

Script: Pastor Frank Johnson

First Peter: Truth and Hope for Sojourners
“Suffering, II: Following Christ When the Heat Is On”
1 Peter 3:13-22

Take a first look.

I. JOHN 12:12-19, RECORDS THAT WHEN JESUS CAME INTO JERUSALEM FOR THE LAST TIME, the people shouted His praise. That was what we traditionally call Palm Sunday. A week later, I imagine that some of those in the crowd that day may have been also later in the week in the mob that shouted, “Crucify Him!” Even amidst the joy of Jesus’ coming, there were those who plotted His death, even though He came to offer life even to them!

When Jesus looked out over Jerusalem, before even arriving, He wailed, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (Luke 13:34-35, NIV).

II. THOUGH JESUS WAS DOING EXACTLY WHAT GOD THE FATHER HAD SENT HIM TO DO, He was opposed and violently resisted. However, even that resistance worked into the Father’s plan. When the heat was on, Jesus remained steadfast. He fulfilled the Father’s purposes for His human life.

III. WHAT ABOUT US? How do we respond when the heat is on, when we face opposition for following Christ or for doing the right thing when others are not?

IV. Peter counsels us here. We need his challenges and perspectives if we are to be prepared for whatever comes against us as the followers of Jesus.

Take a closer look at 1 Peter 3:13-22.

I. WHEN THE HEAT IS ON, CHRISTIANS MUST EXAMINE THEIR MOTIVES. v. 13

The question to ask is, “Are we eager to do good?” Peter asks the rhetorical question here, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” The expected answer is, “No one. They should reward you instead.” This presents us with a question of motive.

A—Are we the kind of people who want to do the right thing just because it is the right thing? Or, are we the kind of people who are always trying to manipulate situations just to get what we want?

I—I read a review in *World* magazine some time ago of a book published by a *Washington Post* media reporter named Howard Kurtz. The book is called *Spin Cycle* and subtitled *Inside the Clinton Propaganda Machine*. He told how the daily chess game was played between White House press secretary Mike McCurry and the Beltway reporters. In the book, he told alleged story after story of the unique spin given to information as it became public knowledge. After reading that review and subsequently listening (sometimes) to the dizzying spin of both PR staff for politicians and media reports of alleged events, and now seeing the

takes on current events in real time via social media, I am reminded of my sorrow and often anger about all of this. Where does the consummate politician of the modern era or the so-called journalist of the propaganda machine get off and the person of character get on? What do we really know about people *as people* in an election year or anytime from what media often reports?

We must beware of our own temptations to use the *spin cycle*. Are we driven to do the right thing before God because it is the right thing, or simply to manipulate the flow of information just to get our way in the school classroom, or in the job market, or in the social club? There is a big difference. Peter challenges us to be those of the former, who are pursuing *the good* with all our energy, regardless of the “press” we receive. This is a difference between *character* (who we are before God) and *reputation* (what other people *perceive* that we are).

II. WHEN THE HEAT IS ON, CHRISTIANS MUST REMEMBER THEIR REWARD. v. 14

1. *The question here is, “Whose response to my actions matters most?”* Are we living for the acceptance and affirmation of our society, our neighbors, our schoolmates, our workmates? Are we simply trying to get ahead by the world’s measure of success? The answer to both questions should be a resounding “No!”

2. *Christians are living for the blessing of God, not the praise of men.* Peter pronounces the blessing of God, an ultimate happiness, upon God’s people who suffer for doing what is right.

A—Are we willing to do what is right even if it costs us something, whether it is money or peer acceptance or advancement?

I—It was inspiring to read about Jedidiah Morse some time ago in our bulletin insert *Glimpses*. Jedidiah was the father of Samuel Morse, who invented the telegraph. Jedidiah was a solid evangelical pastor and geographer, considered by many “the father of modern geography.” He stood up for the Biblical faith of Jesus Christ in the face of the growing liberalism of his time, centered in Unitarian teachings. He realized that a selling out of the Bible would mean the selling out of the Good News of Jesus Christ, and that to appoint those who misbelieved the teachings about Jesus Christ to positions as professors in Harvard University would leave a Christian void. As a member of Harvard’s board of overseers, in 1805, he led the opposition to the appointment of a Unitarian to the faculty of Divinity, the discipline that trained future pastors for their work. They lost. He and his supporters went on to establish Andover Seminary as a place to train pastors in the Biblical faith.

Surely such a determination to do what was right before God cost Morse acceptance among his peers, much time and money, and a lot of sweat and labor. Was it worth it? You bet it was! The truth is just that important.

III. WHEN THE HEAT IS ON, CHRISTIANS MUST SHARPEN THEIR WITNESS. vv. 15-17

1. *Christ must be Lord; this is the witness of allegiance.* When we are faced with adverse consequences for doing the right thing, we must be sure Whom we are living for: ourselves, the boss, or Christ Himself.

A—To whom do we give our final allegiance?

I—At a time in life when many family members and others are encouraging materialistic goals, many twenty-something people today are answering God’s call on their lives for missions. Many of those referred to as Generation X, born after 1964, have risen to great passion for the Good News of Jesus Christ. Some years ago, one International Mission Board personnel specialist watched 108 new missionaries being assigned to Last Frontier areas, where the Good News is not understood in the language of the people. He said that we have a “whole crew of people willing to die for their people group.” The frequent declaration of students considering Last Frontier missions these days is “I want my life to make a difference. I want a cause worth dying for.”¹ If it is a cause worth dying for, then it is a cause worth living for. No matter what your or my generation is called, we need something to live for that will outlive us.

Surely this is something of what it means to “set apart Christ as Lord.” We must make Him *our* holy Lord.

2. *Our words must be prepared; this is the witness of speech.* Peter urges us, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Classically, this is the Scriptural basis for the discipline of Apologetics, the systematic defense of the Christian faith. Here, Peter is not talking about a class that you take or about an academic course only. He is speaking about readiness to speak up for Christ, Who has given us life that is eternal.

A—Are we prepared to speak up for Christ if someone questions why we would have faith and hope in Him?

I—A Christian worker in Asia in a sensitive area reported a couple decades ago that “a town official in a restricted access nation had become a believer. Stripped of his position, he refused to recant. He told his former comrades, ‘Jesus is everything I need.’ Because of his witness others believed.”

The Christian worker met this man a year later. He was by then a pastor himself. He told how he received the gospel. He reported how the Holy Spirit traveled along family and friendship lines, village to village through three provinces—just friend telling friend. He returned to his village and to farming after losing his job and standing for Christ. He began to sow seeds of grain and also of the truth. More than 600 people in his village claim allegiance to Christ.²

Now, we don’t know what the outcome might be when we share the good news of Jesus. But we do know what it will be if we don’t: people will not have the information they need to respond with faith and gain eternal life.

3. *Our behavior must be good; this is the witness of lifestyle.* This applies to the manner of our speech: “with gentleness and respect.” *Gentleness* refers to our manner toward those we address. We should have all our faculties under the Spirit’s control, just as the war horse prepared for battle yields fully to the soldier. “With gentleness and reverence, holding a good conscience, in order that in which thing they are slandering, the ones that are abusing may be put to shame by your good conduct in Christ” (v. 16, FJV). The word “gentleness” here (*prautes*) is the same as that which is part of “the fruit of the Spirit” noted by Paul in Galatians 5:23, sometimes translated “humility.” Here is what my Greek lexicon offers about this word: “*The quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance, gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness, meekness in the older favorable sense.*” The next word, translated “reverence” or “respect” is *phobou*, sometimes translated as “fear.” So, if we have such

¹ *The Commission*, April 1998, p. 28A.

² *The Commission*, April 1998, p. 32.

fear/reverence for God, we will have respect for someone who bears His image, even if we strongly disagree with that person about something—anything!

He also challenges us also to have a “clear conscience” that will give the lie to slanderous words said about us.

A—How clean are our closets, morally speaking? Do we need the Spirit of God to take the disinfectant where no man dares to go in the deep recesses of our personalities and pasts?

I—I must confess today to being a bit disappointed by a post I read from a friend on Facebook recently. She serves as the lead pastor of a mainline congregation in another city—a role which I do not personally endorse, by the way. Recently, she has apparently received vitriolic comments from some people claiming to be Evangelical Christians, who have condemned her in no uncertain terms for her role as a pastor. From what I can tell, the spirit of their condemnation seems to be the opposite of what Peter calls us to do. When we have honest and serious disagreements about important matters, what should be the spirit by which we carry on those conversations? “With gentleness and reverence” is Peter’s answer. Paul argues that it is as we continue “speaking the *truth in love*” that “we will grow up in all things in Him, who is the Head, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15, FJV, my emphasis). The folks who belittled and condemned my Facebook friend were not very convincing, leaving her angry and wounded and defensive. I did not read them for myself, but I got that much from her post. Peter reminds us that both the reputation of Christ and the salvation of others is at stake, so we should uphold the truth and hope we have in Christ confidently, but with love and respect. As I was visiting with my primary health care professional this past week, we talked about bearing witness for Christ (He is a Christian brother). We also talked about my health, but it was about 50-50. We concluded that the character of our lives can either support or contradict our words. How convincing will our arguments be if we resort to ad hominem attacks, if we argue with a vicious and hateful spirit? Not very. Our goal is not just to win arguments, but rather to win *souls*.

IV. WHEN THE HEAT IS ON, CHRISTIANS MUST REMEMBER THEIR SAVIOR. vv. 18-22

1. *Jesus suffered for us, for an eternal purpose.* Verse 18 is a great summary of the Good News about Jesus Christ: He died for our sins, taking our place of punishment, “the righteous for the unrighteous,” with the purpose of bringing us to God.

- a. He is our *Sacrifice* for sin, the One Who took our place.
- b. He is our *Mediator* to God, our “bridge to life.”
- c. He is a *living Savior*, since He both died and was raised to life.

A—Have we crossed this bridge to life by putting our faith in Jesus Christ, in order to be reconciled to God our Maker?

I—Billy Graham told the story of Velma Barfield. She was a woman from rural North Carolina who was charged with first degree murder. No one could have surmised the effect her life and death would have upon so many people. In 1978 she was arrested for murdering four people, including her mother and fiancé. She never denied her guilt but told the chilling story of her drug-dazed life, beginning with the tranquilizers which were prescribed following a painful injury. Here is how Graham recounted her story:

Velma was a victim of incest as a child and the abuse of prescription drugs as an adult. After she admitted her guilt, she was taken to prison and confined in a cell by herself. One night the guard tuned into a twenty-four-hour gospel station. Down the gray hall,

desperate and alone in her cell, Velma heard the words of an evangelist and allowed Jesus Christ to enter her life. She wrote, "I had been in and out of churches all my life and I could explain all about God. But I had never understood before that Jesus had died for me."

Her conversion was genuine. For six years on death row, she ministered to many of her cellmates. The outside world began to hear about Velma Barfield as the story of her remarkable rehabilitation became known. Velma wrote to Ruth and there developed a real friendship between them. In one letter Ruth wrote to Velma, "God has turned your cell on Death Row into a most unusual pulpit. There are people who will listen to what you have to say because of where you are. As long as God has a ministry for you here, He will keep you here. When I compare the dreariness, isolation, and difficulty of your cell to the glory that lies ahead of you, I could wish for your sake that God would say, 'Come on Home.'"

My daughter, Anne, received special permission to visit Velma Barfield many times and was touched by the sadness of her story and the sincerity of her love for Christ as well as the beauty of her Christian witness in that prison.

Before her final sentence, Velma wrote to Ruth: "If I am executed on August 31, I know the Lord will give me dying grace, just as He gave me saving grace, and has given me living grace." On the night she was executed, Ruth and I knelt and prayed together for her till we knew she was safe in Glory.

Velma Barfield was the first woman in twenty-two years to be executed in the United States. She walked through the valley of the shadow for many years and at her memorial service the Reverend Hugh Hoyle said, "She died with dignity and she died with purpose. Velma is a living demonstration of 'by the grace of God you shall be saved.'"³

2. *Jesus bore witness to the saving purposes of God.* Verses 19-22 are some of the most difficult to interpret in the entire New Testament, even the whole of Scripture. With respect toward other ideas, I present this interpretation.

a. When it says that "He went and preached to the spirits in prison in the days of Noah," it probably means that Christ rose from death, and either between the cross and the resurrection or between the resurrection and His ascension, He went to the place where the evil spirits who deceived the disobedient in the time of Noah are imprisoned. He proclaimed the victory of His death and resurrection, announcing both the justice and the love of God.

b. Peter reminds us that the entire story of Noah is a pattern of the Good News. *The ark* represents the power of the Lord Himself to save His people. *The water* around the ark represents baptism, the Christian's confession of faith in Christ. Speaking symbolically, he states, "This baptism now saves you," meaning not that the water itself is magic or has saving power, but as it represents what Christ Himself does in a human life where saving faith is found. It is the "resurrection of Jesus Christ" that makes our salvation possible. Because He conquered death, *so will we*, if we trust in Him explicitly.

3. *Jesus fulfilled God's purpose fully.* He went to the lowest place, the place of death in innocence, for us. He was raised from the dead by the power of God. He declared the victory of the resurrection to the hostile spirit world. He has been exalted to the highest place where everyone and everything are in submission to Him.

A—Have each of us entered the victory of Christ for ourselves? Then what do we have to fear from anyone who may cause us to suffer for doing right or for following Jesus?

³ From *Biblical Illustrator*, an illustration database.

I—In the same issue of *The Commission* several years ago from which I have drawn other illustrations for this message, the story of missionaries Tom and Gloria Thurman is told. They served for a lifetime in the country of Bangladesh. The country sits right on the Bay of Bengal with the country of India on both the west and east sides of it. At the time it was the sixth-largest population in all of Asia with 122.2 million people. 87% of these people were Muslim, 11.7% Hindu, .6% Buddhist, and only .4% Christian. The annual income per person there was \$180 compared to current US dollars.

From before the Beatles had their historic “Concert for Bangladesh” until the time of that article, the Thurmans were faithfully loving, serving, and teaching the people of Gopalganj, Bangladesh. They have listened to the women, whom no one traditionally have honored. They have bandaged the feet of the workers. They have given what they could: soap, aspirin, love. Their work has not always been understood by those from the outside. “During the Persian Gulf War, when anger toward Americans rumbled through the Muslim world, several hundred Muslim extremists from outside the community marched toward the Thurman home. Inside, Tom and Gloria heard the chants get closer. Then ... silence. A few minutes later, the chanting could be heard again—now receding into the distance. The marchers had been turned back by community residents—including Muslims.”⁴

Why? Because for the past 33 years, their actions of love had shown their town something about the reality of their faith and of the depth of their character. The Thurmans prayed earnestly that they had also seen the reality of their Savior.

Taking it home (applications).

I. HAVE WE ENTRUSTED OUR LIVES TO THIS LIVING SAVIOR?

II. IS OUR CHARACTER SHAPED BY HIS PRESENCE AND POWER?

III. ARE WE READY TO SPEAK UP FOR OUR CHRISTIAN HOPE REGARDLESS OF THE SETTING?

⁴ *The Commission*, April 1998, p. 16.