

The Pilgrims' Fear

1 Peter 1:17–21

The Seventh Sermon on First Peter

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As we know, how each of us speaks reveals who we are, where we have come from, and how we were raised. This is true for us as Christians, because how we speak of the Faith reveals how well we know our sins and how well we know our Savior; how well we have grasped Christ for our acceptance with God and how well we are seeking to live in a way that pleases him.

In verses 13–21 there are three main imperative verbs. We saw the first two last week: set your hope (v. 13) and be *holy* (v. 15). Now we come to the third: conduct *yourselves* (v. 17). And we are to conduct ourselves in fear. So when we talk about fear, what does this reveal about how we think of fear? How does this reflect what we believe about God? In verses 17–21 Peter speaks of *The Pilgrim's Fear*.

1. *What Kind of Fear Should I Have?*
2. *Why Should I Fear God?*
3. *Won't Fear Make Me Uncertain?*

May the Lord open our hearts and minds to his truth tonight.

What Kind of Fear Should I Have?

Our passage opens up saying, **And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.** I want to begin by asking, *what kind of fear should I have?*

The context answers this for us, but let me state it this way. **Fear** can be being afraid like the Israelites as slaves in Egypt were afraid of Pharaoh and his taskmasters. **Fear** can also be a deep respect like a child listening to a father's words and then doing what he asks. And so there is a distinction between what is called a servile, slavish fear and a filial, child-like fear. Martin Luther said it like this: "do not fear the Father because of pain and punishment, as non-Christians and also the devil fear; but be afraid lest He forsake you and withdraw His hand, as a pious child is afraid that it may anger its father and do something displeasing to him."¹

Peter is calling us to conduct ourselves in this life as sojourners (KJV) or foreigners (NIV) with childlike fear of our Father. As I mentioned the context shows this as Peter has already told us that the Father loved us and chose us from eternity past (v. 2), that the Father has given us new birth (v. 3), and that we are the Father's obedient children (v. 14). And this is the kind of fear the Word of God has always called God's people to have. After Israel left Egypt the Lord gathered them at Mount Sinai "so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live

¹ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter*, trans. Martin H. Bertram, Luther's Works: The Catholic Epistles (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 30:35.

on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.” (Deut. 4:10) The Proverbs speak of the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10) and also contrasts living in an ungodly way with fearing the Lord: “Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil” (Prov. 3:7). This **fear** is how we as the Father’s children respond in reverential awe of his marvelous holiness, as we seek to imitate him like a child wants to imitate his or her mom or dad. Paul says, “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear for God” (2 Cor. 7:1). And God’s holiness will be manifested for all to see in his impartial judgment of all mankind on the last Day.

And this is why Peter links living in fear of God now with his judgment of our works at the end. The Father is he **who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds**. There is no dichotomy for us between the Father’s gracious acceptance of us already and his judgment of our works in the end. Jesus Christ was already judged for our sins on the cross in order to justify us. That’s not in question here. At the end, the works we have done in the realm of our sanctification will be judged either to distribute eternal rewards or for demonstrating publicly whether we have faith, which was Luther’s view.² This doesn’t paralyze us with servile fear, but motivates us with filial fear.

² Luther, *First Peter*, 30:34–35.

Why Should I Fear God?

One of the questions verse 17 raises is *why should I fear God?* That's what Peter goes on to explain in verses 18–21. The opening verb **knowing** (v. 18) explains the imperative verb in verse 17. What do we know? **That you were ransomed**, that is, purchased out of the slavery of **the futile ways inherited from your forefathers** (v. 18) and liberated in Jesus Christ. This is not just an Old Testament idea (e.g., Ex. 6:6; 15:13) but Jesus described his entire mission in these words: “for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). For we were enslaved by the power of sin, in fact, sin dealt us a deathblow; for we were “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1).

And the price of our redemption was not the perishability of money—**not with perishable things such as silver or gold** (v. 18), which tarnish and corrode when exposed to sulfur compounds in the air, thereby becoming worthless—but the preciousness of Christ—**but with the precious blood of Christ** (v. 19). In accordance with all the sacrificial laws, Jesus was **like...a lamb without blemish or spot** (v. 19). It's interesting that the term **without blemish** comes right from the Old Testament law (e.g., Lev. 1:3, 10), but that the phrase **without...spot** is something new. What it shows is that the fulfillment of the Old Testament supersedes the types and shadows.³ What this means is that Jesus was the perfect sacrifice; he had no spot or wrinkle that would disqualify him to be offered as a

³ Schreiner, 86.

sacrifice for your sins. As Luther said, “Just one drop of this innocent blood would have been more than enough for the sin of the whole world.”⁴

Even more, not only have we been redeemed by the precious blood of the perfect sacrificial lamb, Jesus Christ, but we have been redeemed by the precious blood of the predestined lamb of God: **He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times** (v. 20).

From eternity past the very purpose, the very mission, the very goal of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was to come and save sinners.

Why should I fear God by living a life of godliness? As John Calvin said, “there is hence nothing which ought so much to stimulate us to the practice of holiness, as the memory of this price of our redemption.”⁵ Another writer said this:

The more confident Christians be that they are of the number of the redeemed ones by Christ, the more should they be moved to study holiness for the honour of their Redeemer, considering that the study thereof is the very end of their redemption.⁶

Won't Fear Make Me Uncertain?

Finally I want to address one practical question that a text like this poses in our minds: *won't fear make me uncertain*. It sounds like we're giving the gospel with one hand only to take it back with the other, taking away assurance.

But notice that this godly fear is within the context of hope, which is not an uncertain certainty, but is certain. We have been born again to a living hope in 1:3. We set our hope fully on Christ's coming in 1:13, and our faith and hope are in God

⁴ Luther, *First Peter*, 30:36.

⁵ Calvin, 12:247.

⁶ Nisbet, 44.

in 1:21. As he says at the end of verse 20 and then in verse 21, Christ was manifested **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.**

There is nothing in this passage that makes us uncertain. Our love of Jesus in this passage are compatible with fearing God here. Our being eternally secure in this passage is compatible with fearing God as we strive for holiness without which no one can see the Lord.

So how do you speak about God? Peter encourages us as pilgrims to speak of him in the world that communicates both our love of him and our fear of him. Amen.