

## **First Peter: Ethics at the End of All Things**

**1 Peter 4:1-11**

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Our text is from 1 Peter chapter 4, vv. 1-11. We will make two points: Arm Yourselves in vv. 1-6, and Eschatological Ethics in vv. 7-11.

### **I. Arm Yourselves**

Recall the flow just prior to our text. Christ died, he was raised, he proclaimed his victory, and he ascended into heaven, with all the powers in subjection to him. And this matters to these scattered exiles, because it means that in their situation of weakness and powerless, they are joined to Christ the Victor. And yet, the transition to chapter 4 can seem a bit jarring, if Christian victory is defined improperly.

Therefore, chapter 4 verse 1, since Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking. It's startling. Christ has ascended on high; the powers are subjected to him, his suffering is past – but since he suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves to suffer in the flesh. Flesh here means “in this earthly life.” Arm yourselves? What is this? Some kind of reverse second amendment? Arm yourself not to inflict, but receive, suffering. Is your suffering reception armory full? Peter says: get locked and loaded to suffer.

Christian triumph, then, in this age, it is always conformity to Christ crucified. Jesus never says: take up your resurrection and follow me. Victory, the experience of resurrection power, is paradoxical, cruciform in this age. Adopt, he says, the same attitude as Christ himself had. Who, for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Now, Peter's point to the church is not: get ready for suffering in general – just normal human misery in a fallen world, though there is plenty of that – his point is: like Christ, prepare to suffer for righteousness. Those who suffer this way, Peter says, are done with sin. What a remarkable statement. It's almost as if suffering can burn sin right out of us. Suffering can wrench us from all the vain things that charm us most. This is not, of course, some magical power that suffering has of itself. Plenty of suffering actually produces MORE sin in people.

Yet, Peter says: whoever suffers in the flesh has ceased from sin. Why is this? It is because this is suffering which is in union with Christ's own sufferings. And, thus, a sharing in his own destruction of sin. He suffered in the flesh, putting an end to our involvement with sin. He died, Peter said earlier, so that we might die to sin, and live to righteousness. And the result in v.2 for those armed this way is they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for human passions, but for the will of God.

In short, the result is liberty. The yoke of Christ is easy. It is freedom. Self-indulgent desire is self-imprisonment. Notice the break: the rest of your earthly life is saved from being wasted on sin. Among other things, sin is just a tragic waste of time, and we have so little time to begin with. Now, armed to suffer for what is right, we can live the REST of our time for the will of God. That divine will is for us, the perfect law of liberty, the charter of our freedom, the way of happiness and fulness of life.

In verse 3, Peter grounds the exhortation: For the time past suffices for doing what the Gentiles do. You've already wasted enough time living contrary to the will God. In Paul's words: what fruit were you getting from the things of which you are now ashamed? And you, Peter says, were living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties and lawless idolatry. This is the futile way of life inherited from your ancestors which he spoke of back in chapter 1, from which, the precious blood of Christ redeems.

These things were woven into ancient pagan culture, they are now woven into our modern post-Christian culture. Arm yourself. To Suffer. And be DONE with sin. And live the rest of your days for the pure and good, acceptable, and perfect will of God. And when you do this you can expect abuse. They are surprised, v.4 says, that you do not join them, in what some translations call, the flood of dissipation. Ever see water spilled on the floor, just dissipated, lost? That is what idolatry and disordered lust in all its forms brings. They are surprised, and so they malign. The believers here are not pictured as going around like self-righteous moral police. That is loathsome. They have just broken with what everybody KNOWS is just natural and normal and wonderful. And the result is abuse. Vilification. Castigation. Slander.

This is victory in the ascended Christ. And we live this way, not out of hatred or disdain for the world, and certainly not out of any superiority. We live this way for the sake of the world. That the mercy which has been lavished on us, might spread to the ends of the earth. As for the mockers, they will give account, Peter says in v.5, to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

Now, we see something sobering and yet comforting here. Peter does not expect the church to be vindicated in history, in this life. He expects it to happen in the eschaton, at the judgment. And so here, he points to the one who is ready to

judge the living and the dead. The one who Jesus entrusted himself to, to judge righteously and vindicate him. We are being kept for a salvation READY to be revealed in the last time. And God is READY to judge the living and the dead. For this reason, verse 6 says, for this reason, because there is a coming judgment of the living and the dead, the gospel was preached.

Preaching is done by, and in the light of, and charged by the urgency of, the eschaton. Listen to these bracing words – often used for the charge to ministers at their ordination – from 2 Timothy 4: *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word.*

Preaching lives in the presence of the one who is to judge the living and the dead, it lives and breathes by his appearing, by his coming kingdom. It is because of the coming judgment, that the Word is to sound forth. The gospel includes, as basic to it, the news that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. For this reason, the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead. Here Peter has in mind the Christian dead. Perhaps, since they died, the world thought they had lived for Christ in vain.

So, Peter here assures the church that those who heaped abuse on them will give an account, and that those who embraced the way of the cross will be vindicated. The Christian dead are judged according to human standards - in the eyes of men – in regard to the flesh. Meaning, with respect to their lives on earth, with respect to their lives in this age. But now they live according to God, in regard to the Spirit. Judged in this age by men, they live in the Spirit, in the power of the age to come, before God.

Christ, we saw in chapter 3, was put to death in the flesh, and made alive in the Spirit. And so are the saints who are joined to him. Their death does not invalidate the warnings or the promises of the gospel. Arm yourself to suffer, since Christ suffered. Be done with sin. Since he died to set you free. Be ready for abuse. Wait eagerly for the coming Christ, who is ready to judge the living and the dead. And therefore, ready to vindicate his saints.

## **II. Eschatological Ethics**

Our second point is eschatological ethics. It is arresting to any reader of this epistle, just how persistent, how unwavering, Peter is in directing the church to the end, to the eschaton.

Let's quickly recap what he has said so far in this regard. We are born, he says, into a living hope, to an inheritance reserved for us in heaven. We are waiting for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Our faith is being tested, so that it might result in praise and glory and honor, at the revelation of Jesus Christ. We

are to fix our hope completely on the grace to be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ. We are to conduct ourselves in fear during the time of our exile, looking to the Day of God's visitation. The whole Christian life, we saw, is like living in the time of Noah, building, and waiting for the flood.

And so, we should arm ourselves for suffering, knowing, that those who abuse us, will give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. Christ's resurrection (and ascension to heavenly glory) means he is ready to judge the living and the dead. Since he is the first fruits of the harvest, his resurrection means: the general resurrection of the dead, at the end of the age, is underway.

Imagine a field ripe for harvest. You go in and you reap the first fruits – themselves ripe and ready. That very act means the whole field is ready to be harvested. The risen One is ready to judge the living and the dead, and thus verse 7 tells: The End of All things is at hand. To some, this is clearly ridiculous. After all, Peter said this two-thousand years ago – and the end has not yet arrived. So maybe he was just wrong. The problem with this way of thinking is that it refuses to have its mind shaped, reformed by the text of Scripture.

Peter means we are in the last stage, the final movement, of God's redemptive plan. He means the END has broken into this age in Jesus Christ. He is the last, the eschatos Adam. And in his preaching, he declared: The coming kingdom of God is at hand. In his resurrection, the new creation, is inaugurated. Thus, the end stands over us, and impinges on us. In this sense the END is always near. The END of all things is always at hand. Or as James puts it: establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Behold, the judge is standing at the door. Peter thinks this reality – the end of all things is at hand – is the BEGINNING of Christian ethics. Calvin (commenting on this text) thinks the same thing. *He says: Peter says this to rouse us from the drowsiness of the flesh, reminding us that the end is nigh, so that we ought not – get this – we ought not to become rooted in this world, from which we must soon remove.*

Calvin says we tend to promise ourselves an eternity in this world, to live as if the end will never come upon us. But he says: If the trumpet of Christ were to sound in our ears, it would rouse us with alacrity and not allow us to lie slothfully. To put it differently: There is a fundamental drowsiness, a numb this-worldliness, a blindness to the coming eschaton, which characterizes lives lived without this banner over them.

So, Peter writes to shake us awake: the end of all things is at hand. Let's look at the ethics that flow from this orientation. Here I will make four subpoints. Prayer, Love, Hospitality and Gifts.

## **Prayer**

First, prayer. Notice the key first word in v.7: Therefore. The End of All Things is at hand. Therefore. Be self-controlled and sober-minded. Being focused on the End does not create madness or hysteria. It is sobriety itself. Be alert and sober, SO THAT, you may pray. You cannot pray aright, if you do not think the end of all things is at hand. Paul prays, in Philippians 1, for a number of virtues for the saints, but he concludes with: SO THAT you may be blameless in the day of Christ. The day of Christ shapes apostolic praying – it should shape ours.

Ask yourself this: Do we hear any notes of “the end of all things being at hand” in the prayers we pray? Whatever we are doing in prayer, it is not a consequence, a *therefore* that works like this: the end of all things is at hand, therefore pray. Yet it should be. For to pray thy kingdom come. Is to pray for the King to come. It is to pray: Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.

### **Love**

The second ethical consequence of the End, in v.8, is love. Above all, as the chief thing, love each other deeply. Love each other like you are going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ-- and live with each other in glory forever. We do this because love covers a multitude of sins. Love, in forgiving, in overlooking, breaks the cycle of offenses. And thus thousands of opportunities for division and strife die. Love covers not a few, not a reasonable amount, not many, but a multitude of sins. 70x7. To show love like this, is to reflect the mercy we desire from God on the day of Christ. It is to know that the measure by which we judge is the measure that will be shown to us. It is to live as if the end of all things is at hand.

### **Hospitality**

The third ethical consequence here is in v.9: hospitality. Show hospitality to one another. Hospitality means love of the other, love of strangers. It may have referred, in an age where there were no inns or hotels, to putting up traveling Christians (like the apostles and other missionaries). Or needy travelers in general. But here it also includes showing hospitality to the church. Show hospitality (notice it's a command) to ONE ANOTHER. Notice this: without grumbling. It's such a note of realism. It's easy to grumble and complain.

But done well, hospitality, the sharing of food and drink, helps overcome estrangement, and suspicion. God has been hospitable to us in Jesus Christ, taking us into his house as guests and feeding us, fellowshiping with us, renewing us in love. Hospitality reflects this. It has the shape of the gospel itself built into it. And it anticipates the coming wedding supper of the lamb in a concrete way. That is, those who do it well know: the end of all things is at hand. (every meal has the eschaton in it)

### **Gifts**

Fourth and finally. Gifts. V.10: As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another. Every person is to use every gift to serve the body. God distributes abilities and aptitudes and talents liberally throughout the body, and they must all be deployed. We are to be faithful stewards. Administrators, managers, who are ready to give an account to their master. Stewards understand that the end of all things – the return of the master – is at hand.

In v.11 Peter breaks up the gifts into two classes: speaking and serving. Whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God. While this is probably focused on public preaching and teaching, we can all speak the word of Christ to each other in exhortation. Those who serve should do so in the strength God provides. For these are gifts of the empowering Spirit, thus they are gifts that mean the end of all things is at hand.

All of this has one great End. Namely, THAT, in ALL things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To live in light of the end, is to be Theo-centric. God-centered. The end of ALL THINGS is at hand. Therefore, glorify God in ALL THINGS. And it is fitting that our text ends with an echo of the cry for the kingdom in the Lord's prayer. To him belong glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

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