

1 & 2 Peter: Faith Under Fire

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the
resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and
unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith
for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
(1 Peter 1:3-5 ESV)*

How To Witness From The Margins

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1 Peter 3:13-17

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to 1 Peter 3:13; that's on page 1016 in your pew Bibles. I mentioned in the first sermon in this series that Peter is writing to these people in advance of a coming storm. He see's the possibility – the inevitability of persecution on the horizon but as of yet it has not come upon these people. Thomas Schreiner tells us that:

“The only specific suffering noted is discrimination and mistreatment and verbal abuse from former colleagues and friends”¹

That's all that Peter speaks about as having already happened. More MAY COME – MORE ALMOST CERTAINLY WILL COME – but as of yet all they are facing is social and financial harassment. They haven't been hung up on crosses – but they have taken some hits in the public square and so Peter here begins to speak to them about how to witness for Jesus Christ from the margins of a hostile culture. I think we will find this text extraordinarily useful. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 13:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 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

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *1,2 Peter, Jude* The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 30.

in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, 16 having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. 17 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)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

How To Witness From The Margins: 10 Guiding Principles

As I said I mentioned Peter is giving them counsel here as to how to witness to Jesus Christ from the margins of a hostile culture. The first thing he says is this:

1. Don't overestimate the danger that you face

Look at verse 13.

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? (1 Peter 3:13 ESV)

Again to quote Thom Schreiner here:

“The primary form of persecution in 1 Peter was not physical but social.”²

Nobody is hanging you on a cross Peter says, nobody is feeding you to the lions – that does not appear to be on the horizon at this point. We are talking here about being made fun of. We are talking here about maybe losing out on a promotion or a sales contract. We are talking here about not being part of the in crowd. That's what's on the table AT PRESENT.

Now could it get worse? Of course it could get worse – but it also might not get worse – there is no mathematical formula plotting out the steady movement from social harassment to formal and fatal persecution. Sometimes it gets worse – but then other times it gets better.

Peter uses two verbs in the optative mood in this passage – you don't need a grammar lesson you just need to know that optative verbs are used to communicate doubt and uncertainty. Meaning that Peter is trying to say here that formal and fatal persecution while inevitable is also extremely

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *1,2 Peter, Jude* in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 176.

rare and generally short lived. He's saying don't assume that this social harassment will shortly become full blown persecution. It probably won't! So don't run off into the barn at the first sign of rain – not every cloud on the horizon brings a hail storm of persecution. Sometimes it just blows over – so stay in the field until you are driven underground. That's what he's saying.

And history bears that out. Peter wrote this letter around AD 62 and there was NO FORMAL FATAL persecution of Christians in this region until AD 112 – that's 50 years! Meaning most of the people who first heard this letter NEVER FACED ACTUALLY PERSECUTION FOR BEING CHRISTIANS. Their kids did – but even then – it didn't last. The persecution in AD 112 lasted about a year and then it was called off. Christians were good citizens and good neighbours and it was decided that it was not in the Empire's best interests to hunt them down.

Hear that.

It is so easy to hyperventilate and to assume that social marginalization now will become fatal persecution later. It might. But it might not. And you don't want to miss out on 50 years of harvest because you went in to hiding way too early.

We need to keep what we are facing right now in proper perspective – that's what Peter is saying. Ross Douthat said something similar recently in a NY Times article; he said:

being marginalized, being sued, losing tax-exempt status — this will be uncomfortable, but we should keep perspective and remember our sins, and nobody should call it persecution.³

I think that's a fair point – and I think that's what Peter is saying.

Being forced out of public vocations – the law, medicine, education and potentially losing our tax exemption – should that happen – would be bad - but let's at least acknowledge that those things are not the same thing as being burned alive for believing in Jesus – so let's be careful about calling that persecution and lets not react as if it was persecution. Let's not hide out in our basements in our fortress of canned goods because the government will no longer fund our

³ <http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/on-persecution/>

summer jobs program. That's not persecution and that is no reason to withdraw from the public square.

So let's keep things in perspective and let's continue to be obvious and active in good deeds. That's the second thing that Peter says in this passage:

2. **Be active and obvious in good deeds**

Now who is there to harm you **if you are zealous for what is good?** (1 Peter 3:13 ESV)

Peter's argument seems to be that our best defence against formal and fatal persecution is a well earned reputation for good works and public charity – and history certainly seems to bear that out. You've heard me mention several times now the two great plagues that devastated the Roman world and effectively destroyed Roman paganism. Roman culture and Roman religion did not have the internal resources to respond to this crisis. Canadian historian Charles Cochrane puts it this way, he says:

“While a deadly plague was ravaging the empire ... the sophists prattled vaguely about the exhaustion of virtue in a world growing old.”⁴

Are you hearing that? They didn't have an answer and they didn't do anything about it – they just sat around and said: “Oh well I guess this is the end of the world”.

Well it wasn't and Christians weren't sitting around waiting to find out. The Christian Bishops led their people into the cities to care for the sick and the dying. Bishop Dionysius wrote to his congregations affirming them for their sacrificial action. He says:

“Most of our brothers showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.”⁵

⁴ Charles Norris Cochrane as cited in Rodney Stark, *The Triumph Of Christianity*, (New York: Harper One, 2011), 116.

⁵ Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria as cited in Rodney Stark, *The Triumph Of Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 117.

That's how we did it! We were active and obvious in good deeds – and the world was watching. I mentioned to you that historians generally credit these events – this story – as the reason for the death of Roman paganism and for the end of Roman hostility toward Christianity. In fact one Emperor – after the plagues – named Julian the Apostate wanted to reinvigorate Roman paganism and so he urged the pagan priests to be more like the Christians! He wrote to them and urged them to support the poor and the vulnerable in their communities, noting that:

“the impious Galileans (Christians), in addition to their own, support ours, and it is shameful that our poor should be wanting our aid.”⁶

Are you hearing that? This Roman Emperor was rebuking the High Priest of Roman Paganism in one of his provinces for not being more like the Christians! They take care of their own poor AND OURS! We need to pick up our game if we are going to reclaim our empire. And of course – they did not. There was nothing in Roman paganism to motivate this kind of sacrificial service.

But there was in Christianity!

They had the example of Jesus and the hope of resurrection – and those two things changed the world.

That's what Peter says you've got to do.

When you see the storm clouds on the horizon – don't run into the barn – up your game! This is what we were made for! This is what we are called to! We do our best work under the worst circumstances. We're the resurrection people. We're the eternal life people. We're the treasure in heaven people – so we are the serve at the cost of our lives people. Let's do that – let's serve, sacrifice, love and minister to our poor and the world's poor and slowly but surely let's take over an empire.

That's what Peter says.

Don't run into the barn. There is lots of harvest left so be active and obvious in good deeds.

⁶ Julian the Apostate to the High Priest of Galatia as cited in Rodney Stark, *The Triumph Of Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 118.

Thirdly, and notwithstanding everything we've just said, we do need to:

3. Adjust expectations in light of shifting realities

Peter has already told us not to exaggerate the difficulties that we face. He's already told us that if we are active and obvious in doing good we should generally increase in favour and influence in the culture but nevertheless, he says, we should be prepared for the fact that formal and fatal persecution can come upon us in a hurry. Seasons of intense persecution have come in the past and when they do you should expect to receive extra grace and help from God to endure.

Look at verse 14:

But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. (1 Peter 3:14 ESV)

This sounds a lot like what Jesus said to the disciples

When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. (Matthew 10:19 ESV)

Notice the sequence there: when they deliver you over – help will be given to **IN THAT HOUR**.

That's basically what Peter is saying here.

I've had a lot of people say to me over the years: "I don't know if I'm strong enough to stand up under persecution – what if I deny the Lord?" Well of course, none of us can **KNOW** that we are strong enough – none of us **FEELS** strong enough right now – but that isn't the promise. The promise isn't that grace and help will be given to you now – the promise is that grace and help will be given to you **THEN** – as in **WHEN YOU NEED IT**.

Peter is saying that God gives you sufficient strength for every season. You have enough for this season, Peter says, and if things get any worse, then God will give you **MORE** and **ENOUGH** to meet the need.

Therefore, and this leads us to the 4th thing Peter says:

4. Do not be afraid

That's in verse 14:

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled (1 Peter 3:14 ESV)

Fear is the opposite of faith. Fear reveals that we don't really believe in what Jesus DID or in what Jesus SAID. Jesus ROSE FROM THE DEAD – therefore death is defeated. Jesus said that. He said:

“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” (Revelation 1:17–18 ESV)

Brothers and sisters, do we believe that or do we not?

Faith says YES but fear says NO.

The direction of your belief is important – but the Bible says, so too is the direction of your fear. Jesus said:

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. 5 But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! (Luke 12:4–5 ESV)

Are you hearing that? Jesus says do not fear man – do not fear the government. What can the King do? What can the Prime Minister do? What can the police do? At their WORST they can kill you body – but why would you be afraid of that? You have no need to fear that – therefore you have no need to fear them.

I'll tell you who you should fear, Jesus says, you should fear God – because he can throw your body and soul into hell.

That's why giving up your faith to avoid persecution – social, financial or fatal – doesn't make any sense at all. All you've done is avoid a lesser problem to gain an ultimate problem. Just be faithful. Do not fear – at least, do not fear man and do fear government.

That leads to the fifth thing Peter says; he tells them to:

5. Honour Christ the Lord as holy

Verse 15:

in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy (1 Peter 3:15 ESV)

That's a hard verse to translate. The Greek word there is *hagiasate* which is similar to the word we all know from the Lord's Prayer translated as "hallowed be thy name". Therefore we might be better to understand Peter as saying: "in your hearts hallow Christ as Lord" – understand him as LARGE and IN CHARGE.

You see Peter understood that you need a BIG GOD when you are a small and insignificant person. Isn't it interesting that when we feel safe in the culture we turn God into a safe and small god. He's never angry, never clear and always willing to provide. He's rather like Santa or a dumb and dopey grandpa who gives us all the candy we desire.

Well, let me state the obvious: that is not the God of the Bible.

The God of the Bible – the God who is THERE and who SPEAKS - is large and in charge and he is the perfect God for a powerless church. He is POWERFUL, HOLY, MERCIFUL and NEAR. As C.S. Lewis wrote famously, he is not a safe lion, but he is good. That's the sort of God we need in a dangerous world and thankfully - that's the kind of God we find in the Bible.

Sixthly, Peter tells us to:

6. Always be prepared

I'm going to read verse 15 in the NIV translation because I think they have it better here. Peter says:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (1 Peter 3:15 NIV11-GK)

That's smoother and I think more accurate. Peter is saying that our faith if lived out publicly and properly is going to seem weird to the people in our culture. Therefore we need to be constantly prepared to answer questions – Thom Schreiner again is helpful here, he says:

“Believers are to be ready constantly to respond to those who ask about their faith.”⁷

Now of course to do this, you have to know your faith and you have to know your friends. Meaning, you have to actually know what we believe and you have to be able to communicate what we believe at a moment's notice. That's why a little device like the “5 G's of the Gospel” can be so helpful. Most of us can remember 5 things – or most of us can fit a tiny pamphlet inside our purse or backpack. That's part of giving witness in a hostile world – being ready to give the answer when called upon. The other part of it is being able to anticipate what aspects of our faith your friends will find particularly confusing.

Now this sounds way more complicated than it actually is. Most Canadians will express similar confusion and will ask similar questions about the Christian faith. There are always going to be a few outliers but certain questions seem to get asked by most Canadians on their way to faith in Jesus Christ. Let me mention just a few of them:

1. Can I trust the Bible?
2. Did Jesus ever claim to be God? (Mark 14:62 – I am)
3. If God is so good, then why do so many people suffer?
4. Why is God so obsessed with human sexuality?
5. Doesn't science contradict what the Bible says about the origin of the universe and the uniqueness of human beings?
6. If I become a Christian will I have to change the way I live?

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, 174.

7. Would a loving God really condemn people to everlasting punishment in hell?

Now the good news is that you don't really need to read a bunch of books on science and philosophy and alternative religions to answer those questions; what you really need to do is read your Bible. The best way to prepare for disciple making in this country or any other country is to read and study your Bible. When I have people calling me from my church asking for help with a witnessing conversation almost invariably the answer they are looking for is in the Bible, not in some book written by Daniel Dennet or Richard Dawkins. They're asking me where that verse is in the Bible that says that God is Sovereign over life and death, that one that says "I kill and I make alive"; where is that one found?⁸ Or "does the Bible say anything about gender? If my friend becomes a Christian can she still identify as a gender different than the one she was born with? Where would I go in the Bible for teaching on gender?"⁹ Or "where in the Bible does it say that Jesus was actually God? I'm witnessing to a friend who insists that the Bible never says that. Where do I go in the Bible to show that Jesus was definitely God?"¹⁰ Those are the sorts of questions I get asked by people who are trying to lead their friends, neighbours and co-workers to Christ. So you can prepare for those sorts of conversation by taking this list of the 7 questions and then searching through your Bible looking for the answers. You don't need to go to seminary, you don't need a library full of books, you need to know your faith and you need to know your friends – that how you prepare to give an answer for the hope that you have in Christ.

Now, Peter also implies that it would be really helpful if you lived an interesting life.

7. Inspire curiosity

Look at verse 15 again:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (1 Peter 3:15 NIV11-GK)

⁸ Deuteronomy 32:39.

⁹ Genesis 1:26, Genesis 2:18-25.

¹⁰ Mark 14:62, John 1:1-2, John 14:9, John 20:28 would be helpful.

The text assumes that you are an interesting person. Right? The Bible assumes that a great witnessing strategy is maintaining a positive, observable, remarkable difference – from the world. You’ve heard me say this many times:

The gap is good for the Gospel.

Christians should always be thinking about ways we can be WEIRD for the sake of the kingdom of God – of course there is such a thing as BAD WEIRD I’m not talking about that – but there is such a thing as GOOD WEIRD – and GOOD WEIRD is an important evangelistic strategy in a hostile and generally disinterested world. Very practically here are 5 GOOD WAYS TO BE WEIRD.

- i. Get married, stay married.
- ii. Have and enjoy babies.
- iii. Live below your means – tithe/save/give
- iv. Serve selflessly, in your church and in your community.
- v. Worship faithfully in the same church year after year after year.

Listen – all that stuff is weird and if you do it you will find yourself having all kinds of Gospel conversations with your friends and neighbours. In a hostile culture, personal evangelism often comes down to this: Be weird, answer questions. Pray like crazy.

Alright – the 8th thing Peter is says is this:

8. Be gentle and respectful

Right after telling them to be ready with their answer he says:

yet do it with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15 ESV)

Boy – is it ever hard to keep to the centre of the road on this one! Evangelicalism in this country right now seems to be evenly divided between people who are cowardly and compromised on the

one hand and people who confrontational and combative on the other. Neither of those extremes is very helpful.

We need to be like Jesus here.

The one who was eating and drinking with sinners calling them to repentance. The one who said:

“Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” (John 8:11 NKJV)

That’s the Christian way – speaking the truth in love.

And then ninthly, Peter says:

9. Maintain your testimony

In verse 16 Peter says:

having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:16 ESV)

He says: “Make sure that there is no truth in what they’re saying and they will either be embarrassed now or embarrassed later.”

But of course the flip side is, if we spoil our testimony now then we will be embarrassed later.

We mustn’t do or say anything that would disqualify us from preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Edmund Clowney says here:

Bold words will not honour the Lord if they are not supported by a consistent life.¹¹

That is so true. Nothing takes the steam out of a church’s witness like a good pastoral scandal. Similarly, nothing sets back your witness to a friend like the revelation that you’ve been cheating

¹¹Edmund P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, ed. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 151.

on your wife or failing to pay your taxes. Sometimes the best service you can give to the Gospel is an unflinching commitment to your own growth and sanctification.

And then lastly, Peter tells them to:

10. Resolve to suffer for doing good

Look at verse 17:

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. (1 Peter 3:17 ESV)

Now why would Peter say something like that? Why would he tell us to think of suffering as a good thing? Wayne Grudem in his commentary asks that same question and then provides this answer:

In this context, it is because such wrongful suffering patiently endured is so remarkable that it becomes a powerful form of witness, leading unbelievers to salvation¹²

Are you hearing that? In this world – full of people living for THIS LIFE ONLY – few things
AMPLIFY OUR WITNESS MORE THAN WRONGFUL SUFFERING CHEERFULLY
ENDURED.

That is hard to figure out. That seems to suggest that you know something they don't know. That seems to suggest that you are a different kind of person, filled with a different kind of Spirit, belonging to a different kind of world. And that gets people thinking – that gets people asking questions – and when they do, you'll be there to give them the answers. You'll be there to tell them about Jesus. You tell them who he was, what he did and what he offers. You tell them the Good News. That's your mission. That's your calling and this is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.

¹²Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 162.