

A LIVING HOPE

A Catholic Journey Through the Letters of Saint Peter

Session Four

Aliens on Mission: The Suffering Servant

1 Peter 2:11-25

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps”

1 Peter 2:21 (RSV2CE)

Saint Joseph Parish, Springfield, Nebraska

Leader Preparation Guide

For the facilitator only. Not for distribution.

Session Overview

The letter now turns from identity to strategy: how do exiles actually live in a society that misunderstands and maligns them? Peter's answer is neither withdrawal nor assault but attractive integrity: “Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (2:12). He works it out in the hardest cases, subjection to a pagan state (under Nero!) and slaves under unjust masters, and then grounds the whole ethic in the deepest place possible: the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, whom Peter watched suffer with his own eyes. The session's discovery is the Isaiah 53 mosaic hidden in 2:22-25.

The Discovery Aim. Participants should be able to say: my conduct is apologetics before my arguments are; honoring authority is a Christian act that has a limit, and Peter himself marked the limit (Acts 5:29); and when Peter describes Christ's suffering he is quoting Isaiah 53 nearly line by line, because the crucifixion was the Servant Song performed.

The Catholic Touchstone. Witness by works precedes and empowers witness by words

(evangelization's first language is conduct); legitimate authority binds in conscience but never against God's law; and Christ's Passion is both atonement ("he himself bore our sins") and example ("leaving you an example"), never one without the other.

What You Need to Know

The Mission Statement of the Letter (2:11-12)

"Aliens and exiles" (RSV2CE) picks up 1:1 and Psalm 39:12. The strategy verse is 2:12: live so beautifully that slander dies of starvation and slanderers end up glorifying God "on the day of visitation." This is Jesus' own missionary method ("let your light so shine... that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father," Mt 5:16) and the engine of the Church's growth in a hostile empire. It will return at 3:1 (unbelieving husbands "won without a word") and 3:15-16 (defense with gentleness, keeping conscience clear). For a group interested in evangelizing friends and family, 2:12 is the master key: credibility precedes persuasion.

Be Subject, Under Nero (2:13-17)

"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme..." The emperor is Nero, who will soon execute the author. Peter is not naive; he is theological. Government as such is God's provision for order (cf. Rom 13:1-7), and Christians honor it "for the Lord's sake," not because rulers deserve it. But keep Acts 5:29 in your pocket for Q4: when the Sanhedrin ordered Peter to stop preaching Christ, he answered, "We must obey God rather than men." The same apostle wrote both sentences, so they must fit: honor always, cooperate broadly, but obedience stops where sin begins (CCC 2242). Verse 17's four commands are a masterpiece of calibration: "Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor." The emperor gets honor, the same as everyone; only God gets fear.

Servants Under Unjust Masters (2:18-20)

Peter addresses household servants, many of whom were converts whose masters were not. Handle this with care and honesty: (1) Peter is giving survival-and-witness counsel to people with no lawful exit of their own choosing, not endorsing the institution; the gospel's leaven ("neither slave nor free," Gal 3:28; Philemon) would in time crack slavery's foundations. (2) The principle Peter extracts is universal: unjust suffering, borne with grace and "mindful of God," has God's approval (charis, 2:19-20). (3) This text does not counsel anyone to remain in abuse; enduring what cannot yet be escaped is not the same as declining rescue that is available. Say this plainly if the question arises.

The Servant Song Performed (2:21-25)

Verses 22-25 are a mosaic of Isaiah 53: "he committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips" (Is 53:9), "he himself bore our sins" (53:11-12), "by his wounds you have been healed" (53:5), "you were straying like sheep" (53:6). Peter watched the Passion begin with his own eyes, from the high priest's courtyard, mid-denial, and when he finally describes Christ's suffering, he does so almost entirely in Isaiah's borrowed words, as if the prophecy said it better than memory could. Two more notes: "when he was reviled, he did not revile in return" (2:23) may carry Peter's own memory of the courtyard, where he denied his Lord with oaths and called down a curse (Mk 14:71); and "the Shepherd and Guardian (episkopos) of your souls" (2:25) quietly introduces the shepherd theme that crowns the letter in 5:1-4.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah 52:13-53:12: The Suffering Servant

The fourth Servant Song: despised, rejected, silent before shearers, wounded for our transgressions, numbered with transgressors, making many righteous. This is tonight's discovery text (Q6): the group reads Isaiah 53:4-12 and hunts Peter's borrowed phrases. It is also the passage the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when Philip found him (Acts 8:32-35), the Old Testament's clearest window into the Cross.

Psalm 39:12 and Genesis 23:4: The Resident Alien

"Aliens and exiles" (paroikous kai parepidēmous) echoes Abraham's self-description in Genesis 23:4 and the psalmist's "I am your passing guest." God's people have always been resident aliens: in the land, contributing, honoring, yet citizens of somewhere else.

Voices of the Church

Voices of the Church St. Justin Martyr (d. c. 165), First Apology 17

Addressing the emperor himself, St. Justin explains that Christians, taught by Christ, pay taxes more readily than anyone and pray for rulers, worshiping God alone but gladly serving the empire in everything else. It is 1 Peter 2:13-17 turned into public policy: maximal cooperation, bounded worship. He sealed the argument with his blood under Marcus Aurelius.

Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. c. 107), Letter to the Romans

Traveling under guard to his execution, St. Ignatius begs the Roman Christians not to rescue him: allow me to be an imitator of the passion of my God. His plea is 1 Peter 2:21 lived out: Christ's suffering is not only a payment to admire but a path to walk, and he counted following in those steps the completion of his discipleship.

Voices of the Church

St. Polycarp of Smyrna (d. c. 155), Martyrdom of Polycarp 8-10

Standing before the proconsul, St. Polycarp says Christians are taught to render honor to rulers and authorities appointed by God, so far as it does no harm to the soul, yet he will not call Caesar lord or curse Christ. The old bishop states 1 Peter's balance in one breath: honor the emperor, fear God, and know exactly where the line runs.

Catechism Connection

CCC 618. The Cross is the unique sacrifice of Christ, yet he calls his disciples to take up their cross and follow him, and the Catechism quotes 1 Peter 2:21: he suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow in his steps.

CCC 1899-1900. Legitimate authority is required by the moral order and derives from God; those subject to it should regard those in authority with respect and, insofar as it is deserved, with gratitude.

CCC 2242. The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow civil directives contrary to the moral order: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Peter’s own words supply the Catechism’s limit.

Thread Watch

1. Witness by conduct (2:12). Returns at 3:1-2 (a husband won without a word, Session Five) and 3:15-16 (defense joined to behavior, Session Six).

2. Suffering thread deepens. Session One planted fire that refines; tonight adds the pattern (Christ’s steps); Session Seven brings the fiery ordeal itself.

3. Shepherd and Guardian (2:25). The shepherd motif surfaces here and crowns the letter at 5:1-4 (Session Eight). Plant it lightly; do not develop it.

Session Goals for the Leader

1. Establish 2:12 as the group’s evangelization strategy: conduct that makes slander implausible.
2. Hold honor and limit together: subjection for the Lord’s sake, bounded by Acts 5:29, from the same apostle.
3. Let the group discover the Isaiah 53 mosaic in 2:22-25 phrase by phrase.
4. Handle the servants passage with historical honesty and pastoral clarity about abuse.

Leader Note

Time frame: 75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, Q3 and the Dig Deeper are the cuts; never cut the Isaiah 53 discovery in Q6.

Discussion Guide

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Opening Prayer

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, Suffering Servant, you were reviled and did not revile in return; you trusted the Father who judges justly. Teach us tonight to live among our neighbors so honestly and so beautifully that our lives make your gospel plausible. By your wounds, heal us. Amen.

Win: Gathering In

- ◆ Think of someone whose sheer decency, at work, at school, in your family, made you take their beliefs seriously. What was it about how they lived?
- ◆ When you're criticized unfairly, what is your honest first instinct: fire back, go silent, plot the comeback speech, or something else?

Build: Working the Text

Leader Note

One-minute recap: we are living stones with a priestly job, to declare God's deeds. Tonight: the strategy for doing that in a society that distrusts us. Ask, wait, work, confirm.

Movement One: The Strategy (2:11-12)

Read: 1 Peter 2:11-12 *(from participants' own Bibles)*

- Q1.** Verse 12 assumes the Gentiles are already speaking against Christians “as wrongdoers.” Notice Peter's counter-strategy. What is it not (no lawsuits, no boycotts, no louder arguments), and what is it? Where have you seen this actually work?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The strategy is conduct so plainly good that the slander loses its audience: “they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” It is Jesus' own method: “let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father” (Mt 5:16). Peter does not forbid answering critics (3:15 will require it); he sequences it: credibility first, then words. Arguments open minds; lives open hearts.

- Q2.** Verse 11 says the war that matters is internal first: “abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul.” Why must the exile win the inner war before the outer witness works? What happens to a Christian's public case when the private life contradicts it?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The witness is the life; a divided life testifies against itself, and the world has a flawless radar for hypocrisy. Peter's word picture is military: disordered desires are not quirks but combatants waging war on the soul. Holiness (Session Two) is therefore not private self-improvement; it is the supply line of mission. The most evangelistic thing most of us will do this year is quietly become more like Christ where people can see it.

Movement Two: Honor and Its Limit (2:13-17)

Read: 1 Peter 2:13-17 *(from participants' own Bibles)*

- Q3.** Verse 17 gives four rapid commands: “Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” Compare the verbs carefully. What does the emperor get, what does he not get, and who alone gets it? What was radical about that sentence in Nero's empire?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The emperor gets honor, exactly what “all men” get, no more; only God gets fear. In an empire drifting toward emperor-worship, that calibration was quietly revolutionary: Christians would be the best of citizens and the worst of idolaters. Notice too the middle command: the brotherhood gets love, a deeper bond than civic honor. Peter ranks our loyalties in one line: God above all, the Church as family, every human being honored, rulers respected within that order.

- Q4.** Peter says “be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution” (2:13). Yet this same Peter, ordered by the authorities to stop preaching Christ, answered: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Read that verse. How do both sentences fit in one apostle's mind? Where exactly is the line?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

They fit because subjection is “for the Lord's sake”: God stands behind legitimate authority, so the Christian honors it, and God stands above all authority, so when a command requires sin, obedience to God overrides. Honor is unconditional; obedience is bounded by God's law. The Catechism draws the line with Peter's own words (CCC 2242). Practically: Christians pay taxes, obey just laws, and serve honestly, and refuse the state or the boss or the culture the moment they demand what belongs to God.

- Q5.** Verses 18-20 address household servants, some under “overbearing” masters, and say that enduring unjust suffering “mindful of God” has God's approval. Read it honestly: what is Peter doing for people with no legal exit, and what is he not doing? What must this text never be used to say?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He is dignifying the powerless: giving people the empire counted as property a way to make even their suffering meaningful, joined to Christ's, and evangelistically potent. He is not endorsing slavery; the gospel he preaches ("neither slave nor free," Gal 3:28) planted the charge that would eventually blow the institution apart. And this text must never be used to tell anyone to remain in abuse: enduring what cannot yet be escaped is not the same as refusing rescue that exists. Wherever a door out of injustice stands open, taking it is fully compatible with this passage.

Movement Three: In His Steps (2:21-25)

Read: 1 Peter 2:21-25 (from participants' own Bibles)

Q6. Peter now describes Christ's Passion, and almost every phrase is borrowed. Turn to Isaiah 53:4-12 and read it aloud. Hunt in pairs: how many of Peter's phrases in 2:22-25 can you trace to Isaiah? List them.

Leader Note

The discovery moment; give it a full ten minutes. Matches to surface: no sin / no guile in his mouth (Is 53:9 = 2:22); bore our sins (53:11-12 = 2:24); by his wounds healed (53:5 = 2:24); straying like sheep (53:6 = 2:25). If they stall, assign each pair one verse of Peter to trace.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Nearly all of it: "committed no sin, no guile was found on his lips" (Is 53:9); "he himself bore our sins" (53:11-12); "by his wounds you have been healed" (53:5); "you were straying like sheep" (53:6). Peter, who stood in the high priest's courtyard as the Passion began, describes it in Isaiah's words written centuries before, as if to say: what I watched that day was the Servant Song performed. The Cross was not Plan B; it was the script fulfilled.

Q7. Verse 23: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly." Now remember where Peter was during those hours, and what he was doing with his own mouth (Mark 14:66-72). What does it cost Peter to write this verse, and what hope does that give the rest of us?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Peter was in the courtyard cursing and swearing, "I do not know this man," while Jesus stood silent under revilement inside the same house. The man who failed the test describes the One who passed it, not from a pedestal but from inside forgiveness. That is why this letter can call Christ's Passion an "example... that you should follow in his steps" (2:21) without crushing us: the author himself stepped out of the footprints, was restored (Jn 21), and now walks them to his own cross. Failure disqualifies no one whom Christ restores.

Q8. Verse 24 holds two things in one sentence: "he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" and

“that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” Some Christians emphasize only the first (Christ in my place) and treat the second as optional. What happens to the gospel if you cut either half away?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Cut the first and the Cross becomes mere moral example, powerless to atone; cut the second and it becomes a transaction that changes my record but not my life. Peter refuses the split: the Passion is substitution and transformation, atonement that heals (“by his wounds you have been healed”). The Catholic instinct is always both: what Christ did for us he also does in us, or it has not yet had its way.

Send: Carrying It Out

- ◆ Who in your world is currently “speaking against” the faith, or against you for holding it? What single change in your conduct this month would do more than any argument you could make?
- ◆ Where are you suffering something you did not deserve? What would it look like this week to carry it “in his steps”: without reviling, without threatening, entrusting yourself to the One who judges justly?

Live It This Week

This week: (1) Memorize 1 Peter 2:21. (2) Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12 straight through once, slowly, as an eyewitness account. (3) Choose one relationship where you have been returning fire, and for seven days answer revilement with silence and a prayer. (4) Do one visibly excellent, uncomplaining piece of work for someone who has been unfair to you.

Closing Prayer

Father, your Son bore our sins in his body on the tree and left us footprints through the world's unfairness. Heal us by his wounds, return us to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls, and make our conduct among unbelievers so good that slander starves and you are glorified. Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Scripture Memory

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21, RSV2CE)

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used or referenced in this session

Primary text

1 Peter 2:11-25 (movements: 11-12, 13-20, 21-25)

Discovery passages (read aloud in session)

Isaiah 53:4-12 (the mosaic behind 2:22-25); Acts 5:29 (the limit of subjection)

Leader background and Dig Deeper

Matthew 5:16 (light before men); Romans 13:1-7 (parallel on authority)

Mark 14:66-72 (the courtyard); John 21 (restoration); Galatians 3:28; Philemon (leaven against slavery)

Acts 8:32-35 (the eunuch reading Isaiah 53); Genesis 23:4; Psalm 39:12 (resident aliens)

Threads

Conduct-witness (2:12) returns at 3:1-2 and 3:15-16; shepherd (2:25) crowns 5:1-4

Suffering: 1:6-7 (fire) to 2:21 (steps) to 4:12-19 (ordeal, Session Seven)

Catechism

CCC 618; 1899-1900; 2242