

What the Apostle Peter's 15 Astonishing Words Mean to You

It is astonishing to hear Peter say, "Who is he who will harm you if you follow that which is good?" (1 Pet. 3:13). What could he possibly mean?

No other book in the Bible addresses the issue of Christian, non-retaliating, unjust suffering more than 1 Peter. For example,

- "For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God a person endures grief, suffering unjustly" (2:19).
- "But if when doing good and suffering for it, you patiently endure, this is favorable before God" (2:20).
- "Do not repay evil for evil, or curse for curse, but on the contrary, bless, knowing that to this you are called, so that you may receive a blessing" (3:9).
- "But even if you suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. "Do not be afraid of their terror, do not be troubled" (3:14).
- "For it is better, if it is the will of God, that you suffer for doing good than for doing evil" (3:17).
- "But rejoice insofar as you share in Christ's sufferings, so that you may rejoice and be glad also in the revelation of His glory" (4:13).
- "If you are reproached because of the name of Christ, you are blessed" (4:14).
- "Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God because of it" (4:16).
- "So then, let those who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good" (4:19).
- "Resist him firmly in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are experienced by your brotherhood

throughout the world" (5:9).

Peter is intent on preparing Christians to suffer well. He does not want them to be surprised when it comes: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though some strange thing happened to you" (4:12). It is not strange. It is part of the expected end-time judgment.

"The end of all things is near. ... For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God, and if it begins first with us, what shall the end be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (4:7, 17).

In other words, the fiery trial purifies Christians and punishes those who do not obey the gospel.

A Surprising Statement About Christian Suffering

Therefore, in the context of this book, it is astonishing to hear Peter say, "Who is he who will harm you if you follow that which is good?" (1 Pet. 3:13). This is a rhetorical question. No answer is given. He expects us to supply the answer. And the answer he expects is, "No one." The question implies, "There is no one to harm you, if you are zealous for what is good." That's the way rhetorical questions work.

What does he mean? Bore in with me on the context.

Just before this surprising statement, Peter quoted Psalm 34:12-16 (in 1 Peter 3:10-12). He gives this quotation as an argument for why we will inherit a blessing if we bless those who revile us. "To this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. *For ...* " (3:9-10).

The argument in support of our being blessed for blessing those who revile us is, first, because we will "see good days if we turn from evil and do good" (3:10-11); and, second, because "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous. ... But the

face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (3:12).

Now here's the surprising thing. That very argument for why we will inherit a blessing for blessing those who curse us is also the basis for what Peter says next: "Who is he who will harm you if you follow that which is good?" (3:13).

So the very same argument is given for saying seemingly opposite things:

"You will be blessed for blessing those who revile you;" and, "You will not be harmed by any one if you do what is good."

The essence of that argument is that the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous. Peter's insistence that no harm will come to the righteous is based on the fact that God's eyes are on them. So his point is *not* that good deeds prevent others from abusing us. But that God's people are doers of good deeds, and he is vigilant to watch over them.

So Peter infers, "If God's eyes are on us, no one can harm us." Has he somehow lost the conviction that pervades the whole book—that suffering for doing good is to be expected? No. For the next verse says, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed" (3:14). Why? Because "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous" (3:12).

It seems to me, therefore, that what Peter is saying is: "When you are under my sovereign watch-care, those who cause you suffering do not bring you *harm*, but *blessing*." Peter is differentiating between temporary harm and ultimate harm. Under God's watchful, loving, sovereign care, those who are zealous for good deeds will only endure what leads to greater blessing. No *ultimate* harm.

This is confirmed as we keep reading. The next words go like this: "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled" (3:14). But he has just said, "Even if you should *suffer*." So why should we not fear? It is going to *hurt*. That's what "suffering" means.

We should not fear because Peter believes that this hurt is not *ultimate* hurt. It is ultimate blessing. "If you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be *blessed*" (3:14).

Safe and Fearless With Jesus

There's more—at least three more clues that when Peter says, "Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?" he means: No one can *ultimately* harm you.

If we look carefully, we realize that in 1 Peter 3:15, Peter is giving a loose quotation from Isaiah:

"You should not say, 'It is a conspiracy,' concerning all that this people calls a conspiracy, neither fear their threats nor be afraid of them. Sanctify the Lord of Hosts Himself, and let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread. He shall become a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, and a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Is. 8:12-14).

Peter adapts this amazingly, and substitutes "the Lord Christ" for "the LORD of hosts." Instead of saying, "Honor Yahweh as holy," he says "Honor Christ the Lord as holy" (3:15). In both 1 Peter and Isaiah this is given as the alternative to fearing the enemy:

Isaiah: "Neither fear their threats nor be afraid of them" (Is. 8:12)

Peter: "Do not be afraid of their terror, do not be troubled" (1 Pet. 3:14)

And Isaiah supplies the reason they don't need to fear what others fear: "He shall become a sanctuary" (Is. 8:14). That is, no matter what happens, Yahweh (and now Christ the Lord) will surround you so that no ultimate harm will befall you.

I say not *ultimate* harm because Peter has already said in 3:14 that the ones we are not to fear are the very ones who in fact

are harming us—"But even if you suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. 'Do not be afraid of their terror, do not be troubled.'" Why not fear those who are harming us? Because Christ the Lord is your sanctuary, where no *ultimate* harm can befall you.

Then Peter adds that instead of fearing man, you should "always be ready to give an answer to every man who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, with gentleness and fear" (3:15). Why "hope"? Why not "faith" or "love"? Because hope in the promised blessing is precisely the ground of our fearlessness. This is what makes our adversary wonder. And that hope includes the promise that no *ultimate harm* will come to you when you suffer for doing good. Our hope is not that people won't persecute us and hurt us. He just said they would. Our hope is that this hurt is not ultimate hurt. It leads to blessing.

He Watches Over You

Finally, Peter ends the paragraph with these bold words: "For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil" (3:17).

Now we see why it makes all the difference in the world that "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous" (3:12). He does not watch over them to spare them suffering. Rather in his sovereign watch-care, the all-good, all-wise God decides when his children will suffer for doing good—"if that should be God's will" (3:17).

So the whole section ends on a note of God's sovereignty over Christian suffering. The sovereignty does not mean he spares us harm, but that he spares us *ultimate* harm. This is what I take Peter to mean in 3:13 when he says the astonishing words, "Who is he who will harm you if you follow that which is good?"

Which puts Peter's words in the same stream as the apostle

Paul's, who said, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). Answer: No one. That is, no one can be against us with any ultimate harm. And, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?" (Rom. 8:33). Answer: No one. That is, no charge will stick in the end. No final harm will be done.

So Peter gives wisest of all counsels: "Therefore let those who suffer *according to God's will* entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" (1 Pet. 4:19). Such suffering will not harm you. Not ultimately.

John Piper (@JohnPiper) is founder and teacher of and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author of more than 50 books.

For the original article, visit .