

## WHEN YOU SUFFER FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE

*3* <sup>13</sup>Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is right? <sup>14</sup>But if, indeed, you should suffer for the cause of righteousness, you are blessed! [It is written,] "Do not fear their terror, nor be troubled." <sup>15</sup>On the contrary, "sanctify the LORD," Christ, in your hearts; being always prepared with an answer for everyone who asks you for an explanation concerning the hope that is in you. <sup>16</sup>But [do so] with humility and respect, maintaining a good conscience, so that [by the very thing] for which you are slandered, those who insult your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup>It is better, if it be the will of God, to suffer for doing what is right, than for doing what is wrong; <sup>18</sup>because Christ also died for sins once for all, the Righteous One for the unrighteous ones, so that he might bring us to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive [again] by the Spirit. <sup>19</sup>By [the Spirit] he also went and preached to the spirits who [now] are bound; <sup>20</sup>[namely,] those who were disobedient back when the patience of God was waiting in the days of Noah, while the ark was being built. By means of [that ark] a few, that is, [only] eight souls, were brought safely through the water. (1 Pet. 3:13-20)

### **Introduction**

All who worked for the railroad knew that a strike was inevitable. An undercurrent of bitterness about wage demands and working conditions had flowed through the company for some time. A confrontation between the union and the company had to come sooner or later. Sure enough, it did.

For Don, a Christian who for 15 years had worked as a fireman for the railroad, it posed a dilemma because it was an illegal wildcat strike. He was torn between doing what was right or facing the wrath of his striking co-workers. Recognizing his duty to honor the contract that made it illegal for the workers to stage any unauthorized strike activity, Don continued to work even though he knew he would suffer for righteousness' sake. In a few weeks the dispute between management and labor was settled, and the striking workers returned to their jobs. When they did, Don had to face their rejection, their cold stares, their bitter remarks.

Here is an example of a man who suffered for righteousness' sake—who suffered for his Christ-like conduct in doing what was right. But at the same time, Don could testify to the indescribable sense of peace and strength he experienced as Christ stood beside him. He writes, "I can't explain the feeling of peace and strength that flowed through me as I turned to face those men and go to work. I knew now that I could face any challenge they might want to add ... more alone than I'd ever been in my life, I was aware that Jesus stood with me." (*POWER*, 5/4/86, pp. 2-ff.)

As Christians, we can expect to encounter mistreatment as we walk with Christ and apply our Christian principles to our everyday lives. When we encounter mistreatment for righteousness' sake, may we respond to it in the way God prescribes?

## I. When You Suffer for Righteousness' Sake, ...Honor Christ as Lord

In verses 14-15 Peter is alluding to the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah: *"Jehovah of hosts, him you must sanctify; he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread—<sup>14</sup>and he will be a sanctuary [for you]"* (Isa. 8:13-14a.) The Old Testament people of Israel were facing imminent invasion by the terrible Assyrian armies, who were feared throughout the ancient Near East. The reaction of the people of Israel was terror and despair. But the command that came from the LORD to Isaiah is as follows: *"Jehovah of hosts, him you must sanctify; he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread."* That is to say, recognize the LORD as being the proper object of our fear, fear Him above all others. Let your fear of the LORD—rather than your fear of men, no matter how fearsome they may be—govern your life and dictate your conduct. Following upon the command issued to Isaiah comes the sure promise that the LORD will be *"a sanctuary [for you]."* The LORD shall be a place of refuge, a safe and secure spiritual shelter for those who fear Him, note Psalm 34:7, *"The angel of Jehovah encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them."*

Peter now applies this passage of Scripture to us as New Testament believers: *"sanctify the LORD, Christ, in your hearts."* We are to honor Christ above all others—better that we should offend men in our obedience and faithfulness to Christ than acquiesce to men at the cost of offending Christ. We must let our holy fear of Christ dictate and govern our conduct, rather than an unholy fear of men. The Apostle Paul instructs the suffering Philippian church as follows:

*Live your life only in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that if I come and see you—or if I remain absent what I will hear about you is that you are standing firm in one spirit, and with one soul are contending for the faith of the gospel,<sup>28</sup> and that you are in no way being intimidated by those who oppose you.* (Phil. 1:27-28a)

To conduct ourselves in a Christ-honoring way we must rely upon the Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts: *"God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline"* (2 Tim. 1:7.)

As Christians, we are called and commanded by Christ to live consistent Christ-honoring lives. As we do so, we are not guaranteed an exemption from opposition or suffering; on the contrary, *"everyone who would live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution"* (2 Tim. 3:12.) But we are guaranteed the assurance of Christ to sustain us and carry us through: *"surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matt. 28:20b.) Paul, in the midst of his trials, experienced the Lord's faithfulness: *"the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength ... <sup>18</sup>The Lord will rescue me out of every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen"* (2 Tim. 4:17-18.) Furthermore, we are guaranteed the assurance of Christ's blessing:

*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:11-12)*

When we suffer for righteousness' sake, let us be faithful to honor Christ as Lord.

## **II. When You Suffer for Righteousness' Sake, ...Be Prepared to Give a Reason for Your Hope**

The Apostle Peter tells us that we should be ready at all times to give "*an answer,*" literally, an "apology," for our Christian faith. The Greek term (ἀπολογία) means to defend and explain our beliefs and practices as a Christian, not to apologize for our beliefs. To be able to give such an apology, (i.e.; defense of the faith,) implies that we know what we believe and are so convinced and committed to our Christian beliefs that they are being expressed in our everyday conduct and are making a noticeable difference in our lives.

As Christians, we are to be ready to give a reason for "*the hope*" that is in us. The Christian life is characterized by hope; as Peter had previously instructed these Christians: "*Therefore, focusing your mind and being [spiritually] sober, set your hope squarely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ*" (1 Pet. 1:13.) In his second epistle, Peter will further elaborate on the Christian's hope: "*according to his promise, we are watching for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness resides*" (2 Pet. 3:13.) The Christian's life of hope is in striking contrast to the despair of the world. The Apostle Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians of their state prior to their conversion to Christ: "*[I say, remember] that you were at that time without Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and [being] without God in the world*" (Eph. 2:12.)

We as Christians are to express our hope and give our "apology" with humility and respect. On the one hand, we are not to be self-effacing, timid and intimidated; but on the other hand, we are not to be obnoxious and arrogant and haughty. Let us note the counsel and exhortation of the Apostle Paul; he tells us that as Christians, we are to be found "*speaking the truth in love*" (Eph. 4:15.)

Furthermore, we are to testify to our Christian hope and give our Christian "apology" with a good conscience. A good, or clear conscience, will give moral strength and authority. Note Deuteronomy 11:8,22,25, a passage that teaches us that true moral strength is derived from a life of obedience to the LORD's commandments:

*Observe therefore all the commandments I am giving you today, so that you may have the strength to go in and take over the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess ... <sup>22</sup>If you carefully observe all these*

*commandments I am giving you to follow—to love Jehovah your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him ... <sup>25</sup>No man will be able to stand against you. Jehovah your God, as he promised you, will put the terror and fear of you on the whole land, wherever you go. (Deut. 11:8,22,25)*

Conversely, a guilty conscience will cause one to shrivel up in silence: *“The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion”* (Prov. 28:1.) Note: Our testimony in word and life must compliment each other. Our words must define our life, explaining why we live as we do. Our life must give credibility to our words, demonstrating that our words are sincere and true. As Proverbs instructs us: *“Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach, <sup>18</sup>for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips”* (Prov. 22:17-18.) The Word of God should be received by our ears, it should penetrate into our hearts, it should circulate throughout our lives, and should then express itself in our speech. The Word of God should be so much a part of us that it becomes a natural part of our “conversation,” expressing itself in the way we think, the way we act, and the way we speak.

When we suffer for righteousness’ sake, let us be prepared to give a reason for our Christian hope.

### **III. When You Suffer for Righteousness’ Sake, ...Remember Christ’s Example**

Peter holds out before us the distinct possibility—even the certain fact—that our Christ-like conduct will be met with opposition, bear in mind 1 Peter 4:3-4,

*You have spent enough time in the past doing what the Gentiles choose to do: living for debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable idolatry. <sup>4</sup>Engaged in such a lifestyle, they think that it is strange for you not to plunge with them into the same flood of dissolute living, so they malign you. (1 Pet. 4:3-4)*

Peter points us to the example of Christ our Savior; he reminds us that Christ suffered: *“Christ also died for sins once for all, the Righteous One for the unrighteous ones, so that he might bring us to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive [again] by the Spirit”* (vs. 18.) The writer to the Hebrews confronts us with the extent of Christ’s suffering; it was a suffering unto death: *“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”* (Heb. 12:3.) Consider the innocence and benevolence of Christ, even in the midst of His suffering: His suffering was that of a righteous man on the behalf of the unrighteous. Consider also the outcome of Christ’s suffering: He was resurrected from the dead; that is to say, He was vindicated and honored by God His Father.

In verses 19-20 Peter turns our attention back to the days of Noah:

*By [the Spirit] he also went and preached to the spirits who [now] are bound; <sup>20</sup>[namely,] those who were disobedient back when the patience of God was waiting in the days of Noah, while the ark was being built. By means of [that ark] a few, that is, [only] eight souls, were brought safely through the water. (1 Pet. 3:19-20)*

By the Holy Spirit dwelling in Noah, Christ preached to *“the spirits who ... were disobedient back when the patience of God was waiting in the days of Noah.”* Peter is referring to Noah’s inspired testimony, which he gave before the ancient world. Noah’s life and his building of the ark was a testimony to his generation; in 2 Peter 2:5 Noah is identified as *“a preacher of righteousness.”* But that ancient generation who lived in the days of Noah was disobedient and unresponsive; and they continued in that state throughout the long period of God’s patience while the ark was being built. Here is the point Peter is making: Not only did the world persecute Christ in the days of His incarnate presence during His earthly ministry, they opposed Him in the days of Noah, too; so, why should we be surprised if we as Christians should encounter the world’s opposition and enmity?

When we suffer for righteousness’ sake, let us remember the example of Christ our Savior. Christ faithfully obeyed His heavenly Father even though the world remained disobedient and even though it persecuted Him to death. Note, again, the testimony of Hebrews 12:3, *“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”* Let us bear in mind, and never lose sight of, our Lord’s gracious and wonderful promise made to those who remain faithful to Him, despite the opposition encountered:

*Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:10)*

## **Conclusion**

As Christians, we can expect to encounter mistreatment as a result of our Christ-like conduct that defends what is right and does what is right. When we encounter such mistreatment for righteousness’ sake, may we respond in the way God prescribes. Let us remember the example of the Christian man presented in the Introduction to this lesson, and by the grace of God, may we imitate that example in whatever setting we may happen to find ourselves.