

Oof. What a text! And what an epistle! On the surface, this text sure doesn't appear to ooze any sense of liberation, or compassion, or anything resembling modern sensibilities. For many of us in this room, and maybe even most of us, First Peter, and particularly this passage, are difficult to digest. I'm not sure my reading of today's text is going to make you want to bookmark or dogear this passage in your personal Bibles. Nevertheless, I believe you should be aware of its existence, and you should have access to a more nuanced context to be able to respond to those who might weaponize its content in dangerous and submissive ways.

Let's start with some background.

Today's text, although attributed to Peter, is most likely written by one of his younger disciples or companions. The setting is in the Roman Provinces of Asia Minor around 90 CE, some two generations after the death of Jesus, and a full generation after the deaths of Paul and Peter.

A few things to note:

1) In the late First Century, Christians are seeking to establish traditions and guidelines in this newer context, and there's often a blend of both Paul and Peter's teachings. Remember, Peter's initial focus is within the Jewish community of believers, and Paul's with the Gentile world. We often see the phrase WWJD – *What would Jesus do?* I'd argue that at the end of the First Century, many believers were wondering WWPJD – *What would Peter (Paul) have done?* The two apostles didn't leave a manual. And new leaders often wrote in their names, and new communities often claimed their names, to establish a sense of credibility.

2) Christians reside in a highly structured Roman world, and theirs is a cult directly at odds with Roman culture. The organizational unit of Roman culture was the household. A master or householder held hierarchical autonomy and ultimate power over all persons in the household, be they wife, children, extended family, servants, or slaves. Households formed the bottom of a pyramid of autonomy that worked itself all the way up to the emperor. Members of households stay in line. Householders stay in line. Larger patrons stay in line. And so on. Maintain the structure consistently and ruthlessly, and the structure holds. *Pax Romana* is effective, but it's neither equitable nor peaceful.

So...what happens when you are a practicing Christian occupying a subordinate role, a slave or a woman, in a Roman household? The master expects you to worship his Gods, to follow his customs, to execute a code that is most certainly incongruent with the values of your faith community. Think back to Daniel and the Three Young Men in exile in Babylon. Old King Nebuchadnezzar was none too pleased with the adoption of foreign customs, and their personal adoption came with dire consequences for offenders.

3) Did I mention this is Rome? Christians are a tiny, tiny sect of dissenters with zero social influence. I'm not sure they would have been able to imagine a quick and immediate end to patriarchy, and slavery, and other cruel elements of Rome's domination system. They would have been all too aware of Rome's brutal and immediate response to the Jewish revolts two decades earlier that sacked Jerusalem. They are less concerned with reforming or revolting against Roman culture and more concerned about creating a household of faith that can support its community members in such a volatile world.

4) This author writes in the name of Peter, but they are also influenced by Paul. Paul understood his life as part of a continuing resurrection story that had not yet been completed. Easter and Pentecost would lead to a Parousia (second coming) that was not only imminent, but soon. Paul is SO focused on that outcome that he prioritizes spiritual needs over physical needs, and the body is more of a vessel for the spirit, and sometimes even an inhibitor. I think for Paul, a focus on the physical is an inefficient use of time. Like Paul before them, this author absolutely interprets their present reality as something much more temporary and spatial than the one experienced by you and me as modern readers.

I threw a lot at you. But it's important. In First Century Asia Minor, believers are influenced by the insight of Peter and Paul. They are embedded in a household model. They live in a state of brutal and unchangeable occupation. They understand the return of Jesus to be imminent.

Here's one more thing. We don't live in 90 CE. We live in 2023 CE. In our thinking, the Roman Empire is a textbook example of how to systematically marginalize the masses and curtail power and privilege among the elite. Therefore, our initial instinct (and I would argue it's a very valid and credentialed response!) is to protest the absurdity and grotesqueness of Rome. We do, after all, live in a world where silence about and apathy toward oppressive systems represent condoning them.

We open today's reading, and the first verses are addressed to Christian slaves and other subordinates residing in pagan households, and we are ready for the author to say, "Fight the Power!" Instead, we get this:

For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.

If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. (1 Peter 2:19-20).

You all know our world's sordid history. We as Baptists in North Carolina trace our roots to the very man in South Carolina who used this very passage as a defense for slavery, and I am even a graduate of his namesake university.

The interpretation goes like this:

Slaves, wives, and other subordinates: endure the pain, endure the nonsense, endure the injustice of unjust systems as a measure of your authentic faith. The household system has the ringing endorsement of Peter's communities in Asia Minor! And that endorsement gives license to similar systems in the present.

What a careless and dangerous reading of this letter! And what a reading that lacks any of the context we've previously mentioned.

The author is not condoning, endorsing, or modeling the inhumane behavior of domination systems, no matter how convenient that might be for power hungry patriarchs of any age.

The author is reminding the community of believers that God is rooted in goodness and calls us to live in ways that reflect God's goodness. And no matter our circumstance, we are called to live with God's righteousness. Evil is gonna happen around us, but the occurrence of

evil is not license for us to be evil doers. Believers in this community are going to love and care for another; we're gonna model compassion and empathy, even to strangers and enemies; we're gonna live a kind of counter-cultural goodness. We're gonna be a household that ain't like other households!

Let the Romans do Roman things. Even as subordinates in Roman structure, we're gonna do the things of God. And yes, the householders, and the agents of empire are gonna strike back. They always do, and for too many of us, there's gonna be pain, beatings even, that come with a lived expression of faith. But our expression is not for naught. We believe that at some point, and soon, God's creative love is going to transcend Rome's cruel hate.

Some of you may still be less convinced by our author's argument. This message is too subtle. Where's the blunt force? Condemn Rome and do it now! Don't assume the author's subtlety has a lack of subversiveness and radical thinking. First Peter's author addresses specifically, and for the longest portions of the epistle, household slaves, as well as wives, the most marginalized voices of Roman households. That's very intentional. Every member of the author's household has standing in Petrine communities. How many letters written by powerful Roman men do you reckon would be addressed to anyone other than Roman householders?

And the *Acts of the Apostles* gives us a moving example of the radical nature and structure of Petrine households:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon **everyone** because many wonders and signs were being done by

the apostles. **All** who believed were **together** and had **all** things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to **all**, as **any** had need. Day by day, as they spent much time **together** in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the **goodwill of all the people**. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.
(Acts 2:42-49)

The author says to members of these tiny households in Asia Minor, and members of this household called Sardis, if you wanna follow in the tradition of Peter, be a household that ain't like other households. Be a household where all have standing, where all can model the love of God, where all can carve out goodness, and sustenance, and life in a world bent on lifelessness.

Okay, I really need to wrap up, but there's one more thing. We hear this morning how to be a household in Peter's model, and then we hear that doing so mimics the model of Jesus. The letter's author says to the most vulnerable community members, *slaves*, your endurance, your expression of goodness in the face of suffering, emulates the life of Jesus. Jesus met the abuses of power with love, consistently and faithfully, and God used that expression of love to transform and transcend the human experience. There's a direct reference to the suffering servant model of Isaiah.

The letter gives us a steady diet of two theological strands: The death of Jesus as atonement for sin, and the life of Jesus as moral exemplar for faithful living. I believe two things can be true at the same time. The community in this text, living in a much more volatile context than ours, finds comfort in these theological strands. They experience the fragility

and brutality of life in a much more forceful way than we do. They can identify with Jesus' death and suffering because they are experiencing similar suffering. But it's also true that we in 2023 can struggle, and mightily, with a salvific concept rooted solely in payment for sin and daily suffering. We see in Jesus a kind of living, a kind of loving, a kind of realized empathy and compassion, expressed with consistency and creativity, that models a path to a transformed world. We see Rome's brutality as a cruel response to love, not as a predestined plan to set the wheels of salvation in motion. We understand, not that the world is coming to a quick conclusion, but rather, that our tireless acts of love are working to bring about a divine household that all can experience.

So...here's my invitation when engaging this epistle, and indeed any epistle or passage of scripture. We share, with every person of faith, throughout the entire history of our creation, a resolute hope and belief in a God that can transcend, and ultimately heal the brokenness of this world. Many of us see that transcendence most clearly expressed in the stories of Jesus. What we do not share with one another, however, is an identical expression of that belief, nor an identical lived experience with one another. Therefore, different theological expressions will take each of us on a myriad of possibilities and paths, some good, some not so good.

When you encounter a text like today's, one whose expression leaves you wanting, I would urge you to investigate the spirit in which it is written. Can you empathize with its author? Can you give them even a neutral starting point for assuming that they are simply exploring an authentic avenue of connection and faith? Can you imagine a God who undergirds them, too, loves them, too, hopes and longs for their possibilities in the same way She does for you, too? And can you

A Different Household
Bob Stillerman
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1 Peter 2:19-25



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

imagine a world big enough for both of you to exist, to be loved, to thrive even, not mention the eight million neighbors around us.

What I am saying, Sardis, is can we be the kind of household that doesn't read ancient texts like every other household? Can we be the kind of household that doesn't love like every other household? Can we be the kind of household that models the ideals of Peter, the love of Jesus, and the current expressions and values of Sardis Baptist Church? Can we be, Sardis, a household for April 30, 2023?

May it be so, and may it begin today! Amen.