

***“This Is A Gracious Thing”*** (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:19-25)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Alleluia! Christ is risen! [wait for response: “He is risen indeed! Alleluia!”], so *why – since Christ is risen – do we Christians continue to suffer in so many unjust ways?* Doesn’t it stand to reason that if Christ is risen, victorious over death and the grave, that He would intervene to relieve us [those who trust in Him and who follow Him] of our unjust suffering? Where is the Risen Christ when I need Him in the face of being mistreated? Indeed, isn’t this the reason why so many former Christians are *former* Christians? And isn’t this the reason why we are tempted to turn away as well?

The Word of God teaches us differently -- correcting our sinful skepticism which resides in our sinful nature -- in today’s epistle from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:19-20: ***“<sup>19</sup>This is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup>For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.”***

First of all we should be conscientious about the context of what St. Peter was addressing precisely: Peter was writing to house-slaves who belonged to Roman Empire families. “There were many slaves throughout the empire, and when Christianity was preached to them, many slaves were converted to it.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of 1 and II Epistles of Peter, the three Epistles of John, and the Epistle of Jude*, 114) Unfortunately for these house-slaves, they “were being pummeled by their irate masters, the only offense of the [house-slaves] being that they lived Christ-like lives which were used of the Holy Spirit to convict [their masters] of [their] sin.” (Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, Volume II, 65)

So yes, St. Peter was addressing Christian house-slaves in the first century in the Roman Empire, but taken in the context of Scripture, St. Peter is only echoing the words of Jesus spoken to *all* believers and yet we will be able to come back to St. Peter and realize the richness of his words from God. But again, our Lord spoke similarly as recorded in the Gospels:

Matthew 5:10-12: “<sup>10</sup>Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Jesus also taught as recorded in Luke 6:27ff: “<sup>27</sup>Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup>bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup>To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your

tunic either....<sup>35</sup>But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.”

And in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter chapter 2 we learn more about this grace that is given to us. It is easy to go along with the popular idea that God is setting up a transaction: endure bad things without complaining and I'll give you a reward. This understanding falls short, especially since this section of God's Word is anchored to the heart of the Gospel! This endurance of the Christian is bound to the rest of what St. Peter records: <sup>21</sup>“For to this [endurance in the midst of unjust suffering] you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup>When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

The Lord through His Gospel/Wonderful Good News that He has saved us from our sins and our death has called you to live in faith *no matter what...and especially when you are caused to suffer...and especially when that cause is unjust; when it is wrong; when you shouldn't have to! Why would God do this?*

Precisely dear Christians because such a life demonstrates NOT that the Risen Jesus is *not* here, but exactly the opposite: that the Risen Jesus IS HERE. There would be no endurance in the face of unjust suffering, ***if Jesus Himself were not upholding you keeping you – by His grace – following Him when every atom of your being wants to run and hide in the opposite direction. This is a gracious thing that the Lord empowers us to endure; this is God's gracious work when we can stand and not only is our faith refined (to trust in God alone), but the Lord then permits an astounding testimony to take place.***

Eusebius of Caesarea who wrote in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (the 300's) – 1700 years ago – was a Christian historian who also wrote about the martyrs (Christians who gave their lives for the faith). In Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* he writes about “The holy martyrs....endured tortures, beyond all description; Satan striving with all his power, that some blasphemy might be uttered by them. Most violently did the collective madness of the mob, the governor and the soldiers rage....Against [a Christian woman named] Blandina, also, in whom Christ made manifest, that the things that appear mean and deformed and contemptible among men, are esteemed of great glory with God, on account of love to him, which is really and powerfully displayed, and glories not in mere appearance....Blandina was filled with such power, that her ingenious tormentors who relieved and succeeded each other from morning till night, confessed that they were overcome, and had nothing more that they could inflict upon her.

Only amazed that she still continued to breathe after her whole body was torn asunder and pierced, they gave their testimony that one single kind of the torture inflicted was of itself sufficient to destroy life, without resorting to so many and such excruciating sufferings as these. But this blessed saint, as a noble wrestler, in the midst of her confession itself renewed her strength, and to repeat, 'I am a Christian, no wickedness is carried on by us,' was to her rest, refreshment and relief from pain." (Cruse, tr., *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, Hendrickson, 1998, 150)

This unjust suffering was like a super-nova of light to the enemies of the Gospel and to the other Christians watching: such endurance is not of this world; God is present upholding His people. This as St. Peter writes "is a gracious thing" when you are mindful that when you suffer – even or especially when it is unjust – but when your mind and heart is also transfixed to the Lord Jesus and what He did for you, then you are given grace to stand; you are given grace to endure and this – in and of itself – is powerful. Not only is it powerful to sustain you, but it is powerful in giving witness that the Risen Jesus is with you. He is alive indeed, otherwise you would have been crushed a long, long time ago.

But we resist this truth and instead we are expert complainers. Our complaints are on just about everything. And all we are doing is describing our frustration, our irritation, our inconvenience, our exasperation, our discomfort, or perhaps even our pain that is caused by other people in this world and in the midst of that complaining we do not pray for our enemies, but we curse them. We do not keep back retaliation, but we want revenge and we fight back. This is the way of the sinner; this is the way of the one who has no consideration of what Christ did for them.

Again, St. Peter is not waxing eloquent about moralism. 1<sup>st</sup> Peter is not a returning to the Law and a forsaking of the Gospel. No way! In fact, it would be hard to find a more vivid New Testament example of the Gospel so powerfully proclaimed in Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53 tells us what the Lord Jesus did about the sins of others that cause you suffering; and for that matter what the Lord did about your own sin in the face of that suffering (esp. when you are *not* like the Lord who did not revile in return): Isaiah says, "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah 53:5-7)

And yet He had every right to complain that it was your sin and my sin that took Him to the cross; it was your sin and my sin that caused more unjust, unfair suffering upon Him than what has ever been endured. But He did it to save you. He did it to pay for your sins. He did it so

that you would have eternal life. He – the author of all blessed endurance – endured so much for you and for me that He permitted through the torture He endured “his appearance [to be] so marred, beyond human semblance [that is, His torture was so severe that He didn’t seem human anymore].” (Isaiah 52:14) The blessed martyr Blandina followed in Christ’s steps. Which of us have even come close and what does this say of our complaining? There is no room for it. It is completely out of place. Indeed, it is sinful.

But this is also why Christ bore our sins as St. Peter wrote “<sup>24</sup>in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. <sup>25</sup>By his wounds you have been healed. <sup>26</sup>For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

Thank God for our Good Shepherd who saves us from our complaining hearts and who gives us grace to endure not so that we can try to look good or to rub it in the face of our enemies, no, we receive this grace to know that Christ is living and to show to all men this truth: He lives to lead us and sometimes His leading is ***to permit us to suffer unjustly like He did, but it is always for good to demonstrate that the Living Lord Jesus is holding us up.*** It is to show that the good pleasure of the Lord rests upon you. “This is a gracious thing” and so it must be that you belong to Jesus!