

In His Steps
1 Peter 2:21-25
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Do you remember when *W. W. J. D.?* was popular, mostly in the 90s? It was on bracelets, necklaces, T-shirts, Bibles, books and music. It was a popular way of reminding us to ask the question "What Would Jesus Do?" when we face decisions and situations. The *W. W. J. D.?* idea was a contemporary expression of an old way of looking at Christian life and discipleship.

In 1896 a pastor named Charles Sheldon published a novel called *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* In that story a pastor challenges his congregation to ask "What would Jesus do?" about every decision they make and in every situation they face. In the novel, revival breaks out all over the city as Christians try to live like Jesus would if he were in their city.

Hundreds of years before Sheldon, a German named Thomas á Kempis wrote a book called *The Imitation of Christ*. It's a devotional classic that's been published in many languages and gone through many editions. It has influenced more people's spiritual lives than nearly any book beside the Bible.

This theme of imitating Christ, of following his example, of asking what Jesus would do of course goes back to the New Testament. Jesus calls disciples to follow him. The verse where Sheldon got his title is 1 Peter 2:21: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow *in his steps*."

This is obviously an important dimension of discipleship. But it's not the only one. If Christ is only our example and stays "out there" somewhere and discipleship is only trying to keep up with him or live the way he would on our own, we will only fail and be frustrated. Walking "in his steps" is impossible unless we walk "in his Spirit." Imitating Christ is impossible unless he lives through us. Following Jesus is not self-propelled but Spirit-driven. The Holy Spirit drives and motivates us in the life of discipleship. The question is not just *what would Jesus do* but *what did Jesus do* and what does Jesus do to enable us to live as his people?

Jesus died and rose again to bring us back to God, to forgive us, to make us holy.

The references to Jesus' suffering and death in 1 Peter provide a good summary of the New Testament's teaching on Jesus' death and its meaning.

1:2—"sprinkling by his blood"—sacrifice, the blood of the covenant

1:18, 19—Redemption, Passover, Exodus

2:21-25—The Lord's Suffering Servant

3:18—Substitution—"for sins"—"righteous for the unrighteous." The purpose of his dying is "to bring you to God."

The NT writers use various Old Testament themes, events, rituals and images to depict the meaning of Jesus' death. One of these is the Suffering Servant of God presented in Isaiah.

In the second half of Isaiah there are several passages that speak of the Lord's Servant. These are called the "Servant Songs." One of them is in 52:13-53:12, a passage that portrays both the humiliation and exaltation of God's Servant.

Jesus spoke of himself in terms of the Suffering Servant. Various NT writers use this Servant Song to speak of Jesus. This passage in 1 Peter represents a tradition in the early church that saw Jesus as fulfilling the role of the Servant of the Lord. Whatever and whomever Isaiah had in mind, God brought his words to a fuller realization in Jesus Christ.

As we explore how Peter applies the Suffering Servant theme to Jesus, we need to see this passage in its context and see how Peter brings together the ideas that *Jesus suffered in our place and as our example*.

Peter reminds us that we are the people of God, people of hope who live in holiness and love. Then he moves into talking about how we live as that kind of people in this world. He addresses different relationships in society and in family. He deals with the conflicts that arise when God's people live differently from the world.

In 2:13, Peter encouraged his readers to submit to authority and to show proper respect. Then he applies this principle specifically to slaves. Peter doesn't address the issue of slavery or challenge the practice of slavery. He simply tells them how to live as Christians in that situation. Many of the people who first heard this letter may have been household

slaves. Slaves made up a large portion of the Roman Empire's population. Peter, like other NT writers, assumed that slaves were full persons who had moral responsibility and could make moral choices.

Peter says, "You Christian slaves, respect and submit to your masters. And not only the kind ones, but the harsh ones as well." They are even to endure *unjust* suffering. Because there is grace or favor or commendation in bearing unjust suffering, in suffering for doing right—if we are conscious of God and have our thoughts fixed on God. If you've done wrong, it's not as big a deal to endure punishment. But suffering for doing good and enduring it is commendable before God.

I don't think this is saying we should go looking for suffering. There's plenty to go around. And it's not saying that God causes our suffering. It's just facing the reality that, in this world, to live God's way is to go against the flow. In this fallen world there is suffering. To try to live the life of God's kingdom in this world means facing opposition. In enduring that pain we find grace, favor and God's approval.

Then, to show that this is true and that it's the Christian's calling, Peter points to Christ as the example of such suffering. As he thinks about Christ's suffering and describes it, Peter begins to tell what Christ's suffering and death mean.

Verse 21 holds together two important ideas about Jesus' death. Christ suffered *for you*. Jesus was our substitute. He died in our place and on our behalf. Peter may already be thinking about Isaiah 53, where the Servant's life is made a guilt offering (verses 5, 10).

The second major idea is that Christ suffered "...leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." Jesus not only died for us, he is our pattern, our example—for all of life, but especially for suffering.

Jesus endured suffering for us. We can endure suffering for following him. Jesus is our example. Christian discipleship is following Jesus and becoming like him. The word translated "example" here refers to "something written underneath" that a child traces over while learning to write.

We are called to trace Jesus' pattern for living. And the cross is that pattern. Jesus not only died a cross-death, he lived a cross-life (Richard

Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* 115). The way of the suffering servant was the way he chose to live and minister. The cross marks us as Jesus' disciples.

I once read about an American businessman and his wife who were traveling in Europe. In Germany, at the site of the original "Passion Play," they toured the theater and met some of the actors. Backstage, they met the actor who portrayed Jesus. The cross that he carried in the play was nearby. The businessman asked his wife to take his picture while he held the cross on his shoulder. As he tried to pick up the cross, he was surprised that it was made of solid wood and he could barely lift it. He said to the actor, "I don't understand. I thought it would be hollow. Why do you carry such a heavy cross in the play?" The actor who portrayed Jesus said, "If I did not feel the weight of His cross, I could not play the part" (Maxie Dunnam, *Alive in Christ* 33).

If we're going to be disciples of Jesus, we must take up the cross and follow him. We'll feel the weight of the cross in our lives, in our decisions and actions.

So, Peter says, Jesus is our pattern or example for suffering. If you're going to suffer—and the people Peter was writing to were suffering in various ways—then suffer like Jesus. Endure persecution as he did. Now Peter draws on the Suffering Servant song to describe how Jesus faced his suffering.

First he quotes Is. 53:9, "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." Jesus was innocent. He truly did not deserve the punishment, suffering and death he endured.

Verse 23 refers to Is. 53:7. When they insulted Jesus, he did not retaliate; he made no threats. He certainly had the power to be threatening. He could have called his followers to rise up in revolution. He could have called the armies of heaven to rescue him and destroy his persecutors. But salvation doesn't come through displays of power like that. Salvation comes by the suffering and sacrifice and self-giving of God.

Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the cross (see Is. 53:4, 6, 11, 12). Somehow, Jesus took our sins upon himself and destroyed them at the cross. He did this so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. The purpose of Jesus' dying was to change lives. Through his death we can

be done with sin. We can be free from its power in our daily lives. And something positive fills the void. We can live for righteousness. We are put right with God and we begin to live right, to *do* righteousness.

What's the best motive for living a righteous or moral life? Or for avoiding unrighteousness or immorality? Sometimes we hear reasons such as these for saying no to immoral behavior: "it's against the Bible" or "it will hurt your self-esteem" or "it's against our Christian principles" or "your sins will find you out." True as those things are, they are inadequate and secondary motives. Only the grace of God "teaches" us to say no. It's as if God's grace says to us, "You are not living as though you are loved! As God's child! It is not because he will abandon you that you should be holy, but because at countless cost he has said he won't ever abandon you! How can you live in the very sin that he was ripped to pieces to deliver you from?" (Tim Keller, in *Leadership Journal*, Winter 1996, 114).

John Woolman lived in New Jersey in the middle 1700's. He was born into a Quaker family and tried to live a life of simple, steady obedience in very troubled times. His journal tells what that was like. In one section of his journal, he tells about a vision he had during a time of serious illness.

I then heard a soft, melodious voice, more pure and harmonious than any I had heard with my ears before; I believed it was the voice of an angel who spoke to the other angels. The words were, "John Woolman is dead." I greatly wondered what that heavenly voice could mean.

I was then carried in spirit to the mines, where poor oppressed people were digging rich treasures for those called Christians, and heard them blaspheme the name of Christ, at which I was grieved, for his name to me was precious. Then I was informed that these heathens were told that those who oppressed them were the followers of Christ, and they said among themselves, "If Christ directed them to use us in this way, then Christ is a cruel tyrant."

All this time the song of the angel remained a mystery, and I was very desirous to get so deep that I might understand this mystery.

[Then, after some physical recovery] ...at length I felt divine power

prepare my mouth that I could speak, and then I said, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life I now live in the flesh [is] by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Then the mystery was opened, and I perceived there was joy in heaven over a sinner who had repented, and that the language "John Woolman is dead" meant no more than the death of my own will. (James Bryan Smith and Richard Foster, eds., *Devotional Classics* 258)

"By Christ's wounds you have been healed" (see Is. 53:5). The wounds Jesus received—in the beating, the whipping, and on the cross—were for our healing. He heals our broken relationship with God. We were straying like sheep (Is. 53:6), but in Jesus we return to the Shepherd. By suffering for us, Jesus cures us of the destructive effects of sin. In whatever way sin has warped and distorted us, Jesus heals us and puts us right. Healing for our broken spirit, our minds, our emotions, our bodies, results from his work for us on the cross.

On our own, we turn from God and wander off like sheep. But as we are healed and restored by what Jesus did on the cross, we turn back to the Shepherd who oversees and guards our soul. Christian discipleship involves not only suffering, but also glory. God gives joy in sorrow. There is healing and new life. There is the promise of resurrection and eternal glory. As Paul wrote, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ...For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (Romans 8:18; 1 Corinthians 4:16).

Ed Spencer and a friend were walking along Lake Michigan one evening around the turn of the Twentieth Century. They heard a loud noise and looked out on the lake to see a ship sinking and then they heard cries for help. Ed Spencer was a champion swimmer. He quickly kicked off his shoes, threw down his coat and dove into the water. He swam out and got a person from the wreck and swam them back to shore. Seventeen times he swam out and swam back. Toward the end he would collapse on the beach

and think he couldn't go again. Then he would hear another cry for help and strength he didn't know he had surged in him.

After the seventeenth person was rescued, Ed Spencer collapsed for the last time. The stress and the exposure damaged his body and he was paralyzed. He never swam again.

Years later a friend came to visit him. The friend said, "You packed your whole life in to one night—would you do it again?" Ed Spencer answered, "You bet! Not everyone gets to live seventeen times."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I'm a follower of One who packed his whole life into six hours on a cross."

"Oh, that all of us might pack the spirit of those six hours into the rest of our lives" (Jim Buskirk, sermon tape, First UMC, Tulsa, n.d.).

What would Jesus do? What does Jesus do? He lays down his life to give new life to others. He fills us with his Spirit so we can lay down our lives in witness and service and mission so that others can know new life in Christ.