

When the Going Gets Tough: Redeeming Suffering (1 Peter 3:13-18)

When Peter wrote his first letter to a church that had been scattered by persecution in the Roman Empire, he had no idea that almost two thousand years later, a church in Markham / Stouffville would be studying that same letter as we prepare our hearts for Easter. He wouldn't even have had a word to name the continent on which we live. Yet in God's marvelous way, the Holy Spirit takes those words written so long ago and writes them into our hearts. This is the wonder of the Bible. So here we are, in the spring of 2022, at hopefully the end of a worldwide pandemic, a month into the beginning of a war in Europe that pits some of the most powerful nations of the world against each other, and we are going to consider what it means to redeem suffering—for that is where Peter will take us.

Our series is entitled “When the going gets tough”, based on Peter's first letter. We've heard in the last few weeks how Peter was calling the persecuted Christians to live out the salvation which Christ bought for him—even in the face of persecution and suffering. Which brings us to today's passage, 1 Peter 3:13-18. I'll be reading from the NIV.

13 Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? 14 But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” 15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. 17 For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

In this passage, Peter challenges us to do three things:

1. Revere Christ as Lord.
2. Act out of reverence.

3. Speak out of reverence.

Up to this point in the letter, Peter has had a lot to say about what Christ has done for his people! we are:

- “chosen by God” [1:2],
- “sanctified [set apart / made holy] by the Holy Spirit” [1:2]
- given “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” [1:3]
- “shielded by God’s power” [1:4]
- “receiving the salvation of our souls” [1:9]
- redeemed by the precious blood that Jesus shed on the cross [1:18-19]
- “born again” by the imperishable word of God [1:23]
- being “built into a spiritual house” [2:5].

Peter goes on and on, but the point is clear: in Christ, God has turned us into something new and amazing—a church made up of people who have been redeemed by his gracious gift, called to be a holy people who reflect his glory to a world that doesn’t necessarily understand or accept it.

But woven in between all the things Peter tells us God has done for us, there is also a call for a response from us. Which brings us to our first point:

1. Revere Christ as Lord.

We see it in the first part of verse 15, “In your hearts revere Christ as Lord”. The word which the NIV translates as “revere” is a fascinating word, translated elsewhere as “sanctify” or “set apart”, or as Eugene Petersen describes it in The Message paraphrase, “attentive adoration”. It is the same word Peter used in chapter 1 verse 2 to describe how God has “sanctified” us or “made us holy” by the Holy Spirit. And now Peter turns it around and uses it to describe our response back to God: because of

everything that he has done for us, we are to set Him apart in our hearts as the only one who deserves and receives our allegiance.

When Israel was a young nation, God freed them from oppression in Egypt and brought them into a new land. Moses led them **out of** Egypt, but it his protégé, Joshua, who led them **into** the promised land. Towards the end of his life, Joshua called the whole nation together at a place called Shechem and after reviewing how God had been faithful to them for many years, he issued them the following challenge:

Josh 24:14 “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

I think that Peter would say, we face the same choice that Joshua placed before the Children of Israel. We are all going to serve something or someone—but will we choose to serve the Lord? Peter is up front about it: following Jesus might lead to suffering. And whether we are going through a season of suffering or whether we are enjoying the many blessings of God, God is calling us to set Jesus aside as the Lord of every moment, of every word that comes out of our mouths, of every thought we let settle in our brains, of everything that we do. We decide in advance who owns our allegiance so that when the inevitable struggles of life come our way and we need to make decisions under pressure, our hearts and mind are already prepared. Whatever our circumstances, now is the time to revere Christ as Lord in our hearts.

I should also add that the best way to maintain that reverence in our hearts is found in the last verse of our passage, verse 18: For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. We remember that Jesus suffered too. And he suffered on purpose, for our sakes and to accomplish our salvation. As we move through the season of Lent

approaching Easter, let us remind ourselves each day that Jesus suffered and died, but that he rose again to life by the power of the spirit—the same life he has granted to us. So we revere Jesus as our Lord.

2. Act out of Reverence.

More than that though, Peter is also calling us to act out of reverence. That's our second point: We must act out of reverence. Our passage today opened with a question and a challenge: "13 Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? 14 But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.'"

Peter acknowledges that sometimes we will suffer. We have heard about this in the earlier sermons of this series: being a Christian is no guarantee of a trouble-free life. In fact, for some of Peter's readers or hearers, being a Christian was actually causing them to get into trouble. But Peter here in verse 14 uses the word "blessed" to describe them should it come to that—the same word Jesus used to describe his followers in the Sermon on the Mount which begin:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted. (Matt 5:3-4).

So if you find yourself in a season of suffering, do NOT think it is because God has abandoned you—he would never do that—he walks with you and calls you blessed should you face persecution.

Scholars argue about the finer details of what that persecution might have looked like depending on when exactly the letter was written. If it was written earlier, the persecution was probably more social pressure – disrespect, exclusion from social and

business circles, derision. That sort of thing. If the letter was written later, it might have involved being dragged into court to answer for charges of being a Christian. We know for certain that within 70 years of Jesus' dying, whether people should be punished for just being called a Christian or whether they needed to actually commit a crime such as disloyalty to the emperor was a question being put to the emperor by his governors. But whatever the type of persecution, Peter's advice remains the same: choose to do good, and suffer for that, rather than capitulating to the pressures of society and conform to the way the world behaves. If we start by revering Jesus as Lord, we will act out of that reverence.

It will come as no surprise to you when I say that I am not a preacher. I am a software developer, and tomorrow I am going to get up in the morning and make that forty-foot walk with my pajama bottoms on and a decent shirt in case of Zoom calls to my home office and spend the day wrestling with computer programs, trying to teach them how to make it more efficient for a large sports television broadcaster in the US to share multi language audio content efficiently between its English and Spanish channels. Let's just take a second and think about what tomorrow is going to look like, and if you're watching online, just for fun: type it into the chat: what are you going to do tomorrow. Are you a mom? A student? A doctor? Retired? Working at McDonalds? A farmer? A teacher? But as I make that commute—as we each make whatever our commute looks like--as we get busy with whatever tomorrow holds, the question remains, have we set Jesus Christ aside as Lord of that day? Do our actions wherever we are look like the actions of someone who reveres Jesus?

Peter continues in verse 17: For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. We don't know why suffering comes. In months like this, I admit I question God, and I question my own attitudes, and I question why I have a life of blessing while others struggle and suffer. We live in a broken world, and sometimes we get battered—not because we deserve it, not because God somehow has it in for us, but just because we live in a fallen and sinful world. So what do we do? Peter would

say, start by setting apart Christ as Lord, then act out of that place of reverence every minute of every day and do good!

Which brings us to our third point:

3. Speak out of reverence.

and to be totally honest with you, this is the single most challenging verse in the entire Bible for me. You see, it requires talking to people, and I am terrible at that—especially about the things that matter most. For our third point we are going back to finish verse 15: But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect

For a little context, we don't know if, when Peter says we are to be ready to "give an answer" whether he is talking about in moment of inter-personal persecution, or a courtroom kind of prosecution where you have been asked to defend yourself against the charge of being a Christian. But what we do know is that he is calling us to be ready with a gentle and respectful response if someone accuses us of being a Christian. If our actions demonstrate the reverence we have in our hearts for Christ, it is inevitable that people will notice there is something different about us. And whether they see that difference as a positive thing or a negative thing, we each need to be ready to answer if they ever ask us.

What does that look like? Well let me tell you a story of what it doesn't look like. Something like ten fifteen years ago I was working at a large television broadcaster headquartered in Toronto. A colleague and I were driving out to Waterloo to visit a vendor we had some business with, when suddenly he turned to me and asked, "Dave, why are you so different?" I was confused, and asked what he was talking about. He replied, "well, you are not like the others—you are so calm." I tell you, I was not calm right then!!! I was squirming in my chair. You see, I knew all about 1 Peter 3:15—it was

seared into my brain for fear that one day someone would ask me that very question. My colleague knew I was a Christian; it was well known around the office. Some had even come to hear me preach in church. In that moment I knew in my heart the answer to his question—other than moments like this, I was usually calm because I knew that no matter what happened at work—no matter what broke or who was yelling or how upset they were, I was a beloved child of the living God—and that was all that mattered. That was why I could remain so calm. But somehow I couldn't bring myself to say it. I shrugged it off and failed to name the name of Jesus to someone who needed to hear that name—someone who needed to meet the Jesus I knew and who had poured so much love into my life for so many years.

That's how not to give an answer when someone asks you to give an answer for the hope that is within you. Do I regret it? Yes. Is it the end of my story? No. And we'll get to that. But Peter is calling us to do better than I did that time—to be ready to give an answer for the hope we have. He just assumes that as we revere Jesus, and as we act out that reverence in the public sphere, that people will notice and question us. It is unlikely for us that question will be in a courtroom on trial for being Christians, but people are going to ask, and we need to be ready with an answer.

I want to pause a moment before we conclude and take the opportunity to say that we are all different, and these three things are going to challenge each of us in different ways. For some of us, the idea of revering Jesus above all else—of choosing Jesus over money or power or comfort or safety or entertainment or rest or whatever it is that our hearts long for may be a challenge. Life is not easy, and the world doesn't make it easy. We are constantly bombarded with pressure to conform to a slick image of a self-sufficient successful always happy got it together person that is exhausting and which slowly squeezes Jesus to the sidelines. If you are feeling that kind of pressure, I'd encourage you to spend some time this Lent reflecting on the sacrifice Jesus made for you, and the promises he has made for a glorious future if you will put him first. Maybe this week have a slow read through 1 Peter—it's a great little letter and I know you will find it encouraging.

Or maybe you're sitting here, or you're with us online and you are thinking, I've never made that kind of commitment—I have no idea what it might look like to revere Jesus as my Lord. To you I would say what I didn't say to my colleague all those years ago, I have been serving Jesus for thirty-five years and I have never ever regretted it. My service has not been perfect, that much is obvious, but his Grace has always been sufficient to cover my mistakes. And with Jesus I have known such an ongoing peace, and hope, and love, and yes—even a calmness—that I would never have known if I hadn't decided all those years ago to make him my Lord. I would encourage you to make the same decision—out of all the things that clamour for your heart's affections, set apart Jesus as your Lord.

Or maybe you are someone who has challenges acting out of reverence. Maybe life has pushed you to the place where you have cut some corners, made some compromises, done some things which deep down you know don't reflect the love you have for Jesus. Or like me, you are someone who struggles to speak of your faith in a world that seems to disrespect, look down on, or even persecute those who would stand up and say "I am a follower of Jesus". Whatever the challenges we face as followers of Jesus, I believe with all my heart that the solution is to hold on to Jesus--moment by moment. Seek his forgiveness for any wrongs you have done in the past, and trust in his grace for tomorrow. As we set him aside in our hearts as the lord of every moment of the day we will see him work such miracles in our lives.

I want to close today with a word picture. I am thinking this moment of Pastor Jeremy's first sermon in this series entitled "Chosen Exiles" where he talked about the original recipients of Peter's letter being exiles scattered in a foreign land. I love that word "scattered" because it's originally an agricultural word talking about the scattering of seeds. It makes me think of summertime—which is coming—and all the corn and soy and wheat fields that grow around here. They all start out as a bunch of seeds scattered nowadays by great big machines, but after a few months have passed we see all those beautiful ripening fields that provide food for all of us. There are three things I

love about comparing us to seeds. First, like seeds we are scattered with a purpose. Yes, the original recipients of Peter's letter were scattered by the persecution of the Roman Empire. But they were also scattered on purpose by a God who called them to revere him in their hearts in the midst of their suffering, and in front of a world that needed to see hope lived out so they could come to know the God who loved them. Because that is how God redeems our suffering. Second, I love that seeds are scattered together. We are all in this together—**each one of us** so uniquely talented and positioned to live out the hope of the gospel wherever we are scattered and **all of us working together** can watch God as he moves in our communities. And third, I love that seeds grow. Day by day we grow closer to the image that God is calling us to bear. I told you a story today of a missed opportunity that haunts my memory, but that is not the end of my story. As time passed I learned and grew stronger. Three or four years ago I was at another work thing in Germany, working for a new company and attending its Christmas party when my friend, who was also my boss, introduced me to a colleague I'd never met before from the US. And didn't my friend have to say, "funny thing about Dave here, he has two degrees in theology". Here we go again I thought, I'm going to blow it. But this time I decided I was not going to deny or downplay how important my faith is to me. Sure enough, the inevitable question came, "What's up with that?" So I screwed up my courage and said something along the lines of, "Well, I think the most important question we all need to ask in life is, 'Is there a God? and if there is, then what is he like?'" It was not an amazing and articulate answer, but at least I took a tiny step. It's because we grow—that's what seeds do. We live for God's purpose as we are all called together to grow as seeds scattered into the world. And what will we do? We will revere Jesus as Lord, we will act reverently, we will speak reverently, and then we will watch as God works through us to bring redemption in a world that is suffering.