

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Christ's return

All praise be to Jesus Christ our Lord, for You have promised You will come again in glory! We do not know how this will happen, and we do not know how You will either save the world or save Your Old Testament people, let alone make the church Your Bride! But You will do these things and they will all gloriously come true! AMEN

For myself

Pray for protection for yourself and all you do this day. We all assume we are virtually invincible and can come to no harm, but this is not true, and we should consider our need for protection, whether on the roads, or just going about our business.

For others

Pray for scientists, and for the many research establishments in which they work. Pray for the future of this world that is largely in the hands of people such as this who work tirelessly at the new ideas, new products, new medicines and so much more.

Meditation

Have not babies always cried and kept their parents awake,
And yet made them more happy than they could ever be?

Have not neighbours and friends always been annoying,
And yet also been the source of the most amazing help?

Have not children always resisted their parent's wishes,
And yet run and flung their arms around them in pure love?

Have not the aged oft wondered why things turned out wrong
And yet been the source of powerful help and understanding?

Have not people always been sinful and rejected God's ways,
And yet longed for His salvation, His healing and His love?

Has not God always seen what is happening on this earth,
And sought to draw us near to him for one simple reason -

He loves us!

Bible Passage

1 Peter 4:7-11

⁷ The end of all things is at hand; therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled in your prayers. ⁸ Above all, have a constant love for one another, for love covers over a multitude of sins. ⁹ Be hospitable to one another without complaining. ¹⁰ Each of you should serve one another using the gift you have received, as good guardians of the diverse grace of God. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, it should be done as if speaking the words of God, and whoever serves should do so as if with strength given by God, so that God may be glorified in everything through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the might forever and ever. Amen.

Review

This is a powerful passage of scripture with a great deal of good advice. It is a little strange however because it reads like the end of a letter, finishing with words of blessing and grace, even though there is more than a whole chapter of the letter to go (4:11)! However, it is possible that this passage represents the end of the 'baptismal sermon' preached by Peter which has given a context for much of the letter (see previous studies). In addition, some people think that a different letter of Peter has been added at this point, but this is hard to maintain because it is not easy to see how the next verse (4:12) could be the beginning of a letter. It is most likely that this passage represents the end of Peter's great sermon, and that the rest of the letter adds comments, greetings and advice which Peter felt he wished to add. Those who first read the letter would have understood this, but we are left trying to piece together the clues!

There are a number of significant themes to this conclusion of Peter's sermon, but it begins with 'the end of all things is near ...' (4:7). As with many people of the day, Peter was convinced that the Lord's coming was imminent, but this meant that there was a greater urgency for all to live a life that was honouring to God, and this is what shows through in what Peter says. He emphasises the importance of:

- Prayer (4:7)
- Love which 'covers a multitude of sins' (4:8)
- Hospitality (4:9)
- Christian service to one another according to God's 'gift' (4:10)
- Speaking – as if speaking God's Words (4:11)
- Service – as if serving with the strength of God (4:11)
- Giving glory to God in everything (4:11)

As elsewhere in 1 Peter (see 4:3, 3:18,22 etc.), a list is used as an 'aide memoir' to enable the listener and reader to memorise the whole advice. The structure of the list is simple; it contains seven pieces of advice, the number seven being a 'holy' number of ancient times which would have caught people's attention. To this day, the list stands as good Biblical advice about what Christians should 'do' in order to demonstrate their faith, and in several places it emphasises that these things cannot be done outside of the will and empowerment of God. It also stands in contrast to the list of six sinful occupations of those who are unsaved mentioned in the previous

text (4:3), and it is possible that whereas 'six' implies ungodly incompleteness, the 'seven' items in our list is complete, and therefore 'holy'.

There is much debate whether the words of advice in this passage are intended to be an expression of the life of the church, being a place where people pray together and love one another for the forgiveness of sins (4:8), offering generous hospitality and serving one another according to the gifts given to each according to God's grace (4:10) etc. Some feel that this must all be demonstrated outside the church in order to witness to the saving work of God's grace, given the evangelistic implications of verse 8 ('love covers ... sins'), the prophetic 'words of God' mentioned and the glory and honour given to Christ (4:11). It is best to think of these words as the advice of the most senior apostle given to converts who had been baptised, appealing to them to live in a worthy manner. Each item on the list has consequences both for the life of the church and also for the witness of God's people in the community.

This is a good reminder to us that we cannot simply separate how we behave in church from what we do in the world. All of it counts as our personal witness to the work of God; and if it does not, then the Gospel has not yet fully changed our lives.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

- V7 *'The end of all things is at hand ...'* The Greek verb used in this verse for 'at hand' also means 'is near' or 'is close by'. It is the same word used by Jesus in His sermon 'Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.' The use of these words is no coincidence.
- V8 *'Have a constant love for one another'* In other translations you will find 'have a fervent love ...' or 'love each other deeply'. However the Greek word here does mean 'constant or 'unfailing', and this is a distinct property of love which Peter appeals to which other translations are in danger of losing.
- V8 *'A multitude of sins'* The word for 'multitude' means a crowd or a large gathering of people, and it is helpful that the English word 'multitude' also means a large number but also a 'crowd'.
- V11 *'If anyone speaks, it should be done as if speaking the words of God.'* Literally, the Greek says 'if anyone speaks, it is as the words of God' We need more words in English to convey the meaning of this in English. A similar structure of sentence is used for the next sentence; 'whoever serves should do so as if with strength given by God.'

Christ's coming in glory

The imminent coming of Christ is something that changes a person's perspective on life. If you think that life will simply proceed as it always has, then there is little urgency to make decisions about spiritual things. When Jesus talked to the disciples in an impassioned manner about His coming again (see Matt 24), he spoke to people whose lives had been turned upside down by His presence and who did not know what would happen next. Jesus told them that the end of all things would come 'like a thief in the night' (Matt 24:43), and urged them to be ready for this at all times. The Bible consistently gives us this same message and expects God's people to live with this constantly in mind. In other words, there is no time for us to delay whilst deciding spiritual matters, or assume that the evangelism of the whole world will take a long time and require much planning; this is irrelevant to the Gospel. What the Lord expects of us is to respond to His Word now and get on with what we

are called to do. The Gospel is urgent and active, it is not something we can leave and come back to later (see the parable of the foolish virgins – Matt 25:1f.).

This urgency underlies this whole part of Peter's letter. It is not a map for Christian development throughout life; it is a lively call to action now. Prayer, love for all, hospitality, service, prophetic words and actions and the glorification of God are not things to be planned as if the church was a business with targets to meet. It is a spiritual reality which must function as a body does; it responds to its Creator and is either alive or dead. The descriptions of this passage are of a living church, and we may justifiably and logically say that where these things are not evident, then the church is dead.

Common themes from Old and New Testaments

The list begins with things which can be found in both the Old and the New Testaments. The first item is prayer (4:7), but it is more than prayer in the casual sense of generally talking to God. The words which Peter uses indicate discipline and self control in prayer; in other words, prayer is not an 'off the cuff' matter of speaking when we wish; if this was so, it would be us controlling our contact with the Lord when it needs to be the Lord who is in control. Prayer is a discipline; something which is well attested in the Old Testament by the Psalms (see 4:1f. 32:6, 55:1f. etc.) and also by the great prayer of faith spoken by the people of Israel 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.' (Deut 6:4). God's people were urged by Moses to pray with disciplined urgency and regularity, because he knew the power of sin to divert people from God. Jesus also took prayer seriously, teaching His disciples to avoid false disciplines but to accept those which would draw them close to God in genuine spiritual intimacy, teaching them the 'Lord's prayer' (Matt 6:9f.).

In the same way, the qualities of love which Peter spoke about (4:8) were clearly influenced by Jesus, because Peter quoted the famous command of Jesus 'love one another' (John 13:34f. Ephesians 4:2). However, if you follow the teaching of Jesus about love, you will quickly find that it is based upon the Old Testament texts of Leviticus 19:18b. Moreover, the overwhelming Biblical evidence for the love of God is found in the many descriptions of His Covenant love for the people of Israel; the people He chose as His own and through whom He intended to reveal Himself to the world (Gen 12:2,3, Psalm 117, Exodus 15:13, Numbers 14:18 and countless other texts mentioning God's 'covenant love').

Hospitality (4:9) is another theme which straddles the whole of the Bible, stretching back to the ancient nomadic principles of hospitality found in the stories of Abraham (see Gen 18:1f.) to Jesus' story about the 'Good Samaritan' (Luke 10:30f.) and Paul's concern for the proper treatment of the poor in the life of the early church (1 Tim 3:2, Romans 12:13).

Guardians of the grace of God

At the heart of this great list of Peter's is his fourth command, which starts with the general Biblical theme of service, yet expands this in a powerful way to describe the workings of the church of God. His words; 'Serve one another using the gift you have received, as good guardians of the diverse grace of God.' are an extraordinary sentence combining service with the spiritual 'gifts', and the idea that the church is the 'guardian of the diverse grace of God'. We readily understand the importance of service to the Gospel because Jesus demonstrated the highest principles of service on many occasions, and also told His disciples that they had to serve others as He did (John 13:1-11). However, it is fascinating that here, Peter links this together with the other well known New Testament theme of the 'gifts of the Spirit', and it is clear that this is what Peter has in mind because of his talk in the same sentence of the 'diverse grace of God', and the word for 'gift' ('charisma') and the word for grace ('charis') are powerfully linked in Greek.

This is a phrase which indicates the expansive generosity of God in giving each of His disciples the 'gift' they need to enable them to fulfil their own role in the church and the Kingdom, and it helps us make sense of both Christian service and the gifts of God. We should not be too concerned about Peter's use of the singular in speaking about our 'gift'; his concern was not how many spiritual gifts people have, but the importance of using each one for its intended purpose. Clearly, the individual 'gift' God grants us is what enables us to be the servants He wants us to be, and if all God's people use their gift in service, then collectively, we become the 'guardians' of the great message of God's grace, the Gospel!

Themes of the Gospel

Peter concludes with three Gospel priorities, speaking the Word of God, doing God's work and giving glory to God. All of these great Biblical themes can be found within the Old Testament, but they only make sense within the New, because Jesus has died for the sins of the whole world and has created a Gospel of salvation by which people are brought to a place of peace with God (Rom 5:1,2); moreover, as Paul says in His letter to the Romans, this is a Gospel which is spread through preaching (Rom 10:9-13). There may well be thousands of ways to preach the Gospel and it may be exemplified in many ways, but it is communicated by words spoken; the commonest and most powerful mode of interaction between people. For a Christian, all our words should be ones which reflect the divine prerogative to 'preach the Gospel'. Some people may feel this places an intolerable burden upon people, but this depends on what you think the Gospel is. If it is religious observance, then what Peter says here is indeed intolerable. If however, it is the only possible route to a person's eternal life, then it is by far the highest priority for any conversation! I believe that too many have lost this sense of the Gospel imperative today!

The Christian service mentioned by Peter is just as important. For one who has been saved by the living Christ, then all actions are surely done with thanks, praise and glory to the God who has saved us! Even our work and all our earthly deeds are coloured by the Gospel; and again, if they are not, then it is doubtful that we have been grasped by a 'Good News' which is life changing! Unless the Gospel changes our deeds and our outlook on life so that we become people of service both to God and to others, then we may think we have heard the Gospel, but we have not yet come to terms with it or responded fully to it!

The final words of Peter in his great sermon are both about the glory of God and also express the glory of God! What better way, surely the only way to end a sermon of this nature! The glory of God is the sole aim and objective of all who have been saved by grace, and whatever we feel, think or anticipate in life, unless it resolves in the glory of God, then we have not found the true and unique Gospel of God in Christ Jesus. Peter's list of seven themes is powerful because it is not merely a list of instructions; it describes the natural progression of the work of God's spirit in the human soul. What more could we want from a sermon!

Discipleship

Application

The whole Gospel in one passage?

There is a great deal within this passage of scripture, and the nature of the passage has meant that I have already spoken about various 'application' issues as we have gone through the passage. I believe it is important that this passage of scripture is preached upon. There is clear evidence that it comes from a sermon of Peter, the leader of the disciples, and it reflects in a highly cogent manner some of the most important themes of the Gospel. It is sometimes said that a preacher should not try and preach the whole Gospel in one sermon;

because the Gospel is so huge one cannot do justice to it in a half hour. However, leaving aside the issue of how long a sermon ought to be at its best, I see no reason why a preacher should not attempt to preach the whole Gospel. Unless we do, then how will people either know the whole Gospel, or grasp the way that it connects with the whole of life. Peter managed to preach a succinct and powerful Gospel in one sermon, and we can learn from him that the attempt to do this will lead us to communicate the Gospel in wise, considered and memorable ways. The preaching of the Gospel is a glorious responsibility, and we should take our example from the best!

Ideas for what to do

- *Learn this text off by heart, or if you feel this to be too difficult, then learn the list which summarises it which is given at the start of this study.*
- *Speak to the members of your family about what this text means, and explore the possibilities of how it can help you in your Christian walk, and your testimony to each other within the family and beyond.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does it mean for us to 'discipline ourselves through prayer' (4:7)? How easy is it for us to do this?
2. Discuss the damage that 'complaining' (4:9) does to the great gift of hospitality.
3. Are you conscious of doing the things of God and speaking the words of God at any time? If so, when? How can this be our normal experience?

Final Prayer

Lord God, make me still before Your majesty.
Give me time to reflect upon Your great love.
Give me a heart to live my life graciously;
Through Jesus Christ my Lord:
AMEN