

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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FORWARD IN LOVE

1 Peter 4:7-11

Did you hear about the two guys standing by the side of a road holding up signs that read:

**THE END IS NEAR!
TURN AROUND NOW BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!**

They held up their signs, hoping to get the attention of passing drivers. The first driver who passed them shook his head and called them “religious nuts.” Then, from around the curve just ahead, they heard the sound of screeching tires and a big splash.

“Do you think,” one said to the other, “we should just put up a sign that says “BRIDGE OUT AHEAD” instead?”

Peter was not an end-times alarmist. He was not trying to frighten people with talk about the return of Christ or the end of the world. But he did say, as we read in verse 7: “The end of all things is near.”

You may find this statement and others like it in the New Testament a bit puzzling. It may cause you to scratch your head, for the simple reason that Peter wrote these words nearly two thousand years ago, and the end hasn't come yet. Was Peter mistaken?

No. While he did not know exactly *when* Jesus will return, because, as Jesus said, “no one knows the day or the hour” (Matthew 24:36; cf. v. 42), Peter did understand that the return of Jesus and “the end of all things” could come at any time. With the incarnation of Jesus “in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4) and the history-making, eternity-changing events of His suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, we are now living in what the Bible calls “the last days.” The entire period between Jesus' first coming and the moment of His return to fully establish His kingdom and bring all of history to completion is “the end times.”

Peter affirms that Jesus *is* coming again, and His return could take place at any moment. That “the end of all things is near” means that His return will be sudden and unexpected when it happens. Hence, the need to be ready for His return at every moment.

The apostle John anticipates the return of Christ and “the end of all things” in Revelation 1:7, where he says:

“Look, He is coming with the clouds,
and every eye will see Him,
even those who pierced Him,
and all the peoples of the earth
will mourn because of Him.
So shall it be! Amen.”

“The peoples of the earth” who “will mourn because of Him,” of course, are those who reject Him or ignore Him or refuse to acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior – all who are spiritually unprepared for His coming again.

Peter doesn't want any of us to be in that number. He doesn't want us to be unprepared. He wants us to be spiritually alert and ready at every moment for Jesus' return in glory, whether it happens in our lifetime or not. It might not happen for another hundred years or more. Or it could be today. Or tomorrow. Or next year. It could happen anytime.

Whether or not Jesus returns in our lifetime, Peter's “therefore” in verse 7 and his admonitions in the following verses remain as relevant as they could possibly be. Even if Jesus' coming again is delayed indefinitely by God's design, what Peter says here still applies to you and me.

I have just begun reading a book entitled *Next* by William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird. It is written primarily (but not exclusively) to and for pastors, and the authors begin with the premise that “every pastor is an interim pastor. All pastors,” they say, “are ‘interim’ because the day when a successor takes over will come for everyone in ministry” (*Next*, 9).

It is true, whether we want to think of it in those terms or not. Think about the history of Faith Church. Some of you remember Mark Petersburg, who was our Interim Pastor in 1996 and 1997 after the retirement of Dr. Graham Smith and prior to the start of my ministry here. He had the word “Interim” in his title. But Graham Smith was an *interim* pastor, too. His ministry here at Faith and at Fairlington before that did not last forever. It eventually came to an end, just like my ministry here will eventually come to an end. Every pastor is an “interim pastor.”

The interim nature of our roles and relationships and responsibilities here on earth applies one way or another to all of us, simply because this life does not and will not last forever. Unless we are still alive when Jesus returns, all of us will taste death. Every one of us will have an appointment with death (Hebrews 9:27). Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 7:2:

Death is the destiny of every person;
The living should take this to heart.

John McCain was the *interim* “maverick” of the United States Senate. Aretha Franklin was the *interim* “Queen of Soul.” Who will take her place I don't know, but Aretha Franklin is no longer making music here on earth. Every one of the 45 Presidents of the United States, from George Washington to Donald Trump, has been an *interim* President. William Henry Harrison was in office only a month before he died. Franklin Roosevelt, our longest-serving President, was in his fourth term when he died. Both Harrison and FDR were *interim* Presidents. Pope Francis, like all of his predecessors, is an *interim* Pope. Daniel Snyder is the *interim* owner of the Washington Redskins. He won't own the team forever.

Sooner or later, the end will come for all of us. We don't know the day of our death or the day of Christ's return, or which will come first – it is all in God's hands – but we do know, as Paul says in Romans 13:11, that the day “is nearer now than when we first believed.” Every

passing day brings us one day closer to the day of Christ's return, or to the day of our death, whichever comes first.

Since "the end of all things is near," as Peter says – since Jesus could return at any moment – how should we live in the interim, so that we are ready for that day when it comes? That is what Peter is talking about in these verses. In light of the promise of His coming again, this, says Peter, is how to go forward in your life as a follower of Jesus.

Knowing that Jesus could return or call us home to heaven at any time, here are four things we are to do as followers of the Lord Jesus.

1. KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON IN A SPIRIT OF PRAYER.

The first is in verse 7, where Peter says: "Therefore" – since the end is near – "be clear-minded and self-controlled so you can pray." In other words, to borrow from the popular slogan, we are to "Keep Calm and Carry On" in a spirit of prayer.

Believing that God *is* sovereign, that Jesus *will* come again to right all the wrongs of the world, and that the kingdom of God *will* prevail over the kingdom of darkness, we must not allow the evils and tragedies of the world to drive us to doubt or disillusionment or panic or despair. Nor can we turn the promise of Jesus' return into an excuse for laziness or irresponsibility. The fact that Jesus *is* coming back, and that He could return at any moment, doesn't mean you should quit your job or drop out of school. It doesn't mean you shouldn't plan for the future. It doesn't mean we should all go to the top of a mountain and wait together for Jesus' return.

Nor does it mean that we should panic when bad things happen, when evil appears to triumph, when disaster or tragedy strikes, when someone you don't like is elected to office, or when the news is packed with negative stories focusing on everything perceived to be wrong with the world. Panic is not the Christian response to the condition of the world. Neither is despair.

The Christian response is to keep calm and carry on with a clear head in a spirit of prayer. One of the words Peter uses here is the verb *sophroneo*. It is the same word used in Mark 5:15 to refer to the wild man from whom Jesus had cast out a "legion of demons," who was now sitting with Jesus, "dressed and in his right mind."

As followers of Jesus, we are not to let our minds or imaginations or emotions run wild and lead us into fear or panic or unbelief. We are to keep calm and carry on in a spirit of prayer, in our right minds, knowing that God is in charge – that "though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet" (Maltbie Babcock, "This Is My Father's World"), that He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end – confidently bringing all our cares and concerns and requests to Him.

Since the end of all things is near, we are to keep our eyes on Jesus, not on the troubles of this life or the dysfunctions we see in our government or society or families all around us. When

we are clear-headed, when we keep our eyes on Jesus, He enables us to keep calm and carry on in a spirit of humble, trusting prayer.

Chuck Swindoll says that prayer is “the secret to maintaining (the) kind of balance” we need to keep calm and carry on. “When something alarms you,” he says, “pray. When current events confuse you, pray. If the world looks like it’s spinning out of control, pray.... When you’re panicking, you’re not praying. When you’re reacting, you’re not trusting in your sovereign God.” (*Swindoll’s New Testament Insights, James, 1 and 2 Peter*, 218)

To go forward in your life as a follower of Jesus while you await His promised return, you must keep calm and carry on in a spirit of prayer.

2. LOVE EACH OTHER DEEPLY.

Second, in verse 8, Peter says: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”

Love is the hallmark of genuine Christian community. It is the distinctive mark of authentic fellowship. It is one of the indispensable qualities of the church. You can’t have authentic Christian fellowship without love. If love is not present, if love is not being expressed, the church is not the church.

Some of you – perhaps many of you – have read Rick Warren’s mega-best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*. We studied it as a church a whopping 15 years ago, right after it was first published. If you have never read it, I highly recommend it to you. It is designed to be read in 40 days, one chapter a day. If you read it a long time ago, it might be good to read it again.

Here are a few of Warren’s one-liners about love and the importance of loving relationships in our lives:

- “Life is all about love” (123).
- “It is in loving that we are most like (God)” (123).
- “The best use of life is love” (124).
- “Life minus love equals zero” (125).
- “The best expression of love is time” (127)
- “The best way to spell love is T-I-M-E” (127).

Not everyone would agree with his statement that the *best* expression of love is time. Time – giving your focused attention to another person – is one of the *primary* “love languages” through which we communicate our love to and for others. But it is not the only “love language” we use to express love. Gary Chapman has identified five “love languages” that people use to express or receive love. In addition to quality time, the other “love languages” are 1) words of affirmation or affection; 2) acts of service; 3) gifts; and 4) appropriate physical touch.

Peter wants us to be intentional in demonstrating our love for one another. This mandate to love reaches beyond our particular church family or other believers in general. The big tent of our love includes our neighbors, our community, everyone in our sphere of influence – including those who do not yet know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We want them to come to know and trust and love and follow the Lord Jesus before it is too late.

How important is love in your life and mine as followers of Jesus? Peter says: “Above all, love one another.” *Above all*. That means it is of the utmost importance. Rick Warren is right: “It is in loving that we are most like God.”

Paul says much the same thing in Ephesians 5:1-2, where he writes: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children” – which is what we are – “and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Love like that.

“Love one another deeply,” says Peter. The word translated “deeply” can also be translated “fervently” or “intensely.” Jesus warned that the day would come when the love of many would grow cold (Matthew 24:12). Whether it is love for God, for His Word, for the gospel, for the church, for one another, for our neighbors who are lost without Jesus, or for the world Jesus came to save, do not let your love grow cold.

The Message paraphrase of verse 8 says it this way: “Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything.” This does not mean that love excuses practically anything. Nor is it that love means you never have to say you’re sorry. Real love means you *do* have to say you’re sorry. Real love for one another, like God’s love for us, means that we must be willing to forgive others, just as God in Christ has forgiven us. When you have been hurt, or let down, or betrayed, or mistreated in any way, the willingness to forgive others is a test of whether God’s love lives in you.

Until Jesus returns, or until the day you die, above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

Why is now the best time to express love? “Because,” as Warren says, “you don’t know how long you will have the opportunity. Circumstances change. People die. Children grow up. You have no guarantee of tomorrow. If you want to express love, you had better do it now” (Warren, 128).

3. SHOW HOSPITALITY.

The third admonition is in verse 9: “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” In a world without the modern accommodations of hotels, bed & breakfasts, and AirBNBs that we take for granted, providing hospitality for travelers or strangers was a highly-valued virtue – and a concrete expression of love.

While circumstances today are different than they were in Peter's day, hospitality to our neighbors and friends – perhaps especially to our non-believing neighbors and friends – is an effective way to make God's love visible to others.

Peter says two things about hospitality in verse 9:

- 1) Do it. Don't just think about it or talk about it. Show hospitality to one another. Don't hesitate. Don't refuse when you're in a position to do it. You never know the impact it may have in someone's life.
- 2) Do it without grumbling or complaining. Paul uses the same word in Philippians 2:14, where he says: "Do everything without complaining or arguing." Don't do it reluctantly. Don't do it grudgingly. Do it willingly. Do it gladly. Do it happily, as a way of making your service to others an act of service to God.

Hospitality is one way to make your love for others visible.

4. USE YOUR GIFTS TO SERVE OTHERS.

Fourth, to go forward in your life as a follower of Jesus, you must use your gift(s) to serve others. Notice verses 10 and 11: "Each of you should use whatever gift (*charisma*) you have received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If you speak, do it as one speaking the very words of God. If you serve, do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen."

Every believer in Christ has received some spiritual gift – some *charisma* – to be used in God's service for the glory of God and for the good of others. We have talked about this before. To not use the gift(s) God has given you, or to use your gift(s) for selfish purposes, is sin. It is essential for your spiritual health and well-being, and for the health and well-being of the church, that you use the gift(s) God has given you in ministry. You must not be content to be a spiritual consumer who desires only to receive what the church has to offer without investing personally in the church's ministry.

Since the end of all things is near, it is all the more important to use what God has given you for His purposes in the church and the world.

Since the end of all things is near, how should we then live?

1. Keep calm and carry on in a spirit of prayer.
2. Love each other deeply.
3. Show hospitality to one another.
4. Use your gifts to serve others.

Until you draw your last breath, or until Jesus returns – whichever comes first – make your life count for the Lord Jesus Christ by taking these four admonitions to heart and working them out in your life, "so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ." All the glory belongs to Him.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.