

Prepared for suffering

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Date: 21 August 2022

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[0 : 00] 1 Peter chapter 3 verses 13 to 22. Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness sake, you will be blessed.

Have no fear of them nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard 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.

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered, once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit, in which he went and proclaimed the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through water.

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Christ Jesus, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers, having been subjected to him.

[1 : 48] Thank you very much indeed, Rachel. Please do keep that passage open, and why don't I pray as we begin. Father God, we thank you for this morning, we thank you for this passage, and we pray that you would speak to us through it this morning.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Now we've already reached 21st of August. We've covered a third of the time from the longest day to the shortest day.

I'm sorry to mention it, but it's true. A number of us will be preparing ourselves for the priorities and possibilities of a new academic year. Perhaps sitting A-levels or GCSEs, starting a new job, having a baby, learning a musical instrument, lowering your golf handicap or your park run time, getting ready for medical treatment, caring for aging relatives perhaps, and then waiting to see whether England win the World Cup.

I sometimes feel as though the summer is a period where you put down some heavy bags that you've been carrying throughout the year, you take off your rucksack, you feel a little bit lighter. And then as September approaches, the fear builds again of having to pick them all back up, and you remember how many there were.

Perhaps it's just me. Whatever it is that looms large in our minds as we prepare for this new academic year, the Apostle Peter's words, in 1 Peter, help to recalibrate our expectations of what to expect living as Christians in a world that is hostile to God.

[3 : 27] What that's going to involve. He tells us in today's passage to be ready to suffer distinctively as Christians and to be ready for opportunities to explain the reasons for our Christian hope.

Now given it's summertime, it is still summertime, I'm going to assume that 1 Peter may be a box set of which you have missed some episodes. So let's start with a very quick recap on the letter. It was written by the Apostle Peter, the Apostle Jesus described as the rock on whom he would build his church and to whom Jesus gave the instruction, feed my lambs, look after my church, in John chapter 21.

Peter wrote this first letter to a group of churches in modern day Turkey, which had a mix of Jewish and Gentile members and appeared to have been suffering significant persecution, though that would get worse as Nero's reign continued.

The person who carried the letter most likely went on tour with it, taking it to different churches across modern day Turkey, across some dramatic landscapes, some of which may be known to us from holidays.

[4 : 40] Scholars estimate that Peter wrote the letter in around 63 AD, during the Emperor Nero's reign, and Peter himself was martyred in Rome, where he wrote the letter, approximately three years later.

Now, I'm an accountant. The letter has 105 verses. You'll be fascinated to know. We're looking at 10 this morning. But those pack in a big number of themes.

Christian hope, a topic that we'll come back to this morning. How the church is to bring glory to God in a hostile world by living holy lives, by submitting to authorities, by enduring suffering as Christians, following Christ's example, by resisting the devil, and so on.

I'm going to focus primarily on verses 13 to 18 of our passage, though we'll make some comments on verses 19 to 22. Verses 19 and 20 are some of the most contested verses in the New Testament in terms of what they mean.

You probably knew that before you arrived this morning. And I will give you a view on that, but not spend too much time on it. And I'd like to pick up two main points from the passage which are on the handout in the service sheet.

[5 : 56] Firstly, be prepared to suffer as a Christian. Second, be ready to explain your hope. So first point, be prepared to suffer as a Christian.

Going back to those objectives for the year ahead, I'm sure suffering is not an objective we hold, and perhaps not even a possibility that we like to think very much about.

I certainly prefer not to think about it. I'm a wimp when it comes to suffering. As someone has said, there's a point in your life when you move from no pain, no gain, to no pain, that's okay.

But Peter tells us to be ready for suffering. And he does so with a great deal of realism in verses 13 and 14. He notes that normally, Christians will not suffer for doing good, even in a fallen world.

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? Verse 13. In many settings, most settings, people will appreciate your Christian values and behaviors.

[7 : 02] The biblical principles of working hard, paying your taxes, loving your neighbor, they don't normally trigger an aggressive response. Suffering due to persecution will be the exception, not the rule.

But, verse 14, do look at that. Sometimes, believers will suffer for righteousness' sake. And we know this in practice. Christians may be excluded from friendship groups, parties, or perhaps suffer in their position at work due to being too enthusiastic about their faith.

I was talking to a city worker just three weeks ago who was pulled aside by the chairman of his city firm and told not to be such an outspoken advocate for Christianity in the office with the implication of consequences otherwise.

Some here may have had that experience or a similar experience at school. Sometimes, Christians also suffer in dramatic ways. Now, many of you will receive the Barnabas Aid magazine.

Just hold it up in case you've never seen it. Whose mission is to bring hope and aid to suffering Christians. They're a remarkable organization. And in the July-August 2022 edition, as in almost every edition, there are articles about Christians being killed across the world.

[8 : 19] Here are two headlines from this edition. Islamists mercilessly killing Christians in Northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Scores of Christians killed in Nigeria's Middle Belt.

That article recounts 170 Christians being killed in multiple jihadi attacks across Nigeria's Middle Belt in a three-week period in March and April this year as the Ukraine war rightly occupied our headlines.

But this is happening in the background. It is shocking. Christians and pastors suffering for righteousness' sake, as the Apostle Peter puts it in verse 14.

And if we didn't have passages like this one in 1 Peter 3, we might think that this was an aberration that sits completely outside God's plan and expectations for Christians.

But Peter says, be prepared. And he also gives good news to his readers, which also in verse 14, you will be blessed and you don't need to fear those who make you suffer.

[9 : 24] Have no fear of them nor be troubled by them. Jesus Christ, your Saviour, your Saviour, is more powerful. You will be vindicated. Therefore, by implication, don't withdraw because suffering may be coming, but persevere.

Now that's clearly counter-cultural in a culture that looks for leisure, pleasure and treasure. And if we're honest, probably against our own instincts. If you're anything like me, you naturally want to avoid suffering, whatever it's caused.

And probably we want the same for our children. Now on a lighter note, in our family, we made a mistake a few months ago and slightly caught the tip of our Labrador's tail as we were closing the car boot in the dark with him inside.

There was no visible damage, but our dog, Minou, let out a loud yelp, letting us know that he was not happy. And for weeks afterwards, if not months, we would say, car, and point into an open boot for him to jump in.

And he would stay fixed to the spot. He was not interested. And it took him several months to forget that experience. And until then, he shivered as the boot was being closed for fear of the suffering being repeated.

[10:48] back to a more serious note. The Apostle Peter wants us to accept that suffering may well come for righteousness' sake and not to run away from it.

Be ready. Peter also reminds us that suffering was the reality for our Lord, verse 18, for Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteousness for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.

Now, before finishing on this first point, one important thing to add. Human life is full of suffering from thousands of causes, not only suffering for righteousness' sake, which this passage is talking about.

We can and will face bereavement, illness, unemployment, perhaps disappointment in exams, relationship breakup, watching England take penalties. The list is extremely long.

And I therefore don't want to imply in any way that the suffering Peter is talking about in 1 Peter 3 is the only type of suffering in our lives, or therefore that the application to be ready to suffer distinctively as Christians is a full answer to the problem of pain in our lives.

[12:04] I don't think it is. And we don't have time this morning to consider more holistically the subject of suffering, which may be an acute and real topic to us this morning.

As a church, we're told, rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. And if you'd like to think more holistically about the topic of suffering for yourself or for others, I've put on the handout details of an excellent book, *How Long, O Lord, Reflections on Christian Suffering* by Don Carson.

And please do also speak with friends or with a staff team or even with me if you would like to and you're facing real suffering at the moment. So that's our first point. Be ready to suffer as a Christian. Second, be ready to explain our hope. As mentioned, hope is a major theme in the book of 1 Peter, introduced right at the start of the book, actually with the verses that Ben read at the start of the service.

Let me read them again from 1 Peter chapter 1, 3 and 4, which are some of my favorite verses in the Bible. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

[13:24] Wow. Understanding how wonderful the living hope Christians have is central to Peter's aim in writing 1 Peter. And the key verse in relation to hope in our passage is verse 15.

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. Now, hope in the Bible has a slightly different meaning to how we would use the word normally.

It conveys more of a sense of expectancy. And one way of explaining this would be to think about someone who's getting married next Saturday. You might say to the future groom, I hope it's 25 degrees and sunny.

And he might say, I hope so. You might say to the future groom, I hope your fiancé will choose to come. And he might reply, I hope so.

Hope in the Bible is more than second sense. Christians have the expectant hope of an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

[14:36] And again in chapter one, Peter tells Christians to set their hope fully on the grace that will be brought to them at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Now, verse 15 of our passage contains some implicit assumptions which are super challenging, at least to me.

First assumption, people will notice that Christians are in a state of hope rather than despair, in particular as they suffer. Second assumption, people will want to discuss the reason for that hope, so Christians always need to be ready for such a conversation.

If you're anything like me, this is a conversation that happens too rarely. Do people see a Christian, a difference in me because I'm a Christian in the office? Probably yes.

are they asking me for the reason for my hope much more rarely? And I pray, and I'd encourage all of us who are Christians to pray, that this coming year will bring more such opportunities.

If we take a step back, the reality is that Christian hope is something completely unique, and anyone who has it is in an unusual and very privileged position. Peter says, be ready to share this hope gently, respectfully, even when you are suffering.

[15:55] Now, I don't know what books you've read on holiday. I got through a couple of books, and one book that I re-read was a book called *The God Who Is There* by Francis Schaeffer. It's an IVP classic.

It was written in the early 80s, and it was written by an American pastor who went on to open his house in Switzerland to people, academics, who were thinking about the meaning of life from all sorts of different persuasions.

And he turned his house into a center that was called Labrie, which in French means the shelter. And there was an equivalent structure in Hampshire, and actually both of them are still running, though I confess I haven't been to either.

But when I read this book the first time, age 18, it was probably the book other than the Bible that most helped me to grapple with the meaning of life and why I believed in the Christian faith.

And after reading it, I really felt able to defend the Christian faith to anyone who wanted to have a conversation about it in a way that I hadn't before. Now the reason the book was so helpful, and I have got a spare copy if anyone wants to get one or I'll send a link around and I've put the name on the sheet.

[17:02] It explains how most, if not all, academic disciplines which were looking for the universal answer to life have actually reached despair. And Schaeffer describes it through the book as crossing the line of despair.

He starts with philosophy, giving many examples, including Camus and Sartre. They crossed the line of despair, no longer believing that God had revealed himself or that absolute right and wrong existed.

Hence, it was up to people to authenticate themselves through acts of their will as existentialists with no absolute moral compass and no hope for life after death.

And then Schaeffer explains how that sort of thinking has pervaded lots of other disciplines. He takes the artists like Van Gogh and Gauguin and other artists. He takes scientists. He takes musicians. He takes many, even modern theologians who have crossed the line of despair, concluding that their discipline could not answer the fundamental questions of who mankind is, where have we come from, and where are we going.

Many people, he argues, therefore have to compartmentalize their thinking between subjects they think about rationally and factually, like science, and subjects they think about mystically through a leap of faith without any reasonable basis.

[18:23] There's much more to it, and if you fancy 200 pages of reasonably dense philosophical argument, I really, really recommend it. The key point is Christian hope is absolutely, genuinely unique.

We do believe some extraordinary things. That Jesus died and rose again. That he will return. That Christians have an impertable inheritance in heaven.

Those things are absolutely extraordinary. Even saying them to our non-Christian friends and colleagues can feel strange. But it is not blind faith.

The Bible gives a system of thought, Schaeffer's terminology, which does require faith, but is rational. We see where we have come from, being created by the living God.

We see who we are, people made in the image of that living God, not the product of space, time, and probability. We see where we are going, a new heaven and a new earth.

[19:28] We have historical evidence for the New Testament documents and archaeological evidence corroborating events described. We have the evidence of changed lives from people we've met or read about or even our own experience of change.

And as Schaeffer puts it himself, if we are unexcited Christians, we should go back and see what is wrong. We are surrounded by a generation that can find no one home in the universe. In contrast to those, as a Christian, I know who I am and I know the personal God who is there. Now Schaeffer was gifted. How do we explain the reason for the hope that we have? We can tell our own story. Perhaps that's something we could be practicing over coffee or even starting in the small group time. It's worth writing down if you're a believer and you've never done it before.

And if you're not yet a Christian believer, then ask as many people as you can for their story. I guarantee you will be surprised. Now to give one example to get started, I'm going to take a leap and I'm briefly going to tell you my own story.

[20 : 41] And if you're taking notes, perhaps also jot down aspects of your story as I do this. So, someone might ask, Marcus, what's the reason for your Christian hope?

How did that come about? Well, that's a great question. You could say that I had an early midlife crisis when I was about 14 years old.

You wouldn't have known that to look at me. But underneath the surface, I was increasingly hassled about finding the meaning of life beyond working for my GCSEs.

Two things preoccupied me at that time. Firstly, what was the point of it all? If I worked harder, I might get slightly better results. But I would then die as my grandfathers had died before I'd met them.

What was the point? Second, did I believe the faith that I'd been brought up in? I came from a Christian home where belief was something real, not a formality.

[21 : 40] My father had come to faith in his late 20s, having been a skeptic as a student. Now it was becoming my turn. What did I believe? So I started thinking about the Christian faith again, as a teenager rather than just as a kid.

I read a book called *Who Moved the Stone* that was written by a barrister who wanted to disprove the resurrection. But actually, as he was writing it, he became convinced the resurrection happened.

And I found his arguments were compelling. I was also struck at the same time by some teenagers at my school appearing to be joyful and contented and even having a relationship with God through prayer that I did not have.

And I got to a point somewhere between age 15 and 16, I couldn't give you an exact day, where I realized actually, I do believe. I believe that Jesus is God and that he died and rose again.

I believe that he took the punishment for my sins. And I prayed to say that I put my trust in him and to ask forgiveness for my sins. And since coming to faith at that point, there have been multiple ups and downs, but there have been some constants, such as a sense of the future being known and being exciting and having a sense of purpose that runs deeper than anything else in life, even marriage, family and work.

[23 : 01] Now I'll stop there and normally you would only get to say a snippet of that in a real conversation. Each Christian here will have their own story and verse 15 is saying, please do think about how you can be ready to tell yours.

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.

And before leaving this topic, I should mention that the book of Acts has several examples of Peter and Paul giving their own defense. And you could read, for example, Acts chapter 26, where an imprisoned Paul gives a defense of his faith to a gripper in quite some detail.

Now as promised, before we close, a few words on verses 19 and 20, and I'm going to tell you not what I think because that's rather irrelevant in a sense, but tell you what Wayne Grudem and Don Carson, who are two distinguished Bible scholars, think these verses mean and how they fit into the context of 1 Peter chapter 3.

Now they hold a consistent view between the two of them, but they both comment that neither of them would go to the stake for that view. So anyway, let me tell you what that view is. Let's read again from verses 18 to 20.

[24 : 23] For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were

brought safely through water.

not easy. What are these verses saying? Well, quoting Wayne Grudem from his 1 Peter commentary, the most likely meaning is as follows.

When Noah was building the ark a long time ago, bearing witness to the people of his day, Christ, in spirit, was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness to unbelievers who were on the earth then but are now spirits in prison, i.e. people in hell.

The reasons for holding that view. First, in 2 Peter, the next letter, 2 Peter 2, verse 5, Noah is described as a herald of righteousness. Second, Peter consistently taught that the spirit of Christ inspired Old Testament prophets spoke through them.

So saying that Christ was speaking through Noah fits with that logic. Third, there are parallels that Peter appears to be drawing between believers in Noah's day and believers in his own day.

[25 : 54] So some of those parallels. First, Noah and first century believers were minority believers in a hostile culture. Second, both were to bear witness to a coming judgment.

Noah through building an ark, first century believers through their words. Third, Noah's example shows that the righteous are vindicated. Eight people were saved from the flood.

Many more will be saved from judgment by being part of the Christian church. In Noah's day, people were saved by believing Noah and getting into the boat instead of believing that it was a white elephant DIY project.

Those who did not believe faced judgment immediately through the flood but also in an eternal sense and hence they're described as spirits in prison. For Christians, we're saved by appealing to God for a good conscience, verse 21, for our sins to be forgiven and baptism is a sign of that and water is common to baptism and to Noah and to the flood and that is a link that Peter appears to be making.

What all this leads to is vindication for those in Noah's day who believed the preaching of Christ through Noah and vindication in Peter's day for those who trust in Jesus and who in verse 22 has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels, authorities and powers having been subjected to him.

[27 : 24] That's what they both think. As I say, neither would go to the stake. They are difficult verses. I don't think they changed the overall meaning of 1 Peter but I didn't want to completely duck them as well given that they are in today's passage.

So briefly to close, what should we take from this passage as we prepare for this new academic year and all of its priorities and possibilities? Well perhaps the key application is not to hold back. Don't hold back as a Christian. Engage with others in our homes, in work, in school. Be prepared to suffer distinctively as Christians if that engagement results in ridicule, opposition or worse.

Trust in God that he has our backs. And be prepared to explain the reason for the hope that we have, remembering how unique that hope actually is.

Let's pray. Father God, we do pray that you would help us, those who are Christian believers this morning, to be ready to explain the reason for the hope that we have and please give us the opportunities to do that in this year ahead.

[28 : 32] In Jesus' name, Amen.