

Defending the Faith In Suffering — 1 Peter 3:13-17

Introduction - In order to understand the current relevance of a passage of Scripture, we must discover its relevance to the original audience. Who was the original audience? In 1 Peter 1:1, Peter addresses the “pilgrims [or sojourners] of the dispersion.” This terminology of “the dispersion” (the *diaspora*) was a technical description of the Jewish people who had not returned to the land of Israel after the Babylonian exile. Many Jews converted under Peter’s and Paul’s ministry, and it is these Jewish Christians whom Peter is primarily addressing in his two letters.

Time of the composition - The timing of Peter’s writing is highly significant to our understanding. We are given several clues from Peter’s books that will enlighten us. 1) One of the common themes of the book is that of *intense suffering*. Peter’s audience is suffering persecution simply for being Christians. Peter is both encouraging them in current suffering as well as warning them about more persecution to come. 2) The second clue that we have concerning the time that 1 Peter was written is his hints that something big is just on the horizon. Peter was not wrong when he said in 1 Peter 4:7, “The end of all things is near.” Not only will the persecution intensify, but a *judgment is coming soon*. Peter warns his readers about what will happen to them in the “last days,” namely that mockers will come with their mocking, saying, “Where is the promise of His coming” (2 Pet. 3:3-4)? These “last days” are the days of the original recipients of the letter, and we know this because of their accurate expectation that Jesus would come to judge (e.g. Matt. 24:35).

Vindication coming - For these wavering believers, vindication for their faith couldn’t come fast enough. The primary purpose of the book of Hebrews was to encourage similar Jewish believers to continue holding on and to wait for vindication rather than returning to Jewish ways or even to Jerusalem itself. Yet *patience is tough*, and the Judaizing heresy was tempting to Jewish Christians. Not only would their *beliefs* be vindicated, but the *blood* of the martyrs would be also. The book of Revelation speaks about these martyrs. In chapter 6, they are the saints under the altar “who had been slain because of the Word of God and because of the testimony which they had maintained.” They cry out for vindication, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” The answer is that they must wait and “rest a little while longer.” How long? Verse 10 tells us, “until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.” More blood had to be shed first. The saints must endure trials before the consummation of the new creation is complete, which is when Jerusalem falls and the old Adamic world is done away with finally and completely.

Putting it all together - Once the church was formed in Jerusalem, immediately the Jews resisted, as they had resisted Jesus. Satan used the Jews in order to stop the growth and spread of the church. The first tactic that Satan used was spreading the false doctrine of Judaism, which was the heresy of mixing the gospel with the practices of Old Covenant Judaism, a heresy dealt with in books like Galatians and Hebrews. When Satan failed to defeat the church from the inside through false doctrine, he then attacked the church from the outside through persecution from the Jews and later the Roman officials, beginning with the emperor Nero. It is this final attack that the recipients of Peter’s letter were about to face. Peter is warning them and encouraging them to be patient in the coming suffering.

A surprising rhetorical question - “Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good” (3:13)? What is a zealot for good? A zealot is one who is so strongly and deeply committed to something that he pursues it passionately. So what is “the good” to which this zealot is committed? This is a very significant question because every worldview, every religion has its own definition of *the good* and *the good life*. Every worldview asserts opinions about the source of the good, our obligations for pursuing it, and consequences for doing and being good (or not). One’s ultimate authority is the one who establishes what is good and desirable, and thus only the true God is truly and completely good. Worldviews that deny the one true God inevitably will call evil good and good evil because the foundation of their understanding of what the good is does not include God and rejects Him. See Isaiah 5:20-21.

What is the answer to Peter’s rhetorical question? A rhetorical question is a question whose answer is so obvious that it does not require an answer. But what is the answer to this question? 1) The first answer that comes to mind is “no one.” A wicked man’s attack on your reputation or your body will not affect in any way your security in Christ. Peter is giving to his readers a word of *comfort*. Christians are secure in Christ no matter how they might be maligned, hated, scorned, belittled, and attacked for their zeal for the good. In fact, verse 14 says that they are blessed (see also Matthew 5:10-12). 2) However, this passage continues to discuss the suffering that comes to the righteous. Wicked men *do* persecute the righteous and can cause pain and suffering. In fact, as we have seen, one of the purposes of this letter is to *caution* the believers of continued persecution, even implying that an intensification of it is on the horizon.

“Do not be afraid.” - The natural reaction that we all have in the face of coming persecution is *fear*. And out of the fear, our zeal is cooled. Out of fear we are quiet or ashamed. For this Jewish audience, like the recipients of the book of Hebrews, their primary response to their fear would have been to return to Judaism, something familiar to them, something that would relieve a lot of the pressure from their Jewish persecutors. Consider Isaiah the prophet. He was

an extreme minority in a land of apostates. There were threats to him from within the nation as well as from without, namely, from Aramean invaders. He was in a lonely, pressure-packed situation, and it would have been very easy for him to give up on His message of truth and compromise with the prevailing society around him. But Yahweh's words to Isaiah (8:11-18) are clear. 1) Don't go along with the crowd in their claims of conspiracy. 2) Don't fear the invading Arameans, like the rest of the nation. 3) Rather, enshrine Yahweh of Hosts as the holy one. Dignify and glorify neither the invaders nor the conspiracy theorists by fearing them.

Set Christ as Lord in your hearts - Peter knows that his audience is in a similar situation. Like Isaiah, they feel lonely and pressed on every side. They feel trapped with no escape. And they know that more persecution is just around the corner. So Peter encourages them with the knowledge that they are not alone. They would readily recognize the words of the prophet Isaiah and realize that he faced the same temptations as they did. Peter quotes Isaiah 8, "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled" (3:14). Peter continues with Yahweh's message to Isaiah: "but," rather than fearing, rather than being troubled, "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts" or what more reliable Greek texts say, "set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts." The people must set aside all competing objects of worship, all competing objects of trust, all rivals, all idols and set apart Jesus Christ as their Lord.

Ready to defend - Being ready to defend the faith is the first *effect* of regarding Jesus as the Holy One and as our only Lord in the midst of our sufferings. The word "ready" connects this on-going mindset with the one that the believers of the first century were supposed to have for the coming of Christ to vindicate them. That is, they must be ready for the coming of Jesus in judgment by remaining faithful all the way until their vindication (1 Peter 1:5; Matt. 24:22). They must also be ready for opportunities to give an answer.

Believers' hope - Persecution provides Christians with a particular opportunity for Christians to speak of Christ. In persecution, Christians display a *hope* that the world knows nothing of. Unbelievers recognize in believers who are suffering the fact that they still are *secure* and *confident*. They recognize that a believer's confidence comes not from anything in their circumstances but from some expectation. What object of hope can be so significant and so strong that unbelievers notice and ask about? First, and most obviously, the hope of believers is found in the person of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who has rescued us from our sin, has given us eternal salvation, and so has guaranteed that we are secure in Him no matter what happens to us. Second, part of the assurance that this letter is meant to deliver to these Jewish believers is that Jesus is shortly coming in judgment and in vindication of their faith. Third, if Jesus is currently sitting on the throne (and He is), then one by one His enemies are being put under His feet, and history is a long story of Jesus conquering His enemies and vindicating His people. We continue to have this confidence because we live in "The Gospel Age of Hope." It is a hope in Jesus and His promise that the gospel would be successful and spread to the ends of the earth.

Give a defense - The word "defense" here is the word from which we get the word *apologetics*, and so this is a classic text for that practice. We often think of this as a practice done by specialists, and certainly there are difficult questions that very intelligent, well-studied scholars have ironed out. But the emphasis in this passage is the responsibility of all believers to be ready and able to defend their faith. The Christian worldview does have answers. And we can be confident that our answers not only will be adequate but also will be superior to those of any other worldview.

Meekness and fear - These words complete the picture of a believer's attitude when providing an opportunity to defend the faith in suffering. *Meekness* refers to the attitude that we must have before those who ask. Meekness is an attitude of mildness and gentleness and comes from a humble heart (Eph. 4:2) because Jesus has opened our eyes to the truth. The converse of meekness includes such wrong attitudes as frustration, harshness, argumentativeness, or arrogance, and these we must avoid. Our softness and gentleness will disarm hostility from unbelievers (Prov. 15:1). The idea of *fear* refers to our attitude before God. We must defend our faith in a way that makes no compromises with the worldview of unbelief. We must not be worried or ashamed about the fact that our faith will appear as foolish to the natural man (see 1 Cor. 2:14). We mustn't diminish or soften the truth about creation out of nothing; about the complete accuracy of the Bible; about sin, death, and hell; about the person and work of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, ascension, and reign; about the Biblical standards of morality and ethics.

Good conscience - The second effect of setting Christ apart as Lord in our hearts is having a clear conscience. When Christ is truly Lord in your heart, there will be no compromise with unbelief, you will be able to answer questions and accusations from unbelievers, and your meekness will disarm contentiousness and hostility See 1 Peter 2:11-15.

Better suffering - The suffering from apostasy and compromise is greater than that of remaining true to God. These believers were tempted to return to Judaism or even to Jerusalem in order to relieve themselves from suffering. We are tempted to compromise. But the fact is, giving in to the pressure will result in consequences more devastating than standing strong.