

## LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF THE LORD'S RETURN

### 1 PETER 4:7-11

#### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Having a baby is normally a joyful and exciting event. Ask any mom, and even some of us dads, about the circumstances of the birth of our kids, and usually we can provide details about what happened. Typically there were challenges that preceded the big event, but the anticipation of the new arrival was rewarded for most of us by the appearance of new life.

My wife experienced more than the usual amount of suffering before the birth of our two boys. She was sick for much of the pregnancies. The first time, she was hospitalized for about a week. Her pregnancy with Bart was complicated by a move half way across the country.

What kept us motivated during both pregnancies was the anticipation of the arrival of our son. Both times we knew that we were going to have a boy. The anticipation of their arrivals prompted us to make preparations for them. My wife was busy picking out clothes and finding furniture at yard sales and getting baby toys and decorating the baby's room. I was providing rides to doctor appointments and helping to set up the house.

As the time for their arrivals drew near, there were signs of their imminent arrival. Mom's tummy got bigger, and the babies inside became more active. They both showed up a little later than we expected but just when God planned it. Both of them, appropriately for pastor's kids, showed up on a Sunday. All of our anticipation and preparations and endurance of challenges paled in comparison with the joy at their coming.

The instruction that God's Word provides us is that the Son of God wants us Christians to look at His coming in a similar way. He realizes that being a Christian in this present world involves suffering and

sacrifice. But the prospect of His return ought to prompt us to persevere in the midst of suffering and to make preparations for His arrival. For the suffering and sacrifice that precede the coming of the Son will pale in comparison with the joy at His appearance.

The Apostle Peter in his first letter was writing to Christians in Asia Minor who were faced with suffering. In the first part of the letter he encouraged them to live godly lives because of the salvation that was accomplished in the **past** when they believed. Then Peter discussed their current situation and encouraged them toward faithfulness because of their **present** opportunity for witness to the unbelieving world. Beginning with #4 v. 7 the apostle looks to the **future** and emphasizes the need for perseverance because of the prospect of Christ's Second Coming.

I.

In our passage today the apostle describes the practical effects that the anticipation of Christ's return should have on our daily lives. These practical effects appear in two categories. First, in v. 7 of #4, which is found on p. 1016 of the black Bibles, the Apostle Peter says that **THE LORD'S RETURN SHOULD PROMPT US TO STAY RIGHT WITH GOD**. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE LORD'S RETURN SHOULD...)

He writes at the beginning of v. 7, **"The end of all things is at hand..."** Back in #1 vv. 5-7 Peter spoke about a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time. He made mention of the sufferings that his readers were experiencing. Then he spoke about the coming **"revelation of Jesus Christ."** So it appears that the apostle is speaking about the return of Christ to earth. This will be the culmination of God's dealings with mankind.

Peter was not the only one who thought that the return of Christ was at hand. Paul, James, and John also wrote in the New Testament that the Second Coming was near. It has been almost 2000 years since they lived, and Christ has not come back. Were they wrong about His return?

(2 PETER 3:8) Peter wrote in his second letter in #3 vv. 8 & 9, **"But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. (2 PETER 3:9) The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."**

The Lord did not tell His followers exactly when He would return, and the apostles did not claim to know exactly when He would return. Christ wanted His followers to live in the expectation that He would return soon. (TITUS 2:13) Paul wrote in #2 of the brief New Testament book of Titus, “[We are] waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ...”

From the perspective of the key events of Biblical history, the next item on God’s schedule and prophetic timetable after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus is the Second Coming of Christ. So it is in that sense that it is “at hand.” It is next.

A.

With the prospect of the Second Coming looming on the horizon, the apostle says that there ought to be two aspects of our relationship with God that are affected. First, he says that STAYING RIGHT WITH GOD REQUIRES SOUND-MINDEDNESS. (I.A. STAYING RIGHT WITH GOD...) Peter says that we Christians should “**be self-controlled and sober-minded.**” This is in direct contrast to the previous lifestyle of Gentiles described back in v. 3.

Various surveys of the religious beliefs of Americans have shown that between half and two-thirds of adults believe that Christ will return to earth. According to one survey 46% believe that it will happen before the year 2050. (Pew Research Center, July 2010) Yet when we look around us, we might wonder about the lifestyle of so many Americans. Is that belief in the Second Coming reflected in the culture around us? Or does the behavior of people around us more closely align with the Apostle Paul’s description of the last days in 2 Timothy #3? (1 TIMOTHY 3:1-2) In that chapter beginning in v. 1 he writes, “...in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy (1 TIMOTHY 3:3-4) heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...”

The proper response to the possibility of Christ’s soon return ought to be the exercise of self-control and a sober mind. The word which Peter used for “self-control” means literally “right-mindedness.” (PROJECTOR OFF) It is the word that Mark used in #5 of his Gospel to describe the demon-possessed man who was cured of his difficulty by Jesus. We are told that all of the people came to see this mad man who was now “**sitting there, clothed and in his right mind.**” The term for “sober-minded” in our verse was often used in Greek to describe the condition opposite that of drunkenness.

This sound-mindedness--- this self-control and sober mind--- should be displayed in the behavior of a Christian who recognizes that the Lord's return is near. A sound-minded Christian is one who places a priority upon knowing and following God. He also maintains a balance between the worldliness and unbelief of those who would explain away the Second Coming on the one hand and those who go off of the deep end in believing specific predictions about the time of this return on the other hand.

Some of you remember Harold Camping, who headed up the Family Radio Network, carried by many Christian radio stations across the country. He was fairly orthodox in his doctrinal convictions at first. But he came up with this strange belief that the church age had ended and that Christians should leave their local churches. He also came up with this notion that the rapture of the church would happen in September of 1994. When that did not happen, he changed his prediction to say that it would happen in 2011. His followers had advertising trucks driving around Las Vegas announcing that this would happen and that people should repent.

Unfortunately Harold Camping did not learn from all of the false date setters in the past, and had not learned from the warning of Jesus Himself that no man knows the exact time of His return. When we evangelicals get caught up in this date setting stuff, our cause just gets a bad name. People point to this as another reason to write us off as being whacky and not to be taken seriously. We ought to be sound-minded.

B.

Anticipating the Lord's return and STAYING RIGHT WITH GOD ALSO REQUIRES PRAYER. (PROJECTOR ON-- I.B. STAYING RIGHT WITH GOD ALSO...) At the end of v. 7 Peter says that we are to **"be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers."**

I suspect that Peter had in the back of his mind his failure to pray in a crucial situation in his own life. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus had urged His disciples to stay awake that important night and join Him in prayer. But Peter and the other disciples were not self-controlled and sober-minded. They did not stay awake. Later that night Peter denied that he knew Jesus. It was a painful experience of failure, but it was also an experience that deeply etched in his mind the importance of prayer in difficult times.

Peter was now writing to Christians who were faced with persecution and suffering and the prospect of Christ's soon return. One of the things that he says that those circumstances require is sound-mindedness that reflects itself in prayer--- actually, he says, prayers.

If we skim through this short book, we can get a good idea of the things that Peter thought that his readers should have as a proper subject of prayer: perseverance in suffering, love for fellow Christians, a submissive spirit toward unsaved husbands, honor for wives, readiness to defend the gospel, a good testimony to unbelievers, and holy behavior in general.

Those are the kinds of things that we believers need to pray about for ourselves and for one another today. We can always address these needs in private. We also find many examples in the Bible for believers praying together. We offer corporate prayer opportunities on Wednesday morning and Sunday morning before the service and in the various Bible studies that we offer. We have lost some of our prayer warriors through death in recent months. We would love to have more people join us for these prayer times. Right thinking and prayer are ingredients that are essential for a right attitude toward God, especially in light of the Lord's return.

II.

Not only should the prospect of the Lord's return prompt us to stay right with God, it should also PROMPT US TO STAY RIGHT WITH FELLOW CHRISTIANS. (II. THE LORD'S RETURN SHOULD PROMPT...)  
Verse 7 deals with our vertical relationship with God. Verses 8-11 deal with our horizontal relationship with fellow Christians.

A.

In vv. 8 & 9 Peter says that STAYING RIGHT WITH FELLOW CHRISTIANS REQUIRES LOVE. (II.A. STAYING RIGHT WITH FELLOW CHRISTIANS...) **"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly..."** Jesus Christ said that the most important thing that His disciples can do besides loving God is loving our neighbor as ourself. He also said in John #13, **"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."** Christ could come at any time, Peter says. Will He find Christians loving one another?

Love for fellow believers is a central concern to Peter in this letter. Suffering Christians need the love and support of fellow believers in order to persevere. (1 PETER 1:22) In #1 he said, **"...love one another earnestly from a pure heart."** In #2 v. 17 (1 PETER 2:17) he said, **"Love the brotherhood."** (1 PETER 3:8) In #3 v. 8 he wrote, **"Have... brotherly love."** Now in # 4 v. He says, **"...keep loving one another earnestly..."**

The word for “earnestly” was used by the Greeks to describe the tight muscles of an athlete who was exerting himself to the utmost of his ability. (PROJECTOR OFF) It was used to describe a horse that was running at a full gallop. It was also used to describe a victim of crucifixion who was stretched out on a cross to be nailed. It was this fervent, stretched out love that Jesus had for us on the cross when He died for us. It is this same earnest, stretched out love that we are to have for one another.

1.

This earnest love expresses itself in two ways. **First**, it is demonstrated through FORGIVENESS. Peter says, “...**love covers a multitude of sins.**” He appears to be quoting Proverbs 10 v. 12 (PROVERBS 10:12), which says, “**Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.**” This proverb describes a contrast in the ways that wrongdoing may be handled. Some will use wrongdoing as a reason to stir up trouble. Others, motivated by love, will cover it over. (PROJECTOR OFF)

That does not mean that we are to overlook all sin. We need wisdom to recognize those sins that need to be confronted. We can find examples in the New Testament of sins that the apostles and Jesus regarded as needing confrontation. The setting here is Christians who are faced with persecution. Some of that persecution may have been directed to individuals. Some of it may have been directed to the whole group. There was also probably not another church that one could go to if his or her feelings were hurt by something that happened in their Christian group. So the point is that Christians must be forgiving. They can’t hold grudges. We have to let things go, whether they are confronted or not.

If Congress and the President somehow got together tomorrow and miraculously came to an agreement that something needed to be done about air pollution and climate change, that we needed to start rationing oil products in order to save the planet and limit pollution and move to renewable resources, I suspect that there would be a whole lot of pushback. I suspect that the American public, for the most part, would be up in arms.

Yet that is just what happened in our country eighty years ago. Oil products and a whole lot of other things were rationed. There was not a great deal of public opposition to that. Why was this the case? Because people realized that our country was in a war and that the fate of the world was at stake.

Peter is making a similar point here. There is a spiritual war going on in our world. The fate of precious human beings is at stake. The end of all things is at hand. The Lord could be returning very soon. Therefore, believers should be willing to tolerate inconveniences and slights and errors of omission.

Love covers a multitude of sins. There are more important, eternal issues at stake. We need to overlook the smaller, personal issues. We saw last week from the example of Benedict Arnold what happens when perceived slights and omissions are allowed to fester. He became a terrible casualty in the Revolutionary War.

Peter himself experienced this kind of love from Jesus. While Jesus was being tried by the Sanhedrin--- while Jesus was all alone before this high council of Judaism--- while Jesus was being faced with the prospect of imminent death--- the loudmouth among the disciples who had vowed a few hours earlier that he would never desert Jesus, now denied that he even knew Him. Would any of us have been able to forgive in that situation? Our Lord did. He didn't reject Peter. He forgave him and sought to restore Peter to a right relationship with Himself. Love is demonstrated in forgiveness.

2.

Love is also demonstrated in the body of Christ by HOSPITALITY. In Asia Minor in the first century the number of Holiday Inns and Super 8s was limited. The inns that did exist often had a bad reputation. Traveling evangelists and preachers could seldom afford them anyway. These Christian workers depended upon the hospitality of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

An early church document written a couple of decades after Peter, called the *Didache*, gave these practical directions concerning this kind of hospitality: **“Let every apostle, when he comes to you, be received as the Lord; but he shall not abide more than a single day, or if there be need, a second likewise; but if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. And when he departs let the apostle receive nothing save bread, until he finds shelter; but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet.”** (11:4-6)

The specific kind of hospitality that Peter has in mind here does not appear to involve traveling speakers or evangelists. He says in v. 9, **“Show hospitality to one another.”** He appears to be talking about hospitality among Christians who know each other.

In the first century Christians did not have church buildings. When they met for worship or teaching or fellowship, they met in one another's homes. These meetings may have been frequent. In Jerusalem Christians often met in the temple in the early days. But even in Jerusalem (ACTS 5:42), according to Acts #5 v. 42, we are told, **“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.”**

There must have been work involved in hosting all of these meetings. There was inconvenience that went with it. Those who had bigger houses may have had a disproportionate share of the work. They may also have received more flack than other Christians for their identification with the Christian movement. But Peter's exhortation was: **"Show hospitality to one another without grumbling."**

We have the luxury of access to a building for most of our meetings. But there are other opportunities to exercise hospitality that come along in our midst. There is always the opportunity to take the initiative to host fellow Christians. As a congregation at the very least we need to be friendly toward those who are newer in our midst. Hospitality is indeed an evidence of love for one another.

B.

The prospect of the Lord's soon return calls for love toward one another in the body of Christ--- love that is displayed in forgiveness and hospitality. STAYING RIGHT WITH FELLOW CHRISTIANS also REQUIRES SERVICE. (II.B. STAYING RIGHT WITH FELLOW...) That is the message of vv. 10 & 11: **"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 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."**

The service that Peter has in mind involves the use of spiritual gifts. The text implies that every Christian has received a spiritual gift. The most humble and quiet saint has been given at least one special talent by the Holy Spirit at the time of his or her salvation. The local church and the body of Christ at large are hurt if that ability is not being exercised.

IBM executive Thomas Watson writes in *A Business and Its Beliefs*, **"I believe the real difference between success and failure in a corporation can very often be traced to the question of how well the organization brings out the great energies and talents of its people."** That is no less true in the church.

Peter says that these spiritual gifts are designed to be used in serving one another, in building up the body of Christ. That means that they are not designed for our own personal benefit. Their objective is not our self-edification. They are designed for serving other Christians and for building up the body of Christ.

The apostle says that we are to use these spiritual gifts as good stewards of God's varied grace. Back in #1 v. 6 Peter acknowledged that his Christian audience was faced with various trials. The Greek word that he used there is the same one that he is using in our verse. Our trials are varied and various. But the grace of God is also varied and various. It is sufficient to meet our needs.

We Christians are also called stewards. A steward in New Testament times was a slave who was put in charge of the administration of a household by his master. The resources at his disposal belonged to his master. The steward was simply responsible to administer them well. Peter says that the spiritual gifts that we have are given to us by God out of the storehouse of His grace. So they are not earned or deserved. Our responsibility is to use them well.

In v. 11 there is a distinction made between speaking gifts and serving gifts. When speaking gifts are exercised, the believer is to speak the utterances of God. That implies at least two things. First, we must be sure that when we say, "Thus saith the Lord," that the Lord really saith thus. The best way to do that is to make sure that our teaching or exhortation or evangelism is solidly based on God's Word.

My wife's first pregnancy ended with a miscarriage. When Suzy became pregnant the second time, a woman in our church told her that the Lord had given her the assurance that this time she would have a safe delivery. This woman was a godly woman, and she was well meaning. But Suzy miscarried a second time.

There is disagreement among Christians about whether all of the spiritual gifts described in the New Testament are still active in the church today. I would say at the very least that we should all have a healthy skepticism toward Christians who claim to have a revelation or a supernatural word from God. In the course of my life I have heard too many Christians say things that were contrary to the Bible or predictions that did not come to pass.

Peter does say that we need to speak with conviction when we are presenting God's Word. We just need to be sure that we are declaring what the Bible says. When we do that, we can do it with authority and without apology.

When we exercise serving gifts, Peter says that we must do it with God's strength. That means that our primary motivation is not to please people. We are not trying to bring glory to ourselves. We are not operating on our own strength. Some of the people that we are called upon to serve may grate on us.

They may be difficult people. A number of our Bible study leaders are teaching in prison and jail. They are dealing with criminals, often nasty people. They, and we, need strength from God to love and serve. In all of this our purpose is to glorify God through Jesus Christ.

Our church is always looking for people who are willing to serve. We are often in need of children's workers. We have an outreach coming up this week to families and kids. We need volunteers to man the booths that we will have. Let Jenny or Dave know if you can help out this Friday evening. We have flyers on the back table that you can use to invite your neighbors. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In times of suffering we Christians need to focus on the fact that Christ is coming back. That promise should be a source of hope and motivation. Larry Crabb writes in his book *Inside Out*, **"...when we are able to maintain the fiction that life is tolerable at worst, and quite satisfying at best, we sacrifice an appreciation for the two center points of our faith: the cross of Christ and His coming. The Cross becomes the means by which God delivers us from something not really too terrible, and the Coming is reduced to an opportunity for a merely improved quality of life."**

The truth is that the return of Christ and all that follows it will be so incredible for us Christians that we can hardly even imagine it in our own human understanding. It is often at those times of suffering when we get the clearest glimpses of the glory of His return. What the Lord wants us to do is to keep His Second Coming clearly in focus, especially in those times of suffering.

**"The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 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 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."**