

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11–25

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1 Peter 2:11–25 (NIV)

“Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 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. Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. 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. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ 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. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

As you already know, 1 Peter is written to Christians who are locked in struggle. They do not live in a lush green valley of life. But, as it were, they live on a windswept, rock-strewn plain. The first chapter and a half of 1 Peter has been devoted to helping these Christians in difficult places gain an upward look and an inward look. An upward look in considering the salvation the Lord has provided us. And an inward look at looking at what we are now in Christ. When we're in a difficult place it's good to get our eyes for a moment off the problem and on the Lord.

Beginning in 2:11 the letter takes a turn in direction and begins to focus on social relationships. Today Peter is focusing on the relationship of Christians to the world at large, to the government and to the employer or the master. All of these in the first-century world, and for us as well, are difficult places for Christians, and there is much we can learn by applying truths from these Scriptures to our lives. I was initially tempted to title this message “Succeeding in Difficult Places,” since I always like to see success as a possibility. But I settled on “Surviving in Difficult Places.”

The persons to whom Peter is writing really didn't have a chance of attaining “success” as the world reckons that word. Young Christians, young Christian boys and girls growing up as the children of Christian slaves, never had the possibility of dreaming that one day they might be a governor or president or something like that. They were locked in their station and there appeared to be no chance of success from the worldly motif. Sometimes, when we're in a difficult place, maybe we ought to settle for the best that we can do in that situation, which is survive. If we can survive, that in itself is a success.

I. Survive in the world.

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

First, Peter tells us about surviving in the world. “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 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” (verses 11-12, NIV). These verses form a statement of the general principle, which Peter will work with in the rest of chapters 2 and 3. He talks about a number of specific examples of relationships.

In the general way, though, the early Christians were exposed to many criticisms and judgments from the world. In the first and second century they were accused of hatred of the human race. That was one of the common charges against them by pagans. They were charged with hatred of the human race because of the exclusiveness of the gospel. People misread that and interpreted it as hatred toward other people. They were falsely accused of immoral conduct at love feasts or agape dinners. Pagans couldn't understand this word “agape feasts” that Christians used. They thought there were acts of immorality happening. They even thought at one time that babies were being sacrificed as part of the ritual of Communion by the early Christians. The early Christians were accused with tampering with family relationships, because a member of the household would become a Christian and that would affect relationships. They were accused of despising Roman gods, turning slaves against their masters. They were also accused of disloyalty to Caesar and to the government.

It's not a pleasant thing to have the good that you are doing spoken of as evil. To have your best motives misunderstood and vilified. Yet this is the position many Christians were in and the position many Christians are in now. In being faithful to Christ, our motives and our actions as Christians are misread by those who are not believers.

Peter calls for three responses to this misreading.

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

A. He tells us, first of all, that we are to recognize our true citizenship. “I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world” (verse 11). Here he is reiterating the language which we opened the letter with in verse 1 where there he used the term “exiles.” Our true citizenship is in heaven. Here, therefore, Peter is telling the believers we are only aliens. That is, we have no legal rights. And we are only strangers, temporary residents only. No matter whether we live in a democracy or a totalitarian dictatorship, we as Christians are to understand that this world is not our home; we’re just passing through.

So we’re called to believe and to recognize that we are citizens from another country. And we have alien status in this land.

B. The second thing that Peter tells us in dealing with surviving in the world and its understanding is that we as believers in this world are to abstain from evil desires. Literally in the text it would be “abstain from fleshly desires.” When we think of the flesh, as Christians, we often simply think of sexual immorality. We identify that as a sin of the flesh. It’s interesting to know that the Scriptures do not single out sexual immorality as the only sin of the flesh. Rather, the flesh in the usage of the New Testament stands not only for sins committed by the body, but the flesh stands for the whole physical human nature. It stands for human nature that’s apart from God. Therefore to abstain from fleshly desires is to make a practice of abstaining from the qualities of life that Paul talks about in Galatians 5. Not only sexual immorality but impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and jealousy. You can be just as much a fleshly Christian by being a jealous Christian as you would be by being an immoral Christian. Peter is calling upon us to live in such a way that we abstain from this practice of human nature that’s apart from God. That these fleshly desires war against our soul. The word for “soul” is “psyche” from which we

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

derive “psychology.” That’s very interesting that, indeed, when we let these kinds of things into our lives, our own identity and our well-being are destroyed, inundated with negative things.

We’re called upon to abstain, make a practice of abstaining from these aspects. So again the world, the non-Christian, looking at the Christian’s life could see a quality of behavior.

C. The third thing, then, this leads Peter to say, we’re to live in such a way that non-Christians see the difference. “Live good lives so that though they accuse you of doing wrong they may glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Peter 2:12).

Peter is saying something very critical to Christians of any age that in our work we are glorifying the Lord. In our profession we are glorifying the Lord. We ought not to be, as Christians, ripping one another off. I’ve even heard people say, and I’ve said it myself, “You’ve got to watch doing business with another Christian because they’ll take advantage of you.” That ought not to be in the Christian world.

Peter says we’re to live in such a way that on the day of visitation God will be glorified. The way the text reads it looks like Peter’s saying that on the day when the Lord returns they’ll glorify God, they’ll see that your conduct is finally right. This text may literally read, “Your good works having witnessed they may glorify God in the day of visitation.” It’s possible here that the “day of visitation” doesn’t refer to the Lord’s return but it refers to the moment when the Roman magistrate comes to town and you as a Christian are hauled into court on a charge of simply being a Christian—the day of visitation. Peter is saying that if your life is conducted in such a way on that day of visitation your good deeds will be a witness for you and you’ll be innocent of the charge. They will be guiltless and be commended by society. The early Christians, we know, took this admonition to heart.

II. Survive with the government.

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

The second area of surviving that Peter talks about is surviving with the government. “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king” (verses 13–17, NIV).

It’s all well and good to be submitted to the government. But it’s helpful to remember that when Peter writes, the government was Nero. He was about the craziest person to ever rule. Probably worse than Adolph Hitler. He murdered his own mother. He murdered other rivals to the throne. He had Christians crucified on crosses, pouring pitch over them and setting them afire to light his gardens at night. He openly practiced immorality, including homosexuality, marrying a homosexual in a bridal procession through the streets of Rome. He grew to be very obese, yet he would run in foot races in the coliseum. Of course other runners let him win because Nero hated to lose. He was insane, a maniac. I believe his end was he committed suicide, driven out of the emperorship. An awful ruler. Yet Peter here is saying every authority is instituted by God.

That not only includes American authority. That includes governmental authority in China and Russia and wherever. The Christian’s obligation to governmental authority does not depend upon the personal goodness of the ruler. But it depends upon the office that is represented, and the Scripture regards governmental office as a sacred trust.

A. Peter tells us as Christian citizens we ought to submit and why we should submit. Verses 13–15 tell us about why we should submit to the government. There are two reasons that he gives. One is, for the Lord’s sake we’re to submit to every authority. Paul tells us what this means—for

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

the Lord's sake. In Romans 13 he indicates that government is an institution established by God. Its purpose is to establish justice. The New Testament position on government is that any government is preferable to no government. Therefore, even a wicked, totalitarian regime is preferable to anarchical or no-government kind of society. Government, even though we may not at times agree with it or even like to pay taxes to it, we know that it is indispensable. Try running Orange County for a week and abolish all government and see what happens. Abolish all the police department, fire department, courts for one solid week and see what would happen. It would be worse than the French Revolution. There's enough greed in the hearts of people—in the hearts of people who live in Orange County—that unchecked, without government restraint, it would break out like a serious cancer on society.

So Peter, as well as Paul, tells us that government is God's way of checking evil and promoting justice. The better the government is at this, the better they fulfill God's purpose.

Peter also tells us that it's God's will that we should submit. He indicates that this submission should even be when we are judged falsely or on a false charge, like the early Christians many times were brought before the government and there was no really indictable charge against them yet they were judged. Peter says if you're punished for doing wrong, you deserve it. But if you're punished for doing good and you submit to it, you silence the talk of foolish people.

B. He tells us also in verses 16 and 17 how we should submit. "We're to submit as freemen yet as servants to God." In a democracy we have the chance to submit in an unusual way. Our submission in a democracy is not to the courts so much, it's not to the legislature, it's not to the executive board. The submission of American citizens is to the Constitution of the United States, which is the highest form of government. Therefore, in the United States we have opportunity as Christian citizens to sometimes even take an adversary position to what a government official

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

may take. We may disagree with the president on a particular course of action. We may disagree with the courts on a particular action. Ultimately, our allegiance and our obedience are to the Constitution. Although, to all of those in office in any branch of government we show respect as Christians are meant to show respect. But we live as freemen, as servants of God. There's a balance—freedom yet servitude.

Submission is a gift you give, not an order you get. The only way that anyone can get submission successfully out of you in a relationship is if you give it. They can never get submission successfully out of you if it is simply ordered. The New Testament teaches us that submission is a matter of paying taxes, obedience to the law. It's a matter of praying for the government, doing good to all men, and in a democratic government good citizenship is participation in the government. I show respect to this principle of submitting to the government when I exercise my rights as a citizen to vote and to be involved, to express my stance on matters.

C. Peter tells us we're not only to submit as free men in service of God, but we should show as Christians appropriate regard for all. He gives four categories in verse 17. Show proper respect to everyone. As we'll look at in just a moment, the Roman world was filled with slaves, and there were many human beings who were regarded as chattel, pieces of property. Christian opinion is different. It never looks down the nose at anyone because of their creed or because of their race or because of language or anything like this. Show proper regard and proper respect toward every person whether in life they are above you socially or beneath you socially—respect. Then when we show respect for everyone we're to next love the brotherhood of believers, especially do good to those who are of the household of faith. We're to fear God, which is proper reverence for God. And then this incredible thing, honor the king. Honor Nero? Yes. Not honor the person,

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

but honor the office. All authority is instituted by God to bring about obedience to justice. We look at that and say, “How can an unjust government bring about obedience to justice?”

The bottom line is, again, God views some government as better than none.

III. Survive with the master or employer.

A third area of surviving in a difficult place for the early Christians was with the master, or with the employer (verses 18–25). First, verses 18–21: “Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. 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. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (NIV).

In the first-century Roman world, with an estimated population of 250 million people, there were approximately 60 million slaves. About a quarter of the population were slaves. They performed menial chores and hard labor. Slaves also included professions like doctors, teachers, musicians, actors and even secretaries. Aristotle represented the attitude towards slaves that was prevalent in Roman society when he said, “There can be no friendships or justice toward inanimate things. Indeed not even towards a horse or an ox or towards a slave as a slave. For master and slave have nothing in common. A slave is a living tool just as a tool is an inanimate slave.”

Many times the lot of these slaves was exceedingly difficult. They were many times treated like animals, even branded, kept in filthy barracks, driven each day by the whip to the fields. Most slaves in the Roman world were not allowed to marry; they were only allowed to cohabit.

Children born to the union belonged to the master. A cruel and harsh treatment. A master has the

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

right of life and death over his slave. If a master puts to death a slave, it's fine. There need be no adjudication of that.

Peter, in talking of slaves in verse 18, gives us a different Greek term for slave than the normal word. He uses the word that meant “domestic” or “household slave”—one of the most galling and degrading forms of slavery. It was one thing to work out in the field and to have the master come down periodically and lay the whip. It was another thing to live in the house with the master and have to draw his bath and scrub his back and rub him down. All this activity of servitude in close proximity to the master. Since many of the early Christians were slaves, it was a real problem they had of how to relate to those persons that on a day-by-day basis they worked for.

One might look at the New Testament and say, “Why didn't the apostles just advocate the overthrow of slavery?” Spartacus' revolt gives us an idea of the suicidal impact that that would have had upon the Early Church. So the gospel decides to attack the whole mountain of slavery in this way—they packed dynamite on the inside of the mountain. The dynamite of the new relationships that Christ brings with people. That in the Christian church a slave might be the pastor and the owner might be someone under the authority of the slave in the spiritual sense. The Christians brought a whole new dimension to this.

A. Peter's admonition is to give submission to the good and bad masters. As Christians, just because you have a good master doesn't give you the right as a Christian to slough off, and just because you have a bad master doesn't give you the right to leave off serving him. He covers this whole matter of slavery by saying that we're to follow in the example of Christ. “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (verse 21, NIV)

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

The word “example” is literally the term “underwriting.” You’ve seen it in schools. In biblical days, in the Greek and Roman schools, the teacher would take a strip of papyrus or a clay tablet, the writing material of those days, and would inscribe the letters of the alphabet across the top of the strip. Then the students would come along and beneath it would try to perfectly copy the marks of the teacher. This whole process was called underwriting, following the example of the teacher. What Peter is saying here is that Christ has left us this example of underwriting. He has written His life across the top of the chalkboard. And it’s the Christian’s responsibility to bring our lives into correspondence with the way that He is writing. How did the Lord face suffering? “He committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth” (verse 22). In other words, the suffering which He went through was undeserved. Therefore, since Christ left us an example by enduring suffering undeserved, we also can take our lumps even though we don’t deserve them and survive in that difficult place.

In the world, we’re tested as to whether or not we’re going to be honest. Many times as a Christian in business or a Christian employee it’s going to cost money to be honest. We’re going to have undeserved suffering as a result of following in His steps.

Jesus had unretaliated suffering. “When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered he made no threats” (verse 23). He didn’t say, “Just wait! I’ll get even with you for this!” Christians don’t say, “Just wait until the Lord comes and you’ll find out what’s going on! I may not get even with you for a while, but someday I’ll be in a position of authority.” The Lord made no threats. His suffering was unfrustrated. “Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” That is, the Lord in His suffering went through that suffering with great trust in God and committed His case to the Lord without being frustrated about what He was going through.

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

B. Peter goes on in this chapter to tell us that we're to live in the benefits of Christ's work. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep. But now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls" (verses 24-25).

Peter moves on from speaking of Christ's suffering as a model for us, an example for us that can be imitated. Then he speaks in the last part of these verses about the uniqueness of Christ's suffering. A martyr may be an example of patient suffering, but a martyr cannot bear sins. So the Christian, in addition to having Christ as an example, has Christ in a very special and unique way. From Christ we have redemption from sin.

These 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, and many of them Christians, understood the meaning of redemption. Redemption means that you were bought out of your present state into a whole new state. The release from sin or redemption from sin is the first thing we have in Christ. The word "bore our sins" is the word that was used for a priest that offered up a sacrifice as he went up to the altar. To put the sacrifice on the altar he was bearing the animal. So Christ bore our sins on the altar of Calvary.

Peter goes on to say that we are released from sin "so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness." When Christ died, as a Christian I died. I was the fourth person at Calvary. In addition to Christ and the two thieves, I was there. When I am in the grave I am released from the demands of the law which bring an indictment against me. If I were to get a speeding ticket today and then were to die they would have a rough time prosecuting me in the grave. You do not collect the fine for a speeding ticket from somebody who's in the grave. The law no longer has any demands on us. The law has no hold on us. We are released from law and its penalty.

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

We as Christians have that same understanding that when we're in Christ we're released from sins, released from the penalty that it brings to us. Free in Christ.

Peter says further that in Christ we are restored to soundness—"By his wounds you have been healed." The word "wound" is "welt." It's that which rises up on the skin as a result of a lashing. That bloody welt. By the welts of Christ, by His suffering, Peter is saying, we have been restored to soundness. Here Peter is not thinking about physical healing but He's thinking about spiritual soundness and spiritual wholeness. By His welts we have been made well. A new and strange method of healing. The doctor suffers the cost and the sick receive the healing.

Then Peter says that in Christ we have a return to safety. We have returned to the shepherd and the overseer or the bishop of our souls. As a sheep within the flock of God, we have one who cares for us and watches for us and brings us safely in His arms. He is also the overseer or the bishop.

It's interesting how the early Christians borrowed this word "bishop" out of the usage of the day. It did not initially stand for a leader of the church. It stood instead for someone who was an overseer or a guardian. Peter is telling these Christians who were suffering in different places, "You may have an unjust master and you may be exposed to a lot of personal peril and danger, but you have one who is overseeing your souls." Peter is saying to Christians then, as he would say to us now, we can survive in difficult places because Christ is with us. It's not the difficulty of the place that makes or breaks our Christianity. It is whether or not we take Jesus Christ into our hearts in the midst of that difficult place and live with Christ in us. We can survive anywhere if we will be patterning our lives after Him.

Closing Prayer

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

Lord, there are some persons here today who are not in the kinds of difficult places described in Peter, who are not in trouble with the government. They may be even at peace with all their neighbors in their apartment complex or their housing complex they're in. They may even be in a good relationship with their employees and employers, although there are some here who struggle as an employee in matters of right and wrong. There are times an employer wants them to do something which is morally wrong. And they have to cope with that and learn how to survive in that difficult place because they are a Christian. There are others, Lord, who are in difficult places that have to do with personal relationships—stresses from which there seems to be no immediate answer or release. You're pointing us in Your Word to a way of coping with that. It's not an easy way. We'd like for You to take off the chains and set us free and drop someone into our life who would instantly give us all the financial means we would need to be independent and do anything we might want to do. But, Lord, Your Word here is the same to us as it was to the first century. It's not some easy panacea for all problems. But it's the desire of our heart to give us strength in our inward being in the midst of that difficult place so that we might survive in it. Lord, help us in those moments where we are barely coping to remember that it's not the situation that will cave us in. It is our bitterness that will cave us in. It is not the situation that will harm us. It is our anxiety in the midst of that situation which will do us in. It is not the situation which will destroy us. It is the jealousy, the rage, and the anger over the injustice we feel that will do us in. We may not have any control over the situation, but with Your help we do have control over the rage and the anger and the jealousy and the bitterness and the meanness and malice of our own spirit. We bring that to You that we might be cleansed. That we might be made new persons again in Christ Jesus. Being given Your mind and Your heart which helps us face even the cross and to face the cross with even a measure of joy because we

SURVIVING IN DIFFICULT PLACES

1 Peter 2:11-25

know in the way that we do it You're being brought glory and our lives are well on the inside even though the storm rages without. Give us, O Lord, renewing of our minds in this regard that all of us in our difficult places might cope and go on from victory to victory. Through Christ. Amen.