

# Living for God

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Date: 04 August 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] The poet John Dunn once posed the question, what if this present were the world's last night? It's an interesting question. Particularly I think at the moment as there's more and more fear in the wider culture that actually one day the world will end.

A number of studies have observed a new phenomenon among the young which is eco-anxiety, a fear that the world is heading to ecological destruction.

Two thousand years ago when Peter was writing to these suffering and struggling Christians, you might have noticed as Andrew read in verse 7, Peter says, The end of all things is near. We'll see in time that Peter wasn't wrong to say that two thousand years ago.

What I want to emphasize as we begin is that Christians have always had a strong awareness that there will be an end to this world and that there are implications of that fact for how we live in the days before the end comes.

Because the Bible is clear that there will be an end. Jesus will one day return, but also we might die before that day comes. Either way, our time is limited.

[ 1 : 20 ] What would you do if this were the world's last night? What would you do if you knew the end was on the horizon? It's wise advice to begin a piece of work to start with the end in mind.

The end guides where we're going. This is no less applicable to life. The gospel gives us a very clear picture of the end and shows us how we should live in the days before it comes.

To quote Gandalf, We have to decide what to do with the time that is given to us. And knowing that the end is near will give us wisdom to know how best to use that time.

And so as we look at these verses, I want to reflect on two big ideas that Peter brings to us. Firstly, there is a judgment. So do not sin. Secondly, there is an end. So glorify God.

And what I hope we'll see is how to live as if this were the world's last night. And that actually that is a sort of Christian ethic or a Christian approach to living in this world.

[ 2 : 27 ] Knowing that Christ is coming. So Peter's first point is that there's a judgment that's coming. And so Christians must not sin. He begins by reminding us of what's gone before.

At the end of chapter three, Peter pointed out that Jesus had ascended into heaven, having won the victory over every spiritual power through his death and resurrection. He is the victorious Christ. But the victory crucially was won through his suffering. And Peter now returns to the suffering of Christ and presents it, as he has done earlier in the letter, as an example for Christ's people to follow.

As we says, therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body has finished with sin. The attitude Peter speaks of is an attitude of willingness to suffer.

And Jesus suffered willingly because he knew what his suffering would achieve. He suffered with the end in mind. And when he cried out in the garden of Gethsemane, blood sweating from his forehead, he said to his father, not what I will, but what you will.

[ 3 : 36 ] And the cross stood before him and filled him with fear. And yet he suffered willingly, knowing that it was his father's will and knowing that by it, salvation would come to all those who trusted in him.

He saw the end and the purpose of his suffering, the restoration of humanity to God. And Peter says Christians are to arm themselves just as a soldier picks up their weapon for a fight.

We're to arm ourselves with the same attitude that Jesus had when he suffered. And then he gives a curious reason. He says, because whoever suffers in the body has finished with sin.

Does he mean that Christians who suffer no longer sin at all? No, regrettably, all Christians will still wrestle with sinful desires and longings, with sinful impulses and reactions.

But for the Christian, sin is no longer the reigning power. And because sin is not the reigning power in our life, we live not in slavery to our sinful impulses, but in the spirit who guides us in holiness. [ 4 : 50 ] Now, Peter is saying that if we're willing to suffer for Jesus, knowing that he suffered for us, that's a sign of a changed heart and a renewed life in the spirit.

The one who is willing to suffer for Christ is one who is no longer swayed by the pressure of the world and slavery to sin. The one who lives with an awareness of the world's last night. Because as Christians, we will still fail and mess up. But sin is no longer the guiding power. The Holy Spirit of Christ is.

If we're willing to arm ourselves with a willingness to suffer for Christ, that's a sign that Christ is our life, not the sins of the past.

And so Peter encourages Christians to keep away from the sins of the past because of this new life that we now have in Jesus. And he reminds us that it is better to live for the will of God, just as Jesus did, than for our own desires.

[ 5 : 58 ] And so he says, as a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you spend enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do, living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable idolatry.

Somewhat sarcastically, Peter says, you've already spent enough time in the past living like the rest of the world. So don't go back. What's interesting looking at that list is that despite all the changes in history and culture across 2000 years, well, human nature doesn't really change.

The same things that characterized the culture of the Roman Empire are actually the same things that characterize Scotland today. And so Peter draws attention to what the pagan way of life is.

And it's basically three things. Sex, alcohol, and idols. And we'll take each of these three in turn.

Roman culture was obsessed with sex and was very free in its sexual ethics.

And so the world today is in this regard very much Rome's successor. The historian and writer Carl Truman says the age we live in is marked by the triad.

[ 7 : 14 ] The triumph of the erotic. Sex and sexuality has become intrinsic to identity and modern life in so many ways. Let's just take three.

Firstly, sex is expected if you want to live a fulfilled life according to contemporary culture. Truman notes that the existence of a film like the 40-year-old Virgin makes that point clear.

You know, even if you've not seen the film, just by the title that it's a comedy. Because the very idea that you could get to 40 and be a virgin is seen in culture as tragically humorous.

The underlying assumption is that such a person must be sad and unfulfilled. And this is why you have the rise of so-called incels, short for involuntary celibates. Young men who are celibate but not by choice and who feel that they've been cheated.

And they're disaffected by a culture that says that they ought to be sexually active to experience true fulfillment. But the gospel frees us to recognize that fulfillment is not found in sex.

[ 8 : 20 ] Secondly, there is the dramatic rise in online pornography. The technologizing of the sexual revolution. This in turn has given rise to young people becoming increasingly warped in their view of sex.

As algorithms drive more and more disturbing content. Not least violent sexual acts towards women. And a culture of degrading women for personal pleasure. And Truman observes that pop culture has essentially been pornographized.

He writes, there's surely something significant in the fact that pop artists now market sexually explicit songs. Often accompanied with erotic videos to teenagers. This reality surely indicates something of the way sex has come to be the dominant idiom for expressive individualism in our contemporary culture.

But the gospel gives us a more beautiful picture of what sex can be and is for. One not driven by algorithms and marketing, but a picture of Christ's sacrificial love for his church.

Thirdly, and perhaps most clearly, culture sees sexual desire as a primary mode of understanding your identity. And this is unprecedented in history really.

[ 9 : 39 ] I mean, in Peter's context, sex was something you did. There was no category for identifying as gay or heterosexual. But it's a cornerstone of identity today. We are a sexualized culture in almost every dimension.

But the gospel frees us from finding our identity and our feelings and our sexual urges. You are so much more than that. The second thing that Peter draws attention to is alcohol.

And it needs a little exegesis to illustrate that we live in a drinking culture. The Bible doesn't forbid alcohol consumption, but it does warn against heavy drinking, as Peter does here. The statistics in Scotland are pretty grim and have been for years. To take one, in 2019, there were over 86,000 ambulance call outs in Scotland because of alcohol related harm. And that's just covering the worst end of the spectrum. We all know that the cultural expectation is that when the weekend rolls around, that the route to a good time is to let yourself get absolutely smashed.

[10:43] But the gospel frees us from being enslaved to the pleasures, but also the damaging effects of alcohol. And as for idols, the third thing that Peter mentions, we may not have statues of Jupiter, Venus or Dionysus, but our culture does worship idols.

The novelist David Foster Wallace, who was not a Christian, observed this very clearly in his 2005 speech to a group of graduating students. He said, I think this is really insightful.

In the day to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough.

Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you.

[11:51] Worship power, and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others. Sorry, I've lost my place. Over others to numb you to your own fear.

Worship your intellect, being seen as smart. You will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is that they're unconscious.

They're default settings. So we might not have the statues, but the concepts that stood behind the statues in Rome are still things that our culture teaches us to bow down before.

Our default setting is worship. Our default setting outside of Christ is idolatry. But the gospel frees us by leading us to the one true God who loves us dearly as an idol never can.

I hope from this brief survey that you get the impression that a life centered on sex, alcohol, and idols is extremely damaging. We live in a culture that teaches an extremely dysfunctional way of life.

[13:00] Dysfunctional sex, dysfunctional drinking, dysfunctional worship. But the gospel gives us a better way. But the pressure to indulge and partake can be hard to resist.

And this is what Peter says. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless wild living and they heap abuse on you. If you don't join in, you're a prude. You're uptight.

You're judgy. You're sexually repressed. You're boring. You're old fashioned. You're puritanical. You might even get the label extreme or hateful.

But Peter reminds his readers that there is a day coming that puts the fleeting pleasures of this life into perspective. The world's last night. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

For this is the reason the gospel was preached, even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

[14:05] One day, Jesus will return. One day, everyone who ever lived will have to give account for their lives. It's an incredibly sobering reality and one which we shouldn't relish.

And Peter's point in these verses is that the day when Christ returns should give us direction for how we live, not how people respond to us today.

In the pressure cooker of each day, when people respond to us poorly or negatively, it can have a huge impact. The temptation can be to just do what everyone else does.

Peter's readers were suffering because they were Christians. It would have been much easier for them to take the when in the Roman Empire, do as the Romans do approach. And at the very least, the pressure of culture often makes us more inclined to be less overt about who we follow and pursue a course of careful silence.

But when we take a step outside of the pressure cooker of the present and look at eternity, Peter urges us to live in light of Jesus' return and the fact that everyone will have to give an account to

him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

[ 15 : 19 ] And this, he reminds us, is why the gospel is preached even to those who are now dead. What one might ask is the point of hearing the gospel and following Jesus if it makes your life harder and you die anyway?

That's a good question. Peter's answer is that those who are dead who believe the gospel may well be judged unfavorably by the world they leave behind.

But that does not matter. There are many stories of Christians who died for their faith in Christ or in pursuit of sharing Christ. One I reflect on often is the story of the missionary Jim Elliot.

He and four others were killed sharing the gospel with tribes in Ecuador in 1956. Most people would read his biography. He was only 28 when he died and think, what a waste.

But it wasn't. Jim's wife Elizabeth, along with others, was able to continue the work and in time was able to share the gospel with that tribe that had killed her husband.

[ 16 : 26 ] But even if that hadn't happened, Jim Elliot's own words are a helpful reminder that eternity provides the better perspective. He said, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

And this is Peter's point. The world might think you're foolish for following Jesus, that you're wasting your life. But actually, the real waste is not living for Jesus.

Those who followed Jesus and who are now dead will live according to God in the spirit. When Christ returns and the books are opened, the dead in Christ will rise to eternal life and the judge will look at them and say, I died for this one.

Their sins were once as scarlet, but now are white as snow. He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

This life is only temporary. All its pleasures are fleeting. But Christ is forever and his pleasures are eternal. There is a judgment, so do not sin, but hold on instead to what you cannot lose.

[ 17 : 43 ] When we hold on to what we cannot lose, the implication is that we are led into a new way of life, whereby we live now to glorify God.

The end of all things is near, says Peter. What does it mean for him to say that 2,000 years ago? On the first reading, it seems like he maybe made that pronouncement a little prematurely.

What's going on is that the Bible speaks of two ages. There's the present age, defined by sin and death and the power of evil. But there is a second age, the age of blessing and restoration, where sin, death and the powers of evil are absent and abolished.

This is the age of the spirit, the age of new creation. And we live in between the two ages. Jesus has come and the age of the spirit of new creation has broken into the present evil age.

The cross and the resurrection are moments of declaration where Jesus declares that he has defeated sin, death and the devil. But the present age continues.

[ 18 : 49 ] But as it continues, there's now a marked end point. And the new creation has broken into the old. And there is now a day set when the present age will end.

The world's last night. And the clock is ticking. The sand is running out. So when Peter says that the end of all things is near, he means that the coming of new creation and the return of Christ is certain.

We don't know the day. We don't know the day. Even Jesus didn't when he was on earth. But we do have certainty that the world's last night is coming. And what are the implications of that?

Well, just as Peter has warned against living in sin and joining in with a culture ruled by dysfunctional sex, dysfunctional drinking and dysfunctional worship.

Well, he encourages us to live in a better way. And this is the way of the spirit for the age of the spirit that is broken into the present. And so he highlights four things.

[ 19 : 53 ] And I'll run through these relatively quickly. Firstly, a clear mind so that we can pray.

Therefore, be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Because the end of all things is near, one is to be fully in control of one's thoughts.

The Christian is to understand the reality that Christ's resurrection has brought about. And that understanding is to motivate a clear and self-controlled way of life that leads us to prayer.

In the busyness of the daily grind, this is a reminder that prayer is a blessing. What Peter is saying is if we slow down and reflect on the truths of the gospel, that ought to lead us to prayer.

So often, prayer is one of the first things that gets cut out when life ramps up its stresses. But really, it's the last thing that we ought to cut out. There's an end, Peter reminds us.

It could come at any time. Therefore, be clear in your mind about the gospel, about Jesus, and about its implications. And let those truths lead you every day to speak to the God who loves you and who cares for you.

[ 21 : 11 ] Don't sacrifice prayer. Our busy culture would tell us that prayer is unnecessary. But the gospel tells us that prayer and our relationship with our Father is essential.

Don't give up speaking to God. The second thing Peter highlights is love. Above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins.

Love doesn't negate sin or hide sin. That's not what Peter is suggesting. Rather, he's making the simple observation that when we pursue a course of love, it leads us away from sin.

It's very likely that he's riffing on a proverb found in Proverbs chapter 10, which reads, Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs. When we respond in love to sinful behavior, it breaks the cycle.

So often, sin and hatred create cycles. Cycles where people respond to hatred with hatred and to sin with sin. But when we respond with love, the cycle's broken.

[ 22 : 16 ] And love then covers over a multitude of sins that would have otherwise occurred.

Because the wheel of sin has now been shattered. As Jesus loved even those who crucified him, we, his people, must be characterized by a radical love that breaks the cycles of sin and hatred that characterize our world.

And we love because he first loved us. The world's last night is coming. Don't waste your time indulging sin and hatred. Love like Jesus.

Thirdly and relatedly, Peter urges us to be hospitable. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. The gospel showcases the generosity of God.

He has given us what we do not deserve and at a cost which is far higher than we can comprehend. That Jesus died so that we might live forever with him. This is the radical hospitality of God.

And so we too must be gladly hospitable, opening up our homes so that we can showcase the love of God. And it's important that we do this with our church family, but also with others too.

[ 23 : 27 ] So they also can see the gospel in action. Perhaps over coffee even this afternoon, we could all invite someone over this week who we've not had over to our house before.

The world's last night is coming. Let's not waste time. And finally, Peter says we ought to use our gifts to serve others. Each of you should use whatever gift you've received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so 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. God gives his people gifts for the building up of his church. And Peter highlights to speaking and serving.

Some of us are called to speak and minister to others as an ordained responsibility in the church. But all of us are called to do these things according to our gifts and our capacity. We don't all preach, but we must all be speaking the truth and love to one another.

[ 24 : 35 ] Words of power. We all recognize this. When you speak, use your words for good to build others up and show them Christ.

It's particularly when we share the gospel and share our reflections on God's word that we speak the words of God to other people through the spirit of God who dwells in us.

Because by this, we're sharing the very words of God with people who need to hear it. A Christian and non-Christian alike need to hear the voice of God from his word as his people share it.

And it's important that we do because there is an end on the horizon. We also all can serve according to our abilities and capacities. God will give you the strength to serve him and by extension to serve others in many different ways.

It's easy to assume that we're maybe not needed to serve. And it's easy to decide that we're serving enough. But how would you serve if this were the world's last night?

[ 25 : 40 ] When we speak, when we serve, when we use our gifts for the good of others, we're living the spirit filled life in anticipation of the end that is coming.

And when we live like this, not in sin, but in sacrificial love and service, we are glorifying God and praising Jesus.

A life lived in light of the end recognizes that now is the time for service and sacrifice. Because none of us knows when the end might come.

So we head towards a conclusion. I'd like to quote from C.S. Lewis. He had a famous essay which he titled *The World's Last Night* from the poem that I began with.

And he summarizes well how the end guides the Christian to a life of God glorifying service. And he does so using the analogy of a play.

[ 26 : 39 ] He says that the fact that Jesus is returning and the fact that we don't know when the world drama will end, that's what should keep us wanting to serve God day after day.

He says that for some people this might seem intolerably frustrating. So many things would be interrupted. And we all have plans for our lives.

We all have things that we want to see happen. But he says we think this because we keep on assuming that we know the play. We do not know the play. We do not even know whether we're in act one or act five.

We don't know who are the major and who are the minor characters. Only the author knows. But we never seeing the play, as it were, from the outside, never meeting any characters except the tiny minority who we're on the stage with, as it were, who are wholly ignorant of the future and who have a very imperfect view about the past.

We who cannot tell at what moment the end will come. But we shouldn't waste our time guessing when it will be, but living as if it is coming. When it's over, we might be told what it was all about.

[ 27 : 57 ] And we're led to expect that the author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. This is the crucial point. The playing it well is what matters infinitely.

The life that we live right now is what matters infinitely before the curtain comes down and the author himself steps onto the stage once more and new creation comes.

But what is more important? This is where we're going to finish. What is more important than how we play our part is that we know the one who played his part perfectly.

Salvation ultimately comes not from what we do, though what we do is important. Clearly, salvation comes through Christ and what he has done.

It's because of Christ that the world's last night is not a day for the Christian to fear. It's because of Christ that a man like Jim Elliot and many Christians before and after him can believe that he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

[ 29 : 07 ] And the one thing that we cannot lose is Christ. And as Peter does, to him be the glory and the power forever and ever.

Amen. Let's pray. Let's pray.