

Securities Against a Hostile World

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:13–17

Code: 60-35

INTRODUCTION

The apostle Peter gave essential instructions to believers about living in a hostile world. Because believers in those days were undergoing severe persecution, Peter wanted them to live securely in the midst of such hostility. He began directly addressing the issue of persecution in 1 Peter 3:13. But before that, he gave some important spiritual advice.

A. A Believer's Identity in a Hostile World

First, Peter wanted the persecuted believers to know their identity as Christians (1 Pet. 1:12:12). At the beginning of the section he identified them as "chosen" (1:1), and toward the end he identified them as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (2:9). Knowing their identity encouraged the believers to "proclaim the excellencies" of God, who called them out of sin to live righteously.

Peter also pointed out that believers are "aliens and strangers" (v. 11). A believer is a foreigner and pilgrim living without a permanent home or citizenship. He only temporarily lives in this world and is not to participate in its ungodliness. Peter said, "Keep your behavior excellent among the [unsaved], so that . . . they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation (v. 12). The Lord uses a holy life to draw the lost to Christ. When unbelievers become Christians, they glorify God.

B. A Believer's Relationship to a Hostile World

As believers, we're to have proper relationships with others in part to evangelize the lost (1 Pet. 2:13:12). That involves how we relate to those in positions of authority (2:13-20), our spouse (3:1-7), other believers (3:8-13), and everyone in general.

C. A Believer's Perspective in a Hostile World

After speaking of our identity in Christ and our relationship to society, Peter then explains how to live securely in an unfriendly society. A believer needs to arm himself with a trust in the power of righteousness to triumph over persecution and suffering. During times of hostility, we're to have confidence, not be in turmoil.

The early church experienced great persecution, but that's not the case for the contemporary church in most of the world. Physical persecution exists in some parts, but in our nation it's not as overt and aggressive as that. However, there seems to be a mounting hostility toward Christianity in our society. Many non-Christians treat immorality as an alternate lifestyle and believe man can solve his problems in whatever way he chooses. Christians in our nation can expect to face increasing hostility from personal and governmental levels.

First Peter 3:13-17 is for every godly believer who lives in an ungodly culture. It tells us how to defend ourselves against hostile threats and silence false accusations.

LESSON

I. A PASSION FOR GOODNESS (v. 13)

"Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?"

A. A Rhetorical Question

Most people find it difficult to mistreat those who are fervent in doing good. Those who love to do

good are often gracious, unselfish, kind, loving, and caring. But frauds who steal from widows and orphans aren't usually well-liked. Even the ungodly will condemn those who make themselves rich at the expense of others. So Peter lays down a general principle: A person who is generous and thoughtful to others isn't often the object of hostility. The implied answer to Peter's rhetorical question is that few or none would harm a believer who does good.

B. A Pure Life

"Prove" means "to become," a reference to a person's character. "Zealous" refers to intensity and enthusiasm. During New Testament times a fanatical group of patriots called the Zealots pledged to free Israel from foreign rule. Simon the Zealot, one of the apostles, probably received his name for having belonged to that group. Peter wanted all his readers to be zealots in the sense of doing good. A passion for doing good produces a pure life, which should be the goal and delight of every believer. When a believer is consumed with godly living, he will lose his appetite for the world's ungodly attractions.

"If you should suffer for the sake of righteousness" (1 Pet. 3:14) implies that a passion for goodness isn't a guarantee against persecution. Doing good simply reduces the likelihood of persecution. No one did more good than Jesus, yet a hostile world eventually killed Him. Nevertheless, a believer's life should be above reproach so critics will have no just reason for their accusations.

II. A WILLINGNESS TO SUFFER (v. 14)

"But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled. "

A. The Possibility of Suffering

"But even if" conveys the idea of "per chance" or "contrary to what is expected." The verb "should suffer" indicates the remote possibility that one will suffer for doing good. Peter said that while suffering for doing good isn't likely to happen, it nevertheless can happen. Indeed, many Christians suffered for their obedience to Christ in the early church, but others undoubtedly suffered for their disobedience. When a Christian disobeys God's Word, the world senses a greater justification and freedom in its hostility. But even godly Christians aren't to be surprised or afraid when suffering happens.

1. Peter spoke about it

Further on in the text Peter says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God" (4:12-16). A believer is to accept suffering in his life because God has a spiritual purpose for it.

2. Christ experienced it

As we mentioned before, even the sinless Christ suffered persecution: "Christ . . . suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (2:21-23). Believers can identify with and know intimately "the fellowship of [Christ's] sufferings" (Phil. 3:10).

B. The Privilege of Suffering

1. It brings blessing from God

Sometimes unbelievers can't tolerate a righteous man or woman. A holy life irritates them to the point of aggression. A believer who suffers under such circumstances is "blessed" (1 Pet. 3:14). "Blessed" doesn't necessarily emphasize happiness or joy as much as it does the meaning of "privilege" or

"honor." Elizabeth said Mary the mother of Jesus was "blessed among women" (Luke 1:42). Mary's heart was pierced with many sorrows (Luke 2:35), so that isn't a reference to general happiness. Instead, it speaks of divine favor--the privilege of giving birth to the Messiah in Mary's case. A believer has the same sense of privilege when he shares in Christ's sufferings.

Perhaps Peter understood the meaning of "blessed" from our Lord's words in Matthew 5:10-12:

"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great." A believer has the honor of receiving a divine, eternal reward for suffering on Christ's behalf.

2. It illustrates the importance of fearing God

The last part of 1 Peter 3:14 alludes to Isaiah 8:12-13: "You are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it. It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread. "

In the days of the prophet Isaiah, Ahaz king of Judah faced a crisis because of the Assyrian army's impending invasion. The kings of Israel and Syria wanted Ahaz to join them in an alliance against the Assyrian forces but Ahaz refused. Because he refused, Israel and Syria threatened to invade Judah. Behind the scenes Ahaz had made an alliance with Assyria, but Isaiah warned Ahaz against that ungodly alliance and told him not to fear. Isaiah meant either that Ahaz was not to fear like Syria and Israel, or was not to fear the enemy's intimidation. Instead, the king was to fear the Lord and thereby not be troubled or shaken.

In the same sense, a Christian isn't to be shaken by whatever hostilities threaten him. Fearing the Lord will help him face opposition with courage and see suffering as an opportunity for spiritual blessings, not as an opportunity to compromise his faith before the unbelieving world. As Martin Luther stood before his accusers and refused to recant his beliefs, so Christians today must stand firm in the faith. Church history reveals that many Christians lost their lives because they refused to compromise their stand for the Lord.

To be dedicated to the Lord in the face of persecution demands that our mind and affections be set on heavenly values, not earthly ones. A believer preoccupied with possessions, pleasures, and popularity will fear the enemy's assault. But the heavenly-minded believer can "count it all joy" when he encounters various trials (James 1:2, KJV).

III. A DEVOTION TO CHRIST (v. 15a)

"Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. "

Peter again alludes to Isaiah 8:13, which says, "Sanctify the Lord" (KJV). While Isaiah used the word Lord, Peter used the words Christ as Lord. Peter meant that whatever opposition a believer faces, he always is to affirm in his heart that Christ is Lord. He is to accept and acknowledge the Lord's sovereignty and majesty, fearing only Him.

"To sanctify" speaks of adoring, exalting, magnifying, and giving primary place to. The believer who sanctifies Christ exalts Him as the object of his love and loyalty. The believer recognizes His perfection, magnifies His glory, and extols His greatness. He submits himself to God's will, realizing His will sometimes includes suffering. To live that way is to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect" (Titus 2:10). The Christian, in the deepest part of his or her being, is committed to honoring Christ as Lord--even in the midst of suffering. Submission to Christ as Lord yields courage, boldness, and fortitude in the midst of hostility.

IV. A READINESS TO DEFEND THE FAITH (v. 15b)

"Always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence. "

A. What a Believer Should Answer

When society attacks, the believer is to be prepared to make a "defense" (Gk. , apologia, from which the English words apology and apologetic are derived). The Greek term often speaks of a formal defense in a court of law. Paul used it to describe his defense in a courtroom situation (2 Tim. 4:16). And Festus the governor of Judea used it in the same sense to explain Paul's case to King Agrippa (Acts 25:16).

But Paul also used apologia in an informal sense of being able to answer anyone who questioned him (Phil. 1:16-17)--not just a judge, magistrate, or governor. Furthermore, "always" in 1 Peter 3:15 indicates that a believer should be prepared to answer in all situations, not just in the legal sphere. So the use of "defense" in 1 Peter 3:15 is general: Whether formally in an official setting or informally to anyone who might inquire, a believer is to be ready to provide an answer. That answer is about "the hope that is in you," which refers to the Christian faith. Believers should be able to give a rational explanation of their salvation and Christian faith.

B. How a Believer Should Answer

A Christian is to explain his faith "with gentleness and reverence." That indicates a tender and a gracious spirit in speaking. "Gentleness" speaks of meekness or humility, all references to power under control. "Reverence" (Gk., phobeo) means "fear." Phobia is a derivative of that Greek word. But this kind of fear refers to a healthy devotion to God, a healthy regard for truth, and a healthy respect for the person being spoken to. Therefore, a believer isn't to be quarrelsome when sharing his faith (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

A Christian who can't carefully, thoughtfully, reasonably, and biblically give a clear explanation for his faith will be insecure when faced with hostility, and might be inclined to doubt his salvation. The enemy's blows will devastate those who haven't "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation" (1 Thess. 5:8).

V. A PURE CONSCIENCE (v. 16)

"Keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. "

"Keep" means "to maintain" or "possess." The conscience either accuses or excuses a person, acting as a source of conviction or affirmation. "A good conscience" is one that doesn't accuse a believer of sin because he or she is living a godly life. A good conscience says everything is well, but an evil conscience points out sin in a person's life.

A believer is to live with a clear conscience so the weight of guilt won't burden him when faced with hostile criticism. However, if he doesn't have a passion for doing good and serve Christ as Lord, he will know the heavy weight of deserved guilt. A defiled conscience can't be at ease or withstand the onslaught of trials. But a clear conscience will help a believer not to be anxious or troubled in his trials. That's one of the reasons Paul said, "I . . . do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men" (Acts 24:16).

A pure conscience provides a tranquility and vindicates the slandered believer. His conscience won't point out any sin, and his godly life will show any criticism to be false. Accusations against a believer should be for his doing good, not evil (1 Pet. 2:12; 4:14-16). "Slandered" refers to verbal abuse, and "revile" means "to threaten, insult, or mistreat." When a believer has a pure conscience, the verbal abuse and insults bring shame to the accuser, not the believer.

The world self-righteously condemns Christianity when it can point to a Christian who has scandalized the faith. Unbelievers enjoy drawing attention to a sinning Christian because they want to justify their sinful behavior. Therefore all Christians are to live above reproach so any accusation has no valid basis.

CONCLUSION

First Peter 3:17 says, "It is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather

than for doing what is wrong." A believer has two options. The first is to do right, even if it results in suffering. A believer is to accept suffering as a part of God's wise and sovereign plan for his or her life. The second option is to choose to do wrong, which will result in suffering. Both options are according to God's will. God wills a believer to suffer for doing right so that he receives spiritual strength and glorifies God, and God wills that a believer suffer divine chastisement for doing wrong. So do good and avoid bringing suffering upon yourself from doing wrong.

Focusing on the Facts

1. How does Peter identify believers (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:9, 11)?
2. What relationships does 1 Peter 2:13-17 speak of?
3. Explain the implied answer to the question in 1 Peter 3:13.
4. What is the spiritual result of being zealous in godly living?
5. What are two indications that suffering is possible for the believer? Explain.
6. What does "blessed" mean in 1 Peter 3:14.
7. What lesson did Peter teach from the life of Ahaz (Isa. 8:12-13; 1 Pet. 3:14)?
8. What does being dedicated to the Lord demand?
9. What does "sanctify Christ as Lord" mean (1 Pet. 3:15)?
10. What does "defense" mean in 1 Peter 3:15?
11. Explain what defense the believer should be always ready to give (1 Pet. 3:15).
12. What danger exists for a believer who isn't ready to give a defense?
13. What is a "good conscience" (1 Pet. 3:16)? How does it help a believer who's faced with criticism (1 Pet. 3:16)?
14. What are two options in a believer's life (1 Peter 3:17)? How are both within God's will?

Pondering the Principles

1. First Peter 3:14 indicates that suffering serves as a spiritual privilege for a believer. If a Christian knows "that God causes all things to work together for good" (Rom. 8:28), it will help him accept suffering as part of God's plan for his life. The Puritan Thomas Watson said, "Afflictions work for good, as they make way for glory. . . . Not that they merit glory, but they prepare for it. As ploughing prepares the earth for a crop, so afflictions prepare and make us [ready] for glory. The painter lays his gold upon dark colours, so God first lays the dark colours of affliction, and then He lays the golden colour of glory. The vessel is first seasoned before wine is poured into it: the vessels of mercy are first seasoned with affliction, and then the wine of glory is poured in. Thus we see afflictions are not prejudicial, but beneficial, to the saints" (All Things for Good [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986], p. 32). When you face suffering, be encouraged knowing it's working for your spiritual benefit. If you know someone going through difficult times, take time to encourage him or her through God's Word.

2. Scripture charges the believer to explain his faith "with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet. 3:15).

Read the following verses and write down what they teach about godly speaking habits:

- Proverbs 15:1; 17:27
- Proverbs 12:18; 15:4; Ephesians 4:31
- Proverbs 10:18; 16:28; Colossians 3:8-9
- Proverbs 13:3; 17:28
- Proverbs 15:7; 16:23; Ephesians 4:29
- Proverbs 16:24; 25:11; Colossians 4:6
- Proverbs 19:22; Ephesians 4:25

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