

# Prepared to answer

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 05 September 2021

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

- [ 0 : 00 ] We're reading this morning from God's Word in 1 Peter chapter 3 from verse 13 into chapter 4 at verse 11.
- Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats.
- Do not be frightened. But in your hearts, revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.
- But do this with gentleness and respect. Keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.
- For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins.
- [ 1 : 18 ] The righteous for the unrighteous. To bring you to God. He was put to death in the body, but made alive in the spirit.
- After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits. To those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.
- In it, only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water. And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also.
- Not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- Who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand. With angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.
- [ 2 : 22 ] Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude. Because whoever suffers in the body has finished with sin.
- As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires. But rather for the will of God.
- For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do. Living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.
- They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living. And they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.
- For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead. So that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body.
- [ 3 : 33 ] But live according to God in regard to the spirit. The end of all things is near. Therefore, be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray.
- Above all, love each other deeply. Because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others. As faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides.

So that in all things, God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever.

[ 4 : 45 ] Amen. Amen. Okay, 1 Peter chapter 3. Grab that again if you've lost your place in your Bibles.

Let me start by explaining what I'm planning this morning. Brian read for us chapter 3 verse 13 on into chapter 4. We read that section because most commentaries agree that a new section begins here at verse 13 and runs on for a while even beyond for 11.

It's helpful to us to get some wider context for what we're going to be looking at today. But as we often do, the sermon is focusing on a smaller section than what we've read.

So I'm going to deal today with chapter 3 from verse 13 through to the end. And chapter 4 we'll keep for later. But within that section, the last part of chapter 3, verses 19 through 21, Jesus going and making proclamation to the spirits.

These verses are notoriously complicated to understand. So we're not going to tackle them today, okay? If you can cast your mind way back to the before times.

[ 5 : 56 ] Some of you might recall we were doing a series kind of once a month looking at the Apostles' Creed, working our way through that ancient statement of faith. Easter last year, we got up to Jesus' sufferings and death and burial in the Creed.

And there we paused. Because the next line in the Creed is, He descended into hell, which is the most debated line of the Creed. So next week, we're going to pick up that series in the Apostles' Creed and ask exactly what we do or do not mean when we say, Jesus descended into hell.

And with that question, we then have this related, though certainly not identical, this related question of what on earth Peter is talking about in verse 19 when he talks about Jesus making proclamation to the imprisoned spirits.

So next week, we're going to have some complicated questions to deal with, okay? So you can either dread that or look forward to it according to your own character. That's for next week.

Today, we're going to touch on aspects of verses 18 to 22, but really we're focusing on the straightforward arguments in verses 13 through 17, okay? So 13 to 17 today, descent into hell next week, and then chapter 4 on the 19th.

[ 7 : 12 ] And verses 13 to 17 flows together quite nicely and smoothly. But to focus our thinking, we're going to focus on two headings here in these few verses.

First, confidence in the face of suffering, and then secondly, boldness in the face of questions. Confidence in suffering, boldness when we are asked questions.

So confidence in the face of suffering. Hopefully, you've picked up by now on the idea that responding well when we suffer, when we're persecuted, that this is a major theme of Peter's letter that he writes here.

He's thinking about how they were to respond when persecuted, and so too we think of these things today. Back in verse 6 of chapter 1, already talking about suffering, grief in all kinds of trials.

Chapter 2, he talks to slaves suffering under unjust masters and calls them to bear up under that pain, that reminder that we're all as believers called to suffering because Christ suffered for us as an example for us to follow.

- [ 8 : 17 ] And then last week, the call of verses 8 through 12 to repay evil with blessing when we're persecuted, to respond not by getting our own back, but with blessing.
- It's a recognition very clearly in what Peter writes that we are likely to face evil done against us. That is a reality for them, and it is a reality for us as well.
- Now, given that, doesn't verse 13 come across somewhat bizarrely? Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?
- Well, lots of people are going to harm us if we're eager to do good, aren't they? That's what you've just spent two and a half chapters establishing. Precisely under unjust suffering, you told the slaves to bear up, Peter.
- They're trying to do good. They suffer. It's a weird question, isn't it? Who's going to harm you if you're eager to do good? And so some commentators conclude, well, Peter must be writing before any persecution has actually got serious, certainly prior to the emperor Nero with his horribly imaginative torture of Christian believers.
- [ 9 : 33 ] Maybe he just doesn't really understand the suffering that is going to be real. It doesn't really seem to fit with the rest of what he's written, though, does it? Others say, well, verse 13 has kind of a general expectation.
- It will normally be true that if you're eager to do good, people won't be keen to harm you. And then verse 14 kind of grudgingly admits of exceptions.
- Now, maybe there's something to that. Because we do live in this world where the general expectation is that one good turn deserves another. That responding in kind is reasonable and appropriate.
- That when you're faced with an attack, well, maybe you do fight back. But that when you do good things, normally we expect good. That is kind of a general expectation in society as a whole.
- And so then it will be true that people are less likely to harm those who are eager to do good. And I think it's fair to say that Peter expects in the preceding chapters that in many situations there will be that kind of good response to good things being done.
- [ 10 : 42 ] That there will be at least a grudging respect offered by the pagan world around them to the Christians who Peter says should be not able to be faulted for their behavior.
- That they will have to recognize what's going on. So I think there's something to that possibility of verse 13 as a general expectation. But there's more here, I think.
- Verse 13 is clarified when we read it in light of verse 12. The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayers. This is the promise that comes through in Psalm 34 that we were just singing.
- And verse 13 stands against that background. And verse 13 calls to mind other passages of God's Word. Like Isaiah saying, it is the sovereign Lord who helps me.
- Who will condemn me? Or Paul writing to the Romans, if God is for us, who can be against us? That's the kind of context, the world in which verse 13 exists.
- [ 11 : 44 ] In other words, it doesn't focus so much on whether or not other people might try to harm us. Might try to harm us. No, it focuses more on whether they will succeed in doing so.
- If God is watching over you, then you do not need to fear even the worst of suffering and persecution because it cannot ultimately harm you. And if you understand verse 13 in that light, then verse 14 is not so much a grudging exception to a general rule as an extension, a strengthening of the same points.
- So Peter reminds his readers of more words from the prophet Isaiah. Verse 14 picks up on Isaiah chapter 8. Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy. Do not fear what they fear and do not dread it.

And so Peter writes, even if you do suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats. Do not be frightened. Do not fear what they fear. He takes that verse from Isaiah and kind of clarifies and contextualizes it for his audience.

That whatever might be threatened, you do not need to be afraid. Because instead of fearing them, verse 15, you must revere Christ.

[ 12 : 59 ] Now fear and reverence. We don't necessarily always think of them in the same breath, but they are actually really quite close concepts. That you replace the fear of man with reverence for God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fear and reverence stand very close together. And we do, all of us, we have times where we're inclined to fear the situation that we're in, aren't we?

We're inclined to fear what others around us will do. We go into a new team at work and we wonder how our colleagues are going to view us and how they will consider our faith.

Or we take the bold step of standing up for some aspect of Christian ethics to our friends from the knitting club and we worry that they're going to mock us for it. We move to the other side of the country to study.

And we wonder how our flatmates will respond when we're not interested in spending Freshers' Week the same way that they intend to. That maybe we might like to remember some of the evenings of Freshers' Week a few weeks afterwards.

[ 14 : 09 ] We fear how people will respond, how they will react to what we say and do. Not typically fearing physical harm, but we very much fear mockery, emotional harm, or we fear that our career progress will be stifled and so on.

We fear these things. But Peter says that we need not fear these threats. Indeed, that we should not fear these threats. Whether the threats are explicit or implicit, we need not fear them, but rather revere Christ as Lord.

But there's more than that. It's not just that we should not fear. There's more. Do you see in the middle of verse 14, Peter says not only can you withstand suffering for what's right, not only can you bear up in the midst of it, but in fact in doing so you are blessed.

If you suffer for what is right, you are blessed. It's interesting, isn't it? Most of us are probably inclined to characterize suffering and blessing as pretty much polar opposites.

You know, they don't go together, do they? But the New Testament consistently shows us, in fact, the two can exist alongside one another. And even more than the fact that you can have both at the same time, actually suffering can be a form of blessing.

[ 15 : 33 ] Not just you can suffer and be blessed at the same time, the suffering itself can be a form of blessing. It's what Jesus taught, isn't it?

Matthew 5, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Blessed are those who are persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. Clearly part of the blessing that Jesus is talking about there, clearly part of it is future, great is your reward in heaven.

But that's not incompatible with what Peter says, because both Jesus and Peter are also talking in terms of present blessing. Blessing right now in the midst of suffering.

Karen Job suggests that blessing may encompass the joys and riches of life, but for Peter, the privilege of living rightly because of Christ and suffering for it is nothing less than a blessing, a sign of God's favor and evidence of one's salvation.

[ 16 : 40 ] The privilege of living rightly because of Christ and suffering for it is a blessing and sign of God's favor. It's not always easy to see how that can be the reality, is it?

It doesn't feel like what we experience. But God's word is clear that it is.

And maybe one aspect of that blessing, maybe one aspect of it is that as you stand for Christ in the face of persecution, as you show the genuineness of your faith, as you show to yourself the sufficiency of Christ that enables you to bear up and stand strong.

So that is a blessing to you, that you look and see this suffering is terrible, but Jesus is sufficient in it. He is carrying me through it.

I can see that I am able to withstand this because of Christ at work within me. That the fact that you have seen your faith being tested shows to you the genuineness of it.

[ 17 : 56 ] This is one aspect, I think, of the blessing of suffering. But another aspect, I think, is the blessing of the impact that this experience can have on others.

See, Peter, several times over the preceding verses, he's referred to the possibility that others will glorify God as a result of the Christian's good deeds. And it seems to me at least plausible that such is in view here, that through suffering, others will come to glorify.

Because suffering is, in at least some sense, is an opportunity. Think about the persecution that the apostles went through.

They were called before public courtrooms. They were called before princes and governors. Called to defend why they had been proclaiming the good news of the gospel.

Called to give an account of what they have been doing. And through this persecution, through this imprisonment that they went through before getting to the courtroom, well, through this suffering, they have this opportunity.

[ 19 : 04 ] This opportunity to make a public defense. An opportunity to speak with the great and the good. You don't normally, in the everyday, get to go and speak to the governor and tell him about Jesus.

And yet, by being persecuted, by spending that time in prison, you now have this opportunity to stand in the governor's audience chamber and say, this is the good news of the gospel.

This is what I've been talking about. The suffering provides an opportunity. And maybe, for us, that kind of public, formal opportunity isn't going to come.

Though the prospect that some of us might stand in court, called to account, it is not, you know, beyond the realm of possibility. But even without that public, formal opportunity, it seems to me that this willingness to repay evil with blessing that we were thinking about last week, that this is a powerful witness.

So the suffering, the evil done against you, is an opportunity to return with blessing. And that is, to you and to them, a blessing.

[ 20 : 21 ] All right. That brings us to the second half of verse 15. Second heading this morning. Boldness in the face of questions. Peter says, Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

If you were thinking back at verse 1 of this chapter, if you were thinking that Peter was commending the possibility of winning people without words, well, here is evidence that he doesn't expect that to work universally.

That it is certainly not always the case that you win someone without words. In at least some situations, an answer will be needed. The message of the gospel is contained in words.

So, let's break it down. What is Peter commending in this verse? Point one, this is for everyone. Well, Peter's saying here, this is part of the same address that began up in verse 8.

All of you be like-minded. And it kind of runs on from there onwards. There isn't a new address to a separate group of people. No, this is all of you to whom Peter writes.

[ 21 : 30 ] All of us who want to stand as their spiritual successors. All of you are to revere Christ as Lord. And part of revering Christ as Lord is all of you must be prepared to give an answer.

So, whilst this verse is rightly foundational for the academic discipline of apologetics, it comes from the Greek apologia, and that's the word being translated answer here.

So, if people talk about apologetics, that's where it's coming from. Apologetics as a discipline is focused on giving logical answers, on answering common questions, on responding to philosophical or scientific attacks on Christian doctrine and faith.

And there are people who study this full-time, who work in universities and theological colleges, focused on apologetics. Organizations focused around this goal, the Solas Center for Public Christianity, based over in Dundee.

There's people for whom apologetics is their full-time job, and for them this verse is foundational. But that is not Peter's focus here, is it? He doesn't say, some of you go and prepare to give an answer.

[ 22 : 36 ] No, this is for everyone. To all who believe in Christ, Peter says, you should be able to give an answer. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that you can give the most fully-fledged answer to every conceivable question that somebody who's devoted their life to it full-time will be able to give.

But it does mean you should have some kind of an answer to the questions that people are asking. Peter says, be prepared to give an answer. So first, everyone prepared to answer.

Second, answer the person who is actually asking the question. Peter says, you should be able to answer anyone who asks. And that implies that the answer that you give to that person is going to be intelligible to them.

And I think that's where we often fall down. Because you and I, we spend such a high proportion of our time around other Christians that some of our vocabulary that we use and some of the ways that we speak become to people who don't live in that environment become at best confusing and at worst completely incomprehensible.

So some of the words that we use might need explaining and some of them might be better avoided entirely. And how we use different words depends on the context that we're in and whether we choose to explain or rephrase depends how long we have to talk to this person.

[ 24 : 08 ] Because some of these concepts are important and usefully embodied within one word and some of them are more easily explained in other ways. See, if most people hear us talking about sin, what do you think people actually think in their heads when you talk about sin?

I don't think people think of that as deep-seated rebellion against a perfectly holy God. No, the category for sin is the sinful indulgence of another chocolate.

Sin is trivialized in our society. And if we don't recognize that and we just talk about, you know, you've sinned and deserve to die for it, it's just a category error, isn't it?

How, you know, who could possibly think that you should die for eating another chocolate? Well, we don't think that. But if what you say is the wages of sin is death without any further explanation, well, there's at least two words there that people are completely misunderstanding.

What about, think about the phrase, Jesus came into my heart. What does that actually mean? What actually happened?

- [ 25 : 30 ] What are you talking about? You know, you and I can use it as a shorthand for, well, basically we use it as a shorthand for I became a Christian, don't we?
- But it just sounds weird. What is grace? There's plenty more like that, aren't there?
- We have to actually think about how people will hear what we're saying. You haven't communicated if you haven't been understood by the person who's listening to you.
- Your gospel presentation might be perfectly intelligible to everybody sat in this room and yet utterly worthless to somebody who hasn't been to church before.
- So to be prepared to answer the person who's asking means engaging on a level that they can understand. The other dimension of answering the person who's asking is actually answering the specific question that you're being asked.
- [ 26 : 34 ] Now somebody might conceivably come to you and say, so what is this Christianity all about then? Or, you know, say to you, you know, how did you become a Christian? Those questions are possible. But it's more likely that the question you're actually being asked is, I don't see how you can believe in God when there's so much suffering in the world.
- Now if you respond to that question about suffering with, here is the gospel, you haven't answered the question that they're asking you. Or somebody says, I used to go to church but it never really seemed that relevant.
- Well, don't give them an answer that seems equally irrelevant. Or somebody says, Christians are just hypocrites. Religion's a fairy story for those afraid of the dark. These are the kinds of questions that you're more likely to get than what's Christianity all about.
- So if you just go straight into the generalities, you're not giving a reason for your hope in Christ. You're not explaining, well, my hope in Christ means I can face up to suffering because.
- That's answering the question somebody's asking. If you just talk about personal experience, then you're not challenging the idea that it's a fairy story by providing some historical evidence.
- [ 27 : 51 ] Engage with the question that's being asked. And there's lots of books that can help us to do that well. Lots of books that offer biblical answers to some of these most common questions about suffering, the reliability of the Bible.
- Books that are generally designed to be accessible for non-Christians that in some contexts you might give to somebody. But also designed to equip you and me to offer personal answers with this understanding of God's Word behind us.
- So grab a copy of Roger Carswell's *Gorilla Christian* or Cooper and Williams if you could ask God one question. I've read both of these books. I commend them to you. They are giving you good, helpful answers.
- They give you a good start at least having some kind of an answer across a spectrum of different questions. And if you want to go deeper into particular areas and questions, if you know somebody is asking questions around a particular sort of area or there's an area where if you're honest you have some questions to answer.
- Well if you want to go deeper than where those books are getting you to or you'd rather not get it from a book but from a person, well folks that is what I'm here for. My job is to equip you. So let's talk about it.
- [ 29 : 03 ] And I can recommend more specific books and we can talk things through ourselves. Part of being able to give an answer means equipping yourself to do it.
- Third aspect, Peter says this is about the hope that you have. See folks, it should be the case that our hope is so distinctive that it prompts people to ask about it.

That people look at us and see something different. See confidence, see hope in the future. It should be distinctive and that may well prompt questions. That people ask why do you have hope?

What is it in Christianity that lets you face the storms and the struggles of life? Can you explain why you have that hope? Why you are able to withstand these things?

If you're like me, then, you know, if you're kind of explaining the gospel in the abstract, then doing that, you get to the sin problem pretty quickly.

[ 30 : 05 ] And there's that word again. And then from that problem to the cross. And then job done, right? Jesus died to take away our sins. There's the gospel. Great. Now that's okay as far as it goes, but if that's what you've said, have you actually explained hope?

Have you actually explained how the gospel makes a difference, not in some far off future, but right now? Have you talked about the Holy Spirit at work enabling you to face up to suffering and even death?

Have you talked about how your life has been transformed? Have you talked about the resurrection? Because Paul says, if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.

So if you haven't talked about eternal life and how that's guaranteed by the resurrection of your Savior, then I'm not sure you have explained the reason for the hope that you have. We have hope.

Fourth, Peter's quick to clarify. The end of verse 15, do this with gentleness and respect. Oh, this is another big pitfall for us, isn't it? I mean, think about the apostles going and standing in those courtrooms, thrown into prison for preaching the gospel.

[ 31 : 20 ] You're coming out of, you know, a night in a cold, damp cell and being asked to give a reason, give an answer. It would have been so easy to come out swinging, both guns blazing, this is why I'm right and you are wrong.

Folks, we're often quite keen to show the other person that they're wrong, aren't we? It's really easy to shift onto the offensive. But Peter says that's not the way.

Why is that not the way? Well, because it isn't the route to the objective that we're meant to have. What are we aiming for here if we're giving this answer?

What's the purpose? What's the objective? Well, it's not about making our lives easier, really, is it? It's not about winning the argument.

It's not about being right. No, we're trying to persuade other people for their own good, aren't we? Too often, we are way more interested in winning the argument, in being seen to be right, more interested in winning the argument than winning the soul.

[ 32 : 26 ] than seeing that person find that same hope. Folks, I know I have fallen down on this one so many times.

I want to be right. I really do. I like the experience of somebody knowing that I am right about it. And it's the wrong objective.

I don't mean the truth doesn't matter. Far from it. We do need to be right in what we're saying. But how that truth is expressed matters a great deal.

Peter says, do this with gentleness and respect. Fifth and final dimension of this, verse 16. Keeping a clear conscience.

I think the idea here is a life that matches up with what we're saying. Karen Jobes, again, she says, one cannot explain the hope we have in Christ while living in ways that contradict that hope.

[ 33 : 27 ] I mean, you physically can, but it's not going to work, is it? Who's going to believe that you have confidence in God if they can see that your behavior is marked by fear?



Who's going to believe that Jesus is Lord of your life if they can see that you're not living the way he says? what good is the most eloquent explanation of how Christ sets us free?

If someone looking at you can see you don't live as one who is free in the terms of chapter 2, verse 16. Free to be a slave of God, not using freedom as a cover-up for evil. Your life can put the lie to your words.

Now, yes, it's true, the clear conscience of your justification that sets you free to be a witness. It's sufficient on some level.

Peter here is commending more. Peter's commending the clear conscience not just of the one who has been justified, but of the one who is actively obedient. The clear conscience of the actively obedient saint that provides this outward witness of a life consistent with what we say, of a life that itself proclaims the good news of the gospel.

[ 34 : 43 ] It's a big objective, isn't it? Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

Do it with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience in the context of you might already be suffering. You might be giving this answer to the person who's persecuting you.

So folks, if this call is for everybody, well let me ask you to consider which area, which aspect of this commission is something that you need to work on this week.

Not a kind of distant abstract, what are you going to do this week? Maybe it's at this level of how we view and how we respond to suffering in our lives.

This level of being willing to see that suffering as a blessing. To see it as an opportunity to proclaim the goodness of God who is sufficient for all of our needs. Maybe, maybe you need to work on reducing your use of jargon because it's so easy to drift into.

[ 35 : 50 ] If that's something that you're conscious of, well let me encourage you to watch out for it even when you're in company who will understand the jargon. Because if you watch it there, then you'll be less likely to default to it with the people who won't understand.

Well maybe, maybe the truth is you, you've never actually thought about having an answer at all. You haven't thought, well how would I explain the gospel simply?

If you had two minutes with somebody who's asked you what you believe, are you going to waste the first 90 seconds of those two minutes wondering what to say? Better to spend that time now, wouldn't you think?

Maybe it's the specifics, being able to relate the gospel to particular issues, particular questions, and sometimes you can get a long way with that by just stopping to think once in a while, and sometimes it's helpful to have some help.

So grab one of those books. Ask the elders of the church the question that you've been wondering about. We're supposed to be able to help you with that. Or maybe, maybe if you're honest what you need to work on is your gentleness.

[ 37 : 01 ] Folks, I'm pretty confident that for all of us there's at least one of those areas that we need to be working on and growing and developing. So please think about what it is.

And let's pray for God's help to do it. Lord Jesus, you call us to big things in your word.

You call us to things that are difficult for us. we are not naturally inclined to view suffering as blessing. We are not naturally inclined to repay evil with blessing.

We are not naturally inclined to respond to somebody who's attacking us with the desire to win their soul to your courts. we don't instinctively spend their time thinking through how we will answer questions that people might ask us.

And yet, Lord, we know that these things are vital to the health of our own souls and to others around us. And so, Lord, we ask that you would give us the commitment to work hard at these things, that you would change our hearts to view the world in these terms and you would prompt us to think things through in light of your gospel.

[ 38 : 30 ] Not just to treat things on a surface level but to think deeply and well about what you have done and how we respond to it and call others to do likewise.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.