

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Christ's return

Come and show us Your majesty Lord Jesus Christ; come again in power and might to rule this world and judge all things. Make good what is evil, make sound what is bad, make right what is wrong and place truth on the highest ground. So may we know that You are the glory of all Creation and the Maker, Redeemer and the Victor who reigns at the end of all time! Come, Lord Jesus, Come: AMEN

For myself

Pray with honesty to ask the Lord your God to help you face your fiercest spiritual enemy. This may be found in someone else or may be found in you or one to whom you are close. Only you will know, but ask the Lord your God to help you in this most exacting of tasks so that you can be victorious over the enemy, with Him!

For others

Pray for those who work in agriculture, designing and making the machines and equipment by which our food is grown and produced in a healthy and consistent manner. Pray for modern machinery and the proper upkeep of ancient methods by which people are properly fed.

Meditation

Be honest with God; you cannot keep your faith to yourself;
And if you do, you play with fire; share it with all God's people.

Your faith is yours because you alone can say 'Yes' to Christ;
Beyond that, it is shared with all who make the same confession.

Your faith is yours so that you will worship the God who made you;
And join with all the saints of God in praise of His Holy Name!

Your faith is yours in order to do the work of God's Kingdom;
Which is impossible for one person to do; it must be shared!

Your faith is yours, to receive the spiritual blessings of God;
But pass them on in joy and love to all who need their strength!

Your faith is yours so that you can learn discernment;

And work to bring about God's justice in this impoverished world.

Your faith is yours, to read God's Word and pray yourself
So that you will come to know the truth the God would have you share.

Be honest with God; you cannot keep your faith to yourself;
It is yours to be shared. Give thanks to God, for He loves You.

Bible Passage

1 Peter 3:13-17

¹³ Now, who will harm you if you are zealous to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right before God, you will be blessed. *'Do not be afraid of them or be disturbed.'* ¹⁵ In your hearts make Christ the Lord holy. Always be ready to give to anyone who asks you a reasoned account of the hope that is in you, ¹⁶ but do this with humility and respect. Have a clear conscience, so that when accused, those who insult your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame. ¹⁷ It is better to suffer for doing what is good, if this should be the will of God, than for doing evil.

Review

In this passage, Peter continues to offer valuable advice about Christian living to young Christians to whom he spoke and wrote. Most of what we have read is advice about how to behave as a Christian in a hostile social environment, and as such, it speaks to most of us. Peter calls on God's people to persist in doing good (3:13) despite any negative social consequences experienced, because this brings God's ultimate approval and blessing (3:14). The world does not recognise the proper value of good moral behaviour, and those who follow Jesus will frequently suffer for so doing (3:14,17). Much of this remains very applicable to Christians today

In Peter's day, however, the church was beginning to experience a certain amount of local persecution, largely because of social ignorance about its message, but also because those who were converted stood out from others sometimes because of their refusal to do things which were either plainly evil or dishonourable. It is not easy for us to understand the morality of the first century, but it was a world run by the citizens of one city (Rome) who believed they were doing the whole world an enormous favour (as most empires do). They did not think twice about the life or death of a slave, for example, and they penalised non-Romans with extortionate taxes for their own private benefit without a thought about the consequences for individuals, believing that they had a right to act as they did because of their mastery of civilisation and technology (e.g. in building and road building). If people stood out by refusing to go along with morally repugnant or evil demands, then they were liable to swift and summary punishment with no recourse to appeal (unless, like Paul, someone could claim Roman citizenship, see Acts 16:37, 22:25). It is likely that Peter was addressing slaves and servants working in the service of larger families tied closely to the Roman system, and they knew the cost of moral decency.

Against this background, Peter called his listeners and readers to maintain their zeal and trust in God (3:13,14), to ensure that Christ was given a special place in their 'hearts' (3:15), to be ready to defend their faith, even in a hostile environment (3:15), to maintain godliness

and a clear conscience (3:16) and focus on the rewards of Christ and His Kingdom rather than life's perils (3:17). As in the previous verses (3:8-12), there is a clear structure here, a list of recommendations which was given to those who had just been baptised (see previous studies). This advice was not high-minded or super-spiritual, it was practical guidance for coping with the Christian life, and the list is a valuable aid for people even today. The pressures of persecution we endure may be quite different from those in the past, but many people today have to live their faith in very stressful circumstances, and the advice of Peter remains applicable; 'it is better to suffer for doing what is good, if this should be the will of God, than for doing evil.' (3:17).

At the heart of this passage is one phrase which stands out and has made this scripture very well known. It is the phrase 'always be ready to give to anyone who asks you a reasoned account of the hope that is in you.' (3:15). This is a very powerful comment which challenges each of us to be constantly self aware and able to explain our faith. Peter could not see the value of appealing to mystical experiences or remaining quiet before worldly challenges. As far as he was concerned, Jesus had called on all His disciples to bear witness to Him for the sake of the Gospel (Matt 28:19), and no-one could opt out. Consequently, this text is well known as a text preached upon at baptismal or confirmation services. It remains necessary and powerful advice for all people of faith.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V13 *The word for 'zealous' is the same Greek word used for a Zealot; Greek 'zelotes'. It could be helpful to translate 'enthusiastic', or 'eager', but because of the power of this word at the time of Jesus' life, it is best to retain it and allow it convey its full meaning of 'a fanatical supporter'.*

V14 *'doing what is right before God' The Greek word here is 'dikaiosune' which means 'righteousness'. I have translated it by a phrase which explains the word fully, rather than leaving the word 'righteousness, so that the reader can follow the flow of Peter's argument in English.*

V15 *This verse is difficult to translate, and most Bible versions are quite different. The sentiment is clear however, and Peter asks us to be ready to give a 'word' (Greek 'logos') for the hope that is in us. This could be an explanation, a reasoned account, or any similar phrase. Reasoned account seems to me to fit best.*

Suffering for what is right

Peter begins with a question; 'who will harm you if you are zealous to do what is good?' (3:13) The answer he expects is 'no-one!' A Christian is someone who has died with Christ and lives for Him (Phil 1:21), and knows that nothing in this world can ever be the same again. Life itself has a new meaning, and death has been overcome. This is a complete change of world-view, and one which should enable a Christian to have confidence in every situation.

By 'harm' (3:13), Peter could mean physical harm due to oppression or persecution. Alternatively, he could mean 'harm' as spiritual harm; in other words, 'who can draw you away from your true faith if you are zealous for doing what is right?' This is perhaps the best way for us to read this today, because many people today find that it is too easy for their Christian faith to become a mundane matter of living a certain lifestyle with certain people,

and when the 'zeal' goes out of what they believe, they quickly fall prey to all manner of temptation. Satan will quickly distract a mind that is not occupied!

Perhaps this is the reason why Peter goes on (in verse 15) to give the advice 'in your hearts make Christ the Lord holy'. This sounds extremely spiritual, and some may feel that it sounds like a counsel for the super-spiritual! In fact, what Peter asks of each Christian is to ensure that Christ has a special place 'set aside' (i.e. 'holy') in the heart. As we have discovered in other studies, within scripture the heart is not the seat of the feelings, but it is the seat of the human will, the place where we make conscious decisions about what to do. Because of this, Peter means that we do well to make sure that Christ has a regular place in our conscious mind; He is there, but we must work at ensuring we give Him a place where He is heard and where He has influence in our everyday lives. Some people are able to keep the presence of Christ 'alive' in their minds quite naturally, whatever they do; others need reminders, such as a Cross around the neck or a 'What Would Jesus Do' bracelet. I know yet others who light a candle in their place of work to ensure that their minds and hearts are drawn to think of Christ, or others will have a set routine of regular prayer on the hour, for example (in a similar way in order to remember the Lord, strict Jews will tie a box with tiny copies of the written Law, called phylacteries', around their arms or heads). Everyone will have their way. Our walking with the Lord is not something which can be 'unconscious', and the presence of Christ can never be assumed, however mature we may be in matters of faith. Christ must be there, with us, in the things of everyday life, and one way or the other, we must set apart a place for Him in our hearts.

Such a reminder of the presence of Christ, whether spiritual, mental or practical, becomes invaluable when any of us face suffering for doing what is right before God. It is difficult to give examples of what this might mean, except that this is like the suffering of Christ, who did no wrong and was yet hounded to his death by the ferocious animosity of the Pharisees and other religious authorities. The trouble is that when evil is around, it will pick up on people who do what is right just like a playground bully who homes in on the 'good' child at school and gain perverse satisfaction in making a misery out of someone's life. I mention this because this is not far from the reason why many a Christian youngster has left faith aside, fearing the isolation and bullying of peers and yet lacking the spiritual maturity to find ways to deal with this. For such people, the notion that they will be blessed (3:14) for standing firm is not easy to accept, and they need our support and prayers.

Explaining our faith

We have already noted the importance of the passage in verse 15; 'Always be ready to give to anyone who asks you a reasoned account of the hope that is in you, but do this with humility and respect.' (though note that the full sentence runs through into verse 16). It is possible that Peter had in mind a formal setting for this advice, in which an individual was called to account for their faith before authorities. The reason this may have been the case is because the verb 'to give an account' used at the heart of the verse is the Greek 'apologia', which is a technical word for mounting a defence in a court of law. The word can be used for other more general circumstances, but we cannot discount formal proceedings, partly because Peter goes on to describe the circumstances of a 'trial' by saying, 'Have a clear conscience, so that when accused, those who insult your conduct ... will be put to shame.' (3:16). This certainly sounds like a 'legal' setting of some kind.

Some have suggested that this setting is that of a trial before a Roman procurator when a Christian refused to worship the Emperor as god (something which happened increasingly under the Roman Emperor Trajan in the late first century); but this is presumption, and it could just as well describe the circumstances of a Christian slave brought up before his master on the charge of being disobedient because of acting in kindness towards another person and not in the master's interests, for example.

Whatever Peter had in mind, his advice was to be ready to 'defend your faith'. None of us know when we may be called upon to say something to explain our faith. Christians will readily tell of incidents when they have been challenged by non-believers at odd times, at work, when travelling or speaking to a neighbour. Unless we have a ready way of speaking about our faith, then we will be tongue tied! I know of one Bible College in which students were challenged to light a match and hold it, and then whilst it burned they had to give a brief and succinct testimony to their faith, before the match reached the point of burning their fingers! Of course, this was an exercise to discipline people in what they had to say, but the principle remains important. Can we boil down everything we would say to justify our faith and give testimony to Christ so that it can be said succinctly and understandably?

The challenge persists for every Christian to explain themselves, but as verse 16 makes clear, we fail in our endeavour if by our speech and presentation we do not show normal human decency. Peter says that we should bear testimony 'with humility and respect', and possibly with 'a clear conscience'. No-one will listen to an appeal if it is not spoken reasonably and with respect. Some Christians today are suspicious of reason and the exercise of the mind in spiritual matters; you will come across many calls for 'experience' of Christ rather than 'head knowledge', for example; but we should not be so easily led away from using our God given mental abilities to explain our faith with all the good reason we can muster. In this way, people may be persuaded by what we have to say. This is part of our obligation to be active in spreading the Gospel. We may not be natural talkers, but all of us need to be ready to 'give an account' of our faith, and it may be best if we give this prior thought, and exercise our minds. The Holy Spirit can work through this to powerful effect, and make an effective witness out of the smallest testimony!

Discipleship

Application

Standing tall as God's people

Too often, we regard the task of evangelism as that which belongs to people who have special gifts. Certainly, there are some who are gifted to evangelism and they are able to develop these ministries with God-given ease and blessing. This does not mean that the rest of us should not be prepared to speak for our faith and the 'hope that is in us'. The great gifts of the Spirit mentioned in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 are helpful guides to what God wants to do for people, but most of the gifts mentioned in these passages are both general and specific.

By this I mean that although these passages speak clearly about special gifts for people to enable the church as the 'body of Christ' to grow and develop, each of them may be given more generally to any of us for particular times and occasions; a word of knowledge, or a healing touch, for example, as the Lord so leads. We accept the wonderful and special gift of 'prophecy' evident in a preacher, for example, or the gift of healing through laying on of hands given to a few people; but we should not count ourselves out of any of the 'gifts of the Spirit', as if the Lord was unable to use us in whatever way He so wishes in different times and places. In particular, we should not dismiss the general gift of evangelism as if it was something only a few people can do, especially when Jesus has commissioned all His disciples to do it (Matt 28:19)!

Most of our passage today, however, has been about how we handle ourselves under pressure from the world. It speaks of the dignity and righteousness of standing firm in faith in the midst of trying circumstances, and the rewards and blessing of God we receive when

steadfast under pressure from the world. The Gospel will not be preached to all the world without God's people taking the risks of the Good News!

Ideas for what to do

- *In the course of your day, try to find some positive way of reminding yourself of the Lord's presence, using some of the examples and suggestions within the study.*
- *Discuss with a close friend what testimony of faith you could give if you were asked by someone to explain your faith. Such 'practice' may well come in useful!*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What, for you, is the most challenging part of this text? Share this within your group and discuss how we can meet the challenge.
2. When you read in scripture about giving 'a reasoned account' for the hope we have through our faith, what reasons can you give?
3. Is it acceptable for us to keep our faith entirely private? In what circumstances might this be so?

Final Prayer

Gracious Lord God, speak gently in my ear. For I am conscious that without the saving work of Christ, I am not worthy of Your attention. Tell me the truth, tell me Your Word, tell me where to go and what to do. I will do all to obey Your Holy Name. AMEN