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A Reason to Witness

Kevin Freeman / General

1 Peter / Perseverance; Persecution; Evangelism / 1 Peter 3:13–22

Peter's first letter reminds Christians who experience hostility for their faith to remember the hope they have in salvation and stay focused on living for Jesus now. In today's passage we learn how this hostility actually provides opportunities for witnessing and faith strengthening. Physical hostility creates spiritual opportunity!

Diamond formation

In a couple weeks, Karen and I will celebrate fourteen years of marriage. That also means November will mark fifteen years since I proposed to her. I used a family heirloom engagement stone set in a new ring for our engagement. Karen still has that ring, though she does not still have her wedding band. That was lost six years ago during our move to a new home. After "rescuing" both of these rings from a nightstand before moving it, I put the rings in my pocket. At the end of the day, only the engagement ring emerged. I still sometimes look for that ring. On quiet August nights, I swear I can faintly hear the tinkling of a lost diamond wedding band.

The formation of diamonds is fascinating. According to geology.com, virtually all the diamonds sold by jewelers were formed deep within the mantle of the earth ninety miles or more beneath the earth's crust. This pressure, combined with temperatures in excess of two thousand degrees Fahrenheit, transforms carbon deposits into diamonds. Then, a volcanic eruption brings the diamond to the surface. Many people think coal is the source of diamonds, but apparently the only time coal was used in diamond forming was in the movie *Superman 3*, when Superman crushed a piece of coal in his bare hand to simulate the pressure and then cut the resulting diamond facets with his heat vision.

The hostile environment in which diamonds are formed reminds me of the hostile environment in which our faith is formed. Throughout the centuries Christians have experienced the intense pressure and heat of living out their faith in a world hostile to the things of God.

Today, religious persecution is experienced at higher levels than at any other time in history. When we look back at historic persecution of Christians, that's saying something. Our experience of relative religious freedom is a small cocoon among many other nations where Christians and those of other faiths are persecuted. We are outliers. Even so, hostility is on the rise even in our culture. This should actually be expected.

The Apostle Peter wrote about this in 1 Peter 3:13-22. Please turn them in your Bibles. Peter explained that the hostility believers face and called them to stay faithful in the face of it. Why?

Because,

Hostility creates opportunity. It is how diamonds are formed. Our heavenly Father wants to use even hostility to accomplish His good purposes for our lives.

Let's discover how God does this by reading 1 Peter 3:13-22.

1 Peter 3:13–22 ESV

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 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, 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.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Setting the stage a bit, Peter has just urged the believers to stay faithful and reminded them that God actively looks to bless the righteous while opposing those who do evil. Then in verse 13 he asks,

1 Peter 3:13 ESV

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?

Because we know these believers were facing hostility already, we realize Peter wasn't saying that Christians living out their faith would be left alone. Instead, his message was like Paul's in Romans 8:31.

Romans 8:31 ESV

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

Hostility will come, but we serve a God who is greater than any adversary.

1.) Stand out : Hostility brings contrast

So how does hostility create opportunity? It first happens when we **Stand out. Hostility brings contrast from the world around us.** Peter does not simply ask who will bring harm if we are good. He says if we *"are zealous for what is good."* Any of us can look around and say that we do good. We are pretty good, right? But adding the word *zealous* means we are enthusiasts for what is good. These are people who find joy and energy in actively pursuing righteous living. Some, however, have a more lackadaisical approach to doing what is good.

Do Christians today blend in more than they stand out?

We have a tendency to reduce righteous living to good manners, politeness, and civility. This isn't bad, but it can be bland. If my neighbor, who does not believe in Christ, can have virtually the same moral lifestyle as I do, then I'm not standing out. The enthusiast stands out. The enthusiast devotes time and more time and energy and more energy to the cause. The enthusiast takes risks and exudes passion and discusses righteous living. The enthusiast is not merely concerned with avoiding the bad but with embracing the good. The enthusiast is zealous to be a force for good.

How zealous are you for what is good?

You can find the zealous sports fans, the true fanatics. They'll go to a subzero football game shirtless and with painted chests and faces. They'll stay until the last second no matter what, and their voices will be hoarse. Then there are others in the stands who aren't wearing team colors, who rarely cheer with more than a polite golf clap, and who leave you not quite sure what team they are cheering. That's all well and good in the world of sports, but when it comes to our faith, people should not have to look hard to know which team we're on. We've got to stand out.

John Lewis stood out in 1965. As he led the civil rights march from Selma, Alabama, he was struck in the head with billy clubs by officers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. His skull was fractured in an incident that became known as Bloody Sunday. Lewis's righteous cause led him to stand out. Just recently a pickup truck driver in Portland was attacked by rioters. After crashing his truck, he, too, was physically beaten and needed hospitalization. The facts are not all known in this case, but a couple reports have stated this driver was in the area to help someone who was a robbery victim by the looters. If this is the case, his good intentions put him in a position where he, too, stood out.

Kenny Luck describes the value of standing out like this in his men's ministry book, *Sleeping Giant*. He describes what kind of men are needed in the church and compares them to diamonds. Luck explains that when you go to a jeweler and are looking at a diamond, every jeweler places the diamond on black velvet cloth. Why? So the gem stands out. When it stands out, you notice its features, brilliance, and beauty. The backdrop is perfect for appreciating the quality of the diamond.

This is what Paul was getting at in Philippians 2:15, when he wrote,

Philippians 2:15 ESV

that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,

God has called us to stand out, and Peter reminds us that the hostile backdrop brings blessing. He writes, ***“But even - or so even - if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed”*** (v 14). That blessing is the joy of reflecting the radiance of Christ in the midst of hostility, as we stand out from the world.

2.) Stand up : Hostility enables your witness

We are not only called to stand out. We are told to **stand up. Hostility enables your witness.** That may seem counterintuitive. Many of us prefer to avoid conflict and don't enjoy that uncomfortable feeling in the pit of our stomach when we sense tension. But Peter reminds us not to shrink back in fear. In fact, he provides three keys to stand up, to allow our Christian witness to shine amid the conflict: Don't fear, honor Christ, and share hope.

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Don't fear

He tells us first to not fear those who would cause harm, to not even be troubled by the threat of suffering. The word *suffer* keeps popping up. The Greek term is *pascho*, which is where we get the term *passion*. It describes the passion of Christ - his crucifixion - in the Gospels. But in no New Testament book is *pascho* used more than in this letter from Peter. Twelve times he mentions it, referring to the suffering that Christians endure for their faith. So Peter is definitely not sugar-coating the situation, yet he tells us not to let it bother us.

Fear causes us to shrink back, to mask our faith, to be less enthusiastic in our pursuit of right living. Instead of letting our light shine, as Jesus commands, we are more likely to hide it under a bushel. Fear and worry keep us from standing up.

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Honor Christ

Instead of fearing, we are told to honor Christ. Verse 15 begins, ***“but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy.”*** This involves setting Christ apart as the sole object of devotion in our hearts. A preoccupation with potential fallout for our faith limits our ability to revere Christ in this way.

What fears prevent your ability to honor Christ as holy in your heart?

Share hope

The third key to standing up amid hostility is to share hope. More specifically, we are told to always be ***“prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you”*** (v 15). That defense, Peter describes, is akin to a witness stand defense. He uses the term that we call apologetics, or defending the faith. I think Peter would agree that speaking as a witness can happen outside of a defense trial, too. We can explain why we follow Christ when talking to a friend at the park, to a neighbor in our driveway, or to a co-worker during lunch. If we can stand up and share our faith when on trial, we can also share it over coffee.

Many of us, when challenged to share our faith, respond by saying we aren't ready. Believers say things like, “I'm just not good at talking about my faith,” or, “I stumble over my words and don't know what to say,” or, “Witnessing isn't my gift.” If you've ever felt like this, you're in the majority. So let me remind you that Peter is commanding us to do one thing: be prepared to explain or defend why our hope is in Christ. Be prepared. Yes, there are other passages in the Bible that give an even stronger command to share our faith, but here we see that sharing as a response when we are questioned. Be prepared. Peter would not say a thing like this lightly. This word for prepared is the same exact word he spoke to Jesus the night before the crucifixion. He told Jesus, ***“I'm ready - I'm prepared - to go to prison with you or die for you, Jesus”*** (Lk 22:33). But he wasn't ready. Instead of standing up, Peter folded and denied Christ. Only later did Peter learn to stand and defend his faith well. The one who experienced some bitter failure on this front also received forgiveness and later defended the hope in Christ.

You are more prepared to explain your hope than you may realize.

Christian, if you have the hope of Christ in you - and you do; if you have the promise of the resurrection one day - and you do; if you have the guarantee of one day having full freedom from the trials of this world - and you do - then you are prepared to talk about it. Peter says to be prepared to defend the hope *IN YOU*. Your personal story is your starting point. The more you relate it, the easier it will be. But you can start there. The more you know God's Word, the more you can bolster your story, but you can start with YOUR STORY.

3.) Stand firm: Hostility builds faith

Our zeal for right living allows us to stand out. Our readiness to share about our hope in Christ without fear is how we stand up. Finally, we are to **stand firm, because hostility builds faith**. How does it? We find ourselves walking the path of Christ. 1 Peter 3:18 says,

1 Peter 3:18 ESV

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,

We also can suffer as the righteous for the unrighteous, so that we might be used to bring some to God. The life-giving Spirit in Christ resides in us, too.

Although we were once sinners, we have been declared righteous by God through our faith in Christ and his shed blood on our behalf. As we walk in His footsteps, we become willing to stand out as he did, suffer as he did, and point people toward forgiveness, as he did.

That is the point of all of this. That we glorify God and in good conscience point others toward Him. Hostility builds faith by leading us through the same suffering and glory Christ endured. Our passage next week will underscore this point even more.

Tricky Texts?

Before we turn away from this passage, we need to acknowledge a few verses that have historically caused some head scratching among believers. Pastor Mark wisely makes sure to do some verse by verse series through various books of the Bible each year, and this is good because it forces us to think through some of these without simply skipping over the tricky bits.

The final verses in our passage read that Jesus was ***“put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,”*** 1 Peter 3:19-22

1 Peter 3:19–22 ESV

in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Some wonder if Jesus preached the gospel to some imprisoned souls from the time of Noah. Some also look at the verses on baptism and conclude that baptism can save.

Related to the first question, whatever happened is not a gospel proclamation to spirits. A bit of a spoiler alert here, but next week’s passage has a tricky verse that *does* mention the gospel shared with those who are dead. Setting that aside for now, this proclamation here is not sharing the gospel. So what to people make of it? Some do believe that between Jesus’s death and resurrection, he made a proclamation of his finished work to a specific group of spirits from during the time of Noah. With humility, I will suggest an alternate explanation. This explanation recognizes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ proclaiming the truth of the Messiah long ago. 1 Peter 1:10-11 supports this concept. It references Old Testament prophets who prophesied through the Spirit of Christ in them. The same Spirit of Christ spoke through Noah’s prophetic preaching during the days before the flood. That is why in his next letter, Peter refers to Noah as a herald of righteousness. That is exactly what we become when we are defending the hope of Jesus related to our own zeal for righteousness.

God’s life-giving Spirit has been actively at work through God’s servants throughout all of humanity. Hostility has been a faith-building tool for millennia.

So I advocate that Peter is not going off on a rabbit trail that leaves us in confusion. He is instead creating a continuity of thought that God’s life-giving Spirit has been actively at work through God’s servants throughout all of humanity. And if Noah could spend decades attempting to persuade people to come to faith - remember his zealous good work involved a giant boat stuck on land, which must have led to a lot of faith-defending explanations - If Noah could stand up in that environment, we certainly can in ours. Hostility has been a faith-building tool for millennia.

The second issue that comes is the explanation that baptism now saves us. Based on other, clear teachings in the Bible, we know that no work of our own could ever save us from our sin. Titus 3:5 says,

Baptism that saves? No work of our own could ever save us from our sin.

Titus 3:5 ESV

he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,

And this is actually what Peter says. It is not the water washing - the immersion that removes dirt. It is the appeal to God for a good conscience. Salvation is in our faith appeal. Noah and his family made that appeal by being in the ark in faith of God's rescue. Peter's wording reflects how first century Christians were baptized: immediately. They would have difficulty finding a category for someone who places faith in Christ and then waits around for a few years to decide whether to follow through with the next commanded step of baptism. Outside of a parental decision that their kids wait a bit to ensure they truly understand their faith decision, I agree. It's better to be baptized sooner rather than later. The moment we place our faith in Christ to save us from our sins, several things happen. One of those things is referred to as the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts mentions a few of the odd times when God delayed this to help the Church see what He was doing. So Peter refers to this Spirit-indwelling baptism, which is why he says it is not the immersion event but rather the conversion event.

Diamonds, real or lab-grown

As we close, I'll share that there is another way to get diamonds. It's by creating them in a lab. Technology is getting better with these, so maybe lab-grown diamonds will one day be how we get them. In my opinion, diamonds from a lab just aren't the same as diamonds forged beneath the earth. Historically, these lab diamonds have only been useful as coatings for things like saw blades, to make them more durable, while the gems in jewelry come from the depths of the earth.

In our Christian life, we can simulate a diamond experience. We can be sort of zealous for doing right when we find it convenient. We can stand up for our faith when we are around each other but not in those moments when it matters most. We can take a more casual approach that does not quite follow in the footsteps of Jesus's suffering and so does not truly strengthen our faith. Many Christians settle for a poor substitution rather than the real thing. Which do you want to be, a simulation or the real thing?

Would you rather be a tool or a jewel?

As we pursue following Christ and expose ourselves to potential hostility and even suffering, we find ourselves being formed in his likeness and able to reflect the incredible facets of his glory. It is the promise of our hope, and there are no shortcuts. Hostility creates spiritual opportunity.

If you have a decision you would like to make in response to this message, I would love to hear about it. Perhaps you have been challenged to be more enthusiastic in your pursuit of right living, or to be more bold about your witness. Maybe today is the day that you begin the process by calling out to God to save you from your sins, based on the completed work of Jesus for you. Consider what decision God is leading you to make in response.