

**This Exiled Life – Part 3**

## Always Prepared for Suffering

1 Peter 3:13-17

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*<sup>13</sup> Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, <sup>15</sup> but 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, <sup>16</sup> having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. 1 Peter 3:13–17 (ESV)*

One of the things I absolutely hate is the feeling that I've forgotten something. I can't tell you how many times I've loaded the family into the car for a trip, and as we're driving away, I have this thought: "What did I forget?" Can you resonate with that feeling?

Now this feeling is not without warrant. There have been too many times that I've arrived at my destination, and I couldn't find my boarding pass, my passport, my socks, my notes, or my wallet. Even this week it happened. I was rushing to get out of the house for an early breakfast meeting, and I could not find my wallet. I scurried all over the house looking for it, and I had to steal one of my wife's credit cards and obey every traffic law. During the entire drive to the meeting, I was retracing my steps, wondering where in the world I could have put it down. I even shot my wife a quick text asking her to keep an eye out for it, and it was hard to focus in the meeting until she replied that she found it – in our bed. It's a long story.

I dislike being unprepared so much that I often have a routine that I walk through to be sure that I have everything, especially when I'm packing. I stand over my suitcase, and I talk myself through my clothing from bottom to top: "shoes, socks, pants, belt, underwear, t-shirts, dress shirt, coat. . . ." I'll do the same with my backpack: "computer, cord, charger, backup battery, Bible, journal, Altoids, wallet, phone . . ." And before every sermon, I quickly check to be sure that I have all my notes and that they are in the right order.

I'm sure that you do the same thing in your world. When our kids were little, our Saturday evening routine involved laying out all their clothes on the floor in the hallway, finding the keys to the car, and having breakfast set out. It helped us be less sinful on Sunday mornings.

By walking through what you are going to need in advance, you are better prepared to navigate whatever your day is going to be like. Planning ahead and thinking about what you need in the future provides a level of freedom and focus.

Now what is true in regard to packing and Sunday morning preparations is true when it comes to living as a Christian exile. And since living as an exile is significantly more important and significantly more challenging, it makes a lot of sense for us to think through how to be prepared.

### **Prepared for Suffering**

Peter is writing to a group of people who had become exiles in their own country, cities, workplaces, and even homes. The suffering that they had experienced was not official, governmentally-sanctioned suffering. Rather, it was more subtle, and it seems as though it was starting to intensify.

Part of the purpose of the book of 1 Peter is to help prepare Christians for the moment when they are faced with some kind of suffering or persecution. How should a Christian think? How do we think about suffering in general? And how do we respond in the right way when we feel the pressure of following Jesus?

For some of you, these questions are not theoretical. They are where you are living right now. You are starting to feel the pressure around you. People are starting to ask you uncomfortable questions. Or maybe you look a little bit ahead, and you can anticipate that there are going to be some challenges in the future. Maybe even some things that are a little scary.

In 1 Peter 3:13-17 Peter speaks very directly about how Christian exiles should think and the questions that they should ask themselves as the varying levels of persecution come their way.

### **Five Questions To Ask in Suffering**

I'm going to take this text and boil it down into five useful questions that you could ask yourself as you are facing increasing pressure or direct opposition. Let me encourage you to listen carefully because I think that every one of you will use verses 13-17 at some point in your life. It may be something that you have to personally apply or it may be something that you'll have to walk someone else through as they face some challenges.

Think of this list as a checklist for you to consider as you prepare for suffering as an exile or a way to think through whatever you are facing today.

### **1) Am I keeping an eternal perspective?**

The first question comes from the question that we find in verse 13 and the answer that is given in the first half of verse 14.

*<sup>13</sup> Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. 1 Peter 3:13–14a (ESV)*

This is an extension of what we saw last week in verses 10-12 as Peter quoted a portion of Psalm 34. The word "now" makes that connection clear and apparent. We ended last week's sermon by identifying that there are eternal principles and promises underneath any suffering or opposition that a Christian faces. Those promises relate to 1) God's knowledge of what is happening, 2) His ears being open to the cries of His people, and 3) His commitment to be against those who do evil. Peter quotes an Old Testament Psalm to connect these believers to the eternal truth that is undergirding their experience.

Christian exiles live in two realms at the same time. They are alive physically and born again to a living hope (1:3). They have real houses, lands, and families in this life, but they also have a real inheritance that is imperishable and kept in heaven (1:4). Christian exiles are citizens of the country in which they live, but they are a holy nation and a people for God's own possession (2:9). They are part of an earthly ethnicity, but they are a chosen race and a royal priesthood (2:9). And when Christian exiles suffer, they are to keep in mind that their ultimate vindication is not going to take place on earth. They are to follow the example of Jesus and continue entrusting themselves to Him who judges justly (2:23).

Therefore, Christian exiles are to keep an eternal and heavenly perspective, and 3:13 targets the emotional side of the suffering ledger. The question "who is there to harm you?" is given as a word of confidence and hope. And the promise "you will be blessed" is designed to provide an emotional motivation.

Do you see what Peter is doing here? Why does he talk about harm and the promise of blessing? He knows that one of the greatest foes of Christian endurance is fear. If you look ahead in verse 14 you will see this directly. Therefore, Peter aims to help Christians know how to battle fear. We'll talk more about that in a moment. But for now, just notice that the way he does this is by celebrating two bedrock truths:

- 1) No earthly person can ultimately harm you
- 2) No earthly loss will ultimately affect you

Now if you know something about Paul's letter to the church in Rome, you will hear some of the same ideas. In Romans 8:35 and 37 Paul identifies that believers are safe and victorious. Listen for parallel ideas to "no harm" and "no loss" that we heard in 1 Peter 3.

*<sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:35–39 (ESV)*

Both Paul and Peter know that if you free people from fear of harm and fear of loss, they are unstoppable.

Therefore, the first question we need to ask ourselves as suffering comes in our direction is whether or not we are thinking with an eternal perspective. Are we looking beyond the immediate circumstances? How real are the promises of God to us? How anchored are we in what the Word says about us? Do we live with a two-realm mindset?

This is one of the painful blessings of opposition or persecution. It makes our perspective on life and eternity evident in practical ways. It calls into question if we really believe that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed. . . ." (Romans 8:18). Hardship reveals to what extent you have an eternal perspective.

The way you prepare for future hardship is to be sure that you know the promises that provide an eternal perspective. And the way you battle through hardship is by using the Word to point your heart toward an eternal perspective.

## **2) Am I more affected by the fear of man or the love of Christ?**

The second question tackles the issue of fear more specifically by contrasting it with an exile's relationship with Jesus. Suffering or hardship calls into question who we think is more worthy of respect, obedience, and affection. Do we obey men or God? (Acts 4:19). This second question invites us to consider not just a heavenly versus eternal perspective, but also an evaluation of who is more influential in our lives – people or Jesus.

Now notice in verse 14 that Peter makes a command about two emotions often connected with suffering: fear and anxiety. At one level I want you to be encouraged by this. Real believers dealing with real opposition have to battle with these two issues. So to have fear or to have

anxiety in the face of trouble does not mean that you've already failed. The question is what do you do with these struggles? First, we need to understand them.

Fear is the emotion that you feel because of anticipating something that will be bad or painful. It is an understandable emotion connected to your experience, what you've heard or what you know to be true. For example, I have to work really hard to relax when I go to the dentist because I had some really bad experiences in my childhood. When I hear the whine of the drill, I have emotions that come out of nowhere. Fear is connected to something that threatens you. It is a very strong emotion, and it is easy to act on.

To be troubled is very similar to fear, but it seems to be a lesser form of it or something more connected to our thinking. John used the word in John 12:27 in reference to what was happening in Jesus' soul as he anticipated the cross.<sup>1</sup> The idea seems to be mental anguish or anxiety. It seems to be more focused on what you are thinking and considering.

I don't want to draw too many distinctions here. The point in 1 Peter 3 is that fear and anxiety can become primary motivators in what we do or don't do, say or don't say. What do exiles do about this?

According to verse 15, Christians are commanded to honor Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts. When we have troubled minds that are afraid of what people might do to us, we are to focus on Christ's vindication of us. We are to weigh out the authority and power of those who we fear in light of the weightiness of Jesus' promise and His work on our behalf.

Somewhere in your notes or in the margin of your Bible, write down Isaiah 8, because this passage is a loose quotation from verses 11-15 where Israel faced the threat of a foreign invader. And it is the text just before Isaiah 9 where we hear "For unto us a child is born . . . and the government shall be on his shoulders" (Isaiah 9:6). Throughout history and in the cross, God has proven Himself to be trustworthy.

That is why we need to sing together, pray together, and listen to the Word together. It reminds us what is true and what we believe in. So when the text says "honor Christ the Lord as holy" it means that we reaffirm intellectually, emotionally, and practically that Jesus is the one we serve.

By our actions, we give evidence that we really believe that Jesus is Lord – the one who controls all the events of our lives. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether or not we believe that people are more powerful than Jesus. We have to ask ourselves, "What is really motivating me? Am I succumbing to the fear of man or am I in love with Jesus?"

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<sup>1</sup> See also Matthew 2:3, 14:26; John 13:21, 14:1

This is where Martin Luther had to take his heart in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century when his life was threatened because of his views about faith alone. The second verse of 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God' is incredibly Jesus-centered:

*Did we in our own strength confide,  
Our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right Man on our side,  
The Man of God's own choosing:  
Dost ask who that may be?  
Christ Jesus, it is He;  
Lord of Hosts His Name,  
From age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.*

### **3) Am I talking about Jesus with clarity and kindness?**

The third question relates to responding in the right way when suffering or opposition creates a conversation opportunity. Verse 15b has some great things for us to consider.

First, the passage tells us that we should be "prepared to make a defense to anyone . . ." Some people take this to mean that you need to need to be well versed in apologetics and that you are able to defend the faith when challenged. There is nothing wrong with apologetics, and you should know what you believe and why you believe it. But I think that the NIV gets closer to the sense here when it translates verse 15 as "prepared to give an answer . . . to give the reason for the hope that is in you." The idea is less about an argument as it is about affection. You connect the dots between how you live (e.g., why you won't do certain things) to your love for Jesus. Anyone can and should do that!

The warning here is not about making a bad argument nor is it calling you to be an expert in apologetics. The temptation is to give a reason for your suffering that is disconnected from being a follower of Jesus. The danger is explaining away why you are choosing to suffer such that people do not understand its connection to your obedience in Christ.

That is why Peter talks about the reason for the hope that is in you. The idea is that your actions are so unusual and radical or that you are so filled with peace and internal confidence that people ask you, "What's up with you? Why aren't you freaking out?"

In order for this to work, you have to both embrace the opportunity in persecution and respond in a manner that creates the conversation. Listen carefully! For some of you, the greatest opportunity to share the gospel will come when you are the most tempted to be anxious or afraid. When that moment comes, embrace it, believe, and when you are asked, tell them.

But be careful how you tell them! The last part of verse 15 is important. Our explanation of the hope needs to sound like hope – not like condemnation or condescension. Our words need to be full of gentleness or meekness. The word is connected to humility; it means not responding in a harsh manner, and it is used all over the New Testament for godly, Christ-like behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Talking with respect is the other dynamic. The word is the same Greek word for fear, and it probably means a fear of God. It is the same argument that Peter used in 2:19 where he said that servants were to be subject to their masters while being “mindful of God.” Knowing who you are and knowing who God is should create an appropriate filter on the things that you say and how you say them. This is so important when the pressure of opposition and fear begins to mount. Scared people say unwise things, and that can happen with the gospel.

Here is how one commentator offers a wise caution:

*When believers encounter a hostile world and are challenged concerning their faith, the temptation to respond harshly increases. Defending a position could easily be transmuted into attacking one’s opponents.<sup>3</sup>*

Both what you do and how you respond under the pressure of opposition and fear matter, so as you are “packing” for difficulties, don’t forget to bring along gentleness and respect.

#### **4) Am I building a reputation that is honorable?**

The fourth question we need to ask ourselves is about our long-term name and reputation. Verse 16 talks about having a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, your good behavior will put opponents to shame.

By a good conscience, Paul means that we are doing our very best to do what is right. The challenge is that so much of what you deal with in suffering and opposition is not black and white. There are so many gray areas that need to be navigated. And that is why our conscience needs to be our guide. We need to be asking ourselves what God would want us to do in this situation. As best as we can, we need to honor the Lord.

And not just in the immediate situation. We need to be consistently living in a way that reflects the good behavior in Christ. The implications of this are two-fold:

First, as you live out a consistently Christian life, you are developing a track record that people can see and which can, in the short run, put people to shame in their accusations. I’ve seen this

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<sup>2</sup> 1Co 4:21; 2Co 10:1; Gal 5:23; 6:1; Eph 4:2; Col 3:12; 2Ti 2:25; Tit 3:2; Jas 1:21; 3:13.

<sup>3</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 175.

verse play out so that when a believer is attacked, others step forward – even those who are not Christians – to testify on his behalf.

Second, the text points to a future day of judgment where persecutors are held accountable when the truth is made clear as to who was really in the right. Once again we hear 1 Peter 2:23 – “. . . continued entrusting himself to the one who judges justly.” But now this provides a motivation for continually responding in the right way and doing the right things.

Therefore, do not diminish the value of a lifetime of consistent, quiet godliness both for this life and for judgment that is yet to come.

### **5) Am I really suffering for righteousness?**

The final question may seem rather obvious, but it is an important question to ask. Verse 17 reminds us that not all suffering is directly connected to our righteousness. I've seen this happen before. A believer proudly comes to believe that any opposition that he or she faces is due to their righteousness. They never stop to consider if perhaps the suffering is because of shortcomings, sinful choices, or immaturity.

Peter identifies that opposition may be taking place because of evil actions. God can and does use sinful people and opposition in order to get our attention and to sanctify us. Just because you are a Christian, and just because you are being opposed, do not assume that you are being persecuted for your faith. Don't assume that just because you feel persecuted, you are really being persecuted.

Yet it is clearly God's will that persecution happen. Verse 17 says as much, so we also should not make our way through life as if it never happens. I think the best approach is to realize that persecution can and does take place but to always be sure to ask ourselves if this is really about Jesus or do I just need to grow up? Is this really opposition because I'm a Christian, or am I just arrogant? Am I really being persecuted for my faith, or am I just too harsh and opinionated?

These are great questions to ask, and I think asking them in the first place is probably the most important place to start.

Christian exiles are going to suffer at some point in their lives. Jesus promised it, and Peter tells us that we should not be surprised by it. So, it makes sense that we should be prepared. You can use these questions to get ready for what will come, and you can use these questions to evaluate a situation that you are in right now. You can use these questions to help you cling to hope again:



- 1) Am I keeping an eternal perspective?
- 2) Am I more affected by the fear of man or the love of Christ?
- 3) Am I talking about Jesus with clarity and kindness?
- 4) Am I building a reputation that is honorable?
- 5) Am I really suffering for righteousness?

May God help us to live righteously, to speak wisely, and, if necessary, to suffer patiently.

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