

Life in Exile (1 Peter 3:8-22)

8 Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. 9 Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. 10 For,

‘Whoever would love life
and see good days
must keep their tongue from evil
and their lips from deceitful speech.
11 They must turn from evil and do good;
they must seek peace and pursue it.
12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’

13 Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? 14 But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.’ 15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. 17 For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. 19 After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— 20 to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, 21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

1. If you are familiar with New Testament letters, you will be sceptical when you read the word ‘finally’. Paul often writes ‘finally’ when he has plenty more to say, and Peter does the same here (v8) – but we still have two and a half chapters to go!

2. But what Peter seems to mean is that he is pulling together what he has been saying to these scattered Christian communities: this is what life in exile, life in a minority community, is like. These are the behaviours that are to mark out this community.

3. In the two sections of his letter we studied previously, Peter concentrated first on relationships *within* the exile-community and then on relationships *beyond* it. Here he focuses especially on relationships with their *enemies*, those who were treating them badly.

4. Peter would remember the teaching he had heard from Jesus: love each other, love your neighbours *and* love your enemies – each step gets harder.

5. Of course, some enemies might be within the Christian community, so Peter is here encouraging ways of thinking, speaking and acting that are appropriate for followers of Jesus in *all* areas of life.

6. The temptation to retaliate when people hurt us or mistreat us is very strong. Our hackles are raised, we become defensive, we lash out, we regard people as enemies. *Can you think of situations when you have struggled with these temptations?*

7. But Peter is as clear as Jesus was: we are to love our enemies *actively*, not just tolerate or avoid them, but look for ways to bless them (v9). *Can you hear echoes of the Sermon on the Mount?*

8. Again Peter points to the sufferings of Christ as the incentive for us to respond in this way (v18). He did this in the previous section (2:21). According to Peter, Jesus not only suffered for us to restore our relationship with God, when we were enemies of God, but he is our example of how we are to treat our enemies.

9. The final verses of chapter 3 are not easy to understand and biblical scholars do not agree on what they mean:

(a) Who are ‘the imprisoned spirits’ and what does Christ proclaim to them?

(b) They seem to have some connection with Noah and the flood, but what?

(c) Is this what Jesus was doing between his burial and his resurrection?

(d) What is the link between the flood and baptism in Peter’s mind, except that water is involved?

(e) Peter returns to this topic of Noah’s generation and imprisoned spirits in his second letter (2:4-5), but that passage is no clearer than this one.

10. But these verses do trace the familiar story of Jesus: he suffered, died, rose again, ascended to heaven and is seated at God’s right hand. And this gives assurance to his exiled followers in their sufferings as they ‘revere Christ as Lord’ (v15) and refuse to be intimidated or fearful (v14). However powerful their enemies seem, all authorities and powers are subject to the risen Jesus (v22).

11. I don’t think it will be helpful to spend time on this strange passage or speculate on its meaning. Let’s focus on the challenge of loving our enemies; this teaching is not difficult to understand, but it is very difficult to put into practice.

12. At the beginning of this passage (v8), Peter repeats and reinforces what he has said before. What attitudes are essential if his readers are to remain united and supportive of each other in the face of opposition? As always, love for each other is the foundation, but what does this mean? Peter names sympathy, compassion and humility. These will help them bear each other’s burdens.

13. And in their relationships with those who abuse or oppress them, they must pursue peace, refuse to retaliate and prayerfully trust God for vindication (v9). Their good conduct might save them from harm (v13) or at least put their enemies to shame (v16) as they realise that they are behaving badly. And if they do suffer, they will be blessed despite their sufferings because of their obedience (v14).

14. Again, echoes here of the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven’ (Matthew 5:11-12).

15. And Peter again reminds them that life in exile holds evangelistic opportunities:

- (a) The way they respond to their enemies may provoke questions.
- (b) The way they love each other in the Christian community may provoke questions.
- (c) Their good behaviour may provoke questions.
- (d) Their evident hope for the future may provoke questions.

16. A church historian says that ‘fascination evangelism’ was a major factor in the early church’s growth. Their lifestyle provoked questions, which gave them many opportunities to share the gospel, to explain the reason for their behaviour and hope.

17. So, writes Peter, be ready to respond to these questions. Be ready to explain why you live as you do and why you are so hopeful. But here too your attitudes and tone of voice are important – not strident or arrogant, but respectful and gentle, listening as well as speaking, trusting God to be at work in the lives of others.

18. One of the best books on evangelism in recent years is *The Provocative Church*. The author argues that too often Christians answer questions people are not asking or try to manufacture conversations about the gospel. All this does is to put people off. Instead, we need to live distinctively and provocatively, so that family, friends and neighbours will be intrigued and ask us questions.

19. You might want to reflect on what you’ve read already or pick up other things from this passage but here are three questions to ponder:

- (a) What might it mean to live distinctively and provocatively today?
- (b) We have not looked at the long quotation from Psalm 34 in this passage (vv10-12). What does this add?
- (c) Peter twice (vv16, 21) mentions the importance of having a ‘clear conscience’: why is this so important?