

Selected Studies from 1 Peter
Part 3:

**Living in the Light
of Christ's Return:
An Exposition of 1 Peter 4:7-11**

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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 (1 Pet. 4:7-11, NASB).

The hope of Christ's return is an essential part of the believer's equipment for fruitful Christian living. In this passage Peter discusses aggressive Christian service in the light of the impending end. The anticipation of the Lord's return must have an impact on present Christian conduct.

In the face of persecution from without, believers, inspired by their hope of the future, must band together in loving service to each other to the glory of God. Peter here asserts that the end is near (v. 7a), he delineates Christian living in view of the end (vv. 7b-11a), and he points to the true goal of all Christian service (v. 11b).

The Assertion concerning the End

"The end of all things is at hand" (v. 7a) summarizes the Christian anticipation concerning the future. "Of all things"

(Πάντων), standing emphatically forward, underlines the comprehensive nature of the end in view. The genitive "all" could be taken as masculine, "all men, all people"; in 4:17 reference is made to "the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel." But here this comprehensive term is best taken as neuter, "all things" depicting the eschatological end. "The end" (τὸ τέλος), the consummation of the present course of history, implies not merely cessation but also the goal toward which this present age is moving. It is the prophetic message of Christ's return.

It is unwarranted to limit this comprehensive designation to "the end of the temple, of the Levitical priesthood, and of the whole Jewish economy" in A.D. 70.¹ Neither is it to be understood as a reference to the impending death in martyrdom awaiting the readers.² These views offer no proper basis for the exhortations which follow.

The verb "is at hand" (ἤγγικεν) is used in the New Testament of the approach of the kingdom of God in relation to the First Advent (cf. Matt. 3:2; 10:7; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:9, 11) as well as the Second Advent (Rom. 13:12; Heb. 10:25; James 5:8). The verb means "to approach, to draw near"; in the perfect tense, as here, it portrays the event in view as having drawn near and now being in a position as near at hand, ready to break in. It thus depicts the return of Christ as impending. Newell characterized His return as "the next thing on the program."³ Peter's statement expresses the conviction of the early Christian church (Rom. 13:12; 1 Cor. 7:29; Phil. 4:5; Heb. 10:25; James 5:8-9; Rev. 1:3; 22:20). Christ's anticipated return was "always near to the feelings and consciousness of the first believers. It was the great consummation on which the strongest desires of their souls were fixed, to which their thoughts and hopes were habitually turned."⁴

The delay in the expected return of Christ did create a problem for some in the early church (2 Pet. 3:4-7). Yet the passing of the centuries has not invalidated this hope. No dates for the return of Christ were revealed to the apostles (Matt. 24:36); they did not know when their Lord would return; they were instructed to be expectant and ready for His return. They were not conscious of anything that expressly precluded such an expectation; much that they saw encouraged it.

It may be said that the lengthy time interval must be understood in the light of God's chronology (2 Pet. 3:8-9), not

man's. Peter's assertion that the end is "at hand" and ready to break in expresses the Christian conception of the nature of the present age. With the Messiah's first advent the reality of the eschatological kingdom broke on human history; but with the King's rejection, His eschatological kingdom was not established. It awaits the day of His return. But that eschatological encounter introduced a new element into the nature of history. Human history now moves under the shadow of the divinely announced eschatological kingdom. Newman wrote as follows:

Up to Christ's coming in the flesh, the course of things ran straight towards that end, nearing it by every step; but now, under the Gospel, that course has (if I may so speak) altered its direction, as regards His second coming, and runs, not towards the end, but along it, and on the brink of it; and is at all times near that great event, which, did it run towards it, it would at once run into. Christ, then, is ever at our door.⁵

As human history moves along the edge of the eschatological future, "it is always five minutes to midnight," and "that edge at times becomes a knife-edge."⁶ Only God's long-suffering holds back the impending manifestation of that day (2 Pet. 3:8-9). This consciousness must have an impact on present Christian living.

The Duties in View of the End

"Therefore" (oũν) grounds the duties now depicted in the consciousness of the impending end. In the New Testament this eschatological hope is frequently used to motivate Christian conduct (Matt. 24:45–25:13; Rom. 13:11-14; 1 Cor. 15:58; 1 Thess. 4:18; Heb. 10:25; James 5:8-9; 1 John 2:28: 3:2). "The return of our Lord," Erdman observes, "has always furnished the supreme motive for consistent Christian living."⁷ The proper apprehension of this hope does not lead to uncontrolled excitement and fanatical disorder (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-3; 3:6-16) but rather to self-discipline and mutual service. Peter sets forth the believers' duty concerning their personal life (v. 7b) and describes proper community relations (vv. 8-11 a).

THE DUTY CONCERNING THEIR PERSONAL LIFE (v. 7b)

"Therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer." Two aorist imperatives set forth the urgent and decisive nature of these personal duties.

The first verb, "be of sound judgment" (σωφρονήσατε), was used of a person who was in his right mind as contrasted to one who was under the power of a demon (Mark 5:15; Luke 8:35). It was also used more generally of one who was reasonable, sensible, and prudent, one who retained a clear mind. The readers are thus urged to be self-controlled and balanced in their reactions, able to see things in their proper place. Cranfield remarks, "The sound mind is equally far removed from the worldliness and unbelief of those who think to explain away the promise of Christ's coming again, and from the fanaticism and sensationalism of those who would fain predict the hour of it and the manner."⁸

The second verb, "sober" (νήψατε), conveys the thought of sobriety as the opposite of intoxication. The Authorized Version renders this "watch," but it is a watchfulness related not to sleepiness but to drunkenness. It is a call to remain fully alert and in possession of one's faculties and feelings. The eschatological context of this passage indicates that they must "be free from every form of mental and spiritual 'drunkenness.'"⁹ resulting from befuddled views and feelings about the future.

The two verbs, akin in meaning, are connected by "and" (καὶ), marking a connection between the two duties. It is a question whether both imperatives or only the latter is to be connected with "for the purpose of prayer." The former seems to be the intended view of the NASB, as quoted above. The NIV also supports this position by joining both verbs with prayer: "Be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray." The ASV, by putting a comma after the first verb, keeps the two commands as distinct duties: (1) They must maintain a personal disposition of balance and self-control as they face life, and (2) they must be alert in mind and attitude so that they can pray. This author prefers the rendering of the ASV.

The phrase, "for the purpose of prayer" (εἰς προσευχάς, "unto, with a view to prayer") implies that prayer is a normal and expected activity of the Christian life; but it is easy to become distracted and unfitted for its performance. "Prayer" is a general term and includes prayer in all its aspects. But the original is plural, "prayers" of all kinds, both private and public. What follows suggests that they must maintain the practice of prayer in relation to their own lives as well as in their community relations.

THE ACTIVITIES IN THEIR COMMUNITY RELATIONS (vv. 8-11a)

The close connection between the personal and the brotherhood relations is underlined by the fact that verses 8-11, consisting of a series of participles, depend grammatically on the imperatives of verse 7. Although the participles are subordinate, the words "above all" (*πρὸ πάντων*) make clear that the duties now enjoined are of primary importance. Peter urges the practice of fervent mutual love (vv. 8-9) and depicts two broad areas of mutual service (vv. 10-11a).

The duty of mutual love (vv. 8-9). "Keep fervent in your love for one another" (v. 8a). Peter has already mentioned love several times (1:8, 22; 2:17; 3:8). He fully realized its importance. "At a never-to-be-forgotten interview, the Master thrice reminded him that the supreme qualification for ministry was love."¹⁰

"Your love for one another" underlines the mutual nature of the love being urged. The noun "love" denotes a love of intelligence and purpose which desires the welfare of the one loved. The use of the definite article, "the love," points to the love which they have already experienced. Its mutual character is underlined by the attributive position of "for one another" (*τὴν εἰς ἑαυτοῦς*) before the word *ἀγάπην*, literally, "the into-yourselves love." Peter's reflexive pronoun brings out the thought that they are all members of one body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12) and that love for other members promotes one's own spiritual well-being.

Assuming that this love is already operative among them, Peter urges that their love must be "fervent" (*ἐκτενῆ*), "stretched out" and up to full capacity. The term was used to describe a horse at full gallop or to picture "the taut muscle of strenuous and sustained effort, as of an athlete."¹¹ "Keep" represents a present tense participle (*ἔχοντες*, "having" or "holding") and indicates that they must maintain their mutual love at its highest level. Such love can be actively cultivated.

The words "because love covers a multitude of sins" (v. 8b) justify the demand for fervent love. It has a beneficial impact on social relations because it "covers" sins. The meaning is not that love condones or hushes up sins, either before God or men. The reference here is not to sin in its Godward relations but rather to sins and failures in human relations. Love refuses deliberately to drag out the sins it encounters so as to

expose them to the gaze of all; it prefers to refrain from and discourage all needless talk about them. It prefers to throw a veil over these sins, like the conduct of Shem and Japheth in throwing a covering over their father's shame, in contrast to Ham's viewing of it (Gen. 9:20-23). This gracious action of true love promotes the peace and harmony of the brotherhood, and is the very opposite of hatred which deliberately exposes the sin in order to humiliate and injure. "Only when Christians become mean and ugly do they favor the devil by dragging each other's failings out into the public and smiting each other in the face."¹²

Love's action is necessary because believers are still weak and failing. In their close associations with each other in the brotherhood believers do, regrettably, encounter "a multitude of sins." "Sins," (ἁμαρτιῶν), "the most comprehensive term for moral obliquity"¹³ in the New Testament, basically denotes all that misses the mark in falling short of the standard of right; it may thus include sins of weakness and moral shortcomings as well as overt acts of sin. Love will deal with these sins according to the principles Jesus set forth in Matthew 18:15-17. Peter here is thinking of believers in their mutual relations and not of their individual personal relationships to God. It is unwarranted to assume, as some do (e.g., Moffatt¹⁴), that such covering of sins wins forgiveness of one's sins before God. That would be a form of salvation by works.

The command "Be hospitable to one another without complaint" (v. 9) widens the application of this principle of love. As indicated in Young's literal rendering,¹⁵ Peter continues his directive without any verbal form: "hospitable to one another, without murmuring." He thus names a positive expression of the presence of love.

"Hospitable" (φιλόξενοι) is a plural adjective describing those who have an affectionate concern for strangers, which expresses itself in offering them food and shelter. The practice of hospitality was highly valued in the early church and it is frequently mentioned in the New Testament (Rom. 12:13; 16:1-2; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8; Heb. 13:2; 3 John 5-8; cf. Matt. 25:35). This fruit of brotherly love strengthened mutual ties among the churches, often widely scattered. Without its practice the early missionary work of the church would have been greatly retarded. When travelers or delegates from other churches arrived, their hospitable reception was regarded as a

matter of course (cf. Acts 10:5-6, 23; 16:15; 21:15-17). Believers who were on journeys found it highly desirable to find lodging in Christian homes, fostering mutual fellowship and strengthening the ties between churches. Even more important was it for believers to find refuge in Christian homes whenever they were fleeing from their persecutors.

But Peter's use of the reciprocal pronoun (εἰς ἀλλήλους) implies that hospitality within the local group is involved. Since there were no separate church buildings for the first two centuries, each local congregation met in the home of one of its members (cf. Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Phile. 2). This practice put their hospitality to a practical test.

"Without complaint" (ἀνευ γογγυσμοῦ) is a frank recognition that the practice of hospitality could become costly, burdensome, and irritating. The Greek term denotes a muttering or low speaking as a sign of displeasure. It depicts a spirit the opposite of cheerfulness. Such a spirit negates the value of the hospitality rendered and destroys the recipient's enjoyment of it. It is a ministry to be shouldered cheerfully if it is to be worthwhile. The addition simply emphasizes the true character of Christian hospitality and does not imply that Peter's readers were chronic grumblers.

The duty of mutual service (vv. 10-11a). The thought now passes from mutual love to mutual service. The participle construction again ties this picture of Christian service to what has gone before. Verse 10 describes the ministry of the believers individually as stewards serving the needs of the household of God with the means their Master has entrusted to them.

"Each one" (ἐκαστος), standing emphatically first, stresses that the duties and functions of a steward have been assigned to each believer. Each member of the body of Christ has been entrusted with at least one gift (1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:7). Each member has his own distinct function, "as each one has received a special gift." "As" (καθὼς, "just as") indicates that the service of each one is to be governed by the nature of the gift received. Since each member has received a gift, it is clear that these gifts are not offices in the church. The term "gift" (χάρισμα), derived from the same root as "grace" (χάρις), basically denotes something that has been bestowed freely and graciously. The term includes any capacity or endowment which can be used for the benefit of the church. It is not to be restricted to miraculous gifts; included is any "natural endow-

ment or possession which is sanctified in the Christian by the Spirit."¹⁶ Each should be employed as an expression of Christian love.

Each must employ his gift "in serving one another." The reflexive pronoun (ἑαυτοῦς) again points to the mutual benefit when these gifts are used for the sake of the whole body of Christ. God has made the members interdependent; what benefits others has a reflexive benefit for the one exercising the gift. The participle "serving" (διακονοῦντες) denotes any beneficent service that is freely rendered to another.

All must minister in the personal consciousness of being "good stewards of the manifold grace of God." Christians are "stewards," not owners of the means and abilities they possess. A steward was one to whom property or wealth was entrusted to be administered according to the owner's will and direction. He was entrusted with its use, not for his own enjoyment or personal advantage, but for the benefit of those he served. This entrustment involved responsibility and demanded trustworthiness (1 Cor. 4:2). "As good stewards" means that they not merely resemble but actually are such; they must render their service in a noble and attractive manner.

Each believer has his share in ministering "the manifold grace of God." The collective singular, "the grace of God," comprehends all the gifts graciously bestowed, while the adjective "manifold" (ποικίλης) displays the "many-colored" gifts in their infinite variety. The Lord of the church has distributed His bounty with masterly variety to enable His people successfully to encounter the "manifold trials" (1:6) to which they are subjected.

In verse 1 *la* Peter divides these gifts into two functional categories: the speaking gifts and the service gifts. The two categories are given in two conditional sentences, but no verbal form is expressed in the conclusion, which the Greek did not feel essential. In English one feels compelled to insert some verbal form, either an imperative, "let him," or a participial form.

"Whoever speaks" (εἴ τις λαλεῖ, "if anyone speaks") assumes the speaking function in operation. The verb may be general, simply denoting use of the faculty of speech; it is frequently used in the New Testament of teaching and preaching, and so here the speaking may be in the form of teaching, prophesying, or exhorting. While speaking in the assembly seems pri-

marily in view, the verb is broad enough to include speaking outside a church setting, such as ministering to the sick, or personal communication.

Speaking "as it were, the utterances of God" (ὡς λόγια Θεοῦ) marks the necessary subjective feeling of the speaker as he exercises his gift. He must be conscious that what he says is God's message for the occasion. In classical Greek the λόγια were the utterances or responses of some deity. In the Septuagint the term is often used of "the Word of the Lord," and elsewhere in the New Testament it has reference to the Old Testament Scriptures (Rom. 3:2; Acts 7:38; Heb. 5:12). Here the sense seems to be that the speaker utters his message with the consciousness that he is giving not merely his own opinion but God's message under the leadership of the Spirit.

"Whoever serves" (εἴ τις διακονεῖ) seems best understood as including all forms of Christian ministry other than speech. The one rendering the service (τις, "any one") is again left entirely indefinite. It is unwarranted to limit the reference to the office of the deacon, as Demarest does.¹⁷ The context simply limits the service to the realm of deeds.

"By the strength which God supplies" is a timely reminder that Christian service must be rendered in a spirit of humility and divine enablement. The one serving must avoid the conceit that the strength and ability to perform the service are his own. If his service promotes the well-being of the brotherhood, he must realize that this ability is "by" (ἐκ, "out of") divine enablement (cf. John 15:4). God abundantly "supplies" (χορηγεῖ) the needed strength to carry out His work. In classical Greek the verb was used of paying the expenses of a chorus in the performance of a drama: since the performance reflected on the prior provision of all that was needed, the term came to denote supplying in abundance. Christian service must be humbly yet aggressively performed in full reliance on God's enablement.

The Goal in Christian Living

The added purpose clause, "so that in all things God may be glorified" (v. 1 lb), declares the true goal in all Christian living. The comprehensive "in all things" (ἐν παντι) is best understood as looking back to the entire paragraph. All that they have and do must magnify "God" (ὁ Θεός), the God whom they

now know and serve. He is the Fountain of all their gifts and blessings. In all they are and do, they must desire to thank Him and to extol and ascribe honor to His name.

"Through Jesus Christ" is a reminder that only through the reconciliation achieved in Him can God be truly glorified (cf. 1:21; 2:5; 3:18). "There is only one way to God, and our incense must be scattered on coals taken from the true altar, or it can never rise up acceptable and pleasing to Him."¹⁸

Peter's own grateful heart moves him to glorify God: "to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." The use of the indicative verb "belongs" (ἐστί, "is") marks his words as an assured declaration, not merely a devout wish. "To whom" may refer to either Jesus Christ or God the Father. In favor of Jesus Christ is the fact that He is the nearer antecedent here and that in Hebrews 13:20-21; 2 Peter 3:18; and Revelation 1:5-6 the glory is ascribed to Christ. In favor of God the Father is the fact that He is the subject of the sentence. Best cites three considerations in favor of God the Father as the intended antecedent:

- (i) The reference to the glorification of God in the preceding clause links with "glory" here; (ii) The majority of NT doxologies are offered to God, and in particular the very similar doxology of 5:11 is offered to him; (iii) To speak of glorifying God "through Jesus Christ" and then to speak of glory belonging to Christ seems odd.¹⁹

It is preferable to take God the Father as the subject of this doxology.

God is magnified as possessing "the glory and dominion" (ἡ δόξα καὶ τὸ κράτος). The definite article in the Greek with both nouns marks them as separate and distinct possessions, rightfully belonging to Him. He possesses "the glory," the radiant majesty and sublimity characteristic of deity, and He exercises "the dominion" (κράτος, "might and power in action"), marking Him as the sovereign Ruler over all.

To Him belong the glory and the dominion "forever and ever" (εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων), literally, "unto the ages of the ages." This strengthened form of "forever" emphasizes the thought of eternity in the strongest way. The expression depicts eternity as "a series of ages flowing on endlessly, in each of which a number of other shorter ages are gathered up."²⁰

"Amen" is a transliteration (alike in Greek and English) of the Hebrew word meaning "so let it be." So used, it is not a

wish but rather a strong affirmation, placing a seal of approval on what has just been said. Its use was common in the early Christian worship services as an expression of devout assent (cf. 1 Cor. 14:16). The practice was adopted from the Jewish synagogue.

This brief paragraph is significant as offering insight into Peter's understanding of Christian life and service. For him the hope of the impending return of Jesus Christ was a living reality. But he firmly held that this eschatological hope must promote loving Christian relations and faithful Christian service. The hope of the future is to have a sane, sanctifying impact on the present. In waiting as well as in serving, the true goal of the Christian life must ever be to glorify God.

Notes

- 1 James Macknight, *A New Literal Translation from the Original Greek of All the Apostolical Epistles* (1821; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 5:491. So also Jay E. Adams, *Trust And Obey: A Practical Commentary on First Peter* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 129-30; Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles of Peter, John, and Jude* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1954), pp. 111-12.
- 2 John T. Demarest, *A Translation and Exposition of the First Epistle of the Apostle Peter* (New York: John Moffet, 1851), pp. 224-26.
- 3 William R. Newell, "The End of All Things Is at Hand," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 109 (July—September 1952): 249.
- 4 Nathaniel Marshman Williams, "Commentary on the Epistles of Peter," in *An American Commentary on the New Testament* (reprint ed., Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications Society, n.d.), p. 61.
- 5 John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (1896), p. 241, cited by F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1970), p. 65
- 6 Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 65.
- 7 Charles R. Erdman, *The General Epistles* (1919; reprint ed., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.), p. 78.
- 8 C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 113.
- 9 William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 540.
- 10 F. B. Meyer, "Tried by Fire": *Expositions of the First Epistle of Peter* (London: Morgan & Scott, n.d.), p. 161.
- 11 Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, p. 57.
- 12 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938), p. 198.
- 13 W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (1940; reprint ed. [4 vols. in 1], Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966), 4:32.
- 14 James Moffatt, *The General Epistles, James, Peter, and Judas, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1947), p. 153.
- 15 Robert Young, *The Holy Bible Consisting of the Old and New Covenants*

Translated according to the Letter and Idioms of the Original Languages
(London: Pickering & Inglis, n.d.).

16 Lenski, *Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 200.

17 Demarest, *The First Epistle of the Apostle Peter*, p. 231.

18 Meyer, "Tried by Fire," p. 171.

19 Ernest Best, *I Peter*, New Century Bible Based on the Revised Standard Version (London: Oliphants, 1971), p. 161.

20 Robert Johnstone, *The First Epistle of Peter: Revised Text, with Introduction and Commentary* (1888; reprint ed., Minneapolis: James Family Christian Publishers, 1978), p. 351.

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