Isaiah 53:7-9, 1 Peter 2:19-25 *53: The Silent Savior*

***WWJD***In the mid to late 90s, a phenomenon took over the world of Christian merchandizing. And it all started with some bracelets that said: **WWJD.**

I’m guessing you know what those initials stand for. You still see them around today. Most people who have been involved in church have encountered them. In the late 90s and early 2000s even nonChristians knew these letters and the question they were asking: What Would Jesus Do?

The story behind these bracelets is an interesting one. And, kind of, an ugly one.

The story actually begins in the 1890s, in Topeka, Kansas. A pastor named Charles Sheldon was looking for a way to keep his congregation engaged, so he decided to do a series of Sunday Evening services where he created characters and inserted them into different fictional scenarios where they were faced with a difficult moral situation. In each case, the characters wrestled with the question “What would Jesus do?” Sheldon also told the stories in such a way that each one ended on a cliffhanger, ensuring that people would come back the next week.

The sermons proved so popular that Congregationalist Magazine published them as a serialized story. Soon after they were turned into a book, called: **In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?**

As it turned out, there was a copyright hiccup when the book was published which placed it almost immediately in the public domain. Thus, any publishing company that wanted to could publish it and sell it with no royalties owed to the author. And that’s what happened. The book proved to be immensely popular—today over 30 million copies have been sold making it one of the best-selling books of all time, one list I saw put it in the top 10—but Sheldon made only about $10,000 from it in the 50 years from writing it until his death. Never mind that the companies that published and sold it made a whole lot more.

That didn’t really bother him though. He asked himself “What would Jesus do?” if He had a best-selling book and he truly believed that Jesus would have been uninterested in financial gain. He was mostly just happy that the message was being spread, and that more people were contemplating Jesus because of it.

Fast-forward now about 100 years, to 1989. I’ve read different accounts with different youth pastors’ names attached, but pretty much everyone agrees it was about 1989 that a youth pastor in Holland, Michigan read *In His Steps* and decided to challenge the youth to ask Sheldon’s question--“What Would Jesus Do?”--in their daily lives. In order to make the challenge memorable, the decision was made to give the youth something wearable, and since Friendship Bracelets were a big deal at the time, they settled on bracelets. “What Would Jesus Do?” was a little too long for a bracelet, so the decision was made to **shorten it to the initials: “WWJD.”**

The bracelets were immediately popular, and the youth pastor went back to the company who printed the first order to get more. Soon the company figured out that they could sell these bracelets on their own. Then other Christian apparel and publishing companies noticed and started putting the WWJD initials on their own products. When Paul Harvey commented on it in 1997, it blew up into a world-wide phenomenon. Teddy bears, coffee mugs, bumper stickers, t-shirts, devotional books and more were being emblazoned with the WWJD slogan. There was even a very strange board game, modeled a little after Trivial Pursuit, called WWJD. (As I was reading about all of this in my office, I looked up and **realized I have the board game sitting on my bookshelf.)**

Ironically, some of the same copyright problems that plagued Charles Sheldon also affected those who came up with the WWJD slogan. By the time the youth pastor and the original bracelet manufacturer decided they should apply for a trademark, the courts ruled that the slogan was too prevalent and already in the public domain**.** The story goes that the youth pastor didn’t necessarily want to profit from the slogan, but wanted to put a stop to some of the more tasteless uses of it. At one point, there were something like 7 lawsuits revolving around the slogan, including some filed by some of the larger Christian publishing companies. (Sources: <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2014/06/origin-jesus-slogan/> and <https://thejesusquestion.org/2012/01/16/wwjd-part-3-the-bracelets-and-ensuing-craze/> )

If you were alive and following Jesus in the late 90s and early 2000s, you probably wore a **WWJD bracelet** at some point. Maybe you still wear one now. I remember noticing that even some professional athletes wore them during games. (Which prompted me to ask this question: “What would Jesus do if he played baseball?” Answer: Lead the league in saves. Bad preacher joke.)

***The Verse***Everybody knows the WWJD question. What people might not know as well is the verse that it is based on. The central verse for Charles Sheldon’s book, and where he got the title “In His Steps,” is **1 Peter 2:21:**

**21**To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

You can see how the question comes out of this verse. Christ left us an example. He’s our model. The one we should imitate. We are supposed to follow in His steps. Whatever situations we find ourselves in, whenever we are faced with a tough decision, we should ask ourselves “what would Jesus do?” and act accordingly. So if, as some of the game cards in the board game suggest, we are military pilots and we are ordered to secretly drop chemical agents on an enemy; or we have reached adulthood and discover we were adopted but nobody ever told us; or if we are dating somebody we really like but whose parents drive us crazy; we should ask “what would Jesus do?” and follow in His steps.

This is the verse it is all based on. But what people really seem to be missing is that this verse is asking a very specific WWJD question. The question is: **What would Jesus do if he suffered unjustly?**  What Peter is really challenging us to do in this verse is to follow the example of Jesus when we face unjust suffering ourselves. This is a verse about suffering.

There are several clues that this verse is really about suffering. **One is because the word** “suffered” is used in the verse itself. “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example.” The specific scenario Peter has in mind when he tells us to follow in Jesus’ steps is suffering. That’s pretty plain.

More than that, the verses right before this say as much as well. This verse is in a section where Peter is addressing Christians who are slaves. Peter is neither endorsing nor condemning slavery here; he is simply recognizing that is the reality some of his readers will find themselves in. And if that is the case, Peter is urging them to imitate Jesus even in their servitude. **Verses 19-20:**

**19**For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. **20**But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

Essentially, Peter says that if you are a slave, and you receive a beating because you did something wrong--cheated your master, stole, lied--then there is a sense in which you had that coming. There is nothing commendable in suffering in that way. But if you are seeking to live your life as a slave in a way that honors Jesus, and that leads into suffering and unfair treatment, then that is commendable. Peter says that does honor God.

This is a hard word. Something in us bristles at the casual acceptance of a slave system, and it should. But more than that, it’s hard for us to imagine scenarios where someone is mistreating us, telling lies about us, taking advantage of us, where we just take it. It’s hard for us to accept the notion that we wouldn’t fight back.

And yet, that’s what Peter is saying. **The end of verse 20 again, into verse 21:**

But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. **21**To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

“If you suffer for doing good and you endure it…To this you were called.” The question here really is: how does a Christian respond to unjust suffering? And the answer is: we should follow the example of Jesus.

That becomes even clearer in the rest of the passage. **Verses 22-25:**

**22**“He committed no sin,
    and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

**23**When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. **24**“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” **25**For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

In order to build his argument about enduring suffering, Peter takes us to the cross. And, more than that, he takes us to Isaiah 53. (If you have been wondering why I’ve been talking about 1 Peter in a series on Isaiah 53, now you know.) Again, and again, Peter references Isaiah 53 in this passage. “He himself bore our sins” is a quote from Isaiah 53:12. “By his wounds you have been healed” is a quote from Isaiah 53:5. “You were like sheep going astray” is a quote from Isaiah 53:6. And verse 22—"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth” is a quote from Isaiah 53:9.

Peter is encouraging us to bear unjust suffering by following the example of Jesus. And so that we are clear on the example of Jesus, he takes us to Isaiah 53.

So let’s also turn to Isaiah 53. Our key verses today are **Isaiah 53:7-9.** We will look at this prophecy as a description of how Jesus endured his suffering, and then we’ll come back to consider why as Christians we are being called to follow Jesus in this way. Isaiah 53:7-9:

**7**He was oppressed and afflicted,
    yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
    and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
    so he did not open his mouth.
**8**By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
    Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
    for the transgression of my people he was punished.
**9**He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
    and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
    nor was any deceit in his mouth.

***Christ’s Example***What can we say about the suffering of Jesus? I have three things.

First, **Christ’s suffering was unimaginable.** The words used to describe what the servant endured are strong words, that hint at terrible suffering.

Look at **verse 7**: He was oppressed and afflicted.

“Oppressed” is a word used most often in the Old Testament to describe what taskmasters do to make the life of their slaves miserable. Bricks without straw. Oppression is pressing in on someone so hard that the stress and tension become unbearable. I think of the way Jesus was stalked and captured and tortured by his enemies. I think of Him sweating blood in the garden.

“Afflicted” is a word that implies humiliation, being brought low, being treated with contempt. Shaming, belittling, scorn, jest, mockery, ridicule, derision. All of that was the gall Jesus sipped during his whole ministry and had forced down his throat in the last awful week.

And, he was “led like a lamb to the slaughter.” Such an awful word. Slaughter. Such a descriptive word for His death. He was executed. He was murdered. His death was not an accident, nor was it inevitable. It was a deliberate act by those who wanted to be rid of him.

Then, **look at the phrases of verse 8:** By oppression and judgment he was taken away. He was cut off from the land of the living. He was punished.

“Taken away”, like the scapegoat who carried the burden of sins outside the camp on the Day of Atonement, which we talked about last week.

“Cut off from the land of the living”, like the sacrificial lamb of the Passover observance.

“Punished.” Jesus’ suffering was an unimaginable act of punishment that involved flogging, beating, mockery, humiliation, and the torture of the cross.

Christ suffered. And his suffering was unimaginable.

Second, **Christ’s suffering was unjust.** This is the last two lines of verse 9. The two lines that **are quoted in 1 Peter 2:22:**

though he had done no violence,
    nor was any deceit in his mouth.

One of the things Isaiah emphasizes, even as he lays out this description of the suffering the servant will endure, is that it was not something he deserved. In other words, this punishment the servant experienced was not justified. As we saw last week, he was bearing the sin of others. He was substituting Himself for us.

“He had done no violence” means he had committed no sins of action. “Nor was any deceit in his mouth” means he had committed no sins of heart. In other words, he had committed no sins in thought, word, or deed. Isaiah is describing an innocent sufferer. Someone who had no guilt of his own to atone for.

As you read the descriptions of the trial and execution of Jesus in the New Testament, one of the things that stands out is that even the people who killed him knew he didn’t deserve it. For example, in **Matthew 27:19,** Pilate’s wife sends a note telling Pilate to have nothing to do with that “innocent man.”

Later, **Luke 23:4** tells us that when Pilate faced the crowd, he told them very plainly that he found no basis for a charge against this man. And famously, when Pilate finally gave in to the demands of the mob, he washed his hands in front of them **(Matthew 27:24).** Clearly, Pilate recognized that Jesus did not deserve a sentence of death.

Likewise, **Luke 23:47** tells us that when Jesus died, the centurion in charge of his crucifixion exclaimed: “Truly this was a righteous man!” The story is told so that we will understand that Jesus did not deserve to die.

But, more than that, Christians believe not only that Jesus did nothing to deserve crucifixion, we believe Jesus alone was a truly sinless man. The author of Hebrews, later in the New Testament, especially reflects on this truth. **Hebrews 4:15:**

**15**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

And, **Hebrews 7:26**:

**26**Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

So, Isaiah predicts that the servant’s suffering will be unimaginable and that it will be unjust. And, in the life of Jesus, we see that both those things happened.

Now, third observation from the text: **Christ bore his suffering silently.** What would Jesus do? How did Jesus respond to unjust suffering? Look at the text. **Isaiah 53:7:**

**7**He was oppressed and afflicted,
    yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
    and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
    so he did not open his mouth.

He did not open his mouth. It says it twice. As 1 Peter says, when they hurled insults at him, He did not respond. When He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, like a sheep before its shearers, He was silent.

I wonder if you **saw the pictures of this guy?** About three weeks ago, this sheep from Australia was in the news. Apparently he got lost in the outback and nobody was able to shear his wool for several years. When they found him and took his coat off, they ended up with 78 pounds of wool. That is enough wool for about 61 sweaters or 490 pairs of men’s socks. **Here’s a picture of him post-haircut.** (That story was making news the same week Beth was preparing her sermon. She had the line: “we all, like sheep, have gone astray.” I said she could use the story, but she said she didn’t have a place for it. I knew I’d be talking about sheep shearing, so I threw it in for you.)

Anyway, I don’t know a lot about sheep shearing; so I went to Google and typed in “are sheep silent when being sheared?” The first hit I got back came from some sort of outdoor blog and it said this: “A sheep might wildly fight when a shepherd brings him into the shearer pen, but once that sheep is flipped so he can be sheared, he is quite and docile, willing to let the shearer do what he wants with him.” The blogger ended by saying: “watching the change is rather amazing.”

So when Isaiah uses that image, he is painting a picture of the servant accepting his fate. In fact, the difference would be that the sheep might kick and struggle before getting into the pen; whereas the story about Jesus is that He went willingly. **Matthew 26:62-63**:

**62**Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” **63**But Jesus remained silent.

**Mark 15:4-5:**

**4**So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”

**5**But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

**Luke 23:9:**

**9**He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.

Here is how Jesus faced is unjust suffering: He did not protest, He did not proclaim His innocence, He did not fight back. The one who preached the Sermon on the Mount turned the other cheek. He submitted to the suffering. He bore it silently.

And, by the way, here is something I probably should have pointed out last week when talking about substitution. One of the big differences between Jesus and the ram sacrificed by Abraham, or the Passover lamb, or the scapegoat, is that Jesus was a willing substitute. For those animals, there was no choice. They were chosen to be sacrifices. But Jesus was different. He knew what was happening, and yet He still remained silent.

That’s what Jesus did when He suffered unjustly. He bore the pain willingly.

***A Christian Response to Unjust Suffering***That’s the description, then, of how Jesus responded when He was wrongly and unfairly accused. Isaiah wrote it down centuries before Jesus came, and yet we can see that the description Isaiah gave perfectly dovetails to the events of Jesus’ life. It is amazing.

But now, **let’s take it back to the WWJD question and 1 Peter 1:21**. Remember, the whole point of that question is to follow the example of Jesus when we find ourselves in different challenging situations. And the challenging situation Peter specifically has in mind is when we face unjust suffering. That is, when someone treats us unfairly. When we are lied about. When we are ill-treated. And Peter challenges us to follow the example of Jesus even then. Especially then:

**21**To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

As I said earlier, this is a hard word. When you are being mistreated, don’t defend yourself. When lies are being told about you, don’t attempt to correct the record. If anyone “slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” (Mat. 5:39).

It’s a hard word. Maybe one of the hardest aspects of the Christian life to truly live out. So why? Why does Peter say this? How does this kind of life show and glorify God? I have four suggestions:

**1. Facing unjust suffering in this way goes against our fallen nature, thus revealing that a power outside of us is at work.**

What Jesus did does not come natural to us. The idea of humbly and meekly and silently accepting such an incredible miscarriage of justice is utterly contrary to our fallen human nature. In fact, I would guess that dozens of us are feeling strong feelings of resistance against this teaching right now.

By nature we hate to give the impression of weakness. We hate to look like someone got the advantage of us. We hate to let false accusations against us stand. We hate it when unreasonable and abusive people seem to have the last say. Tremendous powers within us recoil and push us toward retaliation.

What Peter calls for here is utterly contrary to our fallen human nature. Which means: if we truly do follow Jesus’ example in this, if we truly bear up under unjust suffering without escalating the conflict, it is strong evidence that something more than our nature—something outside of our nature and above our nature—is at work in our lives. To live like this is truly to live by the power of God.

**2. Facing unjust suffering in this way shows that we are entrusting the outcome to the one who judges justly**.

1 Peter 2:23 describes what Jesus did:

**23**When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Here is one of the most important keys to how patient endurance of unjust suffering shows and glorifies God. When we endure unjust suffering we are not saying that justice does not matter. We are not saying that the abuse or evil that is being perpetrated against us is good. But we are saying that God is the final judge and that we trust Him to settle accounts justly. Those who hurt us will not have the final say, God will have the final say.

Peter is echoing the **teaching of Paul in Romans 12** here:

**19**Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.

To live like this is to say: "I entrust myself, and not just myself, but my cause and my accusers, and the whole situation and the justice that needs to be done—I hand it all over to God."

Our compliance is not an indifference to justice. It is a way of saying that the safest place for retaliatory justice is in God's hands, not mine. The powerful cry of my heart that I deserve something different is handed over to God. If we are to be vindicated, it will be God who vindicates us.

**3. Facing unjust suffering in this way models Jesus, making Jesus and His suffering real to people.**

When Christians respond to unjust suffering differently than everyone else would respond, it does not go unnoticed. It is not the way others would respond. It is not natural. And thus, it forces people to consider the one in whose steps we follow.

Enduring unjust suffering patiently shows God because it makes the suffering of Christ real to people. People can see that this is the way Jesus was. And if you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father. So this kind of demeanor shows God by showing Christ his Son.

**4. Facing unjust suffering in this way reveals what we hold as our greatest treasure.**

The **1 Peter passage** ends like this:

**25**For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Our natural, fallen instinct is to fight back against mistreatment; to pay back tooth for tooth and eye for eye. But that is our sinful nature. Now, we have come to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. The one who endured suffering to leave an example for us. The one in whose footsteps we seek to walk.

Ray Pritchard asks:

Do you think Jesus was a helpless victim that day at Calvary? He was the Son of God. *He had the power to call down a legion of angels to set him free*. He had but to say the word and all of heaven would come to his aid. But he never said that word.

He was truly the Silent Savior who, having all power in his hands, decided not to use it against those who tormented him. According to Martin Luther King, Jr., “We must say to our enemies, ‘I love you. I would rather die than hate you.’” <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/the-silent-savior/>

When we ask ourselves “What would Jesus do?” we need to remember that question includes—and is especially about—how he responded to His enemies. It’s not an easy word. But when we can follow His example in this, we show that He truly is our greatest treasure.