

# God's Channels of Grace

## 1 Peter 4:7-11

This portion of Peter's letter begins with a striking statement: "*The end of all things is near!*" I can never hear these words without being reminded of an English comedy group that was popular a few decades ago. They called themselves *Beyond the Fringe* and they were known, among other things, for their witty comedy sketches.

One such sketch was entitled, "*The End of the World.*" A small group of zealots had gathered high up on a mountain with their leader. Heedless of the warning of Christ, they had pinned down the end of the world to the exact day and hour. You can imagine what transpired. As the bell tolled at the appointed hour and the group looked wildly around for the expected conflagration ... absolutely nothing happened! Puzzled glances were exchanged until finally one of the members turned to their intrepid leader and asked, "*It was Greenwich Mean Time wasn't it?*"

Often the stuff of comedy sketches is drawn from real life, from the folly of well-meaning people who are heedless of the words of Christ. For example, after 14 years of studying the Bible, William Miller became convinced that Christ would return in 1843. When Miller announced April 3<sup>rd</sup> as the day, some of his followers went to mountaintops, hoping for a head start to heaven. Others were in graveyards, planning to ascend in reunion with their departed loved ones. Some of the "high society" ladies of Philadelphia gathered outside town to avoid having to enter God's Kingdom amid the common herd. When April 3<sup>rd</sup> passed without incident the Millerites, as they were known, were disillusioned, but they took heart. Their leader had predicted a range of dates for Christ's return. They still had until March 21, 1844. So the devout continued to make ready, but again they were disappointed. Yet a third date – October 22, 1844 – was set, but it also passed uneventfully.

Since then, too many well-meaning preachers have made bold predictions that go beyond their knowledge and ignore our Lord's warning concerning his return, that, "*No one knows the day or the hour.*" I can think of one preacher who boldly predicted that the rapture would happen in 1973. Another movement in Bracebridge, Ontario, published a booklet proving that the Lord would return on September 16, 1988.

Why do I mention these things? I do so because these antics have resulted in a measure of disillusionment among Christians. We turn a skeptical eye towards such statements as we find here in 1 Peter 4:7, that "*the end of all things is near.*" When Peter says this, he is focusing on the fact that the greatest event in the history of the world has come and gone – *the first advent of Christ*. Peter considers that the culminating great event of history, the climax, will be the return of our Lord. And, says Peter, the end of history is nearer than the beginning. Peter knows very well that wise believers do not try to set dates for the return of the Lord – but they do watch for it. They watch for the signs of His return. The day of the Lord will come like a thief, but it will come as a surprise and a shock only to those who are not watching and are not ready. In 2 Peter 3:8-9 the apostle will go on to make this observation as well:

***"But do not forget this one thing ... with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."***

I think that it is also tragic that we still have some people in our world who come close to the kind of utopianism that infected our thinking at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before WWI. Some people still cling to what has become known as the “Myth of Progress.”

This is the notion that through scientific endeavor and technological advancement we will eventually perfect human existence. Many things are better than they were thanks to scientific and technological advancement. But morally, as I read the times, things are worse, for now we have technologies that can be used to aid and abet evil imaginations – television, the internet, just to name two. The worldwide web, which has great potential, is also being used to draw many into a web of pornography and violence.

Sadly, the “**Myth of Progress**” has replaced the “**Fact of Final Judgment**” in the world’s thinking. And this is precisely what our friend Peter is pointing to. He is saying to us, “**Our world has almost no belief in a ‘divine end’ to history, but we who call ourselves by the name of Christ must live in the light of His return.**” Peter is saying that our Lord’s return may well be closer than we think – and the day of His return will be a day of judgment. So be “*clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray!*” He means that if we stay alert, then we will be effective in prayer. Thinking that the end of history is at the door and the Judge is about to enter through it can energize one’s prayers and lead to an especially effective focus in those prayers.

Next Peter says, “*Above all love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins*” (v. 8). Peter knows that where there is mutual love in a community of faith, in a local congregation of believers, disagreements and difficulties, misunderstandings and conflicts will be more readily overcome. People who love each other are not necessarily less likely to offend each other from time to time – that can still happen – but they are more willing to forgive and forget, less disposed to nurse bitter roots of animosity. So love each other deeply. The word “deeply” implies that we will have to really work at it. This involves offering hospitality to one another in small groups, just as the early church did. But it involves more.

Peter says, “*Each one should use whatever gift he or she has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms*” (v. 10). Now there are some crucial points that we simply must make here:

- The idea of “faithfully administering” (Gk. *diakoneo*) carries several interesting connotations. It can convey the idea of:
  - Serving others
  - Attending to the interests of others
  - Providing necessities of life for others
  - Waiting upon others; that is, the idea of waiting upon tables and offering food and drink to guests.

So Peter is saying that out of love for one another we are to see ourselves as *waiters* and *waitresses*, virtually supplying necessities of life to each other. But unlike a restaurant waiter or waitress, we have the great privilege of distributing to one another sustenance that is extraordinary. Didn’t our Lord indicate that there is a kind of “bread” greater than ordinary table bread? Yes! It is the bread of life! We bring to each other’s table something far more wonderful and life-giving than mere food. What is it?

- It is the grace of God. Peter said, “faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” One might say that we have the privilege of being channels of God’s grace, God’s loveliness, God’s benefits, God’s favour, in all its diverse, multi-faceted forms. That’s what spiritual gifts are – manifestations of God’s grace in various, diverse, multi-faceted forms. And our individual and collective privilege is to be channels of God’s amazing grace to one another. We should never think of our spiritual gifts in merely technical, clinical or functional ways. They are very functional indeed, very useful in building up each other, but the glory of these gifts is that they are manifestations of God’s activity in our lives.
- Now, not only is a spiritual gift a manifestation of God’s activity in a believer’s life, but it is a reflection of the Giver. So whenever we wait upon one another, serve one another, minister to one another, we are being a reflection of God Himself. What a high calling and great privilege!
- Finally, Peter says that ***“If anyone speaks, he or she should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he or she should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things GOD may be praised through Jesus Christ.”*** What an antidote this is against foolish human pride. When we recognize that our godly words are HIS words, and our godly work is done in HIS strength, we will avoid the deadly pitfall of pride – and all the glory and all the power will be attributed to Him!

You say, “This is inspiring. But I feel so inadequate.” Listen, in 1972, NASA launched the exploratory space probe Pioneer 10. The probe’s primary mission was to reach Jupiter, photograph the giant planet and its moons, and beam data back to earth about Jupiter’s magnetic field, radiation belts, and atmosphere. Scientists regarded this as a bold plan, for at that time no space probe had gone beyond Mars, and they feared that the asteroid belt would destroy the probe before it could reach Jupiter.

But Pioneer 10 accomplished its mission and much more. Swinging past the giant planet in November 1973, Jupiter’s immense gravitational force hurled Pioneer at a higher rate of speed towards the edge of our solar system. On it sped past Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. By 1997, twenty-five years after its launch, Pioneer 10 was more than 6 billion miles from the sun. And despite that immense distance, it continued to beam back radio signals to planet Earth, signals beamed from an 8-watt transmitter, which radiates about as much power as a bedroom night light. The point is this: that little probe finally did much more than it was thought qualified to do.

The NASA scientists had designed it to travel only to Jupiter, and only to transmit data for about three years. It far surpassed all expectations. Now listen, when believers learn to see themselves as being channels of God’s grace and power, then they can far surpass all human expectations. God begins to do through them what only He can do.

We can become pioneers in this great labor of love called service. Until we become channels transmitting God’s power, we have only begun to probe the immense possibilities of His amazing grace. As we do this, those whom we wait on begin to see who He really is. The results are twofold: (1) we have all our needs met in Christ, and (2) He is glorified. We can do this if we are willing to be God’s channels of grace – together.

After WWII ended, a group of German students volunteered to help rebuild an English Cathedral in London. It had been severely damaged by bombing. They did well with most of the Cathedral, except for one statue that had been shattered into many pieces, a marble statue of Christ. It had once stood prominently in front of the Cathedral, a striking figure with our Lord's arms outstretched. The inscription under it had read, "Come unto me."

The students and other workmen were able to find and reconstruct the entire statue, except for the hands, which had been completely demolished. So, when all was finished, they had a statue of Jesus with outstretched arms, but no hands.

They could not decide what to do. Should they make new hands or leave it as it was? Finally, they decided to leave it as it was. Today one can go to London and see that statue of our Lord standing there with no hands. They did, however, change the inscription. It now reads, "He has no hands but ours!"

We are God's hands and feet! All of us together! Let's just serve the Lord by being His servants, waiting upon one another, and even reaching beyond to those outside our walls. This is the way the church is meant to redeem the time as we live in the light of our Lord's return. The end of all things is near!