

I'd like to begin today by asking you to pretend for a moment that you don't know me. You've come to this church today for the first time. With that mindset, what would you think of me if I started my message with this statement: The end of all things is near. It's not a long statement; it's just seven words. But how do you feel about me saying the end of all things is near?

Maybe you'd think I'm one of these crazy preachers who likes to make specific predictions about the end of the world. Perhaps the next thing out of my mouth will be a specific date when the Lord will show up in the sky. Maybe I'll tell you to quit your jobs, sell your houses, head for the hills where we can all store up food and guns and be ready for the end. Maybe you're thinking you came to the wrong church today and the first chance you have you're going to bolt for the door!

Or maybe you'd have a different response. Maybe you're a more reflective kind of person. Maybe you'd try to decipher what I really mean. You know, what does he really mean by "the end of all things is near"? The end of what? Maybe he just means all things as we know it will soon become obsolete, like 8-track tapes. The world is changing and we all must be ready for those changes.

But, let's face it, that's stretching the limits of human language. I'm sure some of you would just say I'm flat out wrong to say the end of all things is near. First of all, people have been saying that sort of thing for centuries but nothing ever happens; time just rolls on. Not only that, the human race seems to be making progress. We may have problems—global warming, nuclear armament, poverty—but look at the progress we've made in medicine, technology, communication. It may be slow, but things are moving forward. We're solving our problems.

Today we're again picking up again in our study of the NT letter called 1 Peter. Now, we know Peter. We know he was a fisherman who Jesus called to be his disciple. We know how, despite his self confidence, he denied the Lord three times. But we also know how the Lord graciously restored him and called him to care for his people. Consider the fact that years later under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter made the exact declaration I posed to you: The end of all things is near.

### **The End of All Things is Near**

This statement begins a paragraph that starts in 4:7 and ends in 4:11. Why does Peter bring this up here? Well, he just finished talking about the reality of a coming judgment. Up in verses 4-5

he told us about those who live wild and reckless lives and ridicule believers. Then he said, "*But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.*" Later in verse 17 he applies this to us and says, "*For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household...*"

This day of judgment is just one of the events associated with the end. When he says, "the end," he's referring to a period of time, not just a single point in time. This period of time began with the first coming of Jesus and will consummate with his Second Coming and the dissolution of this present world order as the Lord sets up his own rule in the new heavens and the new earth. The end of all things in this world means the beginning of something far more wonderful for the people of God.

He says this time—the end—is near. It is approaching. One of the reasons Peter knew this was he believed the end would be immediately preceded by a time of increasing persecution of God's people as the forces of evil have one last fling before their final doom. He learned this from Jesus (Matthew 24:9). Peter and his readers were starting to experience that very thing.

The fact that the end is near doesn't give us permission to try to calculate the exact date or even read into every skirmish we hear about in the news. All these things—wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution—are what Jesus called "*the beginning of birth pains*" (Matt. 24:8). And like birth pains they'll become more intense as time marches on and we get even closer to the end. Yes, 2,000 years have passed since Peter said this, but as he says later, "*With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day*" (2 Peter 3:8b).

Most of us in America have fallen prey to what is called the myth of progress. What once drove believers to long for God's final justice has been replaced today by the notion that better technologies, better therapies, better science, and better politics will actually make the world a better place. But from a biblical standpoint, that is a myth.

So what does this mean for us in terms of how we live our lives? We need to be prepared. Think of it this way: We all know Northern California at any time could be struck by a strong earthquake. The likelihood of that happening is great. In fact, we're way overdue; it **will** happen. So, what do we do? We shouldn't run for the hills, but we should be prepared. Many of us procrastinate and do little to nothing to prepare. But wise people act. That's what Peter goes on in this passage and tells us

to do. In light of the fact the end of all things is near, here's what you need do: He gives us four ways to prepare and one compelling purpose behind it all.

### **Stay Mentally Alert for an Effective Prayer Life**

The first thing is to stay mentally alert for an effective prayer life. He says in verse 7,

**“Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray.”**

It's kind of funny this comes from Peter because he was the guy who kept falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus explicitly told him to “watch and pray.” So I guess Peter learned this the hard way. Like most of us, he knew how weak he was in this area of his life.

When Peter mentions prayer here he uses it in the plural—prayers. He's talking about repeated acts of prayer. He may be talking not just about personal prayer but the corporate prayers of the church. Of course, persecution and opposition will often drive us to our knees. A great example of that is seen in the book of Acts. Peter and John were arrested, brought before the Jewish ruling council, and commanded not to speak about Jesus. After they were released they returned to the believers who'd gathered together. Then they told them what happened, and it says, **“When they heard this they raised their voices together in prayer to God”** (Acts 4:24a). It's like the persecution sobered them and drove them to prayer.

A more contemporary example of this comes from Tim Keller's book called *Prayer*. He writes:

*In the second half of my adult life, I discovered prayer. I had to. In the fall of 1999, I taught a Bible study course on the Psalms. It became clear to me that I was barely scratching the surface of what the Bible commanded and promised regarding prayer. Then came the dark weeks in New York after 9/11, when our whole city sank into a kind of corporate clinical depression, even as it rallied. For my family the shadow was intensified as my wife, Kathy, struggled with the effects of Crohn's disease. Finally, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. At one point during all this, my wife urged me to do something with her we had never been able to muster the self-discipline to do regularly. She asked me to pray with her every night. Every night.*

*She said something like this: “Imagine you were diagnosed with such a lethal condition that the doctor told you that you would die within hours unless you took a particular medicine—a pill every night before going to sleep. Imagine that you were told that you could never miss it or you would die. Would you forget? Would you not get around to it some nights? No—it would be so crucial that you wouldn't forget, you would never miss. Well, if we don't pray together to God, we're not going to make it because of all we are facing. I'm certainly not. We have to pray, we can't let it just slip our minds.”*

That's what Peter means by being alert and of sober mind for the purpose of prayer. When hard times come, we can either panic or pray. We can be controlled by fear and worry or steady ourselves for prayer.

### **Love Each Other Unconditionally**

The second thing he says to do is love each other unconditionally. He says in verse 8,

**“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”**

He's talking about love within the community of believers. When persecution and trouble come, how important it is we stick together in love. Notice he says, “Above all...” This is of supreme importance. Love should define our relationships within the church family.

He adds we must love each other “deeply.” Literally the Greek word means “at full stretch.” The idea is it won't be easy. Such demands will be placed on you that it will stretch you to the very limit.

That usually means God will put someone in your life, someone in this church perhaps, or even in your small group, who's very hard to love. Do you have anyone in your life like that? People who stretch you to the limits of your ability to love? Maybe it's someone with poor hygiene. Maybe it's someone who talks too much. Maybe it's someone who ignores you. Maybe it's someone extremely opinionated. Maybe it's someone who's always complaining. Maybe it's someone who seems to have such an easy life and gets everything they want. Maybe it's someone who's just dull and boring. All these people are hard to love. How do we deal with these folks?

Peter says love them at full stretch. Then he gives us the key. He says, “love covers a multitude of sins.” He pulls this from the book of Proverbs where it says, **“Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers all sins”** (10:12). When someone sins, when someone offends or irritates you, you can either make much of it or overlook it. You can stir up conflict, or you can downplay it. This is telling us to forgive, to maintain a long fuse, to make little rather than much of their sins and shortcomings. When love abounds in a fellowship of believers, we minimize each other's faults. When love is lacking we take offense at everything.

This isn't telling us to live in denial or to have a cavalier attitude towards sin. There are times when sin needs to be confronted and dealt with in the body of Christ. There are times for people to say, “I'm sorry. I was wrong.” 1 Corinthians 13 summarizes this well, **“Love is patient...it is not provoked...it doesn't take into account a wrong suffered...it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”** (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

And do you know what will help us do this the most? It's remembering how love has covered a multitude of our own sins. Peter

understood this. Love covered his sins after he denied Jesus. Let's face it, we all need grace. We all need the love of God to cover our sins! When I truly live every day knowing my need for grace, I extend that grace to others.

### **Practice Hospitality Without Complaint**

This leads to the third thing Peter tells us to do in light of the end being near in verse 9,

**“Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”**

This was important in the early church for several reasons. It was important because there were no church buildings and believers met in homes. Someone had to open their home for church! It was also important because there were many traveling preachers and missionaries who went from place to place and they needed somewhere to stay. Back then, decent people didn't stay in the equivalent of motels; such places were considered sleazy. So it was important for practical reasons that believers open up their homes to one another.

Many of us today confuse hospitality for entertainment. We think hospitality means having a few close friends over for dinner. It's not that that's wrong, but it's so much more than that. No doubt, some of the people we're called to welcome into our homes are those people we just talked about who are difficult to love. It's interesting that the Greek word for hospitality literally means “lover of strangers.” The English word “hospitality” evolved from our word “hospital.” So it's clear we're talking about opening our home to more than just a few close friends. And we're to do this without grumbling, without complaint.

I've found some of the most hospitable people in the world are those who live in developing countries with very few material comforts. I've been embarrassed by how well I've been treated in some of the poorest countries in the world. Here on the Peninsula, this need for hospitality is becoming more urgent. The lack of affordable housing is forcing people to either leave or find alternative ways of living. Many extended families are living together. More and more people in the body of Christ are in need of hospitality. How important it is for us to keep our eyes open and to open our homes to those in need. Max Lucado writes this:

*Not everyone can serve in a foreign land, lead a relief effort, or volunteer at the downtown soup kitchen. But who can't be hospitable? Do you have a front door? A table? Chairs? Bread and meat for sandwiches? Congratulations! You just qualified to serve in the most ancient of ministries: hospitality. Something holy happens around a dinner table that will never happen in a sanctuary. In a church auditorium you see the backs of heads. Around the table you see the expressions on faces. In the auditorium one person speaks; around the table everyone has a voice. Church services are on the clock. Around the table there is time to talk. Hospitality opens the door to uncommon community. It's no accident that hospitality and hospital come from*

*the same Latin word, for they both lead to the same result: healing. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: “You matter to me and to God.” You may think you are saying, “Come over for a visit.” But what your guest hears is, “I'm worth the effort.”*

In one church I was a part of years ago, at the time in the service when people greeted one another, the pastor often said, “Invite someone to lunch.” Why don't we do that anymore? Because we all have somewhere to go? Because it would just be so awkward? What if you came to church with the intention of finding someone new and either bringing them home or taking them out for lunch? Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says about this, **“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it”** (Heb. 13:2). Imagine that! Wouldn't that be cool? Who'd you have lunch with today? Oh, just a couple of angels!

Before Lynn and I were married, we were driving back to San Luis Obispo from the Bay Area. Our car broke down near Prunedale. Have you ever been to Prunedale? Let me tell you, there's not a lot going on in Prunedale. It was Sunday and while our car was being repaired at a gas station we decided to go to church. We met someone there and when they heard of our situation they invited us—total strangers—over for lunch. And then they drove us back to the gas station when our car was ready. I can't even recall all their names, but every time I drive through Prunedale I think of them. And I ask myself, Would we do that?

### **Use Spiritual Gifts to Serve One Another**

The end is near, so be sober for prayer, love at full stretch and practice hospitality. Another thing to do is use your spiritual gifts to serve one another. He says in verses 10-11a,

**“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.”**

Each one of us has been given at least one spiritual gift. This isn't a natural talent, but a special enablement given by the Holy Spirit. Your spiritual gift might very well be something different from your training or talents. Peter says this is a manifestation of the grace that God gives to us in various forms. This act of grace doesn't manifest itself in a cookie-cutter way. God is infinitely creative in how he equips his people. You have been graced with gifts.

We're stewards of these gifts, which means they are given to us to be used for their intended purpose. That's what it means to be faithful stewards—to put them to use in the way the One who gave them to us intended. What's the purpose for which these gifts have been given? Notice there's an immediate purpose and an ultimate purpose. The immediate purpose is to serve others

in the body of Christ. It's not to serve ourselves, but others. The ultimate purpose is that God might be praised. It's not for our own praise but for God's praise.

And this God-centeredness extends even to the way we use our gifts. In his letters Paul mentions about 15 different gifts, but Peter just breaks them down into two categories: speaking gifts like teaching, prophesy and exhortation on the one hand, and serving gifts like helps and healing on the other hand. Both are to be used in a God-centered way. Those who speak are to speak the words of God rather than their own opinions and ideas. Those who serve are to serve not with their own strength but with the strength God supplies. It's only when we speak the words of God and serve with the strength of God that God will be praised through Jesus Christ.

This has always been a church that believes that ministry belongs to the people in the church, not the pastors of the church. You are gifted. You have a calling. You have a ministry. You are a priest. For this church to be a compelling expression of Jesus Christ, you need to discover and use your gift. It's not enough for you to come and sit here on Sunday morning and enjoy the singing and the teaching; that's not church! Church is every member of the body of Christ using their gifts.

How do you discover your gift? You start just by getting involved. Get plugged in and start serving and then ask, How does God seem to use me the most? What do I care deeply about? What excites me? What do others who know me say my gifts might be? We even have a tool that gets you started in discovering your gifts. This week we sent you a link to a Spiritual Gifts Test in our e-newsletter called Take 5. You can also find the test on our app. When you've finished it, contact one of our pastors and we'll walk you through it and help you find a place to serve.

### **Aim for One Simple Goal**

Peter ends this paragraph with what we call a doxology. He says,

**“To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”**

Here is the purpose of it all: Worship! Glory and power (dominion) to who? To Jesus Christ. Peter knew Jesus in the flesh as a man, but here he worships him as God. He has all glory and power! To Peter's readers who may feel powerless, they can be encouraged that all power and dominion belongs to him. Identifying with Jesus may jeopardize our standing in society, our livelihood, and in some cases our lives, but that's okay, because all glory and power belong to him for ever and ever!

So what does this all boil down to? It boils down to this: As the end draws near, don't run for the hills, but dive deeper into community. Years ago I ran a marathon. I trained hard for it. I was prepared. But those last few miles were hard. I knew I was struggling and running slow because there were people in front of me who were walking and I wasn't catching up with them! But then I came to the last hundred yards or so and I saw my wife and kids at the finish line, cheering me on. When I saw that, do you think I slowed down? No way! Seeing them at the finish line, I ran faster.

That's what the word of God is saying to us today: As the end draws near, with the finish line in sight, don't slow down; run faster. Dive deeper into community. Stay mentally alert for effective prayer. Love each other unconditionally. Practice hospitality without complaint. Use your spiritual gifts to serve one another. Do all of this with an eye to worshipping him to whom all glory and power belong.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1427-13FC