Lesson 8

1 Peter 3:13-22

Do Not Fear Suffering for Doing What Is Right (vv. 13-14)

Peter continues the theme that has been running throughout this section of the letter. Believers are called to do what is right before God even when doing what is right creates difficulty for them. One of the things that separates Christians from the world around us is that we believe good and evil are not ultimately determined by culture, popular opinion, or our personal feelings. God Himself determines what is good because goodness is rooted in His character. Psalm 119:68 describes God not merely as someone who does good, but as One who is good.

This means that there will inevitably be times when what God calls good and what the world calls good come into conflict. People who are living outside of God's will, or who are hostile toward God Himself, may not approve of the things Christians believe or the way Christians live. Peter has already prepared his readers for this throughout the letter. Faithfulness to God will not always earn the approval of the people around us.

Peter's response is that believers should not live in fear of those people. That does not mean their actions cannot hurt us. People can reject us, insult us, exclude us, or even cause physical harm. Peter's point is that their judgment is never the final judgment. God alone has ultimate authority over us. Other people can form opinions about us, but only God sees our hearts perfectly and judges with complete righteousness.

Because of that, Christians do not need to build their lives around avoiding the disapproval of others. We should certainly examine ourselves when we are criticized, but ultimately our concern should be whether we are doing what is right before God. If God is good and if He is the final Judge, then His approval must carry more weight than the approval of the world.

This is why Peter can call someone blessed even when they suffer for righteousness. The world may look at suffering and conclude that the believer has lost. Peter says that if the suffering comes because of faithfulness to Christ, the believer has not ultimately lost anything that matters most.

Be Ready to Defend the Hope You Have in Christ (vv. 15-17)

Peter does not merely tell believers what not to fear. Instead, he tells them where their attention should be. Rather than allowing fear of other people to rule their hearts, they are to honor Christ as Lord in their hearts. The answer to the fear of man is a greater reverence for Christ.

Peter then tells believers to always be prepared to give a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in them. One of the important things to notice is that Peter assumes Christians will possess a hope that is noticeable. There should be something different about the way believers respond to suffering, uncertainty, disappointment, and fear that causes people around them to wonder what makes them different.

This means Christian witness involves both our lives and our words. Our lives should create opportunities for the gospel, but when those opportunities come, we should also be prepared to explain why we have hope. It is not enough merely to say that we are Christians. We should be able to explain that our hope rests in the death, resurrection, promises, and future return of Jesus Christ.

Peter also tells believers how this defense should be given: with gentleness and respect. The goal is not to win an argument or humiliate someone who disagrees with us. We are trying to point people toward Christ. We can speak truth clearly without becoming arrogant, hostile, or disrespectful.

Peter again connects this witness with honorable conduct. Christians should live with a clear conscience so that when accusations are made against them, those accusations are exposed as false by the way they actually live. This fits the theme Peter has repeated throughout the letter: our conduct should support the gospel we proclaim.

There is also an important distinction Peter makes in verse 17. If suffering comes, it is far better to suffer because we have faithfully done good than because we have done evil. Christians should never confuse the consequences of foolish or sinful actions with persecution. If we suffer, Peter wants our suffering to come from faithfulness to Christ.

Remember Christ's Victory Through Suffering (vv. 18-20)

As Peter has repeatedly done throughout the letter, when the subject of suffering becomes difficult, he points believers back to Christ. Jesus becomes the ultimate answer to the question of whether suffering means that God has lost control.

Christ Himself suffered while doing what was right. In fact, Jesus was perfectly righteous and still suffered unjustly. Yet His suffering did not represent defeat. God used the suffering of Christ to accomplish the greatest victory in history.

Peter reminds believers that Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God. This is important because Jesus is not merely our example in suffering. He is our Savior. We do not simply look at Jesus and say, "He suffered well, so I should suffer well." We look at Jesus and recognize that His suffering accomplished our salvation.

Christ took the place of unrighteous people so that those people could be brought into relationship with God. The cross looked like defeat to the world, but through the cross God was accomplishing redemption. What appeared to be Christ's greatest humiliation became the means of His victory.

That should completely change the way believers think about their own suffering. We may not always understand what God is doing through our circumstances, but the cross reminds us that God is capable of accomplishing His purposes even through circumstances that appear completely hopeless. If God could bring salvation through the suffering and death of Christ, then we should be careful about assuming that suffering means God has stopped working in our lives.

The difficult language in verses 19-20 has produced several interpretations among faithful Christians, particularly concerning Christ's proclamation to the "spirits in prison." We do not need to pretend that every detail is simple. But Peter's larger point in the passage is much clearer: Christ suffered, Christ was vindicated, and Christ is victorious. The suffering believer is following a Savior whose suffering ended not in defeat but in triumph.

Find Confidence in the Risen and Reigning Christ (vv. 21-22)

Peter concludes the section by pointing believers toward the resurrection and reign of Jesus. This is where the entire argument has been heading. Christ suffered, but suffering did not have the final word. Christ died, but death did not have the final word. Jesus rose from the dead and now reigns at the right hand of God.

The ultimate confidence of the believer is therefore not in our ability to avoid suffering. It is not in our ability to convince everyone that Christianity is true. It is not even in our ability to remain strong when circumstances become difficult. Our confidence rests in the victorious Jesus Christ.

Jesus is now at the right hand of God, and Peter says that angels, authorities, and powers have been subjected to Him. This is an enormous encouragement to believers who may feel powerless in the world. The people opposing them may appear powerful, but they do not have ultimate authority. Christ does.

This brings Peter's argument full circle. At the beginning of the passage he tells believers not to fear those who oppose them. At the end he gives the ultimate reason why: **Jesus Christ reigns.**

Because Christ reigns, we can do what is right without being controlled by fear. Because Christ reigns, we can speak about our hope with gentleness and confidence. Because Christ reigns, suffering does not mean God has abandoned us. And because Christ reigns, Christians already know how the story ultimately ends.