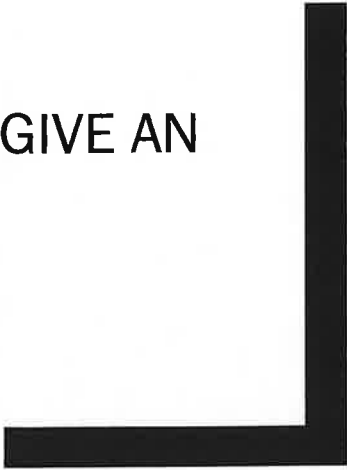



1 PETER 3:8-22
ALWAYS BE PREPARED TO GIVE AN
ANSWER...

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Library Bible Study



1



**Be prepared for suffering for doing good
and prepared to give an answer**

- Bold words will not honor if not supported by a consistent life.
- A clear conscience gives stamina.
- The witness of a good conscience is crucial for the witness for a good word.
- Show by our lives that the gospel is true.

2

the Lord Christ in our hearts; there is the end of fear. We sanctify Christ in our words; there is the start of witness. In the Greek, Peter does not begin a new sentence when he tells us to be always ready to give a reason for our hope. Rather, he says, 'Set apart the Lord, the Christ, ready always for answer.' Our devotion to Christ the Lord makes us ready not only in attitude but in rationale. The word that Peter uses for *answer* is our word 'apology'. We use the word exclusively in the sense of 'excuse', to express regret for a wrong. In the New Testament, however, the word is used to describe a 'defence', usually in a formal or courtroom context.²² (That meaning survives when we speak of an 'apologist' for the Christian faith.) Felix, for example, speaks of Paul's right, under Roman law, to meet his accusers face to face and to make his 'defence' against their charges.²³ Jesus had promised the presence of the Holy Spirit to enable his disciples to state their case before authorities.²⁴ Peter well knew what it meant to stand accused in court and give answer.

As Peter speaks of Christians' readiness to defend their hope, he is certainly allowing for situations in which they might be dragged before Roman magistrates. His encouragement is not limited to Christians in court, however. He speaks of readiness to make a defence to all who might ask a reason for their hope. Persecution was not as intense as it would become: Peter could still speak of *if* rather than 'when' times of trial and suffering would come (14). Yet Christians must be ever ready, not only because they would be called to face Roman courts one day, but because they might be accused or challenged by suspicious or malicious pagans any day. It is true, of course, that the witness of a godly life can evoke questions of another sort. Unbelievers may become enquirers, asking with more than curiosity about the distinctive Christian hope. But Peter is here speaking of suffering for Christ's sake. He is arming Christians against attacks, showing them how such confrontations can be turned into occasions for witness.

How, then, does setting apart Christ as Lord prepare Christians to make defence of their hope? The formal speeches of defence in the book of Acts provide the answer: so, indeed, does the whole New Testament. For the Christian faith, a strong offence is the best defence; indeed, it is the only

defence. Christians defend their faith by proclaiming the gospel, declaring the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the plan and power of God. That which is foolishness to the Greeks and an offence to the Jews is the saving wisdom of God.

Paul's defence before Agrippa shows us why Peter speaks of giving a reason for the *hope* that we have (Acts 26). Paul declares, 'And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers.'²⁵ 'Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?' he asks (8). Peter and Paul both centre on the reality of the resurrection, and they both proclaim the resurrection as the fulfilment of Scripture. Paul summarizes his defence:

I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.²⁶

In this letter, Peter has proclaimed the same gospel to those who have been given 'new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1:3). Peter, too, presents this salvation as the fulfilment of what the prophets have spoken (1:10-12, 25). The apostolic gospel bears witness to the historical fact of Christ's death and resurrection, and proclaims the meaning of that fact from the word of God (1 Cor. 15:3). The reality of the resurrection and the rationale of the resurrection are joined under the authority of God. Apart from the testimony of God's word, the fact of the resurrection could be discounted as a strange and unexplained fact of history. The chief priests who bribed the soldiers to lie about the empty tomb were in full possession of the evidence, yet they did not submit to the word of God (Matt. 28:11-15). Conversely, there is no lack of contemporary theologians who display their skill in reconstructing apostolic Christianity so that an empty tomb is no longer necessary.

When Paul gave the reason for the Christian hope, Festus, who with King Agrippa heard Paul's defence, declared that he had lost his reason (Acts 26:24). (Festus, indeed, shouted his charge, betraying by his emotion

²² BAGD, p. 95.

²³ Acts 25:16, see 22:1, Phil. 1:7, 16; 2 Tim. 4:16.

²⁴ Luke 12:11-12; 21:12-14.

²⁵ Acts 26:6. Av. The *why*, by inserting 'my', loses the force of Paul's declaration. The hope for which he is tried is the hope of Israel (verse 7), not just his personal hope.

²⁶ Acts 26:22-23. See Acts 23:6.

the offence that the gospel aroused!) Yet, in spite of hatred or scorn, Christians present their hope, humbly proclaiming God's work and word. As we acknowledge the deity of the risen Lord in our hearts, we bear witness to our hope in doxology; we declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his light (2:9). Worshipping the Lord, we set our hope fully on the grace to be given us when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:13).

Peter has made it clear that Christians are to be bold in their witness. Hallowing the Lord in their hearts, they are ready at all times to confess his name before others. But now Peter returns to his major theme, the other side of the coin. Humility of life is as important as boldness in word. This is the other result of glorifying Christ as Lord. We are unafraid to press his claims; but we do so as his servants. It has been said that the corruption of the best is the worst; certainly, no pride is more offensive than pride in being trophies of grace. The *gentleness* or humility that we are to show is far more than politeness of manner. It reflects the fear of the Lord in which the gospel is presented. *Respect* seems to be the wrong translation here. It suggests a proper attitude towards those who question us. Peter may have used the Greek word *phobos* in that sense when he described the attitude of servants to their masters (2:18), but he has just used it to speak of our fear of God rather than of human beings (1:4). It seems unlikely that he is now reversing this to ask that we fear others, even in a lesser degree. Rather, Peter is teaching us that it is our fear of the Lord that enables us to bear witness in humility.

b. The opportunity for witness in life (3:16-17)

Bold words will not honour the Lord if they are not supported by a consistent life. Consider the bitterness of a wealthy old man: he was orphaned as a boy, but his father had made provision for him by entrusting funds for his support to the minister of his church. The minister made off with the money. Through a long life the victim of that injustice saw Christianity as financial exploitation of the gullible. The lives of Christians must reflect the gospel message to those outside the church. That consistency is not less needed in the church and in the heart of the believer. The witness of a good *conscience* is crucial for the witness of a good word. Again, Paul's defence illuminates Peter's words. Standing trial after his arrest on false charges of desecrating the temple, Paul could say, 'So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man' (Acts 24:16).

Conscience has been defined as a person's 'inner awareness of the moral quality of his actions';²⁷ Pagan moralists recognized this inner awareness of behaviour, but apostolic teaching transformed its meaning. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer brings the believer's conscience before God, with radical results. On the one hand, the Christian conscience is informed and reshaped by the light of God's righteousness. No longer is it insensitive to sin, like scar tissue seared by a hot iron (1 Tim. 4:2). On the other hand, because God is Lord of the conscience, the Christian is delivered from false guilt, and from the condemnation of sin that God has forgiven. Robert Leighton, with Puritan wisdom, traces the care and nurture of the Christian conscience, growing in the light of the Lord's presence and cleansed by his blood.²⁸

In this passage Peter is speaking of our clear conscience as obedient saints rather than simply as forgiven sinners.²⁹ The clear conscience of justified sinners indeed frees them for witness, but the impact of their witness will require the outward evidence of consistent lives. By maintaining a clear conscience before God we will be able to show a godly life to others. The Walt Disney version of Pinocchio has given us the cartoon image of conscience as a friendly cricket, an effort, perhaps, to reduce the hostility with which people are inclined to view the promptings of conscience. Christians are called to do much better: to cultivate conscience rather than to stifle its occasional chirps. Suspicious observers are quick to detect hypocrisy in a Christian's life; if we are to avoid self-deception we need a conscience that is both informed and clear.

A clear conscience gives stamina and faithfulness to Christians' witness. We know that the malicious slander that we hear is untrue; we can therefore wait patiently for the truth to win out. Our detractors may be ashamed sooner than we think. It may be, however, that their shame will be evident only when Christ returns to judge. In any case, even if persecution and suffering do not end, we know that we are in God's will and that to suffer for doing good brings blessing. To invite the scorn and hostility of others by doing evil would be quite another matter (1:7).

Christians with tender consciences may be dismayed by Peter's words. Aware of their sins and shortcomings, they may despair of having a clear

²⁷ Kelly, p. 144.

²⁸ Leighton, pp. 333-335.

²⁹ See Maurer, *TDMNT VII*, pp. 918f.

conscience. They may find the suspicions of others confirmed by their suspicions of themselves. Peter shows that he knows our need of forgiveness and cleansing, for he goes on to describe again Christ's atonement (1:8). He also shows the source of power for holy living and a clear conscience. He expresses it in the telling phrase *your good behaviour in Christ* (1:6). Peter uses the phrase *in Christ* that is a keystone of Paul's teaching. Like Paul, Peter glorifies in the fact that Christ represented us in his death and resurrection. He suffered, the righteous for the unrighteous (1:8), bearing our sins in his body on the cross (2:24). We are given new birth because we are joined to Christ in his resurrection (1:3). We are therefore 'in Christ' as our representative: he died and rose for us. But our union with Christ does not stop there. We are 'in Christ' also because he gives us life. The Spirit of Christ joins us to our Lord as we hallow him in our hearts. We are in no sense alone as we seek to show by our lives that the gospel is true. Without the assurance of sins forgiven, we could not bear witness to those around us. Christians may rightly plead on bumper stickers, 'Christians are not perfect; just forgiven.' Yet, because the Lord who forgives us also makes us new creations, we are able by grace to show in our lives the reality of his salvation. The God of all grace has called us to his eternal glory in Christ, and will restore and strengthen us (5:10).

Peter again summarizes by saying that it is better . . . to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (1:7). We are reminded of his word to servants in a section that parallels this (2:20). In both passages this statement leads into a declaration about the sufferings of Christ, who did only good. One commentator suggests that Peter may also be warning those who might seek martyrdom through mistaken zeal in opposing the pagan government. 'It is unworthy of Christian believers to court martyrdom through deeds of violence, as, for instance, the Jewish zealots did.'³⁰ Peter, however, seems concerned to encourage Christians to endure suffering; he does not speak of their seeking it. In any case, the application of Peter's teaching does have importance for some forms of Christian protest today. Suffering for provocative acts in the name of Christ is not to be commended, but rather suffering that follows our Lord's example in doing good.

c. The victory of Christ's suffering (3:18-22)

Again, Peter returns to the cross. Our willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ is grounded in the wonder of Christ's willingness to suffer death for our sakes. This passage stands in close relation to 2:21-24. There, too, we read of Christ's atoning death as our substitute. There, too, the merciful purpose of Christ's suffering is declared (that we might die to sins, live for righteousness and be healed, 2:24). Yet Peter now presents the suffering Christ as the Victor. He adds to his teaching about the saving power of Christ's death a fresh emphasis on the saving power of his resurrection. In the earlier passage, Peter points us to the example of Christ's meekness in suffering. We are called to imitate him as we suffer for his sake. In this second passage, Peter tells us that Christ who suffered and died was made alive again, has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand. He is the Conqueror; we share his triumph.

Persecuted and suffering Christians need to remember both the humiliation and the exaltation of Christ. His patient suffering will show them meekness when they are interrogated. His glorious triumph will give them courage to face their accusers. Undergirding both the meekness and the boldness of the Christian is the saving work of Christ.

Christ . . . suffered once for sins.³¹ Christ's saving victory flows from the fact that his sacrifice was perfect, final, and therefore not to be repeated in history or in symbol. If Christ's sacrifice were not complete, it would have to be offered again, as the Old Testament sacrifices were. But, as the author of Hebrews teaches us, Christ's sacrifice was of a different order. If he had offered no better sacrifice than the priests, and had entered no better sanctuary than they, then he would have had to 'suffer many times since the creation of the world'. But he is the Son of God, his royal priesthood is heavenly, his sacrifice is his offering of his own blood. 'But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.'³² When the Protestant Reformers understood this, they could no longer participate in the Mass, for the Mass is celebrated as a bloodless sacrifice in which Christ is again offered for sin.³³

³¹ A variant textual reading is 'died for sins' rather than 'suffered for sins'. This would not affect the sense; it is the mortal suffering of Christ on the cross that is in view. Both readings are also found in 2:21.

³² Heb. 9:26-28; cf. 10:10, 14.

³³ This was a crucial factor in John Calvin's separation from the Roman Catholic Church. Why should Calvin leave the Church when the prophets had remained in apostate Israel? Calvin replied that the prophets never participated in an act of worship that was sacrilegious (*Institutes*, IV.29). The issue remains, see 'Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery', in 'The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy', *Vatican Council II*.