Enduring a lifetime of suffering

Text: 1 Peter 2:18-25

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 53; 1 Peter 2:18-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 223, 266, 271, 117

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD15Q&A37)

**Theme:** Christ provided an example of suffering on behalf of others that we might follow Him and willingly suffer injustice

**Proposition:** We are called to follow Christ’s example and willingly endure a life of suffering

**Introduction**

In a broken world, vulnerability results in suffering and death. It therefore requires great courage to make a conscious choice to be vulnerable. That decision is a choice to willingly suffer. It’s a choice which King Jesus calls all His followers to make: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (Matt 16:24)

This afternoon we focus on the suffering of Christ and the call for his disciples to follow him in this pattern.

1. **Christ willingly endured suffering (v22-24)**

We remember the suffering of Christ on the cross at Calvary especially on Good Friday, when we celebrate Lord Supper and every Lord’s Day when we meet together in this place. It is good and right that we do so.

When we recite the Apostles Creed and say that ‘he descended into hell’ we understand that Jesus suffered the agony of hell which our sins deserve (ref. HC Q&A44). In Q&A37 (LD15) the catechism helpfully reminds us that the suffering of Christ was not restricted to the time when he endured the cross, but that ‘during his whole life on earth’ he endured pain, hardship and distress.

The WSC uses the word ‘humiliation’ to encompass the enduring suffering of Christ during his life on this earth: (A27) *“Christ was humiliated: by being born as a man and born into a poor family; by being made subject to the law and suffering the miseries of this life, the anger of God, and the curse of death on the cross; and by being buried and remaining under the power of death for a time”.*

We see the pattern of Christ’s suffering reflected in these words from the Apostles Creed: ‘Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary’ (LD14); ‘Suffered under Pontius Pilate’ (LD15); ‘Crucified, dead’ (LD15); ‘And buried’ (LD16).

In our text the Apostle Peter summarises the life of Christ on this earth in v22-24:

1. “*He committed no sin*”. Christ never missed the mark of God’s law. He never did anything which was not a demonstration of His love for His heavenly Father and for other human beings. He never left undone anything which was in the Father’s will for him to do. He is the unblemished Lamb of God, full of grace and truth.
2. “*No deceit was found in his mouth*”. To deceive someone is to intentionally mislead them with the aim of gaining an advantage. The word translated as deceit here, literally refers to a fishhook, trap, or trick - all of which are various forms of deception. Here Peter confirms that the prophecy of Isaiah about the coming Suffering Servant ‘*there was no deceit in his mouth*’ (Isa 53:9) was fulfilled in Christ.
3. “*When he was reviled, he did not revile in return*”. To revile is tocurse, speak evil of, insult. Isaiah prophesies of the coming Christ: “*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*” (Isa 53:7)

Remember how false witnesses were brought to testify against Jesus before Caiaphas and the Jewish Council “*But Jesus remained silent*” (Matt 26:63). Remember how the Roman soldiers mocked him saying “*Hail, King of the Jews!”, spitting on him and striking him on his head* (Matt 27:29-30). Remember how those who passed by as he was dying on the cross derided him saying “*come down from the cross!*” (Mark 15:30). Remember how the chief priests and scribes mocked him saying “*He saved others; he cannot save himself*’ (Mark 15:31). Jesus always responded to evil with good as we see in the Peter’s words:

1. “When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued trusting himself to him who judges justly”. When Jesus did speak in the midst of his suffering, he returned evil with good. Saying of those who nailed him to the cross “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34). He trusted in His Heavenly Father’s perfect will, in God’s perfect justice and mercy.

In his prayer life he expressed his dependency e.g. John 17:1 *‘When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you”’* In Gethsemane his humble obedience: "*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done*." (Luke 22:42). At his death his complete vulnerability “"*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!*" (Luke 23:46). As the Heidelberg Catechism states, Jesus suffered in body and soul ‘*especially at the end*’ of his life on earth when he bore ‘the anger of God’.

By offering himself up as a sacrifice for all the sins of all God’s people, Jesus, the Innocent One, paid the penalty of sin on behalf of others, the guilt ones. People like you and me. Peter writes “*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree…by his wounds you have been healed*”. As Isaiah had prophesied: “*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows*” (Isa 53:4a) “*The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all*” (53:6b)

Jesus Christ endured a lifetime of suffering on this earth. He willingly made Himself vulnerable to multiple wounds afflicting both his body and his soul, inflicted from the inhabitants of this broken, groaning world. It was not that He wanted to suffer, but that most of all He wanted to do his Father’s will and that good will for him involved suffering.

He was willing to suffer so that all who come to trust in Him as their Lord and Saviour would be healed, forgiven, reconciled to God, receive life that never ends, joy, peace and an inheritance in the coming New Heavens and New Earth.

He did this **also** in order that we might follow his pattern of enduring unjust suffering…which brings us to our 2nd point:

**2. We are called to follow Christ’s example**

Jesus is not merely a ‘model human being’ whose exemplary moral behaviour should be followed, as people have sought to mimic people like St Francis of Assisi, Mahama Ghandi, or Mother Teresa. Jesus is different from all other human beings who have ever lived:

* He is the only begotten Son of God the Father Almighty, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin.
* He is perfect in all ways, having never sinned.
* He alone has born the wrath of God against the sins of others.
* He is Lord and Saviour of all who, by faith, trust in Him to take away their sins, reconcile them to God and take control of their lives.

All this and more is true of Jesus, but he is nevertheless **also** the perfect example to follow, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church: **“***Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*” (1 Cor 11:1).

In our text, Peter is writing to servants who serve their masters. The majority of servants in the 1st century were slaves. Approximately 2/3 of the population of the Roman Empire (estimated by some historians to be about 60 million) were slaves, owned by their masters. The economic prosperity of the Roman Empire really depended on slavery – a source of very cheap labour, with no health and safety protection costs, no risks of strike action, no redundancy pay-outs. Some slaves were well-treated within the households where they served. Some were freed and some adopted by the family who had previously owned them. However all slaves, no matter how benevolent their owners, were under the control of their masters and were therefore vulnerable.

Whereas the Greek philosopher Aristotle had taught that it was impossible for injustice to be done to a slave because a slave was the property of his or her master (Nic. Eth. 5.10.8), the truth is very different: slaves, like their masters are image-bearers of God, they are not inferior in any way because of their different standing in the social structure of the day. The New Testament does not condemn slavery, but the Scriptures do teach that slaves are to be treated with respect and that masters are not to mistreat their slaves (Eph 6:9, Col 4:1).

In our text, Peter is writing about the willingness of servants to suffer. The point which Peter is making here is **not** that suffering itself is commendable to God. We are not called to actively seek out affliction as part of our religious experience. There is no call to put on horse-hair underwear, to start whipping yourself, to make your life as physically uncomfortable as possible. Many who have become monks have sought out self-inflicted suffering wrongly believing this to be a form of piety. We do not need to go looking for suffering, as followers of Christ in a broken world, suffering will find us.

The call here is to endure unjust suffering, ‘mindful of God’. This does not mean that we should accept all injustices done to us without any protest or appeal. If a crime is committed against you, you should report this. If you are being unjustly treated, it is wise to speak to an elder or trusted mature believer.

However, there are many injustices which are not necessarily illegal actions. There are no legally bonded slaves in New Zealand, but sadly many employees experience injustice in the workplace e.g. verbal abuse, unethical practices, dishonest actions. Many are reluctant to voice their grievances for fear of losing their source of income. Non-physical abuse in the workplace is usually more subtle and can often be difficult to prove.

Peter writes “*if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God’.* Suffering as a consequence of doing wrong is not commendable, but enduring suffering because you have done good is pleasing to God. We are likely to increasingly suffer as Christians in a changing NZ society even when we live law-abiding lives of service to others. As Christ suffered, so also do those who follow Him. We should not be surprised by this, but be prepared. Paul writes to warn Timothy (2 Timothy 3:12) “*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” Peter writes in our text “*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps*”.

The word ‘example’ here refers to “the faint outlines of letters which were traced over by pupils learning to write”. The idea here is that just as a child traces over letters on a page, so the Christian traces out the pathway of Christ, especially here with this text in his enduring the suffering that comes from injustice. The teaching here is not that we are called to suffer the same agonies, anguish and pain that Christ suffered as the perfect child of imperfect parents, as the often-misunderstood teacher of truth, as the Saviour alone in Gethsemane or dying for the sins of others at Calvary. We are however, to willingly pattern our lives after that of Christ, sharing not only in his glory as God’s adopted children, but also in the suffering of God’s only begotten son as his disciples. Paul expresses this truth to the Philippian church this way: “*For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake*” (Phil 1:29)

Brothers and sisters, Christ endured a lifetime of suffering from the injustice of a fallen world for us. He calls us to likewise endure suffering as we follow Him – knowing that our suffering for his sake is always less than His was for ours.

AMEN