

Prayer for Illumination: God of all light and life, open our eyes as well as our ears, so that we may not only hear your Word preached today but then see your Word lived out in our lives and in your world, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## 1 Peter 4:7-11 Living Hope in Action

The end of all things is near. Nevil Shute's 1957 novel, *On the Beach*, imagines how people act when the end of the world is near. He imagines a world where the northern hemisphere is completely destroyed by nuclear war and where people in Australia cope with the reality that the radioactive fallout is heading their way. Shute pictures different people – some who are in complete denial of the situation, others who are resigned to their fate and who live out the rest of their days trying to squeeze out every possible ounce of pleasure. The bachelor Osbourne spends his time restoring and racing Ferraris. Moira Davidson copes with the end of all things by drinking and partying excessively. Members of a “gentleman’s club” spending their time drinking up all the wine in the club’s cellar while they debate whether or not rabbits will survive longer than humans. Shute pictures a world where it was every person for themselves, trying to squeeze out as much pleasure as possible from their last days. Other novels and movies in this apocalypse genre imagine the end of all things as a time when people go to war, where people hoard food and medicine and guns in their small bunkers. This last part at least sounds vaguely familiar after the last year we had. When the end of all things is near, it seems natural for people to turn inwards – to look out for themselves, for their needs, their wants, and to look out for any final moments of pleasure that they can eek out of the days or minutes that remain.

When it comes to **the end of all things**, the author of 1 Peter seems to have in mind a contrast between this inward focus versus an outward focus. We have to zoom out from our passage to get a look at the bigger picture of what is going on behind this letter. Peter is describing what Dennis Edwards refers to as **“The dynamic tension that Christians experience trying to live a life of joyful expectation of final salvation while facing suffering.”**<sup>1</sup> Peter is convinced that for

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis R. Edwards, *1 Peter*, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 47.

Christians, the end of all things was a reason for joyful expectation. He is writing to say that they should live in this joyful expectation, an expectation that Christ's return would mean the end of their suffering and the redemption of their bodies.

He is writing about joy and hope to a people who **are suffering for their faith**. The kind of suffering they were experiencing was probably not official, empire-sanctioned persecution so much as it was social alienation, hurtful rumors and whispers, harsh treatment at work, or verbal abuse heaped on them as they walked through the marketplace. Their faith in Jesus put them at odds with the social and religious norms of their neighborhoods – their faith put them at odds with a kind of inward, self-serving, pleasure seeking focus to life.

Peter writes about evil or more accurately, **inordinate desires**. It is not so much about desiring bad things as it is about desiring badly, or having the wrong priorities. These inordinate desires are **evidence of a selfish kind of inward focus**. Prior to what we read this morning, Peter reminds them, "You have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry" (1 Peter 4:3). The living described here is like a page straight out of Shute's apocalyptic novel.

If Peter were writing in our time he'd be picturing a group of young guys hanging out of their car, honking and waving at their old buddy, "come on we're going to Mac's house for a party, his parents are gone and you know what that means. Everyone's gonna be there. Lighten up, don't be such a snob, just get in the car and let's go have some fun." Peter says, that's what your old friends are like, and you've played that game for long enough. Now if you tell them "no thanks" they'll be surprised. After all, what's the harm? they'll tell you. The folks Peter is writing to know about being mocked and teased and being excluded from the kinds of parties and get-togethers they used to go to. They don't fit in anymore with the norms of the culture where one might aspire to race Ferraris if there were such a thing back then and drink the wine cellar dry when the end of all things is near.

**The end of all things is near**, we hear Peter say. Just about 2000 years later we might be tempted to say that he was a little off in his prediction, and yet we

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too live in this tension between **expectation and suffering**. **That was kind of the whole point of Advent** – to prepare our hearts not only to celebrate the first coming of Jesus, but also in expectation for the second coming of Jesus. The end of all things is near, we claim every Advent.

When the world feels the weight of the future bearing down on it, we have come to expect people to act a certain way. To **turn inward, to focus myopically on themselves**. Not in a healthy self-respect, self-care kind of a way, but in a short-sighted *merely* self-serving kind of way.

It looks like that couple in B.C. who went to several Costco locations every day back in March and bought up all the Lysol wipes and loaded them up in their Ford pick-up truck – stacks and stacks of disinfecting wipes. Hundreds of cases stacked on pallets that they would turn around and sell for four times the usual price. “We’re hustlers,” they proudly stated.<sup>2</sup> Price gouging and hoarding have become part of our common language in the past year – a result of selfish inward focused motives, to be sure. Now it is not bad to grow a business and provide for one’s family, but in the case of price gouging it is the wrongly ordered desire – to take advantage of a situation for one’s own gain.

As we live in this tension between expectation and a certain degree of suffering we, too, are tempted to live in self-serving ways, to having wrongly ordered desires, to turn inward and focus on a kind of toxic material individualism. I think Christians face a second kind of temptation, though. It is to exclaim that the end of all things is near and to use that as an **excuse to disengage** from the needs of our neighbors and from the unjust suffering of so many. To retreat to the safety of our favorite devotionals, of personal alone time with God. To turn our faith inward. This is the temptation to look the other way when we see acts of racism or to only promise thoughts and prayers without interrogating our own assumptions or biases.

As the old saying goes, **Christians may become so heavenly minded we are no earthly good**. Of course devotional time and a personal relationship with God is not a bad thing, and it should be encouraged! But there is that temptation that

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-friday-edition-1.5496727/b-c-couple-confronted-at-costco-for-buying-bulk-lysol-wipes-to-re-sell-for-profit-1.5496733>

personal piety would turn a believer only inward so that faith is about me and God and everything else on earth grows strangely dim as that old hymn says – not just our own suffering as the hymn implies, but also the suffering and needs of our neighbors and of creation.

The end of all things is near. Peter offers a necessary corrective to the inward focus, wrongly ordered desires of old and of our own day. As these believers live in the tension between joyful expectation of final salvation and their own suffering, **God uses this tension to create a new, third thing: living hope** (1 Pet. 1:3). Living hope is the first and central message of this whole book. Peter starts out his letter with an exclamation in **chapter 1 verse 3**: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! (why?) In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). Their hope is living because Christ lives, but it is living for the additional reason that it moves them, it is an active kind of hope.

Peter has in mind this contrast between the inward focus fueled by wrongly-ordered desires, and an **outward focus** fueled by God’s gift of living hope. God’s gift of living hope results in a community that is focused outwards and formed by the following things: prayer, love, hospitality, and the faithful use of their gifts in service to others.

Living hope does not result in a naïve or disengaged community. The first clue to this is that they would be a community marked by **prayer**. And their prayers are marked by alertness to the things going on around them and a sober mind: “...be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray” (1 Peter 4:7). These people formed by living hope would not be inattentive, neither would they be dreamy or idealistic rather they would align their thoughts to God’s thoughts in prayer.

This community of living hope would also be marked **by love**, a kind of stretchy, covering love. “Above all, love each other deeply,” Peter tells these believers, “because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). For love to cover sin does not mean that it conceals sin, but that love unlearns sin. One commentator puts it this way: “Peter’s assumption is that sin...can indeed be

blotted out by the love that Christ commanded and demonstrated.”<sup>3</sup> Love, like hope, is not merely a sentimental feeling, it is transformative, and it is active.

This community of living hope would also be marked by **hospitality, given without grumbling**. Hospitality was the concrete expression of their love. It is not just the task of those people who are especially good cooks or good hosts, it is the outworking of hope, prayer, and love in the entire congregation. The thing about hospitality, though, which Peter and these first century believers knew, is that it is possible you’ll start to feel like your hospitality is being taken advantage of. Hospitality almost always requires more of us than is convenient or comfortable. Peter Davids imagines the first century church grumbling with complaints like, “I don’t know why *we* get all the travelers stopping in *our* town” or “I wish those traveling missionaries would move on so we can stop taking care of them and feed our own families.” These grumbings start up when food is running short, when the house was getting too cramped, or when their hospitality drew unwanted attention and resulted in persecution.<sup>4</sup> God’s gift of living hope will form a community that is not naïve about hospitality. It is not all smiles and feasts and clinking wine glasses. Hospitality is the messy work of living hope; it is the messy work of putting prayer and love into action.

Prayer, love, and hospitality are the God-given tasks of every person formed by his gift of living hope. But there is also room for each person **to use whatever unique gifts** they’ve been given to serve others: to speak the words of grace that God has offered them, to serve in the strength that God provides.

The end of all things is near. And instead of using that as an occasion to turn inward or to turn toward wrongly ordered pleasure or desires, Peter paints a picture of an outward facing community characterized by hope in action: by prayer, love, hospitality, and everyone putting their gifts to good use serving their neighbors. This is not just a matter of making Christians look good or giving Christians purpose. This is about God’s glory. *This outward facing community characterized by hope in action* is how God will come to be praised in all things through Jesus Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter Interpretation Commentary*, 247.

<sup>4</sup> Davids, 159.

Tod Bolsinger is a Christian author who has written about the role of **prayer, love, and hospitality in Christian communities**. He shares how he met Howard and Alice when he was a university student – right at that age when a person is kind of out on their own for the first time. They met at a church meeting. At the end of their first meeting Howard and Alice prayed passionately and tenderly for a dozen or more people, none of whom were part of their own family. Afterward, Tod went up to them and said, “I’m so deeply touched by the way you pray for these people. It’s like the way I picture parents praying for their children.” Tod recalls that his own family went through a lot of turmoil when he was a child, they stopped being part of a church as well, so he had not experienced that kind of earnest prayer, especially not for other people. Howard looked at Tod, having only met him for the first time, and said, “We will pray for you every day. What is your name, son?” Howard and Alice put a picture of Tod on their refrigerator. When Tod got married they put up a picture of his wife too. And then the kids. They prayed for Tod’s family every day until they died.<sup>5</sup> Howard and Alice were alert to God’s prompting to pray and they were faithful in their love and hospitality toward Tod and his family. Their small, faithful acts of hope in action drew Tod into community and resulted in the praise of God. God is still in the business of forming his people through living hope, through outward facing hope-in-action.

This is the first Sunday of the New Year, and the last Sunday of Christmastide. It is a beginning and an end. We have celebrated the first coming of Jesus even as we wait in expectation for his second coming. We have also said goodbye to a year full of suffering for so many people. And as we sit in this space between joyful expectation and suffering, God is using that tension to create a different, third thing in us through the work of Jesus Christ: **hope in action**. Our hope is living because Christ lives.

It is only because of God’s gift of living hope that we can expect God to form us more and more to be the kind of outward facing community Peter talks about. Living hope is hope in action; it is God forming a people through prayer,

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<sup>5</sup> Story found in *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian*

through love, and through hospitality, so that **God will be praised in all things**. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for this the gift of your word. Help us to believe what we have heard and to live in ways that honor you above all. Turn our hearts and lives outward to face each other and our neighbors with prayers, in love, and with acts of hospitality, so that your name will be praised. Amen.