

*The Reason for the Hope Within You – 1 Peter 3:13-22*

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In light of this text from 1 Peter today, I'm wondering if you've ever had to make a bold defense of something, anything.

When we think of making a defense, making a case for a position, we most famously think of lawyers making legal defenses in a court of law. In America, you're innocent until proven guilty; and defense lawyers make the case for their clients' innocence.

The vast majority of us aren't lawyers, however. But there may have been times when we've still had to take a stand on behalf of something or someone we believe in, even including ourselves. And we get our courage from others, whose stories inspire us to defend our own interests or something or somebody we believe in.

My son, Joey, has been reading the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* in one of his classes in school this semester. The Harper Lee novel may be the most-read among high school students for many generations.

The book is ripe with storylines about having the courage to take a stand. The most famous, of course, is that of Atticus Finch deciding to defend Tom Robinson, a black man in the deep south, who was accused of raping a white woman. Yes, Atticus was a lawyer, and defending clients is what lawyers do. Still, though, he took the case and defended him with all he had—even against the strong racial bias of the day working against him and with defeat most likely the outcome.

At one point, Finch says, "It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do." That's what taking a stand is often about. He believed his client, but he also believed in giving every human a fair shot—no matter the color of his or her skin.

That's standing up. That's making a defense for what you believe in.

Our occasions for defending a position are often less famous and life-changing—defending a work proposal, standing up for your child on a school matter, or speaking in front of the local town council on a neighborhood zoning issue. But then there are matters like that which Peter speaks to today: giving an accounting for the hope that is in you. And being ready to defend it.

This all presupposes that there is hope within us to begin with. And there are honest moments we have with ourselves when we really question that truth. Is there really hope? We're battered and bruised, the world having had its way with us. Indeed, at times life might seem hopeless—without the confidence that life will get better.

However, Christian hope is different, of course. It's not a "wishing for" something better or confidence that things will improve. Christian hope is an expectation, a belief. As we look to the past—knowing that God has pardoned us through Christ's work on the cross, that he overcame sin and death in his resurrection, that he is preparing a way for Christ's second coming by his Holy Spirit, and that he is making all things new that we may dwell with him in his coming kingdom—we receive courage to move forward in the present, looking ahead to the future glory that awaits.

In our moments of personal despair, we can still possess that hope—the hope of our faith. And that hope is God's tremendous gift to us.

So, Peter says, in light of that, always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.

What's the case you would make? What is the reason for the hope within you?

If that's hard to articulate, try embracing these three realities as part of your defense: First, God is remarkably faithful. There are challenges we face individually and communally as a people. We can name them. Many of them stand out for their acute pain and disruption. Yet, like a rock, God in Jesus Christ has remained. And we can see evidence of that by the fact

that we are ushered through hard times and come out of them on the other side—changed, perhaps, but intact.

Those of you who have been part of this church family for decades know the ups and downs we have faced. Building changes, pastoral changes, disagreements that have led some folks to leave...and yet the family is still here. Because God is still here and has always been here. That's a reason for the hope within us.

The second reason for the hope within you might be this: you're incredibly resilient. You as an individual, and you as a congregation have withstood great challenge. And you're still standing. And that must give you hope.

And a third reason for the hope within you should be a joyful expectation of what is to come. You might call it optimism. Or, knowing there will still be tough days ahead, you might instead call it a resolute conviction that whatever challenge comes will be outweighed by the joy of Jesus reigning within his kingdom—this one right here and in the one that is to come.

God is faithful, you're resilient, and you have joyful expectation of what awaits. If you embrace those three realities, you're making a solid defense of the hope that resides inside you.

Peter advises his readers to do two things, however, when uttering their defense: defend with gentleness and reverence.

If you watch cable news, there's a lot of defending going on—constantly. But in your quest to find it being done with a gentler and reverent tone, you might come up empty-handed. People name-call, make fun of, and sometimes shout with righteous indignation all in the name of making their case against their political opponents.

Peter would not be pleased, it seems. He seems to know that no credible stand or defense can be made without taking into account the welfare and rightful place in society of the person or people one is attempting to persuade. Peter knew then, and he's encouraging us now, to

be gentle and reverent in our dealings with each other—especially those who need to hear us say what it is that leaves us hopeful.

We've been fortunate to have a group of new friends join our ranks as members of the FPC family. They bring great talent, energy, and love into our midst. And my sense is that through your actions and words—and the tone by which you have done and said them—you have made an effective case for the hope that lies within us as a family. It is our commitment to lifting up Jesus as Lord, serving our neighbors with a humble posture, and welcoming new friends with open arms that has mostly been the impetus for their arrival. You all, with gentleness and reverence, have effectively made your defense.

As summer unfolds, both you and I can be honing our case—our defense. The challenge doesn't get any easier. The need remains great for others to hear what it is that causes us to give so much of what we have to a cause that doesn't produce the tangible returns of a financial investment or profitable business. And what we have to defend is a life that is not without sacrifice, but one that rests in the knowledge that a grace-filled and loving Jesus is by our sides and working to bring in his kingdom.

Our hope is a hope that's more than wishing and wanting. It's grounded in an expectation that God's peace and joy is both here and awaits us.