

Fear God - 1 Peter 3:8-22

Who or what do you fear? Fear controls and drives our lives in many ways. In the midst of a scary world, Peter encourages us to fear God and shows us what this looks like in practice.

Driven by fear...

Much of what we do is driven by fear.

I find heights terrifying. I cower anywhere near the edge of high cliffs without a fence.

Many people are afraid of public speaking and wouldn't dream of standing up in the front of church to give a talk.

I know others are afraid of what they might look like on video, so they don't contribute to the online services.

More seriously, fear is a motive that drives a lot of what we do and don't do.

Fear of losing control, or losing our status can lead us to be argumentative, stubborn and difficult.

Fear of not speaking out, because we are worried about what other people might think can stop us from saying important things.

Fear of rejection can make us give in to peer pressure and simply follow the crowd.

Peter writes to small Christian communities spread out in a very non-Christian world. These people would have had plenty of reasons to be afraid. To fear what their neighbours, colleagues, bosses or husbands might do to them, because of their faith.

Peter's response is to tell them to fear God not man.

Psalm 34; 1 Peter and the Fear of God

To help them out, Peter turns to Psalm 34. Like many Psalms it was a song or poem written by David. However, it is probably written by David when he would have been most vulnerable and afraid as he was surrounded by enemies.

How does David respond? Three times he says, "Fear God!"

The third time he says:

"Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD." (Psalm 34:11)

What follows in the Psalm are the verses that Peter quotes in chapter 3 and much of what Peter says flows from these verses.

So let's look at what the Fear of the Lord looks like.

Fear of God, Seek Peace - 3:8-9

In the Psalm David says, "seek peace and pursue it..." We see that in 3:11.

How does this arise from the fear of the Lord?

Primarily, because this is what God desires. Jesus says,

"Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

Indeed, God is a God of peace, who sends Jesus, the Prince of peace, to bring about peace between us and God.

But, also because if we are fearing God, we won't be fearing other things. We are often unpeaceful, because we fear if we don't fight for our way, our justice and our status we will miss out. But as Christians we trust that God will provide all we need, will bring about justice and gives us the greatest status. So, we are free to pursue peace.

Seek Peace in Christian community - 3:8

That means firstly that we will seek peace in our Christian communities.

Verse 8 is a beautiful description of a harmonious community where everyone is seeking peace.

Where instead of people fighting for their own status or to get their own way, people treat one another as family, they seek to understand others, work for consensus and are humble enough to admit when they are wrong.

Incidentally, although Peter has told wives to submit to their husbands, this general vision of Christian life should also be the vision for Christian marriage!

As it is verse 8 comes immediately after instruction to husbands and wives.

Seek Peace with abusers - 3:9

Secondly, to seek peace means not retaliating.

Verse 9, could refer to how to behave within the Christian community, but I think its main thrust in the context of the letter is how to respond to those outside the community, who are particularly abusive towards Christians.

We have seen already in chapter 2, that Jesus was an example to us in this, because when he was beaten, mocked and crucified he did not retaliate or even speak a word.

Yet, to seek peace, means not retaliating, not trading insults. Sometimes it means just walking away or staying quiet.

And as Christians we can do that because we fear God. He wants us to seek peace and we know that as his people we stand to inherit the greatest blessing of all, whatever people may do to us.

So, we need to fear God and seek peace, but we also as Christians need to fear God and hold out hope.

Fear God, hold out hope - 3:13-16

We fear God, because we know without his grace and favour, all hope is gone.

That's what David implies in the Psalm:

"Whoever would love life and see good days..."
live to please God.

But, how can we witness to Christ in the midst of a hostile society. How can we invite them to join us in that hope, when the world seems to reject Christ?

Fearless Witness

Firstly, Peter says we need a fearless witness.

Verse 15, is a classic quote to encourage evangelism or sharing our faith:

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

The word for 'answer' is *apologia* which is where we get the word 'apologetics', which is the study of how to best defend the Christian faith and persuade others that it is true. Many books have been written on these topics and many YouTube videos have been made in recent years, with people giving apologetic arguments for their faith. It's good to know those arguments, but I don't think learning arguments for Christianity is the secret to evangelism or sharing your faith.

When Peter says always be prepared, I don't think he means: 'make sure you've done your revision, so you can answer the questions your friends have about Christianity when they ask you - as though sharing your faith is a bit like passing an exam! Such an outlook is popular amongst student evangelism at university, but then if you've got to university you are probably not too scared about exams!

The problem with this is that many Christians are scared of exams and because sharing their faith is presented this way - they are even more scared of doing that! Many people have said to me, I'm too scared to talk about my faith, because I don't think I'd be able to answer people's questions.

But that is not what Peter means by be prepared. The context is, 'do not be afraid, do not be frightened.' And how do you stop being afraid? By revering Christ in your hearts as Lord!

If we are honest the reason most of us do not talk about our faith, is because we are afraid! Not afraid of not knowing the answers, but afraid of what people might think. We are afraid of coming across as strange. We are afraid of rejection.

The solution is to push the fear out of our hearts, by having a focus on Christ. The truth is your courage in talking about your Christian faith, will speak far more persuasively to your friends, colleagues and family than knowing any clever arguments. And if they do ask you a question you can't answer, then just say you'll get back to them on it... go away, phone a friend, read a book, google a YouTube video - the truth is there are plenty of ways to find out good answers to these questions.

Be prepared means be fearless in your witness. Speak out when you can, even when there is a risk of rejection or ridicule for doing so.

Good Witness

However, the opposite extreme of being too afraid to say anything about your faith can be to be too aggressive or pushy.

Remember Peter is telling us to be eager to do good. He also says that we are to tell people about the hope that we have, but when people ask us! Being fearless about sharing our faith does not mean crowbarring it into every conversation or making people who aren't interested

listen to us drone on. Neither of those things are sharing our faith with gentleness and respect. That is not a good witness!

Rather it is being prepared to speak about your faith when someone shows interest or asks the question. Hopefully, provoked by the good life we are living.

We need to be fearless, gentle and respectful - all at the same time!!

Fear God, trust his Salvation- 3:17-22

But, how can we hold on to fearing God, even when the world may abuse us for believing. How can we keep doing good, even when we may suffer for it?

In verses 17-22, Peter takes us back to Jesus. Why? Because the death and resurrection of Jesus illustrates the truth expressed in Psalm 34 and quoted in verse 34:

*"For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous...
but the face of the Lord is against the wicked" 3:12*

The point is that if we are seeking to do good and follow Christ, then God is for us and if God is for us, who can be against us?

So, how does Jesus illustrate this point?

Life and Victory for the Righteous

Firstly, Peter stresses that Jesus was the righteous one, who suffered. Yet, God raised him from the dead and ultimately brought him to sit at his right hand with total power. God will ensure that the righteous one lives and is victorious

But do we as followers of Christ fit into the category of the righteous?

Not, without Jesus!
Peter says, Jesus suffered once for sins. Those are our sins. He was the righteous one who suffered on behalf of the unrighteous. We are the unrighteous.

So, our forgiveness, our hope, our salvation comes only through what Christ has done and by trusting in him.

Nonetheless, out of fear of God, we realise our only hope of life can come through faith in Christ. So in faith we trust God's rescue from sins and unrighteousness through Jesus. So, we have the certain hope of eternal life and in so doing we become aligned with Jesus as one of the righteous.

And so out of fear of God, our new identity in Christ, and our new calling to live for God. We live out increasingly righteous lives.

What Peter is saying, then is that when we suffer unrighteously, even though we are seeking to do good, like Jesus God will look on us and vindicate us.

Even though the rest of the world may respond to God differently, we, few though we may be will be rescued, because the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous.

But there is also a contrast. The face of the Lord is against the wicked.

Judgement for the disobedient - cf. 1:11; 2:8; 3:1

This is where Noah comes in. He, his wife, their three sons and their wives were the only righteous ones in their generation.

They lived among a people who were wicked and disobedient. Just as Peter's readers were Christians living in a very unChristian world.

Out of fear and obedience to God they built an ark and all 8 of them were rescued through the flood. In his obedience and trust in God's salvation, Noah built the ark as a symbol to his generation of the judgement that was coming. It was a kind of preaching.

Back in 1:11, Peter spoke of the Spirit of Christ in the prophets of the past. Probably what he is saying here (although no-one is quite sure the best way to interpret these verses and there are a number of different ideas), is that through Noah, by his Spirit, the resurrected Christ was proclaiming that those who turn from wickedness to God and trust in his salvation plan will be saved.

However, despite God's patience only a few were saved. The face of the LORD will ultimately be against the wicked.

Even more of an encouragement to fear God.

Who will you fear?

So who will you fear? What fears will you allow to control your life?

David and Peter urge us to fear God. When we do we will find, life and salvation. If we turn our backs on God, then ultimately we will face the judgement of the disobedient - that is surely something to be feared in deed.

Peter proved himself to be someone who feared God. In Acts he fearlessly shares the truth about Christ not fearing the threats of the authorities, but eager to do what God wants.

In the end tradition tells us that he did die for his faith, along with many other Christians in Rome under Nero. He didn't give in to fear, but trusted in God's gift of eternal life, even as they crucified him upside down.

Will we have the same courage? Will we fear God more than man?