

“Early warning systems” (16)

Over the past few weeks Peter has been reminding us about what our behaviour should be like concerning different relationships. Today he is going to turn his attention to the subject of suffering once again. Now he’s touched on this topic a few times and will speak about it a little more later. But we need to remember that these early Christians were experiencing persecution or they were certainly about to experience persecution sometime very soon.

Before we get into our text today let me share with you a story I heard a few days ago, **it seems this man called a plumber and asked him to fix a problem he was having with some pipes. "I'm pretty busy," the plumber said. "In fact, it'll be exactly 2 years before I can get there." The man asked, "Will you be here in the morning or afternoon?" "Two years from now what difference will it make?" "Well, the man said, "The gas man is coming in the morning."**

And I’m wondering how Christians should react when they know something is coming. You see loved ones if you’re a Christian this morning the chances are you would have already experienced some persecution in your Christian life. But if you haven’t yet, don’t worry about it, it will come, it may be tomorrow or next week or even two years from now, but it will come.

And so with that in mind, the question Peter is going to ask today is this; **are you prepared for persecution coming?** Now under normal circumstances, what Peter writes in **verse 13** is the rule. **1 Peter 3:13 “For who is going to harm you if you are devoted to what is good?”** But we need to realise that there are times when Satan will make every effort to bring harm to those who try to follow the will of God.

That’s why he says in **1 Peter 5:8+9 “Be sober and alert. Your enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, is on the prowl looking for someone to devour. Resist him, strong in your faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are enduring the same kinds of suffering.”** That’s why John reminds us in **Revelation 12:17** that **“The dragon became enraged at the woman and went away to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep God’s commandments and hold to the testimony about Jesus.”** So we need to be aware that the devil is real and he will attack anyone who’s trying to do the will of God.

I don’t remember this but maybe some of our older members will, many years ago during the 2nd World War whenever enemy planes were on their way to bomb Britain the MOD would switch on the early warning system. They were called air raid sirens and whenever they sounded every family had to run into a nearby air raid shelter for cover and stay there until the all clear siren went off. So in affect people would go about their daily business working but they were always conscious of the fact that the **air raid sirens** could go off at anytime of the day or night.

In other words they were prepared, **and I’m wondering just how prepared we are for when persecution comes our way?** Peter is going to share with us **five early warning systems** this morning to help us prepare for persecution whilst we’re still living here on earth as strangers in a strange land.

And the **first** one is this, as Christians we need to remember that **we are blessed if we suffer for Christ.** He says in **1 Peter 3:14 “But in fact, if you happen to suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. But do not be terrified of them or be shaken”.** He also says in **1 Peter 3:17 “For it is better to suffer for doing good, if God wills it, than for doing evil”.** And he’s going to remind of us this again a little late in his letter in **1 Peter 4:14** where he writes, **“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory, who is the Spirit of God, rests on you”.**

Now you might be wondering **how on earth are we blessed when we suffer for the cause of Christ?** We’re blessed loved ones because we have the promise that God is with us as we go through that suffering. Jesus Himself promised that too **didn’t He?** In **Matthew 5:10-12 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things about you falsely on account of me. Rejoice and be glad because your reward is great in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way”.**

Jesus says you’re blessed because you’re reward will be great. Jesus says you’re blessed because you’re in the company of God’s Old Testament prophets. Now loved ones, the alternative is the opposite and we need to understand that we are far better off suffering for Christ than suffering for evil. **1 Peter 3:17 “For it is better to suffer for doing good, if God wills it, than for doing evil”.** You see suffering for evil is what **will** happen if we are not willing to stand up for Christ. But remember that suffering for Christ is only temporary, but the suffering for evil is eternal.

The **second** way to help prepare ourselves for persecution whilst we're still living here on earth as strangers in a strange land according to Peter is to **set apart the Lord in your hearts**. 1 Peter 3:14+15 "But in fact, if you happen to suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. But do not be terrified of them or be shaken. But set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess."

There is a Greek word used only once in the New Testament and yet what a practical word it is for today's Christian. It is the word **diagnōsis** and yes, the English word is a derivative. It means discernment or something that is distinguished. It's used in **Acts 25:21** to describe Festus' discussion with King Agrippa concerning the Apostle Paul.

When Festus spoke of Paul's scheduled meeting with Agrippa, he used the word translated **hearing**. Paul then followed shortly after with his defence address in the presence of Agrippa. It is unusual to describe what Paul was about to speak as a **hearing**, but in the Christian's life it is very appropriate.

And what Peter is saying loved ones is this, we are daily bombarded with attacks on our faith. And so Christians must be well prepared to face the scrutiny and **diagnosis** of the world. The question is **how will we react to the examination of the world? Will we find that we are not prepared? Will we find that our preparedness is founded in self-reliance?** Self-diagnosis should occur first before the world begins its **hearing** about your faith.

So what does Peter mean when he says, 'set apart the Lord in your hearts'? Well in short he means, as Christians the Lord Jesus should be firmly seated on the throne of our hearts. The Lord Jesus should be the Lord and ruler of our very lives. The Lord Jesus should be ruling over our desires to the point where His will becomes more important than our will.

And when he talks about facing persecution without fear or without being troubled. He's telling us that if Jesus isn't set apart in our hearts then we will be afraid of what man might do, we will be troubled by the threats we receive. But if Jesus truly is Lord of our lives then we won't be afraid of anyone.

Bulstrode Whitlock, Cromwell's envoy to Sweden, was one night so disturbed in his mind over the state of his nation that he could not sleep. His servant, observing it said, "Pray Sir, will you allow me to ask a question?" "Certainly," replied Whitlock. "Do you think that God governed the world very well before you came into it?" he suggested. "Undoubtedly"--"And do you not think that He will govern the world quite as well when you are gone from it?" "Certainly" "Then, I ask you, do you not think that you may trust Him to govern it as long as you are living?"

You see loved ones many times as believers; we too wrestle with the problems we face, not realizing that God has been with us all the time. But for this to be our hope, we must realize God is in control. **Hebrews 13:5+6** "Our conduct must be free from the love of money and you must be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you and I will never abandon you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, and I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

It was **Charles Spurgeon** who once gave this illustration: "There is a young girl in heaven now, once a member of this church. I went with one of my beloved deacons to see her when she was very near her departure. She was in the last stage of tuberculosis. Fair and sweetly beautiful she looked, and I think I never heard such wonderful uplifting words as those which fell from that girl's lips. She had disappointments, and trials, and troubles, but all these she had not a word to say about, except that she blessed God for them; they had brought her nearer to the Savior.

And when we asked her whether she was not afraid of dying, 'No,' she said, 'the only thing I fear is this, I am afraid of living, lest my patience should wear out. I have not said an impatient word yet, sir; I hope I shall not. It is sad to be so very weak, but I think if I had my choice, I would rather be here than be in good health, for it is very precious to me; I know that my Redeemer liveth, and I am waiting for the moment when he shall send his chariot of fire to take me up to him.' **Spurgeon put the question to her, 'Have you not any doubts?' 'No, none, sir; why should I? I clasp my arms around the neck of Christ.'** 'And have not you any fear about your sins?' 'No, sir, they are all forgiven; I trust the Saviour's precious blood.' 'And do you think that you will be as brave as this when you come actually to die?' 'Not if he leaves me, sir, but he will never leave me, for he said, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee' " That young girl knew who was in control and she knew who was Lord of her heart and she trusted in the promises of God with her very life.

The **third** way to help prepare ourselves for persecution whilst we're still living here on earth as strangers in a strange land according to Peter is to **always be ready to give a defence for the reason for your hope**.

1 Peter 3:15 “But set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess.” Now this is one of those passages which is taken out of context so many times, read it carefully loved ones. Peter is **not** saying that we need to be ready to give an answer for **every** religious question that someone might ask, he is **not** saying that.

I think it’s good that we’re able to explain why we do what we do in matters of religion, but that’s **not** the point Peter is making here. Peter is saying that we should always be ready to give a reason why we have the **hope** we do. In other words when someone asks you why you’re a Christian, you share with them your strong desires and expectations which come from being a Christian. Peter is saying that our desire and confidence for the future is so strong that it is seen in our lives by others.

That’s why he says back 1 Peter 1:6 “This brings you great joy, although you may have to suffer for a short time in various trials”. That’s why he followed up and said back in 1 Peter 1:8 “You have not seen him, but you love him. You do not see him now but you believe in him, and so you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.” But we should demonstrate this in our lives with the spirit of humility. We shouldn’t be arrogant about it; we should be humble about it. But we should also demonstrate this in our lives with the spirit of fear. In other words we shouldn’t be flippant about it but reverent about it.

The **fourth** way to help prepare ourselves for persecution whilst we’re still living here on earth as strangers in a strange land according to Peter is to **keep our conscience clean**. 1 Peter 3:16 “Yet do it with courtesy and respect, keeping a good conscience, so that those who slander your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame when they accuse you”.

Peter says together with our good conduct we will likely cause our enemies to be ashamed for mistreating us. And remember loved ones, if they are not ashamed in this life, they will certainly be ashamed on the Day of Judgment. Let me ask you this; **how do you sleep at night? Are you looking forward to meeting your Creator?**

You see a guilty conscience will not enable us to face the threat of death without fear and trembling. Because not only should we be able to stand before men without fear, we also need to be able to stand before God without fear. Because let me tell you loved ones, we can’t stand before God without a clear conscience.

And those are not my words but John’s words in 1 John 3:21 “Dear friends, if our conscience does not condemn us, we have confidence in the presence of God.” **How’s your conscience church?** Let me ask you this question, **should we be giving ourselves a guilt complex every time we sin?**

You see loved ones God showed us the greatest example of love when He sent His Son to die for our sins. And He took care of our sin when Jesus died on the cross. But as humans, some Christians just can’t accept that their sins have been taken care of. **So what do these people do?** Those people who just can’t accept that forgiveness, give themselves a guilt complex.

Now please don’t misunderstand what I’m saying here. When we sin it is right that we feel guilty about it, the problem comes when that guilt takes over our lives. You see the guilt complex stops us from talking to God, it stops us from talking to each other, and it stops us from having fellowship with one another. And we sometimes forget or don’t believe that our sins have been forgiven.

There was a young girl who was just 14 years old, and every time she went to church she would say to the minister. “You know, I speak to God every night and He answers me back every night”. And the minister said to her, “It’s just your imagination, you can’t hear God speaking back to you.” But the little girl said, “Oh, but He does.” So the following week the minister said to the little girl, “Well, did you speak to God last night?” the girl replied “Yes, He did.” The minister said “And did He answer you back?”. The little girl said, “Yes, He did.”

So the minister said, “You go home and you ask God what that big sin was that I did last night”. So the little girl went home, and the following week the minister asked, “Well, what did God say, what was that big sin I did the other night?” The little girl said, “I did speak to God and He says in His word that He doesn’t remember anything about any sin”.

You see loved ones, our sins are forgiven, but the problem with the guilt complex after sinning is that it draws us away from Christ.

And anything that draws us away from Christ is not good; we should be drawing nearer to Him, not away. The church in **Colossae** was practicing a form of religion called **Asceticism** which is a form of self-denial, self-punishment. They would beat themselves or beat each other up with sticks or deny themselves things as a form of self-punishment for their sins. I believe that the guilt complex is a form of **Asceticism** that we do today. We punish or deny ourselves by using the guilt complex.

What do we do or think to ourselves after we've sinned? "Well, I don't deserve to go to Heaven" "God probably won't listen to me now" "What will people think of me" "How can I stand up here and preach after what I've done" "I can't go to church after that sin because someone might ask me to lead a prayer" "I can't go to church after that sin because people will see right through me" "Someone might ask me to get involved" "I don't deserve communion" Or "If I go to church and don't take communion, people will know that there is something wrong with me"

I mean the list could go on and on but these are all examples of self-denial and self-punishment, **Asceticism**. These are all examples of Satan working in us trying to draw us away from Christ. That's why we shouldn't beat ourselves up and give ourselves a guilt complex after sinning. But what we should be doing is repenting and praying for forgiveness with a sincere heart and then just get up and get on with it.

Frank Chappel who is a very dear friend of mine from many years ago stood up to preach one Sunday morning and made a statement which blew me away. He said, "Christians should not feel guilty after sinning to the point of punishing themselves."

Well me, in my immature Christian years told him afterwards he was wrong. **Why did I believe he was wrong?** Well simply because I wanted to punish myself when I sinned, I wanted to feel bad and sorry for what I had done, it felt right to me. And so when he offered to go through the scriptures and explain all of this, I grabbed the chance, and when we did, I couldn't believe it, he was right.

And so loved ones, the next time someone preaches something that doesn't sound right, you take the chance to study that subject, just because you have been a Christian for 50 years, that doesn't automatically mean to say you're always right.

If you continue to feel guilty after sinning and don't just get on with it, you're practicing what I call a **daisy chain religion**. 'I'm saved, I'm not, God loves me, He loves me not'. So how do we deal with the guilt complex? How do we keep a clear conscience? I believe that James will help us, when he says in **James 5:16** "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed".

The guilt is removed by prayer, God forgives when we ask but we still feel bad, **don't we?** But we need to remember that God removes that feeling of guilt through the fellowship of confession. In other words that's God plan to help us remove the guilt complex. The guilt is removed through prayers. The sin is removed when you ask God to forgive you, and praying with others is designed to remove the complex.

So loved ones if your conscience is bothering you this morning because of a sin in your life, then let me encourage you to confess your sins to God, He will forgive, as promised in **1 John 1:9**. Let me encourage you to talk to someone today to help you deal with the complexities which come from sin as **James 5:16** tells us and this will help remove the guilt complex.

Now just before we finish let's look at the **fifth** way to help prepare ourselves for persecution whilst we're still living here on earth as strangers in a strange land. Peter says **remember the example of Christ**. **1 Peter 3:18** "Because Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, to bring you to God, by being put to death in the flesh but by being made alive in the spirit".

Peter says remember that Jesus suffered for our sakes, not only to bring us to God but also to help us understand that suffering for good can sometimes accomplish much good in the long run. Now church all Christians have been called to follow His example. Peter reminded us of that when he said in **1 Peter 2:21** "For to this you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps".

Peter is also going to remind us of that again when we get to **1 Peter 4:1** "So, since Christ suffered in the flesh, you also arm yourselves with the same attitude, because the one who has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin."

Loved ones your not alone when you suffer, when we suffer, He suffers. Just knowing that Jesus suffered in so many ways, just knowing that He suffers with us when we suffer should help and comfort us greatly. So Peter has shared with us **five early warning systems** this morning to help prepare us for persecution whilst we're still living here on earth as strangers in a strange land.

Persecution will come loved ones and at times when we don't expect it. And so by applying these **five principles** to our lives we will be more useful to the Lord, and ready for whatever may come. And even though in our lifetime we may not be faced with the prospects of physical persecutions like the early Christians did, they will certainly help us in times of social or verbal persecution.