

1 Peter 4:7–11

Introduction

Today, we come to the end of the main body of Peter’s letter. We know this because our passage this morning ends with a doxology (“To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” – 4:11), and because in the very next verse, Peter starts fresh with another personal address to his readers, “Beloved, do not be surprised...” (4:12) That’s the same word Peter used when he started the main body of his letter back in chapter two:

➤ 1 Peter 2:11a — Beloved, I urge you...

So with this sense of where we are in the letter—ready to conclude, now, the main, middle section—let’s go back to chapter two and remind ourselves of how Peter set the tone for this entire section in the opening verses.

➤ 1 Peter 2:11–12 — Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and foreigners to abstain from the cravings of the flesh, which wage war against your soul, keeping your conduct among the Gentiles good, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and give glory to God on the day of visitation.

We see that the main theme of this section has been how we’re to relate to the Gentiles – how we’re to relate to the world in which we’re living as sojourners and foreigners, a world where we have to be ready to be persecuted and mistreated for righteousness’ sake. It’s in light of this prospect of suffering and persecution that Peter encourages us at the end of chapter three (vv. 18-22) with the reality of the Lordship of Christ who was put to death in the flesh, but has now been made alive in the Spirit, and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”

Last week, we saw how Peter exhorted us—in light of the fact that *this* Christ suffered in the flesh—to arm ourselves also with the same resolve that Christ had – the resolve to always choose suffering rather than sin, the resolve to always choose the label of a “social misfit” rather than compromise. Why should we do this? Because living for the shallow and passing pleasures of our human passions will never be worth it in the end, while suffering for always doing the will of God *will* always be worth it in the end. Peter reminds us that all who live for human passions (and who malign those who don’t) will give account to him who is ready, even now, to judge the living and the dead. On the other hand, all those Christians who’ve already died—who lived not for human passions but for the will of God—though judged in the flesh according to men, they will one day be made to live again in the Spirit (even as Christ does, now) according to God. It’s these realities of a final judgment and final vindication—of the sinner being brought to account and the righteous being rewarded with eternal resurrection life—it’s these realities that put into proper perspective all of our life in the present and that remind us that to choose suffering rather than compromise is always worth it in the end. Christ has already been raised, and He lives now in the Spirit, victorious over all the powers of evil. Therefore, the Judge is now ready, and the promised reward already purchased and prepared.

So in verses 1-6, Peter called us to live **in relationship to *this unbelieving world*** in light of this lordship of Christ. But now, at the close of this section, Peter moves to a very different application. It's in light of this lordship of Christ, and the final judgment and reward that His life in the Spirit now guarantees, that we're also called to live now **in relationship to *each other***. So Peter begins in verse seven:

I. 1 Peter 4:7a — The end of all things is at hand...

Words like these can have a certain ominous ring to us in our day. But of course, that's not how we're meant to hear them. The word for "end," here, has more the idea of the culmination of all things, or the "working out" of all things whether resulting in death for those who stumbled over Christ or life for those who came to Christ in saving faith. (cf. 1 Pet. 1:9 [outcome]; 3:8 [finally]; 4:17 [outcome]) The end of all things is when all of history finally reaches its intended goal according to the sovereign plans and purposes of God. Shouldn't that sound good to us?

But maybe we're wondering: How can Peter say that this end of all things is at hand when Jesus Himself said that no one knows the day or the hour? (Mat. 24:36) We've seen the answer to this question already this morning. All throughout the Old Testament, there was the hope and the promise of a final judgment when all the wicked would be destroyed; but until the life and work of Christ, the man whom God had appointed to judge the world in righteousness (cf. Acts 17:31) had not yet come. In the same way, all throughout the Old Testament, there was the hope and the promise of the resurrection, but until Christ's victory over death and His ascension into heaven, the life of the resurrection didn't yet exist – there was no such thing. But now that Christ has come, we know that the Judge Himself is standing now in readiness, and the hope and the promise of our resurrection life is already being lived, right now, by the one who died to save us. For Peter, and all of the New Testament writers, it's not the knowledge of a date that tells us the end is at hand, but rather the knowledge of a person; it's not the knowledge of a timetable that tells us the end is immanent, but rather the knowledge of Christ Himself risen, ascended, and seated at the right hand of God. From the perspective of the whole scope of history, there's a very, very real sense in which the end is already here in Christ. The end—the goal and the culmination of history—already exists in Christ. So someone has used the analogy that before the coming of Christ history ran perpendicular toward the goal. But after the coming of Christ we could think of history as now running parallel to that goal, ready at any time for the end to break in upon us in the appearing of Christ – who is, Himself, the end and the goal of history. (Newman; quoted in Marshall; NICNT, Epistles of John) Can we wholeheartedly and joyfully agree, then, with Peter when he proclaims to us that the end of all things is at hand?

But if this is true, that the end of all things really is at hand, what does this require of us?

II. 1 Peter 4:7b — The end of all things is at hand; **therefore be of sound judgment* and a sober mind for the sake of your prayers...**

Could we all be described as people of sound judgment and sober minds? The answer to that question, of course, depends on what it means to be of sound judgment and a sober mind – two

* Cf. Rom. 12:3; NASB; NIV; NRSV; HCSB; YLT; ASV; NKJV

expressions that in this context are basically synonymous. The word for “sound judgment” is used in other places of someone just being “sane” or in his “right mind.”

- Luke 8:35 (cf. 2 Cor. 5:13) — [The people] came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

So, to be of sound and sober judgment is really a very simple idea; it just means to be thinking clearly and rationally; it means that our judgment is not impaired – that we’re not delusional or sticking our heads in the sand. It means that our eyes are wide open and we’re always seeing things for how they really are and then living our lives appropriate to that reality. (cf. Achtemeier; Jobes)

So, then, how are things really? What is the reality that should be influencing all of our thinking about the present? It’s the existence, now, of Christ risen from the dead, and so, therefore, the fact that even now the end—the culmination and the goal—of all things is at hand. Wouldn’t you agree that for this to be a true and actual reality, and yet for us not to see it and not to view all of life in light of it would be the ultimate definition of insanity – of not being at all in our right minds? So then, do we really see that the end of all things is at hand? And are we, then, thinking and living sanely and rationally – always in the full light of this awesome reality?

The Bible pictures this life as one of watchfulness and alertness, a watchfulness and alertness that’s then most naturally expressed in our prayers. “The end of all things is at hand,” Peter says, “therefore be of sound judgment and a sober mind for the sake of your prayers.” If we really do see clearly that the end of all things is always, constantly, at hand—not in terms of a known date, but rather in light of the present reality of the risen and ascended Christ—don’t you think that this will result in earnest prayers to God for his help and aid? It’s this eschatological perspective, this sense of living in the time right before the end, that gives to all of our living a certain sense of urgency, and seriousness, and soberness and that therefore teaches us the very meaning of earnest prayer. As I thought about this, I was reminded of the hymnwriter’s simple, but earnest prayer: “Grant us wisdom; grant us courage for the facing of this hour... Grant us wisdom; grant us courage for the living of these days...” (Harry Emerson Fosdick) What is prayer, if not just the result of seeing rationally and thinking sanely? One commentator says this: “Prayer is a function of clear vision [in other words, of seeing clearly that the end of all things *is* at hand] and [so prayer is also, in a sense] a seeking of even clearer vision from God.” (Davids) So Paul says in Colossians:

- Colossians 4:2 (cf. Mat. 26:40-41) — **Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful** in it with thanksgiving.

And in Ephesians, we learn that we are to be:

- Ephesians 6:18 — ...praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, **keep alert** with all perseverance, **making supplication for all the saints...**

The hymnwriter didn’t pray: “Grant **me** wisdom” and “Grant **me** courage,” but grant **us** wisdom” and “grant **us** courage.” So I wonder if Paul’s emphasis on supplication for “all the saints” in

Ephesians 6 is also Peter's emphasis here.[†] Because we see so clearly that the end of all things is at hand, we're to be praying not *only* for ourselves but also for and with each other – praying that we will all have wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour and the living of these days. Why would this be so important to Peter? Because in a world that's an enemy to us, and in which we're living as sojourners and foreigners waiting for the end of all things, we need each other. Not only do we need each other, but we should really also be rejoicing in each other – being comforted that we all share together in the same persecution and rejection by the world, that we all share together in the same zeal for doing good, that we all share together in the same commitment to living no longer for human passions but for the will of God, and that we all share together in the same prayerful watchfulness in light of the end which is always at hand.

So, for Peter, and for all the New Testament writers, one of the surest signs that we're seeing clearly and thinking rationally is that we're all devoted to one another in love.

III. 1 Peter 4:8 — The end of all things is at hand; therefore be of sound judgment and a sober mind for the sake of your prayers, **above all maintaining an unwavering love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins...**

In chapter one, Peter writes:

- **1 Peter 1:22** — Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another unwaveringly from a pure heart...

Then, in chapter three, he writes:

- **1 Peter 3:8** — Finally, all of you, be like-minded, sympathetic, loving-the-brothers, tenderhearted, and humble-minded.

And now, again, in chapter four, Peter exhorts us: “Above all maintaining an unwavering love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins...” Peter knows, on the one hand, that the trials and the stresses that should unite us are the very things that can at times cause friction and discord – that, in the words of Jesus, can cause our love to grow cold. (cf. Mat. 24:9-13) But he also knows, on the other hand, how absolutely essential this community of believers is if we're to be truly ready for the end of all things and whatever trials and persecutions may come upon us before that end. (cf. Michaels) The church, as the body of Christ, is to be in a sense the believer's lifeline – a place of spiritual refuge, and encouragement, and comfort, and joy – an outpost of the kingdom in a strange and foreign land. And so it's in light of this that Peter exhorts us to be diligently working against all the forces that would ever tear us apart by loving one another unwaveringly — since love covers a multitude of sins.

Love never, ever responds in kind to any personal offense against me, pure and simple. And so in this way, sin is never allowed to multiply, and no root bearing the bitter fruit of strife and dissension is ever, *ever* allowed to gain any foothold within the community of God's people. (cf. Heb. 12:15; Prov. 10:12) To paraphrase one commentator from a hundred years ago, when we love by refusing to ever respond in kind to an unkind act or an insulting word, the evil thing is

[†] Perhaps this is the reason for the plural “for prayers” (literal translation)

brought to an end; it dies and leaves no seed... This consideration gives dignity and worth inestimable to the feeble efforts of the most insignificant of us to make love the controlling principle as we live in the community of God's covenant people. (cf. White; quoted in Jobes)

The end of all things is at hand; it is fully prepared and ready and standing at the door in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, let us be unwavering in our love for one another. May strife and dissention never gain an entrance into this eschatological, end-times community of God's people through you, or through me. Instead, as the Apostle Paul says, we must be always be eager and diligent to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:3)

In verse nine, Peter moves on to another expression of this love which is always the sign of seeing clearly and thinking rationally:

IV. 1 Peter 4:9 — The end of all things is at hand; therefore be of sound judgment and a sober mind for the sake of your prayers, above all maintaining an unwavering love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins; **being hospitable to one another without grumbling...**

When Peter was writing this letter, the very existence of the church was, humanly speaking, dependent upon the exercise of hospitality. In the first place, when itinerant prophets or teachers or evangelists travelled around to the different churches, they were completely dependent upon Christians opening up their homes to them and providing them with food to eat and a place to sleep. So the writer of Hebrews says:

➤ Hebrews 13:1-2 — Let **brotherly** love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to **strangers...**

The Apostle John writes:

➤ 3 John 5-8 (cf. 2 Jn. 10-11; Mat. 10:5-7, 11) — Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers [sent out by the church], strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

Hospitality was also a necessary part of caring for those in need:

- 1 Timothy 5:9-10 — Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, **has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted**, and has devoted herself to every good work.
- Romans 12:13 — Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

And finally, in a time when there weren't any church buildings, hospitality was essential to the life of the church in meeting together for worship and for fellowship.

- Romans 16:3–5 (cf. 1 Cor. 16:19) — Greet Prisca and Aquila... Greet also the church in their house.
- Romans 16:23 — Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you.
- Colossians 4:15 — Give my greetings to... Nympha and the church in her house.
- Philemon 1–2 — Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus... To Philemon our beloved fellow worker... and the church in your house.

Hospitality in the New Testament wasn't just a matter of having people over to enjoy an evening together (though that can certainly be a good thing). Hospitality was essential to the very life and existence of the church. So now maybe we can understand why Peter emphasizes the need for hospitality **without grumbling**. This hospitality was hard work. It required energy, and time, and resources, and a lot of sacrifice.

But here's hospitality, now, in the big picture: When we find ourselves alienated in a world where we're living as sojourners and foreigners—a world that's often hostile to Christ's true followers, we know that it's in the body of Christ where we can find our true belonging and acceptance – fellowship and mutual edification and support and encouragement. As one commentator puts it: “The church is to be that alternate society [that wholly different and set apart society] where Christians find [their] place when shunned by [a world] liv[ing] by different values.” (Jobes)

But now let's take it back one step further. Why is it so important that we're always finding and providing this place of belonging in the body of Christ? Why, in the days of Peter, was hospitality so absolutely essential? It's because the end of all things—the goal and the culmination of all things—is at hand. Think about it: If we really are seeing clearly that the end of all things is always at hand—not in terms of a known date, but rather in light of the present reality of the risen and ascended Christ—don't you think that the only rational response must be an always growing commitment and devotion to our life together in the body? Wouldn't that be the very definition of sound judgment and sober thinking? If the end of all things is at hand, then how important must it be to be finding and providing our true belonging in this end-times community of God's people? It's this eschatological perspective, this sense of living in the time right before the end, that gives to these Sunday services, and to our fellowship groups and to our prayer meetings and to all our practical expressions of Christian love and fellowship their real significance and importance – and even, in a sense, their true urgency.

If we're following Peter's thought and logic here, it will make perfect sense to us to see what he goes on to write next:

V. 1 Peter 4:10–11a — The end of all things is at hand; therefore be of sound judgment and a sober mind for the sake of your prayers, above all maintaining an unwavering love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins; being hospitable to one another without grumbling; **as each one has received a gift, using it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.**

So Peter has called us now to an unwavering love for **one another**, to show hospitality to **one another**, and to use the gifts we've received to serve **one another** – all in light of the reality that the end of all things is at hand. It's the nearness of the end that really does give to the words, "one another," their true meaning and significance. And so one of the ways we live out a clear and rational thinking in light of this reality is by always using whatever gifts we've received to serve one another.

Peter sums up all the possible gifts in just two categories: "Whoever speaks..." and "whoever serves..." (the speaking gifts and the doing gifts), so he's obviously not concerned with mechanics or with the details of any specific gift. What Peter really wants to emphasize is that as we use the gifts we've received to serve each other, it's actually God Himself who is the one at work among us in a whole variety of different ways. It's actually God Himself who is at work strengthening and establishing and building us up as we're all waiting, together, for the end—for the goal and the culmination—of all things. Peter says, "...as each one has received a gift, using it to serve one another as good stewards of **GOD'S varied grace**: whoever speaks, as one who speaks **oracles of GOD**; whoever serves, as one who serves by **the strength that GOD supplies**—in order that in everything **GOD may be glorified** through Jesus Christ." When we speak to one another (whether in a formal context of teaching or an informal context of encouraging and exhorting one another) and we're conscious of our words representing faithfully the very words and oracles of God, and when we "do" for one another (whether in acts of giving, or acts of mercy, or leading, or in any other kind of "doing" in the body of Christ), and we're conscious of serving only by the strength that God supplies, then how can we not see that it really is God Himself who is at work among us? How can we not see God's varied grace all around us? And how can God, then, not be glorified in everything through Jesus Christ?

Brothers and sisters, what is the reality that should truly be influencing *all* of our thinking about the present – not only how we live in relationship to the unbelieving world, but also how we live in relationship to each other? It's the existence, right now, of Christ risen from the dead, and so, therefore, the fact that even now the end—the culmination and the goal—of all things is at hand. The Judge Himself is standing now in readiness, and the hope and the promise of our own resurrection life is already being lived, right now, by the one who died to save us. It's this eschatological perspective, this sense of living in the time right before the end, that calls us so urgently to the task of loving and serving one another – to always be finding our true "belonging" here in this end-times community of God's people. It's here that God Himself is at work to equip us, and strengthen us, and preserve us in fellowship with one another until the end.

And so with all our hearts and with all that is within us, we joyfully conclude and confess with Peter:

VI. 1 Peter 4:11b — To **him** [—to God the Father *through* Jesus Christ His Son—] belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.