

Peter's Perspective on Persecution "Sharing in the Journey of Jesus"

Passages: 1 Peter 2:11–25
 Matthew 5:11–16

There are two types of traveller moving around the world today:

- The first is **the tourist**...usually a well-off Westerner who moves from city to city and country to country on a whim! These are the young back-packers or perhaps the middle-aged retirees who have finally saved up enough money to take the trip of a lifetime. There is huge excitement as well as huge expectations! The trip is well-planned-- all the dates and times of departure are booked, the means of travel secured, and all the stopping-off points of their journey clearly worked out. Of course, the goal of this trip is quite simple: **pleasure!** And at the end of it all, they will return to the comfort of their own homes and the security of own country, culture and language, filled with glorious memories and a million photos to share with their family and friends.
- The other traveller that we find moving around the world today is **the refugee**. This traveller is very different to the well-off Westerner because there is no choice but to move. Their trip often begins by selling all their possessions, slipping over the border at night, ending up on a leaky boat, hanging precariously under a transcontinental train, or hiding in a dangerous cargo hold...all in the hope that, eventually, by God's grace, there might finally be a land of welcome—a land of acceptance, citizenship, meaningful work, and a loving embrace.

I want you to keep these two types of traveller in mind as we explore today's passage from 1 Peter 2.

Let's pray.

The opening words of our passage from 1 Peter 2:11 say a lot.

¹¹"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers...

Now tell me; which type of traveller do you think Peter has in mind--the tourist or the refugee? It's obvious that **he's thinking of his Christian readers as refugees**...people on the move, not out of choice but, from necessity. Indeed, this is the third time that Peter has used the word "**strangers**" in this letter to describe the Christians to whom he is writing. And it's clear to him why they are "**strangers**"! It's because they have chosen to follow Jesus Christ! And not only have they chosen to follow Jesus, they have become one with Him by His Spirit. What this means is that the very Jesus who, Himself, was mistreated and abused as an alien and a stranger in this world shares His journey as a refugee with us, drawing His followers into His rejection, pain and persecution! In other words, He is now turning His fellow travellers and followers into "**aliens and strangers**" just like Him! He is their "**people-smuggler!**"

Go back to the verses that immediately precede today's passage. According to verse 9, for example, Peter speaks of Jesus as the One who is leading them from darkness into His marvellous light...to a new life as God's people! And because of this radical change in their identity, they must now live their present life on the road..."in a state of limbo"...never sure what difficulties and suffering lie ahead. Although they have an unshakeable faith and trust in their "people-smuggler", Jesus, confident that He will eventually lead them into a new land where they will receive a new citizenship and a jubilant "welcome home", nevertheless, for the present, they feel stuck... like refugees on Manus Island ... without any immediate hope that their situation will improve.

In fact, Peter intentionally links their present plight with the plight of God's people in the Old Testament book of Exodus as they fled from Egypt. If you remember, although **Moses** led ancient Israel out of this land of slavery, they had to spend the next 40 years in the wilderness! That's where they lived as "**aliens and strangers**", surrounded by unsympathetic nations and ethnic groups that didn't understand them nor welcome them into their country. It's tough to be an **alien**; It's tough to be a **stranger!**

In like fashion, says Peter, **Jesus** has led us out of our slavery to sin! Like the Israel of old, we have been liberated; set free; we are now "**a chosen people, a royal priesthood and a holy**

nation” (repeating the same words that God used to describe Israel in Exodus 19). **However**, we are not yet in the Promised Land! Like Israel of old, we too must push through the wilderness; we must endure this no-man’s land! We have no option but to dwell in a pagan world! We have no option but to live in a world where we are surrounded by people who misunderstand our motives, misinterpret our actions and thus persecute us and our families. All we can do is persevere as **“aliens and strangers”** in this place, whether we like it or not, until the Day when our Lord Jesus will finally bring us all into His Promised Land; the New Heavens and the New Earth!

Of course, the big question on everyone’s mind is: **“How?” “How** are we to persevere? Peter gives three words of wisdom: **Abstain; Be good; Submit!**

Turn with me to **1 Peter 2: 11–25**.

Peter’s first word of advice to his fellow Christians who were living live like **“aliens and strangers”** in this world was **“abstain”**.

¹¹**“Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.”**

Now, many interpret these words in a dualistic way. That is, they take Peter’s words to mean that our bodies are evil and our souls are good; thus, we must deny our bodies and focus on our souls because our bodies will eventually rot in the grave while our souls will go to heaven!

But, of course, this is not what Peter is saying at all! Peter is not speaking dualistically but, rather, holistically! He’s saying that **both** our bodies and our souls are important (the soul being the inner, spiritual identity of a human being). Sadly, however, our world **focuses** far more **on the flesh than on the soul!** (This was as true in Peter’s day as it is in ours!) We are regularly encouraged to satisfy our physical desires without any thought to how this might affect the spiritual side of our personhood. That’s why Peter says, **“Abstain!”** from any sinful desire that wages war against the soul. Of course, Peter is not only talking here about food and sex! There are so many **desires** that wage war against the soul—like the desire for power; prestige; personal comfort;

the desire to be in control of life; or the desire to put my needs before others. All these things can wage war against our souls if, in the end, they hinder us from being holistically shaped into the image of Jesus.

The point is, we are called to live as “**aliens and strangers**” in this world. This means that, like Jesus, we mustn’t become too sedentary; we must not let ourselves get flabby in either body or soul. Rather, in view of this journey that we are on with Jesus, we must discipline both body and soul to work together. We must abstain from anything that tempts us to give up and settle for less than God’s best for both our body as well as our soul. This is a **holistic vision of life**...a vision which we so often neglect!

So, ask yourself: Am I willing to say ‘no’ to any fleshly desire which might be hindering me from growing in the fullness of my true humanity in Christ? Will I stop being lazy about reading my Bible? Will I take more time to pray and reflect on my life before God? Will I abstain from certain physical desires so that I can put more focus on the health of my soul?

Of course, the irony is that when you start to abstain from certain things in order to work on your soul, it may actually increase your persecution. I remember giving up my lunch breaks in order to read the Bible. People thought I was crazy! But this is where you need to fix your eyes on Jesus, agreeing to follow Him as **an alien and stranger** in this world. His opinion is the only one that matters!

The second word of advice that Peter gives to his readers regarding perseverance is found in verse 12—“**Be good!**”

¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Again, it’s important that we keep the context in mind: Peter is writing to Christian believers who live under the constant threat of persecution. They were worried about how they could survive in the midst of such a pagan environment. No doubt, some would have even thought it best to withdraw—to separate themselves from the surrounding community. But Peter’s advice is clear: “Instead of withdrawing”, says Peter, “you should get more involved! Live in their midst and prove to them that you are there to bless them and not to curse them!”

Jesus gave similar advice in the Sermon on the Mount—In Matthew 5, Jesus tells His disciples:

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world.... ¹⁶ (L)et your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

In other words, doing good deeds for others is a way of telling the Gospel story; of shining forth the love of **the Father**, in the generous, self-giving of **the Son**, by the power of **the Holy Spirit!** Good deeds are a way of ‘opening heaven’ over people; giving them a glimpse of God’s glorious love!

Moreover, when they see your good deeds, they will realise that you really see yourself as part of the community, and not as some isolated sect! It’s by doing good deeds in your community that you challenge your persecutors to reassess who you are!

This is the one reason why I don’t like mega-churches! They can be easily criticized for being disconnected from the local community; acting as an isolated cult. (When Hillsong set up in Waterloo, many locals were offended by the fact that it was an outsider-attended church, drawing people from all over the city. Few of these people had any involvement or interest in the life of the local area!) This is Peter’s point—our good deeds must be expressed locally, in the context of community and relationships.

¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that.... they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

Now, that’s good advice for us on our journey! So, let me ask the question—are you involved in blessing the local community...as a volunteer in one of the many community groups? I know life is busy, but good deeds cannot be put on the back burner for later...when we have more time. Now is the time!

There’s a third and final piece of advice that Peter gives to his readers concerning perseverance...advice which covers the rest of chapter 2 and the first part of chapter 3, but can be boiled down into one word: **Submit!** Unlike the previous two words of advice, however, this word cannot be applied very easily to **our** situation today. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that we, in the Western world at least, live in such a different and...(dare I say)

Christianized... setting that Peter’s advice to these first century Christians to “submit” could even be **bad advice for Christians** today!

To explain what I mean, we need to look at the three key verses in which Peter uses this word, “**submit**”. Let’s start with verse 13.

2:13 Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority...

In this verse, Peter is speaking about political submission. This was good advice for 1st century Christians because, in Peter’s day, Christians lived as a minority group in a hostile, pagan environment. In other words, they were politically **powerless!** They had no voice; there was no such thing as a democratic right to speak out against their situation; they simply had to put up with whatever was dished out to them! And this is why Peter encourages them to submit-- because, by submitting to the powers of the state, they were, in fact, showing their trust in God...for God had put these rulers in power in the first place and was using them to bring order and security to the land. Submission, therefore, was an active way of trusting God.

Even more important than this, however, is the idea that, by their submission to the injustices of the political powers, they were expressing unity with **Jesus and His crucifixion!** After all, the cross on which Jesus died was a political instrument of torture and persecution! On it, Jesus was totally powerless! Similarly, in their own powerlessness, the Christians that Peter was writing to were choosing to share in **Christ’s powerlessness** by sharing in His suffering!

But so much has changed since those days! As Christians living in the West, we do have a voice. In fact, we are no longer a persecuted minority, but often align with the majority viewpoint on issues of injustice and persecution! Hence, we can speak up and challenge the State. (We can even establish “Christian” political parties.) Through the ballot box, we can overturn the injustices of our society. That’s why Peter’s words don’t apply to us and our political situation today. In modern cases of political injustice, no Christian would dare advise another to simply “submit” to the political authorities—this would be seen as foolish! As Christians, we must rise up and fix the problems!

Political submission is not all that Peter discusses in this passage. He also speaks about the submission that comes with **slavery!**

2:18 Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters....

Now, once again, there's a huge gap between Peter's situation and what we experience as Christians today. In Peter's day, slavery was common, and the slave (being totally powerless) had no choice but to submit. Any revolt would cost him/her his life! And so, in calling for slaves to be submissive to their masters, Peter is not approving of anyone owning another human being! He is very aware of the injustices associated with slavery! But Peter's overarching point is **the reality of powerlessness!** His advice, therefore, is the same as that which he gave concerning political powerlessness—submit!

Peter is also pointing slaves to **the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross!** As Peter thinks of Jesus' unjust suffering, he commends those of his readers who are slaves to **"follow in Jesus' steps."** Verse 23 makes this clear: **"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."** It is the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross which makes sense of the powerlessness of slavery! (This reality was also the focus of black slaves who, for centuries, were transported from Africa to satisfy the need of white American land owners! That's why Negro spirituals always spoke about leaning on Jesus as a fellow sufferer. There was no other choice but to submit! Only Jesus could teach a slave how to persevere through such terrible persecution.)

But, of course, Peter's advice to slaves in the first century has little parallel in our modern world where slavery has been outlawed! Surely, in our modern world, only a fool would try to follow Peter's advice! Moreover, whenever we do find modern forms of slavery today (like child workers and sex slaves) we, as Christians, would only be serving injustice if we told the victims to "submit" to it! Today's call is to rally modern sensibilities to fight against all forms of slavery and to liberate people from this horrendous crime. Peter's words to "submit" shouldn't find any appeal in today's world.

There's one more use of the word 'submit' which comes up in this passage, Starting with chapter 3, verse 1. Like the other 2 instances, this must also be understood in its historical context

and, like the others, rejected in today's world! Peter writes, ^{3:1}
Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands...

These words of advice, given 2000 years ago, can easily be transported out of their original context and forcefully applied to women today. This is ridiculous! Remember? Peter's advice was for the **powerless**. In Peter's day, women had virtually no rights and no power. Yes, Christianity was beginning to make a difference in Christian marriages as husbands began to love their wives as Christ loved the church. That sort of sacrificial love was starting to lift women up and place them alongside men as co-heirs of God's grace and partners with them in the kingdom of God (see 1 Peter 3:7)! Amongst Christians, the status of women was beginning to radically change!

But, that wasn't the case in the rest of society! When, as in Peter's example, a woman was married to a non-believer, the reality of **powerlessness** was her day-to-day experience! She was powerless to get help. She was powerless to walk away. She was powerless to find someone who would support her and shelter her. She literally couldn't leave her husband! That's why Peter writes to these women, including them in his list of the powerless. These women, in the injustice of their suffering, have found a special connection with **Jesus and His cross!**

But, of course, in our world today, things are so different! Abused women can leave their husbands. There are things like emergency shelters. Moreover, abused women in our society are increasingly able to get support from the police, the government and the church. Indeed, it would be outrageous for a Christian woman today to be advised to "submit" to an abusive husband! Although Peter did it, this would be bad advice in our world today!

In summary, we need to read Peter's words in their original historical context! These three areas of Christian powerlessness of which he spoke are rarely found today (except in those countries where the Gospel still struggles to find a hearing). That's why his advice to "submit", although appropriate for the Christians of his day, is not appropriate for ours!

Or, to use the image we used at the beginning of this sermon, **Peter was talking to Christian refugees, and not to Christian tourists!** That's the reason why we have trouble applying any of

this passage today to ourselves! I mean, even though we are Christians, we live on this earth more like tourists than refugees! **Politically**, we live in a democracy where we can pretty much say whatever we want! As far as **slavery** is concerned, we can be thankful that it has been abolished from much of the world! And the situation for **woman** is vastly changed from the days of St Peter. Indeed, **we** are (for the most part) in control of our lives...we steer the ship, we determine our own destination on this trip! No one tells us what to do! **We are tourists!**

“Submission”, on the other hand, is for the desperate and the powerless, the refugee and the homeless; not for us. And that's why Peter's words are so far from our experience that they hardly touch us! They rarely apply!

So, here's my question: How will we ever know the weakness...the powerlessness... of Christ that Peter is talking about in his letter? How will we ever know the power of the cross that Peter talks about here? Is there a way for us, the tourists of this world, to feel what the refugees of this world feel?

There is one way-- by joining in with those Christians in our world who still experience persecution! Many Christians around the world still live 'refugee-type' lives! They are the persecuted church! And I wonder if we would be willing to join them...or, at least, support them, acknowledge them, give them our time, pray for them? After all, they are the ones who understand Peter's advice and are called to submit to harsh political regimes, unjust masters and difficult husbands! Moreover, they are the ones who know something of the sufferings of Christ, far more than us! Perhaps if we paid them more attention, we might learn something from them about the nature of life in Christ...the life of **powerlessness**...and His cross!

Let's watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaX4Rv02CGk&utm_source=church-watch&utm_medium=email&utm_content=image&utm_campaign=april

Let's pray.