

Ron Walters recently wrote: English [is] the most bazaar and confusing language in the world. It’s a wonder anyone can understand it. For example:

- The plural of *moose* is *moose* while the plural of *goose* is *geese*. But the plural of *mongoose* is *mongooses*.
- *Ewe* (e-w-e) and *you* (y-o-u) are pronounced the same but share no common letters.
- The longest word with non-duplicated letters is *uncopyrightable*.
- The most commonly written word is *the*; the most often spoken word is “I.”

And if that’s not enough, certain wordsmiths play mindboggling games to confuse us even more—as with *palindromes*. Palindromes are words that read the same forward and backwards, as in *Bob*, *radar*, *kayak*, and *racecar*. A palindrome can also be a sentence—spelled the same from either direction, as in: *A man, a plan, a canal, Panama*.

I wonder, “Who thinks up these verbal switchbacks? Who has that much time on their hands?” But modern-day scribes weren’t the first to write forward and backwards—palindromes date back 2,000 years. In fact, cryptic forms of palindromes were used by the early Church as coded messages during times of persecution. Whereas Nero hoped to silence Christians, the first century believers were determined to spread the word, teach the saints, and hold tightly to biblical doctrines even if done through puzzles.

We’ve come a long way during those two millennia. Today we have protected freedoms allowing us to gather for worship and to study God’s word. And pastors have the same freedom to teach. We do not hide our message or veil its truth. Or do we? Ron Walters says: To be relevant and unique, there’s a temptation to sacrifice content for creativity, doctrine for easy-listening, the permanent on the altar of the immediate. But nothing on God’s green earth could be more relevant than his *breathed word*. The further our teaching strays from Scripture, the less its power, and the more veiled it becomes to those who are perishing.

That’s why our commission was made so plain and simple. Paul to Timothy: “*Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.*” Paul to the Ephesians: “*Speak the truth in love.*” And, Peter to God’s elect: “*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*”

In his letter, Peter talks a lot about having hope, especially in the midst of suffering. We might even be tempted to tell Peter to lighten up a bit, because we’re tired of hearing the same thing over and over. But hope in suffering isn’t something that will ever be optional for a Christian—at least, not in this life.

Peter asks this very good question: “*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?*” (1 Pet 3:13). But then he quickly adds: “*But even if you should suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed*” (v. 14). Peter is realistic; he knows full well how much trouble the gospel can bring, and how easily we can become discouraged through suffering. Peter experienced enough suffering himself for the sake of Jesus Christ to know how real it can be.

Suffering is part of life and no one escapes it; whether people follow Christ or not, they will suffer. But there's something different about suffering for the sake of the gospel. When you know you're doing what Jesus wants and that is bringing hardship, then you tend to look at that kind of suffering a little differently.

Sometimes it can make us feel as though life is terribly unfair. I can remember having strong conversations with God, when I wanted to stomp my feet and wail like a child because life wasn't going the way it was supposed to go when people faithfully follow. For some reason, I felt that my obedience to God should give me special treatment, so when the cold reality of unfair treatment hit home, my reaction was like anyone else's. How could this happen to me?

I would imagine there were times when Peter felt the same way. His responses to Jesus were so full of human frailty that we know he just had to have those moments with God too. And I'm not sure we can ever avoid them, not really. When we're hurt—especially unfairly—our first response is usually to defend ourselves and find someone else to blame.

But this can't be the sum total of our reaction to suffering, because how we suffer says something to the world about the God who loves us. People who don't know God suffer too, and for many of them, this is the precise time when they are most open to hearing something about Jesus. *"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..."* These people may be watching us carefully to see if a life of faith makes any difference in our own lives when it comes to suffering. And they'll probably ask us about it, in one way or another. They may have trouble putting it into words, but if we're listening carefully, we will know their question: how is it that we can go through what we do and still manage to keep on going; and not only keep on going, but live with faith and hope?

I think it's interesting that Peter stresses the need to always be ready to give a defense when someone demands an accounting from us for the hope that is in us. Whether people are hostile to Christianity or indifferent to it, whether they are curious and come seeking, part of them will honestly believe that we have one foot outside of reality. How can you possibly live in hope when this world is the way it is? You must be crazy!?!

It doesn't matter if the question comes from someone seeking or from someone challenging, the answer is the same; we must be ready to point to the presence of Jesus Christ, who is our hope, in the midst of every wrong and every terrible thing that will ever happen to us. And we must do it in a way that doesn't turn people off, but encourages them to keep trying to see for themselves the healing light of Jesus.

If we listen to Peter's instructions, we know it doesn't matter how people approach us or react to us. We're not to become frustrated by their attitude or by our inability to get through to them. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our task is to make certain that we don't make the Spirit's work any harder than it already is. That's why a gentle and respectful answer is more important than correct theological language spoken in anger or self-righteousness. After all, we're pointing to our God as the reason for every hope and promise that we cling to. Everything about our words and our attitude should invite people to go further in faith, so that they too experience for themselves the living hope that lies within our own hearts.

Suffering will always be part of this life, but each one of us has a choice as to how we respond to that suffering and live in light of that suffering. As people who follow Jesus, we've got to be able to stand in the midst of life as life really is, and say clearly and loudly that the Lord we follow is a Lord of love and mercy. And in those times when we feel absolutely overwhelmed by life, if we can only whisper these words as a prayer or plea, then that will be enough.

It's easy to praise God when things are going well in our lives. But if we can still praise God when our hearts are being torn apart by suffering, then we make a witness to the world that will not be forgotten. We must be able to say, even in grief and anger and pain, that this may not be what we wanted in life, but even so, we can keep on living it because God is with us in everything that's happening. We trust in the willingness of God to catch up all this suffering and pain in merciful love, and somehow redeem it so that it will mean something in God's ultimate plan to give life.

And someday, by the grace of God and because God is present, we will even be able to say once again that life is good and worth living. But until we feel that, we will persevere in hope because we know the faithfulness of the One we follow. Jesus didn't give up on us when things got really bad. Why should we then give up on Jesus?

I believe the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ sent ripples out in time—forwards and backwards—until nothing in all of God's good creation was untouched by the awesome light of God's saving love. This is the story we live and it is our hope and salvation.

Unfair suffering comes to everyone, but the people of God must be aware that how we live in our suffering says something about the God who loves us. How we speak of our hope in the midst of suffering can be a powerful witness to God's grace. In the midst of life as it really is, God is powerfully present. Therefore... *“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...”*

Gently and respectfully telling someone else the reason for the hope within us is how to share our faith. And let's not forget that God's word is infinite in scope, complete in knowledge, and entirely dependable.

William Barclay once said that the most compelling argument for faith is a Christian life. Go out and make it easier for someone else to believe.

To God be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.