



UNITED BY HOPE – Part 7 Fear God, Not Government

If you have a Bible—, and I hope you do—let me invite you to open it to 1 Peter 1. We're going to be in 1 Peter 2 in our time together today, but I want us to start in the first chapter.

We're starting here because many of you are working on memorizing this chapter. It's been a few weeks since we've reviewed that memorization, so I want to give us an opportunity to do that together. We're going to recite 1 Peter 1:1-13 and I want to invite all of us, wherever you are, to read it out loud together. Sound good? All right, let's do it, and may God be honored as we read and meditate on His Word.

¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

¹³ Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

God, we praise You for Your Word and the living hope we find in it. We pray that You would help us find deeper understanding of the living hope we have in it. Amen.

That leads us to 1 Peter 2:17 where I want us to consider two words. Last week we talked about exalting Jesus in an election. This week we're two days away from that election being official and no one listening right now knows what Tuesday night or Wednesday or Thursday holds—no one but God. Last week we looked at the role of government and the part we play in government as submissive citizens who do good, who abhor evil, who honor everyone, including leaders, and who love the church.

There's one command in 1 Peter 2:13-17 that I would argue supersedes everything. It's where we left off near the end of 1 Peter 2:17. The Bible says, "Honor everyone," then it comes back at the end of the verse and includes the emperor, just to make it clear that we're not missing everyone. So, honor everyone including the emperor, love the brotherhood and fear God. Fear God; not the government. So what does that mean and why is this command so important for us two days before a significant election in our country?

Well, let's think about this word "fear." It's familiar to each of us in unique ways. In fact, let's take a moment, wherever you are, and spend the next 60 seconds in silence and contemplate this question: What are you most tempted to fear in your life? If you're going to be afraid of anything in your life, what would it be? Take 60 seconds to contemplate that. If you're taking notes, maybe write it down and let it soak in. What are you most tempted to fear in your life?

* * * *

I obviously don't know all the things that may have come to your mind. Maybe it's fear of heights, flying, spiders, snakes or other venomous pests. Maybe it's a fear of germs. Maybe it's a fear of COVID. Maybe it's a fear of losing someone or something important to you—someone you love, losing your job, losing possessions or the reputation you have. Maybe you're afraid of losing your health or your life. Maybe you fear getting hurt or losing control. Maybe you fear failure or rejection or being alone. Maybe you fear the unknown.

There may be specific fears you're facing in your life right now. Maybe you fear what we're facing in this election. I've heard people say, "I'm afraid of what might happen if this person gets elected." I've heard other people say, "I'm afraid of what might happen if that person gets elected." I've heard some people say, "I'm afraid of what might happen whoever gets elected."

Does God call us to think this way? Or is being afraid of anything actually the opposite of how God calls us to think? That depends on what you mean by fear, right? Take snakes for example. If you are standing in front of a king cobra snake—the largest venomous snake in the world—and you have chills going down your spine, it seems appropriate not to be too casual or playful, doesn't it? There seems to be a God-honoring, even a God-given, level of appropriate fear. But a king cobra is not ultimate, is it?

Job 26:13, talking about God, says, "*By His breath the heavens are cleared; His hand has pierced the fleeing serpent*" (NASB). Even a king cobra is under the authority of God. This means that ultimately you don't need to fear a king cobra. You need to fear the One Who created and rules over the king cobra, right?

Isn't this what Jesus means when He is speaking to His disciples in Matthew 10? Peter, who writes this command to fear God, once heard Jesus prepare him and the other disciples for the persecution they would face for following and proclaiming Jesus. He said this about persecutors in Matthew 10:26-28:

So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

In other words, Jesus said, "Don't be afraid of people—even governing officials—who can kill your body. Be far more afraid, ultimately afraid, of the God Who determines your eternity." This is why Peter writes in a passage about government, in the middle of persecution, "Fear God." Think about it. In a world where there are all kinds of things we are and should be legitimately concerned about, a world where there are many things we find ourselves anxious or worried about or afraid of why do we have this command? It's not just here; it's throughout the Bible. Over a hundred times we have this command to fear God alone and nothing else. Nothing but God.

Let's look at three reasons why we fear God alone. I want to let these lead us to sing and worship in fear before the God Who is worthy of our fear.

1. We fear God alone because of His ultimate authority.

This is what Peter saying in this passage about government: "We're submissive citizens of the government, but we don't fear government. No matter what happens in government, we fear God." This is exactly what Jesus was saying in Matthew 10:28. Don't fear those who kill the body but who cannot kill the soul. It's an issue of who has ultimate authority. So yes, maybe the government has the authority to kill your body, but that authority is not ultimate. God has authority over your body and soul.

This is what we read this last week, if you're following along with the McLean Bible Church Bible Reading Plan. We just finished the book of Daniel where we see King Nebuchadnezzar declare, "All people must bow down and worship me or be burned in a blazing fire." Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego say to the king, "We fear God more than we fear you. So we will not bow at your feet." Then another pagan, King Darius, declares that no one can pray to God. If they do, they'll be thrown into a den of lions. So what does Daniel do? He marches up to his room like he did every day, opens the window, then prays to God. Then—watch this—right after the king throws Daniel into a den of lions, God spares his life there. Daniel comes out while his accusers are fed to the lions and the king declares, "*I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion, people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end*" (Daniel 6:26).

In other words, He's the ultimate King. It's the same thing Peter is now saying to Christians in the first century—and in the 21st century. Fear God. Do not fear government or anything else. Nothing. Why?

Because everything you might be tempted to fear is under the ultimate authority of God. Everything. Think about everything you put on the list that you fear; everything that came to your mind. Everything you might be tempted to fear is ultimately under the authority of God. Everything.

Think about it. One of my fears does involve snakes. The first time I went to the Sudan—before there was South Sudan—was during the time of major persecution of Christians in the south. We went to serve the persecuted church there. It was certainly at that point the most dangerous trip I had been on to anywhere overseas. Heather and I prayed through that trip before I committed to go, but we believed God was leading me to go and be a part of serving this church there in that way.

We counted that cost and I went on that trip. We were about to go into Sudan and gathered together the night before. The guy who was leading the trip said, “Hey, there’s one risk we have not talked about that we need to discuss.” I thought we had discussed a sufficient amount of risks leading up to that point, so this was a bit of an alarm since we were already there. He said, “We need to talk about the snakes in Sudan.”

He went on to talk about how seven of the ten deadliest snakes in the world live in the region of Sudan where we were going. He started to list them one by one. The green mamba, the black mamba... He talked through all the details about these snakes. He said, “We have a snake kit, but it was not made for snakes like this.” One of the guys asked the obvious question, “Well, if someone gets bit, what will we do?” The leader said, “We will pray.” At that moment we began to realize how much our theology of prayer really matters.

He went on, “With that, I just want you to be aware of this risk. Now, sleep well and we’ll get up and fly out in the morning.” I was thinking, “No way!” I laid in bed that night, closed my eyes, but all I could see were mambas everywhere. I could not sleep. True story. I got up in the middle of the night and started going through the Word. I came across Psalm 91:13: “*You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent*” (NIV). I memorized Psalm 91 that night instead of sleeping, including that verse right there, so that I would be ready.

The next morning we flew in to Sudan in this tiny plane and landed on this makeshift airstrip in the middle of nowhere. We got to this alligator-invested river and were about to cross on a little unstable canoe the Sudanese had made that they named “Mayfloat.” That’s real funny—the May Float. We had to cross an alligator-invested river on a May Float?

We got on the Mayfloat and crossed to the other side. There was a Jeep-like truck waiting for us there with just enough room for most guys to get inside. But they needed somebody to climb up and ride on the top. I was eager and said, “I’ll go ride on top. How cool is that.” As we started to go forward, I remembered the night before, one of the guys told us a story about a villager there in Sudan who had been walking his cattle down the middle of the path, with trees all around, and there was a snake up in the trees. It slithered down, bit three cows in a row and they all fell over dead.

Well, we started driving and I was on the top of this truck, all excited. Then I realized we were about to drive on a little path in the middle of trees everywhere that are now eye level with me. Do you know what I did? *“YOU WILL TRAMPLE THE GREAT LION AND THE SERPENT!”* The whole trip—it was just me on top of that Jeep and the Word of God. I was claiming the authority of God over whatever was in those trees. In fact, that went on through my whole trip. Everywhere I walked I quoted, “You will trample upon the lion and the serpent! You will trample upon the cobra!”

I share that story because that’s what I’m encouraging you to do with any and every fear in your life. Whether it’s the fear of losing someone close to you, fear of getting hurt, failing or being alone—whatever it is—you proclaim, “God is sovereign over this. God is in control of that. Therefore I have no reason to fear.” This is so important. Because we fear God alone Who has ultimate authority, we have total security in Him. This is why Proverbs 14:26 (NIV) says, *“Whoever fears the Lord has a secure fortress...”* Ah, I want you to feel this fortress in your life. I specifically pray that you will feel this fortress before an election where none of us knows what lies ahead.

Let me take you one more place in God’s Word. Let this soak in. In the book of Isaiah, God is warning His people throughout that book not to be afraid of what the world fears, even what the nations of the world might say or do to them. God says in Isaiah 8:13, *“The Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.”* Fear God. Then later, specifically in light of threats to God’s people coming from among the nations, God says in Isaiah 40:9, *“...fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’”* Don’t be afraid of them. Look at your God, Who has ultimate authority over the nations. Look at Him. Fear Him.

Keep going in Isaiah 40:15-17, where he says:

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

Are you getting this? The nations are like a drop from a bucket. All right, here’s a bucket filled with water. I’ll just take a drop from that bucket. Think about the nations of the world—the 200 or so United Nations, all of them, big and small—and all that goes on in them. Picture those nations. Here’s the way God sees them—like a drop from a bucket. That’s the nations in the hand of our sovereign God. Is there anything you need to fear in that? It would be ridiculous to fear that. In fact, what does God say? *“Behold, the nations...are accounted as the dust on the scales.”*





Now, here is my Ph.D. dissertation, full of dust. No one, literally no one, has read this since I wrote it. Here's a scale. I'm going to put the dust from this dissertation on the scale. Look at the effect. Huh? It's not registering at all. This scale starts automatically, but it's not even turning on. That's what the nations are like before our God.

These illustrations are no exaggeration. Look at what Isaiah says next in verse 17: *“All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.”* How is that even possible?

If I'm holding nothing in my hand and you say, “I have less than that,” what does that mean? This is God making a clear point to His people then—and to you and me today—that He is in control and sovereign over countries and elections and presidential candidates.

A few verses later, Isaiah 40:22-23 say, *“It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.”*

Emptiness. Could God's Word be any clearer to us on this day? Do not fear what happens in nations or elections.

Hear the Word of God in Isaiah 41:10. God says to His people, *“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”* Verse 13: *“For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, ‘Fear not, I am the one who helps you.’”* The One Who holds the nations in His hand is your Helper; you have nothing to fear. Because we fear God alone Who has ultimate authority, we have total security in Him. Christian exiles in this country, we are dwelling right now in a secure fortress.

Now, we could stop here, but there would be a problem if we did. The fear of God is not a good thing and this command to fear God alone is not a good command, only because of God's authority. Think about it. There are many examples you or I could think of when it comes to authority figures who are fearful but not good. Think of evil despots throughout history who wielded their authority in evil ways. Think of an abusive husband or dad—or any other person in any position of authority—who wields that authority in wicked ways. I know some of you have fears in your life precisely because of people who have abused authority in your life.

So is authority the only reason we fear God? If that's the case, then fear of God might be extremely unhealthy. But it's not. God's ultimate authority is not the only reason we fear God.

2. We fear God alone because of His ultimate justice.

Think about this here in 1 Peter 2. We've just been commanded to honor and even submit to an emperor who was sadistic in his rule in the first century. I mentioned last week how Nero had his stepbrother, his mom and his wife all arbitrarily killed. He was an emperor who threw Christians to wild beasts to be devoured, who hanged Peter himself on a cross. Yet Peter was saying, "Don't be afraid of him." Why not? Because Peter knows what Jesus had taught him in preparation for this moment.

Go back to Matthew 10:28. *"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* In other words—please follow this because it's so, so, so important—as followers of Jesus, we do not expect this world to be perfectly just. Instead, we wait for perfect justice in the world to come. I'm going to say that one more time, because the ramifications of this are massive for the way we view evil and suffering in this world and in our lives. As followers of Jesus, we do not expect this world to be perfectly just; instead, we wait for perfect justice in the world to come.

I want to be really careful and emphasize that this doesn't mean we do not desire justice in this world, or that we do not do justice according to God's Word. We absolutely desire and do justice in this world to the extent we are able. Yet we know this world is full of injustice. We don't expect it to be perfectly just. As followers of Jesus, we are patiently waiting for the day when perfect justice will reign.

In 1 Peter 2:22, see how Jesus sets the example for us: *"He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth."* In other words, Jesus was perfectly innocent of all evil, of anything wrong. He was completely innocent. Yet verse 23 says, *"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but"*—watch this—*"continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."* Jesus was not surprised to experience unjust treatment in this world. At the same time, as He was being accused, tried, beaten and crucified, He knew Who would have the last word. He knew His Father is Judge of all and that His justice will reign one day.

Knowing that, Jesus entrusted Himself to the Father—and so can you and I as followers of Jesus. Because we fear God alone Who has ultimate justice, we can completely trust in Him. This is why Exodus 14:31 says, *"The people feared the Lord and put their trust in him"* (NIV). Do you see this? A right fear of God goes with trust in God, especially in a world of evil and injustice. For all who have experienced and seen evil and injustice around you, or done to you, and have struggled and maybe even now still struggle with the sovereignty of God and the evil and injustice of this world, hear God saying that He will bring ultimate justice. You can trust in Him for that.

For all of us amidst an election, even as we rightfully desire and wisely work to do justice in our country, let us not expect perfect justice to be present in the United States. Let's expect the battle for justice to be constant in this world, even as we patiently wait for perfect justice to come. This is why Martin Luther King Jr., amidst the battles against racism around him, made his famous statement that is now engraved on his memorial downtown" *"The arc of the moral universe is long and it bends toward justice."*

That quote has been taken out of context in so many ways politically to advocate for all kinds of causes—ironically, even unjust causes according to God’s standards of justice.

Martin Luther King Jr. was not ultimately talking about this world. He described this world similarly to what 1 Peter 2 is saying here. King said, “Evil may so shape events in this world that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ will rise up and split history in A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by the name of Christ.” Yes, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Or more appropriately, it ends in justice.

The reason to fear God alone is because God alone will have the last word.

To every person within the sound of my voice, please listen closely. You will one day stand before God as your Judge, then He alone will have ultimate authority on that day to invite you into everlasting joy with Him in heaven or cast you into everlasting torment in hell. When you die, which could be any moment for any one of us, you will face God as Judge and He will be just.

The problem is most people are banking on relative good they’ve done to get them into heaven. In other words, “I was not as bad or evil as so many other people.” Basically, most people are banking on the scales coming out on the right side. They’re hoping that their good will outweigh their bad, but that kind of thinking is deadly and will be eternally damning for everyone who thinks that way, according to God Himself.

You and I have all sinned and rebelled against God. We have turned from God’s ways to our ways, and one sin—one act of rebellion—against the infinitely just God of the universe is worthy of infinite judgment. This is why our relatively good works on a scale of good works is nowhere sufficient to save us from our sin against God. The only way, God says, that you can be saved from His judgment is by His grace, which He offers freely to all in His Son Jesus, Who came to die on a cross for our sin.

But apart from true life-entrusting faith in Jesus, you will experience everlasting destruction in hell. This is absolutely reason for fear. This is absolutely what matters most on this Sunday before an election. It’s not who will win or lose this week, but where you stand before the God Who will be your Judge. This is why at the height of a great awakening, Jonathan Edwards preached one of the most famous sermons in history. I can’t improve on his words, so I just want to say them right now. There are some of you—and you know who you are—who have not been taking God seriously. Truth be told, whether you’ve been running from God or playing games before God with a religious façade, maybe for many years, hear these words for anyone and everyone who has not truly trusted in Jesus as Savior and Lord of your life. Edwards said:

God holds you over the pit of hell and He looks upon you as worthy to be cast into the fire. You have offended Him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince. And it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire at every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else that you did not go to hell last night, that you woke again in this world after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given why you have not dropped into hell since you arose this morning, but that God’s hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell since you

have sat here. There is nothing else to be given as a reason why you don't at this very moment drop down into hell. O sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in.

Put your trust in Jesus. Fear God. Fear nothing in this world. Fear God, Who will bring ultimate justice in the world and in your life. Entrust your life to Him right now through faith in Jesus.

3. We fear God alone because of His ultimate goodness.

So put this all together. Yes, fear God (Matthew 10), because God has authority and justice to destroy both soul and body in hell. Yet God with His authority has sent Jesus to pay the price for sin on a cross. God in His authority has raised Jesus, His Son, from the dead. God in His authority declares that anyone, no matter what you have done or who you are, if you will trust in Jesus, His Son, as Savior and Lord of your life, He will rescue you from your sin and reconcile you to Himself, so that you might enjoy eternal life now and forever with Him.

Now hear the words of Psalm 34:8-10:

*Taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!
The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*

Man, woman, student—fear, revere, stand in awe of the God Who is the Author of all good things. As you fear Him, find yourself feasting at His table forever and ever. That's the picture. When we fear God alone Who is ultimately good, we find everlasting delight in Him. Now it makes sense; we've come full circle.

When we read Nehemiah 1:11, it talks about servants of God who delight in fearing God's name. How do you delight in someone you fear? Here's how. When the One you fear is the fountain of ultimate goodness, you realize He loves you has made a way for you to enjoy Him and His goodness forever and ever. Which means you now have absolutely nothing to fear in this world.

So on this Sunday before an election in our government, amidst whatever else is going on in your life, I want to call you to fear God. God is calling us in 1 Peter 2:17 to fear Him. In the words of Psalm 2:11, "*Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.*" What does it mean to rejoice with trembling? How do you rejoice with fear? It means you rejoice right now, because brothers and sisters, our security is not found in one candidate or his party. Our security is found in a King and His Kingdom.

Rejoice with fear because our trust is not in a constantly changing government. Rejoice with fear because our trust is in the coming justice of God. And ultimately, rejoice with fear and trembling because our delight is not in who wins an election. Our delight is in the One Who holds the winner and you and this nation and all the nations of the world and all our future in the palm of His hand. Fear Him, with security, trusting and delighting in Him alone.

Here's a word straight from God to you and me today. Psalm 33:16-17, *"The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue."* In other words, do not fear kings or armies or nations, because they cannot save you. Do not look to the United States or presidential elections for what you need. Look to God. And where is God looking? The very next verse says, *"Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love."*

Let's pray.

O God, may Your eyes fall on us right now, the people who fear You, who hope in You, who trust in You, who look to You for our security, who delight in fearing Your name. Even right now, as we sing and shout to You, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, we pray that You would cause fear of You in all these good ways we've just seen to rise up in new ways. Help us sing and worship You with appropriate, reverent, fearful awe.

Lord, I pray for anyone listening right now who does not know Jesus as Savior, that right now would be the moment when they say in their hearts, "Jesus, You are my King. I trust in You to save me from my sin, to lead me as Lord of my life." May they feast at the table You've offered them today and fear You for the first time. Be glorified in our singing and our worship now, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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