

1 Peter 3:13-18

The paper reported this past week that more and more young people need counseling these days. Why? Their families are in disarray, and so their world is falling apart, and they have no hope. Next to auto accidents, the biggest cause of death for young men aged 19-24 is suicide. Why? So many live without hope. They have no reason to continue to try to struggle with their problems. And they're not alone. In fact, without the hope of eternal life, everything in this life is pointless, isn't it? So despite every effort to make our lives comfortable and enjoyable, the majority of people in the world will spend eternity without hope, in despair, in hell.

But you and I have hope. Look at the blessings you have through faith in Christ: 1) Peace with God. God's anger no longer rests upon us. God punished Jesus for our sins. As a lighting rod diverts a bolt of lightning from a building, so Christ diverted God's punishment from us. Because we are at peace with God, we have peace within. Satan and our guilty conscience cannot torture us because of our sins. We respond in faith with the gospel assertion, "Christ died for my sins!" 2) We know God's grace. We don't have to try to stand before God by our own merit. We stand before God clothed in the merit of Jesus our Savior. His holiness covers all our impurity. 3) We have God's loving direction of our lives. God guides even the trials of this life so they work for our good. Through them God develops within us Christian character. He will never abandon us in our trials. He loves us eternally. 4) We therefore have hope. The world thinks of hope as something people wish would happen. But we have no assurance that what we wish for will happen.

Our Christian hope, on the other hand is an assured reality. Our sins are forgiven. Heaven is ours. We're simply waiting the future when we shall live in the reality of heaven forever. Our hope, therefore, does not disappoint us. So many things in life leave you disappointed. Things don't turn out to be what you thought they would be. People fail you and let you down. But God's promises will never let you down. God cannot lie. You can rest assured God will always do what He has promised! Christian, **"Confess the Hope that you have!" 1) Our hope in Christ overcomes fearful silence; 2) Our hope in Christ overflows in heart-felt confession.**

Peter was addressing people who were facing incredibly disheartening and frightening events. In August of 64 AD Emperor Nero unleashed his maniacal anger against Christ's Church, and thousands of Christians perished. Some of them were wrapped up in the skins of wild beasts and torn to pieces. Others were crucified. Many had their bodies drenched with pitch and were set ablaze as human torches to light Nero's gardens by night, as he wildly drove his chariot past these screaming Christians. Those Christians knew that confessing Christ could mean their torture and death! So God inspired Peter to give them a message of hope! He quotes something Isaiah had shared 800 years earlier when the barbaric Assyrian hordes were about to crush the nation of Israel. **"Even if you should suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear what they fear. Do not be frightened.'" (v. 14).**

What would you answer if someone asked, "What keeps you from witnessing more than you do?" Perhaps you'd say, "I have not been trained; I am not out-going; I don't know enough about the Bible. And in honesty, you might even say, "Because of the life I live." When our lifestyle doesn't match our faith, it's impossible to witness, isn't it?

We may have fears, fear of ridicule, of rejection, of being shunned, or being physically hurt. How can we defeat our fears? **"In your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord"** (v. 15a). Our hearts are like a throne. Whoever, or whatever fills your heart will rule your actions. If we love ourselves more than Christ, we'll shrink back from witnessing if we feel threatened. If we love others more than Christ, we'll suppress any witness if we fear their ridicule or loss of friendship.

If we love money more than Jesus, we'll remain silent so we don't jeopardize our business or job prospects.

Oh, we are such miserable sinners. How we fail to witness when we have opportunity! How we give the devil full sway rather than Jesus. Won't you bow your head and plead with me, "Lord, have mercy on me!" Now we look up to the cross, and what is God's answer? **"Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."** (v. 18). *For you* Jesus lived under the Law, the perfect Son of God, making up for your sins. *For you* He shed his blood, the atonement, the guilt payment for the world's sin. *For you once and for all*, He died and rose to bring you to God. You are forgiven for His sake. You are living forever. Set apart Christ as Lord in your heart, for He, the Lord of History, lives and reigns in heaven over all things for the good of His church. **"Even if you should suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear what they fear. Do not be frightened.'"**

Our hope in Christ overcomes any fearful silence. Now our hope in Christ will overflow in heart-felt confession. Did you notice the little adverb, **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have"**? Always! Opportunities for witnessing come at different times and in different ways. We might be paying for our groceries, and we can comment on how thankful to God we are. We might be traveling on the bus or plane and comment on our permanent home in heaven. Jesus is giving us a mission today through the troubled, those who have experienced sadness, tragedy, or other heartache and distress. A woman was told by her doctor she had cancer. Her husband was out of town on a prolonged business trip. She went to the grocery store, and her face looked so depressed that someone in the same aisle asked, "Excuse me. Please don't think I'm pushing myself on you, but you look so very sad. I am a Christian, and I would be glad to share your sadness with you." The women became good friends and later were used by the Lord in helping others who had troubles. Such a chance encounter might not have had that result if the woman in the aisle didn't think it was important for her to be ready *always* to talk about her Lord.

The other expression in our lesson, **"To give answer"** was the technical phrase for a formal answer given in a court of Law. To confess Christ simply means to speak as a witness, telling others the truth which you have seen and heard about Jesus from the eye-witness accounts of His life, death, and resurrection, namely, the Bible! **"Be prepared,"** Peter encourages. We can't advance on our jobs without training and continuing education. Our ability to give a clearer and more confident confession of Christ is directly related to more intensive learning of God's Word. Re-read and re-study for deeper understanding and growth your Bible and your Catechism, which systematically unfolds the main truths of our Savior. Remember your baptism daily, by which you died with Christ and have risen with Him. Commune with Christ by receiving his body and blood for your personal guarantee of peace with God through the forgiveness of sins. Then, filled with hope through Jesus, look in the mirror and ask the person facing you (which would be, of course, you), "Are you ready to confess the hope you have?"

Finally, Peter reminds us, **"Do this with gentleness and respect."** No one has ever been argued into the Christian faith. A witness is not a prosecuting attorney. An abrasive witness is worse than no witness at all, for it turns people off to Christ's promises and claims. A debate teacher cautioned members of the high school team, "Never use a cannon when a pea-shooter will do." We're not confessing Christ to crush others, nor to be haughty or demeaning to them. We're speaking with the prayer the Holy Spirit will win over the other person.

Being an effective witness for the Lord involves 1) having a living hope in Christ in your heart; 2) a willingness to face persecution and overcome fear; 3) a working knowledge of the

fundamental facts of faith; 4) a gentle spirit; 5) a reverent heart towards God; 6) a witness which is backed up by a consistently Christian life. Let's make this our prayer, **“Lord Jesus, forgive me for failing to witness to you as I should. Empower, enable, and embolden me to speak your Good News to those who need it. Amen.”**