

Prayer

Great and mighty God, it is our great joy to welcome You;
 We give You glory, honour and praise!
 Christ, You have redeemed us and there is nothing we need now fear;
 We love You and will follow You whatever the cost!
 Holy Spirit, You are with us and we rejoice in Your awesome presence;
 We receive Your wisdom and trust You with our lives!
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we worship You!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: the sick in mind

Pray for those whose faculties are not what they once were, and struggle with knowing that they will not recover the memory, wit and mental agility they once had. Pray with care.

On-going prayers

- Praise God for church fellowship
- Give thanks for the work of teachers in schools and colleges
- Pray for those worst affected by rising food prices and poverty

Meditation

What truth is there behind Your love, O God?
 A love that made the world and bled when all seemed lost;
 then triumphed in a plan of unsurpassed beauty
 sending Jesus to our world to save the lost,
 and taking all the world's rejection on the Cross
 that love might conquer death and show itself the victor!
 O truth which only finds a home in you and me
 because our past and present make us ever lost;
 Create our future's hope in love's eternity!

Bible Study - 1 Peter 2:18-25

¹⁸ Servants, submit to your masters with all respect, not only those who are good and understanding, but also to those who are perverse. ¹⁹ It is grace indeed when someone endures the pain of unjust suffering because of knowing God, ²⁰ for what credit is there in enduring a beating for doing something wrong? But if you endure suffering because of doing good, this is grace in God's eyes. ²¹ You have been called to this because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. ²² 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His speech;' ²³ When He was cursed He did not reply with curses and though suffering He made no threats, but He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. ²⁴ He took the burden of our sins Himself in his own body on the cross, so that we might live in righteousness and have no dealings with sin! By his wounds you have been healed! ²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

Review

This passage of scripture speaks with profound simplicity about the work of God in Christ. On the one hand it tells us a great deal about the amazing grace of God, but it also leaves us with a sense of the deep mysteries of redemption and a thirst to know more about what Christ has done for us on the Cross. The truly amazing thing about the whole passage is that it is a synthesis of Peter's description of the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross and a personal appeal to those he was addressing; the converts who had just been baptised.

There is a great deal of evidence that the church spread rapidly through the Roman Empire amongst a class of servants and slaves of Roman officials (civil and military) who travelled across the whole Empire. These slaves were transported to the cities of the Roman Empire from its outer regions, and bought and sold in market places. There were large numbers of them, from Britain, Gaul, Northern Europe, Persia, Ethiopia and other parts of Africa. So when Peter preached to baptised converts, many of them would have been servants and slaves who each knew what the rigours of service meant, and about the perils of bad masters and the advantages of the good. Peter speaks directly to these people connecting with their experiences to make his points about the redeeming work of Christ on the Cross. It is compelling theology.

Peter did not tell these people that they should be liberated or freed from their slavery, and he did not hold up to them the hope of a better life. Certainly today, some might think of this as of prior importance to baptism; but not Peter. Instead, he addressed them as if their life's experience mattered to God, and he movingly told them that they were the closest thing to the example of the living Lord Jesus on earth; 'You have been called to this because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps' (2:21). Twice Peter told them that their experience of servitude was 'grace' to them (2:19,20) for as they bore the suffering of servitude they testified to Jesus himself through their forbearance, endurance and good service whether under good terms or bad. This led Peter to describe with powerful dignity the sufferings of Christ, for he knew that he was speaking to people who personally bore suffering daily. It was to them he said that Christ's suffering on the Cross personally 'bore' their own sins and set them free, making them 'righteous' before God. God in Christ stooped low enough to give pure service to those whose lives were sold into earthly service and slavery; it is profoundly moving.

Peter's simple sentence (2:24) is one of the most profound theological explanations of Christ's work on the Cross; 'He took the burden of our sins Himself in his own body on the cross ...'. Peter tells us simply that Jesus has taken our sins on to Himself, like a servant doing his job properly; and by taking from us that which would have separated us from God, His service has won our freedom; 'by His wounds (we) have been healed!'

These words are of great importance for us for although slavery is thankfully outlawed in most countries, no-one can escape suffering in this world. It is far better to suffer for doing right than doing wrong (2:19,20), and we should always be ready to deal with suffering positively when it comes and accept that this is our sharing in the sufferings of God's people throughout history, and also the sufferings of Jesus Himself.

Going Deeper

This passage continues on from yesterday's text about submission to the authorities, but it goes right to the heart of the Gospel. Now we will study some of the words and phrases which make up this inspiring scripture; we will check out what 'grace' means in here, and also look at the scriptural quotes used by Peter. All of this will help us understand even more the incredible power of this passage.

Notes on the text and translation

V18 Earlier in this letter (verse 16), Peter referred to Christians as 'bonded servants of God', using the normal word for slave, i.e. 'doulos'. At the beginning of this passage

Peter addresses his hearers / listeners as 'servants' using the term 'oiketes' meaning 'house-servant', a class of slave used in the house rather than for other duties but still owned by others.

V18 *The last word, 'perverse' describes the worst kind of master. This translates the Greek 'skoliois' meaning 'crooked'. Some versions translate this as 'harsh', but the word conveys more than this, hence my translation 'perverse'.*

V19 *This sentence is coloured by how the translator deals with a phrase not found elsewhere in scripture 'dia suneidesin theou'; which means literally 'through consciousness of God'. Most translations have 'mindful of God' or similar, but the grammar suggests more, perhaps each person's part in the church's consciousness of God. Consequently, my translation makes it clear that the suffering mentioned in the verse comes as a result of being a Christian. It is persecution, no less.*

V22 *The Greek word 'stoma' normally means 'mouth', and is the last word of this verse in most translations. It can also mean speech, which seems preferable here, to me.*

V24 *Most versions of the Bible have 'having died to sin', but the Greek 'tais harmartiais apogenomenoi' makes no reference to death, but rather means 'having no part in sin'. My translation of 'have no dealings with sin' retains this idea.*

Slaves and servants

Some have wondered whether it was possible for servants or slaves to be baptised individually and hence be recipients of Peter's great sermon! In answer, firstly, many would have been baptised together with entire households. It was accepted in those days that if a man or woman was converted and became a Christian, then his whole household was baptised, and our ideas of baptism reflect a more individualised society. Certainly, the jailer at Philippi was baptised 'he and all his family' (Acts 16:33). We should not dismiss those who came to faith in this way, because the positive attitude was 'if it is good enough for the boss, then it is good enough for me'. Certainly the early eighteenth and nineteenth century missionaries found this when they evangelised the South Sea Islands and other regions of the world. When a king was converted, for example, his servants and other dependants followed! Further, it was the servants and others who proved more persistent in the faith than many of the kings who were 'converted'!

Secondly, it is highly likely that baptism services were no big events organised in churches, but secret ones arranged in the courtyards and private rooms of the people involved, and if a group of slaves or servants were to be baptised in secret by a visiting apostle, one can imagine the electric atmosphere! Peter's sermon fits this setting very well.

It remains true that when we read this passage today, we are concerned about slavery, because it is still practiced quite heinously today. We would be cautious about the advice 'slaves/servants submit to your masters ...' (2:18), especially when dealing with those who live with 'perverse' masters (2:18). We would wish to fight slavery and liberate slaves in order to convert them rather than tell them to stay in slavery. However, the social conditions and nature of slavery are different now than in Peter's day, and although the ownership of people has always been a dreadful immorality, it was not the most pressing social concern for people of the first century. Future generations may well lambaste us for failures to deal with social problems to which we sit lightly today (such as the oppression of the poor), just as two thousand years ago, they sat more lightly to slavery!

Grace

In both verses 19 and 20, the word 'grace' appears, rather surprisingly. The Bible tends to use the word to mean God's grace or favour, and in a Christian sense this favour is made available to us through Jesus Christ. It is difficult to see how this meaning can be found in

the sentence 'It is grace indeed when someone endures the pain of unjust suffering because of knowing God' (2:19).

However, if we think of 'grace' more broadly as a physical manifestation of God's blessing on people, then this picture fits the picture better. The enduring of suffering, persecution or tribulation is something foretold by Jesus and spoken of throughout the New Testament. It does not mean that those who endure such things cannot benefit from other aspects of life, but it does anticipate that people will suffer for being called Christian. One can almost imagine the situation in which an arrogant master found out that his servant had become a Christian, and subsequently mistreated the servant because of the discovery. When Peter says that this is 'grace', it is not to condone such suffering but to give it meaning. Most of us will understand that if there is no escape from suffering, we can be strengthened by knowing that there is meaning to what happens to us. Peter tells the servants that their unjust suffering is a manifestation of God's blessing, because they have acted justly by becoming Christians, and by their suffering they are brought closer to Christ, their saviour, who suffered unjustly for them (2:20). Indeed, they 'walk in His steps' (2:21).

No cursing

The picture of Jesus presented by Peter in verses 22 and 23 is derived from the famous prophecy of Isaiah in chapter 53; 'although he had done no violence, there was no deceit in his mouth' (Isaiah 53:9). The words are not the same as our version of Isaiah 53 because Peter was quoting from the 'Septuagint' (the Greek Old Testament available in Jesus' day which is a little different from our 'original' Hebrew text). Peter then added the description of Jesus not replying to curses (2:22). He could have meant that when Jesus was hauled before the Sanhedrin and the temple guards, he did not respond (Matt 26:63, 27:30,31).

What is more likely is that Peter was sensitive to Deuteronomy 21:23 which was well known in the days of the early church, and says 'if a man ... is put to death, and you hang him on a tree ... you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.' Jesus was cursed by the death of 'hanging' on a tree, but still refused to curse others Himself. Peter knew this personally, because he out of all the disciples bore the guilt of having abandoned Jesus on the Cross, and yet discovered afterwards that Jesus forgave him (John 21:15f)! Out of Jesus' suffering came love, and that remains the highest example for all.

Bearing our sins

This led Peter on to the famous verse 'He took the burden of our sins Himself in his own body on the cross ...' (2:24). Remembering that Peter was speaking to servants whose work was normally physical and required great endurance, done solely for others and not themselves, this passage comes to life. Peter did not so much quote Isaiah 53, but use the primary idea of vicarious suffering found in verses 4,11 and 12, to describe the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. It is also possible that Peter conjured up a picture of the sins of humanity as like the great 'cross-beam' of the Cross which Jesus had to carry through the streets of Jerusalem (until helped by Simon of Cyrene – Matt 27:32), a weight to which he was bodily strapped until it was raised above Him at the site of crucifixion and from which he hung until death. How easy it would have been for any servant or slave to say 'no-one has suffered as much as I' and give an example of some horrendous mistreatment; so it was to stop such sentiments in their track that Peter graphically reminded his listeners of the awfulness of the physical injustices done to Jesus.

No wonder then that the last part of v24 emotively rejects sin; it has no place in the life of righteousness. When we dwell on the horror of what Jesus carried for the sake of our sin, and when we have responded to Jesus' love and turned to Him in repentance, is it possible that anyone can knowingly continue in sin and imagine that somehow it does not matter?

Application

There is no doubt that this letter is incredibly powerful at this point, and if we can enter into the scene of Peter addressing a group of baptised converts, mostly servants and slaves gathered in a convenient courtyard of someone's house, then we can see how this passage works in a unique way.

For us, the message remains that whatever the burdens and suffering we endure, and even if it does not measure up to the horrors of servitude in ancient times, then through endurance we receive God's gracious blessing. The reason this is so is because we experience a little of what Christ experienced for us, and if we are spiritually aware then we will be led deeper into the things of God, despite what we suffer. Sometimes there is no meaning in suffering more than this. We want to try and find the meaning of suffering, as if we will be made tougher or find solutions to problems for example. However, suffering and pain frequently have no reason or purpose, and we can only make it meaningful by identifying with Christ. Personally, I do not know how some people endure suffering without the help and example of Christ!

The consequence of Christ's work on the Cross is our salvation and our healing. There can be no greater consequence to the suffering of anyone, and the more we keep this in mind, the more we will find that sin has lost its power over us. Who can continue to knowingly and casually sin when the Cross of Christ is before their eyes?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Who are those today who are the equivalent of the servants and slaves of Roman times? can they become the powerhouse of evangelism now?
2. What does it mean in real terms to 'suffer unjustly'? Have you experienced this for yourselves?
3. Do you find it easy or hard to think of Jesus bearing your personal sins in Himself on the Cross? How should we react to this spiritual fact?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find this passage of scripture deeply moving and in some ways quite difficult to write about. It jumps out of the page at me because of the force of its imagery and the depth of its feeling. It will not do that for everyone, and I know that many people debate the meaning of this passage as if it was incomprehensible. It was certainly deeply meaningful to those who first heard it!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Sit or lie down for half an hour, perhaps instead of watching a favourite television programme, and think about this passage, reading it over several times. Let God use it in you for good and for revelation.
- Research the subject of slavery on the internet and discover what kind of slavery is happening in the world right now. You may be surprised and horrified, but the issue cannot be avoided. Christ has a message for all servants and slaves ...

Final Prayer

It is our greatest treasure to know the truth of Your saving grace, Lord Jesus Christ. May we give you our thanks by honouring what You have done and by keeping close to You in every activity of our lives. Through Jesus Christ we pray; AMEN