

# SUBMISSION AND SUFFERING

by Doug Goins

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We are examining the apostle Peter's first epistle. He was writing to a group of believers in the first century to help them deal with suffering as a universal experience, both in their corporate life together and in their individual lives.

We all respond to suffering in different ways, depending on how we're wired together emotionally and how we've been brought up. Poetry and songs often give us a glimpse into the heart or soul of a people, and they probably capture best our emotional responses to hard times. I was struck by a verse from an eighteenth-century hymn I grew up with. It describes the kind of life this brother in Christ would like to live and the distance that he would just as soon that suffering keep. The hymn writer wrote:

If on a quiet sea  
toward heaven we calmly sail,  
With grateful hearts, O God, to Thee,  
we'll own the favoring gale.

He was saying, "If it's all the same to you, Lord, we'd just as soon have smooth sailing--nothing to rock the boat." That represents anesthetized bliss, the hope that we won't feel anything as we float through life. In contrast, a modern lyricist wrote these words about the experience of suffering in a pop tune Carly Simon sang:

Suffering was the only thing  
that made me feel alive.  
Thought that's just how much  
it cost to survive in this world.

This represents the other extreme--existential despair and hopeless depression because of the reality of suffering in this person's life.

Somewhere between those two extremes lies the real world--a tapestry of pain and joy woven together, which we examined last week. Suffering and the peace to get through it, death and life are part of the same fabric. We can't separate ourselves from suffering. Our choice is how we're going to respond to it, or what resources we're going to draw on.

We saw last week as we studied the opening paragraph of 1 Peter chapter 1 that Peter is a realist. He calls us to sobriety telling us to "gird up our minds," or become tough-minded, in verse 13. He says in this letter that every believer will have to undergo trials, testing, suffering, pain, sorrow, abuse, reviling, ordeals, and persecution. When Peter talks about suffering he talks about the totality of the experience--the little things and the big things, the minor inconveniences and the enormous tragedies that can overwhelm us.

Peter taught us last week that by keeping our eyes on Jesus, being absolutely certain of our salvation, our position and our identity in him, we really can get through any kind of suffering. The passage we studied was tremendously encouraging. We were taught that suffering is even a part of God's ultimate plan of salvation for us. He allows it in our lives, he works through it, and he has purposes that are being served by it.

We're going to examine this experience of suffering from different perspectives. We're going to begin in the middle of chapter 2 this morning. Peter is responding to a number of specific questions that have been addressed to him by believers in several churches in Asia Minor. They were just beginning to have the experience of suffering that comes from persecution. Persecution had broken out in Rome about 63 AD, and Peter knew that it

was going to spread throughout the empire. Part of his purpose in writing this letter was to prepare them. First, there was a question about how to live under a cruel, despotic government. The question we'll deal with today, about how to get along with slave owners who didn't treat their slaves properly. Finally, a question was raised about how to get along in the family setting: What was a wife to do when her husband didn't respect her or acknowledge the dignity that Jesus says she had? The theme that weaves these questions all together in Peter's answer is that no matter what the relationship or difficulty, we are to respond to it with a submissive attitude.

First, the theme of submission in suffering as we look at the relationship between slaves and their masters. Peter writes:

**Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to the kind and gentle but also to the overbearing. For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval.**

The evil of slavery was deeply ingrained in the social and economic substance of the Roman empire. The majority of the population in the empire at that time, sixty million people, lived under slavery and suffered its dehumanizing effect. Slaves were viewed as objects devoid of any personhood. They were valued only as tools to serve the needs of their owners, either Roman freemen or perhaps the government itself. They were given no sense of human dignity .

Peter is addressing a specific group within the general population of slaves. There is a Greek word that is used most of the time in the New Testament to refer to the social class of slaves. But in this passage there is a different word, rarely used in the New Testament, that literally means *house slaves* or slave workers having a specific job responsibility. Usually these slaves did hard physical labor, the toughest imaginable jobs. The word used for masters in this passage is the Greek word *despotoi*, from which we get the word *despot*.

This passage translates fairly easily into the modern setting of the work place. For a number of hours each week many of us submit ourselves to authority. We are not slaves in the literal sense, but there is a degree of slavery involved in the jobs we agree to do for a salary. Of course, we have freedoms in our jobs that the first-century slaves couldn't even imagine. We can discuss differences with our bosses; there is a place for working out misunderstandings. Collective bargaining has made the work place more equitable. We are legally protected from job discrimination and harassment. And if worse comes to worst and the difficulties are too great to overcome, we can resign and go find someplace else to work.

The issue that Peter addresses here of having a submissive attitude is universally applicable. You can apply it to your relationship with your boss. I talked about it this week with my junior-high-age daughter, and I think you can apply the principle if you're a student under the authority of a teacher, or on an athletic team under the "despotism" of a coach. Peter says that the attitude of submission is a universal calling. *"With all respect, be submissive to everyone alike."* Submission is a central theme throughout the New Testament.

Let's look in more detail at the questions. There was confusion in the Christian population of the first century. First, Jesus had said to these new Christians, "Your citizenship is really in heaven; you're exiles and strangers here." The question was, what was their responsibility to governmental authority? Did they really have to submit to it? Peter (and the apostle Paul elsewhere) tries to help them and us understand that even though we have spiritual citizenship in heaven, we do have a responsibility to be submissive toward our earthly government.

Then the question that gave rise to the passage before us today grew out of the New Testament teaching that says we are ransomed people who have been bought out of the slave market of sin. The apostle Paul in his writing even said that in Christ there is no longer slave or free; the categories are irrelevant. So the question was, then did they have to submit to their masters? Did they really have to give up their rights to them? Jesus had said that they were on the same footing; they were brothers.

In the section on family relationships immediately following, we're called to submission to authority within that unit. Wives are supposed to submit to their husbands. Peter tells us in his second letter that these people were already familiar with what Paul had said about these issues in Ephesians 5: that in God's sight there is gender equality, that husbands have a responsibility to love their wives sacrificially just as the Lord Jesus loved the church. So the question that arose was, if a woman's husband didn't respect her, disdained her, or neglected her, did she have to take that? Those are the kinds of questions that Peter is addressing.

Everything that the New Testament teaches on the call to submission flows out of a principle: Submission to others, especially to those who don't treat us well, can be a reality only if we have submitted to Jesus Christ as Lord. Paul says to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5: 21,

**"Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ."**

The Greek word there for *being subject* is also used for *being submissive* here in 1 Peter 2. It means literally to *stand under*. Until we have submitted to Jesus, we are going to have a tough time submitting to anyone else. In all the counseling I've done as a pastor, I have seen this born out. Knowing my own heart, whenever I struggle with a willingness to be submissive to somebody, including my wife, it is usually because I have some unresolved issues regarding my absolute surrender to Jesus as Lord.

Peter gives a strong imperative in verse 18:

**"Be submissive."**

He is saying that we are to willingly, voluntarily take an attitude of submission; that is, we are supposed to be submissive in our hearts, not just in our external behavior. It was possible for those slaves, as it is for us today, to do what someone required of them, but to have a rotten attitude about it inside. In a cartoon I remember seeing, Dennis the Menace is sitting in his rocking chair facing the corner, where his mother has put him to punish him. He is saying over his shoulder to his mother, "I'm sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside!" When Peter talks about the attitude of submission here, he is saying, "Make sure that when you obey, it looks the same on the inside as it does on the outside, for God examines your hearts."

We are called to that universal submission whether it's to kind and gentle authority or to overbearing authority. There were slaves in that first-century setting who enjoyed a good life under benign *despotoi*, people who thoughtfully provided a comfortable, secure work environment. These slaves had easy lives with normal marital and family relationships. As a matter of fact, some free men who got into financial difficulty even sold themselves into slavery for a period of time just to get back on their feet financially, because manumission was possible; they could work off their slavery to an owner. Some slaves had Christian owners who treated them with loving concern and compassion. Now, it's easy to submit yourself to somebody like that, but Peter says that even if they are overbearing we have to submit; that is, even when they are unreasonable, unfair, or cruel. We are to voluntarily take a position under these people whom we abhor the most, to willingly submit to them.

In Jesus' very invitation to follow him, he was calling us to an attitude of submission. Let's turn back to Matthew 11:28-29:

**"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."**

Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon us. Did you ever notice that he is wearing a yoke in these verses? What is the yoke of Jesus? It is his own obedient submission to his heavenly Father. He doesn't ask us to do anything that he hasn't already done. He has submitted himself to the Father's authority, and he asks us to take that yoke on ourselves. He says it is easy. It doesn't seem like it at times, but it is a lot easier than trying to resist what we see as unfair!

My wife Candy has borne me three children, and I have been through the pregnancy, labor, and delivery with her each time. In the first pregnancy we went through a LaMaze class. In the middle pregnancy we didn't, because she sort of figured she had it down; having a baby was pretty easy. And it had been easy the first time, because she took the principles of LaMaze very seriously. You don't fight the pain, you submit; you discipline your mind to understand the process and cooperate with it. In the second pregnancy we didn't practice any of the techniques for doing that, and she had a terrible time with the pain. It just about overwhelmed her. So the third time we took LaMaze again, and it went well. This principle of submission instead of fighting it in the natural world is analogous to what Jesus is calling us to in the spiritual world.

Look at verses 19 and 20 again. He says there is real purpose in this submissive suffering.

**"For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval."**

To endure pain, to patiently deal with suffering even when it's unjust, has the favor of God, God's gracious resources strengthening us.

Now, Peter does acknowledge the fact that this suffering is unjust. That is a reality of life. As a father, I understand how hard it is to teach my children that life is not fair, that there is injustice. What is even sadder is when I bump into adults who have not yet accepted the fact that there is unjust suffering. When adults shake their fist and say, "It's not fair!" I have to ask them wonderingly, "You mean you haven't realized yet that this is a world full of injustice?" We are part of a corrupt, rebellious world system that is full of people and institutions who view humanity with a jaundiced eye. That is why there was slavery in the first century. We still live with the realities of racism, physical violence, war, and poverty. There are people who find the followers of Jesus Christ strange, and the fact that we are resident aliens, exiles, and strangers is threatening to those who stand outside the community of faith. The result is that the truth that we try to stand for in Jesus and the goodness that he represents, which we want to share with the people we work with, is attacked; it is slandered philosophically, economically, and ethically.

Several years ago I had a job in Southern California. One day in a staff meeting our supervisor was very sarcastically and cruelly attacking one of my co-workers, a young woman. He reduced her to tears as he took great delight in exercising his sharp rapier wit. I was the only person in the group of about twelve who didn't laugh. When he saw that I wasn't laughing, asked why not. I said to him, "Because I think it's wrong what we've done to her." I didn't raise a spiritual issue about it, but he responded by accusing me of being "holier than thou" in my attitude.

The word that is translated *approval* in both verse 19 and verse 20 in my Bible may be *favor* in your Bible. Having God's favor means we are graced of God; he will give us the grace to endure unjust suffering, the spiritual resources to go through it if we endure with patience. Peter also says in verse 19 that this is true if we do it *mindful of God*, which implies that we are consciously submitted to his sovereignty in our lives, and if we are also committed to doing what is right; if we have a concern to please and honor the Lord in suffering.

We always need to make sure that our motives are pure in our responses. He says that we ought to be concerned that we are not bringing suffering on ourselves because of our own sinful attitudes and behavior. If you look closely at the first half of verse 20, that is really what he is talking about. Paul wrote to Titus, a young pastor on the island of Crete, saying,

**"Bid slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to be refractory (argumentative) , nor to pilfer, but to show entire and true fidelity..."**  
(Titus 2:9-10a.)

If we are being disciplined in the work place because we are dishonest, because we shoot our mouths off--that is what argumentativeness means--or if we are chronically late to work, we don't try to do our best, or we are just

generally being a selfish pig at work, then we really can't claim that we are patiently suffering according to the will of God. We ought to be embarrassed and ashamed of ourselves, and repent of the sin.

The final thing he says in this paragraph is that we should view our submissive suffering as a calling in life. Look at verse 21 again:

**For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.**

We are to respond to unjust suffering in the same way that Jesus responded. When we decided to follow Jesus, submissive suffering was part of the deal. Suffering and struggles are normative in the Christian life, and our job description is to respond righteously to them, in submissive obedience to the Lord. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian, pastor, evangelist, and martyr in World War II, said this about following Christ: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." What do we die to in this context? We are called to die to standing up for our own rights, to self-interest, to the need to be right all the time, to the need to have the last word in every discussion, to caring more about what people think of us than what God thinks of us. In Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 3, verses 22-24, he says,

**"Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ."**

We are to care more about what God thinks about our servitude than what the people we are working for think.

I recently found a quote from a businessmen essentially summarizing 1 Peter 2:18-21. This is what he had to say about these principles:

My experience has been that there is tremendous freedom when we submit to God's ordained relationships, whereas there is slavery and chaos when we violate them. I have found out the hard way that submission to my boss at work leads to great freedom and enjoyment of my work, whereas rebellion leads to enslavement, jealousy, strife, and a bad reputation. That can lead to one's dismissal or resignation if not rectified by obedience. I thank God that I have learned the freedom of submission.

One of the ways we learn about that freedom is by looking at Jesus. In the closing portion of this passage this morning, Peter asks us to learn to submit the way Jesus did by looking at how he modeled submission in suffering (verses 21-25):

**For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He 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. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.**

Jesus is the one we ought to copy. When Peter uses the word *example*, we could substitute the modern computer term template. Jesus is the *template*, the pattern that we are to look at carefully, that is to be reproduced at all times in our lives. Peter gathers together from Isaiah 53 a number of references to the suffering Servant, the Messiah who had to die to buy our redemption.

Peter says that Jesus was absolutely sinless. He was innocent of the charges against him; he had been unfairly accused. He didn't deserve any of what he had to suffer in his arrest, trial, beating, carrying his cross, or execution. He was the only blameless human being who ever lived. (When I have suffered unjustly in the work place, my

heart wasn't usually sinless. On the inside I had a rotten attitude about it; I was resentful).

The second thing it says in verse 22 is that he was totally honest. He never lied, never shaded the truth, never exaggerated. There was absolute consistency between his lifestyle and his speech, what he did and what he said. Most of us over the years have learned the value of a little fudging at times to protect and defend ourselves. It was not true of the Lord Jesus.

Verse 23 says that he did not argue abrasively or "go ballistic" to or try to defend himself. He did not complain, try to justify himself, or explain. He didn't say, as we are prone to, "But you don't understand, you don't know what you're doing. Let me give you all the facts. You're making a tragic mistake here!"

Verse 23 also says he did not threaten retaliation; he did not lash out at his tormentors in irritation. He did not say to them--as well he could have--"I'm coming back when this is over, and when I do I'm going to get you!" He resisted that temptation, unlike most of us.

Verses 24 and 25 say that he acted sacrificially in the interests of his antagonists in our best interests as well. His death was very purposeful. He voluntarily took our sin on himself, suffered in our place, and allowed himself to be executed in a barbarous way, knowing full well that while he was doing it, we were wandering off like stupid, lost, sinful sheep. We were oblivious to what he was doing for us. But he still died for us.

How did Jesus endure the humiliation, the physical suffering, and the shame? How did he keep quiet through it all? What sustained him? The answer is at the end of verse 23:

**"He trusted to him who judges justly."**

He entrusted himself to a God of complete fairness. He counted on the character of God and trusted him for ultimate justice and vindication.

This is Peter's eyewitness account. He says that he was an eyewitness to the sufferings of Jesus. He had spent three intimate years with the Lord, watching Jesus deal with stubborn, resistant, prideful disciples who never seemed to understand or get it right. He watched Jesus respond to a hostile physical environment, when he was cold and hungry and had to deal with illness and mosquito bites. He watched Jesus deal with the death of close friends and with grief. He watched him respond to a hostile world system that rejected his message and killed him. Peter saw him transfigured, lifted up into the heavens and glorified as well.

What Jesus accomplished for us is encapsulated in Hebrews 5:7-9:

**"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him..."**

What struck me this week is that if I read it in the third person singular and put my name in there, it adds tremendous power to what it means to me. Look at it with me and then do this yourself: *"He himself bore Doug Goins' sin in his body on the tree, that Doug Goins might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds Doug Goins has been healed. For Doug Goins was straying like a sheep, but has now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of his soul."*

Do you know what his death accomplished for us personally? First, we can die to sin. We can know forgiveness and freedom from guilt and condemnation. We can die to rebelliousness, to unsubmitive attitudes toward authority. The power of sinful stubbornness in us has been broken by Jesus' death on the cross.

Secondly, through his resurrection we are being made alive to righteousness. That speaks of the power that we have in him to handle a life of stressful suffering. The power of God at work in us helps us live a life of meekness

and submissive gentleness. It is an amazing juxtaposition.

Thirdly, his death results in our healing, spiritually and emotionally. His external physical stripes--the welts on his back from the beating--resulted in the internal healing we need when we are treated unfairly in the work place, when we are victimized or taken advantage of.

Finally, he says that because of the death of Jesus we are not straying anymore; we are not wandering aimlessly, following our own way. Now there is direction and purpose in our lives because we are following a shepherd we trust. And he is not just a shepherd, Peter says, but also a *guardian*. Being a shepherd speaks of care, tenderness, provision of our needs, and knowing us intimately. The word guardian, on the other hand, is a military word that means oversight, protection, and guarding. There is security in both of those beautiful images of Jesus.

I am reading *The Signature of Jesus* by Brennan Manning, a Franciscan priest for a number of years who now ministers both in Protestant churches and Catholic churches as an evangelist. Manning writes about a priest who taught him this valuable lesson:

Dominique Voillaume has impacted my life as few people ever have. One New Year's morning in Saint-Remy, France, seven of us in the community of the Little Brothers of Jesus were seated at a table in an old stone house. We were living an uncloistered, contemplative life among the poor with the days devoted to manual labor and the nights wrapped in silence and prayer.

The breakfast table talk grew animated when our discussion turned to our daily employment. The German brother remarked that our wages were substandard (60 cents per hour). I commented that our employers were never seen in the parish church on Sunday morning. The French brother suggested that this showed hypocrisy. The Spanish brother said they were rude and greedy. The tone grew more caustic, and the salvos got heavier. We concluded that our avaricious bosses were nasty, self-centered cretins who slept all day Sunday and never once lifted their minds and hearts in thanksgiving to God.

Dominique sat at the end of the table. Throughout our harangue he never opened his mouth. I glanced down the table and saw tears rolling down his cheeks. "What's the matter, Dominique?" I asked. His voice was barely audible. All he said was, "*Ils ne comprennent pas.*" They don't understand! How many times since that New Year's morning has that single sentence of his turned resentment of mine into compassion. How often have I reread the passion story of Jesus in the Gospels through the eyes of Dominique Voillaume, seen Jesus in the throes of His death agony, beaten and bullied, scourged and spat upon, saying, "Father, forgive them, *ils ne comprennent pas.*"

They don't understand.

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