

First Peter: An Exchange of Fears

1 Peter 3:13-17

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We continue in our series on 1 Peter. Beginning now with chapter 3, verse 13. Having (from 2:12-3:12) exhorted the community of exiles, in the various ways it is called to imitate Christ in the hostile environment it finds itself in: Peter now moves to further steel them for suffering, for resistance from the world. And also exhorts them, in what has become the classic text for a Christian defense of the faith. So, we will look at this text under two headings: Fear in verses 13, 14, and 17. And Revere in verses 15 and 16. Fear and Revere.

I. Fear

First, then, fear. Verse 13 is a question: Who is going to harm you, if you are zealous for what is good? Now, in one sense, the answer to that is: lots of people! Lots of people will harm those who are eager for the good. As one commentator put it: The spectacle of moral beauty does not disarm all the wicked; they are often irritated by the radiance of a virtue that condemns them.

Cultures do get to the place, where they are literally calling evil good, and good evil. Ours is well on the road to that Orwellian darkness. And the culture that these scattered Christians live in, is also slowly descending into that irrational abyss. But Peter still holds out some hope (it may be more theoretical than actual at this point) hope that goodness can (maybe) preserve some peace. Nevertheless, the letter as a whole makes it clear that the suffering of the church can be expected to increase.

So, he continues: But EVEN IF you should suffer for righteousness' sake. Or as he puts it in v.17: it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. Now he's at the central theme of the letter. Suffering for what is right. Suffering for being an ardent pursuer of the good. "Even if you should suffer for what is right – you will be blessed."

Here, Peter makes a crucial Christian connection. Suffering and blessedness are not opposites. Indeed, suffering for what is right, receives the benediction of Christ himself. Peter, again, draws deeply from the well of Jesus' own teaching and example as a righteous sufferer. A teaching he initially resisted, but which,

he has come to champion. Where did Peter learn that you are blessed if you suffer for what is right? From the innocent, righteous, Crucified One who said this:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice & be glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The example of Jesus – is radical, cutting, and deep. He subverts the situation of suffering, and turns it into the place, the site of blessedness.

Now, we can re-listen to the opening question of this text: Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? And the answer now is....no one. No permanent harm can come to the children of God. Not a hair on the head of God’s children can be touched without our Father’s permission. Nothing, Paul says, in that famous passage from Romans 8, can separate us from the love of God. Neither death nor life, nor anything else in all creation. And it’s important to remember, the most overlooked verse in that triumphant Romans passage. Nothing can separate us from God’s love – in all these things we are more than conquerors – and right in the middle of all that, Paul says:

For your sake we are being killed all day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Now Peter’s hearers – like us – are not being slaughtered. But they do face serious opposition – and the point here is that IF they suffer for righteousness that is a blessed estate. This takes us into the paradox of the cross, the scandal that shapes the heart of Christian existence. This is why, Paul says, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. After the pattern of our Lord, we win by losing. Like the conquerors in revelation we conquer being conquered.

And the conclusion of this bit of instruction is bracing and heartening, encouraging. It’s at the end of v.14: Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened (ESV: Have no fear of them, nor be troubled). It’s a citation from Isaiah 8 which reads:

“Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. ¹³ The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.”

We don’t fear the opponents of the church, nor do we fear the things they fear. We are called here to question our fears. Some fears are natural, and biological, and even good. But others, even if they may be natural, like the fear of suffering,

will have to be overcome. If suffering is blessedness, then the perfect love of God must drive the fear of it out of us. Its two rapid-fire commands here: DO NOT FEAR their threats. DO NOT be frightened.

Again, Peter, in citing Isaiah, is also drawing from his Master, who said: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. This is what we are calling the exchange of fears. Isaiah said do not fear what they fear, but rather (there's the exchange) the Lord Almighty is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread. And Jesus says, don't fear those who can kill the body. Rather, rather – there's the exchange – instead of fearing A, rather, fear B. Rather, fear the One who can destroy both can and body in hell. That may not appear to be a comforting word from Jesus. But there is a profound point here – and its challenging to the depth of our souls.

Our fears often arise because there is NO – or little – fear, little holy dread, or trembling before God in us. You won't get this counsel for overcoming fear anywhere else. Fears need to be replaced with a greater, liberating fear. Fear of the Lord God Almighty does not sit well, or comfortably, with other fears. Fear of God --real, living, clean, enduring, consoling fear of God – drives out the fear of man, and here, Peter says, it is to drive out the fear of those who inflict suffering on the church. This exchange of fears – the church's enemies for the Lord God Almighty – is what explains the difference between the Christ-denying Peter, cowering in the courtyard on the night of Jesus' arrest, and the bold Christ-preaching Peter of (for example) Acts 3 and Acts 5 before the Sanhedrin. Through the exchange of fears, he had come to affirm with the Psalmist (56:4): In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? That's fear.

II. Revere

Our second point is revere. It's important to be alert here, for something wondrous happens. Peter has just cited Isaiah 8: do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. And we saw that this means, in the very next verse in Isaiah, that we are to fear, to dread, the Lord God Almighty.

So, listen now, Peter cites Isaiah at the end of v. 14, but he doesn't stop citing him, he continues, and he then modifies the thought from Isaiah. Do not be frightened, BUT – RATHER – in your hearts revere (fear) Christ the Lord as holy. Do you see what has happened here? Jesus Christ is now identified as, standing in for, the Lord God Almighty in Isaiah chapter 8. Instead of Lord God Almighty, its Christ the Lord.

The text establishes, that even at this early date, the church has a high Christology. One that identified Jesus as divine, as one with, equal to the God of

Israel. The LORD God of Israel is to be feared. Christ the LORD is to be revered. Revered in your hearts. That is, in the entirety of your inner man. To revere him, is to SANCTIFY him, to set him apart as holy. To reverence Christ AS one reverences the Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, the God of the Covenant.

So, it turns out that THIS is the exchange of fears called for. Do not fear your enemies, but reverence Christ in your hearts. Interior reverence to the Lord Jesus Christ is the key to conquering our fears. One cannot (not often anyway) conquer fear directly. We do it by cultivating this reverence for Christ as Lord. This wonderful fear which displaces all fears. And this fear is the prerequisite for what we call apologetics. Peter continues: Always be prepared, to give an answer, to everyone who asks you, to give the reason, for the hope that you have (in you).

Now, the word “answer” (ready to give an answer) here is the Greek word “apology.” It does not mean to apologize, or to be apologetic, it means to give a defense (ESV: make a defense). Often, it would be used of a formal courtroom charge that would have to be answered. So, when we say “apologetics,” we mean the reasoned defense of the Christian faith. However, Peter is not thinking of some high-powered defense of Christianity reserved only for the elite, for intellectuals. Though there is a time and a place for that. He’s thinking of something all believers are called to do. And what equips one for this task, is not years of academic reading. Its reverencing Christ as Lord in your heart. That’s the pre-requisite for being an effective defender of the faith. For being able to give an ANSWER.

Notice, these answers are given to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope within you. The apologist here, is not pictured as aggressively seeking to initiate conversations. Or as tracking people down (though there may be a time for that). The text says: IF SOMEONE ASKS YOU – be ready to give them an answer. Don’t throw pearls before swine. Trust the Spirit to provoke questions – even from the hostile – and the audience here is assumed to be very hostile. But giving answers to questions that have not been asked, is a futile endeavor.

Notice, the questioning in view here is focused. We are being asked to give a reason for the HOPE that is in us. We live in a culture that has largely (not entirely) shown no interest in asking us questions. There are many reasons for this, but one that we might reflect on from this text is: Is the hope within us bright or is it dim? Hope for Peter, and in the NT, is not general optimism or worldly hopefulness, it is a heavenly, future, eschatological thing. Is this hope visible in us?

The hope in view here is the hope of the gospel. And that is the hope of the resurrection. The hope of a heavenly inheritance. The hope of the appearing of Jesus Christ. Fix your hope completely, Peter says, on the grace to be brought to

you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. The early church was shaped by the fervent expectation of the Lord's return. Even a casual reading of the NT breathes the air of expectancy. Its electric. An air of radical heavenly orientation, of pulsating hope in eschatological glory – of the end of all things being at hand. All of this has drained itself out of the modern church.

It's no wonder no one asks us about the hope we have, we ourselves have either forgotten it, or neutered it. Even apologetics, then, starts from the future and works back. They ask about the Christian hope (future) – because they've seen it in you – and we give reasons for our hope. And those reasons flow out of our reverence for Christ as Lord. For He, in his risen glory, is our hope. And remember, we are not talking (primarily) about coffeehouse conversations with friends, we are talking about defending the faith under some real duress, and yet the call is to do this with gentleness and respect.

This is a spirit of refusing to coerce, to manipulate, to use force, to demand one's rights in the face of provocation. This is a call to meek, sanctified speech. We, who are to be ready, are to be humble, meek, respectful. Keeping a clear conscience – Peter says. You can defile your own conscience by the WAY you defend the faith. And this is done SO THAT: Those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ, may be ashamed of their slander. We will, like our Lord, have to wait for the truth to win out. He was threatened and did not threaten, he was reviled and did not revile in return. What did he do? He kept entrusting himself to him who judges justly. Vindication comes with resurrection.

To conclude: let's notice something obvious. Peter gives no instructions on how to study or read to beef up our ability to do apologetics. His passion is the character of the apologist. Our character. For if the world's malice, forces us to lose gentleness and respect, not only will our conscience be defiled, our witness will be destroyed.

What is required then, is an exchange of fears. A casting out of fear of persecution, fear of opposition, and an embrace of reverence for Christ as Lord. This creates real boldness – we do not fear men, or their threats. And this reverence, of this Christ, also should produce gentleness and respect, the humility which imitates the Lord's own, cheek-turning, forgiving, loving witness in his passion. Boldness and gentleness. These are the fruits of the great exchange of fears. Do not be frightened. But, in your hearts, revere Christ as Lord. For this reverence, this fear of Christ the Lord is the beginning of exilic wisdom. Amen.

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