

Called to Bless

1 Peter 3:8-17

First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

October 16th, 2022
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In our text today, Peter transitions from telling his readers to submit to authorities to now telling them how to handle suffering. How should these new Christians handle pure evil, repetitive reproach, abuse, and vicious slander being done against them? The question makes me think about what little suffering I have experienced and rarely from someone in authority. In high school, my neighbor employed me to cut her grass right up until she fired me running over her garden hose. I had accidentally done so, but she wasn't happy. Slander: I assume I lost new business as neighbors heard about this reckless lawn-mower-wielding hellion, but suffering might be too strong of word. Contrasted with Peter's audience in Asia Minor who were suffering for their faith, my loss of work only came from not seeing a black garden hose nestled under 10-inch-high grass.

I asked a few groups of men from our church this week if they have experienced persecution in the workplace because of their faith. Most of their faces communicated to me that they'd have to think pretty hard to recall anything. As we consider this passage today, it's hard to feel the weight of Peter's exhortation. Our suffering is often more general than personal aggressions acted upon us as a result of our faith. We suffer from sickness, taxes, and inflation. I don't like the price of car insurance in the Louisiana. Moving here from Indiana our premiums went up six-fold for simply moving to a state that encourages no-fault litigation. Yet even though paying for teenage drivers is a blow to my wallet, I'm not being personally attacked by anyone on a billboard. Thankfully in America, we rarely suffer from personal aggressions, and even less of these aggression are brought on because of standing for righteousness. Yet this is changing.

Consider the first points from an overview of how modern thinking is being replaced by post-modern thinking. The ones you might expect begin the list: The modern mind used to value reason, now the post-modern mind values emotion above reason. People used to believe in abstract truth, but now they wrestle to believe there is any truth. We've been hearing those for a while, but think of how these later points impact the topic of suffering: The Modernist mind believed in **principled motives**. The Post-modern mind believes all social relations are **masks for power**. Modern-minded skeptics considered Christianity not true because of **evidence**. Post-Modern skeptics believe Christianity is not true because of its exclusive view. The modernistic mind saw **man individually as the center**, but post-modernism sees the **social group as the center**. The this progression of thinking is gaining force in our culture today and is dangerous for the church. The culture believes Christianity can't be true because of its exclusive claims about Jesus being the only way to heaven. They then begin to form social groups to remove the church from its antiquated patriarchal power.

Consider a recent headline from a week and a half ago about Andrew Thorburn resigning as chief executive of Australian Football League's club Essendon. This was a surprising story because Thorburn had only been in the role for less than twenty-four hours. Before taking the helm of Essendon, he had been the CEO of Australia's largest bank, National Australia Bank, with an amazing pedigree of outstanding leadership. In case you haven't heard of Essendon, Australian Rules Football is the most watched professional sport, surpassing even their beloved FIFA soccer team. Becoming the CEO of Essendon would be like getting to become the next Tom or Gayle Benson of the New Orleans Saints. It was a huge honor and accomplishment for Thorburn, and he was able to enjoy it for just shy of 24 hours. That is because a fan group advocating diversity and inclusion known as the "Purple Bombers," upon hearing the announcement of Thorburn's appointment, opposed it for his involvement and leadership in an evangelical church in Melbourne. The offense? The Bombers cited a sermon from Thorburn's church five years before he started attending that urged people with "same-sex attractions" to seek help from senior Christians to "survive these temptations." Yes, his church, City on a Hill, holds to the scandalous teachings of the sinfulness of same-sex behaviors and the sanctity of human life. The judgment from the culture was swift. The premier of Victoria, Daniel Andrews, said, "Those views are absolutely appalling. I don't support those views, that kind of intolerance, that kind of hatred... bigotry. It is just wrong." The president of the Essendon team said, "As soon as those comments from the 2013 sermon at the church became clear, we acted immediately to clarify the publicly espoused views of the [church's] official website, which are in direct contradiction to our values as a club. Essendon is committed to providing an inclusive, diverse, and safe club where everyone is welcome and respected.¹" That is, obviously, unless you are a member of an evangelical church.

Can you imagine all of the meetings and interviews it took to become CEO of a national football team in Australia? Can you imagine looking for your next job to use your talents? We just had a Discover First dinner a few weeks ago, those wanting to become members will take their vows next Sunday. Do you think they're doing so to the potential peril of their employment? We must not assume that just because we live in America, we will not face suffering for our beliefs.

Here's the danger that our text today needs to warn us about, our desire for comfort and interpersonal harmony makes us hesitant to stand up for righteousness' sake. Coupled to that, we have a naive assumption that suffering personal aggressions due to righteousness' sake only happens in Australia or the first century; we think they won't happen to us. The last danger is that the rarity of interpersonal aggression we experience over righteousness leaves us unprepared and aloof to the need of having a robust theology of suffering.

The big idea from Peter's text today is: When God sovereignly allows suffering for righteousness' sake, He uses it to bless; therefore we need to have a high view of God and be prepared: 1.) Prepared in our hearts 2.) Prepared in our Actions 3.) Prepared with Community. Let's begin by considering how relevant Peter's words are to us today.

In the first century, Peter's audience lived in one of the most heavily populated and wealthy provinces of the entire Roman Empire. To do commerce in the cities, one would go to the heart

of it all, the Agora. This was a bazaar/market type area where everyone brought their goods. A powerful man called the Agoranomos oversaw the agora and was responsible for who would be allowed in to conduct trade. But you couldn't simply waltz in set up your booth. All skilled labor belonged to a guild. Typically, complete families or entire villages would belong to a particular guild. Your family might weave baskets used for fishing, so you would belong to the basket guild. Another family might grow and harvest olives so they would belong to the agricultural olive guild. Being a part of a guild was how one prospered.

Along with being a land of great affluence, Asia Minor was a land permeated by many gods. Each guild had gods that one would make an offering to. If you wanted your metal utensils to sell well in the agora this year, everyone in the metal guild would offer sacrifice to Venus, the god of alchemy. As your guild traveled to the city and arrived in front of the agoranomos, everyone would offer sacrifice to Mercury, the god of merchants. Pagan life in Asia Minor revolved around not angering the panacea of gods and appeasing your particular gods enough to be prosperous and happy. You can imagine the upheaval in society when one became a Christian and had to decide whether to offer sacrifice to a false god. People feared not doing so would anger the gods so they would refuse to buy your merchandise. A brother would say to brother, "Please, I beg you brother, don't curse our entire harvest this year, make a sacrifice." A father would say to a son, "Our family must be allowed to trade in the agora today, offer your sacrifice to Mercury." Worshiping Christ alone in the first century had immediate consequences of suffering.

When Peter tells his audience, "Do not repay evil for evil," they had specific people come to mind that had caused them direct suffering. So his message to "Bless, for to this you were called" is a radical message. In Biblical times, to bless meant more than simply speaking well of someone or giving praise. It also had a notion of bestowing special favor or providing benefits. A modern understanding of blessing someone is to have willful intention and action for someone's true good and flourishing.

In order to bless, we must first: **Be Prepared In Heart**. Consider Peter's quote from verses 10 through 12, "Turn away from evil and do good...for the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous." It comes from Psalm 34 which begins with David saying, "I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall continually be in my mouth." Psalm 34 comes with a heading describing the historical context. It says, "Written when David changed his mind before Abimelech." This was a season when, although David had been anointed by Saul to become king, he was forced into hiding from Saul. Saul had become an unjust ruler who actively persecuted submissive and righteous David. Two times during those years on the run, David had opportunity to take Saul's life. Once, David cut off a corner of Saul's robe when he came into a cave that David was hiding in (1 Samuel 24). After Saul arose and left, David called to him and Saul replied: *"Is this your voice, my Son David?... You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil.... So may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day."* (1 Samuel 24:16, 17, 19) The second time David spared Saul's life was when Saul was asleep in his military camp. David snuck in and Saul sleeping but said to his servant, *"Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the LORD's anointed and be guiltless?... The*

LORD forbid that I should put out my hand against the LORD's anointed."(1 Sam 26:9-11) When Saul awoke and learned that David had spared him, he called out to him, "*The LORD rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness.... Blessed be you, my son David.*" (1 Samuel 26:23, 25) Peter is telling his first century audience, David was a man who trusted in the Lord, submitted his life to an ungodly leader, suffered, and yet was blessed by the one who persecuted him. In David's obedience, the church could see that blessing comes to the righteous. Not only was David blessed by God with deliverance, but he was also later blessed with words by the one persecuting him.

There is a blessing that surpasses circumstance that comes from honoring the Lord. Peter says in verse fourteen, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed." David could have words of praise continually in his mouth even while in exile hiding in caves because the Lord was with him, filling him. Peter is telling the church, "Have no fear of those causing you trouble, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy." He wants his audience to know that if you have honored Christ as holy, set him apart as special and precious in your heart, you will be shown special favor for good and flourishing.

The second point from our passage is **Be Prepared in Action**. Peter asks in verse thirteen, "Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?" I imagine you could hear a pin drop if there was a pause after that sentence. For a persecuted people that would soon have the emperor lighting them on fire to light his gardens, I imagine most were thinking, "Who is there to harm me? Man, people are all around trying to harm me. I am trying every day to keep my head down and do the best at whatever I am told that is within reason so that I don't get harmed." I imagine most were desperately trying to do good to their fellow artisans, farmers, or fisherman in their respective guilds; I imagine none were trying to do their co-workers harm. However, just as fast as Peter could ask the question, he follows it up with a "but." Verse fourteen says, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake."

For first century Christians the call to live a righteous life brought swift suffering. This gave all the more reason to "have a good conscience" concerning one's actions, even when slandered, so that their revilers may be put to shame.

There is a mighty power when suffering if you have a clear conscience. When insults are coming your way, to be able to say in your heart "I have done good, acted justly, loved mercy, and walked humbly with my God." (Micah 6:8) When a grandson, who is abusing drugs, is screaming blasphemies at you because you won't continue to enable his habit by giving him money, there is power to hear God the Father speaking into your heart, "Forgive your grandson, dear one, for he knows not what he does."

A contractor told me about doing work in a fellow church member's back yard. Midway through he sent the first invoice, and it went unpaid. Believing this man to be a brother in the Lord, he sent another, and another, but kept working. He finished the project and the fellow church member (not our church, a previous church) never paid him. There wasn't any dispute over poor construction quality, the guy was having personal troubles and just refused to pay him. When asked what it was like to see that guy on Sunday mornings, he said it was tough,

but he chose not to repay evil for evil. He wanted to honor the Lord. Two years later, the guy who refused to pay wrote the contractor a letter. In it he apologized profusely, said his failure to pay was totally his fault, and begged for forgiveness. When I asked if that letter blessed him or vindicated him, he said, “No, not really. I knew I was in the right, and there was no check for \$45,000 dollars with the letter.” But there is a blessing, my contractor friend has a clear conscience before the Lord, and that is priceless.

On a side note, should anyone think that ‘doing good’ and ‘having a clear conscience’ means that you should let someone steal from you or cause you harm, that is not the point of that story. I didn’t get the chance to ask my contractor friend what he has done to seek financial, legal, or criminal recourse. I would imagine he has pursued options. In the same way, when Paul was about to be flogged for his faith before the Roman Tribune, he said, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?” (Acts 22:25) Paul was using the Roman laws to his advantage and seeking not to be flogged. We can use wisdom in how we interact with those who seek us harm. We can seek to avoid unjust suffering and still have a clear conscience before the Lord as well.

The third point from our passage is **Be Prepared with Community**. Notice in verse eight how Peter begins this text, “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” Who is this verse speaking to or about? He says, “all of you.” It’s as if he wants them to look around at each other and know that they are not alone in this world of suffering. We so often want to read these texts and think, “How am I to live out this passage?” But that is exactly what Peter isn’t saying. It isn’t only about what you are going to do about suffering, but what you as a collective member of a Christian church are going to do about those in the local body of Christ suffering.

Suffering is difficult, and it is often an isolating experience. It might be easy to wonder how a parent could let their child suffer. I have a friend in Georgia whose brother is on the streets because he can’t stop drinking. The family has helped him out so many times, so many rehab programs. The best way they are trying to love him right now is by letting him come to an incredibly low point so that he might finally be ready to change. Peter tells us to have sympathy and brotherly love for one another. It might take a good period of time to work this season out for this young man, somehow we need to have a tender heart for one another and humble minds as this family tries their best to love their beloved. That family is in deep pain, we are to have tender hearts.

As the small groups pastor of our church, I encourage you to seek out community within our church. If others sitting around you in these pews today don’t know the suffering that you are currently experiencing, I encourage you to commit to a group and let others in. I believe you will find your pew-mates to be wonderfully sympathetic, loving, and tender. Together may you seek God to know how to have unity of mind about the challenges of this life.

In closing, the most popular verse in this text is 1st Peter 3:15, “In your hearts honor the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for

the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.” It is such a beautiful verse, and I have usually heard it applied to evangelism training. Indeed, Peter is telling us to be prepared to speak to others about the hope that is within us, but it isn’t so much about really good arguments for why we believe Jesus is God and why the lost should receive him. This verse is much more about Peter describing a hope that overflows because God uses suffering to bless. He says, “Bless, for to this you were called.” God knows the suffering that you will endure. He knows he sent his own son to endure suffering on the cross. God wants to bless. Because of his stripes, you are healed; and because of his calling, you will obtain a blessing as well.