

1 Peter 3:13-16

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[0 : 0 0] Let me tell you about something that happened to me on a Saturday evening in this very building 35 years ago. I was a first year student at Aberdeen University and had come along that Saturday evening to what was called in those days the FCSA, the Free Church Student Association.

And we would meet most Saturday evenings and usually the meeting point was the hall downstairs and it would vary from week to week but often the pattern would be some games that we would play, some badminton or other games and then usually we would go to somebody's flat that was near the church and have a Bible study or a talk. That was the kind of pattern. So anyway I was downstairs in the hall. As I say I would only been maybe in Aberdeen I don't know a few weeks or a couple of months. I don't know exactly how much or how long to my first year it was. But I was sitting on the stage downstairs. Those of you who are from my era in terms of Bon Accord will remember that there used to be a stage in the hall downstairs. And I was sitting on that stage and somebody approached me from the committee and I won't mention the name but he's the minister of Uri Free Church. So you can, those of you who want to work it out, you can work it out or some of you will know already with that reference. But he said to me, he says, David, he said, see at the flat, would you give your testimony? And I thought, whoa! I thought, no, I don't know about this.

So this was, you know, I was just here. I didn't really know people very well and I just didn't like this idea at all. So I kind of mumbled and said, oh well, maybe, maybe, maybe another time.

And fortunately he didn't insist. But having kind of wriggled my way out of this, next to me, overhearing this conversation was a second year student who should also remain nameless. And she turned to me and she said, oh David, she said, fairly, fairly gentle turns. But she said to me, she says, well, you should always be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have.

Of course, I knew that was in the Bible. And I thought, oh dear, what a terrible Christian I am. I haven't done what the Bible says I should be willing to do. Now, that was 35 years ago. I think I've probably avoided the text ever since. I don't know if it's a sort of subconscious sense of guilt, which there shouldn't be because that's all been forgiven. But nonetheless, I think it's probably just circumstantial. Of course, the verse is one that I've heard mentioned and people often use that verse or quote that verse in different circumstances. But I thought we'd spend a little time thinking about the couple of verses in which that statement is found. It ties in a little bit with what we've been hearing already from Andy about the work of the CUs and the encouragement that is being given to the students, the Christian students there to share their faith with their fellow students and classmates. And of course, that's not something just for Christians at college or university, but that's something that we too are to be encouraged to do. Some of us are going through the empowered materials at the neighborhood fellowships, and that also serves to equip and hopefully empower us to do that, to share our faith, to give a reason for the hope that we have.

[3 : 33] So let's think about these words of Peter, and let's think about it in this way. Let's treat it as a challenge that Peter lays before us and consider a few of the different aspects of this challenge as we find them in the passage. So the first thing we're going to think about is the context of the challenge that he lays before his readers. We're then going to think about something that really is at the heart of the matter is what I'm calling the key to rising to the challenge. It's clear that Peter knows that those who are reading this find this difficult, they're fearful, and he identifies for them what is the key to respond as we ought to the challenge laid before us. Then we'll just mention what the content of the challenge is. What is it that we are being challenged to do?

And also notice just very briefly the implicit assumption of the challenge. Now that at the moment probably just sounds a bit intriguing or what's that about? Well hopefully all will become clear in due course. And then finally just a few words to think about and be encouraged by the identity of the one who is challenging us. And again hopefully that will become clear in due course. Well let's start first of all by thinking a little bit about the context of the challenge where Peter is laying before his readers, the believers who are reading this letter, this challenge, to always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. What's the context of that challenge that he's laying before the believers? Well it's not principally me sitting on the stage downstairs being asked to give my testimony to other Christians, however scary I might have felt that that was at the time. That's not really what Peter is thinking about. The context clearly if we read the whole of the passage we read a little bit of the passage but we left unread quite a large part.

But if we were to read the previous verses it's very clear that the context is one of opposition, even persecution, if not actual persecution perhaps the prospect of opposition and persecution.

It would seem that when Peter wrote this letter the circumstances of the believers who have received it would have been that they were enjoying relative freedom but harder times were coming, were around the corner and he's almost anticipating that, hence the language of be prepared. He's saying there will be difficult times ahead. There are difficult times now but there will be difficult times and you need to be prepared to give an answer to those who challenge you. But the context is of hostile challenging. The context is of the believers being accused by those who are hostile to them and having to respond to that hostile interrogation. Indeed even the word there translated reason, always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. The word translated reason there is the Greek word apologia. And in other contexts it's used to speak of a defense. In fact that's how it's ordinarily used in the New Testament when the believers were accused even in a legal context and they had to give a defense against their accusers.

That's the language that Peter is employing. And given that that is the principal context or scenario that Peter has in mind though we'll see in a moment that the language he uses broadens it but given that that's what he perhaps principally has in mind it's not surprising that the believers were fearful of such a situation. You know you wouldn't be you wouldn't be human if you weren't afraid of a situation where you were being accused where you were being hostile or the victim of hostile interrogation with whatever consequences may come of that. It's not surprising that believers were afraid of such a situation.

[7 : 43] Now when we think of ourselves we may not yet be subject to this kind of of opposition this kind of hostility but again it's not something that is inconceivable that in our lifetimes we may be.

And perhaps some people in certain circumstances are beginning to experience this kind of hostile accusation interrogation purely because they're Christians. In certain work situations we read of that even in the secular press where that's becoming more common. But even in the absence if that's the case in our own circumstances of hostile interrogation we perhaps do know what it is like to be subjected to cynical or or mocking questioning of our faith. And the challenge is that in that situation in those circumstances we are to be ready we are to be prepared to give an answer to give a reason for the hope that we have. So that's the context of the challenge that Peter lays before us. But let's move on to the heart of the matter I think which is the key to rising to the challenge. It is frightening to imagine ourselves in that kind of situation or maybe even the the more gentle scenario of friends or colleagues or acquaintances probing us about our faith and questioning our convictions in one way or another.

And even that maybe we find a little bit daunting or the prospect of it just a little bit scary. How are we to face and overcome our fears?

Well Peter here quotes from Isaiah and he urges us, he urges believers not to be frightened. Notice what he says there in verse 14. But even if you should suffer what is right you are blessed. And then he says do not fear what they fear.

Do not be frightened. If we just focus on those words. Do not be frightened. And you'll see at the foot of the page there in the Bible that that is from Isaiah chapter 8 that we read. So he's saying to them yes I know you're frightened but I'm challenging you I'm encouraging you not to be frightened. Don't be frightened. Well that's fine as far as it goes but if we are frightened then being told not to be frightened doesn't seem very helpful. We knew already probably that we shouldn't be frightened and to have somebody say well just don't be frightened we kind of think well I need a little bit more than that. But of course Peter by making reference to this passage in Isaiah is actually giving us a lot more than simply telling us not to be frightened. Because what is revealing is to note what Isaiah goes on to say in the original passage in Isaiah and to tie that in with what Peter tells us to do at the beginning of verse 15. So let's notice we've already read the verses in Isaiah but let's notice what Peter goes on to say or rather what Isaiah goes on to say immediately after telling the believers not to be frightened. Notice there in verse 12. So I'm back in Isaiah. Isaiah 8 verse 12.

[10:50] Do not fear what they fear. Do not dread it. And that do not dread it Peter kind of adapts and you have this don't be frightened. But then notice what Isaiah goes on to say. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. He is the one you are to fear. He is the one you are to dread. So you see what Peter is doing he's saying look look what Isaiah says. Isaiah is saying to the people by way back then don't be frightened by the things that other people are frightened of. Don't be frightened of of the opinion of man. Don't be frightened about any reputation loss that you might endure because of your faith. Don't be frightened about that. Other people are frightened about these kind of things but not you. What you are to do is you are to fear the Lord your God. So it's almost as this is the key to to this bold rising to the challenges what we might call an exchange of fears. No longer afraid of man.

But rather fearing God. Now when we say that I think it is important to be clear that when we talk about this exchange there isn't an absolute symmetry here. We're not to be scared of God in the way that we might be scared of powerful men who can do us harm. But we are to fear God in the sense of a deep reverence and respect for him and a desire to do what is right in his eyes whatever the temporal cost.

So here you have the situation. People are opposing you. People are interrogating you. People are mocking you because of your faith. And that produces fear. You're frightened in those circumstances. And Peter says well I understand that but but don't be frightened. Because that's what everybody's frightened of. You know people opposing them and and questioning them. You don't want to focus your fear there.

Rather what you are to do is to fear the Lord your God. And if you fear him then that will give you the the courage and will give you the the the the grace sufficient to then face those who are accusing you and give an answer and the reason for the hope that is yours. Now how does what Isaiah say fit in with the first sentence of verse 15 in the passage in Peter where Peter says but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. So having quoted from Isaiah don't be frightened he immediately goes on to say but in your heart set apart Christ as Lord. And it seems to me that what Peter is doing he's almost paraphrasing what we find in Isaiah in the next verse. When Isaiah says the Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. Because actually what Peter literally says there is what it's translated set apart. What he says is sanctify in your heart Christ as Lord. So you see the connection with

Isaiah chapter 8 in verse 13. The people of God were told by Isaiah regard the Lord Almighty as holy. And then Peter says sanctify the Lord Jesus Christ in your heart. Now that even in terms of the Christological significance of how Peter is placing Jesus in the place of the Lord God Almighty that is huge theologically. But leaving that aside we simply have this urge to the believers fear God rather than fear man. That's the heart of what he's saying. That will help you be willing and able to give a reason for the hope that you have when you are challenged, when you are questioned, when you are interrogated.

[14 : 34] We are to sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts. What does that mean? Well we are to grant to Christ the place of honor and reverence in our hearts and lives. We are to fear and honor and obey and testify to him. Now Peter does not promise that if we do that it will be an easy ride. He is clear that doing the right thing may well lead to pain and suffering. But in the midst of that there is a twofold promise.

First of all in the midst of that suffering you are blessed. There in verse 14 but even if you should suffer what is right you are blessed. But also the promise that the suffering that you may endure will ultimately not lead to what we might call ultimate harm. And I think that's the sense of verse 13 though the manner in which it's phrased here in the NIV maybe doesn't quite capture it. In verse 13 it says who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good. And that seems to suggest that if you do good and if you're a good citizen and if you're helpful to people then they're not likely to harm you.

Well there may be some truth in that. But I think really what Peter is saying is that even if they do harm you it won't ultimately do you harm. It won't ultimately bring you ultimate harm. And I think it's a little bit like what we hear in other parts of the New Testament where we're reminded that any suffering that we endure now is as nothing compared to the glory that awaits us. Any temporary affliction or suffering is as nothing in comparison to all that we will receive. So we need to set Christ apart as Lord in our hearts. And this is the key to being able to rise to this challenge. The more you are bowed before him the less you will be cowed before men. To set apart Christ as Lord is the end of fear and the start of witness. So that's the key to rising to the challenge. Very quickly and more briefly the content of the challenge. Well the challenge is be prepared to give an answer. Be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Now we've already suggested that Peter has principally in mind the possibility of some formal maybe even legal challenge. But the language he uses seems to be deliberately broad so as to include other circumstances or scenarios. He says always be ready to give an answer to anyone.

And so there seems to be this deliberate intent on the part of Peter of saying yes I am thinking about you know hostile interrogation but I'm thinking about other circumstances as well. Anyone speaking to you at any time always be prepared. And the challenge is clear enough. It is to speak. It is to give a reason for the hope that you have. What hope do we have? Well I think we can understand this broadly as the Christian hope. All that is ours in Christ. But perhaps there is also the sense that we as believers even when we suffer for doing what is right look forward to our reward. That our present suffering whatever it might be is not to be compared with what awaits us with the glory that is ours.

So the challenge is to speak. The challenge is to defend the faith. The challenge is to make known the good news. And remember we are to do it always and with anyone. A friend, a colleague, a neighbor, a fellow student, a classmate, whoever it might be. But notice also that the challenge includes direction as to the manner in which we are to present our defense. There in verse 15 in the second sentence in verse 15 it says, but do this with gentleness and respect. Do this with gentleness and respect. So there it's telling us a little bit about the how. You are to speak. You are to defend the faith. You are to give the reason for your hope. But do it in this way. Those who are opposing you will be disrespectful. They'll be hostile. They'll be maybe even violent in their language. But you're not to respond in like manner. You are to respond. You're not to remain silent. You're not to be bullied into silence. Speak. Speak up. But the manner in which you are to do it is to be in a distinctly

[19 : 07] Christian manner. You are to do it with gentleness and respect. Respect even for those who are hostile to you. Even for those who are treating you badly. Speak but do it in this way. No, it's not easy in that context of being attacked. Our gut reaction is to attack back. Either to flee or to attack ourselves.

And we have to find a kind of middle ground. Not to flee but neither to attack but rather to respond with clarity of thought, with authority, with gentleness and with respect.

Let me mention just a couple other things about this challenge. The penultimate one is what I'm calling the implicit assumption of the challenge. So when Peter says to his readers and he says to us, always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, it's implicit that he's expecting people to do that. He's expecting those who are not Christians to approach Christians and challenge them and ask them. It may be hostile. It may be curiosity.

It may even be in some cases those who are drawn to the Christian faith and they want to know more. But implicit is that people will be asking. And I think maybe that's the most challenging thing about this for us. Because we can read this and we say, oh here's good instruction, good advice about what we are to do in this circumstance. But maybe for many of us it never happens. Nobody does ask us. Nobody does challenge us. We're not visible. We're rather invisible. And maybe we quite like it that way.

It's more comfortable not to be challenged, not to be questioned. But implicit in what Peter is saying is that the hope that you have should be visible in the life that you live. Indeed that visibility is also touched on. In the following verse, in verse 16 it says, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. And again, the implication is that your good behavior is visible. The good works that you do, the way you help others, the way that you help even those who are opposing you, those things are visible. And because they're visible, people are seeing them. And because they're seeing them, they are being drawn to speak and to ask and to confront or whatever it is. And so maybe that's something we need to think about.

[21 : 38] Well, is this true of us? Are we visible or are we often invisible? But let me finish with one final thing, one final aspect of this challenge. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. And that is to think about the identity of the one challenging us. And here I'm thinking about Peter, the writer of this letter. And this final thought, I hope to encourage you. Imagine that you are in the courtyard of the high priest in Jerusalem on the night of Jesus' arrest and trial. So I'm inviting you to use your imagination. You're there in the courtyard and you are observing what is going on. You're one of the crowd. Nobody knows who you are.

You're in no danger. Nobody's challenging you. You're simply observing what is going on. But you're there. And in the distance, you see Peter. You know who he is and you're observing him. You're curious.

What's he going to do? What's he going to say? This disciple of Jesus. And as you observe, you see that there are those who approach him and challenge him. Aren't you one of his disciples?

Aren't you a Nazarene? Aren't you a follower of Jesus? And you're looking on and you're wondering, well, how is this disciple of Jesus? How is he going to respond? Now, you don't know this text, but you might be thinking, is he going to give a reason for the hope that he has? What will he do?

Will he courageously identify with Jesus? Of course, we know that that's not what he did, but rather he denied all knowledge of Jesus. He denied Jesus three times. And you see, this is the same Peter who is challenging us with these words. The one who denied his Lord, the one who did not have the courage, the one who wasn't ready or prepared to give a reason for the hope that was within him. He's the one who we find as we imagine ourselves there in the courtyard.

[23 : 44] He's the one who denied, but he is now the one who is challenging us. And why do I say that that's encouraging? Well, it's encouraging because the man who failed, as we know, was restored. The man who was weak matured in his faith. Peter learned to set apart Christ in his heart as Lord. And as he did so more and more, he became the man who was ready to give a reason for the hope that was within him, and was able to challenge others with authority to do the same. The trembling Peter became bold. And that can be true of you and me. If you maybe identify more with the timorous Peter, the Peter who is frightened in the face of hostile questioning, who would prefer to say nothing and to be invisible, well, you can become the Peter who grew in his faith, the Peter who set apart Christ in his heart, and the Peter who not only himself was able to speak for the Lord, but encourage and challenge others to do so.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the hope that we have. We thank you that it is a hope that is sure, a certain hope, a hope that extends beyond this life into eternity. We thank you for the wonder of it and the extent of it. And we pray that we would be ever ready and willing and indeed desiring to share that hope, the reason for our hope with others.

We pray that whatever the circumstance might be, whether the opportunity that presents itself as in the context of a measure of hostility or mocking, or whether it's in the context of genuine interest or curiosity, we do pray that we would take those opportunities and that we would have the words to say as we share with others the reason for the hope that we have. Help us to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts, that our fear would be directed to you as the Lord God Almighty, that our concern to honor you and to reverence you and to respect you would outweigh all other fears that might paralyze us in our witness. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.