

Glory on the Horizon

1 Peter 4:7-11

Several years ago, the now deceased Christian broadcaster, Harold Camping, predicted that Jesus would come to take his people out of this world on May 21, 2011, followed by the end of the world on October 21, 2011. I don't recall how he arrived at those dates in his calculations, but I do remember a bit of online discussion about that prediction leading up to the date of May 21 of that year. When the day came and went, with nothing out of the ordinary happening, I recall seeing someone on Twitter say, "Worst apocalypse ever." To his credit, Harold Camping publicly repented of his practice of date setting before he died in 2013.

I recall that story because Peter begins this passage with the statement, "The end of all things is at hand." When we read that statement now, some 2,000 years later, should we conclude that Peter really whiffed that one, similar to the way Harold Camping whiffed it in 2011? No, of course not! What Peter tells us here is the authoritative Word of God, breathed out by the Holy Spirit. So when Peter wrote, "The end of all things is at hand," probably sometime in the 60's AD, it was true then, and it remains true today in 2019. Unlike Harold Camping, Peter is not setting a date. Rather, he is pointing us to an entirely new age, the age of the kingdom of God, that has already dawned upon this world in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Because Christ has been raised, the clock is ticking on this present evil age, and one day—we don't know when, but it could come at any moment—Christ will be revealed from heaven to assert publicly his sovereignty over this world. The New Testament teaches us to live in a way that we are ready for his return at all times, though we never know when it will happen.

When Peter speaks of the "end" of all things, that word "end" could refer, not only to the close of this present age, but it could also carry the sense of a goal or purpose toward which all things are oriented. Peter is telling us that we are on the very brink of the fulfillment of God's purpose for this world. And what is that purpose? In short, I would say based on the rest of this letter and the whole teaching of Scripture, that it is a purpose summed up in the word "glory." Note the numerous references to glory in 1 Peter. Look ahead to verse 13: "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." Or skip down to 5:1: "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed." Go back and read through the whole letter, with your eyes alert to the word "glory," and notice how often Peter uses that word.

In this very passage he refers to glory. Notice the end of verse 11: "in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever Amen." The words "To him" in the doxology could refer to "God," as in God the Father, or it could refer to "Jesus Christ." Because "Jesus Christ" stands closer in the text to the word "him," it makes more sense to read this as a doxology to Christ who, because he is fully God, is to be glorified even as the Father is to be glorified. So Peter is writing about the "end," or goal of all things just over the horizon, which means the revelation of the glory of Jesus Christ is just over the horizon. We may be sojourners and strangers in this world that does not know Christ right now, but we are on the brink of the revelation of the kingdom in which we will no longer be sojourners in a foreign land, but citizens who share in the glory of our King.

Of course, this age has a kind of glory of its own, but it is a glory that is quickly fading. In 1:24-25 Peter quotes from the book of Isaiah: “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” How do we direct our gaze away from the fading glory of this age and toward the glory of the age to come that is on the horizon? In other words, how do we orient our lives by faith rather than by sight? We might think the answer to that question requires an incredible depth of insight, or perhaps involves engaging in near superhuman feats of spiritual devotion. But in fact, Peter gives us instructions that sound remarkably ordinary. Orienting our hearts to the glory that is to come is a far more “ordinary” task than you might think. What do I mean by that? Let’s unpack what Peter says here to see how he instructs us on how to live with glory on the horizon, with the end of all things at hand.

First, Peter commands,

I. Consistently focus your mind for prayer (v. 7).

As human beings, we gravitate toward actions that give us an immediate payoff of some kind. We want our time to be invested well, and so when we engage in activities that don’t seem to yield quick results, we get frustrated with those activities and have little motivation to pursue them. And that’s why it’s almost always easier to find the motivation to do something else rather than to stop what you are doing and pray. If you are engaged in an activity, you get the payoff of accomplishing something. You mowed your yard and then stepped back to look over the beauty of freshly cut grass. You filled out that tax form that you needed complete, and now it has been cleared from your “to do” list. You posted a picture to Facebook, and thirty minutes later you saw that twelve people liked the photo, and four people gave you affirming comments. Immediate results produce motivation for action. Prayer usually doesn’t offer immediate results, and thus we often lack the natural motivation to slow our lives down and invest time in prayer that we could be investing in an activity that seems to give more value, at least in the moment.

This is why Peter commands us in verse 7, “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.” The terms “self-controlled” and “sober-minded” refer to the same thing: a state of mind that is intentional, focused, and determined. The opposite of a self-controlled, sober mind is a mind that is drawn away from greater concerns to lesser concerns by a kind of mental “intoxication.” An unfocused mind drifts along as it is pulled by the currents of this age. A self-controlled, sober mind refuses to be pulled along by this world, but rather ascends to God regularly in prayer.

Prayer is hard. Let’s acknowledge that reality. It is hard because of the lack of immediate incentives to do it. It’s an action that must be pursued by faith, and, indeed, it is the very embodiment of faith, for it is in prayer that we consciously look away from ourselves and our own activities to the sufficiency, wisdom, power, and love of God. So how do you focus your mind consistently for prayer? You must begin by learning to think rightly of what prayer is. Prayer is not merely an activity to check off your “to do” list. In his vision of the throne room of Heaven in Revelation 5:8, John writes, “And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” Our prayers are pictured in the book of Revelation as sweet-smelling incense, a pleasing aroma that is presented before the throne of God in Heaven. The very prayers of God’s people for the coming of his kingdom are a factor in

the sequence of events in Revelation that leads to the opening of the scroll with seven seals, or the execution of God's decrees in history. Make no mistake: prayer is the greatest work in which we can be engaged in this world.

So I call on you to exercise intentionality in prayer. Plan to pray. Don't wait for a moment when you feel inspired. Pray because you have focused your mind on devoting yourself to this most important work. And take your cues on how to pray from Scripture. It is my own practice to pray in the mornings a prayer that is guided by the requests that Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer of Matthew 6. Then, around the middle of the day, I read a Psalm and pray for various needs as my mind is led by that Psalm. Then I pray at night with my children, as well as other times throughout the day as needs come up. I don't share this with you because I think of my prayer habits as particularly noteworthy or exceptional, but precisely the opposite. I think of my prayer habits as remarkably ordinary, and I offer this merely as an example to you of how important it is to have a plan to pray regularly and then to execute that plan until it becomes a habit. I'm not always consistent with prayer, but I don't allow lapses in consistency to throw me into a state of persistent prayerlessness. And I think that is also key to remember: you will never be "perfect" at praying (if there is such a thing as perfection in prayer). Consistency and perseverance are far, far more important than the myth of perfection that you may have in your head.

But private prayer is not the only kind that requires intentionality. When we pray together corporately—as someone leads us in prayer either here from the pulpit on Sunday mornings, or in our chairs on Sunday nights, or in a living room during small group—don't think of the experience of being led in prayer as a passive one. Listen attentively to what is being prayed, and give your assent in your heart, and even with your words: "Amen," "Yes, Lord." Corporate prayer likewise requires self-control and sober-mindedness.

In his classic work *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer writes these words about what we must do if we desire to know God: "First, we must recognize how much we lack knowledge of God. We must learn to measure ourselves, not by our knowledge about God, not by our gifts and responsibilities in the church, but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts." The end of all things is at hand. So orient your heart to the glory that is just over the horizon by focusing your mind intentionally, and daily, for the task of prayer. It sounds so ordinary, but a life devoted to prayer is, in fact, extraordinary.

But in addition to prayer, we must be devoted to love for one another, and that is Peter's second command about how to live with glory on the horizon:

II. Nurture your love for the church (vv. 8-11).

When the glory of Christ is revealed at his coming, every institution, power, and kingdom on earth will topple, except one: the church. The church, as God's holy people, will endure forever with him, and because that is so, it is our business now to devote ourselves to loving the church in anticipation of that coming day.

Verse 8 reads, "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." Why speak of this command as "above all"? Perhaps it is because Peter was there when Jesus warned his disciples about the trials that would come, saying in Matthew 24:12, "And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold." Trials have a way of

revealing what is really in our hearts, and it would be in a moment of trial, when the pressure is on, that those whose love for the church is only superficial will reveal that their hearts are actually cold toward their brothers and sisters. It is also worth remembering that Jesus warned the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:4-5: “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love that you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” In the vision of the New Testament, the church is the center of gravity of our lives, and love for the church is a thermometer of one’s spiritual temperature. It is not an institution to which we should be loosely connected, like membership in the National Geographic Society. It is, rather, the body of Christ where members depend on one another; it is the temple of the Holy Spirit that stands together as a unified structure, with stone built upon stone; it is the household of God, the family with whom we share our lives.

So I have opted for the word “nurture” here as a way of expressing what Peter means, because Peter speaks here in verse 8, just as he did in verse 7, of an action that requires intention and effort. Our love for the church is to be intentional and ongoing. Notice that it says, “*keep loving* one another *earnestly*.” You don’t drift into this kind of love for your church family. You must intentionally pursue it, plan for it, and work at it.

I want to take us through the rest of the text now by asking this question: What does love do? If we are nurturing love for the church, what kinds of actions will we perform? Peter mentions three here.

First,

(1) Love protects unity by overlooking offenses (v. 8).

The end of verse 8 tells us, “love covers a multitude of sins.” Peter quotes from Proverbs 10:12, the whole of which reads, “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.” Or consider Proverbs 19:11: “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.” Love, in other words, is lavish in grace toward others. We have the freedom to overlook offenses of our brothers and sisters because we know God has done that exponentially more for us.

Ego-driven people cannot let things go. They seize on every opportunity to be offended, and they hold on to it as a way of defending their own honor. A mindset that is eager to be offended reveals a selfish immaturity that is toxic to a church. One time I was looking at buying a new van, so when I found one that I thought I might purchase, I let my mechanic look at it first. He told me up front, however, “If I look at it long enough, I will definitely find *something* wrong with it.” No car could possibly escape his meticulous eye for an imperfection. You know, if you look long enough, you will be able to find *something* wrong with every other person in this room. And if you are eager to be offended, you will have plenty of opportunities as a result. But if you are seeking to nurture the unity of this body and build it up in love, you will be eager to overlook offenses instead of pouncing on them.

Are there times when we must confront a brother or sister about sin? Yes! Jesus taught us to do so in Matthew 18:15-20. As Lee preached last week, we are responsible for one another, and that means that if one of us begins wandering away from Christ into the snare of Satan, we must go to

that person and seek to bring him or her back to the Lord. That is love, and in that process there is forgiveness. But I think that most of the sins that happen in the church don't fit that category. I think most of our failures toward one another might better be categorized as "mistakes" than rebellious sins. What do you do with mistakes, especially mistakes that could be offensive to you? You let them go. You cover them over with love for your brother or sister. You don't stew over the fact that your brother forgot to call you when he said he would, or that your sister didn't make it to your baby shower, or that your small group leader simply forgot to add your new email address to group email, causing you to miss an important announcement. Love is eager to bury a multitude of these things because it cares more about unity in the church than it does about being offended. In an age when being offended has become a form of cultural currency, we as the church of Jesus Christ must model a better way: the way of love that covers offenses.

What else does love do? Second,

(2) Love joyfully shows hospitality (v. 9).

Verse 9 reads, "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling." Christians are people who gather together for a multitude of purposes: for worship, for fellowship, for meals, for conversations, for all of the above. The Greek word for church literally means "assembly." Gathering is of the essence of the church, which is why there is no such thing as an online church or a virtual church. That is a contradiction in terms. Christians must gather in order to be the church.

Of course, these various kinds of gatherings require physical spaces, and they require people who make those spaces welcoming. Hospitality, therefore, has long been a key Christian virtue. Love impels us to open up our homes and lives in order to share them with our brothers and sisters. And Peter specifically says to do it "without grumbling," which means to do it joyfully rather than begrudgingly. Yes, hospitality can be taxing on a family because of the effort and resources involved in opening your home and life to others. But Peter tells us not to think of it as something we have to do, but rather as something we get to do. No grumbling. Only joy in showing tangible love to your brothers and sisters.

I am thankful for all of you who open your homes regularly to welcome other church members, or to welcome visitors, or to provide a physical space for your small group meeting, or to host an open event for members of the church. I see this virtue practiced regularly among you. But what if your living space is not really conducive to hosting? What if you live in a dorm room or apartment with roommates, and thus don't see it as your right to make use of the whole space for guests? Or what if you live too far away from here to make it practical for church members to come to your house? Keep in mind that, while hospitality is about having a welcoming home, it's about more than that. It's about having a welcoming heart and life toward the church. Maybe you can't host people in your dorm room, but you can open yourself up to others and welcome them into a friendship with you. Maybe you live too far away from so-and-so to have him over to your house, but you can be intentional about grabbing coffee together regularly to build your relationship. Maybe you're not ready to have people over several times a month yet, but you can be intentional about connecting with the church in all kinds of ways otherwise. Hospitality is more about the heart you bring to the church than it is about a particular physical space.

Love cannot grow and flourish where people are not gathering together. That's one reason being here on Sundays regularly matters so much. We live in a society that is fragmenting. People don't gather together the way they used to anymore. Neighbors often don't know each other. Homes have become entirely private domains where digital connections are the only kind many people have. People are becoming isolated and lonely, and the art of hospitality is dying. Again, we as the church of Jesus Christ have an opportunity, as well as a mandate, to be different. Love joyfully shows hospitality.

And what else does love do? Third,

(3) Love faithfully uses spiritual gifts for the good of others (vv. 10-11).

In verse 10, Peter writes, "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." Peter is speaking here of spiritual gifts, or Holy Spirit-empowered abilities that are for the purpose of building up the church. Verse 10 teaches us three things about such gifts. First, spiritual gifts are given to all Christians. Peter says, "As each one has received a gift." There is no Christian who is not equipped by the Holy Spirit for service in some way. Second, spiritual gifts are varied. Peter speaks of "God's varied grace" at the end of verse 10. Our gifts are diversified, and we shouldn't expect that we will all excel in the same way. So focus on serving in ways in which you have been gifted! Of course, there are times when all of us are required to move outside our comfort zone, but that doesn't seem to be the norm. God gifted you the way he has for a reason, so if you find the church affirming you in a particular area, lean into that area of service. God has varied his grace among us for his good purposes. Third, spiritual gifts are stewardships. Peter speaks of us being "good stewards of God's varied grace." A steward is a manager of what is not ultimately his. Your gifts did not come from you; they have been entrusted to you, and you will give an account one day of your stewardship. Are you serving God faithfully with the ability that he has given you, or are you neglecting opportunities to build up the church where you could be excelling? Stewards must be faithful, but on the other hand, stewards must recognize that they serve temporarily at the pleasure of their Master. Your gift, your sphere of service, is not your identity. It is not the source of your value. If you turn it into an idol, God may have to take it from you for your own good. So be a faithful steward, but remember that you are still merely a steward.

There are several lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament. You could see one in Romans 12, one in 1 Corinthians 12, and one in Ephesians 4. Here in verse 11, Peter gives a very short list because he divides all gifts into two broad categories: gifts of speaking and gifts of serving. Gifts of speaking would include teaching, exhortation, prophecy, and a few others you can find in the New Testament. Peter says in verse 11: "whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God." The word "oracles" is a term that refers to God's very words delivered by the prophets of old. Peter does not mean that when we use our speaking gifts, we are speaking prophetic oracles that carry absolute divine authority. But he does say we should speak *as one who speaks* the oracles of God, which means he should speak in a similar kind of way. That means, when we use our gifts to speak to the church or to speak to a brother or sister in a time of need, we should recognize that what we are doing is serious business. When you speak for the building up of the church, that is not the time to speculate based on your own wisdom apart from Scripture. Let your words carry the weight of God's words by speaking according to, and under the authority of, Scripture. Where you have opinions that are not clearly based on Scripture (and we all do),

make a clear distinction between your opinion and the Word of God. And use your gifts of speaking to bring the Word of God to bear on the lives of your brothers and sisters.

Regarding the other category of gifts, Peter writes in verse 11b: “whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies.” Looking at other lists of gifts in the New Testament, it seems that gifts of serving would include doing acts of mercy, exceptional generosity in giving, and leading or administrating so that efforts of many people can be coordinated together toward one important goal. Peter says to those who serve in these (and other) ways to do so in the strength that God supplies. How do you do that? I think serving in God’s strength begins with the recognition of the immense value of what you are doing. When you engage in mundane tasks that are, nevertheless, necessary for the church to function, you are contributing to the support structure of God’s holy temple. So offer that service to the Lord as a priestly ministry unto him. Make your service a matter of prayer. Ask God to show you where you are equipped to serve, and ask him to give you strength to serve joyfully, not begrudgingly. Recognize that it is the Holy Spirit who calls and equips you for these “mundane” tasks, and that makes them anything but mundane.

The purpose of speaking in dependence on *God’s* word and serving in dependence on *God’s* strength is so that God may receive the glory in all of it. That’s how verse 11 concludes: “in order that in everything [all the speaking and all the serving!] God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” Spiritual gifts are given to us to build up the church and to put God’s glory on display, not ours. You are a steward of your gifts. That’s why we call them “gifts.” They didn’t originate with you, and they’re not really that much about you. They are about the church and about the God who so loves his church that he lavishes us with gifts for building each other up in the faith. When we rely on him in the use of our gifts and orient them toward the church in love, we will glorify him.

So if God receives glory when spiritual gifts are exercised in the church, why then does Peter say that God will be glorified “through Jesus Christ”? What does Jesus Christ have to do with this whole equation? Precisely this: the very Spirit who equips us to serve one another with gifts is the Spirit whom the glorified and enthroned God-man, Jesus Christ, poured out on his church in Acts chapter 2. Spiritual gifts are from the Father, through the Son, empowered by the Spirit. The building up of the church is a Trinitarian work that through us brings glory to our triune God: we put on display the power of the Spirit, who is the gift of the Son, who himself was sent to us by the Father.

And the very glory of God revealed in a unified, hospitable, Spirit-empowered church that is defined by love is a taste of the glory that is yet to be fully revealed, but that is still waiting on the horizon, when Christ returns. As we live with hearts oriented toward that day, doesn’t it seem that Peter tells us to live in a remarkably ordinary way? Devote yourselves to prayer. Love one another in a way that causes you to overlook offenses. Show hospitality without grumbling. Use your gifts in dependence on God to build up one another in love. We have a tendency to think more like the hare in Aesop’s famous fable “The Tortoise and the Hare.” When these two animals competed in a race against each other, the hare was confident that he could win with a short, dramatic burst of energy at the end. He had his eyes set on a grand finish, and he ignored the importance of the present moment, choosing to nap rather than to focus on the task in front of

him. By contrast, the tortoise plodded along with consistency and perseverance, and that is what ultimately carried him to victory. As the fable teaches, slow and steady wins the race. We have much too high a regard for the swift and dramatic that we too easily miss this truth.

Peter calls us here to a way of life that is slow and steady, focused on the fundamentals of godliness: intentionality in prayer, and intentionality in love for the church. It seems so ordinary, but the glory that we anticipate when we live by prayer and by love is anything but. Amen.