

# SOJOURNERS AND EXILES

## A JOURNEY THROUGH FIRST PETER



### Reasonable Hope in the Midst of Suffering

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#### 1 PETER 3:13-17

<sup>13</sup> Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, <sup>15</sup> but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, <sup>16</sup> having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

#### SUMMARY

Life is hard. Everyone suffers, and Christians are not exempt. Some suffering is deserved, but at times, it's unjust and undeserved. When we suffer in those moments as believers, we are faced with a choice: we can respond like the world, or we can respond in a way that reveals the hope we have in Christ. This hope rises above the injustice and pain we endure. The Apostle Peter teaches that when we respond with gentleness and respect, setting Christ apart as Lord in our hearts, our lives become a witness. Christ is honored in us as we give a reason for the hope within us. And this hope is not wishful thinking or empty optimism. It's real. It's beautiful. And it's reasonable, even when everything around us is not.

## SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Today, we're talking about two things because our passage is talking about two things. At first, they don't seem related. But they are. We're going to talk about suffering—and defending our faith.

In regards to suffering, specifically, we're going to talk about suffering for doing good—that is to say. Suffering for doing the right thing.

To kids:

- Have you ever done the right thing and then been rewarded for it?
- Have you ever done the wrong thing and then been punished for it?
- Have you ever done the right thing and then still been punished for it?

I definitely have. Probably most of us have been lumped in when in our classes or our siblings were acting up and the whole class got punished even though you were following the rules.

I am a pretty big fan of superheroes. And my favorite superhero is Spider-Man. You don't have to be a fan of Spider-Man to know that one of his defining characteristics is that he has a hard time being both Spider-Man and Peter Parker. It gets him into trouble. Trying to juggle both identities. He keeps doing it because his Uncle Ben told him..." with great power comes..."

Because of that, when Peter does the right thing, he often suffers for it. Peter Parker (as Spider-Man) does the right thing by saving a couple kids from being run over by a truck. But that makes him late for his delivery, so he loses his job.

He has a very reasonable defense for why—but he can't give it. He cannot tell his boss, "I was late because I'm actually Spider-Man." He has to take it on the chin.

In our passage, we are confronted with this same reality. The churches in Asia Minor are the recipients to Paul's letters are being encouraged about suffering even as they do good. Even as they honor God and do the right thing. And in that encouragement, there is an important instruction about our Christian hope. How we talk about it, how we defend it, even as we are misunderstood, insulted, and/or abused.

### **1 Peter 3:13-17**

There's a lot here in these five verses. Let's remind ourselves of where we came from last week.

Last week, we walked through verses 8-12, and in it, we saw 12 distinct commands given.

- Be tenderhearted
- Be humble
- Seek unity
- Don't repay evil for evil
- Instead, bless others

Essentially, those commands amount to—do what is right! Don't do evil. Do good! Even when it's hard, do what's right!

Peter begins this next section, in the ESV, the first word translated is “Now.”

That word is the Greek word *kai*, which is left untranslated in other translations and is usually translated “and” or “but.” In this case, it is more equivalent to “therefore,” but since that is its own word in the Greek, “now” is a good rhetorical substitute in English. A transition word that builds upon before.

The idea here is that this verse is closely linked to the preceding verses.

### **Because the question in, “Who is there to harm you if you're zealous for what is good?”**

Peter had affirmed in verse 12 that **the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous**, which, is a quotation of Psalm 34.

Of course, this is especially true in view of the final judgment, where those who live righteously will be reward and the wicked will be judged.

So Peter says, Now in view of the fact the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, who is there to harm you if you indeed are **zealous to be righteous?**

### **We have to think about the context of 1 Peter. Let's back up and think about a few things.**

- Who is writing this letter? (Peter)
- When did he write it? (AD 62-62)
- Where was he? (Rome, tradition and the reference to Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13)
- Who was emperor of Rome in AD 62-93? (Nero)

What do we know about Nero from history?

Nero has this reputation for being especially awful toward Christians—and honestly, that reputation is well-earned. When the catastrophic Great Fire of Rome broke out in AD 64, it's well documented that the emperor needed a scapegoat... and he chose the Christians.

We need to clear up a common misconception. It is unlikely that Peter is writing after that event. There's no real historical evidence that Nero's persecution—awful as it was—spread beyond the city of Rome itself. Certainly not as far as Asia Minor, where Peter's audience lived.

Nero often gets labeled as the **worst persecutor** of early Christians. It is probably more accurate to say he's simple the **most famous**. The most widespread and systematic persecutions came later, centuries later, under emperors like Decius and Diocletian.

If we're making a “worst emperors” list when it comes to persecution... Nero probably just barely cracks the top five. He was the first, and it was no picnic. But that probably was't in the “harm” in view here.

**Karen Jobes, in her commentary on 1 Peter, puts it this way:**

“... if Peter had asked during or after the persecutions of Nero, ‘And who is going to harm you if you are zealous to do good?’ Every Christian in the room would probably have shouted, ‘Nero!’”  
Karen H. Jobes, 1 Peter, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

This is a helpful insight.

It means Peter isn’t writing to Christians facing empire-wide persecution—but to ordinary believers dealing with everyday pressure, misunderstanding, and mistreatment.

We can’t say Peter is saying—“Just do good and nothing bad will happen.”

Some people might see verse 13 and think he’s saying, “If you’re doing what’s right, you’ll usually avoid suffering—and only occasionally run into it.” That is not what Peter is saying at all. He is not reading suffering like it’s rare. In fact, throughout the letter, suffering is part of the normal Christian life in a fallen world. It’s something believers should expect in this present age.

Peter is echoing the same idea Paul gets at in Romans 8:31

**“If God is for us, who can be against us?”** Romans 8:31

Paul is not saying Christians won’t face opposition—clearly they do. He’s saying that no opposition can ultimately win. No one gets the final victory over God’s people, because God Himself will see to it that they are vindicated in the end.

Suffering of the righteous is real. And Peter allows for that.

The “even if” here shouldn’t be understood as “but in the rare circumstance where that does happen.” His point is that no one will ultimately or finally harm Christians, “even if” they suffer now, for God’s eyes are on them. Ultimately, He will bless them with eternal life.

Peter himself knows this. He’s already been beaten and imprisoned. Brought before officials and questioned. Right now, he’s walking in relative freedom in Rome. But by this point, Peter’s lost friends and fellow apostles who have been exiled or put to death or thrown in prison.

But he says, “when you do good, and you suffer through it, **have no fear of them, nor be troubled.**”

**“Them”** here is the world. The opposition. Those who persecute you out of ignorance. Peter is adapting a quote from Isaiah from the Greek Translation of the Old Testament and recontextualizing it here. The meaning is the same. “Don’t be afraid of your enemies. But instead, fear and honor the Lord.” This is what we see in verse 15.

**In your hearts, honor Christ the Lord as holy.** The honor doesn’t start in the actions that they take. It starts where? **In the heart.**

I always find this a little ironic. The go-to “defend your faith” verse—the one that gets people fired up about apologetics and knowing all the right answers—starts with a part we don’t quote nearly as much.

Because Peter’s not starting with arguments. He’s starting with **allegiance**. With where your heart is.

This isn’t about knowing more facts. It’s about honoring Christ as Lord.

And I say that as a guy that **loves** knowing facts. The guy that gets a special hit of dopamine anytime I know a cool fact that I think other people don’t know.

If I am making a defense. I **\*Love\*** it. I love to argue. The stupider the better. I’m getting better at leaving things alone. Not yucking other people’s gums because I like to fight about movies or music or books.

At my worst... I’m the “Wicked Witch of the East Bro” meme guy.

Then I went to seminary... it was like, “You’ve met debates? Have you met theology?”

I was like, “I didn’t even know there were this many fights to have—I mean...hopes to defend.”

Imagine my surprise as I dug deeper into this text the past few weeks, and I realize that there isn’t any mention of “knowing more facts” at all.

Let me point out a few things we tend to miss—and I mean we, my self included, probably at the front of the line—when we hear this familiar verse in passing, we don’t slow down long enough to really look at it.

- **First, the context is suffering for righteousness’ sake.**

This is not an academic debate. This is happening in the middle of unjust suffering.

- **Second, the first command isn’t “be ready to argue” — it’s to honor Christ as Lord in your heart.**

Everything else flows from that.

- **Third, the “defense” Peter talks about is centered on hope.**

Not what we believe in general, but the hope that is in us—especially when we’re suffering unjustly.

- **And fourth, the manner of the defense matters.**

Not with fiery, righteous indignation or disdain for our opponent... but with **gentlest and respect**.

And I think if we're honest, that is a very different picture than most of us have in mind when we hear "defend your faith."

So this word "defense"—in the Greek, it's apologia, which literally means a defense or a reasoned response. It is where we get our word apologetics—the idea of giving a defense of our hope in Christ.

Now it is kind of funny, because in English the meaning of "apology" has shifted. When we say "apology" today, we don't mean a defense—we almost mean the opposite. We mean admitting fault, expressing regret, owning that we were wrong.

And yet... even though Peter is talking about a defense here, the tone of it should actually have more in common with what we think of as a modern apology.

In other words, this is not about being defensive. It is about being humble.

Not trying to win. Not trying to prove we're right.

But giving a reason for our hope in a way that is marked by gentleness, respect... and a genuine humility before others.

Another word I want to point out is that word "reason."

The Greek word there is logo—a really rich word with a range of meanings. But here, in this context, it simply means a **reason** or a **cause**, a **basis**—the "why" behind something.

So when Peter says to give a defense for the hope that is in you, he's saying our hope isn't random. It isn't blind. It isn't just wishful thinking.

It has a reason. It has a cause.

And part of our calling is to be ready—gently and respectfully—to show that our hope is not only real... but **reasonable**.

Verse 16 continues the thought from the previous verse—especially when it comes to the manner of our defense.

Peter says: **have a good conscience**.

Which means what? It means you're actually suffering for doing good, not for doing wrong. That should take us right back to what Peter said earlier.

In other words—if you're suffering because you've done wrong...that's not persecution. That's consequences.

And if that's the case, no one is going to hear your "defense"—because you don't really have one.

If you're going to represent Christ, you have to suffer with a **clear conscience**.

Think about how this plays out. We've all seen it—when a Christian leader, a pastor, a public figure is exposed in some hidden sin. Suddenly the criticism comes—and it's not slander. It's true. They're being rightly accused. They're being rightly called out. And the damage isn't just personal—it reflects on Christ and His Church.

And the same principle applies to us.

If we are reviled because we've been hypocritical...then our opponents aren't put to shame. **We are.**

Peter says—live differently. Think back to the virtues we look at in the previous verses last week.

If we come in humbly...if we aim to live rightly before God...if our conscience is clear...then those accusations don't ultimately stick.

The world may still hurl them. They may repeat them over and over again.

But in the end, **they are the ones put to shame.**

Now, sometimes—you even see glimpses of that in this life. There are moments when a consistent, gracious, humble response actually turns the table. The accuser loses credibility. It happens.

But Peter's ultimate meaning isn't this life—it's eternity.

There is a final reckoning coming. And those who mock, slander, and revile the people of God—even as they walk in humility and integrity through unjust suffering—will not have the last word.

God will.

Verse 17 is Peter stating explicitly what we've already seen.

He said it back in 1 Peter 2:20. He implied it again in verse 16 with the idea of having a good conscience. And now here—he says it plainly.

Sometimes...**it is God's will that you suffer for doing good.**

That's not an easy sentence. But it's right there in the text.

- Sometimes doing the right thing costs you.
- Sometimes it costs you a relationship.
- Sometimes it costs you your reputation.
- Sometimes it even costs you your job.

Whether you're Spider-Man delivering pizza...or just trying to faithfully live out your faith in a normal 8-to-5...it can and does happen.

And Peter says—if that should be God's will—it is still far better than suffering because you sinned.

Because that kind of suffering isn't punishment. It's not God's judgment.

It's the very kind of suffering Jesus prepared His disciples for—and Peter heard it with his own ears:

**Matthew 5:10-12**

“Blessed are those we are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In other words—when you suffer for doing what is right...you're not outside of God's will. You're standing right in the middle of it.

Which means the very moments that feel most unfair... are often the moments where our hope shines the clearest.

And that's exactly what Peter is calling us into. So let's talk about what that looks like.

**Application:**

**1. When you suffer, honor Christ as Lord in your heart.**

That doesn't mean we ignore the injustice of it. We don't. We can't. Our brains aren't wired that way. When evil is done to us, our first instinct is always going to be, “That's not right. That's not fair.”

And you know what? That's true. Peter isn't telling believers to repress that. He's not saying, “pretend it doesn't hurt.” He's not minimizing injustice.

**He's reframing it.**

He's saying: “In your heart, honor Christ the Lord as holy.” Start there.

And maybe this morning, you're sitting there thinking: “Yeah, that's easy for you to say, Evan. You work at a church. You're not out there. It's rough. Anytime I even mention Christ, my coworkers turn the whole thing—and me with it—into a punching bag. I've just stopped trying.”

Or maybe it's this: “I don't know how to not get angry. I don't know how to not feel hurt. I've been through real injustice. And the idea of willingly stepping back into that—even to honor Christ—it just feels impossible.”

I get that. And more importantly—**Peter got that.** That’s why we have to start here. If your heart is oriented first and foremost toward Christ... if He is the one you prize above your reputation, your comfort, your sense of being right... then something begins to shift. Your focus changes. Your perspective changes. And you begin to see Him for who He is.

Your great High Priest—like Hebrews 4:15 says—the One who has been tempted in every way that you are...the One who has been reviled, insulted, mocked—far more than you ever will be.

And He is not asking you to do something that he didn’t do himself.

When you suffer, he isn’t distant from you in that. **He is with you.**

And he is saying: “You honor Me... when you don’t return evil for evil. When you love your enemies. When you pray for those who persecute you.”

And here’s the good news:

**You don’t have to manufacture that on your own.**

You can’t. But he will help you do it. But it starts in your heart. It starts with Him at the center.

Not you.

**2. Be ready to speak about your hope.**

This doesn’t mean you need to have every answer to every question. But it does mean your hope is something you’ve actually thought about.

Something you understand. Something you can speak to. And if you’re sitting there thinking, “I don’t feel ready for that...” that’s okay. That’s exactly where growth starts.

One of the most helpful books I’ve read on this is **The Reason for God** by Timothy Keller.

Keller makes the point that a faith that’s never been questioned is actually very fragile.

If you never wrestle with hard questions—your own doubts, or the objections of others—your faith won’t hold up well when it’s tested.

But when you do that work... when you wrestle honestly... you hope becomes grounded.

**Reasoned.**

And therefore, it becomes more Reasonable to you and to others. It becomes something you can actually explain. You don’t need a lofty speech. You just need to be able to answer, simply, directly:

“Why do I still have hope, even in this suffering?”

Because I’m forgiven. Because this isn’t the end. Because my hope isn’t in a place or a platform or platitudes. It’s in a Person. And I’d love for you to meet him.

That's what Peter is calling us to.

### **3. And respond in a way that actually looks like Him**

Because here's the thing: How you say it... matters just as much as what you say.

Peter says, "With gentleness and respect."

And that's where this gets really challenging. I like to remind myself that this is the apostle Peter here writing about gentleness and respect. The dude that is standing there with a sword slicing ears off. This dude was a fighter!

But that same fighter watched Jesus heal that man. That enemy. That soldier who led him away to his death. Do you think that made an impression?

Peter learned, just like we have to learn: the goal isn't to win. It's not to prove someone wrong. It's not to "own" the argument. We can't persuade people to believe in Jesus. To hope in what we hope for.

#### **But when we give our defense, we can look like him.**

And this is where Keller's insight and even just his tone, is so helpful:

#### **Timothy Keller, The Reason for God**

"A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own but their friends' and neighbors'. It is no longer sufficient to hold beliefs just because you inherited them. Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive. And, just as important for our current situation, such a process will lead you, even after you come to a position of strong faith, **to respect and understand those who doubt** [emphasis added].

That's the posture. Not arrogance. Not defensiveness. Not irritation. But humility. Patience. Respect. Because you understand what it's like to wrestle with these things.

"When you suffer, honor Christ as Lord in your heart. Be ready to speak about your hope. And respond in a way that actually looks like Him."

Because when the world is unreasonable... a reasonable hope—lived with humility—stands out.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Peter assumes believers may suffer “for righteousness’ sake” (v.14). What are some modern examples of this kind of suffering—and how is it different from suffering we bring on ourselves?
2. When you face unfair treatment or criticism, what is your natural response? How does that compare to Peter’s call to respond with gentleness and respect (v.15)?
3. What does it practically look like to “honor Christ the Lord as holy in your hearts” (v.15) in the middle of a difficult or unjust situation?
4. Peter says we should be ready to give a reason for our hope. What would you say if someone asked you, “Why do you still have hope?” How prepared do you feel to answer that?
5. How do you respond to the criticism that Christian hope is unreasonable, particularly in the midst of suffering?
6. How can maintaining a good conscience and living with integrity (v.16) actually become a witness to others—even when you’re being mistreated?
7. In what ways will you seek to apply the biblical truths in this section of Peter’s letter?

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