

Life Together as We Face the End

1-2 Peter

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Bible Text: 1 Peter 4:7-11
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Our sermon text this morning comes from 1 Peter 4:7 through 11. We continue with our study in the book of 1 Peter and this week our study brings us to chapter 4, verses 7 through 11. Please listen now as I read for this is the very word of God.

7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. 8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: 11 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.

May the Lord bless to our hearts and minds the reading of his word.

You may be seated.

I ask that you would join me in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we pray that we would have an experience even now like the church in Thessalonica experienced so long ago when Paul declared that when the word went forth, it did not go forth in word only but in power, bringing about full conviction. O Lord, would you grant us that blessing, that your word would bring about conviction, repentance, renewed faith and the practical work of new obedience. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, on this day 131 years ago, the United States suffered one of the worst disasters in its history. Historic levels of rainfall through the night had caused the Conemaugh River to overflow its banks and Lake Conemaugh had swelled to record levels. The massive influx of water put inordinate pressure on the South Fork Dam, and unfortunately the South Fork Dam had a number of problems. For starters, its spillway had been screened in order to keep large game fish from escaping through the dam into the river. That

screened spillway would eventually become completely clogged. What's more, the original system of relief piping and valves had been torn out and sold for scrap metal and it had not been replaced, so water from the lake could no longer be released in the event of an emergency. The dam also had some history of smaller leaks in the past which had generally been repaired in substandard fashion, and on May 31, 1889, the combination of the massive pressure of the water and years of poor planning and dam maintenance came together. The South Fork Dam collapsed, releasing almost four billion gallons of water into the valley below. The torrent destroyed a couple of small towns as it rushed on but the greatest destruction came when the water hit the unsuspecting town of Johnstown, PA 14 miles away. When the water hit Johnstown, it was going about 40 miles an hour and was 60 feet high at some points, and it was now carrying massive amounts of debris it collected on its 14 mile journey. The flood almost instantly destroyed over 1,600 homes and killed over 2,000 people making it to this day one of the deadliest disasters in American history.

Why do I tell this dreadful story this morning? I do it to highlight the tragic consequences of what can happen when pressure builds up on something that is deeply compromised, poorly maintained, and ill-equipped to stand in the face of such pressure. The South Fork Dam is an obvious engineering failure of epic proportions but this morning I present it to you as a chilling metaphor for church communities that have collapsed through the ages. You see, difficult circumstances can and do put pressure on church communities. Political pressure. Economic pressure. Social pressure. In Romans 8:35, Paul speaks of various kinds of external pressures that can threaten the church. He speaks of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword. Now sometimes these pressures can build up slowly, almost imperceptibly over time. On other occasions, the pressure can mount suddenly, seeming to come out of nowhere. But no matter how it comes, when these kind of difficult circumstances do come, they can put great pressure on church communities, and when the pressure comes from outside, all the weaknesses and the frailties and the pressure points of the church community get exposed. You see, outside pressure and stress can lead to exposing the cracks and the conflicts within. Conflicts then lead to division, division can lead to collapse, collapse to destruction, and often no one seeks to address the problems until it is far too late. Countless churches have been decimated by this combination of external pressure on the one hand and internal weakness and compromise on the other.

Now as we have seen in our study of 1 Peter and it has become very clear in recent weeks, the Apostle Peter was writing to church communities who were under great external pressure. These believers were under significant social pressure to conform to Greco-Roman pagan practices. The pressure, as we've seen, often came within family units or it came from masters and bosses, it came from the government, and we've seen that when these believers did not conform to this initial wave of pressure, the subsequent result was outright persecution and great suffering which, of course, created even more pressure, and the great question in 1 Peter is under this pressure, will these believers hold fast, and what Peter is seeking to do in this letter is to fortify the internal strength of these church communities. You see, Peter knows he cannot do anything about the rainfall but he can faithfully work to maintain and reinforce the dam.

So in this letter Peter is working to inspire and instruct believers in order that he might strengthen their resolve and enable them to stand firm and to stand together. Now in recent verses and in verses still to come, Peter really focuses the believer's attention on facing that external pressure. Peter's been talking about in ways that help these believers understand the nature of their suffering at the hands of the outside world, and he's been showing them how the gospel of Jesus Christ helps them to hold up and faithfully endure such suffering. But here in this week's verses, verses 7 through 11, Peter takes a little different tact because these verses are focused on the internal dynamics of the church community. He's talking here about how the community must treat one another during these challenging times and you see this internal focus is just as important as external awareness because one of the impacts of external pressure on the church community is the church can start to turn on itself. External stress and pressure can drive us into internal conflict and division and often, then, it is that internal division that ultimately leads to church collapse and Peter is not about to let that happen. So here in these verses he does two things. 1. He reminds these believers of their overarching present context; and then number 2, in light of that context, he gives them a series of commands many of which then come with supporting rationales, and that's what we want to work through in a systematic way this morning. This is the essential project of dam reinforcement so we are ready for times of historic rainfall.

Peter begins, then, by reminding these believers, this rather striking statement he makes that, "The end of all things is at hand." Now exactly what does he mean by this and why would he say it here? The Bible is very clear, the history of existence is a definite story. It has a clear beginning and middle and end. The beginning of the story is creation for Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," and we're told in the opening chapters of Genesis that God blessed the creation and he pronounced it very good. Now the next key aspect of this story is the fall. Scripture says that God created Adam and Eve in his own image and he blessed them in manifold ways, and part of that blessing was that they were commanded, they were given God's authority to rule over them and they had obey him. God gave Adam and Eve a specific command. He told them if they disobeyed it, they would surely die. The choice was clear, they could live in divine blessing through obedience, or they could be subject to death and judgment through disobedience. Tragically, Adam and Eve chose disobedience and death, and as a result of their sin, God sentenced them and all their posterity, which is us, to death and judgment and the entire created order fell under the curse of God's wrath. But thankfully that is not the end of the story. No, rather in grace God then sets in motion a plan to redeem human beings from sin and death and judgment, and to create and restore a new heavens and a new earth where redeemed humanity will dwell with him forever, and that plan of redemption came to full fruition in the birth, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the Scripture says, is God in the flesh who became a man in order to save humanity. He lived a perfect sinless life but willingly died on the cross to bear the curse of sin and judgment for us. Jesus paid for our sin in our place. He died but then he rose from the dead triumphant over sin and death, and this Jesus has now ascended into heaven and he's given his disciples this command, to go and preach the good news of salvation to the whole world in order that a people from every

tongue and tribe and nation might believe in Jesus Christ and be saved forever more. And the Bible is clear that Jesus' life, death, resurrection, commission and ascension has now set up history for its end, its culmination, its consummation. Jesus himself says in Matthew 24, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all nations and then the end will come." The end. You see, history as we know it will come to a conclusion. The Scripture says Jesus will return from heaven in salvation and judgment. At his command, the heavens will be rolled up as a scroll. All those who have rejected him will be judged once and for all and will be then subject to his judgment for all eternity, and all who have believed in him, we will experience the fullness of his salvation forever. Our bodies will be raised and transformed in perfect, incorruptible, eternal holiness and we will dwell in the new heavens and the new earth in the presence of God forever.

This is the end of all things that Peter speaks of here. He is speaking about the imminent return of Christ which will bring about the end of history and the inauguration of eternity. That's very interesting but why does Peter bring this up here? I think he does it because Peter knows that when we face those external pressures of temptation and persecution and suffering, what that pressure can do is make all the details of this life and the affliction we experience, it can make it all seem ultimate. The problems of this life under pressure start to get big and the promises of God seem small and we then began to act in desperate self-preservation. We're quick to take refuge in any worldly power that we think will protect us and we're quick to strike out against anything that appears to threaten us. But Scripture tells us that the reality is the exact opposite, for as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, the slight momentary afflictions of this life are preparing us for an eternal weight of glory that is beyond all comparison. Peter knowing this declares, "Look, the end of all things is at hand. An event is coming. A new reality is coming." Jesus himself is coming and his coming and all that it will bring, oh, it's so dwarfs all the trials of this life that if we believe it, if we rest in it, it will utterly transform how we see life now and how we live on this side of the end.

Peter says that the end is something that Christians must remember, particularly in times of persecution and suffering, particularly in times when we are under great external pressure. We must remember the end of all things is at hand and, you see, when we have the end of the story in mind, it changes the way we live now. How does it change it? Well, I'm glad you asked because Peter here then gives two sets of behavioral commands that flow out of this reality that the end of all things is at hand. The first set of commands deal with the internal relationships we have just interpersonally within the church, and the second set of commands deals with the external exercise of gifts in the church. Let's consider, then, each in turn.

So the first command of this first set of commands is to be self-controlled and sober-minded. When Peter speaks of being sober-minded, I think he's just referring back to what he's just said, right? If the end of all things is at hand, then we must think about that and we must let that reality give our present vision clarity. We must not let ourselves get caught up in the passions of the moment. We must not get drunk on thinking that the present trials are ultimate, but with spiritual sobriety and intellectual clarity, we must

endeavor to see things in their proper perspective, and when we are sober-minded in this way, it should lead us into self-control.

Now self-control is a fruit of the Spirit which enables us to discipline our passions so that we do not act in rash or destructive ways in the heat of the moment. Self-control enables us to discipline our tongues so that we don't speak rash or destructive words. Self-control enables us to discipline our bodies so that we do not give in to the lusts of the flesh in the moment. Now I think in the context here, Peter probably has two things in mind when he speaks of self-control, knowing the end is near and that Christ is coming in salvation and judgment, we should be self-controlled and thus refrain from the flood of debauchery that the world is calling us to. This is what he's just gotten through talking about in verses 3 and 4. However, I think Peter has probably more in mind than just that because based on what he's going to say in the coming verses, I think he's also calling us to exercise self-control in our dealings with one another. You see, I think the context would strongly suggest to us that the external pressures of persecution and suffering are causing these Christians to have some level of friction with one another, and so Peter is saying not just, "Hey, the end is coming so don't go sin with the pagans," but he's also saying, "Look, knowing that the end is coming, be careful how you deal with one another. Be self-controlled in your dealings with one another. Hold back against turning on and speaking against one another as if your life somehow depended on your vindication. The end of all things is at hand. Christ is coming so be self-controlled and careful in your dealings with one another. The failure to do so," Peter says, "will affect your prayers."

You may remember back, we spoke about this very matter of hindered prayer when we took a look at chapter 3, verse 7, where Peter says something very similar, and I just remind you here that the Scripture teaches that if we walk in sin, in habitual, unrepentant sin, in this case I think if we lack self-control and we indulge the passions of the flesh with the world and against our brothers and sisters in Christ, well, then two things are going to happen. 1. It's going to damper your desire to pray, for sin creates a kind of spiritual callousness where we don't even sense the need for prayer. And number 2, I think the Scripture clearly teaches that if we do pray to God while walking in hypocrisy and blatant sin, especially if we engage in public prayer while we walk in such hypocrisy and sin, God does not hear our prayers in the same way. You see, holiness, the pursuit of obedience by grace is crucial to a fruitful prayer life. So Peter says be sober-minded and self-controlled for the sake of your prayers.

The second command in this first set of commands is to love one another earnestly. This, Peter says, is actually even the most important command here because he says above all. So you see, we must not only be self-controlled and refrain from speaking and doing ill against our brothers and sisters but we must also in a far more positive way love them and live for their welfare. It's not enough just to do no harm to a brother or sister, we must actually love them deeply and well, and such love, Peter says, covers a multitude of sins. Again, I think Peter could have a kind of double meaning in mind when he uses this phrase "covers a multitude of sins." On the one hand I think we could say that one of the practical horizontal blessings of loving one another is it creates a kind of forbearance where we are not overwhelmed with each other's sins. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, love

keeps no record of wrongs, it bears all things. Love forgives, love forbears, love is ultimately what makes community between fallen human beings who sin all the time possible. Our hope for a thriving church community here at Westminster, it cannot possibly rest on the prospect of everybody doing what is right all the time. It cannot rest on the hope that everyone will exhibit appropriate self-control at all times. No, on this side of glory we will all stumble and fall, we will all speak out of turn, we will all over-react, we will all mistreat one another under the pressures and stress of life. When self-control breaks down, love must intervene for it covers a multitude of sins and allows us to love one another and care for one another in spite of one another. And yet I think perhaps there is even a more subtle point that Peter is making here which is that because such Christian love flows from Christ, it should always redirect us to Christ and the recognition that it is ultimately Christ's love manifested on the cross that definitively covers our sins. You see, it's because Christ has died for our sins that our sins are ultimately covered and forgiven and that is why we can then forgive those who sin against us because Christ has first loved us in this way, covering our sins that we can love one another. Christ's love ultimately covers, atones for, cleanses our sins which enables us to love and forgive and forbear with each other.

This then leads us to the final command of this first set which is a kind of combination and culmination of the first two. Peter says show hospitality to one another without grumbling. I think this is not a new idea but rather it's kind of a practical manifestation of both our love and our self-control. You see, love if it is genuine must be put into action, and one practical way we can do that is by showing one another hospitality. Now Peter doesn't just mean here have nice polite dinner parties but rather he's talking about opening up our homes and our resources that we might bless and serve our brothers and sisters, particularly in their times of need. You see, times of external pressure inevitably become times of genuine need in the body of Christ where our emotional needs and spiritual needs and financial needs and physical needs get exposed and Peter says look in love, open yourself up using your resources to minister to those in need, but he adds, I think you could say in self-control, do this without grumbling. This is important too because times of external pressure don't just create needs in others, such times create needs in ourselves so that it is often costly physically, financially and emotionally. It's often costly to extend hospitality to those in need because we also have needs and the threatening of our own needs can lead us to grumble.

Donald Coggin the former Archbishop of Canterbury, said it well when he said true Christian hospitality is making people feel at home when you wish they were home. The external pressure of life can make Christians turn inward in self absorption and self-preservation. As a result, we can lash out against one another in our frustration, we can reject one another altogether because of our sins, we can harden ourselves to one another's needs, and in these ways, to keep with the metaphor, we compromise the dam, we render it increasingly weak and ineffective as the pressures from the world mount. So our response must be to arm ourselves with gospel thinking like we talked about last week, and we must be sober-minded about the return, of the coming of Christ and the end of all things, and this should lead us to self-control, love for one another in hospitality without grumbling.

So this first set of commands, then, we can see concerns our kind of internal relationships with each other in the church. The second set is closely related but different in that this involves the external exercise of gifts in the church. Peter says, "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." First, let me just say a quick word about spiritual gifts. Paul tells us very clearly that when God saves us, he not only regenerates us by his Spirit, he not only gives us new life and communion with him, but he also gives every believer a spiritual gift or spiritual gifts for the ministry. It's amazing, God not only saves us but he chooses to use us and equip us, each one of us to accomplish his purposes in the world. If you'd like, you can see a more substantive list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12 or 1 Corinthians 12, but here Peter's point is not to expound on the nature of spiritual gifts but just to give a kind of general emphasis of how those gifts should be thought of and used in the church, and this new set of commands is not unrelated to what Peter has been talking about. He's not changing the subject here to spiritual gifts but I think what he's doing is giving a more specific context where the principles of verses 7 through 9 must be lived out. You see, one of the things we see often in the other New Testament letters is that on many occasions when a church has conflict, when there is a lack of love and self-control in a church, one of the places that tends to manifest itself is in the exercise of spiritual gifts. You see, churches began to argue about, well, which gifts are better or more important? Christians begin to use their gifts but not for the ultimate benefit of others but as a tool of self-promotion in the church.

So here as part of a larger concern for how the body is living under pressure, Peter says, "Look, you must think about and exercise your gifts according to the very reason and purpose that they were given." So he says, "First of all, know this, they aren't yours. They're God's and he has given them to you as gifts. So you aren't the owner of the gift," Peter says here, "you're merely a steward." And he makes it clear, God didn't give you these gifts because of anything in you, you didn't merit the gift otherwise it wouldn't really be a gift, but rather he makes it explicit, these are gifts of God's grace and as such they are then to be used, Peter says, to serve one another not as means to promote yourself.

Then he gives two quick examples and I think maybe he chooses these two because these two are often two gifts that are pitted against one another in the fallen heart of humanity: speaking and service. You can see the argument already, can you not? The speakers think they are more important because they're upfront. It's all about them, right? "A church rises and falls with my performance and so I can look down on others saying, well, I mean, what do you do, right? You just do stuff." Whereas those who serve often without recognition can easily resent the speakers. They themselves can have a kind of self-righteous judgment where they say, "Well, we're the ones who do all the dirty work. We're the real backbone of the church. I mean, consider for a moment all that we do for Jesus' sake. I mean, where would the preacher be without us, tell me that?" In both cases there is little sober-minded thinking, little self-control, little love and lots of grumbling.

So Peter says here, "Look, no, that's not the way it works. If you speak," and I think here he clearly has in mind formal preaching and teaching, "If you speak, then speak as one

who speaks the oracles of God. Preacher, you have no authority in and of yourself, you have no wisdom or truth to offer except that you have been entrusted, as a gift, to teach people the very word of God. You say what God has said, nothing more and nothing less. And if people respond in repentance and faith and obedience, God gets all the credit because it's his word that did the work. That, preacher, is the gift you've been given, to speak the word of God for the benefit of God's people. So exercise this task with great self-control and love for," as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, "if you speak with the tongue of men and of angels but have not love, you are but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal to the Lord. But then again, the word of the Lord is living and active and it's able to make people wise unto salvation so use your gift wisely and well. And to those who serve, remember that too is a gift, a gift that was given to you not because you were so inherently humble or righteous. No, it's a gift of grace," Peter says, "so you must exercise your service in the strength that God supplies. You too must be fueled by love for if you serve in your own strength," even as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, "even if you go so far as to give away all that you have and deliver up your body to be burned, if you have not love you gain nothing. Ah, but such service offered up in the love and spirit of Christ is indeed a fragrant aroma before our God."

So Peter here essentially says, "Hey, guys, you all need to know this, a cloudy-thinking, rash-acting, rash-speaking, unloving, ungenerous, grumbling church where people argue about whose gifts are better and only look to use their gifts for their own self-promotion, that kind of thinking and living will crack the dam, and when the pressure of the world comes, you will not hold. You will not hold. Your church will collapse to the spiritual ruin of many." But that need not be our fate. By God's grace we can declare we have been saved through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have been redeemed by the Spirit of God. We have been regenerated and equipped for the ministry. By the return of Christ, we will be brought home to glory no matter what happens in this world. So today we can be sober-minded. We can think deeply and often about the full gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, creation, fall, redemption and consummation. And with that clarity of mind, we can be self-controlled, we can love one another, we can forbear and forgive sin, we can show hospitality to one another without grumbling, especially when it's hard, and we can use our gifts with self-control in love for the building up of the church, we can preach the very word of God and we can serve in the strength that God supplies.

Peter then concludes by saying this, "When you do this, church, something remarkable happens and this is what it is, in everything God is glorified through Jesus Christ. The God, the very God to whom belongs glory and dominion forever and ever, that God is actually exalted and lifted up by you, by your lives together. Oh, when you live this way with one another, you are blessed, you are protected, you are loved and you are provided for by one another and God is then glorified in you and through you." And though the floodwaters of the world may rise, though the pressure of temptation and turmoil and persecution and affliction may weigh heavy upon us, by God's grace and power we will hold, and the promise of the gospel is not only hold but actually push back against the tide so that the Scripture says the gates of hell will not be able to stand against the church.

So God has promised and so may it be. Here at Westminster Presbyterian Church, may we be able to say to one another all the time what Frodo said to Sam on the slope of Mount Doom in Tolkien's "Return of the King," I am glad to be with you, Samwise Gemgee, here at the end of all things.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word, so much richness in every line. Now by the power of your Spirit, would you apply it to our hearts and minds and bear much fruit. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.