

Psalms 66:8-16, 19-20

⁸ Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, ⁹ who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip. ¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. ¹¹ You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; ¹² you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. ¹³ I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows, ¹⁴ those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble. ¹⁵ I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an offering of bulls and goats. ¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me... ¹⁹ But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer. ²⁰ Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

1st Peter 3:13-16

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.



Our Epistle reading begins with these words: *“Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?”* In an ideal

world, the answer would be “No one!” But in the world of

Peter’s readers, the answers would be numerous. The early

Christians receiving this letter and these words faced frequent persecution. The good that they did in the world drew lots of negative attention – insults and ridicule and worse. And even though our world is far from theirs and even though we face little real persecution, there are still times when the living out of our faith will draw negative attention. We can all think of times when we’ve offered words of comfort only to receive anger in return. We can all think of times when an intended good deed was not received as such.

And if one steps outside of our safe little part of the world, people are hurt trying to do good on a pretty regular basis. Think of the aid workers in the Ukraine, just to draw one example to mind. Think of the medical missionaries who are exposed to and contract diseases and illnesses in their daily service to the poor and suffering. Think of the police officers and EMTs and firefighters who give their lives in service to communities all across the United States. And yet Paul still asks this question. As we begin to delve into this time together, let us pray...

Peter is well aware that his readers suffered greatly. He would be well aware that they would have a lengthy list of authorities and neighbors and others that have done harm to them when they were doing good. Peter himself too could have come up with a pretty good list to personally answer this question. So Peter must have had a bigger picture in mind when he asked this question.

We begin to gain an understanding of this as we press on into verse 14 and 15. Here Peter writes, *“But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.”* He is reminding them again that they are blessed when they stand up for their faith, when they do the holy and righteous thing. He is calling them to live out their faith even as they are threatened and abused. Peter is calling them to look beyond this world and all that it can do to them – *“do not fear what they fear.”* And Peter provides the basis or the way to find the strength to accomplish this: *“in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.”* This is another way of saying what we heard in last week’s message: make Christ your cornerstone, your firm foundation, your rock.

Connecting into last week’s theme of who we are as followers of Christ, Sarah Wright ties these first three verses together as she reframes the question and then the answer this way: “What ultimate harm can befall one of God’s beloved, chosen people? Even if we suffer in this life, it is but a temporary affliction leading to a permanent blessing – so we don’t need to fear *them*” (page 149.) Also connecting into the cornerstone image she adds, “May we all have such deep rootedness in Christ that all earthly fears and evils pales in comparison to his power and goodness” (page 150.) From this perspective and with this foundation, we are able to endure suffering when we do good. That is the message that Peter was conveying to his readers too.



But then in verses 15-16 Peter takes it a step further. Here Peter tells his readers, *“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and*

reverence.” Always be ready to make your defense – this is a powerful statement that Peter is making about being an ‘overt Christian’ in day-to-day life. It is not a call to be quiet or to live a private faith. It is a call to live our faith in ways that draws attention to what we are doing and to who we are as a follower of Christ. And perhaps even more importantly, it is a call to live this way so that we can tell others why we do what we do. *“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.”* Always be ready to tell others why you love them the way you do when most other people do not even give them the time of day. Always be ready to tell others why you serve them when most people simply look the other way.

Peter also offers advice on how to tell our story. *“Do it with gentleness and reverence.”* Not with anger or condemnation. Not with force or with judgment. Not with half-truths or with slight of word. Give your witness with *“gentleness and reverence.”* Be kind and compassionate. Be respectful and considerate. Speak from a place of love. Peter also addresses what gives us the right to speak at all. Living a life of integrity and honesty – *“keep your conscience clear”* is how Peter puts it – gives us a place to speak from that will be received by non-believers. This advice applies to us too. If we get out the bullhorn and start shouting our faith at people, being judgmental and critical and harsh, they will shut down in an instant. But if we approach our conversations and offer our acts of service from a place of love and kindness, respect and compassion, then we will be well-received.

And if we live lives worthy of Christ, then those non-believers that we engage will be more likely to receive the Christ we offer to them.

In the next few verses Peter also addresses something that we need to be up front and honest about. He reminds his readers and us that even though we were baptized into a new life in Christ and even though we are striving to live a new life in faith to our Lord and Savior, we are not yet perfect. This is something we must be aware of. The charge to “always be ready” applies to another area of our faith life. Here we lean into 1st Peter, chapter 4 and into GPS question #3. As part of living in a fallen world and as people prone towards sin, we will face temptations and, at times, we will sin. In chapter 4 Peter calls these elect exiles away from the common evils of the world.

Admittedly these run the gamut. To mention just a few, Peter names *“living in sensuality... drunkenness... and lawless idolatry”* as a few of the bigger societal temptations.

I imagine that most of us look at this list and think to ourselves, ‘We’re good.’ But in our discipleship book, Sarah Wright adds a few more. Before I share her list, a word of warning. We look at these ‘bigger’ sins and they seem obvious and relatively easy to avoid. Maybe not easy, but we definitely feel like we better not cross these lines. This next list will at first seem less significant, for lack of a better word. But be careful, because they are, in their own way, much easier to fall into.

On page 165 she shares this list: “subtly making jokes at the boss’s expense, gossiping about a neighbor, viewing questionable things on your phone, or conducting ourselves in a seductive manner.” Brothers and sisters in Christ, I am pretty sure that at least a couple happen at those tables right out there in Fellowship Hall.

And if we conduct ourselves in this manner here in this place, how much easier is it to stumble at work or school, on the playground or somewhere else that feels less “churchy?” And when we slip up, when we allow sin to rule, in whatever form, others notice. Unfortunately, this too becomes part of our witness. So when temptation arises, we must always be ready to nip it in the bud. We must ever be vigilant about our tendencies to sin so that we can have a defense against the temptations that will surely come. It is good to remember our imperfections and our weaknesses. It is then that we most readily seek Christ. It is here that we find hope in this battle. As we share our story, as we are ready to give witness to the hope we have in Christ, we are reminded that we do not do so based on our own goodness or through our own efforts. We are who and what we are solely by the grace of God found in Jesus Christ.

Turning to Psalm 66 we find a similar story. Instead of the word ‘suffering’ the psalmist uses the words ‘tested’ and ‘tried.’ The Psalm begins with a call to praise and bless God because it is God who *“who has kept us among the living and has not let our feet slip.”* The people who received Peter’s first letter would offer similar praise to God, their rock and refuge. The next two verses of Psalm 66 recount the ways that they have been tested and tried. *“You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water.”* These trials and times of suffering have been difficult to endure. The generations who lived as slaves in Egypt, the years as exiles in foreign lands, the oppression and abuse brought by neighboring tribes and nations – all these things tested and tried the people’s faith. Yet the psalmist is not frustrated; he is not angry with God.

There is perspective here. In this same verse the psalmist writes, *“Yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.”*

The psalmist is implying that there is no human experience that is outside of God’s presence and purpose. There is a confidence and an assurance found in this truth.

We too experience times of trial and suffering. We also experience, like the psalmist, God’s presence in the midst of these hardships. For the psalmist, the response to both God’s goodness and presence comes in verses 13-16. These words tell how he is always ready to witness to his faith. In the first three verses the psalmist pledges to bring the offerings promised when he cried out from his place of suffering. Then, in verse 16, comes the invitation: *“Come and hear, all you who fear God; and I will tell what he has done for me.”* This invitation goes out especially to those who will ask us, ‘How can you still have hope?’ during a time of hardship or suffering. It is to these that we are called – called to witness to our faith in the Jesus.



Before sharing a personal story about why it is so important to always be ready, one last point from Psalm 66. Nowhere does it tell us to keep track of how many times we tell our story or to keep account of the times we witness to or live out our faith. We are not supposed to keep track of or measure somehow the effectiveness of our witness. The Psalm tells us that God pays attention. We know that God listens to our heart and to the hearts of those we encounter in faith. God is our audience, the one to whom we are really being faithful to. This is the only measure of faith that matters.

At times in our journeys of faith, it may feel like no one is noticing. It may seem to us like we are not making the slightest difference in the world. It appears that no one is responding to our words or actions, that we are not changing or affecting anyone's life. But that, my friends, doesn't matter in the least. It is not about numbers. Yes, of course we want to make a positive difference in the world. We hope to reveal Christ to others and to make disciples for the transformation of the world. But in the end our measuring rod is our faithfulness to God and to our call to witness to our faith. God will take care of the responses to our witness. Our task is to always be ready to give a defense, to share our faith with anyone who sees hope or trust or love or compassion or mercy or grace lived out in our lives.

To close, a story that I hope brings you some encouragement as you seek to witness to your faith. Last summer Kristin and I were having lunch at Dakota Butcher over by Menard's. A couple and their daughter were eating at a nearby table. Part way through the meal the mom got up and came over to our table. She asked if I knew who she was. This was 24 years after she was in my 7th grade math class. I was able to recognize her and to remember her name: Renee. Here is her 7th grade picture from my 1998 Dakota Middle School yearbook. She said, "I just want to thank you. You saved my life." She went on to share that 7th grade was a really hard year for her and that she would have given up if it wasn't for me. I don't remember pouring anything special into her. I do not recall giving her extra time or making specific efforts to encourage or otherwise raise her spirits. Renee shared that I really made a difference in her life just when she needed it most.



Now, I've heard it said that you can never argue or bully anyone into believing in Jesus Christ. You can quote scripture at someone until you are blue in the face. And they may pick up a nugget or two, something to chew on.

Because of my encounter with Renee, I can testify that you can love someone into finding worth and value in themselves because you see, notice, and appreciate that in them. This is one place to begin. It is one way to witness to our faith. And, eventually, with the help of the Holy Spirit, one day that person may find faith in the Savior. As Sarah Wright shares on page 156, "Only the Holy Spirit can soften a hard heart. We humans are blessed to participate in some way, but a hundred percent of the responsibility and glory is God's." Only through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit can you and I witness to our faith in a way that God can use. The charge is to always be ready when the opportunity arises. Sometimes it is simply in the day-to-day living. At other times it is in sharing what Christ has done for us. Either way, we are to ever be ready, to always be prepared. That is our hope and prayer. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. In your faith life, who has poured into you, intentionally or just by their natural way of living their faith? How can you do this for others?
- 2) *Pray*. As you reflect on the call to always be ready to bear witness to your faith, how ready are you? Offer supplication to God to make you fully ready.
- 3) *Study*. Read 1st Peter 4:1-6. Do you still struggle with anything listed in verse 3? How might 1st Peter 3:15 help you in this battle?