

Spotless but suffering

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[0 : 00] What do you do when false accusations are brought against you? A friend of mine, a paediatrician, took his car to the garage, a routine service.

And he came back at the end of the day and they presented him with a bill for a thousand pounds. And he was very surprised. And they said, well, you see the problem, Alistair, is you've filled up your petrol tank with diesel.

So we've had to drain the tank, we've had to clean your engine, and that doesn't come cheaply. Now, my friend Alistair is a very bright guy and he said, I don't remember doing that. So he paid them, but he wasn't going to let the matter lie.

He went to the garage where he'd filled up his car and he said, do you keep CCTV footage? And they said, oh yes, we do. So they looked it out and they managed to find a film of him filling his car with petrol.

And the garage owner went further. He said, what I'll do for you is I'll just check the tanker that filled up that pump days before and I'll check what was in that tanker.

[1 : 06] So he looked at his records and he found that it was a tanker full of petrol, which had filled the petrol pump from which Alistair had filled his car. So Alistair went back to the garage with this information and this evidence and they didn't have a leg to stand on.

They apologized, they said they'd made a mistake and they gave him his money back. False accusations abound. How do we deal with them? Well, the recipients of Peter's letter were on the receiving end of false accusations.

They had, we're told in chapter 1, been born again to a living hope. Rescued from the pagan idolatry of the Roman Empire. Called out of a life of sinful immorality.

And they'd come to faith in Christ. But as we saw in our former study, they had become unpopular. They were standing out from the crowd and they were speaking out against the culture of the day. And they'd lost friends. And in our first study, we saw how Peter encouraged them to remain faithful to Christ. He reminded them of their glorious, permanent inheritance in heaven.

[2 : 14] And he contrasted that with their temporary trials on earth. And exhorted them to continue in their faith, their hope and their love. And in the second chapter, he writes into their situation, giving them practical wisdom as to how to live when people start accusing them of things.

When people begin to speak against them and to slander them. And I want to look at it with you under four headings. Firstly, he explains to them the privileges and responsibilities of being God's people.

Secondly, he exhorts them to be innocent citizens in a guilty society. Thirdly, he tells them to expect unjust suffering in a hostile workplace.

And fourthly, he points them to the example of Christ, who was innocent and who suffered for them. The responsibilities and privileges of God's people.

Verse 9. And you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

[3 : 27] Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Keep your conduct amongst the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Last week, Helena and myself were in the Keswick Convention.

That's probably why I've got a cold. We were camping in the rain. A glorious time. But we shared this campsite with about 200 other people. And we spoke to them over dinner time.

And some people were very interesting. One man had a ship. He lived on a ship. And he planned to sail around the world visiting his friends. He said, I've been sailing all my life.

That's not a problem. It's no trouble getting a crew. The real issue with sailing is the worms. And I said, what do you mean? He said, well, every ocean has a different kind of worm.

[4 : 33] And when you take your boat into that ocean, the worms begin to attack the wood. The hull begins to leak. The boat begins to sink. And I said, well, what do you do to protect your boat against worms?

And he said, the important thing is you have to cover the hull in such a way that nothing will stick. You get these copper plates. And you bolt them on and make sure the hull is so completely covered that no worm can stick to it.

And Peter is saying to the Christians, your lives are to be so holy and so transparent and so beyond reproach that no accusation will stick when people make it.

So he reminds them who they are, verse 9. A chosen people. A royal priesthood having access with confidence to God. A holy nation.

A people for his own possession. Brought into a right relationship with the living God. And he impresses upon them the responsibility of that.

[5 : 35] They have been called out of darkness into his light. And as such they are to abstain from the passions of the flesh. And keep their conduct honourable. That's always the pattern, isn't it?

When somebody comes to faith, there is a visible transformation in their life. Conversion necessitates not just faith, not just belief, but repentance.

And it had always been that way. Peter is quoting Exodus chapter 19. He is bringing the words of Moses and applying them to the people in the church.

And Moses had said in Exodus 19, verse 4, just before the Ten Commandments were given. You yourselves have seen what God did to the Egyptians. And how God bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to himself.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey God's voice and keep his covenant, you shall be his treasured possession among all peoples. For all the earth is his.

[6 : 36] And you shall be to him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They were the people of God. But there was a responsibility, verse 7.

So Moses came and called the elders of the people. And set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, all that the Lord has spoken, we will do.

They had been redeemed and they were now to obey. And the recipients of Peter's letter, chapter 1, verse 2. They had been sanctified, redeemed, made holy.

And now they had, to verse 2, obey Jesus Christ. They were changed people. And that change was to be visible to those around them. So that when accusations were made, they would be completely out of character.

And people would be able to see that they were baseless and without foundation. They had to ensure nothing stuck. They had to be beyond reproach in their conversation.

[7 : 44] In their conduct towards strangers. In their relationships with people of the opposite gender. In their handling of finances. In everything they must be above reproach.

So that when an accusation comes, people will see it is without foundation. And the early Christians faced all sorts of accusations. Perhaps not in Peter's day, but soon afterwards.

There were three which were very common. The first, bizarrely, was of atheism. You see, the Romans worshipped statues. And they had idols. And the Christians said, we don't make graven images of our God.

Because he commanded us never to pray or bow down to an idol or a statue. And the Romans said, well, you must be atheists. We can't see your gods. Who do you worship? The second accusation was one of immorality.

Because when they gathered together and when they shared communion, they'd often have a meal afterwards. And these meals became known as love feasts. Because the Christians loved one another. But of course, to the pagan ear, this sounded like some kind of debauched party.

[8 : 49] Christians going to a love feast. Sounded like a festival. And they were suspicious of all sorts of behaviour. And the third accusation which they had to face was of cannibalism.

Because when asked what they did in the communion service, they said, well, we eat the body and blood of Christ. And we got around pretty quickly. This is what they were doing. And people assumed they were literally eating bodies.

And literally drinking blood. So they were accused of being atheists. Of being immoral. And of being cannibals. And it would be pretty plain, wouldn't it?

If a Roman walked into a church service. But none of these charges had any foundation. Because they were living holy lives. And their conduct was honourable among the Gentiles.

They made the gospel attractive. And people were attracted to Christ because of their conduct. And in time would come to glorify God as they accepted Christ for themselves.

[9 : 47] The responsibilities and privileges of God's people. But what does that look like in practice? How is that worked out? And Peter goes on to give instruction as to what Christians should look like in the society and the world around them.

Over the ages, of course, people have had very different views of how the church and Christians should relate to the state. So, for example, in the 5th century there were a group known as the Stelites.

And these were men who had withdrawn completely from society, from secular life. And they built large poles in the desert. And they would stand or sit on top of these poles for decades.

Fasting, praying, preaching. Having nothing to do with the world around them. And then you have the other extreme. Four centuries later, the Frankish emperor Charlemagne.

Who conquered most of Europe, it seems. And when he invaded Saxony, which is now, of course, in Germany. He gave the people a choice. He said, I've conquered you. You can either be baptized or you can be executed.

[10 : 56] Some people have withdrawn completely from society. And others have sought to baptize society and to introduce Christian theocracy. And Peter says, well, both of these are extremes.

Verse 13. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution. Whether it be to the emperor as supreme. Or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil.

And to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God. That by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free.

Not using your freedom as a cover up for evil. But living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

You see, Peter knows that one day, as the book of Revelation tells us, the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our God and his Christ. But that was not this day.

[11 : 56] Chapter 1, verse 1. These people are exiles. They are away from that better country which they call home. And while they are exiles, they have to submit to the law of the lands in which they find them.

Insofar as those laws do not prevent them worshipping God. And so they are to be subject to every human institution. Those which have been instituted by God.

This meant they had to pay their taxes. They had to pay the council tax when the Roman council would come and collect their bins. It meant they had to drive their chariots at the speed limit.

It meant they had to pray for those in authority over them. They had to abide by the rules and the standards of the society. Even when they thought those rules were pretty daft. For the Lord's sake, they submitted to every human institution.

But more than that, they were to be those who did good. Verse 14. To receive praise for doing good. And whenever God's people have been in exile, the advice and the command of God has always been the same.

[13 : 03] Centuries earlier, the Jews had been carried off to Babylon. And for 70 years, they were away from the promised land. And Jeremiah wrote them a letter. Because they were asking, how are we to live in a pagan society?

And the prophet Jeremiah wrote this letter and sent it by hand. And he says in Jeremiah 29 verse 4. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons

and daughters.

Multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. And pray to the Lord on its behalf. For in its welfare, you will find your welfare.

They were to seek the peace and prosperity of the society in which they lived. They were to seek the welfare of the people around them. And they were to pray for them as God's people, exiles in a foreign land.

[14:14] So Peter says, that is what you are to do. That you might do good. And as such, silence the ignorant talk of foolish people when they slander you.

They weren't revolutionaries, the Christians. They were waiting for a better country. And in the 5th century, again, there was a wonderful example of that. There was a bishop known as Cyprian. Who experienced a good degree of persecution. And he was responsible for the town of Carthage in North Africa. And one day a plague broke out in Carthage.

These were the days before NHS 24 and flew friends and things. It was a terrible plague. And the people blamed it on the Christians. They accused the Christians falsely.

They said, you are not worshipping our gods. And therefore our gods are angry. And they have sent this plague. And so they began to persecute the Christians. And they began to become very selfish.

[15:10] They would not treat sick people. And when they died, they would simply throw their bodies into the street. And leave them to rot. And Bishop Cyprian wrote to the Christians.

And he said, we are to seek the welfare of our society, even though it's hostile to us. We are to love our neighbours and to love our enemies. And so the Christian people, rather than fleeing, they stayed in Carthage.

And they began to care for the sick at great cost and great risk to themselves. They began to clear away the bodies. And they began to nurse the people of Carthage. And many of them, touched by their selfless love and their compassion, came to be believers themselves.

Because they saw the Christians loving their enemies in society. Keep your conduct honourable. So that when they speak against you, they may see your good deeds.

And glorify God on the day of visitation. But of course, that doesn't mean that persecution would end. Our third heading, expect persecution.

[16:14] Unjust persecution in the workplace. While we were in Keswick, we met a range of people. But we met some young gents from Bangladesh handing out menus in the street for a restaurant they ran.

And a couple of these fellows came into one of the meetings and sang a few songs. What is fascinating, and it always fascinates me, is wherever we go in Britain, this is an aside incidentally, we meet people from other cultures and other countries who are very unlikely to hear the gospel in their own lands.

Bangladesh, I haven't looked it up recently, but I think it's about 95% Muslim. There is a small church and not an awful lot of evangelism going on. And yet we have these 20 guys who are working in Keswick, where every year about 14,000 Christians descend on the town.

What a tremendous opportunity. And no different to the opportunities we have in Glasgow, where people from all over the world come to live and to work or to seek asylum.

But I went to see these guys in their house, their restaurant, and we got talking, and one of them was pretty keen to talk about religion. And he was just giving his impression of Christianity, having lived in Britain for a year.

[17:30] And he said, the thing about you Christians is you go to church on a Sunday, and that's it. That's the only difference it makes. You get up a bit early on a Sunday. And perhaps that's true, isn't it?

I once saw a sign in a shop that said, God gives you the week, so give him the hour. We have a compartmentalized faith. There is a divide between the sacred, the time we have together, and the secular, the time we have in the workplace.

But Peter says that is utterly wrong. That our faith should impact upon every corner of our lives and every hour of our working week. That your faith matters in the workplace.

And so he says to the servants that they are to be good employees, not just when they get on with their boss, but especially when they don't. Be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.

They are to work hard, not to gossip, not to slander them, not to harbor bad feeling in their hearts against their bosses. They are to be subject.

[18 : 39] And they are to be hard working. Look at verse 20. What credit is it if when you sin and are beaten you endure it? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

It is no credit for the Christian and no credit for the gospel when they are not hard working. When they are lazy, when they turn up late, when they are sloppy in their work and they get beaten for that.

No credit whatsoever. But if you do your job well and you continue to suffer, then that is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

And the Old Testament holds before us many examples of people who gave themselves wholeheartedly to their secular work. I am reminded in 2 Kings, reading that recently, Josiah finds the book of the law and decides to repair the temple.

And he appoints people to look after the money. And there is this little verse, wonderful verse that says, The people in charge of the money did not need to give an account. Because they were trustworthy.

[19 : 45] He had such confidence in their integrity that he didn't need to supervise their handling of money. But of course the Old Testament believer par excellence is Daniel.

And in chapter 6 we find him at the end of his life, or nearing the end of his life, and his career in a secular civil service. And there is talk of promotion.

And Daniel looks like the top candidate. He is being headhunted to rule over almost the entire civilised world. And we are told in Daniel chapter 6 verse 3, This Daniel became distinguished above all the other presidents and satraps.

Because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.

We are told that Daniel, his colleagues could find no ground for complaint or any fault.

Because he was faithful and no error or fault was found in him. What a tremendous CV Daniel had. Wouldn't it be a lovely reference to have as you apply for a job, if your employer could say, we have no ground complaint or any fault because this person is faithful and there is no error or fault within them.

[21 : 02] An exemplary believer working hard wherever he was found. But it didn't make him popular. Because these colleagues with which Daniel were competing were jealous.

Professional jealousy, no doubt. Provoked by Daniel's open confession of the God of heaven. And so they conspired against him. And they wanted him to be thrown to the lions. And of course you know the rest of that story.

So Peter says, even when you are living righteously and working hard, you will continue to experience persecution. When you do good and suffer for it, you endure.

For this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. And that's what we see today, isn't it? There are some countries of the world where the law is very clear that if you are a Christian, you will not be given the first refusal of jobs.

There are some countries where it is required that you convert to another religion in order to be employed by that factory or that company. And we see it in our own land as well.

[22 : 09] As the seemingly benign progress of secularism begins to bear its teeth. And in recent years we've seen people who've been told not to wear their cross at work.

Not right to bring your faith into the workplace. We've seen nurses who've been suspended without pay for simply offering to pray with a patient. There are guidelines coming in telling Christian doctors not even to think about sharing their faith with one of their patients or somebody under their care.

If you are known as a Christian in the workplace, even if your work is of the highest caliber, says Peter, you will still suffer unjustly. But that is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

But of course it's not a surprising thing because his final point, he reminds us of the example of Christ. Verse 21, 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.

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

[23 : 27] He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed, for you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

It's very interesting when we read the Acts of the Apostles to see what the Apostles preached. What was the gospel they shared with the Jews and the Gentiles they met? And one of the most concise summaries of the Christian gospel is in Acts chapter 10, where Peter explains his faith to an Italian soldier.

I won't read it all, but he puts a couple of sentences side by side and the contrast is very stark. He says, You know what happened throughout all Judea, verse 37, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.

He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. What do you expect the response to someone who goes around doing good and healing to be?

We are witnesses of all that he did, both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear.

[24 : 53] Peter reminds us that Christ was innocent. There was no sin in his mouth, no deceit. He went about doing good and healing those who were oppressed by the devil.

And what was the response of the world? Rejection and suffering. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return.

He was called mad. His family stood at the door and said, He's out of his mind. His opponents said that he was possessed and in league with Satan himself. The Roman soldiers mocked him, considered him a false prophet and jeered at him.

But he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. Christ trusted in God that he would bring about the vindication. He didn't call down fire from heaven. He didn't bring his 12 legions of angels to wipe out the Roman army. He committed himself into God's care. The innocent sufferer waiting for that day of judgment when justice will be done.

[26 : 09] Verse 23, and be seen to be done. Why then did he suffer? And why then should we as Christians expect to suffer? Well, it does seem, doesn't it, that from the day Cain murdered Abel or the day that Ahab murdered Naboth in order to claim his vineyard, that the wicked have always trodden upon the righteous.

And more often than not, they seem to get away from it. But, people didn't like what Christ had to say. And throughout the Gospels we see a conflict between him and the religious authorities.

They didn't like the fact he spoke about sin and repentance. It wasn't a very popular message then, not a very popular message now. We're happy to have faith and love and justice, of course, but to bring sin and judgment and righteousness is another matter, isn't it, to speak of that.

He spoke of the exclusive claims he made of himself. He said, no one comes to the Father except by me. And the apostles were just as adamant, weren't they? Salvation is found in no one else.

And when Paul wrote to Timothy in Ephesus, he said, there is one God, not what the secularists want to hear, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ.

[27 : 31] Not what the pluralistic, multi-faith society of our day wants to hear. They spoke about sin and the need for repentance and faith. They spoke about the exclusive claims of Christ.

God desires that all men to be saved, but that salvation is only available in the name of Jesus Christ. That was an unpopular message then, and it will be an unpopular message now.

It should be no surprise, says Peter, when you experience suffering for doing good. But there was another reason, of course, and throughout this chapter, Peter is quoting from or alluding to the 53rd chapter of Isaiah.

And in this chapter, God had promised one man would come, a servant was to come, who would be himself without sin, without spot or blemish, and who would be rejected by men, despised, considered nothing by them.

And he would suffer, and when he suffered, he would say nothing. He would be like a lamb going to the slaughter. And he would be wounded, Isaiah 53 verse 5, for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.

[28 : 47] He was to suffer the penalty of sin, though he had no sin himself. He was to be a sinless substitute, bearing the sins of the world, in order that others might be forgiven.

The Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all. And in closing, Peter reminds his hearers that Christ was that innocent sufferer.

He was the one prophesied centuries before he appeared in Galilee. He was the one who was rejected by men in order that they might be accepted by God.

He was the one who was judged by God in order that sinful men and women might be forgiven and welcomed into that chosen race and royal priesthood and holy nation. He was the one that died in order that we might live to righteousness, like a lamb before the slaughter who now becomes the shepherd and overseer of our souls.

So Peter says you are a chosen people and you are to live such exemplary lives that nothing will stick when false accusations are made. You are to submit to the authorities of the land and to do good to the society around you as salt and light.

[30 : 06] You are to expect suffering in the workplace even though you work very hard to the very best of your ability. People will still take exception to you and the message you preach. But we must remember Christ that he was completely innocent and he suffered and was vindicated finally by God when he raised him from the dead.

And if he was willing to suffer for us then we ought to be willing to suffer for him. Let's pray. Father we thank you that we are part of your family part of that chosen nation that you have cleansed us of past sins and brought us into newness of life.

I pray Lord that as we go home we might think upon these things that you might give us the strength and the grace to live as your people in this world distinct from it Lord praying for it and seeking to invite those trapped in it into your family.

We pray for your strength we pray for your encouragement and Lord we pray for your grace as we face opposition and difficulty. We pray Lord that you will fix our eyes upon Jesus that we might always set him before us and we offer our prayers to you in his name.

Amen.