

Preparation for Religious Persecution (Part 2)

You are a chosen race. You are a royal priesthood. You are a holy nation, you are a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. As a chosen race, as a royal priesthood, as a holy nation, the LORD God has set us apart. The LORD God has set us apart to be his special people, a people for his own possession. And the LORD God has set us apart for a purpose, for a divine and glorious purpose.

In the midst of a godless and wicked world the LORD God has strategically placed each one of us to live amongst the world as his witnesses. In each one of our individual contexts, the LORD God has called and ordained us to proclaim his excellencies. To proclaim the excellencies of God means to tell forth, it means to tell something that is not otherwise known. To proclaim is to make something widely known, to announce, to broadcast, and to declare it everywhere to everyone.

What is the truth to which we are to proclaim? The excellencies of God. The truth we are to proclaim are the mighty and heroic deeds of the LORD God. We are to proclaim his excellent character. We are to proclaim his excellent works. We are to proclaim the LORD Jesus Christ, and the hope that is found in him alone. We are to proclaim the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, and him crucified. We are called to proclaim to the world that Jesus Christ is LORD. As those who have been called out of the world, as pilgrims, as sojourners, as aliens, and as exiles, it is our distinct privilege to tell the world that Jesus Christ is LORD, that Jesus Christ is the Savior, and that salvation is found in him alone.

The world in which we live is darkness. The world is ignorant of the excellencies of God. The world has suppressed the truth of God in unrighteousness and cannot see his excellencies, the world is unable to see his excellencies, so we must boldly proclaim them. At one time we too were darkness, but now we are light in the Lord, and we must shine brightly in the darkness by proclaiming the truth. This message of truth is not always easy to proclaim. The excellencies of God are not always met with acceptance or applause. In fact many times, proclaiming this message is met with mockery, open hostility, and persecution. Throughout the history of the church those who have faithfully proclaimed the excellencies of God have been met with opposition, enmity, and many times even death.

In my last sermon, I asked the question, are you prepared to suffer and die for the LORD Jesus Christ? In the midst of severe hostility and persecution will you stand firm in the Faith or will you abandon and renounce the Faith?

The society in which we live is rapidly deteriorating. America is becoming more and more hostile to the exclusive truth of the gospel. When persecution arrive at your door, will you be ready? Are you prepared to suffer for the LORD Jesus Christ? Please turn with me to the book of 1 Peter, 1 Peter 3:13-17. Last month, we began this passage by looking at vv13-14, and this morning we will conclude with vv15-17.

By way of reminder, Peter has been preparing his readers for hostility and persecution as they live as aliens and sojourners in this world. In this life, those who follow the LORD Jesus Christ, those who proclaim his excellencies, will experience tribulation, they will experience suffering, they will experience persecution. In this passage, Peter provides five principles that will help prepare his readers to stand firm as faithful witnesses of the LORD Jesus Christ, being steadfast and immovable, even in the face of the most severe and life threatening opposition.

1 Peter 3:13-17, 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.

To be well prepared to suffer you must:

1. **Have the right perspective (vv13-14a)**, The first principle to help prepare us for suffering is to have the right perspective. Christians should expect trials, we should expect persecution, we should expect suffering, however, we should also expect reward and benefits. If you suffer for righteousness sake, you are blessed, you are fortunate, you are privileged. Why? Because righteous suffering prepares us for glory. Righteous suffering gives us endurance, it completes us, it restores us, it confirms, strengthens, and establishes us. Righteous suffering produces in us spiritual maturity and spiritual completeness, so that we are lacking in nothing of spiritual value and importance.
2. **Have the right attitude (v14b)**, The second principle to help prepare us for suffering is to have the right attitude. What is the right attitude? Christians are to be fearless. Christians are to be unshakable –we are to have no fear of them, nor be troubled. In the midst of suffering, persecution, and difficulty believers are to be bold and courageous. Perfect love casts out fear, and there is no fear in love. Good fear results in respect and humility before the LORD God. Bad fear is the fear of man, the fear of circumstances, or any other irrational fear that hinders us from loving God and loving our neighbor. In order to be well prepared to suffer for the LORD Jesus Christ, you must have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but rather cast out your fears by loving LORD God and loving others.

This morning we will conclude this passage by reviewing points 3-5. To be well prepared to suffer you must also have the right heart, have the right answer, and have the right conscience.

Principle #3, Have the right heart.

1 Peter 3:15, 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,

In the previous verse (v14), Peter reminds us that when we suffer, or when we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, we are blessed. And because we are blessed, because we have this perspective, we are to have no fear of them, nor are we to be troubled by them. In verse (v15), Peter elaborates this thought, because we are blessed, not only are we not to fear them, but we are also to honor Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts. Peter gives both a negative and a positive. The negative is do not fear, do not be troubled, do not be agitated or distressed by those who persecute you. The positive is to honor Christ as Lord in your hearts.

This is once again a reference to the Old Testament book of Isaiah. In writing to the faithful remnant who stood opposed to King Ahaz and his alliance with the ungodly Assyrians.

Isaiah 8:11-13, For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: 12 “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. 13 But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

In this passage, Isaiah makes reference to the LORD of hosts, who is the LORD of hosts? The LORD of hosts is the LORD God. The LORD of hosts is Yahweh, Jehovah God, the great I AM.

It is interesting that in our passage this morning, 1 Peter 3:15, through the inspiration and influence of the Holy Spirit, Peter changes “the LORD of hosts” into “Christ the Lord.” This is a very significant change. This change reflects Peter’s conviction that Jesus Christ is LORD and that Jesus Christ is God. Who is to be our fear? Who is to be honored as holy? It is the LORD of hosts, Jesus Christ, who is to be our fear. It is the LORD of hosts, Jesus Christ, who is to be honored as holy. We must fear and honor Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts.

What does it mean to honor Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts? How do we honor Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts? The Greek translation of the word honor is *hagiozo*, which means to render, or to acknowledge. In other words, you are to render, or acknowledge, Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts. The human heart is to render, or acknowledge, the Lordship of Jesus Christ that in everything he might be preeminent. To honor Christ the Lord as holy means that you will give the LORD Jesus Christ his due. You will give the LORD Jesus Christ the supreme position in your life, the primary place in your life. It means that you will honor him as the highest and greatest over everything and everyone else in your life including yourself. To honor Christ as holy is to give him preeminence.

In honoring Christ the Lord as holy, you are recognizing his deity, his sovereign majesty, his rule, and his authority over your life. It is to recognize that he is the sole object of your reverence. It is to recognize that he is the sole object of your awe. Christ he LORD is the highest and greatest, nothing can compare to him. Practically speaking, I honor Christ the Lord as holy in my heart when I submit my will, to his will, when I surrender my desires to his desires. I submit myself to him and to his plan for my life. And in doing this, who is there to harm me? Who will bring a charge against me? Who am I to fear? No matter what comes against you, no matter what attacks you, to

honor Christ the Lord as holy is to believe and affirm in your heart that Jesus Christ is Lord. It is to affirm that he is the only one who is worthy of fear. You must not fear your circumstances, you must not fear man, you must not fear the world or the powers of this present darkness, but rather you will fear the Lord. This was the intent of the prophet Isaiah, in Isaiah 8:12-13, and this is the intent of Peter as well, you must honor Christ the Lord as holy. So, put him in a category all by himself. Give him the highest place. Give him the greatest honor. Place upon him the greatest value. Esteem him as the most supreme treasure, the most cherished prize, the one whom you celebrate and love the most, out of all the people and the things in this world. Ascribe to the LORD all glory, praise, and honor.

To be well prepared to suffer you must have the right heart, a heart that has set apart, that has sanctified, and honored Christ the Lord as holy, even when facing unjust suffering and persecution. Regardless of your circumstances, you must recognize, worship, and exalt the LORD Jesus Christ alone, for he alone is worthy. He is to be your fear, he is to be your dread, and he is to be honored as holy.

Principle #4, Have the right answer.

1 Peter 3:15, 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,

In this pilgrim life, in the midst of an irrational and ungodly world, in the midst of death and disease, pain and suffering, confusion and uncertainty, the LORD God has given us a purpose. Our God-ordained purpose is to be his witnesses, we are to be his ambassadors, we are his hands and his feet. The LORD God has called us to proclaim his excellencies. The LORD God has called us to make him known, we are to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that the LORD God has commanded. Regardless of the difficulty or the persecution that you presently face, you must always be ready to fulfill your purpose, you must always be ready to give a defense of the faith, you must always be ready to give a defense for the hope that is in you.

The Greek term for defense is *apologia*. It refers to giving a verbal defense or a reasoned statement or argument in both formal and informal settings. In other words, whether it is in a judicial court of law, or on the front lawn of your house, you must always be prepared to give an answer. What answer must we be prepared to give? We must give a reason for the hope that is within. What is the reason for the hope that is within? It is Christ crucified. It is Christ in us. The hope that is in you is your hope in the LORD Jesus Christ, in his life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. You must be prepared, and ready to give, a rational explanation, and a defense of the truth of the Scriptures. You must be prepared, and ready to give, a rational explanation, and a defense of the gospel message. This is what it means to always be prepared.

Let me tell you what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that you need to know every answer to every religious or philosophical question. It doesn't mean that you need to know every answer to every theological question or theological controversy. It doesn't mean that you need to know the intricacies of the Hebrew and Greek languages. What it means is that you understand what you believe and why you believe it. In other words, you clearly understand the gospel message, and you are clearly able to articulate the gospel message to others. On this passage, Charles Spurgeon remarked, "Have your doctrinal views, and all your knowledge of Christ, packed away in a handy form, so that, when people want to know what you believe, you can tell them. If they wish to know why you believe that you are saved, have your answer all ready in a few plain, simple sentences; and in the gentlest and most modest spirit make your confession of faith to the praise and glory of God. Who knows but what such good seed will bring forth an abundant harvest?"

This may sound fairly straightforward, but in reality there are many professing believers who are unable to articulate the Faith. There are many professing believers who are unprepared to give an answer for the reason for the hope that is in them. There are many who are unable and unprepared to proclaim the excellencies of God. Are you prepared? Some of you have attended church for your entire lives, do you understand what you believe? Do you understand why you believe, what you believe? Children, young adults, newly saved, seasoned saints, are you able to articulate the gospel message? Are you able to articulate the Christian Faith? Are you able to correct error with the truth of the Scriptures? Are you prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you?

What needs to be communicated in order to accurately and to faithfully give a reason for the hope that is in me? What needs to be communicated in order to accurately articulate the gospel? The answer to these questions would be a sermon in itself, but let me give you a few pointers.

In proclaiming the excellencies of God, you must make God known, as God is revealed in the Scriptures. God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. There is only God, the living and true God, and God is triune. There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. God is Creator. God is King. God is sovereign, he is over all things, he is in control of all things. The LORD God ordains all things. God is righteous. God is love. God is light. God is holy, holy, holy. The LORD God is entirely just, he will always do what is right. Therefore, the LORD God is the judge of all men. All men are accountable to the LORD God. All men are accountable to him, because all men have sinned against him. All men have fallen short of the glory of God.

All mankind walk in the futility of their minds. Man is darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. Man is callous, and have given themselves up to sensuality. Man is greedy to practice every kind of impurity. All mankind, by their fall into sin has lost communion with God, and are under his

wrath and his curse; and so all men are made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for all eternity. The consequence for sinning against an infinite and eternal God is an infinite and eternal punishment –hell. Hell is a place of unquenchable fire. It is a place of darkness, it is a place of solitude, it is a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, it is a place of unending torment and terror, and it is something that all men rightly deserve. All men rightly deserve this appalling and terrible end, but not all men will receive this end. Not all men will receive what has been earned.

Ephesians 2:4-5, But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.

But God out of his rich mercy, but God out of his great love, even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, even when we were his enemies, God made us alive together with Christ. While we were still sinners, God sent his son. God sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. God sent his son to appease, to placate, and to satisfy his wrath against man.

Romans 3:23-25, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

The LORD God put Jesus Christ forward as a propitiation, he put him forward as the satisfaction for sin. Jesus Christ bore our sins in his body, and on the cross, he took upon himself the full wrath of God, as our substitute, in our place, for our sins, making reconciliation between God and man.

Ephesians 2:13-16, But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Upon the cross, Jesus Christ absorbed the full wrath of God, and in doing so he has forever changed our status before the LORD God. Prior to the Lord Jesus Christ:

- ⑩ We stood before God guilty, but have been declared righteous because of Christ.
- ⑩ We stood before God as debtors, but our debt was canceled because of Christ.
- ⑩ We stood before God as strangers, but we were made sons and daughters because of Christ.
- ⑩ We stood before God as his enemy, but we were made friends because of Christ.
- ⑩ We stood before God as slaves, but received freedom because of Christ.

These are things that we could never have accomplished by ourselves. Man could never pay back what is owed to the LORD God. Man could never pay back the tremendous amount of debt, 10,000 Talents worth, that we owe to the LORD God. This is why hell is eternal, because it literally

takes an eternity to pay for our transgressions against an infinite, holy, and eternal God. But the LORD God took that certificate of debt, which was hostile towards us, which stood against us, with all its legal demands, and he has canceled it out, through propitiation, by placing it in the hand of the Lord Jesus Christ and driving a nail through it. By his wounds, we are healed.

The truth of it is, man cannot become righteous on his own, so the LORD God intervened. The LORD God graciously provided for our redemption through the atoning sacrifice of his son, Jesus Christ. God put Jesus Christ forward. God publicly displayed his Son as our propitiation, and in doing so, forever removed from us the wrath that we so rightly deserve.

In this the love of God was manifest. The Lord Jesus Christ who was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Jesus Christ is our Savior. Jesus Christ is LORD, and he is the reason for the hope that is within us. Beloved, Jesus Christ and his work, these are the excellencies of God, and these are the truths, which we are to make known and proclaim.

What is the best way to proclaim these truths? What is the manner of our proclamation?

1 Peter 3:15, 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,

Our proclamation of the excellencies of God must be characterized by gentleness and respect. Gentleness refers to meekness or humility, not in the sense of weakness, but in the sense of not being domineering. Gentleness describes a gracious attitude, which expresses itself in patient submission to others. To speak with gentleness is to bear hostility and reproof without taking offense, and without feeling slighted or annoyed. It is the ability to provide a calming influence over someone who is angry, bitter, and resentful.

Respect refers to a sense of reverence or fear. Peter is once again referring to the fear of the Lord. Here the term respect expresses our devotion to the LORD God, having a deep regard for the LORD God, a regard for his person, his work, and his word, not wanting to blemish or mar his reputation because of our sinfulness. Regarding our proclamation:

Colossians 4:5-6, Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

2 Timothy 2:24-26, And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, 25 correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Our proclamation to the lost must be wise and gracious, our speech must be seasoned with salt. Our proclamation to the lost must not be quarrelsome, but kind, patient, and gentle, recognizing that the actual saving of souls is done by the LORD God, we are just his ambassadors, we are his heralds, we are the broadcasters who proclaim his glorious news. In a word, our proclamation is to be loving.

1 Corinthians 13:1-7, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

If your proclamation of the excellencies of God does not manifest these qualities, then you are a noisy gong, you are a clanging symbol, and the world will not hear the truth that it so desperately needs to hear. The manner by which we proclaim the excellencies of God, is just as important as the proclamation itself. In 1521 Martin Luther stood before the Imperial Diet at Worms and was commanded to recant his teaching. Years later Luther commented on this trial, “Then you must not answer with proud words and bring out the matter with a defiance and with violence as if you would tear up trees, but with such fear and lowliness as if you stood before God's tribunal. So must you stand in fear, and not rest on your own strength, but on the word and promise of Christ.”

In our conduct, and in our proclamation, we must be fearful and lowly, we must make every effort to show honor and respect, not only towards the LORD God, but also to those to whom we are proclaiming.

Principle #5, you must have the right conscience.

1 Peter 3:16-17, 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.

What is the conscience? Webster defines the conscience as the sense, or consciousness, of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character, together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good. In other words, it carries the idea of knowing oneself, the inner sense of right and wrong. The conscience is the soul reflecting upon itself, and it either affirms right behavior or it condemns sinful behavior. All men have an instinctive, built-in sense of right and wrong that activates their guilt, this is the conscience.

The conscience may be compared to a window that lets in the light of God's truth. If we persist in disobeying, the window gets dirtier and dirtier, until the light cannot enter. This leads to a defiled conscience. A seared conscience is one that has been so sinned against that it no longer is sensitive to what is right and wrong. It is even possible for the conscience to become so poisoned that it actually approves things that are bad and accuses things that are good, the Bible calls this an evil conscience. But what is a good conscience? What does it mean to have a good conscience? It means that your conscience is not accusing you. Your conscience is a mechanism which either accuses you, or excuses you. Your conscience is a device that the LORD God has planted within you to act as a source of conviction or as a source of affirmation. If you have a good conscience, a clear conscience it will be telling you that all is well with you and the LORD God. If you have an evil conscience, it will be reminding you that all is not well, because there is sin in your life.

Peter's point is that believers must keep their lives right with the LORD God. In the power of the Spirit, we must be obedient to the Word of God. We must walk and keep in step with the Spirit of God –this will result in a pure conscience, and when we are slandered, we will not be the ones who feel ashamed, but our accusers will feel ashamed because their slander is unjustified. A good conscience removes from us the fear of what other people may know about us, say against us, or do to us. If we honor Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts, if it is the LORD God who is our fear, then we need not fear anyone, or anything else, not their threats, opinions, or their actions.

Psalm 118:6, The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?

Take a look at the last verse in our passage. Here we are given two different alternatives regarding our suffering.

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

In this life, you can either suffer for doing good, or you can suffer for doing evil. You can either suffering for righteousness sake, or you can suffer for unrighteousness sake. You can suffer according to the will of God, or you can suffer for your sin. According to Peter, it is better to suffer for doing good. So, do good, pursue good, walk in the good works that the LORD God has prepared beforehand, and entrust your suffering, entrust your circumstances, entrust your soul, into the hands of your Faithful and Heavenly Father. Be prepared to suffer and do good.

To be well prepared to suffer you must:

Principle #1, have the right perspective, Christians should expect trials, we should expect persecution, we should expect suffering, but we should also expect, rewards and benefits.

Principle #2, you must have the right attitude, you must have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but rather, cast out your fears by loving God and loving others.

Principle #3, you must have the right heart, a heart that has set apart, sanctified, and honored Christ the Lord as holy, even when facing unjust suffering and persecution.

Principle #4, you must have the right answer, you must be prepared, and able to give, a rational explanation and a defense of why you are a Christian.

Principle #5, you must have the right conscience, our lives must be pleasing to the LORD God, so that our conscience does not accuse us of our behavior, but rather that it affirms our behavior.

Suffering and persecution is coming, but there is nothing to fear, there is no one who can harm you if you are zealous for what is good. And even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. So have no fear of your persecutors, nor be troubled, be courageous, be bold, in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy. Always be ready and 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, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.