

Meeting Jesus: Heart Preparation

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Date: 25 February 2018

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] Well, welcome to St. John. It's nice to have you here. We are in a series that's looking at meeting Jesus and we're doing a little detour for a few weeks on how our friends and family come to meet Jesus through us.

And that's why we read that little section in 1 Peter 3. So if you put your bulletin down and open the Bible at 1 Peter 3 verses 3 to 17, there's a very simple passage.

And the reason we didn't read verses 18 and onwards is I don't have a clue what it means. And I know the commentators don't either because I read them. There are two very simple points the Apostle Peter makes. One is a command and the other is a response or an application, if you like.

The command is at the beginning of verse 15. In your hearts, honor Christ the Lord as holy. And the implication or the response is always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that's in you.

You do it with gentleness and respect. This verse is often taken out of context and used to make us all feel very guilty about the fact that we don't share our faith more often. So I want to put it back in its context.

[1 : 1 8] And the context is suffering. As Christianity spread across the Roman Empire toward the end of the first century, it didn't have any legal status.

And over time, the legal system increasingly made decisions that excluded Christians from the workplace and even punished Christians for not joining in with certain activities.

At the time Peter was writing, there was no systematic persecution. But increasingly, laws were being made against Christianity, which is not so dissimilar to our circumstances in the West.

Christians were widely accused of all sorts of things. In fact, right around when this letter was written in 64 AD, there was a fire that destroyed Rome.

70% of Rome. And the Emperor Nero, who some historians thought wrote it, sorry, not wrote it, set the fire, looked around for an easy scapegoat and found Christians.

[2 : 2 0] And the Roman historian who was there at the time is a man called Tacitus. He was not a friend of Christians. He thought Christianity was what he called an evil superstition.

This is what he writes. He says, Nero falsely accused and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty, a class hated for their abominations.

He called Christians. Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius.

Which is just an interesting reference from someone who's hostile to Christianity for the historical reality of Jesus. And then he goes on, just reading from him. Arrest was first made of those who confessed to being Christians.

Then on their evidence, an immense multitude was convicted. Besides being put to death, they were made to serve as objects of amusement. They were clothed in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs.

[3 : 19] Others were crucified. Others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display and was putting on a show in the circus where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot.

This is right around the time Peter's writing. And you'll know if you've been a Christian for a while that in the first century, Christians were accused of all sorts of things. They were accused of cannibalism because it was said when they went to church, they consumed the body and blood of Christ.

They were accused of sexual immorality because they called each other brother and sister. They were accused of disrupting business because when Christianity came to town and people became Christians, there was no longer such a desperate need for idols and gods.

They were accused of atheism because they no longer believed in the Roman gods. And perhaps above all, they were accused of lack of patriotism, antisocial, unpatriotic, because they withdrew from festivals and orgies that honoured the gods.

And they wouldn't say Caesar is Lord. It's like being accused of being un-Canadian. That's the context. Suffering comes 12 times in the letter of 1 Peter.

[4 : 43] And here's the thing. It's not suffering for doing wrong. It's suffering for doing right. That's the point of verses 13 and 14. And under normal circumstances, you don't suffer for doing good.

I mean, how do I say this? Yesterday when I cleared the paths of my neighbours from snow, I'm just saying this because the kids said it in the children's talk.

When I cleared their path, I didn't expect them to come out and hit me on the head. And they don't. They're very thankful. You don't expect this under normal circumstances. Verse 13.

Who is there to harm you if you are, literally, if you are zealots for doing good, if you're enthusiastic do-gooder? Great picture of Christians. It's just not expected that you would suffer.

Verse 14. But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Or verse 17. It is better to suffer for doing good if that should be God's will than for doing evil.

[5 : 45] How can that possibly be true? You know, suffering is the human condition. But there is suffering that is unique for Christians.

It is suffering for Christ. Because there are decent non-believers in the world who love others doing good, except if it's done in the name of Christ. When it's done in the name of Christ, sometimes there's a ferocious reaction.

And the perfect example in all the venom in the mainstream media about Billy Graham. And though our suffering is not as fierce as our brothers and sisters in the Middle East or in Africa, in the marketplace, if you make Christ-honoring decisions, you will be snubbed or you may be snubbed and overlooked.

You may not be. You know, if you no longer laugh at the jokes in your reading circle or use social media in the same way, there is a cost to pay. So what I want to do is I want to look at the command and the response in reverse order.

And I'm doing it in reverse order because I tried it in the right order at 9 o'clock and nobody listened. It was very dull. Well, so there's one response that Peter calls for.

[7 : 10] It's in the second half of verse 15. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that's in you.

Yet do it with gentleness and respect. This is not too different from last week where the Apostle Paul said... What did he say last week?

I wasn't here. What is it? Yeah, I always give an answer to those who... It was something like...

Do you remember in Colossians 4, Paul speaks about how... Would you pray for me that I'd proclaim the gospel? And yourselves, that you speak wisely, season with salt, so that you may know how to answer.

So you see, there's a difference. This is the way God has arranged it. God has given to some of his children the gift of proclaiming. And they ought to proclaim. They ought to give themselves to it, you know, in season and out.

[8 : 11] But the vast majority of Christians who have other gifts, not that gift, all of us are expected to answer. We're supposed to live a life that is somehow showing the hope that's within us.

And we're expected to be asked and we're expected to answer. It doesn't mean that when you go to work, you leave your desk and make yourself a pain in the neck and force things down other people's throat.

If you're in the shop, that's where you're supposed to work. But this is the way God has arranged things. And when he says answer, he says, he's not talking about preaching and teaching or having all the answers.

But this is the normal expectation for the normal Christian as they seek to reverence Christ as Lord. You will be asked. And it's God's desire that you should be prepared to give an answer. It doesn't mean that those who proclaim are excused from having to answer questions.

Nor does it mean that everyone who answers questions never proclaims because sometimes they do. Well, you know what I'm saying.

[9 : 17] When the person asks you what you believe or why you believe it or asks you something about your Christian faith, it's an opportunity. And Peter is saying it's very strange if you don't say anything.

Always, he says to anyone. Don't you love this, that it comes from the Apostle Peter? This is the Apostle Peter who denied Jesus on the night before he was crucified. This is Peter the tough guy.

I imagine if an army came to Peter on the night before Jesus' crucifixion and said, I am your follower of Jesus, he would have fought them off. And then to his death, bravely and valiantly, taking as many with him as he could.

But there he was around the fire. It was just one little servant girl. Jesus is inside. And she says, weren't you with him? Weren't you one of the Galileans? And he's pulled himself up to his full height.

He said, absolutely not. Three times. And now here is Peter, the same Peter, telling us, always be prepared to anyone. The person who takes you off guard.

[10 : 19] It's great, isn't it? It just means God uses failures. And Peter says, be prepared. Be prepared. It means we need to take some care and effort to answer questions when we're asked and to prepare them.

That is to think about it beforehand, being ready for opportunities. This is your responsibility to learn this so that you can do it. I have a friend, became a Christian, a couple of months in church.

And someone saw him on the train station and said to him, you become a Christian. What do you believe? And he didn't know what to say. And he realized the next week that he'd been saying the creed week by week.

And he should have gone over that. But he didn't get a chance to do it. Peter says, give a defense for the reason. And I just point out both of those words have the little word logic in them.

There's nothing more reasonable than the Christian faith. Think about it. If God created the world, raising Jesus from the dead and doing miracles is a simple thing, isn't it? If God had not revealed his word wrong, we would not be able to really say what's truly right and wrong, would we?

[11 : 24] I mean, we could say we don't like certain things or the majority of people, we can vote on it. But that gets you into terrible situations.

No, if God's word has revealed what's right and wrong, we have a secure basis. Don't you think that some of the hot button issues in our culture right now are bridges for us as Christians?

And some of the time, we're going to have to look at Jesus and how he uses logic and Paul and how he uses logic in a devastating way. So when you're asked something about your faith, you know how the conversation runs, you're skating towards an opportunity.

You and I are to speak reasonably and remove misconceptions, explaining why we reverence Christ as explaining the hope that's in us. Question, how many of us are doing this?

There's an answer. Well, I think there are a lot of things that hold us back from doing this. And I'm not talking about being too busy or not having enough friends.

[12 : 27] And I can think of six things that hold us back. The last one's the most important. Let me roll through these quickly for you. The first thing that would hold you back from answering to those who ask you is that you don't know you're meant to do it.

You might be saying, I don't know, it's my place. Isn't that the place of specially gifted evangelists? And I've got to say, I have a lot of friends who are specially gifted evangelists. And it's just incredible watching them turn the conversation to the gospel.

I've tried doing that and I always end up in a mess. But Peter is writing not to one congregation. It's a general letter to all Christians.

And here is God's call. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you. It means we ought to be praying for and looking for opportunities and preparing for them and answering, speaking when they come. The second reason that holds us back is we sometimes feel we're going to put people off.

And you've got to be wise about this, haven't you? If you've been a believer for a long time, you've seen enough situations where Christians win arguments and lose people.

[13 : 33] Where Christians bully other people and are just not Christian in the way that they answer. Peter himself says at the end of verse 15, do it with gentleness and respect.

It's lovely, isn't it? Gentleness, it's a word for having a lot of power and holding it under control, under the lordship of Jesus because he's gentle in heart.

Not raising your voice, not being arrogant or superior, not putting the other person down. And respect means considering the other person. It doesn't mean what it's mean to come in our culture that you have to agree with me.

But irrespective of whether that person is being arrogant and rude and unfair, we are to treat them with gentleness and respect. You can't take away the offensiveness of the cross of Jesus Christ. It is always offensive.

But we must, we must, our manner is as important as what we say. The third thing that holds us back is I just don't know what to say.

[14 : 37] I wouldn't know what to say. This, brothers and sisters, is a valid concern. I think I've said this before from the pulpit. I vividly remember the first time I was ever confronted with someone who actually wanted to become a Christian.

I was, I think I was 18 or 19. I was on a mission team. In Australia, we have these things during the summer called Beach Mission, where 50 young people go down to the beaches and they stay in the camping grounds.

They run all sorts of crazy things and preach the gospel. Well, and one of the leaders had spoken very clearly about the gospel.

And I got to know two young boys, they were 14, who were not Christians. And I said, what did you think about the talk? And they both said to me, it makes sense. We want to become Christians. How do we do it?

Oh, no. I thought, I'm going to panic about this. So I started blurbing out, they needed to do this. They needed to do this. They needed to do this. And I just, I was making a digging a very big hole for myself.

[15 : 35] And I said, wait on. Let me go and get the leader. So I went and got the leader. And I sat there and listened while this leader explained with great care and gentleness and clarity.

And listened to these boys and then prayed with them and led them to Christ. And I went back into my, got into my sleeping bag that night. And I asked God to help me never be in that situation ever again.

I think some of us are quite brilliant in the areas in which we work. You know, we are, we've advanced far, but we still feel, we still feel like we don't understand the basics.

And you're not sure what to say. Very interesting in this little CCQ course that we're running. And by far from the feedback, the most helpful section is answering questions that people are asking us.

And I think the reason it's so helpful is because we're not so clear on them. So if you don't know what to say, it's up to you to be ready and to pray and to prepare yourself.

[16 : 44] Number four is one I struggled with a lot. My life is just not good enough to be a witness. I live a messy life. I try to do what's good, but I let the Lord down all the time.

I'm afraid that if I spoke up about my faith, it would only reflect badly on Jesus. The lovely thing about this here in Peter is that what you're being asked about is not your perfect, sinless life.

By the way, if you get to the stage of living a perfect, sinless life, don't come to St. John's. You'll depress all of us. It's not about you being perpetually positive and upbeat.

It doesn't even mean that your difference is so good. What we're to answer about is the hope that's in us. And if you hope in Christ, here's the thing, Christ will shine through you.

You need to trust him that he will do that. If you are trying to honour Christ as Lord, he will show himself through you to others. And when you're asked a question, and the conversation goes this way, Peter is saying, if you wait till you're good enough, you're never going to say anything.

[17 : 54] Speak. The fifth reason, I hope nobody believes this anymore. The fifth reason that holds us back is you may have heard some people say, I will witness with my life.

I don't have to speak. So you can preach a better sermon with your life than your lips. That's from an Irish romantic poet. Or let your lives preach, which is ascribed to George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, although he never said it.

Or this is ascribed to Francis of Assisi, preach the gospel at all times when necessary, use words. Francis of Assisi never said that. And he was more known for his preaching in his lifetime than he was for his life.

I just say to this, it's very instructive, isn't it? In Jesus' mind, the best life ever lived, the perfect, pure and sinless life, was not enough to communicate the gospel.

That Jesus himself felt it was necessary to speak. But sixthly, and I think the largest reason that holds us back, is fear.

[18 : 55] And this is absolutely normal. If you are fearless about this, the Lord bless you. But I'm yet to meet someone in that circumstance.

And I think it's great. Peter knows all about fear. So the words before 15, you see he says, the end of verse 14, have no fear of them, nor be troubled.

And literally it reads, do not fear what they fear, nor be terrified. He's saying, don't be afraid of the wrong thing. Don't have something else as ultimately valuable in your life.

Make a list of the things that other people feel they fear, they reverence, they worship. Christ himself outweighs them all. He's not saying be fearless.

He's saying with your fear, direct it towards God, and then you won't be terrified. But here's the thing. The fear of the Lord is different from every other fear. Remember we did this in Proverbs.

[19 : 59] All our other fears are we're frightened of something bad that's going to happen to us. But the fear of the Lord is because of his goodness. So if you would take up your bulletin, if you've written a shopping list on it, you are forgiven.

Turn back to page seven. I sometimes find, I don't know how you find Sunday mornings, but there's so much in our liturgy that we roll over that's astonishing.

Some of the things you've said today are quite edgy. Shall I take a moment? No, no, let's just, okay. No enthusiasm for that.

Let me just show you Psalm 130, Psalm 130, verse four. With you there is forgiveness that you may be feared. The fear of the Lord is not because of his vast mighty power that will crush us.

The fear of the Lord is because he's forgiven us. Or look down at verse seven. O Israel, hope in the Lord. For with the Lord there is steadfast love and plentiful redemption.

[21 : 15] Overflowing salvation, see. So the fear of the Lord is the fear of his holiness. But what he's done is he's taken his holiness in Jesus Christ and used it to save us.

This, I think, is the key to undermining the fear of rejection because that's where frightened I am. I'm frightened that people won't like me anymore. I shouldn't tell you this.

I'm frightened that somehow they don't want to be my friend and they're going to talk about me behind my back. But if Christ is Lord and if he is my fear, your accepting me does not make me valuable.

And your rejecting me does not make me any less valuable. It'll make me feel diminished, but it won't actually make me diminished. I'm valuable and you are valuable because God has set his love on us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So that is the implication, Peter says. Always be ready to make a defense. We have to go back to the command more briefly. Why do we live like this?

[22 : 20] Why do we speak for Christ? And the command, this is my second point, is at the beginning of verse 15. Here it is. In your hearts, honor Christ the Lord as holy.

That's the one command from all this section, chapter 3. Peter is simply talking about what's ultimately valuable, what's ultimately treasured. If you treat something as holy in your heart, it means you set your affections and your heart on it.

You treat it as the object of supreme worship. You reverence it. You're in awe of it. You want it above everything else. And if that thing that you treat as holy is not holy in itself, it's not Jesus Christ, it will make you unholy.

You'll slide away in unholiness. That's how God's made us. And if the focus of my heart is on something that's in the world, it makes me completely vulnerable because everything in this world is temporary.

You know, if the focus of my heart, if the thing I'm making holy in my life is finding a marriage partner, or how my kids do, or getting through the bucket list when I'm retired, it can all be taken in an instant.

[23 : 38] But if it's on the holiness of Jesus Christ, it will last forever. And holiness, as you know, is deeply personal.

This is the highest perfection, if you will, of God. It's personal because God gives his holy name to his children. He wants to establish an exclusive love relationship with his children.

The holiness of the Old Testament shows God wants to give himself to us fully. And he wants us to give ourselves to him fully. And it comes to its great expression in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And Peter is just saying, here is the command. Set your affections above everything else on Jesus Christ as Lord. Set him apart in your hearts. Make him the one you love and you want, and honor and reverence.

And he's got a wonderful new translation of Augustine's Confessions, written just before 400 AD. Not the translation.

[24 : 42] Augustine was a church father, wrote wonderful... He wrote a lot of wonderful things, actually. And he out-thought the culture.

But the most famous of his books, perhaps, is his Confessions, where he describes his own personal conversion and what it means for him to belong to God.

And this translation by Sarah Rudin, it just makes the whole thing a great read, a rollicking good yarn. He calls God the beauty of all things. Listen to what he says.

Give me yourself, my God. Restore yourself to me. You see, I am in love with you. And if it's too little, let me be more powerfully in love with you.

I can't measure and know how much is missing from my love, how insufficient it is for allowing my life to run into your arms and not turn away from you. But stay until it's hidden away in your hidden presence.

[25 : 44] Or again, this is a well-known quote. I took too long to fall in love with you. Beauty so ancient and so new. I took too long to fall in love with you, but there you were, inside.

And I was outside. And there I was searching for you. It's the language of the heart. Peter is saying, in your heart, set your affections on him.

He alone deserves it. And if you reverence him as holy, again, there is nothing, nothing, nothing that can take him away from you. And I think just as I finish, that's why the command and the response belong together so well.

Because all true witness comes out of this in your hearts, reverence Christ as holy. You know, if Christ is not the holy one in our affections and we speak about him, it's going to sound a bit hollow, I think.

You can have all the best answers, but if Christ is not our true hope, we're not going to find it natural to talk about it. But this brings heart and lip together so naturally. And the more we reverence Christ and sanctify in our hearts, the more hopeful we will be because he pours hope into our hearts by his fellowship with us.

[27 : 06] In a culture, I think, that's very, very thin on hope. And then it'll be more natural, I think, to give a defense for that hope. So as we finish, I think we should pray for two things, for humility and boldness.

This apostle Peter, after Jesus rose from the dead, went into the temple and began preaching the gospel and healing. And the Jerusalem Council, the group that had managed to murder Jesus, got a hold of him and they beat him.

They flogged him. Which must have been a terrifying experience. And he went back to the little church and they gathered around and he reported to the church. They were frightened out of their wits, meeting behind closed doors.

You know what they prayed for in Acts 4? This is our quote from the prayer. Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.

And boldness just means open mouth. While you stretch out your hand to heal. And when they prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

[28 : 16] And continue to speak the word of God with boldness. So let's pray for humility and boldness. Would you kneel? Thank you. Thank you.