

As The End Approaches, Part One

1 Peter 4:7-11

It began August 13 of 1992 as a patch of thunderstorms over western Africa, then moved out over the Atlantic Ocean as a rain-filled low-pressure wave. Using satellites, the U. S. Weather Service began watching it as a matter of routine, since many of these low-pressure waves develop into hurricanes every year. By August 17, the system had developed into a tropical storm named Andrew. Still weak and disorganized, the storm began to veer off to the north.

But on Saturday, August 22, the winds had reached hurricane strength of 74 miles an hour, and by Sunday, the winds had doubled to 150 miles per hour. Early Monday morning, the monster hurricane hit south Dade County, Florida, creating a zone of devastation larger than the city of Chicago. It is now known as the fourth strongest hurricane to hit the U.S. More than 160,000 people were left homeless. Forty-three lost their lives. Thirty billion dollars' worth of property was completely destroyed. Thousands of cars and hundreds of boats were simply stacked into piles. Almost every tree had either been blown down or stripped of its leaves.

There are two details I would like to point out to you today. First, building codes in south Florida required that houses be able to withstand winds of 120 miles per hour, but Hurricane Andrew exposed shoddy workmanship and cheating contractors. The flimsy roofs, roof shingles which had been stapled on, and wallboard for siding failed long before winds reached that speed. Experts said that damage to many homes occurred because the winds blew out a window, ravaged the interior, and pushed off the roof from inside. If the owners had done something as simple as installing storm shutters over the doors and windows, most of the damage would never have happened. Many lost their homes and everything in them simply because they were not prepared.

The second detail is found in the words of LeRoy Sheats, the founding pastor of a congregation named Southmost Mennonite Church. He and his people gathered near the site of their flattened sanctuary on the Sunday following Andrew's arrival to give thanks. Pastor Sheats pointed to the ruins of their church building and said, "That's only the building. The anchor is solid." (*"Andrew Aftermath,"* by Rick Gore, *National Geographic*, April 1993).

In our days, we can look out across the horizon of our country and our world and see a storm approaching. Here is one glaring example from recent events. In 2003 the Pentagon granted permission to the Southern Baptist Convention to publish Bibles bearing the various insignias of the branches of our military. One person—***one person!***—complained and threatened legal action, and the Pentagon caved. So that permission has been withdrawn. We have the strongest and best-equipped military in the history of the world, yet we cannot stand up to one individual who threatens a lawsuit.

One day after the announcement was made about the Bibles, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced the military would honor the contributions of homosexual service members as part of a month-long celebration proclaimed by our President. So the bottom line is that while our military does not want to be associated with the Bible, they sure don't have any qualms about being associated with ungodly lifestyles.

The storm is gathering strength even as it draws closer. Are we prepared for it? Do we have an anchor which is solid? In this series of messages, we've been locating some anchors we can use to keep us steady in the storms which may come our way before Christ returns. The belief that Jesus was coming again was common in the early Church, and it had a profound impact on the way they conducted themselves.

Paul had written the Christians in Rome, "*The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light*" (Romans 13:12). He told the Philippians, "*Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near*" (Philippians 4:5). Jesus Himself said in Revelation 3:11, "*I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*"

When Peter wrote his first letter, he was trying to warn the followers of Christ to be prepared for the storms of persecution which would descend upon them without warning. He told them in 4:7, "*The end of all things is near.*" Two thousand years have passed since Peter first wrote that, and from a human perspective, it would appear that Peter was incorrect about that. But on God's timetable, next on the agenda is the Return of Christ. On the basis of that fact, then, Peter gave his readers some anchors for their lives as they prepared for the Day of His Return.

Since the coming of Christ is so much closer to us than it was in Peter's day, we would do well to pay attention to these things Peter wrote down. How should we conduct ourselves as the end approaches?

1 **As the end approaches, be clear-minded and self-controlled, v. 7**

We followers of Christ must always be watching and waiting for His return. That doesn't mean that we become lazy, quit our jobs or sell everything we have. Peter gives us a couple of clues as to what our stance should be. Peter used two different words here to describe the way we are to conduct ourselves.

The first word Peter used is "clear-minded," and means "to keep the mind safe." This is especially important in our day, considering the frequency with which someone predicts the day and hour of the Lord's return. Every few years, it seems, someone publishes a pamphlet or a booklet or even a book—and sometimes puts up large billboards!—claiming to have greater insight into the Word of God than anyone, and claiming to have privileged information as to when and where Jesus will return. I've seen otherwise intelligent people get caught up in a frenzy of sorts as they began to re-interpret the Scriptures in light of their newly-found, so-called "knowledge."

When Peter warns us to be clear-minded, he is saying that we should not be caught off-balance by a misinterpretation of prophecy. He is saying that we should not allow someone else's disobedience to Scripture in predicting the date for Christ's return to cause us to lose perspective. Jesus had said in Matthew 25:13. *"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."*

Just before He ascended to heaven, Jesus told His disciples in Acts 1:7, *"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."* When someone claims to have unlocked a secret in the Scriptures for predicting the day and hour of Christ's return, they are dabbling in something which is nobody's business but God's. Peter says, "Protect your mind. Keep your sanity."

One young preacher gave a message on prophecy, in which he tried to explain everything. An older man came up to the preacher after the message and said, "Brother, you must be on the planning committee for the return of Christ!" The preacher said later that he understood what was meant—that it sounded as if he were trying to arrange the time and circumstances for Christ's return. But then the

older man said, “I’ve moved from the program committee to the welcoming committee.” He was saying that as Christians we need to keep our minds clear, and not get involved in setting a date for the coming of Christ. Our duty is to be alert, ready to welcome Jesus the moment He comes.

The other word Peter uses here to describe our conduct as the end approaches is the one translated “self-controlled.” Someone once defined self-controlled as the ability to break a chocolate bar in four pieces with your bare hands, and just eat one of the pieces! That’s not what Peter was talking about here.

The word originally meant “to be sober” as opposed to being drunk with wine, but then came to mean “to act soberly and sensibly.” We are not being told here that Christians are to be gloomy, with frowns and scowls on our faces. Instead, we are to be careful to approach life with responsibility and earnestness. You see, a person under the influence of wine or other liquors is not in control of the self, but neither is the person who is under the misinterpretation of prophecy!

Our world is too often intoxicated by wild thinking and misguided judgments. In a world like that, especially as the end approaches, we Christians are to be careful to be self-controlled, providing a sharp contrast to the way the world thinks. That we are to be **self-controlled** is a command we see in many places in the New Testament.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “*So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and **self-controlled**,*” and a couple of verses later, he wrote, “*But since we belong to the day, let us be **self-controlled**, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet*” (1 Thessalonians 5:6, 8).

Paul wrote Timothy, “***keep your head** in all situations*” (2 Timothy 4:5). Looking forward to the day when Christ will return, Peter wrote, “*Prepare your minds for action; be **self-controlled**; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed*” (1 Peter 1:13).

In each of those places in the New Testament, the word suggests that we come face-to-face with reality, that we not allow ourselves to be tossed around with fleeting whims and desires.

Being clear-minded and self-controlled is so important to the Christian that Peter says we should be giving special attention to it in these days as the end approaches. There are many reasons we could give why this is important, but let's look at the reason Peter gives: *"Be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray."*

So think about that carefully. When our minds are confused and our thinking is distorted, we find it nearly impossible to pray as we ought. When we are not alert or clear-minded in a spiritual sense, we either feel it unnecessary to pray, or else we feel that our prayers are going nowhere. That may be the result of a variety of things, but many times it is because we have not maintained watchful vigilance in our prayer lives. We have allowed too many other things to crowd in upon our minds and cloud up our thinking about God. We have followed the ways of the world in allowing self to be pampered and idolized. Peter is pleading with us to be sure that we approach life with sanity and reason, being careful not to become caught up in either too much emotion or too much sterile logic.

2 As the end approaches, love each other deeply, v. 8

One anonymous author described a "Recipe for a Miserable Life":
Think about yourself. Talk about yourself. Use 'I' as often as possible. Mirror yourself continually in the opinion of others. Listen greedily to what other people say about you. Expect to be appreciated. Be suspicious. Be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive a criticism. Trust nobody but yourself. Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything. Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors shown them. Never forget a service you may have rendered. Be on the lookout for a good time for yourself. Shirk your duties if you can. Do as little as possible for others. Love yourself supremely. Be selfish. (From "Great Quotes and Illustrations," George Sweeting, compiler. Waco: Word, Incorporated, 1985, p. 228)

In contrast to that, Peter wrote, *"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."* Why is that so important? Why can't I just do my own thing and live in my own little world until Jesus comes back? Why all this emphasis on loving each other? When Jesus comes back, He must find His people loving each other in cooperative fellowship and peace with each other.

Pay close attention to how Peter describes the kind of love we are to have for each other until the time Jesus returns. The King James Version says we are to *"have fervent charity,"* for each other, while the New International Version says we are to *"love each other deeply."* The word translated "fervent" or "deeply" is a very

graphic word, which may help us to come to grips with the truth of what this Scripture means.

In the New Testament, the word is nearly always used for stretching out the hand. For example, in Matthew 14:31, when Peter was sinking beneath the waves, the Bible says that Jesus *“reached out his hand and caught him.”* Jesus had said to Peter, *“...when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go”* (John 21:28). So we can see from these uses that a fervent, deep love is one that “stretches out the hands” or one that reaches out to others.

But since the basic meaning is “stretching out,” it was applied in a lot of other ways. For instance, it was used to refer to someone stretching out in sleep, or stretching a part of the body, or even for deploying an army, in the sense that the soldiers were stretched out across the land. In the day in which we live, we Christians should be careful to be reaching out to others, stretching out across the landscape with the love of God as expressed in the Gospel of Christ.

But there was a third way in which the word was used. It described two runners approaching the finish line, as one of them stretches out his body, so that he breaks the tape just a split-second before the other. It described a horse at full gallop, stretching out his legs so that you can see every muscle and ligament straining to reach out to cover more ground.

Apply that to our love for each other in the days which yet remain before Christ returns. Our love should be energetic and straining outward, pushing against the confines of our lives and our world so that we strain toward the finish line. If our love is like that, we find that we have no time for the bickering and fault-finding so characteristic of people who do not know Christ as Lord and Savior.

As the end approaches, will you be clear-minded and self-controlled, so you can pray? Will you stretch out yourself so that you love others inside and outside the family of God fervently and deeply?

The hurricane of turmoil for many who claim to know Christ is brewing on the horizon. What are you doing to prepare for His Coming? Is your anchor solid? Will it hold firmly when the storms break out? Author and Bible teacher Kay Arthur has

written, “If you do not plan to live the Christian life totally committed to knowing your God and to walking in obedience to Him, then don't begin, for this is what Christianity is all about. It is a change of citizenship, a change of governments, a change of allegiance. If you have no intention of letting Christ rule your life, then forget Christianity; it is not for you.”

There are many people who don't realize that the half-hearted, laid-back, convenient brand of Christianity they practice will not help them at all when the storms come. No, the kind of Christianity we're talking about is the kind that puts Christ first ahead of self. It's the kind that remains firm and deeply committed even when it's not convenient. It's the kind that has saturated your very being, the kind that makes you hungry and thirsty to know Christ more and more as the days pass. And yes, the kind of Christianity we read about in the Bible is the kind that will require us to even lay down our lives for Him if the situation requires—which it does right now for millions of people around the world, and may for us one day as well.

That's the kind of Christianity I'm asking you to consider—a lifestyle of following Christ to the ends of the world. Are you ready to make that kind of commitment, which is all the more important as the end approaches?