Exiles: Faithfully Present in a Foreign Land
17—Missional Living, Part 6 22 Feb 2026
1 Peter 3:13–17 J-T Richards

Introduction

Our text this morning addresses Peter's central point in this letter. If you were blessed to grow up in a Christian home, you may have been taught this text in way similar to the way my wife was taught. She was also raised by Christian parents who taught her this text but as can be the case, some verses are usually cited out of context in a way that the original context is lost. This often changes the meaning of a verse and can be hard to "undo". This reveals the importance of not proof-texting but rather always studying—and *citing*—Scripture in its original context.

If you were to ask my wife about this particular verse she'd tell you how it was not an encouragement to her, but would fill her with existential dread. This is because it was, in her case, almost always a distortion of the text she was taught, rather than the real meaning that ought to fill us with hope, not dread.

Some of you might hear this text and see it as a challenge, and desire to rise to the occasion. Some of you might hear it and feel the same burden my wife has long felt. Last week I shared the blessing of individuals like Wes Huff, those who are able to speak about Scripture and the reasonableness of our faith and the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. For many of you, our text will bring to mind such people and this is the source of pressure many feel.

Wes is in the middle of a PhD program, studying these things in depth. Few will ever pursue advanced theological and biblical education in a Masters program, let alone a doctoral program. Because of this we often feel the pressure and the need to defend our Christian faith, whether that means knowing the historical evidence for the resurrection or the manuscript evidence for the reliability of the Scriptures or even the historical context for truly heinous things done in the name of Christ over the centuries.

I have good news for you: Peter's instructions in our text are not meant to fill you with dread. They are meant to encourage you to meditate on the living hope that is ours in the risen Christ. Rather than placing a burden on you, Peter's words ought to lift you and remove a great burden from you, for the truth is God does not *need* to be defended. He doesn't call us to defend him. He calls us to bear witness to him, and each one of us can do this. We're in 1 Peter 3, verse 13.

> 1 Pet 3:13 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.

1 Peter 3:13–17

They May See Your Good Deeds

We must remember what Peter is doing in this letter. He's writing to encourage the believers in Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia because they were suffering for their faith. They weren't being physically harmed. Rather, they were being slandered and maligned. They were losing friends and business partners. Because they refused to embrace the idols the culture worshiped, they were being shunned and despised.

Peter isn't merely encouraging the believers. He's instructing them how to remain faithful to the Lord in the midst of their suffering. Part of this faithfulness is a commitment to God's mission. The Lord is drawing men and women to himself from every tribe and language and people and nation. He's showing mercy to them and he uses means. The lives of those in the church are a significant means the Lord uses. Therefore they must remain faithfully present in their communities so their lives may be seen by others.

This is a difficult concept for many of us because we've been taught that our righteousness is personal and quite private. We keep it to ourselves. This is a fine line. Jesus warned in Matthew 6 about acts of piety like prayer and fasting and sharing with those in need. If we do those things *in order to be seen*, the Lord will not be honored by them. That is, if we pray or if we fast or if we give to the needy in order to impress others, to leave them with a sense of our greatness, God will not be honored.

This is why Jesus says to fast *in secret*. We know he cannot mean to hide the fact you're fasting from everyone because he also said to *pray* in secret. If fasting requires secrecy such that no one knows we're fasting, then prayer would also require such secrecy and we could not pray together, ever. That's clearly not what Jesus meant.

Rather, our aim in these works of righteousness ought to be to honor the Lord. We live in a such a way that others will see our good works, but we do not live in such a way so as to show off our righteousness to others. For example, we have a group of folk who often stay behind after family meals cleaning our kitchen and washing dishes and such. They don't close the door and hide what they're doing, but they also don't do it *because* people notice. They're serving the Lord and his people. This is what Jesus meant in Matthew 6. There's a significant difference between *showing off* your righteousness and *showing* your righteousness.

Peter expects these Asian believers to be seen by unbelievers. He expects their lives to intermingle. Some of that was out of their hands as many were being shunned, at least on some level. As they were able, however, they were to remain faithfully present in the world. They couldn't participate in every community activity, yet they could participate in many. Peter has been fleshing out his instruction in chapter 2 verse 12:

> [1 Pet 2:12] Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.
>
> 1 Peter 2:12

In order for those outside the church to see their good deeds, the followers of Jesus must be *among* those outside the church. You cannot be seen hiding inside these four walls. That

visibility takes place in the office, in the factory, in your driveway, in various community organizations. Peter does not want them to withdraw from the world because the world has, in a sense, withdrawn from them. When the world despises us, we must not despise the world. We must remain faithfully present.

This leads Peter to offer proverbial wisdom. He asks in verse 13 who is there to harm these believers if they are zealous for what is good. He means good works. If those who are in Christ pursue what is good in the world, who would harm them for it? Here he generally means things the world would recognize as good. Feeding the poor. Caring for the homeless. Helping folk with practical needs. Serving the community at a community event.

Generally speaking, everyone would acknowledge these are good things. *As a general rule*, such good works would not lead to suffering. Peter then acknowledges suffering may come anyway.

Suffering for Righteousness' Sake

In verse 14 he says, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed". He clearly doesn't anticipate suffering to be constant. It could happen. It often happens. Even as the world was turning against these believers, there would still be a recognition that their good works were good works and so suffering would be uneven rather than steady.

If such suffering were to come, Peter says the outcome will be their blessing. This word is different from the blessing they were to offer those who insulted them. Back in verse 9 he says when they are reviled, they shouldn't respond in the same manner, but instead should *bless* in return. That means to speak well of. In context, Peter was referring back to Jesus' instructions to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This is not that word.

The word "blessed" here has the idea of being fortunate or happy because of circumstances. When the Celtics win the Finals, I'm am *blessed*. When we have tacos for supper, I am blessed. When it doesn't snow, I am blessed. When my grandsons smile at me, I am blessed. I'm happy. I'm thankful for my circumstances. Peter says if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. You will be happy for your circumstances, and he would know! He remembers what happened many years earlier in Jerusalem.

> Acts 5:40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged
> them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 Then they left the
> presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor
> for the name.
>
> Acts 5:40–41

This was right in line with Jesus' own teaching! He said in Matthew 5, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).

This is the same word Peter uses. He uses it to indicate divine favor. When Jesus says those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, he ties it to their ultimate destiny. They are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and the evidence they are citizens is their suffering. He said in John 15 that a servant is not greater than his master; if they persecuted Jesus,

they will also persecute his followers. In other words, their suffering for righteousness' sake is evidence they are in Christ. This is why the apostles rejoiced they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Christ.

Notice, however, he says suffering *for righteousness' sake*. That doesn't include suffering because you're a jerk or because you're dishonest or because you're mean on social media. Being rude and unloving online and then being called out for it is *not* suffering for righteousness' sake.

Once again we see Peter's assumption that those who are in Christ are being transformed. To be faithfully present requires a transformation. This doesn't mean they're perfect and have somehow become sinless. It means they are on that path and are pursuing righteousness. This is why he adds that they must not fear those who cause their suffering, nor should they be troubled by them. Instead, they should honor Christ the Lord as holy.

Here Peter makes a profound statement about the Lord Jesus. He's citing the Greek text of Isaiah 8.

> Is 8:13 But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.
>
> Isaiah 8:13

Isaiah says to honor YHWH as holy; Peter cites this and says to honor Christ the Lord as holy. That is, one must recognize Jesus is the Lord God, and must therefore *honor* him as holy. The idea here is that one's regard for the Lord must never be merely intellectual. He says *in your hearts* honor him as holy. There must be a love for the Lord that goes beyond mere intellectual assent to the facts about him.

Genuine faith in the Lord is not an intellectual faith. It is a love for the Lord. The greatest commandment is, according to Jesus, to *love* the Lord your God. Your affections must be centered on him. If you truly comprehend who he is and what he has done for you and if you trust him with that knowledge, love for him is the inevitable result.

Be Ready to Give a Defense

Peter continues his thought and summarizes the point of his letter in verse 15. As one suffers for righteousness' sake, that is, while living a righteous life, and as one is honoring Christ as Lord with love, one should always be ready to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in you.

The word for defense is the word "apology". We spoke briefly about apologetics last week, which is simply a defense of the Christian faith. Peter says to always be ready to respond to those who ask you for a reason for the hope that is in you. There are a number of observations we need to make here.

First, Peter assumes there will be such questions. In fact, these questions are central to his understanding of the church's missional role in the world. Interestingly, the apostle Paul also expected questions like these!

> Col 4:5 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.

Colossians 4:5–6

Notice Paul's focus on words as well. *How* we speak is as important as *what* we speak. The greater emphasis, however, is on our conduct. The idea of "walking" has to do with our manner of life. Our manner of life is significant for the gospel, so Paul agrees with Peter: we must know how we ought to answer each person.

Second, Peter assumes such an outsider to the Christian faith will see the hope that is in you in order to ask for the reason for it. This is why their lives must be characterized by good works and love for neighbor. If unbelievers cannot see the hope that is in you, why in the world would they even think to ask about it? The implication is clear: you must be walking in hope.

What did he say in the very beginning of this letter? God has "caused us to be born again *to a living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3). Pete shared a quote with the men of the church recently that really captures this idea.

> To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda or even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist.
>
> Cardinal Suhard, archbishop of Paris

More specifically, would your life make sense if Jesus had not been raised from the dead? Would the faithfulness you exhibit and the sacrifices you make and the suffering you endure make sense if Jesus had not walked out of his tomb? There's a reason Paul told the Corinthians that if Christ has not been raised then their faith is futile and you are still in your sins. He has been raised, however, which guarantees our resurrection, which makes any loss we can experience in this life worthwhile for the promise of what is to come.

Peter also assumes what is being defended is the reason for hope, not the individual believer's reputation. Peter doesn't mean we should be ready to defend ourselves, our honor, our reputation against the slander thrown at believers in Jesus. If we are suffering for righteousness' sake and not because we're idiots, then we don't need to defend ourselves. We need to defend the reason for our hope. Our hope is the Lord Jesus. When people ask for the reason for our hope, we point them to Jesus.

This is why they must respond with gentleness and respect. He assumes they are not suffering because they're rude or judgmental or angry but because they are faithful to the Lord Jesus, which means they do not go along with the sins of the culture. It also means, then, they do not stand against the culture with finger wagging judgment! Gentleness and respect prevents a judgmental posture toward those who do not know Christ. To truly grasp the gospel is to recognize how great the Lord is in showing *us* mercy. He does not stand over us wagging his finger; why should we adopt a posture toward others that the Lord does not have?

Finally, Peter assumes they will have a good conscience, which is to say they must walk the walk before they talk the talk. As Cyprian said, we do not speak great things, but we *live* them. It would be really difficult to tell others about the mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus while you wantonly and with utter disregard for holiness continue to wallow in your sins. Again, Peter is not expecting sinlessness, but he is expecting a striving for holiness. He's expecting you to *struggle* with sin, not give in time and time again.

In this context the believers in these five provinces should always be ready to answer unbelievers when they ask why they live the way they live.

Application

Peter shifts his focus from the present to the day of judgment, just as he did in chapter 2 verse 12. There he referred to "the day of visitation". Unbelievers who slander believers will see their good works and glorify God on the day of judgment. That is, they will be forced to acknowledge the goodness of God on display in the lives of his people.

This is why it's imperative that we live good lives. Peter says that having a good conscience, which is to say, living as we should, even though we're slandered for our good behavior in Christ those who revile us will be put to shame. That is, their lies will be revealed. What this really means is God will be vindicated. God is the one who caused them to be born again. God is the one who instilled in them a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. God is the one who has placed them where they are and instructed them to remain faithfully present. The outcome of their life of faithfulness will be God's glory.

For this reason our response to slander ought to be gentle and respectful. We do not repay in kind. We do not hurl insults back, however justified they may seem. Remember Peter's instructions to slaves. Slaves, the lowest on the social ladder, those with no power in the world, were to be like Jesus who did not return insults for insults, and if anyone were justified in speaking truth directly, it would be Jesus.

Peter told them they represented the Lord Jesus himself! They had no power, no control, no real influence in the world yet Peter told these slaves they had tremendous gospel influence simply by living faithfully for the Lord. He told wives the same thing. Though they had more power, more control, more influence in the world, they were not on top, so to speak. They weren't slaves, but their lives were largely dependent on the men in their lives, whether their fathers or their husbands. He didn't need to remind husbands of their power, their control, their real influence in the world. Instead, he warned them against abusing this power and control and influence, even telling them their prayers would be hindered if they did not represent the Lord Jesus accurately by *serving others*.

Do you see Peter's emphasis here? Over and over again he warns the believers in Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia against using their tongues for evil. They had to put away all malice and deceit and slander in chapter 2. These are sins of the tongue. They were a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession that they *may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*. To that end they must honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, and honor the emperor.

They must not repay insult with insult or reviling with reviling, for the Lord Jesus did not do this. He suffered *the most* injustice in this world and had the most right to respond appropriately, yet he kept silent. He says wives, through their respectful behavior, may win their husbands to Christ without a word. He broadens this to everyone, for none should repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but instead should love their enemies and pray for those who persecute you. By praying for their salvation, you bless those who speak evil of you.

Do you see Peter's emphasis here? Faithful presence in a land that is foreign and hostile to the Lord Jesus does not begin with our words. Rather, it begins with our quiet manner of life, one that does not seek to disrupt those around us but seeks instead to love our neighbors as ourselves, to remain faithful to the Lord even in the midst of suffering. Church, this is how we bear witness to the world! To bear witness *to* the world, we must first remain faithfully present *in* the world. Paul Achtemeier puts it succinctly:

> Cultural isolation is not to be the route taken by the Christian community. It is to live its life openly in the midst of the unbelieving world, and just as openly to be prepared to explain the reasons for it.
>
> Paul J. Achtemeier, Hermeneia

Peter says to always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. New City, this is the payoff! This is the big moment for us! Peter does not mean you must have the "Romans Road" memorized—in the original King James English, of course. Peter does not mean you must be prepared to explain the significance of Papyrus 52, which is the earliest manuscript of the Gospel of John from the second century. Peter does not mean you must be prepared to give a two-minute presentation of the Kālam Cosmological Argument so as to prove the existence of God. Peter does not mean you must be ready with a pithy and compelling theodicy to answer why God is both good and allows evil in the world. Peter does not mean you need to be ready to explain the simple logic that if the Qur'ān is true, then it's false, as Wes Huff does so well.

I saw a website just this morning with a post titled "65 Apologetics Questions Every Parent Needs to Learn to Answer", and I realized how badly I've failed as a parent—except that is not what Peter means. Look closely at verse 15 again.

> 1 Pet 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,~~
>
> 1 Peter 3:15

What is the assignment here? Peter has been instructing believers to live faithfully among non-Christians, with the expectation that this faithfulness will result in gospel interactions. As Christians continue to relate to non-Christians, offering them sincere friendship, they begin to notice the difference in Christians. This difference is not in what they think of New Testament manuscripts, though that question may come up. This difference is not in what they think about the origins of the universe, though that question may come up. This difference is not in what they think about the nature of evil in this world, though that question may come up. Peter says to be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you *for a reason for the hope that is in you.*

The question Peter assumes will come is this: why are you so different? Why doesn't the suffering you experience crush you? How are able to navigate an abusive husband who left you? How can you deal with that cancer diagnosis without despair? How can you smile when you've lost your job? Why are you not overcome with bitterness at all you've lost? Whether it's family drama or personal rejection or financial ruin or the difficulty of a crying

baby or the profound disappointments life can throw at us, often by the truckload, why is your response *so filled with hope*?

There may come a time a coworker asks you if you really believe God created the world in six days. There may come a time when a skeptic mocks you for believing the Bible is the word of God. There may come a time when your neighbor, going through something horrific, demands to know how God can be good when he allows so much suffering in this world.

If they're asking you, you have time to find the answer to those difficult questions. It is extremely unlikely that you will be in an elevator and need that two-minute elevator pitch. The question from your coworker or your neighbor comes in the context of a relationship. It's okay to say, "That's a good question. I'll get back to you." When Peter says to always be ready to give a *defense*, this is not what he means. The defense is an explanation of the reason for the hope that is in you.

In those situations you're being asked for your testimony. The unbeliever, asking you why you are filled with hope, is really asking what it is that God has done in you to make you this way.

Church, here is my hope: Jesus Christ walked out of his tomb on the third day, victorious over death. If he can do that, I can endure anything he allows to come my way. This is the reason for the hope that is in me, this living hope given me in Christ when God caused me to be born again. God continues to guard me through faith on account of this *living* hope.

The truth is I can face whatever this life brings in hope because of who God is. I once was lost in darkest night, yet thought I knew the way. The sin that promised joy and life had led me to the grave. I had no hope that God would own a rebel to his will, and if he had not loved me first, I would refuse him still. But as I ran my hellbound race indifferent to the cost, he looked upon my helpless state and led me to the cross. And there, on the cross, I beheld God's love displayed: he suffered in my place. He bore the wrath reserved for me. Now all I know is grace.

When my health suffers all I know is grace. When my relationships are painful all I know is grace. When the money runs out before the bills stop coming all I know is grace. When the medical tests aren't good all I know is grace. When I'm unable to quiet the voices in my head all I know is grace. When my career hopes and dreams come crashing down all I know is grace. When the season of Lent confronts me with all my profound inadequacies and I feel like giving up all I know is grace. When I'm tired and weary and not even a five-hour energy can boost me all I know is grace. When the news reports of profound evil in government officials and wealthy and powerful men in this world threaten to overwhelm me all I know is grace.

I may not be aware of it in the moment. Yet every moment is an experience of God's grace in my life. This is the reason for the hope that is in me. Church, that is your hope, too. Whether it's babies that cry all night long or dear friends who suddenly walk away or children who make painful choices or knees that give out or the heartaches that come with life in a fallen world, all you and I know is grace.

When people ask you for a reason for the hope that is in you, always be ready to give an answer. Hope has a name. That name is Jesus.