

Follow in His Steps

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The image of Christ our Savior as the Good Shepherd is one of the Church's most vivid and cherished. It truly helps us understand our relationship with him. It casts us in the role of weak, defenseless, wandering, and (let's face it) creatures not known for their high intelligence – an accurate description of our spiritual state – and Jesus in the role of our all wise, all knowing leader, defender, and caretaker—our caretaker so devoted to us and our wellbeing that he goes to the extreme length of laying down his own life to save us. He knows and always does what is best for us. And so the best thing we can always do is listen to his voice and follow in his steps *wherever* he leads. In today's Epistle lesson, St. Peter informs us that it happens, at times, that our Good Shepherd leads us to places where we would prefer not to go.

We've been working our way through Peter's first letter for the past several weeks. Two Sundays back we heard the Apostle encouraging us with the joyful hope that we have in Christ: the absolute certainty that because Jesus died for our sins and rose again, we too shall rise and live forever in glory with him. Then last week, in view of this joyful hope, and because of spiritual rebirth we've been given by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we heard Peter instruct us on how we are to conduct ourselves while still living "in exile" here below. Specifically, he exhorted us to love one another from a pure heart. As Christ loved us and gave himself for us, so we are to love one another.

In the section we heard this morning, Peter explains yet another aspect of our calling as Christians; namely that we are expected to patiently endure unjust suffering. Yes, that's as disturbing as it sounds. Indeed, if we back up and look at the context of the statement, it may be *even more* disturbing than it sounds.

Earlier in this chapter, Peter gave direction on how we Christians are to serve as good citizens, showing proper honor and respect for those in positions of authority over us and praying for them. He specifically mentions the emperor in this regard. So let me make this clear: we're not talking about a democratically elected leader who was chosen by virtue of his merits. No, this was an absolute dictator who sat atop and commanded the military machine that conquered most of the known world. The people to whom Peter originally wrote didn't choose to become subjects of Rome; they were forced into it. It doesn't matter. God has ordained civil government to maintain order in society and to punish those who disobey the law. And the Scriptures nowhere prescribe a particular form of government. Wherever a Christian is and whatever kind of government and legal system is in place there, that the Christian is duty bound to honor and obey. The only exception is when the authorities order us to do something that violates God's commands. Then we must say "We must obey God rather than men."

A good example of this is when the Apostles were ordered by the Jewish ruling council to stop preaching about Jesus. They refused. And they were beaten for it. They suffered unjustly. They hadn't broken any laws; they were doing what the Lord Jesus told them to do, and they paid dearly for it. But they didn't sit around complaining and feeling sorry for themselves about it. Instead we read that they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus.

In the section before us today, Peter is addressing himself specifically to those who are serving as slaves. And we're likely to think, well, if anyone had a right to complain about their

lot in life and do their work poorly and full of resentment, that would be a slave. But no, Peter essentially says that if God in his wisdom has made you a slave, then be a good one. Do what your master says. Do it well. And it doesn't matter if your master is kind and gentle or a cruel, overbearing jerk.

For this we have the biblical example of Joseph whose brothers sold him into slavery. I'm sure he didn't want that to happen; but that was the situation he found himself in. So he served his master to the best of his ability, even to the point of substantially enriching him. Later, when he was falsely accused and sent to prison, he served there as the assistant to the warden. He found a way to love God and serve his neighbor wherever he happened to be. And he didn't sit around lamenting about how unfair it all was – even though it was totally unfair. But in the Joseph story we see more, though. We see that the Lord was using what happened to Joseph, how he managed the affairs of Potiphar's household in prosperous times, and how he helped manage affairs in the Pharaoh's prison which certainly operated on a much tighter budget, to prepare him for what was coming; namely his rising to manage the affairs of all of Egypt during the seven years of plenty followed by the seven years of famine. The Lord had a purpose in causing Joseph to suffer unjustly. It was to develop him into a more Christ-like character.

And that is exactly Peter's point. Christ suffered unjustly for you, leaving you his example, so that you might follow in his steps. The Good Shepherd leads us to green pastures and quiet waters. He leads us through the valley of the shadow of death. And when he does, we don't fear. We know he's gone this way before and came out again on the other side alive. He'll bring us through death to life too. That's our joyful hope. And there are times when the Good Shepherd leads us to unjust suffering because he knows what's best for us; because he knows we need to be taught patience and endurance and long-suffering; because he knows we need to be taught to love and forgive our enemies – which isn't possible if we don't have any; because he wants to make us more like him who bore our sins in his body on the tree.

When he did suffer, he didn't threaten and curse those who tortured and mocked him. He didn't seek revenge. No, he prayed for their forgiveness. And he entrusted himself to his heavenly Father who was causing him to suffer unjustly for a greater cause. In the same way, when you are called to suffer unjustly, you are to entrust yourself to the Lord confident that he has a higher purpose for allowing it to happen to you – a higher purpose which may or may not be revealed to you in this lifetime. Again, the point is that the Lord knows what is best. Our part is to trust him.

Okay, that's the general principle; what we have to do is apply it to our situation which is quite a bit different than things were in the ancient world. As I said, Peter addressed this part of his letter specifically to those who were serving as slaves. And slaves pretty much by definition didn't have any rights. They lived or died by their master's whim. They also comprised something like 60% of the population of the Roman Empire. In our time we consider the institution of slavery to be repugnant. But it was a fact of life for almost all of human history. We consider ourselves more enlightened and moral for having gotten rid of it; but the truth is it's only industrialization and modern machinery that made it possible. In any society in which most of the menial work is done by human hands, most of the hands need to be working on menial tasks. And that means that society runs on slavery.

But as I said, at least in this regard we are fortunate to live in better times. We are also blessed to live in a nation in which we citizens have certain rights enshrined by law. And we are not wrong in using those rights to defend ourselves from injustice. For this we have the example of St. Paul who exercised his rights as a Roman citizen, on one occasion to avoid a beating he was about to be given, and on another to appeal the legal case against him to the

emperor. So, I don't want anyone to get the idea that as a Christian you are called upon to patiently put up with every school yard bully who wants to steal your lunch money and make you his personal punching bag. Nor should a wife of a physically abusive husband shrug her shoulders and say, "Well, if God wants me to keep being beaten, I'll just have to take it." That's not what I'm saying. We are correct in exercising our legal rights to avoid unjust suffering.

There are times, however, even when exercising those rights, injustice that causes suffering comes. There are also times when the system of justice is itself unjust. Some people are wrongly convicted. Or take the case of Jack Phillips, the Colorado baker who has been hounded by the state for years because it was against his Christian conscience to prepare a wedding cake for a same sex marriage. Even after winning his case before the Supreme Court, he's still unable to make wedding cakes because of new lawsuits against him. It means for him a loss of about 40% of his normal business, not to mention all the legal fees, harassment, and even death threats that are constantly hurled at him. Although it's not physical abuse (yet), he knows what it means to suffer unjustly as a Christian. And near as I can tell, he's enduring it with grace and patience.

And so must we when, in the Lord's wisdom and care, he calls upon us to suffer unjustly. Doing so, we will be following in the steps of Jesus, our Good Shepherd who knows and always does what is best for us. We have only to entrust ourselves to his guidance and careful keeping. For, as Peter says, "You were straying like sheep, but now have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls". Therefore let us gladly follow *wherever* he may lead. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!