

A Case for Hope

1 Peter 3: 15 (NIV) 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...

This scripture verse has been one of my favorites for many reasons and one that has guided my life in the last decade or so. God has called us to be hope-bearers amidst a hurting world, but what does that really mean? Bearing hope versus weighted with grief is a rare find these days, and I believe the holy scripture is guiding us to find the source of our strength here. Finding the strength from our Lord, so that we may hold fast in God's love both personally and collectively. God is inviting us into a relationship, so that we may build up others in the faith and so that they too can live a life with hope both in the present and in the eternal.

I have not always been the most organized person. In college, I almost always made it to class, but it was the organization part of writing papers, keeping track of notes, and adhering to due dates, that often threw me off. My discipline was under construction, and it was a great time of learning, although it would be many years later before I understood its importance. Always being prepared was not one of my strengths, so when I read this verse, it sticks out with great importance: ***“Always be prepared to give an answer”***

As we think about our Christian identity, this idea of hope becomes central to who we are in God. Being prepared to share my hope was both a gift from God and a learned experience from others. If I wanted to build a case for God-given hope, it would be this: God walked with me through the good times and in the deep suffering, never once leaving me alone. There was a time in my life when things were pretty dark. It was a season of confusion, depression, loneliness, and pain. Maybe you've had a similar time. I wish I could remember all of the details, the specific prayer I prayed, or the sequence of events, but I remember the important ones as God led me out of the darkness, took out my heart of stone, and imparted to me a heart of flesh. It's written in Ezekiel 36:26: **I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and supply you a heart of flesh.** And that is exactly what God did and I will never forget it, nor will I ever stop sharing it. One evening I was shedding tears of pain, and upon waking the next morning, I was a new person, ever-curious about the world, pain-free, and excited for what the day might bring. This was a new beginning, with a new heart, new eyes, a fresh spirit!

Pastor and author, Francis Chan, wrote a fantastic book titled, “Crazy Love.” Chan writes, “God is calling you to a passionate love relationship, because the path to a life of hope in God isn't working harder at a list of do's and don'ts — it's falling in love with God. And once you encounter God's love, as Francis describes it, you will never be the same. God is love: crazy, relentless, and all-powerful love.

God is preparing us for a hope-mission soaked in the overflowing love of God. Looking back, God had used my circumstances and bad choices, and turned my life story of messiness into one of redemption and restoration. Preparation is hard. It's a time of molding, stretching our synapses, intentional learning, and even seasons of unlearning the stories we have written about our life that are untrue. God is preparing us right now, for something great. A new season, a divine appointment perhaps, where we might even get a glimpse of heaven. But for now, let us prepare. Let us reflect on the things, the people, and the places that brought us to this moment. Let us prepare to share our own story of hope. How God once intervened into our convoluted existence, and brought tremendous meaning and purpose, both laughter and tears, and used it all for good. How might our story impact others? If we shared our Christian walk, how might it spark a curiosity about our faith, or provide consolation, or bring about something new in us? **God will use every drop of our existence.** Every tear ever cried; every pain endured. Every loss and difficult circumstance we've faced, God will use it to prepare us to be the hope-tellers in our circles of family, friends, and community.

We are a people loved into preparation for the church's mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We are loved by God through others into our divine meaning and purpose in this life. Do you believe it? I know I do.

To continue onto the next part of my story, my interior life was transformed through Jesus Christ. Soon thereafter, I would find myself among a community of spirit-filled believers at a local United Methodist Church. The church sat right across the street from my house and whenever I peeked out my living room window, I could see a car lot full of cars with people coming and going, almost every day of the week. I was curious to know what was going on over there! Maybe I was being nosey. Either way, God used it. My neighbor who was disabled told me of a Wednesday night dinner the church held every week. She would have her grandson pick up a to-go container for the two of them. One week, I had worked some long days and the kids were hungry, so we decided to give it a try. I arrived at the doorstep for a community meal with kids in-tow, not expecting to meet the spiritual provisions that were inside those church doors. The people were kind, generous, and loved my family. They ate with us, sat with us, invited us to church and events, and knew our names. Over the years, that bunch would become a family to me and my children. This season of my life holds special memories of love and laughter, and growth in biblical understandings, many faith conversations, and exploration of spiritual gifts. Through God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit working in this faith community, my story was being re-written with one filled with hope in God. And I never underestimate the power of a busy parking lot to spark the curiosity of neighbors!

Now, having this great hope living inside, the holy spirit that dwells within each one of us, is just too great not to share with the world. My greatest love is for others to experience and know this great love of God. I became a counselor then a pastor to listen to others' stories about life and how God's provision of redemptive love is woven throughout our world. I've heard countless stories about life, love, tragedy, difficult seasons, marriage, loss, and many, many more. I never get tired of listening and finding the "God-Moments" speckled all through them. Sharing our faith journeys is important and it can also be hard work. It often requires we address uncomfortable parts of us and see with new eyes how God was with us all along. It requires vulnerability to share with our family and friends the ways we see God at work, but in this passage we read today, God is putting in the request: **Always be ready to give the reason for your hope.**

Admiring Christ, making him the ruler of our life, sets up the perfect journey. As we turn areas of our life over to the Lord, our life becomes joy-filled, simpler, and easier traveled.

One of my go-to books is "Thin Places: A Memoir" by Mary De Muth. She writes about a dark time in which she wanted to end her life. She writes, "But now I really want to live. Really live. To follow God out of the box of my loneliness and insecurities, to find abundance when my soul lacks. Today, someone blessed me with words that help me see that God has indeed created something beautiful in me. Now, I see clearly. I'm blessedly alive to feel the wind on my face, to experience the achingly beautiful words of my children and grandchildren, and to see Jesus in the cracks and fissures of my life."

May the reason for our hope pour out from our hearts to someone's ears today. May they hear a message of hope and find that life is wonderful in all the twists and turns. And may God continue to woo us inward to Him in all the seasons of our life.

My prayer for us today is that we share the reason for our hope with another person this week. No matter how large or small, long-ago or recent, find the hope living within you and give it away.

We often find ourselves asking the question, "How do I begin to share my faith story?" Here are a few practical ways to begin a season of preparation:

A few simple ways to put your faith walk into your muscle memory and live it out!

- Read one passage every day this week.
- Memorize one of the passages.
- Text it to a friend.
- Write one or more verses on a post-it note and put them up throughout the house, on the fridge, on your bathroom mirror, next to your charging dock, above your computer, etc.
- Share it on your Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram, or other social media
- Write a letter or mail a card (pen, paper, and stamp!) and include one of the passages.
- Pray the passage out loud inserting your own name in it*

And lastly, however you prepare, in whatever way you may share, do it with love. We Christians are marked by love and that's how we are to be known. **Do so in gentleness and meekness.** We aren't strong-arming people into the kingdom. We are loving them in. For God is love, and that same love dwells within us. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control are the fruit of the spirit, thus saith the Lord. May it be so.

God of Grace, we come into your presence so aware of our human frailty and yet overwhelmed by your love for us. We thank you that there is no human experience that we might walk through where your love cannot reach us. If we climb the highest mountain you are there and yet if we find ourselves in the darkest valley of life, you are there.

Teach us today to love you more.

Help us to rest in that love that asks nothing more than the simple trusting heart of a child.

In your wisdom, mercy, and grace, we pray-Amen.