

1 Peter 3:15

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[0 : 00] Well, as we continue to consider the theme of hope, we come to 1 Peter chapter 3. And my theme tonight is reason for hope. The text that leads to that title is well known. You can find it in verse 15 of chapter 3, where Peter says to the Christians scattered throughout the various areas that he addresses, but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

Many people will not associate reason with faith, reason with Christianity. Many would suggest that Christianity is not rational, that in fact you cannot use your reason fully and effectively and still retain Christian faith. But Peter disagrees, and many others throughout the history of Christianity have disagreed with this idea. One of the most helpful books recently that enables Christians to understand and to communicate their faith is a book by Tim Keller called *The Reason for God*. And it is using in the title the notion of reason in the service of God, in the service of the gospel. And a book like that can be extremely helpful. In this passage, the idea of reason is again brought together with the idea of hope and of communicating that hope to others. This text takes the issue of hope, where so far we've thought about the hope that is within the Christian community that a believer might have, that a Christian community can have, and asks the question, how will that hope be passed on to others?

How can you share that hope? Tonight I want to look at this particular text and some of the surrounding verses to look at the reason for hope that a Christian can have, to ask each one of us to consider whether we have reasons for hope, and to think about the context in which that hope might have to exist.

I want to look at several topics. Sharing hope in a hopeless world, sharing the content of hope, sharing hope, sharing hope graciously, and character as significant in sharing hope.

So let us look at a number of these themes quickly tonight. First of all, sharing hope in a hopeless world. When you read this passage, one of the things that's very striking is that there is a sense of a sense of a world which is aggressing against the Christian believer. You might find it, for instance, in verse 13, who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? And it might seem that that is a rhetorical question. Well, no one will harm you if you are eager to do good, but that's not the way Peter reads it. He says, but even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.

[4 : 24] Again, you can see that general sense of a threatening world in verse 9. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called.

So if you read the whole of this letter, this first letter of Peter, you will find many references to a Christian community that is under threat from various sides. Perhaps some of them were more official, perhaps local authorities. Perhaps some were less official, just local communities, perhaps business people, perhaps neighbors, who rejected the Christianity of the believers and caused trouble for them. And Peter says you're living in a world which generally does not see God as a center, as a part of their worldview. It's as well for us to be clear about that. It's as well for us to recognize that sometimes perhaps we get discouraged because we are a relatively small group in a church. There are many people around us in Aberdeen who are not gathering in a church tonight and who seem to have little interest in gathering in a church tonight, and perhaps that might make us think, well, is there any point? Are we just going down the wrong road? Perhaps we might be discouraged.

But it has always been that way. It is not a new thing. It is not some modern experience of the Western world alone. It has always been the case that Christians are a minority. And even where they have grown, even where the church has flourished, they are nonetheless often and virtually always in some form or other under pressure from the wider community. And so it becomes clear that the hope that Christians have, the hope that we've been thinking about over these two days, is a hope that for many people is not shared. It's a world without hope. Paul will describe the experience of those who once were not believers as being without hope and without God in the world, in Ephesians. And so there is that sense that the combination go together. Without God, you're without hope. Now, of course, we saw already that people do say, well, I hope for,

I hope things are going to get better. I hope that my life will become more stable. I hope to be financially secure. I hope, well, what do I hope for? Perhaps there is hope that all will be well.

Perhaps there is hope that some way or other my life will mean something. Perhaps there is hope that in the end, God, whoever he may be, will look kindly on me, will say, yes, you did your best, or yes, you managed to outweigh your bad deeds with your good deeds. There may be many notions of hope, but as we saw before, many of these hopes are without basis. They are just a kind of gut reaction, a kind of longing, but without any reason to believe that they are true, just as we might hope that we'll get nice weather next week because we're on holiday. There is nothing to say that that is what will actually be true. So, Christians who have hope, if we have grasped the hope that we found in Colossians 1, the hope that Peter speaks about in 1 Peter chapter 1, if we have that hope, then we are those who possess something that much of the world does not have. And many people would describe their lives, their situations as hopeless. So, some way or other, we as those who have hope are to find a way of communicating that hope to others. So, let's be aware that if we have hope, and I hope that for many of us, at least for most of us this weekend, as we've reflected on the foundation of Christian hope in the gospel, as we've reflected on the experience of hope that comes from knowing forgiveness, that we desire hope. We long to grasp that hope that is found in the gospel. I pray that that's our experience tonight, to be able to say, I have hope. Well, if we have hope, then surely we are obliged to share that hope because so much of this world does not have hope in any real sense.

[9 : 42] As Peter is going to address this issue of communicating hope, the way he starts is with fundamental principles. Verse 15 begins, In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. This really comes back to fundamental issues. If you are looking for hope, where are you going to find the hope? And the hope that we have as Christians is that there is a king, that there is a sovereign, that the world is not, in fact, careering materially and socially and ethically and economically and whatever else way out of control. That there is not, in fact, simply chaos. Because for many that will be the ultimate way that they see the world, that there is no reason for the world, it's just happening. It's just an untamed set of chaotic events.

But Christians start from the position that there is a king, there is a lord, a master, one who has all authority and one who exercises that authority so that there is meaning in this world, so that there is a story from beginning to middle to end. And that that end is not in disaster, but is in the final fulfillment of God's purposes. So there's where we start. There's where we must start. Is Christ set apart as Lord? Is that our conviction tonight? In my world, Christ is Lord? In my world, I recognize the claims of Christ and I acknowledge them. I say, Lord, you are king and it's according to your purpose that I will live my life. If I seek meaning in my life, it will not be in my professional path primarily, it will not be in many other good things, but it will be in living a life that is ordered according to your will. That's where we must start.

That's where Peter starts and where we need to also. Then there is the question, of course, of whether that is the case for us. Peter will say, always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have.

But we're making an assumption there. We're making the assumption that you have this hope, that you have the hope that Peter speaks of, that you have the hope that comes from setting Christ apart as Lord. So let me just leave that sitting before you, nice and frankly, that unless you have set Christ apart as Lord, then you cannot give a reason for the hope that you have, because the hope that you have can only be founded on Christ. And if you have not yet set Christ apart as Lord, then you do not have that hope. So let me encourage you to deal with that issue right from the start if you haven't. If you haven't beforehand, ask yourself now, am I ready to set Christ apart as Lord? Is He going to be the one who determines my life from this moment on? And if you say in your heart, yes, that is what I want, then what follows will have relevance to you. It will make some sense to you.

But if in fact you say no, or not yet, which is another way of saying no, then ultimately you remain a rebel. You remain out with the allegiance sworn to the rightful king, and there is no reason you can give to others for a hope, because you do not yet have that hope.

[14 : 40] And there is ultimately no reason that you can give for any hope, I would suggest, because only in Christ's Lordship is there hope in this world. So as we begin to think about sharing hope in a hopeless world, we can only share what we have.

So let us take a moment to ask, where is my hope personally? And just to ask yourself, well, is it in my own ingenuity, in my own skill, in my own resources, in my own ability to get myself out of a scrape, in my own way of managing people? I can make people work in my favor? Are we thinking of any of these kind of things when we're thinking of the reason for our hope? Or do we recognize that our only hope is if there is one who has sole absolute authority in this world, in this universe?

And if that's our only hope, then let us place that hope in Christ Jesus. Let me speak then, particularly to those who have set apart Christ as Lord. And perhaps even in the course of speaking, over this next 10, 20 minutes, then there will be some who start not having done so and end having done so. And I pray that God's Spirit would do that which only His Spirit can do in the lives of individuals. What about sharing this? Peter says, be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Well, there's a couple of things that I want to highlight here. First is be prepared. Always be prepared. Now that means be ready, have made advance preparation. You can't be prepared just instantly on the spot. You can only be prepared if you've made preparations. If you've thought about something ahead of time, put in place the arrangements. If you're going camping or if you're going on holiday, you won't just go out to the car on the morning of departure and say, okay, let me be prepared. You can say, can I please be prepared?

And it won't work. You just have to prepare. You have to do certain things so that when the moment comes, you're ready. So Peter is calling Christians not just to wait for a moment of inspiration, but to get themselves into the state where when an opportunity to share the reason for their hope comes, they are prepared. So let me encourage you to think about how you can prepare to give this answer.

One or two suggestions come to mind. Let me encourage you to be able to explain the story of the Bible in two minutes. Now, in fact, you can explain the story of the Bible in four or five words, I would suggest. Creation, fall, redemption, consummation. That's the story of the Bible. It probably takes five seconds. But you can expand that a little bit, and you can be able, in your words, in your understanding, in a way that's natural for you, explain what it is that God started to do, continues to do, will complete. And that will help you to give a reason for the hope that is in you. Likewise, let me encourage you to have in your mind practiced perhaps two to three minutes of an explanation of what it means to be a Christian. Many of the folks who came to study with us at Dumasani would come and they'd say, I want to be a pastor. I want to preach the gospel.

[19 : 18] And so the next question we would ask them is, so what do you understand the gospel to be? And sadly, so often, these folks were incapable of stating clearly and simply what the gospel is.

Again, if you're looking for a head start on that, let me point you back to Colossians chapter 1, verses 12, 13, and 14, where Paul explains the gospel, focusing not on our personal experience or our personal feelings or whether we have a sense of fulfillment in life or whatever it might be, but rather what God has done in Christ Jesus. He has rescued us from the domain of darkness. He's brought us into the kingdom of the Son that He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. There's, again, the gospel in 10, 15, 20 seconds.

Memorize something like that. Get into your way of thinking the story of the Bible, the message of the gospel, so that if somebody says, oh, well, what do Christians believe anyway? You're not thinking, well, it's difficult to explain. It's really a little complicated and, well, but rather have something that you can express that is already familiar to you that you're comfortable. Be prepared.

Read something straightforward, appropriate for your comfort level. That will help you to understand more fully what the gospel is, what the Bible story is. And then give a reason.

Listen, be prepared to present a rational case. Now, each of us is called to do what we're able to do at our particular level and in our particular context, and so it's not necessary for everyone to be able to present some lengthy philosophical argument. But it is valuable for us to realize that loving God means loving God with our minds as well as our hearts and our souls, so that we are able not to prove God, not to prove the gospel. We ultimately cannot do that, but we can show that the gospel is reasonable. There's a book by William Lane Craig called Reasonable Faith. You can find a website that has the same name. And he is saying that faith, while it is not rationalistic, while it cannot prove God from first principles, it is reasonable. It is something that is in keeping with the way that God has made us as rational beings. And so think about some of the reasons that we might use to understand why it's important to have God within our worldview. Why, for instance, should we trust the gospels? Well, for many Christians, we simply trust the gospels because they have a self-authenticating testimony. They have the ring of truth in our ears, and that's fine. But it is possible also to show that we have very good reason for trusting that the gospels provide us with an accurate, reliable, faithful testimony to events that truly took place. So let us think in a way that's appropriate for us how we can explain, how we can help someone who might indeed have reasons for questions, help them to come to terms with those questions. Now, that again is different from proving someone into the kingdom of God. And in fact, it's worth our while thinking very carefully, and we'll do so in a moment or two, about how we present arguments. Sometimes Christians have sought to devastate an opponent with their unanswerable argument, and indeed, they have won a battle, but they have lost the war in that they have humiliated somebody, they have hurt somebody, they have left somebody hurt and broken, and that person will, apart from the grace of God, be resistant to speaking with a Christian again, to hearing of the gospel again. Let us be very careful about the way in which we present an argument.

[24 : 35] Let us be very sensitive. Let us listen and really hear what people who do not believe are saying. But also, let us realize that Christianity is not unreasonable, and that there are good grounds for believing that the Bible is giving us a faithful record of reality. And if we're not sure what these reasons are, then by all means find someone who can help you to understand that, whether that somebody is in person, or through a book, or through a YouTube video, or whatever it might be. There are remarkable resources available. Give a reason. A reason will include your personal testimony. A reason includes your experience.

And that's a valid reason. But there are other reasons too. And the more that you can gather, the more clearly you can present Christianity. But that takes us on to the third point. We've seen that we are called to share hope in a hopeless world based on Christ as Lord in our lives. We're to share the content of hope, which includes being prepared and giving reason for our hope.

We're also to share hope graciously with gentleness and respect. This little addition is often missed out when this give an answer verse is quoted. The famous verse is, always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. The next line is crucially important. But do this with gentleness and respect. If you miss that part, then the first part, done with devastating and clinical precision and professionalism, may be disastrous.

God chooses to use us not simply so that we can present an argument, but so that we can reflect His character.

We are to be Christ to people. And Christ was perfectly capable of challenging a false argument, judgment of being precise and firm. But still we are called to reflect Christ's character also in His care for sinners, in His care for those who were far from God, and to do what we do with gentleness and respect. That will take a determined decision. I will recall as a young person in school, learning arguments that I could use against my friends and enjoying the kind of thrill of the chase of seeking to puncture holes in the views of those who did not share my view of the Bible. And as I reflect back on that, I realized that at that stage I was not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. I had not submitted to His Lordship. I just happened to know things about the Bible. And I was using those things like a big stick to bang people on the head. Well, not surprisingly, I do not expect that those arguments had any lasting spiritual significance. Perhaps something I said may have caused somebody to think, God is gracious. He sometimes uses us in spite of ourselves. But He calls us to demonstrate

[28 : 29] His character. And so we are called to be gentle and to show respect. And in fact, that notion of character is built in further to what is said in this passage. We see that in verse 16, we are to answer with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. So how we present our hope will be seen. How we present our hope will be recognized. And so if we have a hope within us, Peter says, give a reason for the hope that lies within you. So we should be able to express that in words. We should be able to give a rational and orderly, a clear and understandable perspective on why we are

Christians. A simple explanation of why we are believers. But the way in which that hope shows itself, the reality of a hope that is rooted in Christ as Lord, the way that that shows itself will also speak volumes. So let that hope be seen in our character, in our words, in our attitudes, in our care for one another, in the fact that we listen to somebody before we come up with our devastating response.

The fact that we are ready to treat someone with kindness, with gentleness, with respect. Let hope shape our character. Also let us recognize that despite our best efforts, sharing hope may not be received well. So in verse 16, we see those who speak maliciously against your good behavior.

We might wish to think that good behavior would always be rewarded, but it's not, and it never has been. So you may find that someone who you treat graciously and with respect nonetheless responds with aggression, with dismissive remarks, with abuse, with personal attacks, all sorts of things.

But if you follow your Lord, follow His example, then you will find that all that happens is that these people who attack you are presented with their own attack. They are presented with their own, their own, the reality of their own attitude. So let us not be surprised if we are attacked.

[31 : 34] Let us not be surprised if our arguments are rejected. God never promises that a good argument will be received. But that is not what we are called to do, just to give arguments where they are received well.

However, we find that through your clear conscience, those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ, may be ashamed of their slander. In other words, their conscience, because your conscience is clear, their conscience may prick their conscience that you have acted in such a way, that your very response to rejection may be part of what God uses to make them spiritually sensitive, may be part of what God uses to bring them in due course to Himself. And so we have an opportunity to prepare ourselves, to ask ourselves if we have a personal experience of hope, which comes from trust in Christ Jesus and acknowledgement of Him as Lord. We have a chance to use whatever resources, and in the modern world there are amazing resources to grasp Christianity, not necessarily in all its complexity, but in its basic clarity and simplicity, to grasp it for ourselves in such a way that we are ready to share it when the opportunity comes.

We are called to reflect Christ's character in the way in which we share it with gentleness and with respect, and we are called to do that even when our reasonable response is rejected, knowing that even the way in which we respond to rejection may be used by God to bring others to Himself.

Are we ready? Are we prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we, each one of us has, if we have that hope? Doing so with gentleness and respect. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for the privilege that you give to your people of being the custodians of the gospel, of being the ones who share the gospel, and indeed when living life in a hostile environment to give a reason for the hope that we have. Lord, may it be true of each one of us tonight that we have that hope, a personal hope, a hope that comes from a personal faith in Jesus Christ, a personal conviction that He is our Lord. And we pray that you will enable us to share that hope with others in a way that is sensitive, that is clear, that is effective in human terms, but especially that this is effective because your Spirit works through our words to draw others to Christ. In His name we pray. Amen.