Making a Case for Your Hope

SOS Verse:
1 Peter 2:22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

Opportunities for witness for Japanese Christians b/c of the disaster; Michael Card story: Joseph, Masai warrior converted, beaten for sharing his faith with his own tribe, returned twice, whole village converted

Suffering creates unusual opportunities for sharing the good news about Jesus, because it makes a Christian’s hope conspicuous. If everything is going well and you are filled with hope, no one will wonder why. But if your hope endures through difficult times, people will stop and take notice. The suffering Peter has in view in this text is persecution—mistreatment by another person specifically because one is a Christian. We certainly need to think about that application. But the principles here apply to suffering of all kinds—every form of unpleasant circumstance provides you with a special opportunity to make a case for your hope. How? Peter touches on five aspects:

• The Heart: fear vs. reverence
• The Setting: always to anyone
• The Simplicity: a word
• The Manner: gentleness and fear
• The Conscience: clear

THE HEART: FEAR VS. REVERENCE
1 Peter 3:13-15  13 Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 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;

Notice the leading clause of verse 15: “in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy.” What does that mean? The NIV has “in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.” The NAS uses the word “sanctify”: “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.”

It’s the verb form of the word “holy”—the noun is often translated “saints” or “holy ones.” It’s a striking statement, especially applied to Jesus as it is: “Make Jesus holy.” What does that mean?

An illuminating cross reference is found in the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Hallowed be Thy name.” What are we praying for there? We’re asking for God to exalt His name and make it uniquely revered on earth as it is in heaven.

And that’s Peter’s point here. To “honor Christ as holy” (ESV) or “set apart Christ as Lord” (NIV) or “sanctify Christ” (NAS) means to think of Him in a category all by Himself—one of a kind, the highest honor, the greatest value, the most supreme treasure, the one you esteem and honor and love the most out of all persons and all things in the world.

Peter places special focus on His lordship: “Honor Christ the Lord as holy.” Stand in awe of his lordship over the universe. Tremble with joy before His sovereign rule. Jesus Christ rules over the whole created realm. Every element in nature, every angel in heaven, and every demon in hell is subject to His commands (cf. v 22 “angles, authorities, and powers subjected to Him”). Your suffering and whatever is causing it does not control your life. Jesus controls your life. He stands unique above every rival, and in this sense, He is holy. He has one-of-a-kind power, one-of-a-kind wisdom, and one-of-a-kind love. Believe it. In your heart, honor Christ the Lord as holy. Deliberately think of Him this way.

So what does this have to do with the rest of this text? Look at the rest of verse 15:

1 Peter 3:15 …in your hearts regard 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;

Peter actually doesn’t use a verb to connect these clauses. Literally, it reads: “always prepared for apologetics to all those who ask you…” The NAS and ESV insert “being” to smooth out the wording, but Peter is forcing a very close relationship here between honoring Christ as holy and our ability to talk about hope.

In fact, notice that both of these are inner experiences of the heart: “in
your hearts honor Christ” (15a) and “the hope that is in you” (15b). How does this hope arise in the heart? When others ask why we are so hopeful, should we say, “Because I make it my aim every day to think positively, to be hopeful, to be an optimist”? No! Peter doesn’t direct his readers to get themselves hopeful. The directive he gives regarding their heart is to “honor Christ the Lord as holy” in their heart. So what’s the connection? Hope arises in the heart as a natural result of regarding Christ as holy. Doing the former (setting your eyes and heart on the supreme Lordship of Jesus) produces the latter (conspicuous hope). When we think of Christ as He really is, then no matter what suffering comes our way, we will have hope!

And when that happens, Peter says people close to us will notice how we respond to tribulation and ask us for our secret to peace of mind in troubled times. It’s worth pondering Peter’s vision for how to engage a hostile world. Not isolation. Not counterattack. Not founding a parallel subculture. Christians may be aliens in a strange land, but we are to live our lives openly in the midst of this unbelieving world, inviting them in to observe our life and offering to them an explanation for what they see. Notice that it is our hope in God that gets their attention, not our freedom from tough times. It’s our hope, not our health. It’s a very natural and very awesome opportunity to explain your faith!

Why are nonbelievers so drawn to hope like this? Because this is so different from their own inner experience. That’s what Peter is talking about at the end of verse 14:

1 Peter 1:14 Have no fear of them, nor be troubled...

I’m frustrated with this translation in the ESV. The NIV gets it exactly right when it says: “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” Literally Peter writes: “do not fear their fear.” He’s quoting Isaiah:

Isaiah 8:12-13 "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. 13 But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread."

Peter is not saying, “Don’t fear what they might do.” He’s saying, “Don’t fear what they would fear.” When unbelievers face hard times, they will experience fear and uncertainty. Why? Because they fear things other than Christ—things Peter commands Christians not to fear.

I believe Peter is using “fear” (v 14) as a parallel idea to “sanctify” (v 15). He’s saying: “Don’t give respect or fear to what they do. Fear Christ. View only Him as holy.”

Think with me for a moment about the experience of fear. When you fear something, you regard it as special, unique, i.e., holy. If you perceive that something has unique power to hurt you, you will fear it: illness, poverty, a certain person. Or, if you perceive that something has unique power to bless you and make your life happy, you will fear losing it: health, family, job, reputation. This is exactly the opposite of regarding Christ the Lord as holy. When you “sanctify the Lord Christ,” you regard Him as the ultimate source of blessing to be gained and the ultimate source of punishment to be avoided.

Reverencing Christ is what we do in order not to have fear in our heart. Don’t be afraid; instead, regard Christ the Lord as holy. The only way to battle fear is to displace its power with a greater power.

A concrete example: cf. 3:5-6. Peter exhorts wives to submit to their husbands, but it is so much easier and so much more respectable to resist this call to respect the man God has put in your life. And a lot of that resistance is rooted in fear—fear that you will miss life’s best, fear that you won’t be satisfied or loved, fear that you will be miserable or your great ideas won’t be heard or you’ll have to live with a second best life. Look at what Peter says to that in verses 5-6:

1 Peter 3:5-6 For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

Don’t be afraid: hope in God! Regard Him as holy. He will never fail you. His ways will never turn out second best. He has not made a mistake here. Trust Him!

Making a case for your hope begins with a heart that is free from fear because it is filled with reverence for Christ.
THE SETTING: ALWAYS TO ANYONE
1 Peter 3:15b ...always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you...

Notice the universals “always” and “anyone.” Making a case for our hope isn’t something we do in rare, exceptional moments, like when some official complaint has been brought against us. It’s something we do all the time with everyone. We are constantly looking for opportunities to say a word about hope!

Larry King Live, January 17, 2006
KING: Didn’t the short story move you at all? MOHLER: Well, no, actually...
KING: For example, you’re a reverend, didn’t you have some compassion for what happened to the younger one of the two? MOHLER: Well, absolutely. You have to feel compassion when anyone feels pain and when anyone goes through that kind of struggle. But, you know, I really am horrified to think about where that story ended.

You know my main concern, Larry, is not with the gospel of heterosexuality, even though I think that’s very important. It’s with the gospel of Jesus Christ and what I find lacking in the movie, the screenplay and in the short story is any resolution that really brings these persons to know why they were created and how God really intends them to live and how they would find their greatest satisfaction in living just as God had intended them for his glory.

KING: Reverend Mohler, do you think that tide is turning against your opinions? MOHLER: Well, I think we’re watching the breakdown of norms in this society. I don’t doubt that. I sense that we have a big task as Christians to articulate what is our most basic concern, and that is, Larry, that on the cross, Christ died for sinners, heterosexual and homosexual, and the only way to be made whole is in him, and that is more important than anything else I could possibly say.

Friends, witnessing will always be a burdensome duty to defend a doctrine as long as Christianity means for us simply accepting certain doctrines as true and keeping a certain list of do’s and don’ts. But if we realize that Christianity’s most basic concern is that Jesus Christ died on the cross so that sinners like me and you could be made whole, we’ll be filled with hope and happiness and eagerness to talk about it.

This raises the question of how many Christians can give a comprehensible statement of their hope in Jesus. How much of your Christian experience is so encoded with Christian jargon, unconverted people can’t even make sense of it? We must be able to relate our faith to unbelievers, who have little to no idea what words like “justified” or “wrath of God” or even “sin” mean. We have to address their questions in terms that they themselves would find meaningful.

The heart: reverencing Christ. The setting: always with anyone. Third...

THE SIMPLICITY: A WORD
1 Peter 3:15b ...make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

There’s a point here to be made regarding the role of systematic, rational apologetics. This verse isn’t exclusively about the emotional condition of the heart. Peter does use the word ἀπολογίαν – i.e., “apologetics.” We have a responsibility to study hard and prepare well so we can give articulate, coherent, and compelling explanations of the reasons why our faith is reasonable.

But Peter’s goal is actually much more simple than that. He uses the very common term λόγος, “word.” Most translations use the phrase “asks you for a reason” or something similar. But it’s not all that impressive or involved. Peter’s just asking us to share “a word.” It’s not a sermon or an exhaustive explanation. It’s a word of hope. Colloquially, we might say that we should be ready to say what Jesus means to us.

Ordinary evangelism is done by ordinary Christians responding to ordinary people within ordinary conversations. No one says, “Hey, you’re a Christian! Would you please preach to me about Jesus for half an hour?”

Colossians 4:6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. Know what it means to “let your speech be seasoned with salt”? It means you say just enough to leave people thirsty for more.
THE MANNER: GENTLENESS AND RESPECT  
1 Peter 3:16a yet do it with gentleness and respect...

Belligerence won’t help convince anyone. Tenderness and dignity are far more compelling and winsome than paragraphs of argumentation. 

Again the word “fear” shows up, most certainly fear of God. We maintain gentleness toward people by maintaining fear toward God. We don’t have to overpower them with our argument. We just say a word about hope and then trust the Holy Spirit to persuade the listener.

ILL: at Niagara Falls when confronted with a group of drunk teens who mocked us with “church is cool.” A gentle, salty answer from one of the leaders: “Actually, it’s not really about church. It’s about being truly satisfied and completely free!”

THE CONSCIENCE: CLEAR  
1 Peter 3:16b-17 ...having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.

When we do talk about what Jesus means to us, our lives have to back that up. Hypocrisy is deadly to our testimony, and most nonbelievers have a bloodhound’s nose for it.

See, making a case for your hope isn’t really about saying certain things; it’s about being a certain kind of person. We’re not out to win arguments. We’re out to win people.

“Put to shame” refers less to emotion and more to standing. It’s about defeating their attempt to malign the faith; it’s not about embarrassing them personally.

“Better” (v 17) as Peter sees it reaches far beyond this present age. Only by taking the long view will any form of suffering seem “better,” especially when we suffer righteously. God’s final verdict and our eternal joy are what really matter. These are what make it better. And should those who observe us and listen to us actually be converted through our testimony, how much better is that! (NOTE: this is the point of Christ’s unjust suffering – to bring us all to God, v 18)

APP: Start each day with a determination to get your heart happy in God!

George Mueller wrote: “The first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day is to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about every day is not how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state.”

Morning by morning we have to go to the Word because we are so desperately needy, our own hope wanes. We have fears that need to be overcome by the promises of God. We have doubts that need to be answered. The fight of faith is waged with the Word of God and prayer. And when we emerge from that encounter with God with a renewed and lively hope in His promises, we will be ready to make a case for our hope.

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