

The Christian's Duty in a Hostile World, Part 1

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:7a

Code: 60-41

INTRODUCTION

The church today urgently needs spiritual revival. That will occur only when we as Christians fulfill our spiritual duty. When we do, the church will have a greater spiritual impact on the lost world.

A. The Church's Spiritual Condition

1. In the past

Not long ago the church experienced a revival. The Jesus Movement of the 1970s yielded an unprecedented rise in conservative biblical evangelicalism. During that time there was a great interest in evangelism, Bible study, and discipleship. New Bible translations appeared and Christian broadcasting, publishing, and music ministries expanded rapidly. Churches experienced rapid numerical growth, and some built auditoriums that could seat several thousand people.

2. At the present

However, the prevailing trend now in the church is a departure from that time of Spirit-moved revival. The church increasingly has become a popularized institution. As it continues to eliminate any offense from its message, the church has increased its social acceptance. Now it is characterized by self-centeredness, secular psychology, and pragmatism. Today's church asks, Does it work? What will it do for me? How much success will it produce? How much money will it bring in? But instead it should be asking, What honors the heart of God?

This "pop church" is found on "Christian" television, radio, and celebrity variety shows. Entertainment has replaced worship, pride has replaced humility, success has replaced excellence, and cleverness has replaced character. Sometimes Christian radio shows feature guests who make unbiblical claims about God, yet the host makes no attempt to correct it. Psychology and psychiatry have replaced Bible teaching as the staple of Christian radio. And local churches are becoming comfort zones, Christian country clubs, and community centers, with little redemptive impact or threat against sin. There are several main features that categorize this popular Christianity.

a) A new basis of faith Its trend is more subtle than theological liberalism, which directly attacks the church and therefore is easy to see and deal with. The popular church pretends to adhere to the truth, yet quietly undermines it. It substitutes experience, emotion, and problem solving for the Word of God as its basis of faith. Its theology is focused on meeting people's needs. The Charismatic Movement is at the forefront of this new basis of faith with its private revelations, prophecies, and visions. Many Christian ministries are now characterized by pragmatism, manipulation, professionalism, and consumerism. b) A new object of affection Instead of Christ as the object of its affection, the popular church is attracted to a celebrity, an evangelist, a project, a fund-raising campaign, a new building, or supposed miracles and healings. Faith has turned to fantasy with a message of health, wealth, and comfort. In that kind of environment "easy believism" flourishes, so many people who associate themselves with the church aren't even Christians. In the contemporary church much of the emphasis is on solving one's own problems so one can live more comfortably, and there is hardly any focus on Christ's second coming because that would end the pursuit of pleasure and prosperity. So we have to ask, Where is Christ-centered faith that helps a believer stand in the midst of his trials? Fragile emotionalism is selfish escapism, not biblical faith. c) A new goal in life The new goal is happiness and satisfaction, not holiness. Whatever makes a person happy

is what he or she is encouraged to pursue. All those features negatively affect the church's spiritual vitality and are Satan's most effective way to destroy the church. How can the church have revival? What is its focus to be? How can it be useful to God and not lose its power? First Peter 4:7-11 answers those questions.

B. A Christian's Spiritual Motivation

There are several motivating factors to help a Christian be faithful during times of suffering. First, every believer has a precious salvation that demands his or her best effort (1 Pet. 1:12:10). Second, he should live a holy life because God has called him to be a witness for Christ, no matter how difficult it is (1 Pet. 2:114:6). Third, he is to live with Christ's second coming in view, not his difficult circumstances (1 Pet. 4:75:11). Those are the basic motives for living the Christian life.

In his present situation the believer has certain securities against a hostile world (1 Pet. 3:13-17). But in the midst of suffering, what is his duty and what is his incentive for doing it?

LESSON

I. THE INCENTIVE (v. 7a)

"The end of all things is at hand."

The Greek term (telos) translated "end" doesn't necessarily refer to cessation, termination, or some kind of chronological end. The term speaks of consummation, a goal achieved, a purpose attained, or a fulfillment realized. The consummation in view here is Christ's second coming. If it were the consummation of persecution, we might assume an imminent change in government rule whereby its citizens receive benevolent treatment. But this is the consummation of "all things." The second coming is the only time when all things will be consummated. Peter referred to that event, when saying believers are protected by God's power "for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5)--"at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (v. 7).

A. The Imminence of Christ's Return

The verb translated "is at hand" speaks of coming near. Its perfect tense indicates a process consummated with a resulting nearness. That means the event is imminent--it could happen at any moment. A believer is to live with an attitude of anticipation or expectancy because Christ's return is imminent. Anticipating His return is a mark of faithfulness. Many New Testament passages reflect that truth.

1.1 Thessalonians 1:10 -- We're "to wait for [God's] Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come." Paul commended the Thessalonian believers because they were waiting for Jesus Christ to return from heaven. Waiting creates a pilgrim or sojourner mentality, reminding us that we are foreigners in this world with a heavenly citizenship.

2. Acts 1:7 -- Jesus said, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority." God hasn't chosen to tell us when Jesus will come. If we knew the time of Christ's return, it would affect our motivation. If we knew He wasn't coming soon, we would become lazy. On the other hand, if we knew He was coming soon, we'd probably panic. But imminency eliminates both possibilities so that we can live in expectancy.

3. Matthew 24:36 -- Jesus said, "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone." Even in His incarnation, Christ didn't know the time of His return. Only the Father knows that time.

Christ's imminent return is an unpopular doctrine most people today aren't interested in. In fact, one of the compelling reasons people today teach a post-tribulational rapture is that the time scheme allows for plenty of warning prior to His return. They assert that Jesus won't return until the end of the seven-year tribulation period. Consequently, they say believers will live through the tribulation period. If a believer were to know he would live through the tribulation period, that would remove the pressure of expectancy that holds him to a high level of accountability. He would be tempted to think he could live any way he wanted. During the tribulation time he'd recognize the abomination of

desolation in Jerusalem when a sacrifice on the Temple altar is made; he'd know when the seals were broken and the terrible plagues begin; he'd see when the waters turn to blood. If a believer charted his way through that period, he'd have a good idea of when Christ returns and perhaps delay his obedience.

But Christ could return at any moment (1 Pet. 4:7) and when He does He will be "ready to judge the living and the dead" (v. 5). So a believer is accountable for holy living because he expects Christ to come at any moment as Judge. Although the wait for His return might appear to be long, we know "that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8).

4.1 Corinthians 15:51-53--Paul said, "I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality."

The Lord will clothe a believer's body in immortality in the time it takes to refract light off the pupil. The happening is not only sudden but also a mystery, which indicates it hadn't been revealed in the past. The sounding trumpet signifies Christ's imminent return, which is when the change occurs.

5.1 Thessalonians 4:15-17--Paul said, "This we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord."

"By the word of the Lord" speaks of revelation from the Lord Himself about the rapture. And "we" indicates that Paul expected the Lord's return in his lifetime. The church is responsible to live in the light His return.

6. James 5:7-8--"Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

Since the believers were undergoing persecution, James encouraged them to patiently wait for the Lord's return. Obviously Christ didn't return then, but nevertheless the persecuted believers were to live in that expectancy. "Is at hand" speaks of imminency. The reality that Jesus could come at any moment should always be on the heart of every believer.

7. Hebrews 10:25--We should not be "forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near." Believers are to gather together faithfully to comfort each other. There was motivation to do so because the time of Lord's return was approaching. Since we are living about 2,000 years after the letter's writing, there is even more urgency to gather with God's people.

8. Hebrews 12:26-27--In Haggai 2:6 God tells the prophet Haggai that He will remove this material world and establish His eternal kingdom and glory: "'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.' And this expression, 'Yet once more,' denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain." We are to live in light of that glorious future as those in New Testament times did.

9. Revelation 1:3--"Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near." A believer receives divine approval for reading the book of Revelation and observing its content because the Lord could return at any moment.

10. Revelation 22:20--The apostle John said, "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." God's Word is that Christ's coming will be speedy, to which John added his agreement because he too lived in the anticipation of Christ's imminent return.

B. The Presence of the Last Days

1. The early church was already in the last days

First John 2:18 says, "It is the last hour." The apostle John was already living in the last days when he wrote his letter. Second Timothy 3:1 says, "In the last days difficult times will come." The apostle Paul gave a detailed description of people who characterize the last days since the church was already in that time frame. First Timothy 4:1 says, "The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith." Departure from the faith was already happening in the early church, so the Spirit was specific in characterizing it.

2. The last days began with Christ's first coming

a) John 19:30--Jesus said, "It is finished!" The Jewish people who lived during the days of Christ saw an end to the Old Covenant and the inauguration of the New Covenant. The whole system of ceremonies, rituals, sacrifices, priests, and offerings collapsed with the tearing of the Temple veil and the opening of the Holy of Holies to everyone (Matt. 27:51; Heb. 10:14-22). Later, God sent judgment via the Romans to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple. That ended the sacrificial system even to this day. When Jesus was on the cross, He finished the inauguration of the New Covenant. Beforehand He declared, "Not one [Temple] stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down" (Matt. 24:2). The Temple's destruction symbolized the entire Old Testament economy's devastation. The old order ended and the new order of the Messiah began. b) Hebrews 9:26-28--"At the consummation of the ages [Christ] has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him." Christ's first coming "at the consummation of the ages" provided salvation through His death on the cross. Taking us out of the kingdom of darkness and placing us into the kingdom of His Son, Christ provided redemption and forgiveness for our sins (Col. 1:13-14). He established His authority and began to build His kingdom, having defeated sin and death. We are living in the last days of that kingdom, which is spiritual and inward. On the other hand, Christ's second coming will be to establish His earthly kingdom. With His incarnation the kingdom came in a state of grace, but when He returns, it will come in a state of glory. Christ's death, resurrection, and exaltation to the Father's right hand brought in the dawn of a new era. The Messiah's kingdom exists here now as a spiritual reality, and will soon appear in its visible form.

C. The Godly Effect of Expecting Christ's Return

Christ's imminent coming should lead us to a godly attitude and holy living, not turn us into zealous fanatics or lazy dreamers who do nothing but lie around. Scripture indicates that His coming should make us watchful pursuers of righteousness.

1. 2 Corinthians 5:9-10--"We have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

The mark of every true Christian is a desire to please Christ. Not wanting to please Him indicates an absence of spiritual life. One of the motivating factors for wanting to please Him is knowing you will someday stand before Jesus Christ and give account of your life. The believer's sins won't be judged because Christ already washed them away through His blood. Rather, Christ will reveal whether his works were good or useless. Effectiveness, dedication, devotion, service, and usefulness of a believer's life will be accounted for in Christ's presence. At that time the believer will know to what degree he or she pleased Christ.

My grandfather wrote a poem in his Bible that I memorized many years ago. It goes something like this:

"When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ and He shows His plan for me, the plan of my life as it might have been, and I see how I blocked Him here and checked Him there and would not yield my will, will there be grief in my Savior's eyes, grief though He loves me still? He would have me rich, yet I stand there poor, stripped of all but His grace while memory runs like a haunted thing down a path I

can't retrace. And then my desolate heart may well nigh break with tears I cannot shed. I will cover my face with my empty hands. I will bow my uncrowned head. O Lord, of the years that are left to me, I give them to Thy hand. Take me and break me and mold me to the pattern that Thou hast planned." No believer who desires to please Christ and who lives in light of His imminent return will want to be empty-handed.

2. 2 Peter 3:14, 18--"Since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless.... Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." As a thief comes unannounced, so Christ's coming will be unannounced (2 Pet. 3:10). A believer is "looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God" (v. 12). Wanting to live in blissful perfection, the believer hopes that coming is soon. When it does happen, we who know Christ will dwell in a sin-free environment in "new heavens and a new earth" (v. 13). In anticipation of that day, a believer desires to live in holiness by cultivating his relationship with Christ.

3. 1 John 3:2-3--"We are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." Every believer should long to be like Christ. That was Paul's yearning when he said, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). Knowing we will face Christ instills a desire for purity.

4. 1 John 2:28--"Abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming." A believer wants to meet Christ with joyful assurance, not with regret, like an unbeliever would. To do so he must live in holiness, expecting the Lord's return at any moment. Paul said a divine reward awaits those who anticipate our Lord's return in that way (2 Tim. 4:8).

CONCLUSION

Jesus said, "Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps alight. And be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them" (Luke 12:35-37). When Christ comes, He will serve those who looked for Him.

However, Jesus warned, "Be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will" (Matt. 24:42-44). Christ's words are a warning not only to the lost but also to believers. We too must be ready because we don't know the moment of Christ's coming. And that's an incentive for holy living!

Focusing on the Facts

1. What characterizes the church's present spiritual condition?
2. What should be the basis of the believer's faith, the object of his affection, and his goal in life?
3. What are some motivating factors to help a believer be faithful in suffering?
4. What does "the end of all things" refer to in 1 Peter 4:7?
5. What does "is at hand" speak of in 1 Peter 4:7?
6. How should waiting for the Lord's return affect a believer's thinking?
7. How could knowing the time of the Lord's return affect a believer's conduct?
8. James encouraged suffering believers to wait for the Lord's return (James 5:7-8).
9. What is a motivating factor in believers' gathering together for worship (Heb. 10:25)?
10. How do we know the early church was already in the last days? Support your answer with

Scripture.

11. Explain how 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 should motivate a Christian to please Christ.
12. What was Paul's goal in life (Phil. 3:14)? What will that goal instill in a believer (1 John 3:2-3)?
13. What awaits a believer who lives to please himself (1 John 2:28)?
14. Those who look for the Lord's return and live to please Him can expect a (2 Tim. 4:8).
15. What is Christ's attitude toward those who look for His return (Luke 12:35-37)?
16. Summarize the meaning of Christ's warning in Matthew 24:42-44.

Pondering the Principles

1. Christ's first coming provided salvation through His death on the cross. The Puritan Thomas Boston depicted Christ presenting a sinner to the Father in this way: "Father, here is a poor creature that was born in sin, and hath lived in rebellion all his days; he hath broken all thy laws, and deserves all thy wrath; yet he is one of that number that thou gavest me before the world began; and I have made full payment to thy justice by my blood for all his debt; and now I have opened his eyes to see the sinfulness and misery of his condition: I have broken his heart for his rebellions against thee, and bowed his will into obedience to the offer of thy grace: I have united him to me by faith.... Since he is mine by regeneration, let him also become thine.... Since thy justice is satisfied for his sins, let thine anger also be turned away, and receive him graciously into favour" (The Beauties of Boston, Samuel M'Millan, ed. [Inverness: Christian Focus, 1979], p. 205). Has Christ forgiven your sins so that you can anticipate His second coming with delight? If you are a believer, read 1 Peter 1:3-5 and offer thanksgiving to the Lord for His saving work through Christ's "precious blood" (v. 19).
2. Paul's ambition was to please Christ through holy living (2 Cor. 5:9-10). J. C. Ryle said, "A holy man will follow after spiritual-mindedness. He will endeavour to set his affections entirely on things above, and to hold things on earth with a very loose hand. He will not neglect the business of the life that now is; but the first place in his mind and thoughts will be given to the life to come. He will aim to live like one whose treasure is in heaven, and to pass through this world like a stranger and pilgrim travelling to his home" (Holiness, [Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1987], p. 37). Ask the Lord to help you look for His coming so that "you seek first His kingdom and righteousness" (Matt. 6:33).

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