Living in Fear
1 Peter 1:17-21

We're looking at Peter's first letter. And he's writing to early Christians who are facing growing hostility for their faith. And he began by reminding them of all the things God has done, and will do, for them in Christ: He's chosen you, loved you, set you apart, given you new life and new hope. But then, as we saw last week, he made a turn. In view of all that God has done for you, let it change the way you live: set your hope fully on Christ, don't be conformed to the desires of your old life, *and* be holy because God's holy.

But in today's passage Peter tells them there's another implication for their lives, and it's one that cuts across almost everything our modern culture tells you to do.

The Life of Fear
Look at v17, 'And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each ones deeds, conduct yourselves *with fear*.'

But to suggest your life should be marked by a pervasive sense of fear is arguably the antithesis of our modern way of thinking, isn't it? Roosevelt famously declared 'We have nothing to fear except fear itself.' Superman arrives on the scene and says, 'have no fear, Superman is here.' Christopher Reeve, who played Superman said, 'Living in fear is not living at all.' And we have clothing brands and bumper stickers declaring, 'No Fear'. And our culture says, instead of fear pursue self-belief, confidence, and a refusal to fear.

And yet, everyone's afraid of something, aren't they? Now, you might respond, 'No! Think of extreme sports, people who throw themselves off mountains, or climb up them unattached, they're fear*less*. They've pushed through their fears.' Sure. But they're still afraid of something. Because if I'm afraid of what they do, they're afraid of what I do. Their afraid of the normal, the hum-drum, boring, 9-5 of daily life. They're afraid of being constrained, of commitment. I remember talking with one young man who was pushing himself to the edge and he said 'don't tie me down, don't cage me in.' What he feared wasn't danger, it was working in an office, it was not experiencing the adrenaline rush, the dopamine high of being on the edge.

We're all afraid of something. Like the fear of failure, or embarrassment. The fear of looking foolish, the fear of what others might think. The fear of job loss and the insecurities it would bring. Or, like the tech entrepreneur in the press last week, who spends thousands of dollars a week, and hours of his time, on the quest to regain his teenage body, there's the fear of ageing and death.

So it's not *whether or not* you fear, it's *what* you fear. It's not *whether or not* fear will be a feature of your life, but which fear will you let shape you.

And yet, courage - and the determination to push through your fears - is a virtue. In fact, for centuries, Christian thought has argued it's one of *the* virtues. And the Bible repeatedly tells us 'Fear Not!'

But to be courageous is not to pretend you have no fear, it's to fear the right things.

You see to have *no* fear would be to live like a little girl my colleagues and I looked after when I was a paediatrician. She was born with a condition that meant she had no perception of pain. Her parents first realised something was wrong when, on learning to walk, she walked right into a glass door, and laughed. She picked herself up and did it again. And again. And everyone laughed with her. Until she began to hurt herself and she didn't notice.

Because pain has a purpose. And so does fear. It can shape what you do and how you live. But if it's going to shape you in good ways, it's got to be a good fear. A fear that makes you choose the right and avoid the wrong; a fear that makes you courageous, not cowardly; a fear that causes you to form the deep relationships that bring true happiness, rather than avoid them. A fear that causes you to step out in service of others, not retreat into self-centredness.

In other words, you need a fear that leads to hope not despair, joy not sorrow, deeds that are good not evil.

But is there such a fear? Does a fear exist that can so flavour your life that it produces those kinds of fruit?

And Peter says yes - it's the fear of God.

And the Book of Proverbs, the wisdom of the ancients, agrees because it says that while 'The fear of man is a snare' (Prov 29:25) and we could group a whole load of our fears under that title, 'the fear of the Lord leads to life' (Prov 19:23). In fact, according to Proverbs, the fear of the Lord has the power to shape the whole of life.

But Peter drills down further: it's the fear of your Heavenly Father: v17 again, 'If you call on him as *Father*… conduct yourselves with fear.'

Now, if the idea of our lives being seasoned with fear seems alien, what about coupling *fear* to *father*? That sounds like abuse. Except Peter's not talking about terror. He's not talking about the kind of fear I saw in the face of a sweet young boy who had been admitted to our hospital with signs of abuse, and he was chatting away to me happily until the door behind me opened. And I couldn't see who came in but I could see that boy freeze, and watch. It was his father.

Peter's not talking about that kind of fear. He's not talking of the fear that doesn't know when the next fist will land, or the next outburst of anger erupt. He's not talking of the fear that goes to bed not knowing whether your father will be there when you wake in the morning.

He's talking of a fear that dispels every other fear. A fear that fills your heart with confidence and courage. Because it's a fear that, firstly, is born of the *affection* of the Father.

You see, did you notice that Peter says, 'if you *call on him as Father*…' Not *if you call him your father*. Because when you know that God your heavenly Father has chosen you, and loved you and set you apart, and given you hope and an inheritance in Christ, you call on him. You know he loves you and your life is in his good hands, so you bring your needs and problems and desires before him. And because he loves you, you don't want to disgrace him. You want to honour him. In fact, you fear to grieve him.

You see, elsewhere, this word for *fear* is translated *respect.* But I think the translators are right here. Peter's got something more than respect for a distant father in mind. He's got that love that fears any distance from the one it loves in mind. A love that at one and the same time stands in awe, knowing it's unworthy to approach, and yet cannot hold back and must approach. A reverence that dare not reach out and touch, but knows it must reach out and touch and take hold. A fear that knows you are loved by one so fearful and yet so beautiful, and you know you've done nothing to deserve it, so you love fearfully in response.

So right fear is born of the Father's affection, it's also born of his *authority*.

Verse 17 again, 'If you call on him as Father *who judges impartially* according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear…'

Your Father loves you, Peter says, but that doesn't mean he plays favourites. So you can't live however you want.

But think how the people Peter's writing to may have been hoping God *does* play favourites, that he is partial. They're facing growing pressure for being Christians, and they're likely paying a relational, maybe even financial cost for their faith. And when trials like that come, temptation is often not far behind.

Maybe they're facing the mockery of friends, and in comes the temptation to compromise. They face the loss of friends and in comes the temptation to self-pity. They face the hostility of colleagues, and in comes the temptation to answer their rudeness with your own. They face being shut out of business, and in comes the temptation to look after number one. And on the heels of all those temptations comes the temptation to think, 'God will understand if I give in to temptation, he'll give me a free pass, he's my Father after all.'

Think how we might think like that. 'He knows how much stress I'm under'; 'he knows how she spoke to me'; 'he knows the hurts I'm carrying, and how much I need this. He'll turn a blind eye, he'll excuse this.' And God *does* know, and he *is* abounding in mercy, but he's not partial. And people say love is blind, but not the love of the Father. He never says, 'o you're my child, I'll turn a blind eye.'

Instead, Peter says, fear him as the one who judges your deeds. But he's not saying he's your father on the basis of your deeds, or that you can call upon him as Father because you've clocked up enough good deeds to earn his love. Religion might say that, but not Christianity. Instead, it's because he loves you and because he's your Father and because you can call on him that you're going to do good deeds. They're the fruit, not the root of the fact that you've been chosen and loved and set apart, the evidence that he really is your father.

So, Peter says, this fear of God doesn't leave you paralysed with fear. It's not a fear that dares not dare, lest it be punished for failure. It's a fear that dares to risk, that dares to commit, that dares to spend itself in service of others. A fear that shows itself in the kind of deeds that stand up to the Father's judgment. A fear that flows from the affection and authority of the Father.

And Peter says, live like that, v17, 'throughout the time of your exile.'

Now, one of the problems of living in Switzerland is that you can grow to like it here. Maybe you got posted by your company and you thought, 'that'd be a good step, help position me to further climb the ladder.' But you get here and after a while you start thinking, 'hmm, I rather like it here. This step on the ladder seems pretty good to me - I'm not so sure I need to climb any further.' As a friend once said, 'Switzerland is the graveyard of ambition.' And then you start thinking that a diet of bread and melted cheese is not so strange after all. And far from not making any noise after 10pm being oppressive it begins to seem eminently sensible.

What's happening? You're beginning to conform; you no longer see yourself as an exile, instead it's beginning to feel like home.

And Peter's saying, that's not what it should be like for us spiritually. The world as it is now is not home. Instead, we're waiting for our true home.

And Bishop Ambrose of Milan, the man who had such an impact on Augustine, said that we're to 'use the time as those who know that they are setting out from here.' In other words, this life in this world isn't where you finish your journey, it's where you start it. Now, after a big hike, when you've got back to the car, or the house, what do you do? You take your boots off, and rub your feet, and run a hot shower; you sink into the sofa and you relax. Why? Because you've reached your destination.

But is that what you do when you start the hike? No. When you start you take your map and plan your route, you check the weather and fill your bottle; you put on your boots, and take your coat. The way you conduct yourself depends entirely on whether you think you've arrived or are just setting out.

And Peter and Ambrose are saying, this isn't your home, this is where you set out for home, and as you travel, let the affection and the authority of your Father, and the reverent fear that flows from that, season all you do.

But there's another reason to do that, Peter says…

The Price of Redemption

Look at v17-19, 'Conduct yourselves with fear… knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.'

Imagine you're helping a friend move a piece of furniture that's seriously valuable. Or imagine you're carrying something of your own that's got great sentimental value. Does knowing its value change the way you behave? Sure it does! I mean, if you're in the kitchen and putting away an Ikea plastic pot that cost you a few franks, you'll just chuck it in the cupboard. But if it's a priceless Ming vase you're handling, you are going to watch your every movement.

The value of what you're dealing with seriously affects the way you behave.

And Peter's saying, it's like that with your life. You've not been ransomed just with silver and gold, even though those have some value. You've been ransomed by 'the precious blood of Christ', something so precious you couldn't put a price on it.

Ok, but what does he mean by *ransomed*? Well, in the Graeco-Roman world, to buy a slave's freedom - to redeem them from slavery - either the slave himself, or a friend or family member had to pay a sum of money called a ransom. And when they did the slave could go free - from now on he was a freeman.

But if that's what their culture would have understood by being ransomed, Peter's almost certainly got something else in mind as well. Because they've been ransomed, he says, v19, 'with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.' And on the night when God redeemed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, he told them to take a lamb without blemish, slaughter it, and paint its blood over their doorposts. And it was that blood that protected them as God's wrath was poured out on their slave masters. The lamb died so they didn't. It paid the price so they could go free. And that's what Christ has done for you, Peter says. God gave the thing of greatest worth to him, his Son, to rescue you and redeem you from slavery, let that profoundly influence the way you live. Conduct yourself with fear.

The film Saving Private Ryan ends with Ryan standing in front of the grave stone of Captain Miller, the leader of the men who gave their lives to save him. And as his wife comes to his side Ryan turns to her and says, 'Tell me I've led a good life, tell me I'm a good man.' Why does he need to know that? Because he knows his life was bought at great cost and he's tried to live worthy of that.

And Peter's saying, your life has been bought at far greater cost, the infinitely cost of Christ's life. So live a life worthy of that. Not to earn it, not to try and deserve it, but precisely because you don't deserve it.

Ok, but if like ancient Israel, we've been ransomed and redeemed, who or what have we been redeemed from? To whom are what are we enslaved? Well, Peter says, v18, 'you were ransomed from *the futile ways inherited from your forefathers*.' And something's futile when it's useless, when it doesn't do what you hope it'll do, when it's a pointless waste of time or energy. And Peter's almost certainly got in mind pagan religious practices.

You want a good harvest, so you sacrifice to the god of the harvest; you want protection on your journey, so you pay off the god of safe journeys. You want vengeance on the person who wronged you, so you place an image of that person under the nose of the god of vengeance. And the gods are capricious, they're given to mood swings, so you have to keep up your efforts to keep them on your side. And Peter says, those ways are futile - they don't work. Worse than don't work they alienate you from the true God, and so have an enslaving, controlling effect on people's lives.

Now, if you're not yet a Christian, you might think, 'well thank goodness we're more enlightened and don't feel the need to do any of that stuff!' But don't you? What about the gods of public opinion, or career progression, or sexual pleasure that we make sacrifices to? Or that we look to, and trust, to give us what we want. That if I can just get *this* to work for me life will be good. And think how those same things that we thought would bring freedom, and the life we want, end up controlling us? In fact, the pursuit of freedom itself, the throwing off of all the rules, becomes what J Budziszewski, professor of Government and Philosophy at the University of Texas calls 'an enslaving liberation.' We become enslaved to the very things that promise us freedom.

And Peter's saying, that just as God heard the cry of Israel in chains in Egypt, so he sees us. And he loved us and sent his son to redeem us at infinite cost, to be our ransom, and bring us out into true freedom. The freedom to fear the right fear.

But then he gives one last reason to conduct ourselves with fear:

The Weight of Eternity
Peter says we should conduct ourselves with fear because we've been redeemed by the blood of Christ but then he adds, v20-21, 'He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.'

I read an article recently about a man waiting for his invitation to the upcoming coronation of Charles III, and the instructions for the role he would play in the ceremony. And he wasn't expecting that because he was a member of the aristocracy, or rich, or even famous, but because a member of his family had taken part in every coronation of every British monarch since the crowning of William the Conqueror in 1066. And reading it you could tell that he knew that when the invitation came, it wouldn't be about him, it would be about something far greater, about a king and an unbroken line stretching back in time.

And Peter's saying, you too are caught up in an unbroken line, the great flow of God's story of redemption. Because when he says that Christ was foreknown before the founding of the world, he doesn't just mean that God the Father and God the Son know each other. He means that God's plan of redemption was never plan B. It was never an afterthought, like, 'Oh, no, they've really gone and messed up this time, I need to come up with a plan.' No. From before he even created us, God foreknew that in doing so he would have to launch a rescue mission. A mission that would cost the life of his Son.

And all the great tide of history is about that rescue and, Peter says, you are caught up in it. And when Christ came, Peter says, when he was made manifest, he did so, v20, 'for the sake of you.' It was for your sake he came. And yet ultimately, it's not about you. It's about something far greater. It's about a king. Because it was to Jesus, Peter says, that God 'gave him glory'. And our hope and trust - our confidence - are not in ourselves, but in him.

So let a right fear season your life, Peter says. You know the affection of the Father. You know the authority of the Father. You know you carry within you something of infinite value and have been redeemed at infinite cost. And you stand with all the weight of eternity and the glory of the king, bearing down on you. So, fear and fear not.