

How to Live at the End of All Things

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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1 Peter 4:7-11

“The end of all things is near.” That’s an ominous way to start a passage.

“The end of all things is near.” Not only is it ominous, it’s a little odd. Why does Peter use these words to start this section of scripture? It’s fairly important that we figure that out. We’ve just read a passage full of moral instruction, and this strange sentence is the basis for all that instruction. It’s the grounds for all that instruction. The logic is: *“The end of all things is near, therefore here is how to live.”* If we are going to understand how this passage applies to our life, we are going to have to understand what Peter’s talking about when he refers to the end of all things. So...what do they mean?

The most obvious interpretation is that Peter thinks Jesus is coming back soon and that’s why the end is near. Peter thinks, mistakenly, that the second coming will be arriving any day now and that’s what he has in mind as he writes those words. That’s certainly possible. I do think that the New Testament authors did not foresee Jesus’ return being delayed as long as it has. I do think the New Testament authors expected Jesus relatively soon. But, I think Peter had something a little more complicated in mind when he tells the church the end of all things is near. I think the phrase means to say something about the church and about the world.

Concerning the church, he means to say that we are living in the last age. In the coming of Jesus, and in his death and resurrection, we have entered the last age of humanity. That’s the language and Spirit of the beginning of the book: *“You have been given new birth into a living hope!”* Peter gushes. *“You have received a salvation that the prophets could only dream of. Things have been revealed to you by the Holy Spirit that even angels hadn’t understood. A new age is upon you and you’re living it.”* So there’s actually a positive and empowering side to the phrase. It’s almost like a leader standing in front of his troops saying, *“The victory is won people. The tide of history has turned and we are on the victorious side. We have some great battles ahead of us, but don’t be afraid: the end of all things is near.”*

But there’s also another, slightly gloomier side to the apostle’s words. “The end of all things is near” is also a sober assessment about the state of the world. If you read the letter of 1st Peter carefully, it’s pretty clear that the people are living through some tumultuous times. 1 Peter is a letter to people whose lives are under stress. Chapter 1:6 talks about the church going through various trials. In Chapter 2:20 Peter refers to them living through suffering. In 2:24, we hear how Jesus handled hard times and how he suffered to save us. In chapter 3, Peter talks about the people suffering evil and abuse. In 4:12, the verse right after our passage we hear that the church is going through a fiery ordeal. And in chapter 5 we hear how the devil prowls around looking to devour. In every single chapter of this letter, you get the picture of a church living in a time when things seem to be falling apart. When things seem to be falling apart, people feel like the end of all things is near. When civil society breaks down, people are at each other’s throats. When political order suddenly seems tenuous and people kill each other for no apparent reason, it feels like the end of all things. When your family is in turmoil, a child is struggling Mom has cancer, Dad has dementia, the bills are piling up and now, on top of it all, it looks like you might lose your job, it feels like the end of all things. The end of all things is both a statement about the

reality of living in the last age where Christ has risen, and it's an existential statement about how life feels when things fall apart.

So that's the context evoked by the verse 7. These are words for hard times. Peter is telling us how to live when the pressure is on, when the devil is prowling, when the end of all things is near. So what does the letter tell us about how we live at the end of time, when the pressure is on? It's different than the typical reaction. The typical reflexive reaction of people under pressure and in situations of conflict is fight or flight.

Often when times are stressful, when people feel pressure, they get combative. They fight. That's our political climate right now. We live in the age of outrage. We live in the age of the double down. If someone questions you or opposes you, you hit back and you hit hard. Forget circumspection, forget deliberation and nuance and compromise. Fight! When they feel like the end of days is upon them, lots of people raise their voices, raise their fists and get ready to fight.

On the other hand, a lot of people have exactly the opposite response: they flee. Pressure makes them run. You see that in response to the current political climate as well. While some folk go the route of outrage, many people try to avoid the whole scene. A lot of people are choosing not to watch the evening news: "I can't watch the news; it's too depressing." Flight is the other instinctive human response to pressure. When people feel like the end of days are upon them, they cocoon, they flee, they distract themselves, they amuse themselves to death.

Peter's suggestions for how to live at the end of all things do not include flight or fight. Peter suggests four ways to live when it feels like the world is coming to an end. First, we pray. "*Be sober of mind so that you can pray.*" Be sober of mind... what does that mean? Sometimes we think of a sober person as a kind of grim person who doesn't laugh or smile much. That's not what this is about. Sober here is a direct contrast with the drunkenness and the carousing mentioned in verse 3. If a drunken person responds to the world's troubles by fleeing into an alcoholic fog, the person who is sober in prayer keeps a clear mind about the world's problems so that she can pray intelligently and specifically for troubles. That's really the sense of the Greek word. Sober doesn't just mean not drunk; sober means focused, clear minded. So it's a picture of a person who focuses on the troubles, who studies them as much as she can, who understands the issues at stake, who knows the enormity of the task at hand, but then instead of taking that enormous task in the direction of outrage or in the direction of helplessness, she takes it in the direction of prayer. She doesn't fight or flee, she prays. That is a fundamental move for a person facing the pressure of the last days. If you respond to the trouble in your life by looking first to your own hands and their strength, you are either going to make fists, or let them fall helplessly to your sides. But when you open your hands to the risen Lord and remember the strength of his promises, the certainty of his victory and the depths of his love, you engage your troubles in a way that goes beyond fight or flight. You engage your troubles with love.

That's the very next thing Peter holds up. Love one another deeply, says Peter. That sounds good and right, but it has the danger of being sort of obvious. What's less surprising than a preacher calling on us to love each other. Fortunately Peter gives us a little more and adds specific texture to this love that we're called to: *Love each other as a way to cover over sins.* That's interesting. How does that work? How do we love each other in a way that covers over sins? Sometimes people say love covers over sins in the sense that love is blind and so when you love someone you don't notice their faults. There's truth in that, but that's not what's going on here. Peter is talking about love's all-purpose effectiveness. When you are in the middle of a time when you feel like it's the end of all things, when your family is overrun with conflict and

stress, when society is at each other's throats, things get so complicated that you can despair of solutions. "I don't know how to fix this. I have no idea what to do." The one thing you can always do is love. Love someone with the sacrificial, unconditional love of Jesus, love someone deeply from the heart. Even if you find yourself in the middle of a storm, you can do something kind, and patient, and sacrificial. If you can break off a little piece of yourself and offer it to someone else who looks hungry and sad, you will be doing something good, something important, something eternal.

Maybe the best place to see this is in the family realm. Nowadays parenthood can seem like an overwhelming task. Young parents are flooded with studies and articles and advice about how to raise children properly. Here's how to discipline, here's how not to discipline. Here's what you should eat when you're pregnant. Here's the music you should play to your child in utero. Here's the food you should give your child. Here's the proper safety equipment you must use. Here's how to put your child to bed. Here's when to start them in pre-school. Here's how to do devotions. Here's the Bible story book you should be using. Parents are flooded with an avalanche of shoulds and oughts and musts and or elses. And because there's so much advice, in the middle of the parenting trenches, parents inevitably feel as though they are doing it wrong. Peter cuts through all that with the simple, central task of Christian parenting, and the central task of the Christian life. Here's what you need to know: Love one another deeply from the heart. Love your kid. Make sure that your kid knows that you love her. It won't solve all the problems. It doesn't end ADD, it doesn't make depression vanish. It doesn't zap learning disabilities, but it covers over a multitude of sin and an ocean of hurt. Give the people around you the love of Jesus and you will give them the thing they need most.

After love, Peter mentions hospitality. I'm going to skip that one. It's a really important practice for the end of all things, so important that there will be a whole sermon series on this subject in the fall. So you'll have to wait till then.

The final instruction Peter gives to Christians living at the end of days is in verse 10: "*Each of you should use whatever gift you have to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace.*" Remember, says Peter, you are a steward, an oikonomoi, of God's grace. That's the Greek word. What's the image here? An oikonomoi is a person with a specific area of responsibility within a house. A large household would have many oikonomoi employed at various places: one might be in charge of the cooking, another might take care of the farm, and another would be in charge of the housekeeping. Each had their specific area of concentration. You are oikonomoi in God's house, says Peter. You are not given responsibility for the whole house, you are responsible for just one small part, you have your little corner to work in. Focus on your little corner and work earnestly and diligently there. Love people deeply, from the heart, in that place. Work earnestly and graciously in that corner for the betterment of the whole household. Don't take responsibility for all the world's issues! Learn about them. Pray about them. Lift them up to God. But when it comes to work, focus on what you can do in your small corner, in your little area of household responsibility. You are an oikonomoi. Focus on the tasks right in front of you and work cheerfully. You will be amazed at what God will do through your speech and your actions.

What God will do through you... Peter finishes the section by reminding us where our power comes from. Just like he did at the beginning of this little section in verse 7 when he told us to pray, he reminds us of the true power in all of this. It's God. "If anyone serve, so it with the strength God provides." Here's the most important thing to remember for people under pressure: this all-surpassing power comes from God and not from us. Knowing that his power is over us

and under us and all around us helps us avoid the fight and flight response. Knowing that helps us to pray, to love deeply, and to focus on the work right in front of us. We can live this way at the end of all things because we know: the battle belongs to the Lord. As Peter himself says: "*To him belong the glory and the power forever, amen.*"

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