

**The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter  
(Good Shepherd Sunday)  
May 3, 2020**

**The Lessons:** Psalm 23  
Acts 2:42-47  
1 Peter 2:19-25  
John 10:1-10

**The Hymns:** # 709 *The King of Love My Shepherd Is*  
# 711 *Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead us*  
# 649 *Blest Be the Tie that Binds*

**The Collect:** Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

**The Sermon:** “Following in His Steps” 1 Peter 2:19-25

The Word of the Lord from 1 Peter 2: “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.”

I. Steps of Suffering

“...so that you might follow in His steps.” In 1897, Charles M. Sheldon took the verse to heart and wrote *In His Steps*, the 39th best-selling book of all time. In the novel, a pastor challenges the members of his congregation to confront every decision with the question, “What would Jesus do?”

Many took him up on his challenge, with some curious results. Among them, for instance, is a newspaper editor who decides that if Jesus ran the paper, He would not cover prize-fights and other “ungodly” events, or issue a Sunday edition. Other themes are that Jesus would make patriotism a newspaper agenda item, He would work hard to discourage the use of rum around town. The changes to the newspaper met with varied degrees of success. On the one hand, the editor cleaned up his paper from what had been a scandal-sheet. On the other, he lost an awful lot of subscribers because people (a) want a paper that comes out on Sunday and (b) reports the news, godly or not.

I don’t know how many people still read *In His Steps*, but one result endures: the now- fading WWJD—“What would Jesus do?”—campaign of bracelets, T-shirts and bumper stickers which challenged bearers to follow the theme of Sheldon’s book.

Having given this brief review, my first plea is this: please check out the context of our verse in 1 Peter. When he tells you of following in the steps of Jesus, the apostle is not challenging you to ask “What would Jesus do?” in every decision you face in life. Rather, he’s telling you a sober truth: although He was the Son of God and Lord of all, Jesus suffered. If you follow Him, you will suffer for it, too.

Christians suffer. Of course, everybody suffers, so it's important for us to make a couple of important distinctions about suffering. Our text is speaking of suffering specifically for doing good, for being mindful of God—for being a Christian. It says, "For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly."

First off, then, our text has no praise for those who suffer for doing wrong. It asks instead, "For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?" If you have done something wrong, the suffering you must endure is not something noble or praiseworthy: it is, quite simply, a dose of what you've got coming to you. It may be the suffering of a guilty conscience. It may be that you've been caught, and parents or bosses or magistrates or other authorities have assigned some miserable punishment to teach you not to do it again. This suffering isn't noble—it's paying what is owed. Having said that, however, let us say this happens to you. Let us say that you must suffer for doing something wrong. How should you respond to the suffering? Give thanks to God for it. Give thanks to God for suffering from a troubled conscience, for that is His gift which calls you to repentance so that your soul is not lost. Give thanks for other punishments doled out by those in authority, because they will help control your flesh and discourage further wrongdoing. Furthermore, give thanks especially that Christ has died for your sin: and while you may suffer for doing wrong in this world, you will not suffer eternally for it. Christ has already suffered that in your place.

So, we rule out praise for those who suffer for doing wrong. With gentleness, we also note that our text has no praise for those who suffer for foolish notions that seem right. Some well-meaning Christians make extremely poor decisions, and then believe they are being persecuted when their foolish actions bring consequences. For instance, take the editor from the novel: does he suffer rightly when losing subscriptions? Insofar as he avoids sensationalism and scandal, perhaps the answer is yes. But when he loses subscribers because he no longer prints the news—or the paper at all on Sundays, then he suffers from poor business sense. That's not a good Christian witness.

So, imagine a man who covers his arms with Bible-themed tattoos so that all who look at him will see some sort of artwork pointing to the Gospel. He may have trouble finding any sort of good employment, but please understand: he is not suffering because he bears the Gospel prominently on his body, but because he's defaced himself. Imagine the Christian who stands on a platform on a busy street in downtown Edmonton and harangues passersby: he may believe he suffers rightly when he is heckled, but it may simply be because he's been obnoxious. Think of the student confronted with science quiz that says, "Give three arguments for evolution;" and he responds, "Evolution is bogus because God created the heavens and the earth." He flunks the test: not because he declared God's Word, but because he didn't answer the question. Or imagine the man who sells all he has and gives the proceeds to his church or favorite televangelist. He suffers poverty: not because he is a Christian, but because he gave up all the daily bread that God gave him for his good.

I'll admit that these examples are not the norm, and that real life is seldom this clear cut. My point: it's easy to believe that you're suffering for being right when you're actually suffering for being foolish. No one wants to admit foolishness, so your old sinful nature will do its best to justify what you've done, foolish though it may be. I make this point out of necessity so that we might move on to what this text **IS** talking about: while there are plenty of ways to suffer for doing wrong or for being foolish, our text makes clear that as a Christian you will suffer for being right and doing right. You will suffer for holding fast to your Savior.

Let's say that you are the student in science class where evolution is the standard teaching. Even if you make your disagreement known in the most polite terms, you'll suffer scorn for allegedly placing religion over science—even though evolution is far more a religion than good science. If you trust your Lord's Word about chastity and keep your virginity until marriage, people are going to make fun of you for being too good for them; of course, if that's the case, rest assured that they're not good enough for you. When your Christianity leads you to practice good business ethics at work, it may cost you the loss of the promotion to the guy who's willing to cut corners and hurt others to get ahead for himself. If you defend the rights of the unborn, you'll be accused of trying to enslave women to your narrow religious views. If you believe homosexuality to be a sin, the world will call you a bigot. If you refuse to cheat on the test in high school—and lots of students are texting the answers back and forth all the time, you might suffer lower grades for your honesty of actually studying.

So, you may suffer for your good works. You may also suffer for your doctrine. You may suffer the broken heart of a would-be spouse who will not put up with your insistence on attending church. You may suffer estrangement from family or friends because you hold to the one true faith. You may suffer at the hands of other Christians who discount your infant baptism or insist that your faithfulness to Scripture harms your witness. Furthermore, as church bodies view themselves more and more on business models, congregations will suffer if they adhere to Scriptural teaching, but circumstances prevent them from growing in numbers or accruing wealth. That's only the start: it is entirely possible that you could suffer the loss of health, property, freedom or life for being a Christian.

We need to add one more warning about suffering: it is quite possible to suffer for all the right reasons, but use it as an excuse for doing wrong. When you suffer, unrighteous anger and bitterness come easy. It is easy to justify them as feelings you deserve to have—not to pray for those who persecute you. When this happens, you justify sin and make room for it. This will only damage your faith.

So then, there are lots of ways that you will suffer for being a Christian—for being a follower of Christ. If you read through the Gospels, you see the example of Him and His suffering. Do not be surprised when the devil will do his best to make you miserable for being a Christian. Do not be surprised when, for being a child of God, you must follow in your Lord's steps of suffering.

## II. The Example of Jesus

Jesus suffered for his works. He ate meals with sinful tax collectors and repentant prostitutes, and He was slandered for keeping their company to teach them His Word. He healed people all the time, Saturdays included, and His miracles were used as a reason to accuse Him of working on the Sabbath and thus breaking the law. He suffered for His doctrine—for what He taught. He taught that works couldn't save, which angered many. He warned people of sin, which always offends the guilty. And He taught that He was the Savior, which earned Him the cross for His trouble. Jesus suffered precisely for being the Savior of the world. As Christians, you acknowledge this soberly and thankfully. He endured the suffering willingly. He did so by choice. He did it for you. You needed a Savior who would bear your sins, die your death and rise again. That is what Jesus has done for you. For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, scorning its shame—so that you might be redeemed.

When subjected to suffering, how did Jesus react? Our text tells us: He committed no sin—He did not respond to the affliction of others by afflicting them in return. No deceit was found in His mouth: He

accepted the suffering rather than deny truth for an easier life. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return: instead, He prayed for His enemies. When He suffered, He did not threaten, but entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly: He commended Himself to His Father and His Father's will, dying for the sins of His persecutors so that He might rise again to give them forgiveness.

Jesus endured suffering without sin. Many will hear this only as law—they will say, "Jesus set a high standard for His people, and as Christians we are to act just like He did." And so we should, but that is Law. It is impossible for us to be sinless like Jesus when suffering: if it were possible, He would not have had to suffer for us. But there is better news here for you than that. Because Jesus committed no sin, even when suffering, He remained the perfect holy Sacrifice for your sin. Because He did not have to die for Himself, He died for you. Because no deceit is found in His mouth, you can be sure that He speaks the truth when He speaks of His love and forgiveness for you. Furthermore, because He does not revile sinners, He does not revile you. Instead, He gathers you to Himself—He calls you by the Gospel so that you might be His people. He feeds you His own body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. Although He has suffered for your sins, He does not threaten you. Risen from the dead, He does not say, "I'm back—and you're in big trouble!" Rather, He suffered for your sins not to threaten, but to forgive—to say, "The price is paid, and the kingdom of heaven is yours for My sake." Having entrusted Himself to the one who judges justly, He now sits as your Judge to decide your eternal fate, and He already tells you the verdict: He declares that you are not guilty anymore, because He has suffered the guilt of your sin, and heaven is yours.

How is all of this true? Our text becomes very clear, very explicit: "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."

For Jesus' sake, you've died to sin and live to righteousness. Don't be surprised when sin puts up a fight, tries to make you suffer for being made righteous. When you suffer for the faith, give thanks that you are counted worthy to do so. Give thanks that, while you suffer now, it is only a passing thing. Eternal life awaits.

This is today's epistle because of our Gospel lesson, where Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd and us His sheep. In my opinion, that reading ends one verse short, for in verse eleven Jesus declares the Gospel with these words, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." And so He has—so that His sheep might have eternal life.

Dear friends, do not be amazed when you suffer for being a Christian. It will happen, and you may even be tempted to regard it as proof that the faith isn't true. It is quite the opposite: the faith we believe says that suffering should come as no surprise. When you suffer for being the Lord's, you follow in the steps of Jesus who suffered hell for you. Should our Lord tarry, those steps lead to death and the grave, just like His. But just like His, they lead to the third day and the Resurrection forever. Suffering will come, but it will also go. Heaven and peace are eternal and yours in Christ Jesus, because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen