

Living In The Rest Of The Time

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[0 : 0 0] Let's share in our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit, our teacher, and your great glory, our supreme concern.

! Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Although we read a good chunk of chapter 4 this morning, we're going to concentrate mostly on verses 7 to 11.

But it's helpful for us to see the whole passage surrounding these verses because it's always good when reading the Bible to pay attention to the context. So before we see what verses 7 to 11 say to us about how we can live as God's people while we wait for the end, which is our subject this morning, let's think briefly about the beginning of chapter 4.

Verses 1 and 2. Verses 1 and 2, he reminds his readers that Jesus suffered and died for them as a human.

That is that in his suffering on the cross, he was not separated from the same suffering any other person would experience if they had been going through that same ordeal.

[1 : 1 7] In the second part of that verse, he says that whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. Now, first, that does sound a bit strange. Does he mean that after we have suffered, we're no longer tempted by sin?

Well, we know that can't be true. We have our own experiences or know of the experiences of others who have suffered and we and they do continue to sin.

To discover what Peter meant by this phrase, we can take a quick look at a verse from the previous chapter, which says, For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

So, whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin means whoever has suffered for doing right and has still gone on obeying God in spite of the suffering involved has made a clean break from sin.

There's a strengthening effect on our lives which commits us more firmly than ever, where obedience is more important than our desire to end suffering.

[2 : 2 3] Now, that does sound good, but it sounds like a hard path as well, and not one that we could ever walk in our own strength. The best we can do is pray for that strength.

And when these times come to us or to others, we know, commit them to the Lord in prayer and trust in a good God. And the next verse makes sense of that context as it talks about no longer being driven by the passions of the flesh.

Go back to that one. That is our worldly desires, but being driven by the word of God. Then we have some descriptions. I'm shaking, I'm going to the right version.

So, we do have some descriptions of how some people live when they have no regard for how God wants people to live.

And a reminder that when we don't follow them in the godless lifestyle, they attack us. But Peter reminds everyone that all of us will have to give an account to God for how we have lived.

[3 : 3 3] And this sets us up for the question we mentioned earlier, which is how can we live as God's people while we wait for the end? And in verses 7 to 11, we see three things that we can do.

Three ways we can live while waiting for Jesus to come back. And they are praying, loving, and serving. But just before we get into them, it seems clear that when this letter was written, people expected Jesus to be returning really soon.

Now, I just showed you them, but I'll show you again. I don't know. You might be able to guess in the context of what we've been saying, but I don't know if anyone would know what all these random dates have got in common. Exactly.

Yes, well done. So, predictions. These are predictions some people have made of the date of Jesus' return. Now, we won't go into them, but there are some imaginative and complicated formulas used to predict so confidently when these dates were going to be and when Jesus was going to return.

And they must have completely missed that verse in Matthew 24 that says no one knows the day or the hour, but they just went ahead anyway. The other common image we have in our mind might be this guy thinking about the end, wearing his The End Is Nigh sandwich board.

[4 : 51] I don't know if anyone's seen. I think this guy's moved on to a golf sale cabard thing now instead of holding that one. But in Acts 1, we have the ascension when Jesus went back to heaven just some weeks after the resurrection.

His followers were standing about after he left them, gazing up into the sky when two angels appeared and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven. Now, the disciples knew Jesus was coming back.

He just assumed from what the angels said it wouldn't be too long. Now, Peter wrote this letter around 62 or 63 AD, some 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

And as we read through the letter, we get a sense of urgency in his language. But we know something, of course, that Peter didn't know at the time, which is that, of course, Jesus did not come back really soon after.

[5 : 54] And he's not come back yet. Peter was writing instructions not just for the people he knew in these scattered churches. He was writing to us and everyone who has looked into God's word from his time till today and everyone who will look into God's word who comes after us.

I wonder if that changes how we look at these words and indeed every word we read in the Bible. God inspired Peter in what to write.

Peter thought it was for a few people, but God knew it would be for millions of people down through the ages. And it's quite a thought that God had you and me in mind sitting here this morning when he guided Peter in this letter and writing this letter.

Jesus is coming back. We know that because of the verse we just read and elsewhere in the Bible. Jesus said in John 14, I will come again and take you to myself.

He left the church a task. And we, the present day church, have inherited that task. And for now, while we wait, we live as witnesses.

[7 : 01] And that's what we're going to turn to now. In verse 7 of our passage, we read, The end of all things is at hand. Therefore, be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

So how should we pray when we have the end in mind? Be self-controlled and sober-minded. In other words, as we might say here in Scotland, keep the heed.

But what would the opposite of that be? Sometimes in very worrying situations or very unexpected situations, can cause us to sort of freeze up and we find that we can't do anything.

That's what Peter's warning them about and encouraging them to be aware of so they can avoid it. If the situation does not come completely out of the blue, we are more prepared to respond rather than react or not react, as the case may be.

Jesus showed us this in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was not facing a completely unexpected circumstances, but his example for us is when faced with stressful and difficult time, he prayed.

[8 : 09] Thinking about the end time should also give our prayers a sense of urgency. There's so much teaching around what will happen around Jesus' return that it can be difficult to be sure.

But the important thing really for us to remember is that the time before Jesus' return is the time for people to accept him into their lives. So there is an urgency to our task of going into the world and making disciples.

We've already seen that. We don't know when Jesus will return. It's been over 2,000 years. But we don't know when the end times will come, maybe in our lifetime, or maybe another 2,000 years will pass.

And it's maybe a good thing that God didn't disclose the date because we might be tempted to feel that if it's ages, there's no rush, or if it's really soon, what's the point?

But we don't know, so it's up to us to play our part in making sure everyone has the same opportunity to hear about Jesus that we did. In his second letter in chapter 3, Peter's about to say that it's God's will that none should perish, but all should come to repentance.

[9 : 18] And by repentance, he means turning away from their old ways of living towards God's way of living and a new life in Jesus. Peter's next instruction to his readers is to love one another, as we see in verse 8.

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sin. Peter starts this verse with the words above all, which indicates the supreme importance of love as a controlling factor in all relationships in the church.

Because what Peter's talking about here is our love for one another. And when we think about that in the light of Jesus' return, we know there will be difficult times for the church around that time. And we don't know when any of these things will happen. So the thing that matters above all else is our love towards one another. This love certainly involves caring for the needs of one another, but Peter adds the word earnestly to emphasize that this is more than just kindness and charity, important as they are.

One person interpreted the word earnestly here to mean at full stretch. And I wonder if any of these images come to your mind when you're thinking about something at full stretch, maybe reaching for something at the top shelf of the supermarket, right on your tiptoes, hoping that you'll be able to somehow knock that packet of cornflakes or whatever it is down into your basket.

[10 : 47] Maybe you're thinking about the 100-meter sprint at the Olympics, where the two runners are side by side so close, stretching out as far as they can go, so that that photo finish will just show them ahead by a fraction.

Or maybe just that last hill walk you were on, where you can see the summit ahead. I thought this was quite a good picture. The guy's looking like a little bit discouraged, but maybe your legs are really tired.

You can't move another inch, but you're so close, so you just put in that extra effort and stretch out your legs to get to the top and get your reward. What they all have in common is not that they require effort, but maximum effort.

And as in everything, Jesus is our example. We know that he didn't spare any effort in showing his love at full stretch for us. He went all the way to the cross, gave us a free gift, but one that cost him everything.

This sort of love leads us to forgiveness. Thinking again of Jesus' example. Paul finishes this verse by saying, Love covers a multitude of sin.

[11 : 54] Now, there are many phrases from the Bible that have entered common usage. You're probably familiar with some of them. For example, the phrase, Escaping by the skin of your teeth is found in the book of Job.

The writing is on the wall. It's found in Daniel chapter 5. And a leopard can't change its spot is from Jeremiah. You can go and hunt them up later.

The phrase, Love covers a multitude of sins, is similarly used without people always knowing where it's from or what it means. Often, it's used in the sense of hiding something or covering something up.

That's not Peter's meaning at all. As we just mentioned, he's talking about forgiveness. If we love each other, we will also forgive. Which, again, is a lot easier to say than it is to do.

But we don't have to muster up the resources to do this sometimes difficult thing on our own. The love and forgiveness we show to others is God's love in us.

[12 : 59] That's the well we draw from, and it is a bottomless well. That brings us then to the third of the ways that we can live while waiting for Jesus to come back, which we find in verses 9 to 11.

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace. Whoever speaks as one who speaks the oracles of God, whoever serves as one who serves by the strength that God supplies, in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

One of the things that the full stretch of love we have been talking about finds a practical expression in is hospitality. And Peter adds to the instruction, do it without grumbling.

What Peter wants him to remember is that every good thing they have, or we have, comes from God, and that includes our homes, our budgets, the contents of our kitchen cupboard, and our time. So although this certainly includes hospitality, as in sharing meals with one another, very important of course, it's also so much more than that, as the list we just went through demonstrates.

[14 : 18] The how we will obey, that instruction will differ from person to person, and won't be the same from one season of your life to another. What Peter's reminding them about is to lay all that God has given you before him, and ask him how he wants you to use it to serve him.

One of the other ways we can serve is to exercise our gifts in the church. We're told here that each of us has received a gift, but that includes all of us here.

Now you might feel that you understand this, and you know the gift God has given you, or you might not be very sure, and feel maybe that God hasn't given you a gift. Verse 11 talks about one who speaks.

That might seem an obvious gift, because it's a very public one. It also talks about one who serves. And Peter makes no distinction in that verse between them, or gives greater prominence to one over another.

And one person has said that gifts are discovered in service. If we're unsure about what gifts God has given us, what way we might serve, then we can look for needs in our fellowship, or in the wider Christian community, and ask God to guide us as we serve, and try to meet those needs.

[15 : 35] And we'll see that all our gifts are entrusted to us by God, so that we can serve him in his church. Jesus is coming back. That's something that should concern every Christian.

Thinking about how we live in the light of his coming can be a good reminder to us of the urgency of the task that he has given us, and the life of prayer and love and service he wants us to live.

The hope for the world is a growing church, full of people whose lives reflect the love God has for the world, and whose message draws people towards him. God is calling us to be those people, and our greatest fulfillment will be found in living lives in obedience to that call.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for your church, and for the task you have given us as we wait for your return. Help us to draw people to you as they see how we live, and love and serve each other.

In Jesus' name, amen.