

When the End's in Sight

I Peter 4:7-11
David H. Roper

Certain monks of the Middle Ages had human skulls in their cells, inscribed with the Latin expression, "memento mon" (remember your death). It was a morbid practice not the sort of thing likely to catch on today - but it served a useful purpose at that time. It was intended to remind these men of the transiency of life and the need, in view of the imminency of their death, to establish the right priorities. That sort of exercise is helpful for all of us, and that is what the apostle Peter takes us through in the passage we will study today, 1 Peter 4, verses 7 through 11:

The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Peter establishes four priorities: prayer, love, hospitality, and the use of our gifts. Remember that this is the concluding section of the summary passage we have been studying. Peter goes back over much of the material he has covered in the earlier portions of the book, gathers it together in summary form, and leaves with us the very vivid and helpful picture of the Ark, which is our protection against the buffeting of life. Jesus is the Ark, and if we are in Christ, he takes upon himself all of God's wrath and judgment directed toward the world. So, in the Ark we are safe and secure. But, Christian living is far more than being secure in the Ark. We cannot merely look through the windows of the Ark and feel sorry for people on the outside; we have a responsibility to tell them about the Ark. This is why Peter says in the closing words of the previous paragraph, verse 6,

For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.

The gospel was preached during their lifetime to people who are now dead. But even though they are now physically dead, Peter says, they live in the spirit, according to God. They have eternal life. That is why we preach to them, Peter says. Because everyone comes to an end, everyone has to face death sooner or later, they therefore need to know the words of life. "The end of all is at hand," Peter says in verse 7. The New American Standard Version says, "the end of all things," but Peter's point is not that all things will come to an end, but that every person, sooner or later, will come to an end in his life. The death rate has remained constant since the very beginning of human history. Only two men have avoided death - Enoch and Elijah. As far as I know, everyone else has had to face it. The one thing we can be certain of in this life is that sooner or later we are going to see the end of the world. It will happen during our lifetime. Either Jesus Christ will come back, or we will go to be with him. It is inevitable.

And yet, this is not something which should fill us with dread. Rather, it is a hopeful prospect. There are people who are terribly bothered by this concept and try to avoid it at all cost. But that should not be true of believers. I was in the public library yesterday looking up the Latin phrase I used earlier, because I could not recall it. I looked through several books but was not able to find it. So I talked to a librarian, who was very gracious and helpful, and we searched together for a time. Finally I found it, and I was quite excited. "Ah, I've found it! Here it is, 'Remember your death!' 'Remember your death!' Isn't that great?" She looked at me and said, "Well, I guess it is sort of apropos." And the poor lady wandered off, muttering to herself, occasionally looking back over her shoulder at me! I could hardly blame her, because it is not the sort of thing people ordinarily like to be reminded of. Yet Peter says it is something we have to face.

The end of all things is at hand, and that end is in God's hands. God is the One who decrees the time of our departure. It is not up to us. It is not for us to know the times and the seasons, the Lord said. They are in

God's hands. We are immortal until the time comes for the Lord to take us home. When we have finished the work God wants to do in us and through us, then he takes us home. But nothing can touch us until that time. And when it is time for us to go, then we ought to be willing to go in a restful and peaceful and acceptant spirit.

According to Scripture, there is such a thing as living too long. There is a man in the Old Testament, a king of Judah named Hezekiah, who lived too long. He came to the end of his life, and the Lord announced to him that it was time to go home. Hezekiah did not want to go, and asked for additional time.

Sometimes if we plead with God long enough, he will give us what we want - to our own detriment. Because Hezekiah continued to plead with God to extend his life, the Lord granted him fifteen more years. During those fifteen years, Hezekiah revealed the secrets of the treasury of Judah, which brought about the Babylonian captivity. He sired Manasseh, who came to the throne when he was twelve years old and was the wickedest king Judah ever had, plunging the entire nation into ruin. So it is possible to live too long. The Lord knows what is best. He knows when it is our time to go. And we can face death with peace, without fear, without frustration.

Peter says we should look at the imminency of death not with fear but with sobriety, with a calm heart and a calm spirit, and should use the nearness of our death as an incentive constantly to re-assess our priorities. For instance, if you knew that within sixty days the Lord would call you home, what would you do? How would you rearrange your life? What things in your life would you change, since you had only that brief time to live?

A television show a number of years ago was based on that theme. A young man who was in the prime of life discovered he had only a few months to live, so he gave himself to pursuing all the things he had ever wanted to do, tried to crowd an entire lifetime into a few months, did all sorts of daring things with great abandon. Actually he never died - the television series did! But that is one option - to throw yourself into something to fill up those last hours.

Or, you might prepare by providing for your family. Some months ago my wife, Carolyn, and I were having breakfast at a restaurant and talking about various evangelistic approaches. I commented that someone had recently suggested asking the question, "What would you do if you knew you had only thirty days to live?" A man seated at the next table raised his head and began to listen. After a few minutes he got up, walked over, and said, "Excuse me, but I couldn't help hearing what you said, and I thought I'd introduce myself. I'm a life insurance agent!" Now, there is nothing wrong with buying insurance - if you could get it at a time like that. Certainly we should provide for our family, because the Scriptures say that if we do not, we are no better than pagans.

However, those are not the things Scripture says are the real priorities. There are other things which are far more important in God's sight, and these are what Peter calls to our attention. They are not the things we ordinarily would do if we knew that our departure was imminent. There are four of them. One has to do with our relationship to God, three with our relationship to one another. The first is in verse 7:

The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.

The words translated "sound judgment" and "sober spirit" both mean basically the same thing. They have to do with control of the mind. The word translated "sound judgment", or "sane" in the Revised Standard Version, is used throughout the New Testament in contrast to insane." It is the term found in the gospels to describe the behavior of the man from whom Jesus had expelled the legion of demons - he was "seated and in his right mind." The term "sober" is used in Scripture in contrast to "drunken". One refers to our emotional life, and the other to our intellectual life, but both have to do with control. We are to keep a cool head, in view of the imminency of death and its certainty. But we do so, Peter says, because we are in prayer. Most translations say, ". . . keep sane and sober for your prayers." But, in the Greek, Peter says, ". . . keep sane and sober into prayers." It is not that we are to keep a cool head in order to pray; it is, rather, that prayer enables us to have a cool head. It is when we are immersed in prayer that we have control.

What is the first priority, Peter says - to pray. In fact, not merely pray out prayer - a habit of prayer, protracted periods of prayer, prayer through the day, prayer about everything. Peter is saying that at a time like this all of life ought to be related to God. It is a sign of maturity when we can see God in everything, when we can relate everything in life, even the most casual and mundane aspects of our life, to God by means of prayer. Immerse yourselves, Peter says, in the habit of prayer. Paul writes, "Let your forbearance be known to all men. The Lord is at hand." It is the awareness that God is at hand, available to us, operative in all of life, which enables us to forbear. And Peter says that is where we must begin.

Our tendency is to begin with action. If I knew I had but ninety days to live, my natural tendency would be to get busy

- "There is so much to accomplish!" Peter says there may be some actions God wants you to take, but that is not where you begin. You begin with prayer, because godly actions grow out of prayer. Our tendency is to run about and dissipate our energy and our life in various activities, none of which will have any lasting effect. Therefore, we ought to begin with prayer. Prayer is what changes our attitudes and our circumstances.

There is another story in the Old Testament about Hezekiah, king of Judah, which indicates that he did not always take the wrong approach to life. There were times when he responded appropriately. He reigned in a very troubled time in Judah's history. The city of Jerusalem was surrounded and besieged by the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, and his enormous army - perhaps a quarter of a million men. There was no way for Hezekiah and his people to escape. One of the Assyrian documents preserved from that time, inscribed by commission of Sennacherib himself, describes this siege and says that he had "shut up Hezekiah in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage." An Assyrian courier was sent to Hezekiah with a letter demanding that he surrender. Hezekiah took the letter up to his room, spread it out on the bed, fell to his knees and said, "Lord, you see our circumstances. Your name is at stake here. We have nowhere to turn. You're the one who must provide for us." He left it in God's hands, and he had a great sense of peace, knowing that God was in control.

The next morning when the inhabitants of Jerusalem awakened and looked over the walls, the Assyrian army was dead. A plague had swept through the army in the night, and a hundred eighty-five-thousand men died before morning. That is what prayer does. It changes you, gives you God's perspective on circumstances. And it changes circumstances and people around you. "So," Peter says, "begin there. Pray."

The second priority is to love one another. Notice that all three priorities having to do with our relationship to fellow Christians are built around the words "one another". "Love one another," "be hospitable to one another," "employ your gifts in serving one another." The first priority in our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ is to love them with God's kind of love.

The Greek word translated "love" is the term used throughout the New Testament to refer to God's love - a kind of love which loves no matter what the response of the object of that love may be. There are four kinds of love in the New Testament. There is *storge* love, the kind of love you have for cuddly, warm, fuzzy ducks. (In 2 Timothy 3:3, Paul predicts the absence even of this elementary form of love.) There is *eros* - sexual love. And there is *philia* - the sort of affectionate love one has toward a friend. But Peter uses *agape* - the kind of love God expresses. He loves the unlovely, seeks the best for the objects of his love. Peter says we must love unfailingly, unstintingly. The term he uses basically means "stretched out". It is used in Greek literature to refer to an athlete's straining to reach the finish line - going all-out, fully committed.

"Love one another because love covers a multitude of sins." Peter is not alluding to something love does for us. It does not atone for our sins, but overlooks the sins of others. Love does not allow the shortcomings and failures of others to keep us from loving them. Love keeps on loving. We all have limitations in almost every area of activity - intellectual, social, or physical. But, in Christ, there is no limit to our capacity for growth in love. Some of us start out life pretty cold, insensitive, and loveless. God takes us from there and begins to share his love with us, and we begin to grow in our capacity to love. Others are naturally more loving, and God takes them on from there. C.S. Lewis said, "God is in the business of making bad people good, and good people better." No matter where you are in that continuum, God can take you from where you are and make you a more loving, giving, gracious person. Pablo Casals, the great cellist, was asked

once why he continued to practice. After all, he was the best in the world. His answer was, "I think I'm improving." That is what God wants us to know. You may not think of yourself as very loving, but God's love in you will cause you to grow, as you lay hold of it, and you will improve in your capacity to love. There are no limits to that kind of love.

Carolyn and I have a very dear friend, Wally Howard, who used to be with Young Life and was for a while the Youth Editor of Gospel Light Publications. While he was with G/L, he was asked to teach the college group at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. At that time there were four or five hundred students in the group, which had been taught for several years by professors from Fuller Seminary. Wally felt very keenly the weight of this responsibility. He told us it occurred to him that he could not compete with these men intellectually - but he could love these kids. So he asked the Lord to give him an overwhelming love for them, and he made himself available to them to talk and to share, and was willing to help them no matter what circumstances through which they might be going. As the years went by it was apparent that Wally's was one of the most significant and powerful ministries anyone ever had with that group. So that is the second thing Peter wants us to establish as a priority - not only a cool head for prayer, but a warm heart for others, a love that grows.

The third priority is hospitality. That is strange. Who would guess that would hold a place of high priority in God's eyes? "Be hospitable to one another without complaint." In Peter's day the public inns were filthy, immoral places, and both Christians and non-Christians tried to bypass them if they could. So it was necessary for people to open their homes. Peter says one of our paramount characteristics ought to be that we love strangers. That is what hospitality means - we love strangers; we have an open home. Perhaps you cannot have a large public teaching ministry, yet you want to find a place in God's program where you can be of effective service. Well, here is where you can begin - by opening your home.

The home is a place of shelter - first for our family; they are always top priority - but also a shelter for others. We live in an era when there are few homes which are genuinely shelters for people. I am sure that many young people among us could not go home if they wanted to - their parents do not want them. And many people do not have access to their homes - they are too far away. Such folk are essentially homeless - they do not have a shelter. Hospitality toward them is a ministry in which you can engage.

And anyone can do it! That is what strikes me about all of these priorities. They are the sort of things any believer can engage in . . . and in God's sight they are the most important things to do! And is it not striking that we are to open not only our hearts, but our homes as well. Many of us feel we will do that when we get a better sofa, or some new drapes. But if we wait until we are in a better situation we will never do it. Life is intended to be lived by faith. We are to venture ourselves. If you waited to get married until you could afford it, you would probably never get married. If you waited to have children until you knew how to be a parent, you would never have children. God wants us to venture ourselves and start with what we have - as humble as it may be - and make that shelter available to others. Anyone can start there.

Our problem is that we tend to make ends out of means. Our houses are a means, a way of providing shelter for ourselves and others. But we tend to make them an end in themselves - showpieces. We do that with many aspects of life. We do it with clothes. Clothes are merely to cover us and keep us warm, and yet clothes can become an end in themselves. We do it with cars. Cars are transportation, but they can become an end in themselves. And our homes can be that. I remember standing in the backyard one day and looking at the pitcher's mound in the middle of my dichondra. It suddenly dawned on me that you can either grow grass, or kids; but you cannot grow both at the same time. My tendency is to get uptight when the kids are mutilating the grass or the house. Of course, there is a modicum of concern and care we ought to exercise for things the Lord has given us. But let us not forget that these things are a means to an end, and not the end in themselves. One reason God made grass grow is for little kids to play on, yet how often we confuse ends with means and make a faultless lawn an end in itself. We need to see that our homes are means, instruments for doing good to others.

Anyone can start right there and provide a home for others, can prepare a place for them. That is what the Lord is doing for us. He is preparing a place for us. He wants us to feel comfortable and at home with him. And what a great ministry we carry out as we use our homes that way!

Peter says we are to do this without complaining. Now, there are times when we need privacy, and we may have to say, "No," but Peter is speaking about the spirit of grumbling which often overwhelms us when we are asked to provide for the needs of others - when we can well afford it, and we have the time for it, but we just do not want to do it. That is the third priority - to practice hospitality. The fourth is found in verse 10:

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

He is speaking here of spiritual gifts - not natural talents but divine enablements - which God gives to every member of his family when they become members of that family. Every individual who knows Jesus Christ in a personal way has at least one spiritual gift - a capacity given you by the Holy Spirit to minister to the needs of other members of the family.

In verse 11 Peter divides these gifts into two categories. There are the speaking gifts, which include the gifts of teaching, encouragement, wisdom, and knowledge; and there are the serving gifts, such as mercy, administration, helps, and giving. Both kinds are necessary, and each is just as important as the other.

The gifts involved in communicating, or teaching, Peter says, are to be exercised according to the Word of God: "Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God. The word translated "utterances" is really the word for "oracles", which any Greek, reading this letter at this time, would understand. The oracles were famous - perhaps infamous among Christians - as places to go to get information. If you wanted to know what the gods were thinking and saying, you went to an oracle - chiefly the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, in Greece. You would pay a fee, and the priestess would inhale volcanic fumes escaping from a hole in the ground, and she would prophesy. The pagans considered her utterances to be the words of the gods. They were almost always unintelligible, garbled, and enigmatic.

There is the famous story of Croesus, king of Lydia, a kingdom in what today is Turkey. His kingdom was in danger because of the advance of the Persian army. So he went to the oracle to receive information from the gods. The priestess prophesied that if he went to war, he would destroy a kingdom. Croesus took that to be a favorable word, and he went to war. His own kingdom was destroyed! I believe Peter may have used this term "oracles", taken from contemporary thinking, in a tongue-in-cheek way. Because in contrast to the oracles his readers had been familiar with, the oracle of God was sure and certain and trustworthy. It could be understood. And it was applicable to all of life. Peter says, "If you are going to speak, if you are going to teach in any way, do so according to the oracles of God. Base your message upon the sure Word of God."

That is the content. Then there is a word about the power: "...whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies . . ." This is what we refer to as the New Covenant. The content is the Word of God; the power of our ministry is the Spirit of God, the indwelling Christ. Peter is saying that is all we need to carry on a fruitful and effective ministry to others. Our teaching may be in a large group, a small group, or on a one-to-one basis. Our serving may be in a large, observable way, or in a small, very quiet way that no one sees. But whatever we do, we are to do it according to the Scriptures, and by the power of the Spirit of God who indwells us.

Peter says to do this "in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." That is what we want - a life that is glorifying to Jesus Christ. We want a life that accomplishes something significant in the world. And Peter says that in view of the imminency of death, we need to re-assess our priorities in order to attain that goal. Our priorities are to be prayer, love, hospitality, and service.

It is so important that, in Scripture, God makes clear he is not primarily concerned about the dramatic, overt, obvious things that Christians do. The things that delight his heart are the quiet, unseen acts of mercy. James says that pure religion is to visit widows and orphans. Whoever passes out prizes for visiting orphans? But that is what delights the heart of God. If you want to do the things that really count, these are what Peter says they are: to keep a cool head, because we are immersed in prayer; to have a warm heart that never stops extending itself to others; to have an open home; and to give a helping hand to brothers and sisters in need.

Father, it is good that we know the things which count. We are grateful that we are not left in the dark. And we thank you that you not only supply your Word, which reveals the truth, but you have also given us your Spirit, which makes possible a willing and responsive heart. We are grateful, and we ask that our lives might result in greater glory to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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