

May 22, 2016

Sojourners

The End of All Things is at Hand

1 Peter 4:7 – 11

You can tell a lot about a person by what they focus on at the end. P. T. Barnum, the circus king, who died in 1891, asked just before he died, "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?" Oscar Wilde's last words were "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do." John Barrymore, the famous actor replied to a friend who asked him if he was afraid to die, "Die? I should say not, dear fellow. No Barrymore would allow such a conventional thing to happen to him." Dominique Bouhours, a French grammarian, departed saying, "I am about to, or I am going to, die: either expression is correct." William Saroyan, famous author telephoned his final words to the Associated Press. "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case." And Humphrey Bogart exited stage left by saying, "I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis."

Now here we have Peter talking about the end of all things. And it is almost as if he is saying, 'Now pay close attention here. I'm summing all this up'. It is the conclusion of a section that began in chapter two where Peter has been talking about how to live as sojourners in this world. And throughout he has been framing his message in various but related perspectives. 'Live in such a way among the people of this age that the only accusation they can bring against you is that you are a follower of Jesus, and your life will cause them to see your deeds and glorify God. Live in submission to authority because that is a means of grace to an unbelieving world. Don't live like the world and repay evil for evil. Repay it with blessing instead. Understand that suffering may come, even though you are doing what is right. Walk this path because this is the very path the Lord you follow took when He walked this earth. Fortify your thinking with the knowledge that God uses suffering to define and refine His people.'

'And now, listen closely, the end of all things is at hand, and I've got a few final remarks on this.' He seems to be saying, 'In view of the fact that things are winding down, things are coming to a conclusion, you need to understand how you ought to live'. He's giving them an eschatological perspective on how to live out their faith. In fact, all the way through the New Testament the certain future believers can expect is always presented as the basis for their present behavior. And so Peter is pointing them to that future so that the present is put in proper perspective. *The end of all things is at hand; therefore*. Because the end is at hand, because we are moving toward the final consummation, there are certain entailments, certain ramifications, to the present. And Peter lays out five things here – clear-minded prayer, sin-covering love, generous hospitality, selfless service, and undaunted worship.

First of all he talks about clear-minded prayer. *7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers*. Here Peter connects four separate things together: the end of all things – sound judgment – a sober or clear mind – and prayer. When you come to the end of something, a lot may have gone on before, but as you approach the end you want to focus on the really important stuff. *Eric Hulstrand, a pastor, tells this story in Leadership magazine: "While I was preaching one Sunday, an elderly woman, Mary, fainted and struck her head on the end of the pew. Immediately, an EMT in the congregation called an ambulance. As they strapped her to a stretcher and got ready to head out the door, Mary regained consciousness. She motioned for her daughter to come near. Everyone thought she was summoning her strength to convey what could be her final words. The daughter leaned over until her ear was at her mother's mouth. And with much effort she said, "My offering is in my purse."*

And that is what Peter is doing – he's saying, 'Listen up! These are the important things.' '*The end of all things is at hand...*' Essentially, the word he uses *telos* – means the fulfillment, or consummation, or completion of a goal. Now some expositors write this off as either Peter simply making a mistake on the timing of the thing, or he wasn't aware of what things needed to take place before Jesus returned. But I think Peter was very clear about what had to happen. He was there when Jesus was telling His disciples what would happen in the end.

In Luke 17, Jesus foretold the coming destruction of the Temple which prompts His disciples to ask, 'When will these things be?' And the Lord goes on to talk about the appearance of many false Messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, earthquakes, plagues and famines, terrors and great signs in the heavens – *'...but the end does not follow immediately.'* *'...but before all these things they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and the prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My Name's sake...but when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies then recognize that her desolation is at hand...and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.'* Luke 21:6-24 And what Jesus was saying here is that the destruction of Jerusalem is part of what is coming **before** the end, and after that there is this period of time of unspecified length that has to be fulfilled, and then it culminates with world evangelization: *'This gospel of the kingdom must first be preached in all the world as a testimony to all the nations; then the end will come.'* Matthew 24:14

1st Peter was written around AD 62 – 65; and Jerusalem was not destroyed until AD 70. So Peter knew that some things had to happen before the end of all things. So what was he saying when he said, *'The end of all things is at hand...'* I think Peter was saying, 'Listen up brothers – history is marching to a conclusion and God is controlling the pace. The Holy Spirit has been poured out; the gospel is being preached; there wars and rumors of wars all around; persecution is increasing among us – and we don't know how long we have. We know that the things our Lord predicted still need to happen – but those could be accomplished quickly, even in our lifetime – the fulfillment of all things draws nearer each day.' Now if Peter was saying *'The end of all things is at hand...'* in AD 62, how much closer do you suppose it is today? Shouldn't we sit up and take notice?

Like the two gas company service men, a senior training Supervisor and a young trainee who were out checking meters and parked their truck at the end of the alley and worked there way to the other end. At the last house a woman looking out her kitchen window watched the two men as they checked her gas meter. As they finished the meter check the older supervisor challenged his younger co-worker to a foot race down the alley back to the truck. As they came running up to the truck, they realized that the lady from the last house was huffing and puffing right behind them. They said, 'Lady, what are you doing?' Gasping for breath she said, "When I see two gas men running full speed away from my house, I figured I had better do my best to catch up." And because the end of all things was drawing near, Peter was saying something about how we live in context with the lateness of the hour. *therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded.* **Self-controlled** here is the Greek word, *sophroneo*, and the main idea of the word is to have 'restraint in one's passions and desires' – in other words, self-control. It means to be in your right and sensible mind about your affairs here on earth in view of your ultimate goal of heaven. Don't let passions and desires rage out of control because they will hinder your progress and may lead to destruction.

Sober minded in this passage is the Greek word *nepho*, which basically means not to be drunk which makes our thinking cloudy. Be clear-minded. And here I think Peter was remembering the words of Jesus as He ended His discourse on the culmination of all things in Luke 21. *'Be on guard that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day come on you suddenly like a trap.'* Luke 21:34 The day is coming when everything that needs to happen, has happened and we see the fulfillment of all things. And the point is that there are many things that are working against us to cloud our thinking, to encourage us to dissipate our energies in other directions, to intoxicate us with the pleasures and comforts of life, to medicate and desensitize us from the things of God, and to keep our minds busily engaged in all the anxieties and worries that life can offer, rather than God. And Peter is saying, 'Don't be fooled – the end of all things is close – don't be drunk with the wine of the world – be sober and clear thinking.' That is what Jesus had taught him and he was passing it on. *'But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place and to stand before the Son of Man.'* Luke 21:36

You can't be alert if you are not self-controlled and sober-minded. And Peter says that we need to be because we need to be in prayer. *therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.* He is assuming of course that we do pray. But prayer is the one thing in the Christian life that is talked about more than it is done. We will do a lot of things rather than pray. We will even suffer a lot of things rather than pray. Whether it is private prayer or corporate prayer – there is a big hole in the church when it comes to prayer. Sunday morning worship services, mid-week Bible studies, weekend Christian retreats, church potlucks – all of these are better attended than any given prayer meeting in the church today.

In fact if you took all the people who attended church each Sunday and laid them end to end...they'd be much more comfortable. People talk about prayer – they know they need to pray – and yet they stay away from prayer in droves. Private prayer and corporate prayer is really a spiritual gauge for the Christian. To the extent that we are taking time to go to the Lord in private prayer – to that extent we are growing. And to the extent that the church corporately is praying – to that extent the church is growing spiritually. Spurgeon wrote that ***'The condition of the church may very accurately be gauged by its prayer meetings. So is the prayer meeting a grace-ometer, and from it we may judge the amount of divine working among a people.'*** I think Spurgeon knows a little of what he is talking about. His church was filled Sunday after Sunday to capacity and beyond and thousands came to Christ through his preaching. And yet when a visitor asked him what the secret to his success was, he took them down some stairs to a room below the pulpit where a crowd of 40 -50 people were gathered in prayer – intercessory, beseeching prayer – and he said ***'This is the power house.'***

So pray. Pray for the coming of the Lord Jesus and His kingdom; pray for strength to endure to the end; pray to escape spiritual apathy and dullness; pray that you are not made drunk and your thinking become cloudy and your heart become hard by the things of this age; don't waste your days in worry about anything, pray about everything; pray in the morning and at noon and in the evening. And if you play around thinking that you have plenty of time – you're mistaken. You don't know how much time you have. James tells us that He is at the door, and if James could write that 2,000 years ago; and if Peter by the Holy Spirit could say ***The end of all things is at hand***; how much more should we, in this century, be looking for and hastening the day of the Lord? ***"If any of you should ask me for an epitome of the Christian religion, I should say that it is in one word- Prayer. Live and die without prayer, and you will pray long enough when you get to hell."*** Charles H. Spurgeon

First of all Peter talks about clear-minded prayer. Next he says 'You need to express a sin-covering love in community'. ***8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.*** The word translated 'earnestly' literally means '***stretched out***'. You could translate this '***keep loving one another stretched-outedly***'. That is really bad English but I think it makes the point. It implies a self-denying kind of love that endures against self-seeking interests. You stretch yourself out for each other. You go above and beyond, precisely because you are brothers and sisters in the family of God. The writer of Hebrews puts it like this: ***Let brotherly love continue.*** Philadelphia – brotherly love. That implies a community of people who are visibly, actively, loving each other because they belong to each other. They are a family. Brothers and sisters. Literally the writer says, 'Practice brotherly love, continually. Don't let it stop. Don't stop putting one another first. Don't stop thinking up ways to encourage and stimulate one another to love and good deeds. When life gets hard and storms threaten and hope is fading, let your love for one another continue.' Peter says, 'Because the end is near, be all the more fervent in your love for each other. Don't be self-seeking but stretch yourself out for each other. Let love for one another consume you.'

You see, we've been born into the family of God. That implies a deep intimacy and love. Families know and love each other in ways that those outside the family do not. Families share life experiences. They share the joys and they share the sorrows. Sometimes they'd like to not belong, but they can't. They're family. Blood is thicker than water, even bad blood. Their success is your success. Their failures are your failures. You eat together, you play together, you do life together. To a great degree, you give up your privacy. You share your resources with each other. You put up with them and you love them because they're family. You laugh with them and you argue with them. You know them and they know you. They get into your business. You can't pretend to be other than you are with them because they know you. You are accountable to one another. They give you unwanted advice. There is a deep intimacy in family. You see, if you just come to church events and you never allow yourself to get into deep community with one another, you belong to a kind of Christian club; you're not part of a Christian community. This love is a consuming kind of love.

And it is this kind of love that will cover a multitude of sins. This is crucial; and particularly crucial if you are going to pray. You can't really pray effectively when you are at odds with your brother or sister. God does not listen to prayers that spring from a heart that holds offenses and grudges and ill-will toward another – especially toward those of the family of God. And here Peter says that the solution is love. Love covers a multitude of sins. I think he said that because he was aware that there are almost infinite opportunities we have to sin against one another, and to complain against one another, and to grumble against each other. And the church is riddled with sins that lay there, exposed by our selfishness and uncovered by love.

These are offenses real or imagined that good Christians take up against one another. And they lead to strife and fighting, cold shoulders and hot heads, and more than one church was started by disgruntled, offended people leaving another church. Some people don't like to think about this verse because they are afraid that their particular hurt or offense will somehow be ignored or covered up – but Peter does not say ALL – he says 'a multitude'. **That's a lot more than a few, and somewhat less than all.** Not every sin against us ought to be covered. But the implication is that *most* of what we consider to be sins against us ought not to be exposed to everybody, but rather covered over with a heaping helping of love. The Bible says in Proverbs 17:9: *'He who covers a transgression seeks love.'* Are you seeking love – or revenge – or justice – or just seeking to let people know that you've been hurt and they were wrong? The Bible makes it clear that the more mature a Christian is, the more love will cover the faults of others – the more readily we forgive others and the more sensitive we are of other's feelings and the more careful not to offend.

And yet offenses will still happen, so one of the first things we need to learn as Christians, is the art of giving and receiving forgiveness. You need to understand that if it is possible for you to be offended, you will be – and you need to learn how to stop being offended and to forgive. And then there are those who were born with very little in the way of tact or diplomacy and always seem to offend – and you need to learn how to stop offending people and to receive forgiveness. I want to give you three verses to meditate over this week – the first is in Matthew: *'If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way, first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.'* Matthew 5:23-24

We are obligated to take care of known offenses. If we know that someone has something against us, we must go to them and try and make it right. We have no choice. The context here is in the community of believers. We are at the altar – we are offering praise and prayer, song and psalms to the Lord – and we suddenly remember, 'So and so has something against me.' Actually that is the Holy Spirit reminding us. 'Don't try to play the good Christian with Me when you know there is something you haven't taken care of.' Maybe you knew it, but blew it off – maybe you knew it, and didn't want to deal with it – whichever it may be – the command, not a suggestion is to go – now, not later, and try to make things right. Otherwise your worship is worthless.

The second is in Luke: *'Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns seven times saying, I repent, forgive him.'* Luke 17:3-4 Here the context is an offense or even, repeated offenses against us – and our responsibility as the one who is sinned against is to forgive. All too many people pounce on the 'rebuke him' phrase and forget the 'forgive him' phrase. But the word here means to 'rebuke tentatively' or approach with caution, because you just might be in the wrong here yourself. But if indeed there is a sin against you that he recognizes and repents of– you need to forgive. It is not based on whether you feel like it or not – whether you feel that the repentance is genuine or not – whether you feel like he deserves it or not – it is a command – not something you take under advisement.

And the final verse here is in Mark: *'And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions.'* Mark 11:25-26 This speaks to the issue of our heart. Just as we stand praying, do we stand ready to forgive? Forgiveness can only be granted to someone who repents – but on the other hand, are we always ready to forgive? Do we have a forgiving heart? Is it just like the Father's? You notice again the context is worship – worship in prayer. God will not hear our prayers if we regard iniquity in our hearts and that especially is true of unforgiveness. This matter of forgiveness is huge in the church and we have just touched on a few things this morning. This is the testimony to the world that the gospel is true – that we love one another in truth.

Peter moves on now to talk about generous hospitality. **9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.** Because you are living in the light of the truth that the end is near, show hospitality to one another ungrudgingly, that is, without resenting the time or the expense that may be involved. The word is *goggusmos* (gong goose mos), and it refers to a secret displeasure that is mostly hidden from view. It describes a kind of murmuring or complaining to others. It describes a grudging and ungenerous spirit. It is like the lady who invited some people to dinner, and as they sat down to eat, she turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, "Would you like to say the blessing?" "I wouldn't know what to say," the girl replied. "Just say what you hear Mommy say," the mother answered. The little girl bowed her head and with sincerity in her voice said, "Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

Historical records tell us that the early church was marked by three things: love for one another; care for the poor and the marginalized; and generous hospitality. In fact, one of the qualifications for leadership in the church from the beginning is this kind of generous, ungrudging hospitality. You see, hospitality does not happen for an hour or two a week; it is a lifestyle of openness and availability that flows from a deep conviction that because we love God, and because we love one another, we open our homes. When Paul told the Romans to '**practice hospitality**' in Romans chapter 12,, the word literally means '**pursue hospitality**'. This means you are proactive, looking for opportunities, following the example of our seeking and inviting Savior. Pursuing hospitality often means sacrificing your comfort and your convenience for the sake of others. And generous hospitality is opening your home and freely giving of your time and resources to others because of the immeasurable value of the gift you have been given.

Max Lucado, in his book, *Outlive Your Life*, wrote: "Long before the church had pulpits and baptistries, she had kitchens and dinner tables. Even a casual reading of the New Testament unveils the house as the primary tool of the church. The primary gathering place of the church was the home. The early church (with its varied backgrounds got along) without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy, or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages (the Cross) and the simplest of tools (the home). Something holy happens around a dinner table that will never happen in a sanctuary. In a church auditorium you see the backs of heads. Around the table you see the expressions on faces. Church services are on the clock. Around the table there is time to talk. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: 'You matter to me and to God.' You may think you are saying, 'Come over for a visit.' But what your guest hears is, 'I am worth the effort.'"¹

And then Peter says, 'Because the end is near, be engaged in selfless service. **10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: 11 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.** You see, as believers, we've all been given some kind of gifting from the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us in Romans 12: *For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...*' Romans 12:4-6 In 1 Corinthians he explains: *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* 1 Corinthians 12:7 And in Philippians Paul makes it clear that these gifts are intended for the progress and joy of one another's faith.

In other words, every believer is given some gift, some grace by the Holy Spirit that is intended not to terminate on ourselves but on others. Gifts are given so that everyone in the community of believers will benefit. Someone else needs the gifts you've been given. That's why you have them. Our lives ought not to be about pursuing our dreams. So many of our dreams are simply self-exalting pride fantasies and incredibly selfish when we really examine them. And the truth is, we rarely know what's best for us and what will really make us happy. But God does. He knows that what will really float our boats and make our hearts happy is when we are satisfied in Him. This is emphasized by the goal of our gifting: *in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.* You see, the point of having gifts, the point of serving one another is that our service and our lives would glorify God through Jesus Christ. And that is the only thing that will truly satisfy us.

And then Peter says, 'Because the end is near, make your life all about the worship of God. **To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.** You see, because Peter is living in the light of the end of all things, he points us back to the return of Jesus and to His rule and reign over all things. Life may be hard just now, but He's coming back. We might be suffering now, but Jesus has dominion over all the circumstances of life. You might be the focus of evil and reviling now, but Jesus has power over even the hosts of hell; and in the end, He triumphs over all. The early church lived and worked and suffered on the edge of the end of all things. And they knew all the trouble and all of the suffering and all the heartache was worth it to see Him one day. And a passion for His appearing fueled undaunted worship. Nothing in this life can overshadow the joy and the hope of seeing Jesus face to face one day. To Him belong glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen.

1 Max Lucado, *Outlive Your Life*, (Nelson, 2010), 55.

Our gracious Lord and Savior,

Help us to live with the mindset that the end of all things is at hand and to focus morning by morning on the important things. May we not be intoxicated with the things of this world and desensitized to the things of God. Let us not be careless with our days but help us to redeem each one. Grant that we would be a people of prayer, advancing the kingdom of God on our knees. Make us radical lovers of Jesus and of one another. Cause us to walk in love and by our love make known the greatness of Your name, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.