

1 Peter 2:18-23

Life was incredibly tough in the first century. It was worse if you were a follower of Jesus. That meant your problems didn't go away when you became a Christian; if anything, they were exacerbated. They mounted up. The situation was not helped by the prevailing cultural climate, those were the days when men and women were treated as things rather than as people. It has been estimated that in the time of the early church there were as many as 60 million slaves in the Roman empire. Such folk were not only consigned to do the jobs that no-one else wanted to do, they covered the entire spectrum ranging from the medical profession through to education to the arts and into the multitude of roles which people normally engage in today. It is not an exaggeration to say that all the work of Rome was done by slaves. The Roman mindset dictated that there was no point in being master of the world and doing one's own work. It's the philosophy which reasoned: let the slaves do that and let the citizens live in pampered idleness. William Barclay tells us: 'Slaves were not allowed to marry; but they cohabited; and the children born of such a partnership were the property of the master, not of the parents, just as the lambs born to the sheep belonged to the owner of the flock, and not to the sheep.' It would be wrong to think that the lot of slaves was always wretched and unhappy, and that they were always treated with cruelty. The fact is, they weren't. Many slaves were loved and trusted members of the family; but one great inescapable fact dominated the whole situation. In Roman law a slave had no legal rights whatsoever; to all intents and purposes he was seen as a *persona non grata*. For that reason there could be no such thing as justice where a slave was concerned. And that's where Peter's insights in verses 18-20 are truly welcome for they add a new dimension to the position of a slave. I have given you an historical perspective on slavery in the early days of the first millennium. That is how it was in that particular era, that was life in the cold light of every new day, that

was the reality of the first century world when Peter addressed slaves and told them to 'submit' to their masters. It would have been easy for slaves who became Christians to think that their Christianity gave them a passport to freedom; it would have been a cushy option for many of them to feel that this was one of the perks of giving your life to Jesus if they could extricate themselves from the mangled web of slavery. Interestingly enough, Peter does not say that, he doesn't go down that road, he doesn't advocate that course of action. Peter makes it abundantly clear that they have to stay where they are, the difference now is they have the Lord as a means of total support; no matter how difficult and demeaning it may be as a slave, it's always better to walk in the dark with the Lord than it is to walk in the light without him! I believe Peter is encouraging them to hang in there, to hold on tight, and that ultimately the Lord will reward them for their faithfulness in the midst of unthinkable and tortuous adversity. The principle emerging from verse 18 is that no matter how good, bad or indifferent your master is, we are challenged to respect them; no matter how appreciative or arrogant he is, no matter how considerate or cruel he is, no matter how helpful or harsh he is, we are exhorted to submit to them because of their position over us. We may not like them, we may feel as if we are treated like a doormat and they are walking all over us, we may think our position is untenable and nightmarish, we may not be over the moon about our lot in life and there may be no end in sight; well, according to Peter, that doesn't really figure for we need to remember in good times and in bad, that God's pay-day is coming. Peter's instruction holds good for life in the third millennium, for some of you will be able to identify with the job conditions which Peter has been elaborating on. There is barely a day goes by when we don't hear some folk whinging about their employer and the awful way they are treated by him. There are those in the family of God who do have a very demanding assignment in life when it comes to employment. And there are others for whom life couldn't be better, they work for a boss who is

generous in his understanding and who is genuinely appreciative and supportive of all their efforts on his behalf. It's not easy, is it! Do you have a boss who treats you like a general dogsbody? Do you have a supervisor or line manager who isn't fair? Do you have to deal with a colleague who enjoys putting you down in front of other people? Do you spend the bulk of your working hours in communication with a lot of unreasonable people? If your answer is 'yes' to any of those questions, then I have news for you, Peter's comments are what you need to hear! Believe it or not, in verses 18 and 19 he is addressing your situation! What he says is tailor-made just for you! Human nature being what it is, our initial reaction when people ride roughshod over us is to fight back, we want to take the law into our own hands. We want to retaliate, we can't resist the chance to get even. We can hardly wait to see them get their deserved comeuppance; we rub our hands with glee in anticipation, so far as we are concerned, it can't come quick enough. But, you know, Peter's main point is that seeking revenge for unjust suffering can be a tell-tale sign of self-appointed lordship over one's own affairs. We think we are the masters of our own destiny. In other words, revenge is totally inappropriate for one who has submitted to the kingship of Jesus in their life. The people of God are different, we're meant to be, we should stand out in the crowd, Christians must stand in marked contrast to those milling around them. Chuck Swindoll suggests this 'includes a difference in attitude and a difference in focus.' Basically, the attitude we adopt should be one of submission, and the focus we have should be directed toward God. That's the thought behind the phrase 'conscious of God.' I wonder, how does God view it when we react and respond in this way? Again, Peter plugs the gap in our thinking when he reminds us that our behaviour is 'commendable' to the Lord if we actively pursue such a spirited course of action. It finds favour with the Lord and, in the final analysis, that's what really counts. One Bible commentator with 20/20 vision says: 'Our focus, then, should not be consumed with getting the raise at the office but with getting

the praise from God, our all-absorbing passion should not be with getting the glory for ourselves but with giving the glory to him.’

That’s pretty much what Peter says in verse 20 when he answers his own question: ‘But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.’ The contrast is an eloquent one in this scenario, it’s patently obvious what Peter is trying to say. There’s no credit due a person who suffers for what he has coming to him. If you mug an old lady and steal her handbag, you will be arrested and you could be sent down for such a heinous and despicable crime. And if you patiently endure your jail sentence, no one in their right mind is going to congratulate you for having stuck it out to the bitter end and there’s no awards handed out for being a model prisoner. You don’t stand a dog’s chance of being elected ‘citizen of the year’ in your local community! But if you are a keen hard-working, faithful employee, and you’re diligent, you’re honest, you’re productive, you’re prompt, you’re caring, and you’re working for a boss who is belligerent and stubborn, he’s short-sighted, and ungrateful, and if you patiently endure that situation, it’s all so different, for that is commendable before the Lord. Such an attitude wins his smile of approval, such a mindset guarantees his blessing. The underlying thought behind your securing the Lord’s commendation is rooted in the word ‘grace’. It means, when you endure, when you persevere, when you hang in there and don’t call it quits, when you do all of that, you put grace on display. And when you exhibit grace in public for the glory of God, you could unwittingly revolutionise your workplace or any other situation. I think you will agree with me when I say, that’s a rather radical policy statement, it’s one which deserves our wholehearted support. For, according to Peter in verse 21, ‘to this you were called.’ To put it simply, this is God’s will for your life and mine! That’s the main reason why you find yourself in that company, that’s the reason why you are working for that employer, that’s the reason why you are filling that role and holding down that

job, that's the reason why all those things are happening to you. If you like, it's an integral part of God's calling on your life and mine! In no way is Peter glossing over the kind of situation we often find ourselves in, nor is he minimising the injustice of the slaves' situation. He didn't approve of it and he certainly didn't agree with it, but he encouraged them to handle it properly, and in the end, in God's perfect timing, justice would be done and innumerable people would be blessed. It's the old story isn't it, if you don't take up the cross you can't expect to wear the crown; that's a capsule of Peter's teaching, it's suffering today, it's glory tomorrow!

Some lessons are easily learned in life; if you're anything like me, others I have to learn over and over again. It seems to me when I read through the gospel narrative that Peter learned a couple of vitally important lessons: number one, we lead by serving; and number two, we serve by suffering! Whether we realise it or not, there's an obvious link between them, there's a connection there which becomes increasingly apparent when you turn your eyes in the direction of the Lord Jesus. And that is what we are encouraged to do in verses 21-25. The apostle sketches three pictures for us of Jesus Christ: in verses 21-23, he is our example in his life; in verse 24, he is our substitute in his death; in verse 25, he is our watchful shepherd in heaven. So, what nuggets can we mine from this rich seam of Scripture? I think in this section Peter shifts from an example of unfair treatment to the example we should follow, he moves away from that of a servant to that of the Saviour. Peter has just reminded these suffering pilgrims of their unique calling. A call to suffering, a call to unjust verbal, emotional and physical abuse, a call to patient endurance even when they are beaten for doing right. In the previous chapter Peter has skilfully drawn a picture of our heavenly calling; in these verses he brings them down to earth with a big bump when he reminds them of their earthly calling. This affects every one of us to a greater or lesser degree for at one time or another we will experience trial and trouble, we will encounter a

season of personal suffering, we will pass through dangerously deep waters, it is something we can't possibly avoid or evade, it's our calling, and that's the way it is; the sunny side of this truth is, all believers are called to suffer with Christ before they are glorified with him. In the glory, all that we have suffered down here will be seen in a new light, it will be viewed from a different vantage point, we will see our ups and downs from God's perspective and everything will fit neatly into place. The fact is, until we arrive in heaven, we have no option but to face the hassles and hurdles head on, this is our calling. It's heartening to realise that Peter doesn't ask for stoic resignation when it comes to handling our trials, he doesn't expect us to walk around beaming from ear to ear with a smile like a Cheshire cat on our face. As someone has said, 'a life of suffering is our calling, not our fate.' I can tell you why, and there are two main reasons: first, it is our calling because we are God's people; second, it is our calling because it was Christ's calling. And this comes out very powerfully in verse 21 where Peter reminds us that 'Christ suffered for you.' In so doing, he wasn't only setting us an example to follow, he wasn't only putting himself forward as an eligible role model; it means much more than that! The example of Jesus Christ who suffered is also set before us as a saving example. You see, his suffering is our model because it is our salvation. It does not simply guide us; it is the root of all our motivation to follow. This is what keeps us going, this is what drives us on, this is what propels us forward in the life of faith. It goes without saying, but the example he left for us is a breathtaking one, it is a stunningly beautiful representation, it is a superbly brilliant image; it has to be said that the fella or girl who fails to see Christ in that number one spot is an individual suffering from myopia. Peter uses a fascinating word for 'example' in verse 21 for it refers to a pattern to be traced. Clement of Alexandria gives samples of Greek sentences containing all the letters of the alphabet (it's the Greek equivalent of: 'the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog!') They were written out to be traced so that children would easily learn their ABCs. The word

could also apply to an artist's sketch to be filled in by someone using the appropriate colours, that would be similar to our painting-by-number kits which you can buy in any decent high street toy shop. Peter supplements this vivid figure with another familiar analogy, it's the one where you place your feet in the footsteps of another. Peter knows precisely what he is talking about here for he had followed in his Master's footsteps along the narrow paths of the hill country and through fields of grain in Galilee. No doubt Peter also witnessed with his own eyes the dreadful procession that slowly wended its way up to the hill of Calvary. To save himself from that path Peter had sworn fearful oaths when he denied his Lord and Saviour. But now, he is ready to follow Jesus all the way. And he calls every Christian to walk that path with him. It can be an unbelievably solitary path at times, on occasion it will be a path of intense suffering, there will be days of stress and strain as you plod along this path, it's not all doom and gloom on the path for there are many light-hearted moments of unsurpassed joy and exhilaration, there are enthralling encounters which lead to times of celebration and undiluted happiness and pleasure. The main thing is to keep on walking and to try to maintain a steady pace. The tremendous thrill awaiting the travelling pilgrim is that one day he will come to the end of the earthly path and he will be elevated in triumph to heaven itself. Isn't that what happened to Jesus! Every time I read these verses I am challenged as to my walk with the Lord; I am constantly amazed at the way the Lord Jesus handled the most horrendous of situations. No-one could point a finger at him, he was above and beyond reproach. So much so that Peter quotes in verse 22 those significant words from Isaiah 53:9. The great evangelical prophet of the eighth century BC provided this great apostolic preacher of the first century AD with the exact words that he needed to adequately portray the perfection of Christ. He writes: 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' It doesn't matter how you look at that statement, it tells you something profound about the Lord Jesus Christ. It underlines his

perfection, it is an affirmation of his sinlessness, it is a reminder of his impeccable credentials as one who is the holy Son of God. When his back was to the wall and he was exposed to all the rigours of severe trial and testing, when he was barracked and harangued by evil men who were bent on destroying him, when he was subjected to a raging torrent of abuse from a fanatical crowd of jeering onlookers who had nothing better to do with their time, when he was made the inevitable scapegoat so as to appease those who had a vested interest in what was happening, when he was singled out and victimised because the political and judicial system was heavily weighed in someone else's favour, when all of this was taking place and an awful lot more besides, what was his response, what was his attitude? I can tell you and again I quote from the words of Peter: 'when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.' You know, dear friend, you may be tempted to get even and strike back; please, don't do it! Walk the Jesus path, for when you do, you will eventually discover it is the path of vindication and, thank God, it is the path of ultimate victory.