grace to endure, to bear up under unjust suffering, that we would have in mind the commendation of God, the reward that we are promised, that we would be conscious of the call that we are under, and that very especially we would fix our eyes on Jesus as the one whose example and whose footsteps we are to follow. And it is in His name that we pray. Amen.

Amen. We're going to sing as we close our service this morning, and we're going to sing Psalm 124, the second version of that psalm in the Scottish Psalter. You'll find that on page 418.

On page 418, Psalm 124, and we'll sing the whole of the psalm, we'll sing to the tune Old 124th.

Now Israel may say, and that truly, if that the Lord had not our cause sustained, if that the Lord had not our right sustained, when cruel men against us furiously rose up in wrath to make of us their prey, then certainly they had devoured us all, and so on, through to the end of this psalm. And we'll stand to sing.

Amen. Ing- In the Lord had not arised a spare, When cruel men against the furious fear
Rose up in rock to make of us their way.

[36 : 10] Well, certainly they had devoured us all, And swallowed quick for all that we could deem.

Such was there it, as we might wear it still, And as fierce blood before them all things
come, So had they brought our soul to death quite down.

The bridge in streams with their proud-swearing ways, And gave our soul, O Lord,
well-met in the deep, And blessed be God, who hath a safely here, And hath not given us
for our living prey, Unto their teeth and bloody cruelty.

He was the burden of the fowler's still, He sticks away, so is her soul set free.

Prove our earnest, and thus received we, Therefore our help is in the Lord's great name,
Who hath not dealt by his great heart in the grave.

[38 : 49] Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God, and the fellowship of the
Holy Spirit, Be with us all now and always. Amen. Amen.

Amen.