

LIFE IS SHORT: PRAY HARD! 1 PETER 4:7

Verse 7a. *“The end of all things is near...”*

In 1995 free-lance journalist Philip Gourevitch spent several months in Rwanda investigating the genocide that had occurred the year before. He visited extermination sites and fields still littered with the skulls and skeletons of innocent Tutsis. He spoke with countless victims who survived. He interviewed officials and local leaders. Then he compiled a number of stories which describe in detail what happened in those hellish months of 1994.

The title of that book may be the most intriguing title of any book I've ever read. It is called, *“We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families”*.

That title is actually an excerpt from a letter that seven pastors had written to their bishop and the mayor of the community, on behalf of more than two thousand Tutsis who had taken sanctuary in their church building. They had just been informed that they would be killed at precisely nine o'clock the next morning. And, tragically, at precisely nine o'clock the next morning, they were.

It made me wonder. What was going on in the minds and hearts of those Tutsis in the hours just prior to their deaths? As they were sitting in this church, knowing the murderous intentions of their enemies who had surrounded the church, knowing that these enemies had already been on a murderous rampage just before they had herded them into this building, what were they doing? How were they preparing for the end?

It got me to thinking: What would I do; how would I prepare, if I knew that the end was imminent? How would that knowledge affect me? My attitude, my conversations, my behavior? Would it make a difference in what I chose to think about or how I spent my time? Would it compel me to do anything about my relationships, especially relationships with loved ones?

Peter's first letter is written to Christians who were being treated not so very different from those Tutsis in Rwanda. They were suffering for their identity as Christians. And this statement in **verse 7**, *“The end of all things is near,”* is in the context of Peter reminding his readers that Jesus' death on the cross was the culmination of God's eternal plan to defeat the mortal enemies of mankind—sin, Satan, and death—and inaugurate a kingdom of peace and righteousness. Through the sufferings of Christ we've been set free from bondage to sin and enabled to live as God intended us to live. We have been reconciled to God and brought into a relationship of friendship. Everything we are and have—everything we ever hope to be and hope to have—points back to the cross, and so it is appropriate that we live each day, as one hymn writer put it, “in the shadow of the cross.”

But the death of Christ is not the only event that ought to occupy our minds, because that's not the end of God's redemptive story. A day is coming when the skies shall be opened and the crucified Lord who rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and took His seat at God's right hand shall descend from heaven in all His kingly splendor and majesty. And we, who have received Him by faith and confessed Him as Lord, along with all those who have preceded us in death, shall be caught up into the air to meet Him, to live with Him in the fulfillment of His glorious kingdom. That's the day we are living for.

Someone has wisely said, *“We ought to live as though Christ died yesterday and was coming back tomorrow.”* And Peter is telling us in this passage that these two events, one

past and one future, ought to occupy our minds in such a way that they determine how we live in the present.

That's why he would say in **verse 7a**. "*The end of all things is near*". Literally, "***But the end of all things is near***". I'm not sure why my translation left out that little conjunction, "but". It is important, however, because it connects this statement with the previous few verses where Peter has been talking about suffering for being a Christian.

He's writing to people who have been harassed and persecuted simply for doing good and representing Christ in the world. Some of them had been driven from their homes and families. Some of them had become society's outcasts. Some had been beaten and imprisoned, and some were experiencing life threatening situations.

When you are in the midst of that kind of suffering sometimes it seems like it will never end—like the pain will never go away and the circumstances won't ever get better. Peter knows that, and so he would say, "*But...keep in mind, don't forget, always remember...that the end of all things is near.*"

This life and the world as we know it is coming to an end. It's going to be terminated. He elaborates on that in greater detail in his second letter. But "*the end of all things*" is not the end of our existence. It's only the beginning. That's when we start really living.

This life we are living now is temporary. It's a prelude to and a preparation for our life in heaven. That's why Peter would say earlier on three different occasions, "You are aliens and strangers in this world." This world is not your home; you're just passing through.

And the end of this world is near!

Someone might say, "Near? Yeah, right. It's been two thousand years since Peter wrote these words. Either he miscalculated, or *near* doesn't mean what I think it means."

What's going on here? The tense of the verb helps us some. It's called a *perfect* tense, which stresses that something has been brought to a point of culmination. It's used to describe fruit that is ripe and ready to be picked.

Peter is saying that God has completed His redemptive purposes in the death and resurrection of Christ. The stage is set. Everything is in order for Him to go on to the next part in His plan of salvation—the second coming of Christ. And the tense of the verb indicates that He could come at any time.

And so Peter would go on to say, **Verse 7**. "*But the end of all things is near: therefore, be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.*"

How do you maintain that "big picture" perspective? How do you live in preparation for Christ's return? This is it. "*Be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.*"

Peter uses two words that refer to the condition of our minds. The first one could be translated "*be cool-headed*". It was a word used in Mark 5 to describe the restored mind of the man whom Jesus delivered from demonic control. It's the opposite of a hyper, frenzied, agitated state of mind. It's the opposite of being overwhelmed. It describes a mind that is free from worry or fear or some kind of emotion that controls us. A mind that is calm and composed.

The second word is similar. It means literally, "*be clear-headed*". Some of your translations might use the word, "be sober" because this was a word often used in contrast to a drunken state—a state in which you cannot think clearly because something is controlling you.

But the idea this word conveys is broader than merely keeping oneself from being under the influence of alcohol. Peter is talking about mental alertness; being able to focus

as opposed to letting your mind wander; being mentally sharp as opposed to being dull.

Do you see what Peter is driving at by using these words? He's talking about not allowing your mind to be controlled or cluttered by things that distract or divert you from spiritual realities. Especially the reality that Jesus could come back at any time.

What's the condition of *your* mind? Is it free of clutter? Are you able to focus your attention on spiritual realities for more than a few minutes at a time, or do you get easily distracted by all the things competing for your attention?

Let's face it: we live in a culture that has mastered the art of capturing our attention and stimulating our senses. We have a smorgasbord of titillating choices constantly before us, many of which appeal to our incessant appetite to be entertained and amused.

What is more, we live in a culture in which the number one enemy, it seems, is boredom. We are terrified of tedium; we are restless when we have nothing to do. And so we have conditioned ourselves to perpetually fill our minds with something—anything, that will stave off boredom. We turn on the television, we text a friend, we watch a movie, we listen to music, we surf the Internet, we get on Facebook.

How many of us, when we have discretionary time, are in the habit of turning to one or more of these mediums to engage our minds, or maybe even to disengage our minds? It seems to me that we don't often try to *clear* our minds, as Peter exhorted us to. We try to keep them occupied. And it's not that we occupy our minds with bad things, necessarily. Some are good, useful, constructive things. But they *can* clutter our minds and prevent us from participating in the *most* useful and constructive thing we can possibly do—pray.

And when we don't pray, spiritual realities can be obscured.

When my parents lived in Camino, California, a piece of art hung on the east wall in their living room. It was a painting by local artist, Thomas Kincaid, of an elegant farm house surrounded by spectacular gardens and stately cedars. Judging from the shadows, the light in the windows, and the deep hues of the flowers and fauna, it is dusk. It is a warm, welcoming scene—the kind of scene you wish you could step into and get lost.

But what made this particular piece of art so special in the context of my parents' home is that if you were standing in front of that painting on the east wall of their living room, and then turned 90 degrees to the north and looked out the front window, you could see, less than half a mile away, that very home. You can see the cedar grove that surrounds it. You can even discern some of the colors of the gardens.

That was the view from my parents' window.

However, I need to tell you that when you looked out that window that's not really what you saw. Oh, it was there alright—you could see it in the distance, but that's not what captured your attention. In fact, unless it was pointed out you may never have noticed that it was even there.

That's because just across the street, down slope from my parents' home, between our home and this magnificent farm home, sat another house, built a few years after we built our home, over fifty years ago.

The house across the street looked abandoned, although it was not. It was almost completely overgrown with shrubs that had rarely been pruned and weeds that had never been pulled. The paint had almost completely peeled off the exterior walls; there were a couple of broken windows that had been boarded up; and the driveway was completely inaccessible because it was crammed full of old cars and a boat—all of which had remained stationary for more than thirty years, and had simply become part of the landscape.

And so, when you looked out the front window of my parent's home you didn't really see the idyllic scene that Thomas Kincaid captured in his painting. It had been obscured, replaced by something far less attractive and desirable and compelling.

When we allow our minds to become cluttered by the things of this world we are, unwittingly, obscuring our view of God. We are being distracted and diverted by something far less deserving of our attention, far less beautiful, and far less satisfying. And somehow, God gets lost in the picture. Oh, we know He's there—He's just not very prominent.

Hear what Peter is saying. We do ourselves a great disservice when we allow our minds to be preoccupied with the things of a world that is passing away—a world that is coming to an end.

You say, "But there are so many wonderful things in this world. There's so much to do. So much to taste and experience. I don't want to miss any of it. I want to get the most out of life."

Some of you might say, if you were honest, that you've *got* to have the world because, frankly, God, all by Himself, isn't enough. You can't imagine finding pleasure in God. You can't believe that He can truly satisfy.

But He can! He *is* sufficient! In fact, He's more than enough. If you don't know that it's because you've never really known Him like it's possible to know Him. Or, you've somehow distanced yourself from Him and forgotten what He's really like.

But I'll tell you the way to get to know Him. It starts by removing the clutter. It starts by obeying these imperatives that Peter has given us in verse 7. "...*Be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.*"

I find it so interesting that the goal of being cool headed and clear minded is that we might be able to commune more effectively with God. It's so that we can fix our undivided attention on Him in order to get the most from our relationship with Him.

Just after Mindy and I were engaged we were separated from each other by several hundred miles. I lived on a small island off the coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia and she lived in Southern California. During that time we communicated solely by letter. And that correspondence was precious to us.

When I sat down to write I didn't just scribble a few haphazard lines in my spare time and then throw it in the mailbox. I made sure I was mentally alert and in the right frame of mind. I was very thoughtful and intentional about the words I chose and the events and feelings I described. And it took *time*—at least a couple of hours to write one letter. And I would do it at a time when I could think most clearly, in a place where I was free of any disruptions.

Likewise, when I received a letter *from* her, I wouldn't dare think of ripping it open at the post office and begin reading it in front of everybody. I'd take it to a solitary place, a beautiful, peaceful place, a place where I could leisurely pore over the letter's contents. And I'd take it out and read it ever so slowly. I'd read it half a dozen times. I'd read between the lines. I'd savor every word.

Why? Because that communication was precious to me. That was my girl writing from the depths of her heart to *me*. And I could practically feel her heartbeat on those pages.

Prayer is our opportunity to feel God's heartbeat. It is the means of communication between Him and us. It's the way we connect with Him and deepen our friendship. And it is a time to savor and enjoy and cherish. I'm not talking about the kind of prayer that we recite quickly before a meal, or tack on to the end of the day when we're too tired to think straight.

I'm talking about real intimacy. Real conversation. Real dialogue. The kind that encourages and refreshes, invigorates and endears.

That's the kind of prayer that Peter is talking about. And it is this kind of prayer that is our greatest privilege and ought to be our top priority.

Now, I doubt if there's a person here who would deny what I just said. We all believe prayer is a good thing. We've been told what it has accomplished in and through the lives of people, and we believe it. But who among us is really praying? Who among us is *devoted* to prayer?

My greatest desire for myself and my greatest desire for our church is that we be a people who love God so much that we cannot wait to be in His presence. That prayer is our first priority, and that we do nothing apart from prayer. That, in the words of the Psalmist, we drink deeply from His river of delights, that we be so long in His presence that we emerge dripping God.

We ought to live as though Christ died yesterday and was coming back tomorrow. One way we prepare for His return, according to this passage, is to be cool-headed and clear-headed so we can pray. In other words, prayer is an essential activity in preparing for eternity.

AT&T used to have a clever marketing slogan. "Long distance is the next best thing to being there." That's no longer true, because now we have FaceTime and Skype, which are far better, especially when you have grandkids living on the other side of the world. But it's still a good slogan.

With regard to our relationship with God, the same could be said for prayer. A day is coming when we will be in His presence and be so enthralled with His beauty and glory and majesty that we won't be able to take our eyes off of Him. Right now, in this earth realm, prayer is the next best thing to being there. It's a little taste of heaven on earth.

I want to make this very practical for a few moments. I want to underscore that the activity of prayer *is* a spiritual discipline. What I mean by discipline is that the activity of consistent, earnest prayer requires making it a priority, it requires planning for it, it requires dedication, it requires self-control, and it requires perseverance in the ups and downs of life.

Particularly in our culture, with its seemingly infinite smorgasbord of appealing options regarding how we can spend our time, it seems to me that unless we deliberately set aside a time for prayer each day, unless we form a habit of praying each day, unless we have a quiet place where we can pray each day, chances are it won't happen. Not with our busy schedules. Not when there are so many other options competing for our time and attention. Not when we can so easily be distracted by and preoccupied with other things.

You already know that prayer is not automatic. It's not the default mode for most of us. But it can be. And I think if it became our default mode we would be very happy. Because it really is our opportunity to feel God's heartbeat, to drink from His river of delights, to align ourselves with His will, and to tap into His power. And so I want to encourage you to make a commitment to do it.

By the way, prayer is a learned activity. It is something one learns how to do by doing it, and one cannot become adept at praying unless he/she consistently practices prayer. It's like learning how to ride a bicycle, or learning to swim, or learning to play the piano. Sometimes those activities are not very pleasant at first. They're awkward, they're uncomfortable, they make you feel uncoordinated and unsure of yourself. And maybe you

stumble or fall down or mess up when you are learning how to do them. Maybe you feel like you'll never be good at them. But with time, and practice, and perseverance you can become skilled at any of these activities.

If you've never felt comfortable praying, I'm going to suggest that you haven't stayed with it long enough to feel comfortable. If you don't like to pray, I suspect that you've not persevered in prayer long enough to really, truly encounter God.

Because those who have practiced prayer long enough to become adept at prayer would rather pray than do anything else. Prayer is oxygen to their souls.

I want to ask you the question that I asked myself at the beginning of this message. What would *you* do if you knew that the end was imminent? That your life on this earth was drawing to a close, and it could happen at any time? By the way, I hope you believe that the end of all things is, indeed, near!

Peter says, prayer is a way we can prepare for the end. I'll say it another way: Prayer is an essential activity in preparing for eternity (since the end of the world is not really the end, but the beginning). Prayer is the means by which we connect and commune with God, our dearest Friend. It is a means by which we align ourselves with His mind and heart. And it is a means by which we tap into His power and receive His generous provision.

Life in this world is not easy. It is fraught with challenges and perils and pain and suffering. Prayer is our lifeline. It enables us to endure whatever life throws at us, because in prayer we get to cling to the Rock of our salvation.

Life is Short: Pray Hard!

1 Peter 4:7

Main Idea: Prayer is an essential activity in preparing for eternity

“The end of all things is near...” (7a)

The big picture

The perfect tense

“...Therefore, be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.” (7b)

Cool-headed

Clear-headed

Getting a “good view” of God

Prayer: The next best thing to being there

Application

Prayer is a spiritual _____

This requires P_____, P_____, S_____, D_____, P_____

Prayer is a _____ activity

One cannot become adept at praying unless he/she consistently _____ it

Family Life Groups

Sermon Discussion Questions

1 Peter 4:7

Main Idea: The best way we can prepare for eternity is to pray

1. Describe your personal prayer life. Are you satisfied with it? What would you like your prayer life to look like? Be specific (describe frequency, time allotment, time of day, place to pray, tools or props that might help facilitate prayer, etc).
2. Prayer is a spiritual discipline in that it is an activity that requires making it a priority, planning for it, dedication, self-control, and perseverance in the ups and downs of life. Assuming you make personal prayer a top priority in your life, what specifically will you do to:
 - Plan for it in your daily life?
 - To make sure you are stay devoted to prayer even you encounter distractions (i.e. sickness, children, unexpected demands on your time, etc.)?
 - To form a habit(which takes a least 18 consecutive days)?