

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE END IS NEAR: HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE?

1 Peter 4:7-11

A good opening line can grab your attention and pack a powerful punch. Consider these examples:

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* begins this way: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

Charles Dickens began his *A Tale of Two Cities* with this: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

The opening sentence of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is this: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Then, of course, there is the proverbial "It was a dark and stormy night."

M. Scott Peck begins his book *The Road Less Traveled* with this profound truth: "Life is difficult."

The first sentence of the first book of the Bible – Genesis, the book of beginnings – is this: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The Gospel of John, taking its cue from Genesis, opens with this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Our Scripture reading from 1 Peter 4 today begins with these dramatic words: "The end of all things is near" (1 Peter 4:7). No, it's not the opening line of a book or even a book of the Bible, but it is the beginning of a passage in which Peter gives some specific and practical instructions to us about how to live when the end is near. And you have to admit: It is a pretty dramatic opening line, isn't it? I don't know about you, but I can picture a man with a long beard in a flowing robe and sandals walking around Times Square in New York or downtown Washington, D.C. carrying a sign announcing that "the end is near."

Throughout history there have been many voices predicting the imminent end of the world. Thousands of followers of a man named William Miller, for example, were convinced that Jesus would return and usher in the Day of Judgment in October 1844. But the date they identified came and went, and still today the end has not yet come.

There are some who believed that Y2K would prove to be the end of the world as we know it and result in mass chaos. But Y2K came and went, and the end of the world has not yet come.

There are some who believe, in this post-September 11 world, that the end must be near. Terrorism, tensions and war in the Middle East, combined with unfathomable atrocities such as the shootings at Virginia Tech two weeks ago and other evidences of the decline of our culture, lead some – perhaps many – of us to conclude that the end is near.

What did Peter have in mind when he said: “The end is near”? What he said literally was this: “The end (that is, the *telos*, which means the completion or fulfillment) of all things has come near.”

Not only is the end coming at some point in the future, he says, it has now come near. It is now on the horizon. What Peter means is that the end – the *telos* – has come near in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ and the events of His birth and life and death and resurrection and ascension into heaven constitute the great dividing line in history. They are the most decisive and significant events in all of history. They are the defining moments of all defining moments.

From the perspective of God – that is, from the perspective of Him who sees the end from the beginning, even if we cannot, from the perspective of the God who transcends time and space, and for whom a day is like a thousand years and vice versa (2 Peter 3:8; Psalm 90:4) – from God’s perspective, the end has come near because what the Bible calls “the last days” actually began with the first coming of Christ.

The end of human history – not just the chronological end of history, not just the end of time as we know and measure it, but the completion or fulfillment of God’s redemptive purposes in history – has now come near because of the coming of Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross for us. We who live between the first coming of Christ 2,000 years ago and His promised second coming find ourselves living in the last days.

When the last day will come, when the second coming of Christ will occur, when the promised Day of the Lord will take place, we don’t know. What challenges or hardships, what difficulties or suffering we may have to endure before that day comes, we don’t know. But we know the day will come. We know, as it says in Revelation 11:15, that the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever. Can I get an “Amen”?

That, you see, is the hope and confidence in which Peter lived. And that, too, is to be our daily hope and confidence. It could be today or tomorrow. It could be next month or next year. It could be a hundred or a thousand years from now. But “the end of all things” will come. In God’s perfect time.

The question Peter addresses in these verses in 1 Peter 4 is this: Since the end of all things has come near, since we live in this in-between time of waiting for Christ to return and establish His kingdom in all its fullness, what kind of people should we be? Or, to borrow Francis Schaeffer’s famous question: “How should we then live?”

1. BE CLEAR MINDED AND SELF-CONTROLLED.

First of all, says Peter in verse 7, we are to be clear minded and self-controlled so that we can pray.

We live in extraordinary times. These are serious times for the world, for our nation, and for the church. This is no time for fuzzy thinking. It is no time for confusion about what is right and what is wrong. It is no time to be thrown off-balance by ideas or arguments that appeal to our emotions, but are not grounded in the truth. It is no time to be confused about who is ultimately in charge or about what pleases God.

God does not want us to be tossed around by every new idea or doctrine or philosophy, like a leaf blowing in the wind. He does not want us to be confused about His Word or His character or His will. He does not want us to be consumed by fear or doubts.

He wants us to be clear minded. He wants us to keep our heads, even if others around us are losing theirs. He wants us to have a clear and accurate understanding of the times in which we live. He wants us to think – and to think biblically. He wants us to look at all of life through the lens of the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He wants us to set our minds and hearts on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:1-2), so we can keep all things in proper perspective. He wants us to stay focused on things that have eternal significance, because those are the things that really matter.

God wants us to be clear minded so that we can pray. So we can pray according to His will. He wants us to see things from His perspective so that we will know how to pray.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, the 19th century Russian novelist, described the unnerving and unenviable experience of being led before a firing squad with some 30 other political dissidents. What they didn't know was that the whole thing was a charade. They were all brought outside into the early morning cold, and they were wrapped in shrouds. A stack of empty coffins was piled up next to them. Then the rifles were raised, the muskets cocked. You talk about the end being near! But at the last second it was called off. Some men, Dostoevsky recounted, actually lost their minds as a result of this experience.

His comment about the experience and its effect on him was classic. He said: “Standing before a firing squad marvelously focuses one's mind.” In other words, an experience like that helps you get clear in your thinking about what is really important.

When you're living in the last days and the end of all things could come at any time, when you have to deal each day with the uncertainties of life on this planet knowing that no one is guaranteed tomorrow, it is critically important to be clear minded so you know how to pray and how to live in a way that reflects the eternal values of God's kingdom.

Be clear minded, says Peter, and self-controlled. Stay focused and stay under control. Keep your head and keep your balance in life.

A lot of years ago, when my daughter Erin was in elementary school, I had the privilege of coaching her 5th grade girls' basketball team. Our priorities were simple. We wanted to teach the girls the rules and fundamentals of the game, and to give them a positive experience of playing together as a team. One of the skills we worked on was dribbling the basketball. For one particular drill, we would have the girls divide into two lines and then dribble the ball from one end of the court to the other, and then back again.

Every time we did it, the girls wanted to race. They wanted to go as fast as they could – or at least faster than the girls in the other line. What I was concerned about, though, was the control of the basketball, not the speed, because if you cannot control the ball as you go up and down the floor, it will never matter how fast you can go.

In the Christian life, too, control matters. Self-control matters. In fact, as Paul says in Galatians 5:23, self-control is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. It is one of the evidences that God really is at work in your life. And the truth is that no matter how fast you're going, you can't serve God effectively if your life is out of control.

In your thought life, in your emotions, in the attitudes and desires of your heart, in the habits that make up your life – in your eating and drinking, in your work and leisure pursuits, in your TV or movie watching and net-surfing, make a commitment to live a balanced life under the sovereign and gracious rule of God. Don't compartmentalize your life and keep some part of it separate from God's rule. Don't get out of control in any area, because if your life is out of control – even in one area – and your mind is out of focus, not only will your service to God be inconsistent and ineffective, so will your prayer life.

So be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray with spiritual power, so that you can rightly understand and apply God's truth in your life, and so that you can experience a communion with God that is deep and rich and life-changing.

How are we to live?

2. LOVE EACH OTHER DEEPLY.

Second, Peter says, we are to make love our highest priority. "Above all," he says, "love each other deeply" (4:8a). In *The Message* it says: "Love each other as if your life depended on it." With every fiber of your being, love one another. Let your love be more than something you simply feel in your heart. Let it be something you do, something you put into action.

The reason love is so important is because it covers over a multitude of sins (4:8b). Forgiveness is an act of love. And we are to love one another by forgiving one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32).

What Peter is saying is that love helps us to bear with and to overlook the sins and faults of others. It is not that love ignores the reality and seriousness of sin, or attempts to

justify or excuse it. It is, rather, that forgiveness recognizes the seriousness of sin, and love motivates us to forgive the faults of others, just as we have experienced the forgiving grace of God in our lives.

Above all, love each other deeply. From the heart. In all your dreams and plans for the future, in your devotion to God's Word, in the passionate pursuit of righteousness, don't forget to love.

In all our relationships and dealings with others, "the faucet of love," as Paul Cedar puts it, "should never be turned off." Never. On the contrary, love should flow out from us in practical ways. One practical way of showing love is to offer hospitality, especially to other believers.

In Peter's day, in a world without Comfort Inns or Marriotts or Hiltons, hospitality between Christians was an especially important and concrete expression of love. And it is still important today. Peter says that we are to open our homes and our hearts to one another. Our homes are to be places of welcome, places of refuge, and places of ministry.

Just how you offer hospitality will depend on your particular circumstances and the leading of the Holy Spirit. But God's Word says we are to do it. Without grumbling. As an expression of love.

Philippians 2:14 instructs us to do everything without complaining. It goes far beyond hospitality to every area of life. God wants us to serve without complaining and to give without grumbling, because it is the nature of love to expend itself for the sake of another.

Love each other deeply. Be devoted to one another in love (Romans 12:10). And never stop doing it.

How are we to live?

3. USE YOUR GIFTS.

Third, Peter says, we are each to use the gift(s) God has given us to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms (4:10). Just as each one of us has received some gift, some endowment of grace, we are to use these gifts in God's service and for God's glory, as long as He gives us breath.

If Peter is right – and He is – then none of us can say: "I have nothing to offer Christ. I have nothing to offer the church. I have nothing of any value to give." That is hogwash!

Radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh boasts of having "talent on loan from God." I don't know how orthodox his theology is, or how devout he is in his beliefs. But I think

he is right about this, whether he understands the theological significance of it or not. Whether he knows it or not, he is articulating an important biblical principle.

The truth is that everything we have is on loan from God. Our money, our possessions, our talents and abilities, our gifts, our time – everything! It is all on loan, a trust from God.

Our job is to take whatever God has given us and use it for His glory. Don't worry about what you don't have. Don't waste your time wishing you had what someone else has. Just use what you have to serve Him.

If your gift is speaking, use your gift to glorify God. If your gift is serving, use it in the strength God provides. If it is teaching or encouraging or showing mercy or leadership or generosity or anything else, use what God in His grace has given you. And do it, says Peter, "so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever" (4:11). Isn't it interesting how often it all comes back to the chief end of man – the overarching purpose of life – which is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever!

And the truth is that whenever we use our gifts and talents and money and time to serve others in the name of Jesus under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, God is glorified.

The end of all things has come near. It may be closer than any of us thinks. So use your gifts for God's purposes as long as He gives you opportunity.

4. SHARE YOUR FAITH.

One more thing: Be prepared at all times to share your faith in Christ. In these tumultuous times, in times of tragedy and upheaval and uncertainty, some people who don't know Christ personally may be more open to hearing about Him, especially if they see your clear-mindedness and self-control, your love and servant-heart in action. If you keep your head when others are losing theirs, if your faith in God keeps you going when others are prone to panic or are paralyzed by fear, you may win the opportunity to share what Christ has done in your life with those who see that there is something different about your life.

I don't mean that you should pretend everything in your life is perfect or that you don't have any problems. There is too much of that plastic phoniness in the church. I'm suggesting that God wants us to be real. And in being real, He wants us to show how His grace and our faith in Him sustain us in the midst of our problems and troubles.

In 1 Peter 8:15, Peter writes:

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

Paul says in Ephesians 5:16 that we are to “make the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.”

So, how are we to live when the end is near? We are to make the most of every opportunity to point others to Jesus and the peace and hope He gives.

The end of all things – including this message – is near. I know I can’t speak for all of you, but God has spoken to me through this passage from His Word, and I needed to hear it. Maybe it is true for you as well.

May our hearts be right, may our minds be clear, may our lives be under God’s control, may our love be deep, may our lights shine brightly for Christ and our gifts be used for His glory, and may we exhibit the peace and hope and confidence of those who know that we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37).

Let it be so, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.