

# Living for Jesus in the real world without fear

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[ 0 : 00 ] The reading is taken from the first book of Peter, chapter 3, verses 13 to 22, and that's on page 1221 of the Bibles.

That's 1 Peter, chapter 3, beginning at verse 13. 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 honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence 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 behaviour 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 being 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.

[ 1 : 37 ] 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 Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers having been subjected to him.

Good morning, everyone. Do be keeping that reading open, because we'll be looking at it shortly. Now, at school, at the age of 14, I had a rather quirky English teacher, who set a rather quirky English exam at the end of the year.

One question was simply this, spell soliloquy. The word was spelt correctly on the exam paper, so for two marks, all we needed to do was to copy the word onto the answer sheet.

Several pupils assumed it was a trick question and changed the spelling. They got no marks.

Another question for another two marks was as follows. Put your pen down, look around the room, and then write down the first word that comes into your head.

There were inevitably many different answers, and all were awarded two marks, apart, that is, from one. The classmate, who had written down one word, crossed it out, and then written down another.

[ 3 : 09 ] Self-evidently, it wasn't the first word that came into his head. Well, what's the first word that comes into your head when you hear the phrase, normal Christian experience?

I'll pause to give you a second or two to think about it, but not so long so that you mentally cross out your first answer and come up with another. Did anyone here think of the word suffering or persecution?

I suspect that in normal day-to-day Christian life for us, it wouldn't even have been our fifth choice if we crossed out the first four. That's because even in London in 2015, our general day-to-day experience as Christians is a pretty comfortable one.

If you did choose the word suffering, then perhaps it was because of this morning's reading, and it's the focus of today's passage. For Peter's readers, persecution was normal Christian experience, or would be before too long.

And in many parts of the world today, Christians are persecuted for their faith, and for them it is their normal Christian experience. So I went on the Barnabas Fund website to look at the latest news.

[ 4 : 27 ] So here are three items of latest news, all reported within the last week as to what's been going on recently around the world. Forty-five Christians have been killed by Boko Haram in two separate attacks in the last two or three weeks.

In Pakistan, a Christian woman has been kidnapped by her employer, married off, and forcibly converted to Islam.

And in Sri Lanka, a Christian pastor has been ordered to stop preaching by the local police chief after his church was surrounded by a mob of 50 people during a Sunday service.

Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. And that's not even mentioning what's going on in Syria or in Iraq or many other parts of the world where Christians are having an extremely tough time.

And as our society becomes more secular and more intolerant of biblical views, we too will increasingly face hostility if we're not already.

[ 5 : 39 ] It might be ridicule. It might be mockery from friends and colleagues for speaking out as Christians. So I was hearing recently that Hugh Palmer, the rector of All Souls Langham Place, has apparently told his wife and children that he fully expects to be imprisoned by the end of his life for faithfully preaching the Christian faith.

Now, you may think that that's far-fetched, but let me just read you from this week's spectator. So this is what's been reported in the news this week.

Conservative MP Mark Spencer has suggested that anti-terror legislation should be used to punish teachers who hold old-fashioned views about homosexuality and perhaps divest themselves of those views to their pupils.

These old-fashioned views would include doubting the legitimacy of gay marriage and might incur an extremism disruption order. And the columnist reporting this goes on to say, these days even the mildest dissenting view, even a mildly dissenting view held by the majority or a large minority of the population is extremism.

This is the new absolutism at work. So it's coming. If it hasn't already come, we are going to face persecution and suffering for our Christian beliefs.

[ 7 : 09 ] And Peter, writing to Christians in that situation, he wanted his Christian brothers and sisters to have God's perspective on persecution. And he knew that without that perspective, they'd be tempted to wander away from a true faith, looking for something just a little bit more comfortable.

Now, if you glance over the page at chapter 5, verse 12, you will see Peter's purpose statement.

I've written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God.

Stand firm in it. So when suffering comes, Peter wants his readers, us included, to stand firm. And so it's a lesson that we all need to hear.

And there's an outline for today's talk on the back of the service sheet you were given as you arrived. Do follow that outline if that would help you. In verse 13 of our passage, Peter starts with a rhetorical question.

Now, I'm sure we all know what rhetorical questions are. They're questions where the answer's obvious, but the point of asking the question is to stress a particular point. So the question, who is there to harm you if you're zealous for what is good?

[ 8 : 28 ] The answer is obvious. No one, no one will harm somebody who wants to do the right thing. But, as verse 14 continues, people do suffer doing the right thing.

And Peter wants to help his readers as they do so. His first point is that they should have the right mindset. Now, it's sometimes said of somebody as a compliment, oh, his heart's in the right place, or her heart's in the right place.

Well, what verse 15 is telling us is that the right place for the Christian's heart is to regard Christ the Lord as holy. But in your hearts, regard Christ the Lord as holy.

And we see throughout the Bible that recognizing God as holy involves fearing him as a pure and awesome God. So I've printed on the service sheet Isaiah chapter 8 verses 12 and 13.

Do not fear what they fear nor be in dread, but the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy. Let him be your fear and let him be your dread.

[ 9 : 41 ] You see, our temptation when we're faced with potential suffering or persecution will be to fear that those who want to harm us or to mock us for being a Christian. But, says Peter, look at your heart.

if your heart regards Christ as pure and awesome, then we'll fear him more than we'll fear those who are trying to harm us.

We should fear Christ first. So often our hearts and minds are conditioned by the world around us rather than by Christ. And we don't fear Christ first rather than fearing those around us.

And I guess to do so requires conscious effort. Let me illustrate how we might apply some conscious effort in this way. Pete Sampras is one of the Wimbledon greats.

He's won Wimbledon a record seven times, a record equalled only by Roger Federer in the Open era. And at the end of his career back in 2002, he was bidding for an eighth Wimbledon title.

[10:47] He was drawn in the second round against an unknown unqualified George Bastille of Switzerland and he was struggling. So every changeover, he reached into his pocket and he opened a letter written to him by his wife full of encouraging words.

The television cameras were trying to zoom in on this letter so that they could potentially read what it was that was so encouraging Pete as he read these words. But he wanted it to stir his heart and give him the mindset he needed for the battle ahead.

And for a while it worked. He battled back from two sets down to two sets all. Well, when God appears to Moses through the burning bush, he told him that the ground on which he was standing was holy ground.

And Moses' first reaction, understandably, was fear. When Jesus calmed the storm and was in the boat with his apostles, the reaction of his apostles was to fear him.

So it seems that the more we consciously reflect on the lordship of Jesus, the more our reaction to him will be one of reverent fear of his holiness.

[12:02] And with the right mindset, we will be prepared to speak up for Christ. Look at verse 15. Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

I take it that this is cross-examination, not open-minded inquiry. Peter knows all about this type of questioning. It's the cross-examination that Peter himself faced on the night of Jesus' trial, just before his death, when questioned in the courtyard outside the high priest's house.

And it's the cross-examination he faced when he himself was hauled before the Jewish leaders early on in the Acts of the Apostles. On the first occasion, he denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed.

On the second occasion, risking his life, he proclaimed this, salvation is found in no one else, for there's no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

God's death. So how ready are we to speak up? The verse says we should always be prepared to make a defense to anyone.

[13:16] Well, to me, that's pretty challenging. Think of the person you know who is most hostile to the Christian faith. Are we ready to explain the gospel even to them?

I guess often what stops us speaking is not lack of training but lack of trust in Christ our Lord as holy.

At work, do our colleagues know we're Christians? At school, do our friends know we follow Jesus? In a game of football, you can't defend the goal if you're not on the pitch.

And in the Christian life, you can't defend the gospel if you're not publicly Christian. Well, if we're not experiencing much suffering in our Christian lives, is it because in fear we duck the opportunity to give a defense of our faith?

Well, says Peter, trust Christ our Lord as holy. Fear him, not those around us. And when we speak out, we'll do it winsomely. Verse 16, yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience.

[14:28] So we won't get into an argument, we won't lecture them as some Christians have done, with or without a soapbox or a sandwich board. We will trust God to the consequences.

And those consequences may be varied. Our listeners may, if you look back to chapter 2, verse 12, they may see our good deeds and glorify God on the day of his visitation.

Or on the final day of God's judgment, they may, in the words of 3, verse 16, they may be put to shame. So that's the mindset we should have faced with suffering, fearing Christ first.

But that then raises the question, when the going gets tough, why should we fear Christ first? And it's a question answered by the next two verses, which speaks of our model for living in this way.

So verse 18, 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.

[15:36] Peter's argument is that in his death on the cross, Christ suffered unjustly by putting us first, the righteous dying for the unrighteous.

He was taking on himself the punishment that we deserve for our sins, so we don't have to be punished. And the proof is in his resurrection from the dead, when he was made alive in the spirit, which proves that physical death need not be the end if we trust in him.

Well, that's the gospel in a single verse. It's the very core of our faith. Our very existence as those in relationship with God is all down to unjust suffering, Christ's unjust suffering on our behalf.

So, verse 17, it's better to suffer for doing good if that is God's will. After all, it was God's will for Jesus Christ and look at the consequences.

So, we should emulate Christ's model and be prepared to suffer for doing good. Now, if you're here this morning as someone looking in on the Christian faith from the outside, as it were, you're very welcome with us.

[16:54] You may be wondering why Christians would be prepared to put up with being persecuted for their faith. Well, here's the answer. Christ the righteous put up with persecution and death to bring the unrighteous to God.

Naturally, we're all unrighteous. None of us can live with a holy and righteous God unless God forgives us and makes us right with him. And I guess that the more we look like Christ and speak like Christ, the more we may be treated like Christ was treated.

We'll be mocked and scorned, excluded by the secular establishment. Is that so surprising? After all, verse 17 tells us that it might be God's will for us.

So if we call ourselves Christians, are we willing for that to be God's will? You see, I think personally so often I see suffering and persecution as an optional extra, something to put up with occasionally but not something to consider might be God's will for me in a particular situation.

The challenge for me as I read these verses is, at work, am I prepared to model my priorities on Christ even if it harms my career unjustly?

[18:19] With other parents at the school gate, am I prepared to model my conduct on Christ even if other parents avoid me or speak about me behind my back?

And I guess if we're here and we're still at school, are we prepared to stand up for Jesus when his name is being mocked or the word Christ is used as a swear word?

So if our mindset should be putting the fear of Christ first and if our model should be that Christ put us first, then the final point concerns our motivation.

The point of verses 19 to 22 is that Christ is first. The journey that starts in verse 18 with his death on the cross finishes in heaven where Christ is now at the right hand of God.

He's in charge of all angels, all authorities and all powers and that's who's ultimately in charge in Dulwich at quarter past eleven on a Sunday morning right now.

[19:26] That's who's ultimately in charge in the office, at the school gate or in the classroom next term. David Cameron's official title is first lord of the treasury but Christ is officially the first lord of heaven and earth.

Now don't get too hung up on verses 19 to 21. They are perhaps some of the more difficult verses in the Bible but I think what's going on here is Peter is describing the victory parade that Christ took after his resurrection and before his enthronement as the heavenly king.

Having conquered death by rising from the dead it seems that Christ proclaimed his eternal kingship to the spiritual powers that had been kept waiting for Christ's rule ever since the time of Noah.

So his rule extends not just over the present time but for all time and it's not just over the material world the things we can see but over the spiritual world the things that we can't see and the reference to Noah reminds Peter and reminds us that rescue is possible and has always been part of God's plan for those who trust him.

Think of it this way in 2005 England beat Australia in an ashes test match series for the first time in England in 20 years. Now judging by this summer you might think it happens all the time but it didn't at the time.

[21:03] It was a dramatic victory won in the last test. This was a great moment in English test history. The England cricket team went on a victory parade through the streets of London on an open topped bus proclaiming their victory.

The parade ended at the seat of political power at 10 Downing Street. They were sitting down with the Prime Minister himself. Now on their journey there will have been moments when the bus was perhaps hidden from view when it wasn't exactly clear what the players were doing but that doesn't

diminish the reality of the victory.

Or the glory due to the team for the way that they won it. In the same way just because it isn't exactly clear from the passage exactly what Christ is doing don't miss the enormity of his victory and the extent of his authority.

Often if we're suffering for being a Christian we can feel weak. We can feel powerless. We can feel that we are defeated. But Peter wants his Christian readers to remember that victory has been won. Christ is at the right hand of God and his death has brought us to God. So if we continue to trust him we are eternally secure.

[ 22 : 28 ] That's the ultimate motivation for suffering as a Christian. Christ is first. He's in charge. And it's the answer to the question that Peter started with in verse 13.

Now who is there to harm you if you're zealous for what is good? Ultimately no one can harm us because Christ is in charge.

The challenge for all of us is do we believe it? Are we willing to stand firm when we're under attack as Christians? Will we encourage each other to do that?

And will we pray that for our brothers and sisters in Christ both here and in other parts of the world who are suffering even today? So as we end let's pray together.

Heavenly Father please forgive us when we forget that the Lord Jesus Christ is in ultimate charge at this very moment. Help us to remember it and so fear him rather than those around us who might harm us.

[ 23 : 37 ] Help us to remember that without Christ's unjust suffering for us we would be far away from you. Please cause us to live out our faith trusting you in every situation whatever hardships it may bring as we remember that Christ's death has brought us to you and we ask this in his precious name.

Amen.