

“The Hope that is in You” (3:13-17)

The word God has for us this morning is in the Bible at 1 Peter 3:13-17. Turn there with me and let’s meditate on God’s truth together. If you are picking up one of the Bibles provided in the chair rack, the passage is at the top left corner of p. 1016.

Last week, in 3:8-12, Peter assured Christ’s people that we have God’s promised blessing and attention in prayer. Peter now engages us with a question intended to lead us to a conclusion. Follow as I read:

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 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.

May God perform his word in our lives for his glory. Amen.

The more I study 1 Peter, the more confident I am that this is a letter about fear and hope. The more I ponder that conclusion, the more intrigued I am about the relationship between fear and hope. It strikes me that fear reveals hope.

Fear as a theme runs throughout this letter. Peter writes to Christians who are being bullied, teased, slandered, rejected, shunned, criticized, hassled, stressed, and, in some cases, beaten by those who were suspicious of or hostile to their Christian faith. The Roman empire’s official opposition to Christianity meant that, those who became violent against Christians would not face legal action.

There were plenty of reasons for Christians to be afraid. Similar circumstances exist in our world and even around us. Anyone who practices and promotes basic biblical morality invites ridicule. So, Peter emphasizes the command not to fear. You see it in the middle of the paragraph we just read, v. 14, “Have no fear of them.”

But there is also in 1 Peter the call to fear God. In 1:17 we read,

And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile,

In 2:17 we hear the simple and direct words, “Fear God.” Here in 3:15 we learn that we are to defend our faith with gentleness and respect. The word translated “respect” is the familiar word “fear,” the same word as in 2:17 (“fear God”). I take 3:15 to say that Christians must defend their faith with gentleness toward people and fear toward God.

I submit to you that there is link between fear and hope. For example, if I fear what other people think about me, then my hope will be to gain their approval. I will live for their affirmation. If I fear failure, then my hope will be in my performance. If I fear losing control, then my hope will be to always be in control.

There is an organic connection between fear and hope. The same conclusion applies to God. If I fear God, I will hope in him. I will seek his approval. I will trust in his performance. I will relinquish control to him. D.A. Carson wrote about the passage we are looking at today,

"Fear God, and fear no other": this oft-repeated slogan has bred courage in moral conflict and in Christian witness and has invested in Christian commitment an eternal perspective that is not easily seduced by opinion polls and social fads. This is precisely the kind of spiritual backbone that Peter is trying to build into his readers. At the end of the day, it depends utterly on a view of God that brooks no rivals.

Last week we tried to describe how we trust God's promises, how we put our hope in him. In 3:13-17, Peter shows us how to know if we are fearing God and hoping in him. Here are four tests to discern whether we have true hope in God or a false hope in something else. First,

1. True Hope Doesn't Require Immediate Reward (13-14)

Peter seeks to get our minds in gear by asking a question in v. 13. "Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?" From the Bible's perspective, "to be zealous for what is good" is to be a Christian. It is the person described in v. 10 as one who "desires to love life and see good days." He is (v. 9) called in Jesus Christ to obtain a blessing.

So, who can harm a follower of Jesus Christ? In the short term, the answer is "many." Peter is clear that Christians are suffering and will continue to suffer. They may not continuously suffer. But they will suffer. However, from a long-term perspective, no one can harm the Christian.

Peter continues in v. 14. "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed." The future perspective here is important. It is not that Christians call suffering pleasant. The suffering is not the blessing. But the blessing will come. If I fear God, my hope will be in a future blessing that those who harm me now cannot touch. Recall in 1:4-5 when Peter described the Christian's living hope as,

... 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.

So now in 3:15, Peter commands believers "Have no fear of them." Of whom? Of those who can cause you harm now. Don't fear them. Zealously, passionately do good and wait for your reward.

In contrast, if I fear other people, I will look for their immediate approval. My hope will be to gain their affirmation as quickly as possible. But if I know that God has accepted me and affirmed me in Christ, I can pursue good now and trust my reward with him.

I know that this long-range perspective seems difficult for you who are younger. You see life stretching before you as a road extending into the distant unknown. You look forward to many blessings in this life. The next life seems far away.

But none of us has a guarantee for tomorrow. We cannot presume that today's blessings will continue or that tomorrow's will come. Christ could return at any moment. Death could surprise us.

Which causes me to take time for a word to those who are not Christians. God created you to find your greatest delight in fellowship with him. But all of us have rejected God's purpose and tried to find life on our own. You are doing that in some way right now.

But God did not abandon hope for humanity. Jesus Christ, God's eternal Son, came to earth as a man to live the life we were commanded to live but refused. Then he died the death we should die as punishment for sin. He took the place under God's judgment of anyone who will reject sin's rule and receive Jesus Christ as Lord. You can continue to seek hope in this world or you can find true hope in Christ. Following Christ is not easy. But life with him holds the promise of eternal reward.

A second test:

2. True Hope Doesn't Water-down Worship (15a)

Peter continues in v. 15 (in contrast to fearing those who might harm you), "but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy." In other words, don't fear them; fear Christ. Worship him as Lord. Honor him as holy. Do this in your hearts.

When we think of doing something "in our hearts" we focus on the private, personal, and emotional side of our being. Our culture accepts religion that remains in this sphere. It blesses faith that remains private, in the heart, behind the door of your house, or in the confines of a church building.

But, in Peter's time, "heart" referred to the control center for one's whole being. It included the mind, the will, and the affections. The heart represented the complete person not just a part within you. To honor Christ as Lord in the heart means a complete devotion of the whole life to him. Every aspect of our being must express worship to him. Purely emotional worship is watered-down.

The fact that "hearts" here is plural implies that Peter has public worship in mind. Gather with others who honor Christ as Lord. Don't let those who want to harm you isolate you from believers who encourage in worship. Purely private worship is watered-down.

Peter quotes from Isaiah 8:12-13. We do not have time to make a full comparison to this OT text. What's most important to note is that Peter takes an OT passage describing God and applies it directly to Jesus Christ. He calls Christians to treat Jesus as holy in the same way that they are to treat God as holy.

Here is a perfect example of a New Testament writer claiming that Jesus is God. Peter is either guilty of the worst blasphemy or Jesus really is God. He is holy. He is the only God. Romans in that day were happy to allow worship of Jesus so long as he took his place among the other dozens of gods that pagans worshiped. His followers needed only to recognize the divine status of the emperor.

Jews at the time might have recognized Jesus as an important Rabbi but not as God. Peter insists that you cannot water-down the worship of Jesus Christ. To fear him is to worship him as the One and only true God. It is to confess him as the only Savior. Such a conviction invites ridicule in our culture. But those who hope in Christ will not water-down worship to gain acceptance. We honor him as the holy God.

Test #3:

3. True Hope Doesn't Force Faith (15b-16a)

V. 15 scares a lot of Christians. It scares me. It commands us to be ready to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for our hope. That feels like real pressure. That seems to demand elaborate gospel presentations all the time.

Before panic sets in, let's look closely at what Peter calls for here. First, as Tim Chester and Steve Timmis point out in their book, *Everyday Church*, Peter calls Christians to live so that those who do not know Christ will ask about our hope. Non-Christians are supposed to start gospel conversations with us.

The "hope" to which Peter refers is not merely individual. "You" in v. 15 is plural. Several commentators take "in you" as meaning "among you," referring to the hope you share as a Christian community. Peter calls us first to live hope and then let others see our hope.

How are we doing? Are we sharing life together so that we are regularly strengthening our hope? Are we making Jesus, who is our hope, a regular and natural part of our conversations?

Then, are we welcoming those who do not know Jesus into our relationships so that they can see the hope we share? This kind of evangelism doesn't force others to believe by relying on airtight arguments. It seeks to make hope in Christ evident so that others ask.

Peter also says that such evangelism is done with gentleness (end, v. 15) and with a good conscience (beginning, v. 16). We show compassion and courtesy to those with whom we share Christ. We do not use gimmicks or tactics that violate our conscience. We take care to ensure that our words and actions match. If someone is offended, it is not our character but the gospel message that gives offense. Our hope is that God is at work. We do not have to force faith.

We **do** need to know how to explain the gospel. That's the basis of our hope. If you want to think more about how to do that with hope, I encourage you to read the chapter "Everyday Evangelism" in the book *Everyday Church* (mentioned earlier). We have time for a fourth test:

4. True Hope Doesn't Second-Guess God (17)

Verse 17 concludes the paragraph straight-forwardly. "For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil." Peter often heard Jesus speak in this way.

Mark 9:43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

This kind of comparison comes down to eternal destinies. It is better to suffer now as a Christian as part of God's plan to save you, than to suffer forever in hell for doing evil.

If I am hoping in God, I accept his will for my life even if it involves suffering. To this we add two important clarifications. First, God does not will suffering as an end in itself. It is always for a greater purpose. A woman does not choose labor just for the experience. She anticipates holding a baby. There is a strong statement of this principle in 1:6-7

In this [salvation] you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that

perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

God uses trials to test faith in order to shower praise, glory, and honor on Christ's people when he ushers in the full enjoyment of his kingdom.

Second, as we mentioned earlier, Christians do not call suffering good just because it fits into God's will. All suffering is, in some sense, evil. It is all painful. There is no delight in the suffering itself.

As someone has noted, Christians can even **complain to** God about suffering as long as we do not **complain about** God because we suffer. True hope does not second-guess God; it trusts in his eternal purpose.

Recall the words you sang earlier:

You fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy and will break
With blessings on your head.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan his work in vain.
God is his own interpreter
And he will make it plain.