June 27, 2021

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WHY JESUS DIDN’T USE LIGHTNING BOLTS

1 Peter 2:17-25

I once had a friend that I felt I had a strong bond with. I spent many hours talking with him and felt like we were on the same page in so many things. I knew him for many years and trusted him a lot. Then a series of events occurred that were difficult and confusing to me. Then at one point he did a couple of things that opened my eyes. It was like someone turned a light on and I could see what was going on. In a breathtaking moment I saw this man in a different light. I realized he was behind many of the difficulties I was going through. He wasn’t a friend at all, he was stabbing me in the back. With that revelation it was like all the puzzle pieces fell into place and I could see what was really going on and why.

In 1962 a somewhat obscure American philosopher of science named Thomas Kuhn wrote a book titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In it he put forth the theory that science doesn’t advance through a linear, long process. Rather, it undergoes periods of turmoil often sparked by a radically new idea, an insight of an individual that challenges accepted thinking. This produces a revolution in thinking. He coined the term “paradigm shift” to describe it. Germ theory, for instance, was a paradigm shift. The idea that there are microscopic creatures invisible to the naked eye that were the cause of so much disease was pioneered by people like Louis Pasteur in the 19th century. Prior to that Galens miasma theory was the accepted wisdom, but germ theory revolutionized medicine. Albert Einstein brought about a paradigm shift when he challenged Newtonian physics with his theories of relativity.

In order for us to thrive in a world that is hostile to our faith, we need to have a paradigm shift. Paul wrote in Romans 12:1-2 that we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. He’s talking about a life changing paradigm shift in how we think about our lives. If we think like humans normally do, we will end up where they usually are, and that is not in a place where they are doing God’s will and are joyful about it. Today we will look at 1 Peter 2:17-25 and hopefully get a grasp on a paradigm shift that every follower of Jesus needs to have.

WE ALIENS THINK DIFFERENTLY

Peter reminded us in verse 11 that we are aliens in the culture of this world. It should not surprise us that we think differently than the culture in which we live. There are some things we see in these verses that bring that reality into sharp focus. One of those is a comment at the end of verse 17. In the context Peter told us to submit to governing authorities and to show respect to all people. We are to treat them with dignity and respect because they are created in the image of God. Then Peter said, “honor the emperor.”

He had already told them specifically to submit to the emperor, so why this? We are to go farther than submitting to the emperor and honor him. We all know that it is hard to show some people respect because they are not deserving of it. Peter is telling us we show them respect regardless. One person who would have been a prime example of this in his day was the emperor. We know him as Nero.

His full name as emperor was Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus. He was born in 37 AD. His father died when he was 2. His ambitious mother, Aggripina eventually married the emperor Claudius. Pressured by Aggripina, Claudius would later adopt Nero. Through the scheming and manipulating and maneuvering of Nero’s mother, when Claudius died, Nero was chosen to be Caesar over Claudius’ natural born son. Nero was a piece of work. He saw himself as an actor, poet, musician, and charioteer as well as Caesar. Had he lived today he would have been a dictator who insisted he was an actor, a rock musician, a great athlete, a novelist, and maybe a military leader thrown in. In other words, he was a narcissist who thought he was wonderful at everything. He needed sycophants around him praising everything he did. He became concerned about his mother’s maneuvering to try to get power, so he had her murdered. He did the same with his step brother. He had at least two flagrant affairs with women other than his wife, decided he didn’t want his wife anymore so he had her executed. Divorce apparently wasn’t effective enough for him. After that, at one point, he had a public wedding ceremony in which he married a man, with himself dressed up as the bride and taking that role. During his reign, as you likely know, there was a terrible fire that destroyed much of Rome. Some suspected he was responsible for it, but he blamed Christians, possibly to deflect blame from himself. This became his excuse to initiate a merciless persecution of Christians, resulting in the terrible deaths of many. Later on he “married” a young boy and tried to have him surgically turned into a woman. Though he was popular with some people, he was known for tyranny, extravagance, debauchery and religious persecution. He committed suicide when he was 30 years old. This was the man about whom Peter said, “honor the emperor.” The man he told his readers to honor ultimately was responsible for Peter’s death.

Imagine that I said to you, “God wants you to honor Kim Jong Un,” the dictator of North Korea. He has executed anyone that he even suspects of daring to favor dissent, including his own half brother and a number of other relatives. He has imprisoned thousands of his own people. He enforces a rule called the “Three Generation Rule.” That rule states that when a person does something the great leader deems to be a crime, not only is that person punished, but also his children and his grandchildren will be. For instance, failure to wipe dust off a portrait of the Great Leader, which is considered a terrible crime, can result in a person, their children, and their grandchildren being sentenced to life in prison! As you know, this man also threatens the whole world with a nuclear arsenal. This man also has abolished religion, including our faith. He seeks to destroy Christians. We should honor him? What do you think a believer in North Korea, if you could find one, would say if you told him to honor Kim Jong Un?

To put it mildly, Kim Jong Un is far from deserving of honor, and so was Nero. So why would Peter tell his readers to honor him? Remember that Peter said they should do this “for the Lord’s sake.” How is honoring a dishonorable man something one could do for the sake of the Lord? Notice in verse 12 Peter mentioned people seeing the good deeds of his readers and glorifying God. In verse 15 he mentioned the believers’ good behavior silencing the foolish talk of ignorant people. What that tells us is that people were watching and were talking about Christians.

In those days people didn’t know a lot about this sect known as Christians, but there were many rumors about them. Because they were so different, because they claimed there was only one God, in many cases they were viewed with suspicion. They refused to declare that Caesar was a god, so some claimed that they were rebellious, opposing the established order. They were dangerous, seditious people. This kind of talk could expose Christians to persecution from authorities who saw them as a threat.

Peter was telling the Christians that by submitting to the authorities and honoring Caesar, even though he was absolutely not worthy of it, they were honoring God by potentially making it easier for the church to exist and continue to spread. In other words, there was something more important than whether they liked or admired Nero. There was a much bigger issue at stake. By honoring an emperor who was doing them harm they were in effect choosing the kingdom of God over their own kingdoms, over what would make life easier for themselves.

Why in the world would Peter want people who suffered because of Nero, people whose beliefs were trampled on by him, people who had no respect whatsoever for the man because of his depraved character, to honor him as they submitted to him? He wanted them to do it **because there was something else that mattered so much more.** That becomes even more clear when we look at the next few verses.

Verse 18 tells slaves to submit to their masters, whether those masters were good, or harsh tyrants. What is your response to that? Don’t you think something is missing there? Why isn’t Peter railing against the evil of slavery? Where is his encouragement to stand against this awful institution? He said nothing about trying to change a system that enslaved so many people. Doesn’t God care about such injustice and inhumanity? People sometimes raise the issue of why the Bible doesn’t seem to condemn slavery. It refers to it in a matter of fact way in a number of places, including this passage, but never seems to oppose it. First century slavery wasn’t as awful as the more recent form of it, but it still wasn’t good. Why no argument against slavery?

When you combine that reality with the comments about honoring Nero, you begin to get an inkling that maybe God is looking at something different than we usually do. Could it be that he has bigger fish to fry? British Christian thinker, Harry Blamires, wrote in his book, *The Christian Mind*, that a Christian mind “is supernaturally orientated, and brings to bear upon earthly considerations the fact of Heaven and the fact of Hell…The Christian mind sees human life and human history as held in the hands of God…It sees this life as an inconclusive experience, preparing us for another; this world as a temporary place of refuge, not our true and final home.”

The Christian mind thinks that way because that is how God thinks. God sees the reality, as should we, which is different than what our world thinks. Blamires writes, “Modern secular thought ignores the reality beyond this world. It treats this world as The Thing.” He suggests that we look at what our culture presents to us in the media, movies and television. He says, “Ask what kind of a world is pictured there. Is it…a world in which angel and demon are locked in conflict? A world packed full of sinners desperately dependent upon the mercy of God? A world amok with fundamentally powerless creatures, running hither and thither, foolishly imagining that they can do without God, and making an appalling mess of things as a result? A world fashioned by God, sustained by God, worried over by God, died for by God?”

He accurately says that is absolutely not the case. Our culture depicts a world that is self-sufficient, one, he says, that is “conclusive and final, whose comprehensiveness of experience embraces all that is and that will ever be. It is a world run by men, possessed by men, dominated by men, its course determined by men.” Notice that Blamires says our culture ignores the “reality beyond this world.” He correctly claims that our believing that there is a spiritual world, that God exists in that world, that God is in control of this world, that we are all heading for an eternity in that spiritual realm where we will be judged, actually is real. In fact it is the ultimate reality that underlies everything in this world. It is what matters most!

There is another way we think differently than our world. We know that there is truth, there is reality. We also know that to live without regard to that reality always does damage to us. When what we think does not line up with reality, we end up getting hurt. Always. Our culture doesn’t believe that, because it doesn’t believe there is truth. Back on June 7 there was an article on the *Union Tribune* about the fact that doctors’ offices are now taking the lead in the effort to vaccinate people. The story contained something that was hilarious, but also quite sad. Dr. Bryan Fox, a family medicine doctor in Spring Valley, mentioned the funniest thing he’s heard while encouraging people to get vaccinated. A patient who has not be vaccinated told him, “I identify as vaccinated.”

In a nutshell, that is a microcosm of our culture’s insane belief that one can choose one’s reality. I can identify as whatever I choose. I make up my own reality. Do you see what the problem with that is? That individual can identify as vaccinated all they want, but the fact is, they are not. When you don’t live in line with reality it does you harm. In that person’s case it exposes them to the very real risk that they will get Covid, and it could be quite serious.

Fine, Rick, but what does all of that have to do with honoring Nero and slaves? It reminds us that God is aiming at the ultimate reality, at the spiritual realm and at eternity. This passage reminds us that God wants us to think Christianly, to interpret our world and make our choices through the lens of that reality. It means he wants us to be willing to make sacrifices in this temporary world in order to focus on the much greater reality of his kingdom, to possibly put up with some difficulty right now for the greater gain of eternity.

In other words, we think differently because we live for God’s kingdom, we believe God is at work in this world, is in control of it, so we can trust him, and we can focus on eternity. We don’t make what happens in this world the whole of our existence. So if honoring Nero, a horrible person, will further God’s kingdom, we do that. If submitting to our masters will further God’s kingdom, we gladly do that.

This means that we will aim at different things in life than the world around us does. We will value different things than the world does. We will make different choices than the world does. We see life in an entirely different way. Suppose that a person treats you in a way that you feel is unfair, maybe they even cheat you. How do you respond to that? The normal human way is to seek redress, to set the record straight, maybe even to get back at that person for what they’ve done to you. That’s so ingrained in us we respond that way without even consciously choosing it. But now let’s suppose you are an alien in this world, one whose thinking is formed by God’s way. What will guide your response? It will be determined by what most builds up the kingdom of God, by what will store up riches for you in that eternal kingdom. That becomes a very different dynamic.

Laurie and I have a number of different Christian friends who have been battered by a series of just gut wrenching trials. In a couple of cases it has been just one thing after another. It would be easy for people to see that and ask why they would continue to believe in a loving God when their lives bear a striking resemblance to Job’s. But our friends have God’s thinking. They see that they are in a spiritual conflagration. They see that there is an enemy who is firing artillery shells at them in the effort to ruin them. They understand that the pivotal issue in these ordeals is whether they will stand firm. Because they know the spiritual realm and the battle raging in it is quite real they have reason to continue to seek to walk with God and honor him. They see this is the most important thing in their lives.

WE HAVE A RADICAL EXAMPLE AS OUR MODEL

At the heart of this different way of thinking and living is something Peter said in verses 20-21. “If you suffer for what is doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. **To this you were called**.” Well that’s not good news. It is commendable to suffer for what is doing good, and we are called to that? Uh, I think I’d rather not answer that call. No one likes suffering. But suffering for doing good is galling.

I was watching a baseball game on television and I saw a situation that sort of touched on this. The batter had two strikes on him. The pitcher threw a pitch that might possibly have touched the strike zone, though it looked to me like it was just outside the zone. The umpire disagreed with my assessment. He thought it was strike three. He called the strikeout and the batter reacted in a very visible way. He pounded his bat on the ground. The umpire immediately threw him out of the game. He thought the guy was trying to show him up and dispute his call. The batter immediately objected vociferously. He stuck both arms out in the very recognizable plea of the innocent. You could tell even on television that he wasn’t trying to show the umpire up, he was just upset that he had struck out. He might well have thought that wasn’t a strike, but every baseball player knows if you have two strikes on you and a pitch is close, you’d better swing at it. That is a basic truth that is drilled into you since youth, and he had not done that. But now he was being thrown out of the game for something he did not do. His actions weren’t intended to say anything about the umpire. He was just upset with himself. So now he was being punished for something he hadn’t done. Human beings can’t stand that. It is unfair and we can’t bear unfair.

Being punished for actually doing good is even worse. I know this because there have been occasions when I have tried to help Laurie with something and my efforts backfired. Once she was painting some cabinets in our kitchen. I felt bad because she was doing the work and I wasn’t, so I wanted to do something to help. I saw there was some trash in a cabinet that I could get out of her way. She told me not to do anything, that she was fine. But I wanted to help. So I did. I reached down to get the trash. Unconsciously when I bent down I put one hand on the top of a cabinet door that she had just painted. So now I’ve got paint on my hand and I’ve put a hand print on the fresh paint that she would have to paint over again. I actually made her job more difficult, and as a result she got a bit impatient and upset at me. “That’s why I told you to not try to help.” My response was, “Well excuse me for trying to help.” I was trying to do good and now I was suffering for it. She was expressing frustration and impatience with me. Don’t I get any credit for good intentions?

This is a matter that has real implications for us. If we have that alien mindset that I was just talking about, it is likely that there will be times when we will suffer for doing good. We will try to do good, but it will be misinterpreted or others will take advantage of our good will and efforts. We will end up getting hurt for trying to do something good. I can tell you from personal experience with the cabinet painting affair that the reaction tends to be, “Fine, I’ll never try to help you again.” That attitude is tossing the alien mindset right out the window. What we are called to do is just keep trying to do good, just keep spreading the grace of Christ.

Knowing this can and will happen we wonder why we should even bother. Peter’s answer is we need to remember Jesus. He was history’s biggest, clearest, most graphic example of suffering for doing good. Peter said people hurled insults at him, but he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he didn’t threaten his tormenters. Instead he took our sins upon himself and accepted the horrifying punishment that we have earned so that we don’t have to experience it. By his wounds we are healed.

Think about that for a moment. Jesus was the most admirable, the best, the most powerful human being who has ever lived. The day he was “tried” before the Sanhedrin, the high court of Israel, at the end Matthew 26:67-68 says, “they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, ‘Prophesy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?’” Matthew 27:28-30 says the profane, ungodly Roman soldiers “stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again.” Matthew 27:42-43 says when he was on the cross the hypocritical religious leaders mocked him saying, “He saved others but he can’t save himself. He’s the king of Israel. Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him.”

A classic movie that is one of my favorites is the old *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. I see that they are making yet another Indiana Jones movie. Are you kidding me? Harrison Ford is 79 years old! He’s so old that he knew Cap’n Crunch when he was only an ensign. Perhaps instead of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade,* they will call this one *Indiana Jones and The Wheelchair Brigade*. Anyway, in that first movie do you remember the climactic scene near the end when the Nazis finally were able to open the ark of the covenant? All of a sudden lightning bolts came flying out of the ark and zapped every one of the Nazis, melting them down to skeletons. That, of course, was just Hollywood stuff. But had I been there when all of that mocking and torture was happening to Jesus, I would have desperately wanted him to do exactly that to those people. And the fact is, he had the power to do something exactly like that if he wanted to. He had the power to disintegrate them all and then say, “How do you like me now, suckers?” Not only did he have the power to do it, he would have had every right to do it. What was done to him was the most horrible, the most galling injustice that will ever occur. It was a wrong of galactic proportions, one that was horrifying. Those who mocked Jesus and who put him on that cross would have absolutely deserved getting zapped with a death ray at the very least.

But he didn’t do any of that. He let them do their worst. He didn’t fight back, he didn’t threaten them, he didn’t try to stop them, he didn’t use his power to destroy them, which he could have done. Why not? Because something much larger was at stake. It was all about doing the will of the Father, and that was the most important thing. It was about bringing about the Kingdom of God, and that’s what mattered to him. It was about rescuing you and me and bringing us into God’s eternal kingdom of light. Jesus had eternity in mind, so he accepted the pain and the horror and the injustice of it all, and did what the Father asked him to do. That is the example for us to follow. That is our model. That is the goal for how we live in this alien world.

CONCLUSION

The temptation to fight back, to try to take control, try to gain power, to protect ourselves, to just live to make life a little easier on ourselves, is always there, and the pressure it exerts on us is strong and relentless. This passage is a call to resist those temptations, to be totally counter cultural, to live in a demanding way. How can we have the strength to do that?

We do it the same way Jesus was able to do it. Verse 23 reveals the secret to a life that is truly counter cultural, that lives for the right things regardless of the cost, no matter how hard it might be. This really isn’t a secret. You’ve heard it in a variety of ways many times before, so I guess we should say it is the key. Here is the key to living this life, “He entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” What happened to him was wrong in every way. But he didn’t take it upon himself to stop it or make it right. He entrusted himself to his Father, who is just, and will make all things right. That is exactly what we must do. Don’t take it into your own hands. Don’t look at life only from the temporal perspective. See that life is eternal, and the one who judges justly will make it all come out right. Trust yourself to God.

John Ortberg related an incident in his book, *If You Want To Walk On Water, You Have To Get Out Of The Boat*, that reminds me to trust God. He and some friends were in Newport Beach walking on the sidewalk when a fight spilled out of a bar they were passing. Three men were beating up on a lone opponent and he was bleeding profusely. Ortberg and his friends yelled at the men to stop, though he expected they might get drawn into the mess. He was surprised when the thugs looked up with fear in their eyes and began to slink away. He couldn’t understand their reaction. Then he turned around. Standing behind him and his friends was the bar’s bouncer, all 6 feet 7 inches and 280 pounds of him. He stood there with his muscles bulging. That was all it took. Ortberg said he and his friends began referring to him as “Mongo,” though not to his face. He said Mongo’s presence instantly changed his attitude. Now he was released from fear, filled with confidence because Mongo was there. He said, “If I were convinced that Mongo were with me 24 hours a day 7 days a week, I would have a fundamentally different approach to life. We don’t have Mongo, but we have someone better. Our God is with us, and that’s what enables us to live out this different mindset that Jesus Christ has exemplified for us.

We were like sheep going astray, “But now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” This is who we entrust ourselves to. He is the shepherd of our souls. He cares for us like a shepherd cares for his flock. Confidence in him is what gives us the strength we need to live this life.