

Freedom Under Oppression

Thomas Robinson, *Born to a Living Hope* 5, May 1, 2016

1 Peter 2:9-25

⁹ But you are a **chosen family** [Isa 43:20], a royal **priesthood**, a **holy nation**, a people for his own possession [Exod 19:5-6], that you may **proclaim the saving deeds of him** [Isa 43:21] who called you **out of darkness** into his marvelous **light**. [Isa 9:2] ¹⁰ 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**. [Hos 2:23]

¹¹ Beloved, I counsel you as **sojourners and resident aliens** [Gen 23:4] to abstain from the **fleshly desires** that **wage war** against your **life/soul**. ¹² Do this by keeping **your way of life** among the nations **excellent/beautiful**, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your **excellent/beautiful deeds** and **glorify God** on the **day of his visitation**.

¹³ **Be subject to every human creation/institution because of the Lord**, whether it be to an **emperor/king** as having high position, ¹⁴ or to **governors** as sent through him for vengeance on those who do evil and praise for those who do good, ¹⁵ for this is the **will of God**, that **people who do good** should silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ **Be subject as people who are free**, not as though you held that freedom as a cover for evil, but rather **as God's servants**.

¹⁷ **Honor all people. Love the brothers and sisters. Fear God. Honor the emperor/king.**

¹⁸ You **house-servants** do this by being **subject** to the **masters** with all fear/respect, not only to the good and gentle but even to the twisted/cruel. ¹⁹ For **this is grace**, if because of a **conscience shaped by God**, one **bears up under pains** while **suffering unjustly**. ²⁰ For what sort of praise is due, if you endure when you do what is wrong and are beaten for it? But if when **you do good** and **suffer** for it you endure, **this is grace in the sight of God**.

²¹ For **to this you have been called**, because **Messiah also suffered for you**, leaving you an example, so that you might **follow in his steps**.

²² He committed **no sin/wrong**, neither was **deceit** found in his mouth. [Isa 53:9]

²³ When he was reviled, **he did not revile** in return; [cf. Isa 53:7]
when **he suffered**, he did **not threaten**,
but he was **handing it over** to him who judges justly. [Isa 53:6,12]

²⁴ He himself **bore our sins in his body on the tree**, [Isa 53:4,12]
that we being **freed from sin** might **live by faithful righteousness**.
By his wound you have been **healed**! [Isa 53:5]

²⁵ For you were **like sheep going astray**, [Isa 53:6]
but have now returned to **the shepherd**
and **guardian of your lives/souls**. [Ezek 34:11,23]

Isaiah 53:4-12 The Servant of the Lord, embodying God's people, suffering for them.

⁴ Surely he has borne our sins | and carried our sorrows; | yet we esteemed him stricken, | smitten by God, and afflicted. | ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; | ...and with his wound we are healed. | ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and THE LORD has handed him over for our sins. | ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, | yet he opened not his mouth; | like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, | and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, | so he opened not his mouth....⁹ ...although he had done no violence, | and there was no deceit in his mouth....¹²... *his life was handed over to death* ... and he bore the sins of many.

Ezekiel 34:11, 23 LXX

¹¹ Thus says the Lord, behold, I will seek for my sheep and I will be their guardian....²³ And I will raise up one shepherd over them ... my servant David (the Messiah), and he shall be their shepherd.

Peter 1:6,8-9

⁶ This is why you celebrate! Even though now for a little while you have been distressed by all kinds of trials, if they have been forced on you.... ⁸ Though you have not seen him [Jesus], you love him. Though you do not now see him you believe in him and celebrate with joy inexpressible and filled with glory,
⁹ as you are receiving the goal of your faith, deliverance of your lives/souls.

Living Hope / Resident Aliens – The Inside Challenge

Pagans, Jews, slave, free – the communities Peter addresses were remarkable. We today struggle with diverse communities as did cities of the Roman empire. Christian communities lived with increasing pressure of hostility and persecution. They had become resident aliens. God had called them into a “living hope” created by Jesus’ resurrection. That new birth created the tension between the deep reality of their identity in Jesus and the structures of life and society where they lived and worked.

You are a “holy nation” but also perhaps a slave woman abused at the whim of her master.

They had experienced the transformation of their lives within an empire explicitly based on class hierarchy, slavery, sexual hierarchy, ethnicity, and violence, with no opening for political change.

How do you live? You want revenge, rebellion. You want passivity. You want to go back to pagan life: career success, standing in the community. Peter says those desires are at war against your life. Don’t react. Rather actively create an excellent, beautiful way of life. No malice, guile, envy. Learn love, forgiveness. That’s who you are. Live that. Don’t let reaction to evil make you violent, envious. Even under oppression, let every act you control create a place of beauty, God’s glory lived out.

Living in the Frame of Human Institutions

But you live in some specific spot in the world with its structures of power, control, violence. You know who your true Lord is, and for his sake you expect the best of human powers (very human). An emperor (even Nero), a governor, all claim to support the good against evil. Well, that’s exactly who you are. Your true Lord calls you to embody doing good: create inclusive communities, serve, love even enemies. Don’t fight the world’s foolish ignorance with your own foolish hatred or violence.

Live within those structures knowing that you are free people. You are God’s beloved creatures, given new birth as God’s children. You serve God who is the true Lord of all that exists, even the emperor. Peter knows well the tensions of that situation (Act 5:29). God never calls you to do evil, but many situations challenge us to stop an evil, protect others, create the beauty of justice, find the good.

Peter encapsulates the challenge with four imperatives: Honor every person. No one is “the other.” Everyone is valued. Build a real inclusive community of love where you break down all the human barriers and create real community. Only God holds true life and death. Only God is to be treated with reverence, fear. The emperor? He’s a human. You honor him like everyone else, even Nero.

Finding the Wholeness of Grace under Oppression

Peter begins applying this by going to the most challenging case: a disciple who is a slave (property owned by a master with the power of life, death, abuse, punishment) with no control over her/his life. It was precisely these, living at the very bottom of “human institutions,” who had experienced grace in a new birth to a living hope through Jesus’ resurrection. They also faced the moment by moment challenge of believing in their own humanity in a world that made them chattel and tools. But they are full human beings, free children of God; they can create and experience grace even in suffering.

The radical disparity of evaluation between the slave as human property and as God’s beloved child points to the deep challenge of Jesus as seen through Isa 53. He comes among us, under the twisted master of humanity. He shows God’s reality in the midst of human desires, violence, ignorance, and fear. He embodies the God who seeks our good when we neither know nor want that good. He descends into the bottom of what human depravity does all the time, and he takes it fully on himself.

He bears our sins and our wounds and creates life and hope. He heals in a way that even a slave, even a prosperous New Yorker can experience. He gives us identity that is real and good and beautiful!