

The Witness of Suffering

1 Peter 3:13-17

Joseph Tson was a pastor in Romania during the sixties and seventies. He was often jailed and beaten because he preached the gospel of Christ. One day when he was being interrogated a man held a gun to his head and told him to renounce his faith. Joseph Tson said, "*Your greatest weapon is to kill me. My greatest weapon is to die.*" He went on to explain that if he were killed, he would become a martyr and other believers would redouble their commitment to Jesus Christ. He understood that suffering as a Christian is a powerful tool in the hand of God.

You and I may or may not be in a situation like Joseph Tson's. But the issue is still the same. When we are mistreated we have a unique opportunity to imitate Christ and suffer well. Instead of offering threats and insults, we can suffer in a way that is strikingly different from the way most people suffer. The principle we'll be exploring today from 1 Peter 3 can be stated this way:

Suffering well can provide our greatest opportunities to share Christ with others.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at 3:8-12, a passage that challenged us to be likeminded, sympathetic, loving, compassionate, humble, laying aside insults and retaliation. As Sam mentioned, if these qualities characterize our lives, others might just be interested in knowing why we live the way we do.

Today's passage, 1 Peter 3:13-17, builds on that passage, describing how we should respond when people mistreat us because we are doing the good works Jesus desires.

13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?

Here Peter asks a rhetorical question to point out that, generally speaking, people don't harm you for doing what is good. When you feed the hungry, help the poor, and comfort people in distress, others tend to respect and appreciate you.

Earlier in this letter Peter urged his readers to realize that this shared morality with the world was their first witness. If the witness of their behavior was strong, they might also be able to witness with their words. In 2:12 Peter wrote, "Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles" so that when they "observe your good deeds" they might "glorify God in the day of visitation." This shared sense of what is good is a bridge between believers and those who don't yet know Christ.

However, beginning in verse 14 Peter also acknowledges that sometimes this is not the case. Sometimes people will mistreat you for good behavior.

14 But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled,

Peter is careful not to say that you don't always suffer for righteousness' sake. But if you do, you will be blessed; you will experience the favor of God in your life, having the sense that God is pleased with you. Remember that Peter had followed Jesus and had heard His teachings. Jesus had taught, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10 NASB95).

Here in our community, we don't experience violent persecution. Any mistreatment we might experience because of righteousness (doing what we understand to be the will of God), is usually rather subtle. A business associate might not appreciate you demanding that you do what's ethical even though it costs you money. You might initiate a conversation about Christ with the purest of motives, and the person accuses you of being judgmental and narrow-minded. In chapter 4 Peter will mention that some people are surprised that you don't participate with them in behaviors that used to characterize your life; in such cases you might find yourself excluded from groups and friendships. So there may be fallout from simply doing what you understand to be the will of God.

At the end of verse 14 Peter quotes from Isaiah 8. Israel had legitimate enemies, but God had promised that one day He would deliver them. To Isaiah God says this (Isaiah 8:11-13):

11 For thus the Lord spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying,
12 "You are not to say, 'It is a conspiracy!'
In regard to all that this people call a conspiracy,
And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it.
13 "It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy.
And He shall be your fear,
And He shall be your dread.

Instead of being consumed with conspiracy theories and with fears of surrounding nations, Isaiah should fear the Lord, acknowledging the superiority of His authority and His strength. Instead of dreading what the enemies of Judah might do to him, Isaiah should (in a sense) dread the consequences of being an enemy of God. In an ultimate sense, the safest person in the world is a friend of God.

Peter makes reference to this passage in Isaiah when he writes in verse 14:

14 . . . And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled,

The man I mentioned in the introduction embodied this truth; Joseph Tson had no fear of those who could only kill the body. Peter urges us not to be afraid of the threats other people make; do not be troubled by them. Instead of fearing other people, we should live in the fear of the Lord (v. 15):

15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;

The term “sanctify” means to revere or to set apart as holy. To “sanctify Christ as Lord” is a command to give Jesus the place of greatest honor in our hearts. Scripture tells us that the heart is the command and control center of our lives; Proverbs 4:23 tells us to “watch over our hearts with all diligence because from it flow the springs of life.” Since Jesus *is* Lord, it only makes sense that we acknowledge Him as such in our hearts - the place from which we live.

To sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts is to say, “Jesus, You are the Lord/master of my life. You have complete authority over my thoughts, emotions, words, and actions. I care what You think more than what other people think. What really matters to me is Your will for my life. You have every right to give me tough assignments. You are always gracious when you give and You are always just when you take away.”

With Christ having first place in our hearts, Peter adds, “always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you. . .” Peter is laying out a scenario in which people actually ask, “What is the deal with you Christians? Tell me about the hope that you exude even though you are mistreated and insulted?” The pronoun in the phrase “the hope that is in *you*” is plural, suggesting that people notice the hope that they see **among** believers. Our life together is supposed to be so intriguing to people that they ask about it. This is one more reason why our unity matters.

In the Bible hope isn’t merely optimism or “staying positive.” It’s much deeper and more substantive. It’s the conviction and confidence that we will not always be living in exile and that God will one day rescue us and make all things new (new heaven and earth). This is sometimes called “the consummation of all things” that begins at the return of Christ. If we have this hope, we won’t become passive or disengaged from this world; rather, we will become zealous for good works in this life. We will see this life as a unique opportunity to represent Christ to people who desperately need the life that only He can give.

Peter says that when people ask about the hope within us, we should be ready to explain ourselves to people. We get the term “apologetics” from the word Peter uses (*apologia*) for “make a defense.” I’m reluctant to say that we should all be proficient in apologetics because that term has such an academic connotation. To be sure, some believers need to be able to make an intellectual, philosophical defense of the Christian faith. But here Peter is talking about something that every believer should be able to do: explain why we have hope and joy and confidence even when we are mistreated and insulted.

This begs the question, “When people look at your life, do they see hope? Do they see you joyful and confident even though you’re suffering? Is there anything distinctive about your life that they don’t see in the world?” Corporately, “When people enter into

our presence - whether on Sunday mornings or in our homes or in life groups - do they see something distinctive about our relationships and the way we talk with each other? Are they intrigued because we don't grumble and complain as if we think we have a right for things to go our way or as if we expect this life to be easy?" In other words, thinking about the overall message of 1 Peter, do they see us as people who know how to live in exile skillfully and joyfully, confident that our exile is only temporary?

Biblically, hope in the midst of being mistreated is the norm, not the exception. This type of extraordinary life is commonly advocated in Scripture, but very uncommon in this world. That's why our passage in 1 Peter 3 tells us that ***Suffering well can provide our greatest opportunities to share Christ with others.*** When people see us having joy and hope when we're mistreated, they may just be intrigued enough to inquire, "What is up with you people?"

This is something we learn in community with each other. Instead of feeding each others' discontentment and bitterness, we encourage each other to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross. We urge each other to imitate Christ in His suffering.

Peter adds that we are to explain our faith "with gentleness and reverence" (better - "respect"). Peter tells us that when/if we have the opportunity to explain our hope/faith, the way we express ourselves should be an asset, not a liability. In relationships in general, gentleness and respect are an asset. When you are gentle and respectful, others tend to hear what you're saying. When you are harsh and condescending, it doesn't matter what you're saying; others will be predisposed to reject what you're saying, even if it's true. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

This past week I was told about a graduate student from South America who was at K-State several years ago who embodied such gentleness and reverence. She became a follower of Christ after she had begun her studies here; when she did her views changed significantly on a number of issues. Specifically, her newfound convictions about marriage and human sexuality changed in ways that put her at odds with others in her department. Apparently she was already a rather passionate, articulate person. But she learned not to pick fights about her newfound convictions, but to ask questions to start a dialog. Through such gentleness and respect she built trust with others in her department.

In verse 16 Peter urges believers to persevere in good behavior, confident that we'll one day be vindicated:

16 and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.

In the world of the Bible, to be "put to shame" isn't so much to be embarrassed but to be defeated (e.g., Psalm 44:7, Psalm 129:5). Peter is urging us to live with the confidence that the enemies of God will one day be defeated in shame. Instead of fearing their

threats, we are to keep a good conscience before God, knowing that one day we'll be vindicated. In light of the reality that those who are faithful to God will be rewarded and those who oppose God will be judged, Peter writes this in verse 17:

17 For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

If we have to suffer unjustly in this world, so be it. It is better to suffer for doing right in this life than to suffer in the next life for "doing what is wrong."

Engaging this life of witness:

In our time remaining I'd like for each of us to think about our own lives and the life we share as a community of believers. Let's consider three questions that mirror the progression we've seen today in 1 Peter 3.

Am I experiencing hope and joy in the midst of my suffering?

I know I'm being Captain Obvious here, but if we're not experiencing genuine, countercultural, biblical hope, nobody is going to ask us about it. Do we experience hope and joy when we're mistreated as followers of Christ or when we suffer in ways common to humanity (sickness, loss, broken relationships)? These qualities are the byproduct of sanctifying Christ as Lord in our hearts. It's only when Jesus is Lord in our lives that we are able to suffer as He suffered. Periodically it's good for every single one of us to spend time in the presence of God honestly asking, "Are there any areas of my life I have not submitted to the Lordship of Christ?" When such areas become obvious we enter into a lifestyle of repentance and obedience.

If you're in a tough place in your life right now, don't hear me saying that there's necessarily something deficient in your walk with God. Almost all of us (including me) experience seasons of struggle and sadness and discouragement. Trusting God through the tough times is something that can become part of your witness to others.

Am I living an appropriately transparent life?

It's possible that we have hope and joy in the midst of suffering but we're not letting other people see our lives. The consistent teaching of the NT is that we should live a transparent life, one that puts the life of Christ on display for others to see.

Jesus said "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). It's true that Jesus said we should perform righteous acts simply to impress people (Matthew 6). There is a tension here. But nobody is going to inquire about our hope unless there is an appropriate degree of transparency in our lives.

Our transparency with people outside the body of Christ is an extension of our transparency with at least a few others inside the body of Christ. If you never talk about what God is doing in our life with other believers, it's highly unlikely that you'll do so with

people who don't yet believe. But if you do learn how to talk about your faith naturally, you can learn to be appropriately transparent with friends/acquaintances who don't yet believe.

This can look very different for different ones of us, but here are some examples that came to mind this past week. I know that many of you are involved in various organizations and efforts around town that meet very tangible needs: FIT Closet, foster care, Homecare and Hospice, Thrive, Life Choice Ministries, Relate 360, BBBS, etc. When you talk with your friends about your involvement in these organizations, what if you took the opportunity to explain your convictions as a follower of Christ. You could even share a Scripture such as Matthew 25 where Jesus said that what you do to "the least of these" you do unto Him! Or you could explain how you try to treat others the way God in Christ has treated you: He has shown you more grace than you deserve, so you seek to shower others with grace.

This type of transparency might require deeper relationships than you currently have with people. You might need to begin cultivating honest friendships with people who are only acquaintances now. Over time your appropriately transparent life can bear fruit.

Am I ready to explain this hope to those who notice?

People may not come out and say, "Tell me about the hope within you," or "Why do you have hope and joy when things don't go your way?" But they might say, "I admire you for the way you care for people in our community." If someone is intrigued at our lives, we need to be able to explain our lives in terms of what **God** has done through Christ. In this way we glorify God instead of ourselves. Honestly, learning to tell your story and learning to talk about God's work in your life is one of the most strategic things you can do if you want God to use you in others' lives.

One of the exciting things about this life of witness is that you don't have to be flawless, you don't have to know everything, and you don't have to understand everything that's happening in this world. You mainly need to be experiencing God in the midst of whatever is happening in your life (the good times and the tough times). Then you need to be ready and willing to give a firsthand account of what God is doing. This is the will of God for every believer. This is His plan for reaching a community, a nation, and the world.