

Faithful Fear

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[0 : 00] Thank you so much, Steric. It's really good to be here. And, well, if you're a visitor here today, I was going to say you're in good company, you're in my company. It's my first time here as well.

And if you're new today, maybe you've just come in for some reason, maybe a friend brought you. I don't want to assume anything about where you are or what you believe. But one of the things that the church do here every week is to open the Bible, which we believe is God's words, and to listen to what it's saying.

And so we're going to do that now. So if you've shut it, why don't you open again to 1 Peter chapter 3. And that's page 1015. I should say as well, if you're worried about keeping your children in today, don't worry, I have five children.

I'm very used to children not listening to what I say. So be at ease. Let me take you back a few months in our house. I was not going in there.

No way. It was massive and hairy and unpredictable. And I'm not talking about one of my children.

[1 : 10] The spider had been in the bathroom all week, holding court, setting up shop, mocking me. And now it had to be dealt with.

But there was no way that I was going to do it, because if you haven't guessed yet, I am terrified of spiders. This spider had control of me. Because what you fear controls you.

Or to put it the other way around, to put it more positively, what you revere also controls me. Let me take you back a few more years. Many years. In fact, I was about 10.

It was the prize giving at my local football club that I was training with. Incidentally, the club was Newcastle United. As a youngster, I trained with their youth academy for a while. This is not much of a humble brag, because they kicked me out when I was 13.

So it's still a sore subject. Anyway, a few years before I was 10, it was the annual prize giving. And there was no way I was going to miss it. Because someone from the first team was coming to present the prizes.

[2 : 14] Yes, it was Peter Beardsley. And there was no way I was going to miss Peter Beardsley being there. If you like, he had control over me.

Because what you revere controls you. And hold on to that thought, because it is at the heart of this passage today.

We're picking up again in the New Testament book of 1 Peter. As I understand it, you're in the middle of a series on discipleship. And I think Derek preached a few weeks ago on 1 Peter chapter 4.

So this is like the prequel to that, if you like. Just to paint the picture for you, the apostle Peter is writing to Christians who are scattered around the fringes of the Roman Empire.

These people are a long way from Christian centers like Jerusalem, or like the megachurch at Antioch. They're out there on the fringes of the Roman Empire.

[3 : 11] And the pagan Roman culture clashes with their Christian faith. And because of that, life could be tough for these Christians.

And so Peter writes them this letter. And again and again in it, he reminds them of the glorious hope they have in the future when Jesus returns.

And he's kept on telling them that fixing their eyes and their mind on that hope in the future will enable them to deal now with the uncomfortable cultural clashes there are in the Christian life.

And he's been teaching them to live well in a world that opposes the gospel. In every area of life, he's talked about living for Christ at home and at work and amongst this culture that's so difficult.

I guess he knows that the danger for Christians living in a hostile culture is that we feel abandoned by God out there on our own.

[4 : 21] And so Peter writes to remind them that no, no, that they are God's chosen holy people, his special possession. I suppose one other danger of Christians living in a hostile world is that they will be hostile in return to those who are persecuting them.

And so Peter has written to teach them to be good and submissive citizens, which he says will win a hearing for the gospel in that culture. And here's another danger and this is the point today. Another danger is that Christians living in a hostile culture will fear that culture and so they'll be controlled by that culture around them.

And so he writes here to encourage them instead not to fear the world, but to revere Christ and so be controlled by him.

And so you might have noticed the first half roughly of today's passage was stuffed full of practical instructions for Christian living. But look at verse 18.

[5 : 32] Can you see it starts with a little word for or you could say because. And that means that what comes after is the reason for everything that comes before.

And so Peter's point here is that what you fear or revere controls how you behave in all these little practical ways. And so if you see on the screen as we go along today there's a couple of headings and here's the first one. Peter says revere your victorious Lord.

That word revere is actually translated honor in the ESV. It really just means set apart as holy.

Revere look to. So read with me if you would from verse 14. But even if you should suffer for righteousness sake you will be blessed. Have no fear of them nor be troubled but in your heart's honor or revere Christ as Lord and always be prepared to give it a fence and so on.

He's saying don't let your behavior be controlled by fearing the hostile culture. Let your behavior be controlled by revering or honoring Jesus Christ. Now when it comes to the great Peter Beardsley I could tell you something of the victorious story of his time at St. James's Park. And so I will. He grew up on Tyneside. He trained with the youth Academy there and then he went away and played in other places and then he re-signed for Newcastle United in 1993 for a record fee of £1.5 million. Those were the days when £1.5 million got you anything in football. Anyway Newcastle had just been promoted to the Premier League and in a barn storming season the sort of season we can only dream of these days they finished third and qualified for the UEFA Cup. And then the following year Peter Beardsley captained Newcastle United to a record second place in the Premier League. We were pipped to the title by Man United. I could tell you more of the victorious story of Peter Beardsley but I better stop there. You get the idea and you get the idea why I as a ten-year-old boy revered him and wasn't going to miss that prize giving for anything. Well to encourage the Christians that he writes to Peter tells them something of the victorious story not of Peter Beardsley but of Jesus. And the story of Jesus' work starts there in verse 18. Have a look. For Christ suffered once for sins the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God being put to death in the flesh and being made alive in the spirit. Now when it comes to Jesus' death of course the apostle Peter can recount firsthand the crucifixion of Jesus. At the time you might remember from the Gospels that Jesus was that Peter was totally astonished that Jesus would go to the cross. He didn't understand the purpose of it at all. God's Messiah coming to die seemed so wrong to him. And you might remember that occasion in Mark's Gospel we often look at it in the Christianity explored course where

Jesus announces in chapter 8 that he's going to the cross and Peter takes him aside and starts to rebuke him. What do you mean you're going to die? What kind of Messiah goes to die? Peter didn't understand but now he does. Now he sees why Jesus' death is so glorious because as he says Jesus suffered and died for us. The righteous that's Jesus for the unrighteous that's us. So that our sins might be paid for so that we might be brought to God. And if you're here today and you're not a Christian that is the heart of the Christian faith. Not what you can do for God but what he's done for you. Jesus has won a great victory Peter is saying over sin and death.

[9 : 48] But that's not the end of the victorious story of Jesus. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the spirit. In other words he rose from the dead. But that's still not the end of the great and glorious and victorious story of Jesus. The climax is there in verse 22. He has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels, authorities and powers which just means everything submitted to him. That's the end point of the victorious story of Jesus reigning over everything.

And you need to keep that in mind because what Peter says in between those two points is just a little bit tricky. Maybe you noticed that as we read it. Have a look at verse 19. In which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison because they formally did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared. In which a few that is eight persons were brought safely through water. Now when you read that you might be forgiven for thinking what on earth does that mean? And I might reply, that's a good question. What on earth does it mean? Well there's considerable debate about how to understand these couple of verses. It isn't clear at all on first glance exactly what Peter means. Actually that makes this a really good opportunity for us to learn. The question is what should you do when you come across a verse or two in the Bible that you cannot make head or tail off? And the principle is always this. We interpret scripture by scripture. Another way to say that would be to say that we interpret what isn't so clear in the light of what is very clear. And so just remember the overall thrust of this section is abundantly clear. It is the story of Jesus' victorious journey from the cross to the grave, from the grave to resurrection, from resurrection to what we call ascension. Jesus seated and reigning. And the point of all of that is it demonstrates Jesus' power over everything. And on the way Peter tells us that Christ preached to imprisoned spirits. Who are these spirits? Well the Bible experts give a few different options. It could be that these spirits are human beings. Although it would be unusual for the Bible to use that word spirit on its own to refer to people. Not impossible but unusual. And there's a couple of other Bible references might help you. You can look them up at home if you want. 2 Peter 2 verse 4 and Jude verse 6, they're their references to what seem to be evil spirits or perhaps even fallen angels being kept in chains and darkness. And the verse in 2 Peter also makes reference to the story of Noah. So it may be a link. So a best guess is that these spirits are fallen angels or evil spirits of some kind, fallen sons of God. And of course there's a reference to that in the story of Noah as well if you know it. But look, even if the details are sketchy, you see the point clearly. Victorious Jesus rules and reigns over everything. All angels, all authorities, all powers are in submission to him. That is the present reality. Why? Well because he's won this great victory over sin and death. Which I suppose might be another reason for the reference to Noah. Just as God rescued Noah and his family through the water, well so now for us if we come to faith in Christ, we would pass as it were through the waters of baptism, which is that symbol of God having washed us clean, not physically, of course, verse 21, but morally, spiritually to give us a clear conscience. Verse 21. And so we land in verse 22. Jesus is the victorious Savior. He rules and he reigns as king over everything. Now you might think, well fine, that sounds like a good abstract theology lesson, but to think only that would be to totally miss the point. There is a reason that Peter is saying all of this to you today. There's a reason he's pointing to Jesus as this victorious Lord. And it's because he's writing to this persecuted suffering church. And he wants them to be sure that they don't fear the threats of their persecutors, verse 14, but instead they fear or revere Jesus. [14:54] So that their behavior would be driven by reverence for Jesus. And so now we're going to see what kind of behavior should flow and follow if you revere Jesus. So secondly, live for your victorious Lord.

Of course, one reason, again, that Peter is reminding that Jesus reigns is because the Christian life now involves hardship and difficulty and even conflict. So far in his letter, Peter has said a lot about how we should handle ourselves in these kind of situations. And maybe the key verse of the whole letter is chapter 2, verse 11. I'm reading it here from the NIV. Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners in exiles to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul.

Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. And there's the general principle. And Peter has applied that, as I said, to different situations, the workplace, the home, the families. And now I think he gives some instructions about how to live within your church family here at St. Columbus.

How do you live out of reverence for Christ when there's conflict and difficulty, not just out there from the world, but even inside the church? I think it's clear here that Peter is addressing Christians because he says, and this is back in verse 8 if you want to chase it up, he says, all of you, he's addressing us to all Christians show brotherly love. In fact, Peter builds a little pyramid of instructions here. Again, these are from the NIV, so the text is just slightly different. But he begins and ends this little section in verse 8 by saying, be sympathetic, be like-minded towards one another. You could literally translate that, be humble-minded.

And then a level in, he gives us some instructions about how we should feel towards one another in the church family, be sympathetic, be compassionate. But at the heart of his little triangle of instructions in verse 8 is the command to love one another, or brotherly love, as it says here. So this is a reminder that the church that you belong to here, it's not a club that you attend.

[17 : 40] If you're a Christian here today, this church is a family that you belong to. And the people you're sitting around, and you can have a look at them if you can bear it, they are not just mere acquaintances, they are not just your colleagues, they are your brothers and sisters in Jesus. I guess Peter is all too aware of the dangers within churches that far from there being bonds of brotherly and sisterly love, there will instead be those verse 9 who repay evil with evil, or perhaps insult with insult.

And there is the danger within a church family of the kind of tit for tat petty squabbling and jealousy and slander and gossip that you might expect out there in the world, but too easily invades in here in the church. And if it does, that is deathly.

So do you want to kill your church if you do? Speaking ill of one another is a good way to go. Oh, do you want to ruin your congregation if you do lies and rumour and slander and backbiting?

That's a good way to do it. Of course, that kind of attitude, that kind of talk is the very opposite of the instructions Peter has given in verse 8. And so it will create a disunited unsympathetic church, a church where in place of love there's just apathy or even worse hostility between the members, a church where instead of compassion for one another, there's just a kind of a callous disregard in place of humility, there's pride. And isn't it interesting all the sins that were warned against here and all the things that are commended here have to do with speech?

The things you say. And Peter drives that point home with this quote from Psalm 34. You'll see it there just set in as poetry in the text. Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good. Let him seek peace and pursue it. So here's the question in St. Columbus Free Church. Do you want love, life and good days ahead for your church? And if you do, keep your tongues from evil, watch the way you speak, speak only the truth and only in love if you want unity within your church family. And Peter's point here is that in all of this, the stakes are really high. This is not just some trifling matter the way you speak. Look at verse 12. There's a promise here, for the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, that is those who conduct themselves that way and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. That's a sobering promise for your church family here, isn't it?

[21 : 23] So-called churches that are full of evil and deceitful and hurtful speech, our church is that God promises to abandon. God hates that kind of talk. There is no place, if I can say this as an outsider, there is no place in St. Columbus Free Church for those who will speak ill of others in the church family. So let me ask you, I don't know many of you here today, I suppose I can just ask this. What are you saying about others in your church family, behind their backs or behind closed doors? And who are you looking down on? Who are you having slanderous thoughts about? What unkind words are you saying? If any, stop it.

Stop it. You are called to love one another. And as an aside, you can hardly love people you hardly know, can you? I know you guys have a good program of small groups, I suppose that's why things like that are so important to be able to know and to love deeply a smaller group of people within this church family. If you're not in one, join one. So as we live for our victorious Lord, we are to turn from evil and to do good. And when it comes to Christians being under pressure, and I think Peter is now turning to think not just about conflict or difficulty within the church, but again, conflict that comes or difficulty that comes from outside the church, when it comes to that sort of thing, Peter has a fairly optimistic outlook. Just have a look at verse 13.

Now, who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? So here we go. We're starting to think now about conflict and difficulty outside.

This is one of his repeated themes in the letter, live good lives, live godly lives within that hostile culture. And if you do that, very often your hostility will neutralize any, sorry, not your hostility, your godliness will neutralize any hostility from outside, because people will have nothing that they can reasonably accuse you of. Very often living a good and godly life within a hostile culture will make those who want to persecute you ashamed of the things they are saying. And he says your godly living may even have a kind of evangelistic edge.

Back to chapter 2 verse 12, live such good lives among the pagans that they may glorify God having seen your good deeds. And you get the same idea here in verse 13. Have a look again. [24 : 26] Now, who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? Good. But Peter knows that's not the whole story. There may still be times when Christian people are got at or mocked even in some places persecuted for faithfully following Jesus.

But Peter says even if that happens, verse 14, even if you suffer for doing what's right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats, do not be frightened, but in your heart honor Christ as Lord. And this is the heart of it really. Do you see now why we spent the first half of this talk looking at the second half of the passage? Because when you face hostility from the culture for standing up for Jesus, I suppose our natural reaction is to be afraid.

And if we're afraid that the next natural step is to stop standing up for Jesus because we're afraid and we don't like to be afraid and we're uncomfortable and none of us like that. So for example, if you take a stand at work and you're asked to lie and you refuse and you feel the heat from your boss, well, you feel afraid, right? Or when you speak up on some issue and you know you're going to get stick from it for it for standing up for the truth of the Bible, you're afraid, right? But in your moments of fear, Peter is saying to you pretty simply, you've got to decide who you fear most. Do you fear the threats of a hostile secular culture?

Or do you fear or revere Christ as Lord? And of course, you'll only revere Christ as Lord when you have a sense of how awesome and powerful He is and how He rules overall and how He's king overall and how one day every knee will bow before Him.

Peter is saying, don't fear man. Revere Jesus. And in doing that, therefore, always be prepared to speak about Him. Don't be frightened into silence. That's how Peter goes on halfway through verse 15. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you. Always be prepared. And near us in Burkhead, we have a couple of military bases, RAF Lossymouth and the Kinlos Barracks. So we have a few military folks in the congregation. I get nervous doing military examples because I always get them wrong. But when you join the army, you are put through basic training. And if you join the infantry, you are put through more and more and more training. Because the army knows that on the battlefield, in the heat of the moment, most of us would just go to pieces and not know what to do.

[27 : 50] And it's hard enough to get soldiers to do what you want them to do at the best of times. Never mind on the battlefield. And so they are drilled again and again and again to do the same thing over and over and over so that they are always prepared. And only then, when they are always prepared because they are drilled and drilled and drilled, will they be able to do the right thing on the battlefield when the heat is on. And Peter makes the same point to us today. Are you prepared? Are you drilled, ready to be able to explain the Christian faith to someone?

In one sense, this is quite a neutral statement. It might be a good evangelistic strategy for your church. But I wonder, in the context of the passage, there might almost be a kind of judicial tone here. It's possible Peter is even talking about a time when these Christians who are under pressure had been brought into court to give a defense for their faith because of some accusation against them. But whatever the situation, the point is the same. Are you drilled and prepared?

When I was working at a church down in Sheffield before we moved north, I would often be responsible for interviewing people. It was quite a big church, so when someone wanted to get involved in serving in some different ministry, we'd often meet with them to hear about their Christian story and so on. It was quite mean, but one of the questions I would often ask would be to say to them, just imagine that you're standing at a bus stop and maybe you're on your way to church on a Sunday morning and there's two minutes left till the bus arrives. Let's imagine in this story the bus is on time, so it is just two minutes you've got. Your friend comes along and stands next to you and says, where are you going? You say, I'm going to church. They say, oh yeah, I knew you went to church. Oh go on then, you've got two minutes before the bus comes. What is this Christian faith all about? Maybe I'll come with you to church if your answer's any good.

Imagine yourself in that scenario. I used to make the man sigh, I won't make your all answer just now. But what would you say? Would you be prepared, drilled, equipped to say something that was meaningful about Jesus and the gospel and about how He's come from heaven to earth to save a world that's fallen and turned from Him and that He's died on the cross to pay the price for our sin, that He's risen and He's ascended to heaven and He rules the universe and He holds out this offer to you, this gift of forgiveness and new life. Could you say something?

And more than that, could you say it in a way that wasn't so full of jargon, like I probably did, that someone who'd never been to church before could actually understand what on earth you were going on about? If you think, oh man, I don't know what I'd say, then let me recommend something to you. There's a great resource called Two Ways to Live. You can get it in a little booklet, you can get it online, just go and Google it or speak to me. It's a great way to learn a short gospel outline in six simple steps. So Peter asks you today, who will you fear? And I suppose as we live in a culture which becomes a little bit more hostile to our Christian faith, that the question becomes all the more important, who will you fear? Will you fear the culture around us and live in response to that? Or will you revere Jesus as Lord and live in response to Him and even be prepared to speak for Him? Because you speak about the most precious thing. Verse 18,

[31 : 50] Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. Let's pray, shall we? Heavenly Father, we give you great thanks for Jesus. We thank you that He came from heaven to earth. We thank you that He stepped down from glory to the dirt and mud and mess and moral decay of our world. We thank you that He stepped down even further to death and even further to death on a cross for our sins. We pray, Father, that you would help us to honor and revere Jesus as Lord. And even this week as we face times of pressure, we pray that you would help us to choose wisely, to revere Christ, not fear the world, and be ready to speak for Him in all that we do. Amen.