

Living for Christ with Limited Time

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Date: 16 February 2020

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. As it's been said, we're continuing our series in 1 Peter, looking at the first 11 verses of chapter 4. I think it's a passage that has a lot to say to us and challenging to us as we think about how we live in the limited time that we have in our lives.

Our culture has a really strange relationship with death. On one hand, we hide away from it. I'm sure in most cultures, in most societies around the world and throughout history, it would be completely inconceivable that I could have got to this age without having ever seen a dead body. But on the other hand, it's also obsessed with the idea of morality. People make bucket lists. Lists of things to do before they kick the bucket.

Publishers have jumped on the bandwagon with 1,001 whatever's to do, see, hear, visit before you die. And those of you who are a bit younger than me, tag all your posts with YOLO.

You only live once. It's something I was particularly conscious of towards the end of last year as I was heading towards my 40th birthday.

[1 : 31] And sort of looking back and thinking about, yes, the things I'd achieved. But also possibly the opportunities that may have let pass by.

So with that in mind, let's turn back to the passage that was read to us. Be helpful to keep it in front of you because we're going to be jumping about a bit in it so you can see where we're going.

And so you can confront me at the end if I completely misinterpret what it says there. Because in this passage, Peter talks about how the Christians should live.

But this is mixed through with why. Why should they live this way? Why does it matter? As we read the passage, you may have spotted that's full of words giving reasons.

In verse 1, therefore, since, because. Verse 2, as a result. Verse 3, for. Verse 6, for this is the reason.

[2 : 36] So that. Verse 7, therefore. Verse 11, so that. Peter wants to make sure that they are not just blindly following what he says.

But that they understand why. That they are not about legalistic rule keeping. But that they are about living, intelligent lives of thoughtful worship.

So I want us to take a first pass over the text looking at the reasons why that he gives. And then go back over it to look at how he says that we should live.

One of the reasons that Peter keeps repeating throughout the passage is that time is short. In verse 2, he talks about how the Christian lives the rest of their earthly lives.

And he carries on in verse 3 to say, you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do. You have limited time and you've wasted enough of it already.

[3 : 45] Stop wasting time and get on with it. In verse 4, he compares the Christian life with the reckless, wild living of the people around.

The phrase in some translations, in fact in the older version of the NIV on the pews, translates it as dissipation. Essentially, waste.

Waste. Squandering. Just letting life run away. It's the same word that's used to describe how the prodigal son wasted his inheritance.

But he notes how that will be brought to an end. And they will have to give an account before God for this wasted life. But then we get to verse 6, which says, For this is the reason the gospel is 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.

When you first look at this, it's a confusing verse. You wonder if this is going back to those tricky things that Thomas dealt with last week about imprisoned spirits and such like.

[5 : 09] But in the context, he has just talked about having to give an account to God. And so because of that, it's important that the gospel was preached to those who are now dead, to those who have died since the gospel was first proclaimed, since Christ's death and resurrection.

In Peter's time, that would only be part of a generation. Today, that is many, many generations. We and the world may judge them by human standards.

We may see some of them as great men and women. We may see others of them as tyrants. But many of them we'll see as nobodies that have been completely forgotten to history.

But that is not how God judges them. He knows the heart. And he will judge them on how they responded to the gospel that was preached to them.

And I think that's a key thing to point out here. This passage is not about how to live a good life to please God. Instead, this whole letter is written to Christians.

[6 : 30] It's written to those who have accepted the free gift of salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. It's written to teach them how to live in response to what has been done for them.

If that's not you, then that's the issue you need to be thinking about. But Peter doesn't just want to tell them that life is short.

Because actually, he tells them that time is running out on a far more cosmic scale. In verse 7, he writes, The end of all things is near.

In his second letter, he repeats this idea again, saying, Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?

Even at that time, people were questioning, Will this really happen? Would Christ truly return? They'd waited several years.

[7 : 37] Decades even. But Peter insists that the end is near. And if that was true in around 65 AD, how much more true must it be in 2020?

So it's not just our individual lives that are short. But history itself is rapidly heading towards that day when God will say, Enough is enough.

When he will bring all things to an end. When, as we thought about this morning, he will bring all the earth to justice. And we'll usher in new heavens and new earth.

So Peter wants us to know that time is short. But so what? The world understands that.

We know there is limited time, but why does it matter what we do with that time? Peter bookends this passage with two reasons. Right at the beginning, in verse 1, we read, Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body.

[8 : 52] Immediately we see he starts, Therefore. This is not a standalone passage. He's continuing the argument that he's been going through in the previous passages. In particular, I think this is a reference back to verse 18 of chapter 3, which says, Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

If Christ suffered for our sins, to bring us to God. If, as we read back in chapter 1, we were redeemed by something as valuable as the blood of Christ.

Then, we are under an obligation to live in response to this. Our lives are not our own. And so how we live matters.

But he then finishes the section, in verse 11, with the ultimate reason. The reason that we, and in fact all of creation, exist for.

So that, in all things, God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever.

[10 : 09] Amen. It's not about us. It's not about us feeling fulfilled. It's not about us achieving. It's not even about what we do for others.

Although, as we'll see later, that is important. As the Catechism says, and probably the only line of it I know, man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

forever. So how we use our limited time is important because Christ has died for us. Because we have been redeemed.

And because we were made for an amazing purpose. To bring glory to God. So then, having thought of the reasons of our limited time, of the great price that has been paid to redeem us, what does Peter say about how we should live?

About what we should do? We see back in verse 1, he talks about suffering. It's a major subject of his letter and one that will be dealt with far more fully next week.

[11 : 27] But primarily, he says that just as Christ was willing to suffer for us, we should be willing to suffer for him. He goes on to say, whoever suffers in the body is finished with sin.

Obviously, suffering for Christ does not bring about moral perfection in this life. So what on earth does he mean? I think he's saying here that if we're willing to suffer for Christ, it demonstrates that we are no longer living for the desires of the flesh.

If what is driving us is what feels good, then of course we will not be willing to suffer. Everything in us will flee from it. If we are willing to suffer, it shows that something has changed.

We will still fail. We will still stumble and fall again and again. But that's no longer what defines us. Last week, we were reminded about how baptism demonstrates the fact that our old self has been put to death and that we have been raised to new life in Christ.

[12 : 50] But in Romans chapters 5 to 8 that we studied last year, Paul discusses the complexity of all of this. Yes, we have been made alive in Christ, but we still must daily put to death the deeds of our sinful nature.

I think what Peter is saying here is that if we are willing to suffer for Christ, it shows that sin is no longer our identity. It's no longer what defines who we are.

He continues this in verse 2, writing that we should not be living for evil earthly desires. We're really not sure why the NIV chose to translate it that way, because almost every other translation just talks about human desires.

desires. I think what Peter says is true whether these desires are evil or not. What drives us should not just be what feels good, what our bodies want.

Some of the things we long for may be good in themselves, but they are not what life is about. We are made for far more than that.

[14 : 07] rather than our lives being driven by our own desires, our own ideas, our plans, our own wisdom, Peter says we should be seeking to live for the will of God.

When we make the big decisions in life, or when we make the small ones, when we choose what career to follow, where to live, or how to respond to the person that's just said something that really annoyed you?

Are we just trying to do what feels good, what feels right, or are we seeking to know and learn what would be honouring to God?

He goes on in verse 4 to talk about how we should not be living. I think the key idea that links all of these things together is losing control.

being carried along by our feelings, our fantasies, by losing our inhibitions. But probably one of the least popular parts of the fruit of the spirit is self-control.

[15 : 20] We should not be losing our inhibitions to alcohol, good though it may be in moderation, or allowing ourselves to be controlled by anything else.

But instead, we should be seeking to be led by the spirit. This may make us not fit in with the world around us.

Like Noah, who we thought about this morning, we are sometimes called to go against the flow.

Some people we meet may be curious.

Some may mock, as they can't understand why we don't want to live the same way as they do. But we know why it's important.

We know what we have been made for. We know that we have been redeemed. So Peter then goes on to detail some of the positive things that we should do.

[16 : 20] In particular, how we should respond to the fact that there's so little time. And they're not necessarily the things that we would automatically put top of the list.

Maybe sort of naturally, he starts in verse seven by calling us to be alert and of sober mind so that we can pray.

It's interesting because so often we think of prayer as a means to an end, of a way of achieving something. even if that thing that we're trying to achieve is just a closer relationship with God.

But Peter here sees prayer as an end in itself. Because prayer shouldn't be something that we fit into the gaps, as so often I'm inclined to do.

I think possibly many of us rebel against the sort of perceived legalism of fixed daily quiet times and think that somehow spontaneity is more spiritual.

[17 : 34] But what Peter's telling us here is to shape our whole lives in such a way as to enable prayer. That's what we should be fitting everything else round, not fitting it into the gaps.

We may think that we're too busy to dedicate much time to prayer. But Peter, in light of the fact that we have so little time, puts living a life of prayer as his top priority.

It should be the central focus of our lives. But then the next thing he prioritizes in verse eight is living in community.

He tells us to put loving each other above all. And not just loving each other, but loving each other deeply. This should not just be a passing concern for a brother or sister, but an intense, deep, sacrificial love, a willingness to put ourselves out for the benefit of our brothers.

And the reason he gives is quite interesting. Because love covers a multitude of sins. He's not saying here that love is salvific, that it's a means to gain salvation.

[19 : 06] That is only available as a free gift from God. But what he is saying here is that in our relationships with one another, as we try and live as best as we can as a community of broken people, we will sin against one another.

And it's only if we have that sort of love that we will be able to forgive, that we will be able to put aside our grievances and keep seeking the best for those who have wronged us, knowing that we likewise need forgiven for the way we through our own selfishness, arrogance, pride, and just general carelessness hurt those around us.

To go perhaps slightly off-piste, on Friday many, many cards and gifts were given in the name of love.

many romantic words were spoken, and I don't want to belittle the importance of that for a moment. But this morning, I saw something different.

I watched as a few rose in front of me. John Cameron put his arm round his wife, Rose Marie, and helped her to stand up. That is love.

[20 : 37] The love that is there through thick and thin. the love that is there when it hurts. And that is the love that we are called to. In verse 9, he teaches us to offer hospitality to one another.

And he goes on to say that we should do this without grumbling. I think all of us appreciate generous hospitality, and we often aspire to it, but then allow other things to get in the road. Whether it is being too worried about having to impress with our homes, or our culinary abilities, or just being too keen to keep our own space, and not wanting others intruding on it.

Recently, I had a friend asking if one of their friends could stay with me for the weekend. I must admit that when I initially asked, it took a while to respond.

If I had been my friend himself, yes, I'd have dropped everything immediately, and welcomed the opportunity to spend time with him. But, I felt this would be an intrusion.

[22 : 06] I'd had a hectic week. I just wanted to be able to collapse in a heap, and not worry about anyone else. To be honest, it was partly studying this passage at the time that persuaded me that I should be willing.

And, to be honest, he was no problem at all. And I've welcomed him back several times when he's here tonight. So, yeah, but, I've experienced two great examples of hospitality in my life.

Before coming to Brunfield, I lived and worked for about a year and a bit down in Guernsey. I went along to a small gospel hall there.

There was only about 15 to 20 people, and there were many things that I would have happily changed. But one thing they got right was their welcome.

I was really made to feel part of the family right from the beginning. I was fed four nights a week, every week, for the year and a bit I was there.

[23 : 15] For a young man away from home for the first time in a strange place, that was amazing. second was a woman who used to be in Brunfield, Sheila McBride.

Many of you will have known her, but it's amazing how many of you never met her. In fact, some of you may not even know her name. She was a fairly quiet, unassuming woman who lived alone just across the road from the church, where many people say, oh, drop in at any time.

Sheila meant it. Her door was always open at any time of day or night. As students, we'd be frequently there for a Sunday lunch, and it was always full three courses, the full Sunday roast, all the trimmings, and we were gathered there around huge dining table, and another table set up in the corner to take the overflow.

She frequently had one or more guests staying with her, even sometimes when she wasn't even there herself. I remember one time turning up at her door at about half ten at night.

I've locked myself out my flat, and my flatmate's not back till tomorrow. Do you have a bed for the night? And unquestioningly, I was welcomed in.

[24 : 51] We sat and talked for several hours, and before heading off to bed. When at the end she was seriously ill, it was announced that visiting was for family and close friends only.

But they discovered a slight problem. There was an awful lot of people who considered they were close friends. When John Gemmel, our previous pastor, first came to Brunsfield, probably about a year after Sheila's death, he made a point of meeting up with as many people in the church as possible and talking to them about the church.

And he commented that almost everyone he spoke to mentioned the huge influence that Sheila had had on the life of the church. And so finally, in verses 10 and 11, Peter teaches us to use all of the gifts that God has given us to serve others.

For some of us, like Sheila, that gift may be going way above and beyond expectations in hospitality. For others, it may be a great ability to get alongside those who do not yet believe and share the gospel with them in a way that they can relate to.

For others, it may be being great at encouraging those around you to keep on in their Christian faith, to listen to their struggles, their difficulties, their doubts, to offer wise, godly advice.

[26 : 41] For others, you may be those people whose life is defined by prayer, who spend much time alone interceding for brothers and sisters around the world.

We're told to do whatever we do as faithful stewards, recognizing that God has graciously given us these gifts, not to use for our own benefits, but for that of others.

He specifically focuses down in verse 11 on anyone who speaks. That's particularly humbling when in this position.

conversation. But I don't think it just means in this context, but whenever we speak of God and his word, in public, in small groups, in our homes, one-to-one, in any of these situations, we have to make sure that we are not saying what we want to say, or what we think our hearers want to hear, but that we're trying as much as we are able to keep faithful to God's word and to allow him to speak through us.

But of whatever we say, whatever we do, however we serve, Peter reminds us in verse 11, that we cannot do it by our own strength.

[28 : 21] We can't love as we need to. We can't share hospitality as we should. We can't speak the right words in the right way at the right time by our own strength.

Instead, we must do everything relying on the strength that God provides to us. And so as we draw to an end, we've seen that Peter agrees with the slogan, you only live once.

As C.T. Stud, the English international cricketer who gave up a life of fame and fortune to go as a missionary to China and beyond, famously wrote, only one life will soon be passed.

Only what's done for Christ will last. It doesn't matter if you visit all 1001 buildings and have only managed 108 on the list so far.

Watch all 1001 films or whatever. Ultimately, at the end, it doesn't matter. Do you want to be remembered at your funeral by those who knew you for having done all the amazing things on your bucket list?

[29 : 41] Or do you want to stand before the throne of God after a life of service to him and hear the words, well done, good and faithful servant?

for some, like Sheila, our lives may be cut short by illness. For others, like her father who's commemorated the plaque on the back pew, we may live past 100.

Either way, time is limited. So what we do for Christ matters. Others. I'd like to finish with the words of a hymn that were quoted at my gran's funeral.

Don't remember much else of it. It was quite a long time ago, but this stuck with me, and I hope it's a challenge to all of us. We bear the torch that flaming fell from the hands of those who gave their lives proclaiming that Jesus died and rose.

Ours is the same commission, the same glad message ours, fired by the same ambition. To you we yield our powers.

[30 : 58] O Father who sustained them, O Spirit who inspired, Saviour whose love constrained them to toil with zeal untired.

From cowardice defend us, from lethargy awake, forth on your errands send us to labour for your sake.

Amen.