Power and Promises
2 Peter 1:3-4

We're looking at Peter's second letter, and today we're just going to look verses 3 and 4 of the passage read to us. And I want to do that for a reason.

You see, this letter is probably *the* most controversial in the whole New Testament. Probably the whole Bible. Should it even be in the Bible? It's called Peter's *second letter,* but is it? Did Peter write it? And a whole load of theologians say, no, he did not. And one reason they give is what he says and the words he uses, not least in these two verses.

Words like, v3, 'divine power… [or] godliness' or, v4, 'divine nature… [or] escap[ing] from the corruption that is in the world.' And we might read those and think, what's the problem? Well, the problem is that those are words and terms that the rest of the New Testament rarely, if ever, uses, but that Greek philosophy and pagan Roman religion used a lot. And used to say things that no Jewish person or early Christian, let alone an apostle like Peter would ever say. So this can't be Peter, it must be someone else, someone who's grown up in Greek culture, whose faith is compromised by pagan philosophy.

Now, we'll see later what those words and terms meant, but who says Peter shouldn't write like this? When I was a junior doctor training in paediatrics, we were trained on how to talk to children. And the first rule is, get down to their level - their physical level. Don't stand over them, bend down and talk to them face to face. And if you're explaining something, use language they'll understand.

Or think about the difference between Rugby and American Football. Rugby is a game played by men, while American Football is a game played by people wearing sticky tights, with lots of padding and helmets so they don't get hurt. Now, imagine Su and I moved to America and I became a pastor of an American church. How well do you think I'd get on? Talk of rugby would have to go, wouldn't it? And in its place I'd have to talk about quarterbacks and touchdowns and offence and defense, and gridirons and yardage - I'd have to learn a whole new vocabulary. Why? Because I'd want to be understood, and get the message across in language that meant something.

So, if Peter is writing to people coming to faith in Christ from a Greco-Roman background, swimming in that pagan culture and philosophy, and if he genuinely cared about them, and wanted them to understand, wouldn't you expect him to bend down, and use the words and terms they used, but use them in ways that pointed to Christ? Which is exactly what Peter does do.

And not just for them. You see, it's possible that you are 100% happy with your life, that there's absolutely nothing you'd change. It's *also* possible that that isn't true! That as you look at your character or your circumstances, things are not as you want. But where do you find the power to change, or to handle life when circumstances don't change? Well, in these verses, Peter tells us, but as he does he talks about becoming godlike, and you might hear that and think, 'well I might be interested in change but I don't have any ambitions to become a god!' But is that really the case?

We're going to look at three things: the change we desire, the problem with desire and the answer to desire.

The Change We Desire
Look at v4, 'through them [that's the promises of God] you may become *partakers of the divine nature*.' And in their culture that was a loaded term. Depending on which philosopher your read, or pagan religion you followed, your great hope was to die and be absorbed into the divine, or to

become like one of the gods, or even, if you were Caesar, to be a god, and be worshipped as a god. And to us that seems totally alien - but is it?

Have you ever walked around your neighbourhood, or hiked to mountain refuge, and seen prayer flags fluttering in the wind? And as Christianity has declined in the West, interest in Buddhism has grown. But what's the end point of Buddhism? It's the loss of self in the Ultimate, it's to become one with the divine.

But you don't have to embrace Buddhism to think like that. As we saw last week, maybe you're not yet a Christian, and your idea of God is that he's a sort of Universal Consciousness, and that when you die you become a part that.

But again, you don't have to buy into any of that to want to be godlike, or share of the divine nature. Just take a look at the latest Marvel superhero movie, or Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings and how we're captivated by their characters *with godlike powers*. Or think about those who engage in extreme sports, who defy death, who have a seeming invincibility about them, who achieve a godlike status.

Each year I teach a course at the Bible School in Geneva to the final year students, just before they become pastors. And one of the things I tell them is, you are not the messiah. You see, when the religious leaders came to John the Baptist they asked him, 'who are you?' And his response? 'I am not the Christ.' But we want to be, or try to be, and not just pastors.

Think about the characteristics of God: he's omniscient - he knows everything; he's omnipotent - he can do everything; he's omnipresent - he is everywhere. Ask yourself: are there times when you wish, or try to live as if those are true of you?

Do you ever beat yourself up or get anxious because you don't have all the answers to your or someone else's questions or problems? Or do you ever fake it, and pretend that you know more than you do? It's the desire to be omniscient or the pretence that your knowledge is not limited. Or do people's problems, or those of society or the world, weigh heavy on you? And you see all the needs, but you're paralysed to do anything about it, or you get angry with yourself or at others for their inaction. Why? Because we want to fix every problem. We want to be omnipotent. Or do you find yourself living life in overdrive, and you're running around trying to be at every meeting, or every social activity, not missing out on anything, but your stress levels are climbing, or fear of missing out, FOMO, is growing. We want to be omnipresent, but we're not. Only God is.

So, sure, we may not think in terms of being absorbed into the divine nature like a Greek philosopher, or becoming a god, like a caesar, *but the desire to be godlike is real*. And that's without even considering what the praise of others can do to us. How we can crave it; how we feel when others get it but we don't. Do we want to be gods? No. But do we want to be worshipped and adored? Yes.

And Peter's taking that desire, then and now, and saying 'I want to show you a better way.' And it's not you being absorbed into the Ultimate, or you having superhuman powers. It's that you can become increasingly like God in your character.

You see, *to partake* is to share in something with someone else. And so to share in God's nature is not that we become godlike superheroes, it's that as his children we grow in his family likeness. That we become more loving, more courageous, more patient; more full of joy and full of peace; that we grow in wisdom but rather than that going to our heads, we also grow in humility; that day by day we are growing to be more like Christ. Until the Last Day when his work in our lives is complete.

And I suspect many of us would say, 'that's the change I want to see. I want to be less anxious or angry with others. I want to be more loving and kind; or free of these things that control me. I don't want to be a Greek god, but I would very much like to be more like God in his character.'

And Peter says you can. But…

You see, the problem is that while this desire to change and be more like God is good and right, it's also the desire that's at the root of all our problems.

The Problem With Desire

So, the desire to be omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent can lead to anxiety, burn out, and despair. The desire for praise, or being on the receiving end of it, can destroy you. The desire to feel truly alive, to feel immortal, can lead to behaviours and risk taking that, rather than giving life, threaten it.

You see, whenever we forget that we're creatures and instead think we're the Creator, things get screwy.

And yet, there's a still darker side.

Look at v4 again, 'that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, *having escaped from the corruption that is in the world.*'

And to the guys Peter's writing to, swimming in a culture of Greek philosophy, the corruption of the world was the physicality, the materiality of this world. It was your physical body. It was eating and drinking and sex and relationships and work and play. It's all corrupt and corrupting and to be truly free, to partake of the divine, you had to escape your physical body at death and leave it all behind.

And Peter's saying, 'sure there's corruption in the world, but you're pointing the finger at the wrong place.' Verse 4 again, 'having escaped from the corruption that is in the world *because of sinful desire*.' The problem's not with your physical body, Peter's saying. It's with our hearts, our desires: what we want and how much we want it. And it's that that has a corroding effect on our lives.

And the first book of the Bible, Genesis, tells us what the first sinful desire was: the desire to be godlike. The serpent comes to Eve in the Garden and says of eating the fruit of the tree, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, *and you will be like God*, knowing good and evil.' (3:4-5). And then Genesis tells us, 'So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, *and that the tree was to be desired* to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.' (3:6).

And so the Bible says at the root of all our problems is this desire to be like God. *Not* to show more and more of his character, that's what we're created to do as his image bearers, but to take his place.

Now, maybe you're here and you're not yet a Christian, and you'd call yourself secular, but you still have a moral code, don't you? And you feel bad if you break it. But if someone else breaks it, and they do or say something you think is wrong, or don't do something you think they should, what do you do? Do you find yourself judging them? I mean, take a look at social media feeding frenzies and the demands for apologies when someone steps out of line. Secular culture is highly moralistic and judgmental, isn't it. Why? Because you, or secular culture, have become the lawmaker and the judge. You're deciding for yourself what's right and wrong. In other words, you've done what the serpent offered Eve, you've taken the place of God.

But that's not just a problem for the secular person, think about the religious person. How do they try to escape the corruption of the world? Well, if you take the eastern path, like Buddhism, by meditating and emptying yourself of all desire. Or if you've grown up in the West in a legalistic form of Christianity, you do it by obeying all the rules and living a highly moral life.

But if the non-religious person has taken God's place as lawmaker and judge, the religious person takes his place as saviour and redeemer. I can save myself, I can earn God's favour, if I live right.

So, we can want to see change in our lives and grow in peace and patience, love and joy, kindness and courage, but if we try and do that by deciding for ourselves what those look like - as our current culture has done with love - by becoming our own lawmaker and judge… *or* by thinking we can achieve them in our own strength and be our own saviour, then it's not more of God's character we want, it's his throne.

Which is why Peter talks of *Christ's* power and *Christ's* promises.

The Answer to Desire
Look at v3, '*His divine power* has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.'

Now, have you ever been in a situation at work where you've been asked to do something but not been given the resources you need to do it? How did you feel? Frustrated? 'You've asked me to do this, but you've given me no power to do it.'

And sometimes life can feel like that. You know what's required, you know the change you want to see, but you feel powerless. And Peter's saying, while you may not have everything you want, God has already given us everything we need. And it's his power.

And, he says, he's left nothing out.

Which means, the Christian life is not like Su and I going on holiday. There we are, driving down the motorway, about an hour into the journey, one of us will turn to the other and go,'bother, guess what I forgot to pack?' And the list begins. And Peter's saying, God has no such list. He's forgotten nothing that you need.

Now, when I was at school it was probably one of those times when the trendy educationalists had gotten hold of the schools, and grammar was considered passé. So I can't tell my adverbs from my

adjectives, let alone distinguish complicated verb tenses. But the books say that when Peter writes, 'His divine power *has* granted to us all things…' it's the perfect tense. Meaning, this is something God has done for you, but the good of that keeps on going. So it's not future, or conditional, like 'if you try really hard, or pray long enough, or seek this special experience with passion enough, at some point down the line, God might just give you what you need.' Nor is it a bog-standard past tense, like, 'God has given you what you need, but don't go spending it all at once 'cos that's all you're going to have.' It's, he has given you everything you need and that supply is as good today as it was when he first gave it.

So, how do you access that power for change? Verse 3, 'through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.'

Ok, so does that mean that if I want to be growing in love and joy, or get free from the stuff that's dragging me down, I need to hit the books, or listen to more podcasts, and grow in knowledge? No - though there are some great books and podcasts out there.

It's that when Christ first calls you to come to him, he leads you into a growing personal and intimate knowledge of him. And that knowledge begins with God showing you Christ's glory and excellence, Peter says. As John writes at the beginning of his gospel, 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father *full of grace and truth*.' (John 1:14).

And he shows you how, in Christ coming as a man, he took on our human nature, so that we might be partakers of his divine nature. That he bent down to us, that we might be lifted up to him. That he lived a perfect life of godliness and that, as we trust in him and not our rule keeping, that life is counted to us, and our ungodliness, our rule breaking, is counted to him.

You see, when Moses asked to see God's glory, God passed before him and proclaimed his name, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex 34:6-7). And you're left thinking, 'but that's contradictory. How can you both forgive the guilty and punish them? How can you be both a God of Mercy and a God of justice?' And yet here is God saying to Moses, 'But that is exactly who I am. That's my glory.' And so it becomes the unanswered question, running through the Old Testament, 'yes, but how?'

Until Christ comes - and John and Peter say, *he* is the glory of God. It's in him that God's justice and mercy are reconciled. Because it's in him, at the cross, as the innocent one steps into our place and bears our punishment, that we, the guilty, go free.

And it's as that love of Christ for you first dawns on you, and you see his glory and his excellence, and it's as your heart knowledge of it grows in depth of understanding, that your desire to live as he wants you to live grows. As you increasingly see the beauty of Jesus' character, you'll want your character to reflect his. As you understand how he humbled himself for you, it'll humble you. As you see his compassion towards you, your heart will fill with compassion towards others. As you understand how he is for you, regardless of what others say, your courage will grow. Because it's through the knowledge of the glory and excellencies of Christ that his divine power is released within you.

But not just his power. Verse 4, ‘By which he has granted to us his precious and very great *promises*.’

Now, Peter doesn’t tell us what promises he’s thinking of. He tells us their impact. That through them we ‘become partakers of the divine nature.’

And through the prophet Jeremiah, God promised that the day would come when he would write his law on his people’s hearts - that they’d want to obey him from the heart. And through the prophet Ezekiel, God promised that the day would come when he would give his people new hearts and put his Spirit within them.

And so at the Day of Pentecost, after Jesus death and resurrection and ascension, Peter stood up and said, “This Jesus… being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father *the promise of the Holy Spirit*, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:32-33).

So, if you were to take the Bible and make a list of all God’s precious and very great promises; promises to crush the serpent’s head through the offspring of Eve, and bless all nations through the offspring of Abraham; promises of a king in the line of David who’s kingdom will last forever, and of a sin-bearing servant by whose wounds we are healed, you’d have to include on that list the promises of a changed heart, and his Spirit within us. Promises that we can partake of his divine nature. And Peter is saying, and God has kept his promises in Christ.

And his work of change in your life begins when you first see Christ at conversion, but it continues throughout your life. As Paul writes, ‘Now we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.’ (2 Cor 3:18).

Try and become like God in your own strength, and you’ll become anxious, exhausted or frustrated. Try and take God’s place and be your own lawmaker or saviour and you’ll behave like a demigod - judging and condemning others. But come to Christ, and spend your life beholding his glory and excellencies, and trust his promises, and you’ll see the change you want to see, as your character becomes increasingly like his.