

Mission Month - The hope in Christianity

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[0 : 0 0] All righty, well, by show of hands, who was here either on Friday evening or yesterday?! Oh, very good, a good few of you. So hopefully you're not too tired of hearing my voice at! this stage, because we've been together for a little while. But yeah, this morning we're going to be in 1 Peter 3, verses 13 to 16. It is one of my favorite sections of Scripture, and hopefully I'll be able to share a little bit of why, you know, given the work that I feel the Lord has called me to be doing, but has also called every single one of us to be doing.

I'll be able to share a bit of that. With Solus, you know, I mentioned the work that I do with going out to universities a lot of the time and speaking to students on campuses and really trying to show that the Christian faith is true and actually makes sense of life, I think, better than anything else, any other worldview or religion. And as I'm going about and doing that, what I encounter a lot of the time is misunderstandings. People have a lot of misunderstandings. And so on that note, there were three daughters who left home and went out to be on their own and all became quite successful. We can click to the next slide if you don't mind. But getting back together, they all discussed the lovely gifts that they'd gotten for their elderly mother, because it was her birthday coming up. The first said, I have built mom a big new house. She's absolutely going to love it.

Not too bad. The second says, oh, you know, very, very good. But, you know, I have got her a brand new Mercedes with her own personal driver. Very good, said the third sister, but I've got you both beat.

You know how mom enjoys reading the Bible, but, you know, her eyes are getting a bit bad and so she can't see that well anymore. So, I have got her a talking parrot that can recite the entire Bible.

It took 12 monks in a monastery two years to teach him. I had to pledge to contribute 2,000 pounds a year for the next two years, but totally worth it. All mom has to do is name the chapter and the verse, and there you go. This parrot will recite it. Pretty cool. Soon after, their mother sent each of them a letter of thanks. To the first daughter, she wrote, Melinda, thank you so much for the gift, but this house you built is just too big. You know, I only really live in one room. It's too big for me to clean. Please can we make a plan and get something smaller? To the second daughter, she wrote, my dearest Mavis, I'm getting too old. I don't go out much. As lovely as this car is, it's just, you know, a bit extravagant. And frankly, the driver is a bit rude. Please can we sack him?

[2 : 4 4] Oops. To the third daughter, she wrote, my dearest Marigold, you were the only girl with the good sense to know what your dear old mother really likes. Thank you so much for the chicken you sent over. It was absolutely delicious. I think I like telling that more than people like hearing it.

But it just tees up the reality of misunderstandings. Sometimes we can really just get the wrong impression of what's going on, and that happens when it comes to our faith. As I say, I'm going around campuses and speaking to people in different settings, and even in churches, a lot of the time we have misunderstandings. You know, who was Jesus? Sometimes is the question I get. Did he even exist?

You know, what about the Bible? Isn't it just this corrupted tool used to oppress other people? Isn't it full of mistakes and contradictions? What about ethics? Aren't Christians bigots if they believe the Bible to be true? What about the sciences? I spend many years studying and working in the sciences, and the question comes up all the time, you know, doesn't science disprove God?

You know, doesn't it? You know, God has closed, science has closed all the gaps that we once used to fill with this idea of God. You know, all these really big questions. And again, you know, you Christians are just so narrow. How dare you say that there's only one way to salvation?

Right? Lots of big questions, lots of misunderstandings. And I think increasingly so, we've seen this over the years with a rise in antagonism to the Christian faith, where sticking to your Christian convictions might actually get you in a little bit of trouble, you know, in the face of these misunderstandings and all of that. And you hear this often. I mean, you look at the news, and you see headlines about people even losing their jobs for sticking to their guns and sticking to their faith. And just being, you know what, I just believe the Bible is true, and communicating that actually getting them in trouble. You look at the headlines recently about things happening around the world, specifically in places like Nigeria, where Christians are really being persecuted because of what they believe, because of their faith. So it's intense, and it's real, and we need to reckon with it. But at the same time, it's not all bad news. It's not all doom and gloom.

[5 : 05] It's a sort of bit of a down at the beginning, but it's not all bad. There's also a wonderful opportunity that we have. As you read the headlines about the term that's been used is this idea of a quiet revival and openness to spirituality that is really on the increase. And so people are, seems to be anyway, people are slightly more receptive to hearing about faith, hearing about the gospel. And I think more and more people, the reason for this is that people are really feeling disheartened, right? They're feeling disheartened as they look around in culture and see that the world hasn't delivered on its promises. You know, the promise of technology. It hasn't delivered all of the joy that it promised. Politics really just, you know, seemed to be an endless muddle, right? And science, as good as it is, seems to have, you know, also raised more questions than provided solutions a lot of the times. And it doesn't answer life's biggest questions.

And so what this has led to, I think, in many ways, is this overarching mood of anxiety and worry, widespread confusion, and many times, hopelessness. Hopelessness. And so as we look around at the state of the world, I think people are honestly looking for something true and something lasting, something that can go the distance and bear the weight of our human hopes and desires.

And so if you're a Christian here this morning, I think you would agree with me that we know what that hope is. We know what that fulfillment is. And that is the gospel. It is the true and lasting hope that we find in Jesus Christ. And the Christian worldview, I think, the Christian faith makes sense of the world, and we have something amazing to offer in terms of this hope of the gospel.

And so we have the commission to do that and the opportunity. And that is where we come to this passage this morning that we've had read. It's very short, so I'm going to read it again for us. And you can just follow along if we can have that up on the screen again. Oh, very good. Head of the game.

So 1 Peter 3, 13 to 16 says, Now who is there to harm you if you're zealous for what is good? I've got the ESV here. But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.

[7 : 28] Have no fear of them, nor be troubled. But in your heart, 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. Having a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. So what's going on here? What's a bit of the context?

You know, prior to this section, what has the Apostle Peter been doing in this letter to the church? And it is to the church very broadly. Well, he's been exhorting the church to holy living, to be living a life of love and compassion toward one another, not repaying evil for evil as the world would do, but rather, on the contrary, repaying evil with a blessing. And so if you go and read the section leading up to this, and I hope later today you would actually go and do that, I think as Peter does that, the words of Jesus are probably on his mind when he thinks to Jesus' radical teaching of turning the other cheek and loving your enemies, right? I think that's important because this exhortation that we see here that Peter has given us is to a church that is under intense persecution.

And this is in Rome under the Emperor Nero at the time where Christians were being tortured and killed for their faith, and the church in Jerusalem was being scattered, right? And so it's into that when verse 13 he says, who then will harm you if you're devoted to what is good? But even if, even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear them or be intimidated.

And so just a couple of observations. The first is that we don't fear people. We fear God. We don't fear people. We fear God. Peter is not saying to go out and seek persecution, but he says even if it comes, don't be intimidated. Don't be intimidated. And I think reflecting on the Western church, especially and maybe in the UK and the West in general, I think in many times what we've been concerned with more than other things is our comfort. It's our comfort. And so we've pulled back from doing anything or saying anything that might cause offense to other people, because then it might lead to a tough conversation, and that's uncomfortable. It might lead to persecution, some real implications for my job and for my life. And so what we do is, okay, we're just going to take a step back and maybe another step back and maybe another step back until the idea of sharing our faith and going out there and not having fear is just so far from our minds. And so what Peter is doing here is exhorting us and saying, no, no, no, we don't fear people. We don't fear people. We have something amazing that we take out to the world, even if it leads to a bit of strife, even if it leads to persecution. And then he moves to verse 15, where we'll spend some time. It says, but in your hearts, regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

Now, this is the classic verse that people go to for something called apologetics. Now, you may be hearing that word for the first time or maybe not, but you might be thinking, Apollo, what are you actually talking about? Is that about apologizing for our faith?

[11 : 10] Well, actually, no. This is taken from the Greek word apologia, right? Apologia, depends who you ask. But that word is translated defense, right? Always be prepared to give an apology, a defense, a reason, right? I remember when I first sort of discovered this whole thing of apologetics, and I thought, oh, this is great. I didn't even know this is a thing. And I went to my gran, who is a good, faithful Christian lady, and said, oh, gran, I just love this apologetic stuff. And she was like, oh, nonsense, nonsense. I will never apologize for my faith. I was like, I don't think that's what we're saying, gran, but thank you. Amen. Amen to that. It's a word that's really used in more legal type settings, right? It's not about apologizing. It's about giving a logical or reasoned or persuasive explanation or answer for something. And in particular here, it's about a reasonable and persuasive explanation of the Christian faith and our hope in the gospel.

Okay, but before Peter really gets there to this whole reasoning and defending, I think he gives us three things to think about. Three thoughts related to that. And these are, and these will be sort of my main points, the heart of the Christian, the mind of the Christian, and the hope of the Christian.

And so the first there is the heart of the Christian. Okay, before any of this reasoning and all that, he says, but in your hearts, this is the starting point, but in your hearts, regard Christ the Lord as holy.

See, we're all called to be able to give a reason for the hope that we have. But before we get there, we have to have hearts that are orientated toward Jesus, hearts that know him, hearts that love him and serve him and worship him above all else. That is the starting place, right? And so if we haven't ourselves done that, if we haven't experienced the love of Christ and sat at his feet through intentional communion by being with him, being in his word, being in prayer, being in the body of Christ that is in community with other people, there is no way we're ever going to be able to fulfill this commission that we're called to by giving a reason and a defense, right? Our hearts should be so enamored by the gospel that it drives out all fear. If you don't have that, then there will be fear, right? But perfect love drives out fear. And so that is why it starts with knowing Jesus, really knowing him for ourselves. That is the starting point. And so you might not be the most eloquent person with all the answers. I definitely am not, as those who've been here this weekend will be like, he definitely is not. No, I'm joking. But what I have, and what you also do have, is a heart that you can daily commit to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. That is what all of us have, and that is the most important thing. That is the starting point. It's, but in your hearts, regard Christ the Lord as holy.

The second point is the mind of the Christian. The mind of the Christian. It says, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

[14 : 27] A few years ago, I worked with a lady who is a very, very ardent atheist. And we got into discussions about religion quite often. If you hear here yesterday, you would have told the story of how I use questions of, you know, what do you mean by that? Or why do you think that when she asked very hard questions or had these objections? And I remember once, very early on in chatting to her, I said, oh no, yeah, I'm a Christian because I think there's great evidence for the truth of Christianity. And she like stopped in her tracks and looked at me as though I'd stolen cake from a child, like appalled. How could you say that? Evidence for your faith? In her mind, it's all just blind faith. Either you believe it or you don't. There's no evidence for it. You know, she'd never come across any of this stuff. The church that she'd been in, she told me, had really not been open to kind of questions and asking things and digging deep and trying to find answers. And that had left a mark on her.

And so her mind, in her mind, it was all just blind faith. But on the contrary, the Christian faith, Christianity is grounded in reason and evidence. And I think sadly, and this is the point, I think the church has in so many ways listened to what the world has told us about this idea of blind faith. And so what we've done is we've retreated from engaging in the tough questions. We've just retreated from the me like, no, no, I have my faith and that's all that matters. I just got my faith. No, no, of course it starts with faith. Of course it's bathed in faith and undergirded by faith and faith permeates it.

But there's reason and evidence at the same time. We're not called to switch our brains off, right? We've so often retreated from a discipleship of the mind. And that's the opposite of what Peter is calling us to, right? So now that is the rational side. There is the rational side, but of course there is also the side of the emotion. And that is something we cannot negate. But what Peter is saying here is engage the mind along with the heart. Here are just a couple of verses that speak to that.

Matthew 22, 37 says, Jesus speaking, quoting Deuteronomy, he says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. 2 Corinthians 10, 5, we demolish arguments. This is Paul speaking. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. And we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ, right? Sometimes that verse is used to say something around, you know, no, we take sinful thoughts captive. I think that is true. Obviously, we take them to the cross and to Christ. But in its context here, this is primarily about talking about philosophies and worldviews and religions that would deny the deity of Christ. They would deny that he is indeed God in the flesh. And he says those arguments, not the people, but the arguments need to be demolished.

Well, that's tough. But that's what we're called to. Here are just very quickly a couple of instances I see through the book of Acts where this happens. It's not just a, hey, we're just going to have faith. It's like, no, no, engaging with people, understanding where they're at, understanding what their worldview is, and saying, okay, based on where they are, how do I engage them with the gospel? The first is Acts 2, where we see Peter. He reasons with the Jews from Scripture that Jesus is the Messiah. He reasons with them. That language is there. Acts 5, devout Jews from every nation living under Jerusalem is how he starts speaking to them. He understands who they are, and then he speaks to them, pointing out that Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy, and he demonstrates that Jesus meets the specific expectations that they have. And so he understands that, no, they acknowledge the Old Testament as being something that is the source of authority, and so he appeals to that, and he uses this familiar language.

[18 : 29] He speaks about the Lord and the Messiah. And so he doesn't just assert with them that the resurrection is true. What he does is he interprets it to them. He interprets it to them. And so he's basically saying, did this really happen? Yes, it did. And what does that actually mean? What is the significance of that?

Go and read Acts 2. It's brilliant. We see it again in Acts 17 now, and it's not Paul, it's Peter. I'm sorry, it's not Peter, but it's Paul now in Acts 17, where he takes a very, very different approach, understanding that these Greek philosophers that he's speaking to, they don't recognize the Old Testament as their source of authority. What does he do? He learns their philosophy. He learns about some of their poets, and they're big thinkers, and he knows about it. He can actually quote them, and that's where he meets them. He understands these Greeks were more Platonic in their thinking, and so he engages in philosophical reasoning with them at the Areopagus in Athens, right? And he appeals not to the Old Testament, but he appeals to the sense of divinity and what's called natural theology. He appeals to the world around us and saying, hey, you know, you know, there is this, you acknowledge there is this unknown God, and let me bring to you who he is, right? And so he finds another point of contact with them. It's not, hey, here's the Old Testament hope of the Messiah that he speaks to the Pharisees with and the Jews with, like we see with Peter in Acts 2, but here he says, oh, no, no, there's something else. There's this unknown God. Let me come and explain to you who that is. It's the point of contact, right? Because these guys, they didn't have any Old Testament background. They didn't know the Old Testament scriptures at all, and so Paul appealing to that wouldn't have made any sense, right? Yeah. So, I mean, Peter appeals in Acts 2 to the book of

Scripture, the Old Testament that they would have been familiar with, but Paul appeals to the book of nature, right? And so we see this happening. It's different engagement with people in different ways, understanding their background, understanding the audience. And so Paul believed in the theological truth and the apologetic importance of this, right? And then later in Acts again, we see another really different approach. Acts 24 to 26, we see Paul again, but he doesn't interact in the way he did in Acts 17. Rather, he's now in the Roman legal system. And he, as you look at the structure that he gives, experts on the time and the text there would say, oh, no, what he's doing here is he's entering in to the Roman legal system, and he puts forth a defense that would have been structured according to the rules and regulations of sort of legal system interaction. And that's, again, really important.

He understood, okay, now I'm stepping into this setting. I have to understand the people that I'm going to speak to. And so the way I communicate the gospel is different. It's not a different gospel, but the way I interact with them is different. And so that's basically the point of just showing those three instances is, in a nutshell, to say we, it's not a cookie cutter approach. And it's understanding people. It's doing them the service of saying, hey, let's sit together as I'm going to bring a reason and a defense for the hope of the gospel. Do I understand the person sitting in front of me? Or do I just view them as some kind of project? That won't work, right? We have to understand and love people well, understand what's going on in their lives before we can reach them properly with the gospel, I think. So how do we do that better ourselves? To make a start, you know, I've thrown a lot at you there. Go to the Solus website. You'll find some good resources to start that. Find a decent book on apologetics or evangelism. Lots out there. Come chat to me afterwards. Speak to your pastor. Speak to James. Speak to the elders here. Find an older, wiser Christian who can help point you in the right direction of, hey, where do I find these answers? How do I interact with this kind of person or this kind of person who might be dealing with this or that? How does the gospel meet that person in their need? And then pray that God will bring you opportunities to engage with people about your faith. And I think he definitely will. The point is that I think we're all called to train our minds to be able to give a defense and a reason for our faith, as Peter calls us to. Some of us are more gifted than that, you know, at that or better equipped maybe, but all of us have a reason for the hope that we have. All of us have that reason. Do you know what that reason is? I suppose, have you ever actually stopped to think about what is your hope in? What is the gospel all about? How is that impacting your life? You need to stop and dwell on that for a little while. You don't necessarily need to be able to rattle off like 10 lines of evidence for the resurrection, although, you know, that would be useful. But what you can do when you're interacting with someone is just calmly and honestly share about what the Lord has done and is doing for you and to you. And that is all part of sharing the hope.

It is the rational. It is the experiential at the same time. So then next is the heart. Sorry, we've seen the heart of the Christian, the mind of the Christian, and now third, the hope of the Christian. I've been alluding to this a lot. You know, in verse 15, always in your hearts regard Christ the Lord is holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks for a reason. It doesn't end there, not just a reason for anything, a random reason, but a reason for the hope that is in you, right? What is that Christian hope? I don't want to assume that everyone sitting here knows what that hope is today or has fully laid hold of that hope. Maybe you might think it's all about me getting myself together, having my life in order, having followed all the rules, having done enough good deeds for a while and not done all the crazy stuff that I've kept on doing because then I'll be good enough to God and then God will hear my prayers and then God will enter me into his presence and I'll be able to come to him. But I have to get there first.

[24 : 38] It's not at all that. That is not the gospel. That is not the hope. That is what any other worldview and religion would say. It's all about you working your way up to God, right? That is where Christianity is so radically different. Radically different. It's basically saying all of us have fallen short. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and we can't make it up. We can't climb the ladder. We can't get close enough to him ever, any of us. And so God in his mercy sees us in that fallen state and he himself steps in to find us. And that is what the coming of Christ is all about. God himself was born into this world in the person of Jesus Christ. He lived the perfect life. He died the death we deserve and then he was resurrected to new life, proving that he is God in the flesh, proving that death is not the end and proving that there is forgiveness when we come to him, just as he taught. John 3, 16, God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Not whoever works their way up, whoever follows enough rules, you know, follow these 12 rules and you'll find, you know, a better life and success or follow these five steps and these, this program and you'll find transcendence and enlightenment and then you'll have eternal life. No, no, it's it's whoever believes. It is faith. It is receiving God's gift of grace that we do not deserve.

That is the hope. That is what Christianity is all about. Right? And that's what Jesus has done. And as you come to him and experience his love and experience his regeneration from the Holy Spirit, you are then transformed from the inside to live a new kind of life, to be free of your continual brokenness and actually live a life with your creator who loves you. That is the hope, or just part of anyway, the hope of Christianity and the truth of it. And it is true. So we have the heart of the Christian, the mind of the Christian, the hope of the Christian. I'm going to throw in the last one here, the character of the Christian, the character of the Christian. In verse 16, yet do this. All of this that we speak about, this, this answering, this engaging, all of it, do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping a clear conscience so that when you are accused by those who disparage your good conduct, they will be put to shame. You may not be able to keep people speaking evil of you or speaking badly about your faith, but what you can do, and this is something, it's sad we have to even say that something you can do is stop giving them ammunition for that, right? And the reason I say that is not too long ago, I was out speaking at a university, and a question, a young guy stood up, and he said, you know, if Christianity is so good, why are so many Christians jerks? I was like, thank you for your honesty, and it is true. It is true. So much of the time, and social media is just where you go for this. You don't, like, just don't go to comment sections on videos sometimes. It's like, it's where hope goes to die, really. But this, it's just too true. Sometimes the way that we engage people, often, I think more of the time, the way that we engage people says so much more than what we're actually saying, okay? And so that, and that is exactly what Peter says. He's saying, do this with the reverence, your whole life in reverence to Christ. That means living out the love and the generosity and the gentleness that Christ displayed as we go to love a broken world that so desperately needs the gospel. As people see that, they see that you take an interest in them, that you really love them, then they will actually listen to what we have to say. And so the life that we live and the reason that we give will then sing in harmony of the redemptive power and truth of Jesus Christ and the eternal hope that we have in him. Won't you bow your heads and pray with me before we sing again?