

God in Everything at the End of the Age

- Resource by John Piper
- Scripture: [1 Peter 4:7–11](#) Topic: [End Times](#)

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.

I have preached on this text at least three times since I have been at Bethlehem. Once I focused on the call to prayer in verse 7. Once I focused on the call to love and hospitality in verses 8–9. Once I focused on spiritual gifts in verse 10. And I think there was a fourth time when I focused on how to serve God so that God gets the glory from verse 11.

So as I was praying about what to focus on this time, it seemed like I should focus on something I have not before. Two things seemed timely. One was the phrase, "The end of all things is at hand," in verse 7. The other was a special word I think the Lord has for us as a church at this specific juncture of our life together—coming through hard days and entering into a time of master planning.

So that's what I want to try to do this morning. I want to explain what I think Peter means by "The end of all things is at hand" (in verse 7), and then draw out a word for us that I believe the Lord impressed on me fairly strongly yesterday.

The End of All Things Is at Hand

What did Peter mean?

Let's begin with verse 7. Peter starts the paragraph, "The end of all things is at hand." What does he mean? Was he claiming to know and teach that Jesus would come back in a few months or years and end this age and establish the kingdom—so that he made a mistake in his prediction? Or was he teaching that Jesus could come back at any moment because everything that needs to happen before he comes had happened—and so his coming is near in the sense of being immanent? Or is there a third possibility?

He Wasn't Simply Mistaken

Interpreters with less confidence in the Scriptures have sometimes concluded that the apostles simply made a mistake when they said things like this—"the end of all things at hand." The end is near, they said, but the end was over 2,000 years away. So they made a mistake—the argument goes.

But for those of us who have come to trust in Scripture as God's word and believe that God did not allow his apostles to teach mistakes to the church, this is not so easy. And there are other reasons it's not so easy. One is that Peter was there in [Acts 1:6](#) when the apostles ask Jesus if now is the time for the kingdom to be established. "Lord, is it at this time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Peter heard Jesus say, "It is not for you to know the times or epochs which the Father has fixed by his own authority" ([Acts 1:7](#)). Peter had been told that it was not his business to know when Jesus would come and establish his kingdom. His business was to do the Master's bidding till he comes—to spread the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

A Clue in the Word on Prayer

So what was Peter teaching about the end of all things in verse 7? The clue that I followed was the following word on prayer, "Therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer." Peter connects the nearness of the end with the need for prayer. I think this points us back to the teaching of Jesus who did the same thing in [Luke 21:36](#).

I invite you to look it up with me, so we can see it in context: "But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." The point of praying for "escape" is not that Christians will be taken out of the world and not pass through the trouble Jesus is predicting. You don't need "strength" for that. He prays for "strength"—that they would be strong so as not to be spiritually and morally ruined by the end-time stresses. Two verses later in verse 34 he calls the coming end a "trap" for those who are weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life. That's what we need to have strength to escape from—the trap of worldliness as the end draws near.

So both Jesus and Peter connect the urgency of prayer with the drawing near of the end of the age. Peter was there when Jesus taught this and learned it from him. So let's stay with the context in Luke 21 for a few minutes and see how Jesus taught Peter and the others to think about the end of the age.

Jesus' Teaching on the End of the Age

In verse 6 of Luke 21 Jesus predicts the demolishing of the Jerusalem temple: "not one stone will be left upon another." This prompts the disciples to ask (in v. 7) about the signs when these kinds of things would happen.

So Jesus mentions some things that are going to happen leading from then to the end. Verse 9: "And when you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately." Notice: Jesus is careful to say that these signs—wars and disturbances—are not immediately followed by the end. There is an undefined space of time. He is avoiding locking himself into a specific time frame.

In verses 10 and 11 he mentions wars again, as well as earthquakes and famines and terrors and some kind of cataclysmic signs in the sky or in space. Then in verse 12 he says something

important about timing. Looking back on the wars and upheavals and famines and earthquakes, he says, "But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you . . . etc."

Notice the word, "before." So now you have another indefinite space of time implied: First there is the persecution that Peter and other disciples will experience (v. 12). Then there is "these things"—"before all these things" (v. 12)—namely, the wars and famines and earthquakes, etc. Then there is the end. And between these there is no set amount of time.

Then Jesus adds some more signs that will happen on the way to the end—still without getting specific about when they happen or how they are connected. For example, verse 20: "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand." Then verse 24b: "Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." So the destruction of Jerusalem is part of what is coming before the end, and after that there will be this period of time, again of unspecified length, that has to be fulfilled—which Jesus calls "the times of the Gentiles."

Peter Wasn't Saying Jesus Could Return at Any Moment

Now when Peter wrote 1 Peter, Jerusalem had not been destroyed yet. He died around AD 65 and Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in about AD 70. So it's hard for me to agree with the interpretation that says what Peter meant in [1 Peter 4:7](#) ("The end of all things is at hand") was that Jesus could come back at any moment. Jesus had said that Jerusalem would be destroyed first and then an undefined time of the Gentiles would elapse before the end of the age would come and he would return.

Besides the destruction of Jerusalem Jesus also said that world evangelization would take place before the end would come. For example, [Matthew 24:14](#), "This gospel of the kingdom must first be preached in all the world as a testimony to all the nations; then the end will come" (cf. [Acts 1:8](#)).

And not only that, Jesus had told Peter what would happen in his old age, and so he predicted that Peter would get old. In [John 21:18](#) Jesus said, "When you grow old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." So Peter can't have believed that Jesus would return at any minute during his middle aged years of ministry. The Lord himself had told him how he would die when he was old.

And Paul warns against this view that Jesus might have returned in those days at any moment. Paul says, to the Thessalonians, "[The day of the Lord] will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed" ([2 Thessalonians 2:3](#)). So he explicitly checks the spread of the view in his day that the Day of the Lord could have already come. He says there are things that yet have to happen before the day of the Lord can come.

The End of All Things Is at Hand: An Interpretation

My suggestion, then, is that Peter means something like this when he says, "The end of all things is at hand":

"All around us there is intensifying persecution, as the Lord said there would be. There are rumors of wars. The horizon is dark for Israel, and the judgment on Jerusalem is near.

"Not only that, the gospel is spreading like wildfire as the Spirit is poured out. Paul was able to plant churches in all the major cities of Galatia in a matter of months. Now he has completed the frontier mission work from Jerusalem all the way around to northern Italy ([Romans 15:19](#)), and he plans to go to Spain. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other bands of missionaries are forming and going to the unreached.

"I don't know how big the world is. But if Pentecost is any indication, and if the success of Paul is any evidence, the world could be evangelized in not many years by God's great power. Brothers, the end is near—I'm not predicting when it will happen. I mean, the things that the Lord said must happen before he comes are taking place around us, and could be accomplished quickly—even in your lifetime.

"So be sober for prayer, because the great danger facing us is that we fall in love with this world and become spiritually dull and the day come upon us like a thief and we be destroyed. O pray, brothers, pray for the coming of the kingdom and for your strength to endure and escape the trap of spiritual apathy. Pray that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."

And that's exactly the way I would talk about the coming of the Lord today. It is just around the corner. The end is near indeed. If anyone dallies with sin and the world, thinking, "I have lots of time," he plays the fool. The Judge is at the door. And the time remaining should be spent in earnest prayer that we not be made drunk and hard by the cares and pleasures of this world.

Love Covers over Sins

The other word for us comes from verses 8 and 9 about how to live together in the end time stresses. "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaint [without grumbling]." I saw a connection between verses 8 and 9 that I hadn't seen before. And it made me think of where we are as a church.

Verse 8 says that our love needs to be the kind that covers each other's sins. In other words the focus is on the effect of love that enables fellowship in spite of sins. Isn't that remarkable?

Then in verse 9 Peter says that we should be hospitable "without complaint" or without grumbling. Grumbling about what? Maybe about the time and effort it takes to fix a meal or straighten the house. But don't you think he means grumbling about people. Love covers over

sins. Let hospitality be without grumbling. Love says, "I'm just going to cover the things about which I could complain and grumble."

The Lord is ministering to us here. He's choosing the texts as we move through 1 Peter. If we want to, we all have ample reason to complain and murmur, don't we? Some feel that there are past sins in the way Dean and Leah were disciplined. Others feel there are past sins in the way the elders were treated. Others feel neither or both.

But God's amazing word to us this morning, I believe, is: love covers sins, so that hospitality—real heart-felt fellowship—can happen, not because we even agree on what the sins are—that's the amazing thing in this text—not because we finally decide what the real sins are, but because love covers them.

Peter is saying that bona fide, authentic love and fellowship is based, in part, on the covering of many sins. This is not sweeping things under the rug. It's not endorsing keeping skeletons in the closet. It's not renouncing church discipline. It's saying at least this—probably more: When we've done all the confrontation—when we've done all the argumentation and exhortation—we cover it. Whatever side we are on, we cover it; we give it up; we bury it as a cause of murmuring.

And then we turn together to God's future grace and take our united cue from verse 11: we will so live "that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

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