

The End's in Sight

Series: *When the Going Gets Tough*

March 27, 2022

1 Peter 4:7-11

Well good morning, both to those here in person, and well as those of you who have joined us online.

We're continuing our series *When the Going Gets Tough*. We've been making our way through the New Testament letter of 1 Peter, and today, we'll be hanging out in chapter 4, and in particular, verses 7-11.

The title of this message is *The End's in Sight*.

I invite you to follow along as I read the passage from the New International Version of the Bible. Peter writes:

The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. ¹

Peter first penned those words to pockets of Christians who lived in ancient Asia Minor, located in the part of the world we know today as Turkey. These Christians were a misunderstood and often mistreated minority group. They'd regularly face hostility in various forms from their pagan neighbours.

Accordingly, 1 Peter is a letter that has a lot to say about how we can find hope in Jesus in the midst of suffering— a theme which seems especially relevant these days, doesn't it?

When the going gets tough, it can be incredibly tempting for us, even though we're followers of Jesus, to just blend into the prevailing culture. When the going gets tough, and stress and pressure and confusion and weariness and fear descend upon us, if we're not careful we can drift from God. When the going gets tough, it can seem so much easier to just check out, to give in to temptation, and live for evil human desires. ² But that's not who

¹ 1 Peter 4:7-11 (NIV)

² See 1 Peter 4:2-3

you are, says Peter. You used to live for those things, but now, you're called to live the rest of your lives for the will of God— even and especially when the going gets tough.

You see, a key theme in 1 Peter is that as followers of Jesus, we are to live holy lives in the midst of an unholy world, reflecting the distinct beauty and goodness of our Lord Jesus to others, so that they may see the hope we have in him, and perhaps be drawn to Christ themselves.³

A key motivating factor for holy living, according to Peter, is the fact that Jesus will return to earth one day as Judge, and at that time, he will set the whole world right, once and for all. In fact, we already came across this very theme back in chapter 1 when Peter said:

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.⁴

And later in chapter 4, we read that judgment begins not with the secular world, but rather with the household of God.⁵ That's us. That's the church. Christians will be first in line to face the just scrutiny of a holy God for the way we've lived our lives.

Now, this same theme of the second coming of Jesus and final judgment comes into view again in the passage we're looking at today, in verse 7, where Peter says:

The end of all things is near.⁶

When you hear that phrase, what comes to mind? For some, it might be the image of a man with wild hair, a scraggly beard and a kind of crazed look in his eyes, standing on a busy street corner preaching a message of doom as he holds a sign that reads, "The end is near!"

Still others might think of a best-selling (but I would argue biblically dubious) series of books and movies about the end times.

But when Peter speaks of how the end of all things is near, he has something quite different in mind, and for the remainder of the message, we're going to unpack it.

³ 1 Peter 3:15

⁴ 1 Peter 1:13

⁵ See 1 Peter 4:17

⁶ 1 Peter 4:11a

Specifically, we're going to look at what it means, and how to live in light of it. "The end of all things is near." What does that mean, and how do we live in light of it? Let's begin by looking at what it means.

1. "The end of all things is near" - WHAT IT MEANS.

In a period of history like the one we find ourselves in, when the world seems upside-down, some popular preachers have a tendency to speculate about how current news events are signs that the end of all things is near—that Jesus' return is imminent.

I remember back in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait and the U.S. military intervened, launching Operation Desert Storm. This led to the publication of a number of Christian books that speculated about the specific ways this particular war was a sure sign of Jesus' imminent return. Those books were featured on the most prominent shelves in Christian bookstores. [Who remembers the days when there used to be Christian bookstores around?]

The thing is, just a few months later those very same books about Operation Desert Storm and the end times could be found in bookstore clearance bins for a quarter apiece, because they didn't turn out to be worth the paper they were written on.

You see, biblically speaking, humanity has effectively been living in the "end times" for over two thousand years— between the time of Jesus' ascension back into heaven, and his eventual return to earth.

And if you think about it, throughout those 2000 years of history, some pretty crazy and scary events have happened in this world—events that are at least as crazy and scary as what's going on right now. Sometimes more so. Therefore, it's important to realize that the latest reports you hear on the news are no more of a definitive sign that Jesus is going to return at any moment than such events ever have been over the past 2000 years.

That said, Peter does speak of the return of Jesus to judge and renew the world as if it is imminent: "The end of all things *is near*." Some Bible readers would look at that and say, "Well, he clearly got it wrong. Because it's some two millennia after Peter wrote that, and Jesus still hasn't returned." Some people even cite this as evidence that the Bible isn't trustworthy and true.

But that would be to misunderstand scripture. Jesus said that even he himself didn't know the timing of his return. In Mark 13, he says:

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.”⁷

So no one except God the Father knows when the end of this present age will be upon us. Therefore, we need to be prepared for it at all times. We need to live like it’s near, like it’s imminent. That’s why Jesus says, “Be on guard! Be alert!”

Like the first Christians, we too need to live with a sense that Jesus could return at any time, because he could. It may be sooner, it may be later. It may or may not be in our lifetime. But we need to be ready. As Peter goes on to say in his next letter:

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...⁸

It is in this sense that the end of all things is near. So we need to be alert, and ready.

Before we move on, one more thing is important to understand about the meaning of Peter’s words, “The end of all things is near.”

The end of all things doesn’t mean that God’s going to air lift us all up into heaven for an eternal worship service in the sky, and just do away with earth. The end of all things is referring to the end of this present age, and the ushering in of a new age, when *up there comes down here*. The realms of heaven and earth will be joined together into one new realm called the new heavens and the new earth, and there we will dwell, rule and reign with God forever. The whole created order will be restored, made new. The letter of 2 Peter puts it this way:

But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God’s righteousness.⁹

So, we’ve looked at what the phrase “the end of all things is near” means. Now, we turn to look at how to live in light of it.

⁷ Mark 13:32 (NIV)

⁸ 2 Peter 3:8-10a (NIV)

⁹ 2 Peter 3:13 (NLT)

2. “The end of all things is near” – HOW TO LIVE IN LIGHT OF IT.

In instructing us how to live in light of the fact that the end of all things is near, Peter has a goal in mind, and he states that goal the end of verse 11:

... so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. ¹⁰

These are massively significant words. *All things*—in other words, every atom of creation, everything in heaven and on earth— is moving towards the ultimate and eternal praise and glory of God through Jesus Christ. This goal of cosmic proportions is the goal of the instructions Peter gives us in the middle of our passage about how we are to live our lives.

How would *you* finish this sentence?

Jesus could return at any time, and the supreme goal of all things is the praise and glory of God, so the way we ought to live is _____.

How would you fill in the blank? I think many of us would be inclined to fill in the blank with something remarkable, something radical, such as, the way we ought to live is to:

Sell all we have and give to the poor!

Travel to the far reaches of the world and proclaim the gospel!

Plant lots and lots of churches!

Become martyrs for Jesus!

Indeed, God has moved many Christians to such radical acts of obedience throughout the history of the church, and still does today. But Peter doesn't end the sentence—he doesn't fill in the blank—with any of those things.

Peter says, Jesus could return at any time, and the supreme goal of all things is the praise and glory of God, so the way you ought to live is to:

Keep a clear mind so you can pray.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 4:11b (NIV)

Love each other deeply, forgiving each other.

Offer hospitality to one another.

Serve others with the gifts God has given you and the strength God provides.

Those things seem pretty mundane. But these are precisely the ways Peter calls us to live in light of the fact that Jesus could come back at any time and that the supreme goal of all things is the praise and glory of God. As one preacher puts it:

We want big, fast, and famous. But what God is after is usually small, insignificant acts of love over decades... Peter teaches us to aim for the most massive end by means of [seemingly small acts of] obedience.¹¹

Let's break down Peter's instructions about how to live in light of the fact that the end of all things is near. First, he says:

... be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray.¹²

When the going gets tough, the cares of this life and the pressures of this world can "intoxicate" your mind and distract your focus as easily as beer or wine can. And this, says Peter, can hinder your prayer life.

Can I confess something to you? I started out this year focused, with rich and meaningful rhythms of daily prayer. But as Lent began, of all times, I found myself increasingly distracted by challenges and stresses, whether stuff here at church, or with the health and well-being of some people in my family. And while I know my challenges are light compared to what many people in this world are going through, they still make me muddle-headed, and recently this happened and affected my prayer life. I mean, my prayer life didn't disappear or anything, but it wasn't what it needs to be.

Keeping a clear and sober mind in Christ so that we may pray is vital for us, both personally, and as a church family, especially when the going gets tough. Because whose interests are served if we stop praying? Later in 1 Peter, it says our enemy the devil prowls about like a lion, looking to for people to devour, and that we need to stand firm and resist him.¹³

¹¹ Brian Suave, *Love at the End of All Things*, <https://www.refugeutah.org/1-peter-4-7-11>.

¹² 1 Peter 4:7b

¹³ 1 Peter 5:8-9

And a big part of doing so is prayer. Prayer keeps us in vital contact with our Commander-in-Chief—Jesus. In the military, when there is a breakdown in communication between the troops and command, the operation falls apart. On the news we see that this is what’s happening to the Russian military in Ukraine. And while the Russian military is fighting for an obviously bogus and evil cause, the principle remains true.

As followers of Jesus, and as a church family, we troops must keep our channels of communication open with command every day through prayer. Prayer is our lifeline to God, so when the going gets tough, we need to be clear-minded so that we can pray, and we also need to pray so that we can be clear-minded.

Let’s move on to Peter’s next instructions about how to live in light of the fact that the end of all things is near. He says:

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.¹⁴

When the going gets tough, our relationships with each other can easily become strained. Peter is writing to these clusters of suffering Christians in Asia Minor, and what does he need to remind them of? He needs to remind them to love and forgive each other: *Love covers over a multitude of sins*. What was going on in their churches for Peter to have to write those words? Surely, there was some relational strain happening.

What is God saying to you as you hear those words of scripture now? “*Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*” The connotation of the original Greek is that we need to *earnestly maintain* the loving unity of the church at all times—especially when the going gets tough. What challenging person or people in your life—maybe it’s even someone in this church family—is God calling you to choose to love deeply and to forgive?

It’s easier said than done. So how can you do it? Well, my small group is currently studying Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s classic little book on Christian community called *Life Together*. If you aren’t familiar with Bonhoeffer, he was a German pastor and theologian who resisted the Hitler regime, and was ultimately hanged in a Nazi prison camp. A martyr. So Bonhoeffer knew very well what life and relationships could be like when the going gets tough. And when it comes to having the kind of love for each other that covers a multitude of sins, he points us back to *prayer*. Listen to what Bonhoeffer says about this (and when he uses the word *intercession*, he’s talking about praying for others):

¹⁴ 1 Peter 4:8 (NIV)

There is no dislike, no personal tension, no estrangement that cannot be overcome by intercession as far as our side is concerned. Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer ¹⁵

I wonder if God is calling some of you to make a commitment to pray daily for one or more individuals along these lines. Bonhoeffer goes on to say:

Intercession means no more than to bring our brother into the presence of God, to see him under the Cross of Jesus as a poor human being and a sinner in need of grace. Then everything in him that repels us falls away... To make intercession means to grant our brother the same right we have received, namely, to stand before Christ and share in his mercy.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer ¹⁶

How else are we to live in light of the fact that the end of all things is near? Peter says in verse 9:

Offer hospitality to each other without grumbling. ¹⁷

In the Bible, hospitality is all about welcoming the stranger—someone who is unknown to you. Quite often, it's someone of a different culture, social status or background.

In the context of our passage, Peter may well be referring to welcoming other Christians who had been forced to flee their homes because of persecution. He was telling the Christians in Asia Minor to welcome these travelling Christian strangers into their churches, homes and hearts.

How does this apply to us? There are many possible ways it can apply. But one way, I think, is that if you consider Cornerstone to be your home church, view yourself as a host. We have gained all kinds of newcomers over the course of the pandemic—praise God. So if you're attending worship in-person, I challenge you to meet at least one new person each Sunday, and personally welcome them to Cornerstone. If you're worshipping online, is it time to consider coming in-person more regularly, so you can be here to embody the hospitality of Jesus to our newcomers?

Peter says we are to offer hospitality *without grumbling*. Why does he say that? It's because hospitality is rarely convenient. But God doesn't call us to convenience. He calls us to love like he loves. And one of the most important and practical forms of love is hospitality. In

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Harper & Row (1954), p. 86.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 86.

¹⁷ 1 Peter 4:9 (NIV)

fact, it's one of our core values as a church, and it only works as it should when we all consider ourselves to be hosts.

Last Sunday, I was speaking with a couple after the 11:30 a.m. service, when Dennis and Jo-Anne Malfara came up to our little circle of conversation and introduced a newcomer they had just met. We all had a good chat with this newcomer, who is a seeker, and he shared some of his story with us and what brought him to Cornerstone. He intends to come back, and I think that's the case in no small part because of Dennis and Jo-Anne's hospitality. How might you follow their example?

Finally, Peter tells us:

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides...¹⁸

What gifts has God given you? What are you good at?

It's not about serving in ways that are big, fast and famous. As we said earlier, it's about small, faithful acts of service to others in the name of Jesus performed over the long haul—acts of service that in many cases very few people will ever see or be aware of.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to all of you—both staff and volunteers—who have served so faithfully in so many ways throughout the course of the pandemic. Many of you continue to do so to this day. God sees and knows what you've done.

Maybe you're serving and you're tired. My prayer for you this day is that you will continue to serve *with the strength that God provides*, as Peter puts it in verse 11. Because his strength is perfect when our strength is gone, and his power is made perfect in weakness. If you need to say to God, "Lord, I need your strength in my service," would you raise your hand right now— or if you're online, you can simply type in the chat, "Give me your strength, Lord!"

Maybe God is calling some of you to get involved in serving here at Cornerstone. There are a variety of ways you can get involved. To learn more about available serving opportunities, just visit our Serve page at www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve.

One of many ways of serving, according to our passage, is the service of speaking. Those who speak are to do so as if speaking the very words of God, says Peter. Peter himself preached sermons to crowds of thousands. And usually on a much smaller scale, some of us are called to preach and teach in a local church context, like I'm doing now. But the service of speaking often happens in much quieter and less public ways. The service of

¹⁸ 1 Peter 4:10-11a (NIV)

speaking can be as simple sharing an encouraging word with someone by text or email or in-person.

Last Sunday, someone asked to speak with me after the worship service. She shared that she had been reading scripture and sensed that a particular verse she came across was especially for me. She explained, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but it’s not even like I really think about you all that often. But for some reason when I came across this verse, I got this powerful sense of prompting that this was for *Steve*. Well, I only know three Steves, and by process of elimination, I believe God wants me to share this verse of scripture with you.”

I think she was probably a little nervous. I mean, approaching one of the pastors to say, “I have a word from God for you.” But she was faithful and obedient, and as Peter would put it, she spoke to me as *one speaking the very words of God*. And the word from God she had for me was from 2 Chronicles chapter 20:15— “The battle belongs to the Lord.”

“Does that mean anything to you?” she said.

“Does it mean anything to me? YES!”

She had no idea that I’ve been facing a number of battles on a number of fronts lately. I had come to church a little heavy-hearted that day, but I drove home singing praises, because the Lord had used this person to share his personal word for me, and it was just what my heart needed to hear. The challenges haven’t gone away. But now I have the assurance that the battle belongs to the Lord.

The faithful, humble service this sister offered me is a demonstration of the kind of service that keeps us going when the going gets tough. Who is it that God calling you to serve today, in whatever way, shape or form?

Well today, we’ve looked at Peter’s words about how “the end of all things is near”— both in terms of what it means, as well as how to live in light of it.

And now we turn to the Lord’s Table...