

Ps 136:1,2

Yarrow, September 20, 2009

Ps 5:3,4 – with the law read context of Ex 20

Ps 103:4,5

Ps 25:6,7

Ps 119:14,15,16

1 Peter 1:1-21

Leviticus 10:8-10; 11:1-8;41-47

1 Peter 1:17b – “Conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile” - ESV

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Until the day of Christ’s return in glory, we live in this world. As we heard in previous weeks from Peter’s earlier instruction, we’re strangers here, resident aliens, displaced persons in exile waiting for the time when we shall receive our inheritance. What, meanwhile, ought our living here to look like??

Peter’s theme in this letter focuses on precisely this point: how should Christians live in this world. The apostle has laid the groundwork of his answer in the earlier verses of our chapter, and now in our text gets more specific. We are (says our translation) to “live [our] lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” The word ‘reverent’ is not in the Greek, and so to help us understand Peter’s instruction we do well to skip over the word ‘reverent’ for now, lest it mislead us to think that all we need is awe for God.

Just what, though, does the fear Peter enjoins look like? Isn’t ‘fear’ a negative thing, even sub-Christian for the redeemed people of God? Why would Peter want it?!

Peter, brothers and sisters, wants his readers to take God seriously. It’s Peter’s conviction that all who live in this sin-filled life need to fear God in a way the holy angels do not. In fact, not to fear God is arrogance, and the height of spiritual impiety.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **THE CHRISTIAN’S FEAR OF GOD DETERMINES HOW HE LIVES THIS PASSING LIFE.**

1. What is fear of God?
2. What does this fear look like?
3. What consequence follows?

### **1. What is this fear?**

The word ‘fear’ has a rich track record as a mark of godly piety. Think of Job; God Himself says of him that “he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8). Just how much the “fear of God” was a necessary mark of Biblical piety is evident from the command God gave His people before they entered the Promised Land, for He told them to “fear the LORD your God, serve Him only and take your oaths in His name” (Deuteronomy 6:13). David presses this command upon his people; Ps 34:9: “Fear the LORD, you His saints.” And lest one think that ‘fearing the Lord’ is an Old Testament theme that has no place in the New Testament, consider Mary’s words in Luke 1: “His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation” (vs 50). This fear of God characterized the church of Pentecost, for Luke tells us that the church “was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord” (Acts 9:31). To fear God remains a

command for New Testament Christians, as Peter himself says later in his first letter, “Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king” (1 Peter 2:7).

There is, of course, a direct link between “fearing God” and one’s lifestyle. It is telling that God says of Job that “he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” Job’s ‘fearing God’ meant concretely that he ‘shunned evil’. After the people met with God on Mt Sinai, Moses told them that “God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exodus 20:20). Solomon put it simply: “to fear the LORD is to hate evil” (Proverbs 8:13).

What, now, is this ‘fear of God’? It’s common knowledge that there are two distinct senses in which the word ‘fear’ is used in Scripture. On the one hand the term catches the sense of terror and dread we feel when we are afraid of a person or a situation. This is the sense of the word in a passage as Deuteronomy 2, where the Lord says, “This very day I will begin to put the terror and fear of you on all the nations under heaven. They will hear reports of you and will tremble and be in anguish because of you” (vs 25). On the other hand, the command to “fear [your] father and mother” (Leviticus 19:3) would not have the child tremble before Dad and Mom, but tells the child to respect and honour his parents. There’s now the question: when the Lord tells us to ‘fear God’, does He command the ‘fear of terror’ or the ‘fear of reverence’? Does He want us to be afraid of Him *or* does He command us to honour and respect Him?

One hears, also in our midst, that we are not to be afraid of God, but must instead hold Him in high esteem. The thought then is that we are children of God through Jesus Christ, have been restored to God through the Saviour’s blood, and so it’s not proper for us to be afraid of God. So when Peter in our text tells us to ‘live in fear’ of God, the reference can’t be to being afraid of God (that would be sub-Christian), and so the point of Peter’s instruction must be that one hold God in high esteem. The translators of the NIV would go in this same direction by speaking of ‘reverent’ fear.

But there is, brothers and sisters, a very good reason not to make a contrast between these two nuances of the word ‘fear’. Is it proper for a child of God to be afraid of God? The proper answer has to be this: it is the essence of impiety not to be afraid of God when there is reason to be afraid of God! After the fall into sin, Adam –child of God though he was– told God, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid” (Genesis 3:10). We understand that he was rightly in terror of God on account of his sin! The people of Israel had to put particular sinners in their midst to death so that (we read) “all the people will hear and be afraid, and will not be contemptuous again” (Deuteronomy 17:13). Our chief Prophet and Teacher emphasises the same point in His words addressed to His disciples: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28; the Greek uses the same word ‘fear’ as appears in our text). “The One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” is none other than God Himself; He alone has the authority and the right to cast a sinner into hell – or to spare one from hell. He has that authority, and He’ll exercise that authority too, precisely because of His intense hatred of sin.

At the same time, it’s precisely the realization that God has the right and the power to cast us into hell because of our sins that needs to move us to deep respect for God. Our fear of God is not to be simply an awe motivated by God’s infinite power and wisdom as displayed in His works of creation (that’s the sort of fear the holy angels have), but our fear of God has to take seriously the awareness that this God of infinite power and wisdom has the right to cast us sinners into eternal damnation. An awareness of our sinfulness and what we deserve adds depth to our fear of God so that we do *more* than stand in awe of Him; our fear at the same time has a healthy respect for His righteous judgment.

And see, congregation, this is the flavour of our text. Peter’s instruction in vs 17b to “live your lives as strangers here in fear” follows hard on Peter’s words in vs 17a, words that describe God as the One “who judges each man’s work impartially.” That’s to say: the fear of our text occurs in the context

of God's identity as Judge. And we need to note: the way the Greek is put together makes clear that God as Judge is busy *today*, in this life, responding to His people's behaviour with His blessing or with His curse. That's how He acted in the Old Testament (think of the covenant promises of Leviticus 26), and it's how He continues to act towards His people in the New Testament dispensation.

Well now, what kind of a judge is He? Peter says that He judges "impartially". That is: He treats each person on equal terms. He does not say, Because of your skin colour I shall judge you more severely than another person. Nor does He say, Because you're a Moabite I'll be more prejudiced against you. Or, Because you're Canadian Reformed I'll deal with you more leniently than if you were Baptist. He does not say, Because you've been to Catechism for so many years and you've come to church so faithfully and served the saints in your church for so long I'll overlook your indiscretions. This Father "judges each man's work impartially." Slander is just as offensive to God from the mouth of His children-by-covenant as it is from the mouth of a heathen – or maybe it's more offensive. Ignoring God as you decide your business deals is as offensive to God from one of us as it is when the unbelieving competition across the road makes the same decision – or maybe it's more offensive. *Just because we're children of God doesn't mean that we're going to get away with more!* That's why Peter adds the line about living *in fear*. He wants his readers to reflect in their lifestyle their conviction that God is in fact *God*, and so they need not just to stand in awe of Him but need equally to be aware that this righteous Judge tolerates no sin amongst His children – at all. For truly, He "can destroy both soul and body in hell" – a word, I repeat, which Jesus spoke to His *disciples*. Hence the need for *fear* – and that includes *both* reverence for God as well as awe for Him; a sinner cannot separate these two!

This point receives extra force from Peter's words in vs 18. This verse explains *why* the Father "judges each man's work impartially," that is, *why* the Father is not less demanding of His children than He is of unbelievers. The reason? Look at the price God organized to redeem you from Satan's bondage! The price wasn't silver or gold; that's created material that will one day perish. No, you were bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ, God's only Son! If you were purchased with that kind of price, do you really think that God won't really mind if you embrace sin? Do you really think that if God has given *so much* for your redemption, He'll not be too perturbed if you live and talk like your unbelieving neighbour does – as if God will judge him harder because he's an unbeliever? Does it not make sense that because *God has invested so much more in you*, He also *demands more from you*? How dare you then, sinner as you are, have no *fear of God*!?

Recall the context of Peter's words. Back in 1:3 Peter had used that striking analogy of rebirth, with its accompanying imagery. In the womb one's world is so very small; in the womb one isn't aware of the big world outside the womb, and certainly can't begin to imagine what life outside the womb might be like. That's true physically, and is equally true spiritually. As a result of the fall into sin our understanding of reality is limited; in this fallen world our worldview is as limited as it is to a child in the womb. In this fallen world our perception of reality is restricted to what we can see and experience – and God with His hosts of angels and sovereign control over our world and redeeming grace in Jesus Christ is not part of what we perceive. We see nothing more than brokenness and pain and sickness and frustration, which all ends in death – and we can't fathom what might lie beyond the walls of this claustrophobic womb. But, says Peter, God "has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." With Christ's resurrection we too are raised to a new life, and that's to say that through Him we've broken out of the limited womb-of-this-world so that we can taste and enjoy the bigger reality outside the womb. This bigger reality knows of God our Creator, He who is our Father through Jesus Christ, and so we are His children – what glorious panorama that provides! To be with God in heaven where Christ is: what an inheritance (vs 4) awaits us on the day of Christ's return! (vs 13).

Meanwhile, that Day has not yet come, so that we continue to live on this earth. Around us are so many who are spiritually (yet) unborn, and they're still living in the closed and narrow worldview of the womb, oblivious to the bigger realities 'out there' –including the existence of God and reconciliation to Him through Jesus' blood– that we who are born again may see and enjoy. So when we act as 'reborn' people (and all who are 'born' by definition act differently than those who are still unborn) the spiritually unborn around us think we're weird, aliens. Hence Peter's use of the word 'strangers' in 1:1, and again in our text.

And there's now the thing: *in this broken life we experience that we don't want to be different*. To be called weird, to stick out as odd: we're not by nature comfortable with that. That's now the point of the passage before us: Peter would encourage his readers to dare to be different than those around them. Because they are born again, they need to *act* born again. That is: they are to be so appreciative of the price God gave for their redemption that they *dare not disappoint Him* – for they know His hatred of sin. They *fear* this impartial Judge not just in the sense that they hold Him in reverential awe, but also in the sense that they take seriously His right to throw them into hell on account of taking Him for granted.

That brings us to our second point:

## 2. What does this fear look like?

I said before: deep respect for God as Judge results in a lifestyle of specific colour. Peter draws out what this respect for God as judge looks like with a phrase as that of vs 14: "do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance." He uses a similar phrase in vs 18 when he tells his readers that they were "redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers." Both of those phrases reach back to the lifestyle Peter's reborn readers used to have before they came to faith. Their fathers had passed on to them a lifestyle they'd inherited from their fathers, and it was a style of living driven by one's "evil desires". It was the same kind of living as still characterized the spiritually unborn people around them, a lifestyle reflecting a limited, claustrophobic view on reality – as if only *this* life is real and there is no heaven that created this earth and governs it still, no heaven with a Judge to whom we shall all one day report. It's a lifestyle that says that *this* life is as good as it gets and so you may as well make the most of it. But that style of living –though it's handed down from the fathers– is "empty", says Peter, is vain, futile. For God *is* real, and He *is* the Judge, today already.

Well then, says Peter, since you are reborn, since you now know of God in heaven as your Father, since you even call upon this Father in prayer (as Jesus instructed you to), take this Judge seriously today. He judges impartially, and so He is not going to treat His children differently than He would treat the unbelieving neighbour when they commit the same offence. He hates all sin, and He will not overlook it just because you claim to be His child! So: act differently than the unborn people around you do! You can't keep living the way your ungodly and spiritually unborn fathers used to live, and you can't live the way your ungodly and spiritually unborn neighbours still live. Instead, vs 15, "as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'"

And there you have what fear of God looks like in daily life. Fear of God compels you to a life of holiness. After all, if the one who judges you is holy, you'll want to be holy too! And what is this holiness all about?? What does that look like? Here I ask your attention for the passage of Scripture from which Peter draws his quote about holiness. That's Leviticus 11, about the clean and unclean food. It ends with the conclusion of vs 43: "Do not defile yourselves by any of these creatures. Do not make yourselves unclean by means of them or be made unclean by them. I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy."

Leviticus 11 has 40 verses about which creatures the people of Israel may eat and which they may not eat. We need not today go into the details of why this animal was clean and the next was

unclean. Let me instead draw your attention to the wider context. God, you see, had established His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai, had the people build a tabernacle for Him, and God Himself moved into the tabernacle – holy God in the midst of His people! Leviticus 8 described how Aaron was ordained to the office of high priest, and so chap 9 could describe the beginning of his priestly labours in the tabernacle. It was an awesome moment in Israel’s history: God and man are reconciled through the blood offered on the altar so that God and man can peacefully live together in one camp. How marvellous! It’s a worldview that connects heaven to earth, earth to heaven!

Then you get the instruction of Leviticus 10:10. God tells the priests to “distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses.” That’s where chap 11 comes in: the priests have to instruct the people about clean and unclean foods. Yet they’re not to do that for reasons of hygiene (though the meat of one animal is certainly healthier to eat than that of another), but this is teaching material by which the Lord would impress on His people that they need to be holy. Even through the foods they eat they are to be reminded daily that they are the Lord’s people – and subsequent chapters drive the same point home with its instruction about spots on your skin, mould in your house, bodily discharges, etc. That is, *they are to be ever conscious of the fact that they belong to God*. They are clean in His sight (that’s why the tabernacle can be in their midst), while the Egyptians and the Moabites, etc, are unclean in His sight (and so He does not live with them). *So Israelites are never to act like Philistines!* The Philistines live in ignorance of the true God, and so their way of life is vain; they do not experience the blessing of the Judge day by day. The Israelites know God –He destroyed the Egyptians but delivered them from Egypt, they saw His majesty on the mountain– and so know they need to fear Him, and that fear has to come to expression in their being *different from the Canaanites around them*. They need to be holy, clean, different – even if the Philistines and the Moabites and the Egyptians think they’re weird.

Well, so it for the people Peter addresses. They are different, special to God, holy in His sight. As a people redeemed through the precious blood of His only Son, they need to be *different*, holy, allergic to sin – and it’s their *fear of God* that needs to compel this holiness. That, beloved, is what the fear of God looks like in daily life.

So we come to our last point:

### 3. What consequences follow?

I mentioned before that Peter’s letter is about how the Christian is to live in this world. Hence his picture of ‘rebirth’, of Christians having the wider perspective that life is about so much more than the naked eye sees, and so his eye is on the inheritance Christ Jesus has obtained for us. Because of the coming glory, the Christian is OK with the spiritually unborn thinking him a stranger, a displaced person. But still, how concretely do you live as long as we remain in this life?? That’s our text: “conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” It’s Peter’s insistence: while you live in this world, your conduct needs to be determined by your awareness of who God is. There’s a sense of awe for this God because He purchased you with the precious blood of His Son, and there’s equally a deep awareness that this God is able to –and will!– send to hell every person who claims to be a Christian but refuses to live a holy life in this world.

So: what reputation do you have among your business associates? Is your way of doing business in step with the selfishness characterizing the practices of unbelievers? Or do your employees and clients feel that you actually *care* for them, are genuinely interested in their well-being? What determines your social activities, your forms of entertainment, your taste for music, for clothes, for the way you speak? You’re strangers, resident aliens in a community of unbelievers, and it’s your *holy respect for God* –both in terms of how much He’s given for you in Jesus Christ *as well as* His role as impartial Judge– that prompts your manner of living, your willingness to be holy, different.

Here, congregation, is need for continued self-examination. Am I in fact different, known in my circle as odd in my values? More, *why* do others see me as different? *How does my esteem for God come out in what I do?* It's a question we need to keep asking ourselves – and each other. That is the concrete consequence of Peter's instruction. And of course: if those around me do not see my total lifestyle as driven by my fear of God, I need to repent and to change it. God, after all, judges impartially....

Should a Christian fear God? The answer is categorically Yes. Though Jesus Christ has obtained forgiveness for our sins and set before us a delightful inheritance, we today remain sinful – and therefore vulnerable to conforming to the evil desires we have by nature (vs 14), in danger too of falling back into the “empty way of life handed down to [us] from [our] forefathers” (vs 18). Healthy fear of God leads to fine-tuned sensitivity to holy living. It's what our children *need to see* in us: healthy fear of God! It's equally what the people around us need to see – that well-rounded, healthy fear of God that comes with knowing how much He's done for sinners in Jesus Christ.

Let it be fixed in our minds: it's the height of impiety, it is full-blown arrogance, to think that the Christian need never tremble at the thought that God is today his judge.

I hear you say: we need comfort, you need to tell us of the good news that Christ has forgiven our sins. It is true: you have been born again, and that is to say that you have been redeemed from your futile ways –that worldview that had you stuck in the womb, as if this life was all there was to reality– through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. But here's now Peter's point: *the ungodly lifestyle God hates is no less hated if it is lived by a person who professes to be a Christian!* And in this broken life we remain prone to sin. Do not, then, do not, beloved, push Peter's command to live in fear of God to one side as if that's true for unbelievers but not for believers, and do not, do not fill the term 'fear' with only half its content as if it means only awe and reverence for God. If you dare to call Him 'Father' –and you may and you must– then be consistent and dare never to offend Him.

How did David put it? “Who, then, is the man that fears the LORD? ...He will spend his days in prosperity, and his descendents will inherit the land” (Ps 25:12f).