

## **I Peter 4:7-11 in the context of I Peter**

The main theme of 4:7-11 is that the consummation of all things is close at hand and therefore, believers must live in a certain fashion. This flows well with the overall theme of Peter's book and even may be thought of as a summary of the book up to this point. "There is no book in the New Testament where the eschatology is more closely integrated with the teaching of the document as a whole." (Russell p. 79). There are many references to last things and future hope throughout the book of First Peter: living hope (1:3), inheritance ... kept in heaven (1:4), salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1: 5) , when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:7), goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1: 9) , glories that would follow (1: 11) , the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:13), revealed in these last times (1:20), on the day he visits us (2:12), they will have to give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (4:5), when his glory is revealed (4:13), for it is time for judgement to begin (4:17), when the chief shepherd appears (5:4), who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong (5:10). There are also many references to the proper kinds of behavior in light of the eschatological hope, some of which parallel the imperatives given in this section: be self-controlled (1:13), have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart (1:22), live as servants of God (2:16), so that nothing will hinder your prayers (3:7), not live the rest of his earthly life for evil desires, but rather for the will of God (4:2). In the context of the book as a whole, it is one in a series of ethical imperatives throughout the book based upon some theological fact. Some divide the book of First Peter into three sections based upon the phrase "dear friends", (1:1-2:10; 2:11-4:11; and 4:12-5:13). This section would fall at the end of the second section which is evidenced by the presence of a doxology in verse 11. It seems to be a summary, not only of the second section, but of the book as a whole and many have postulated that the book originally ended after verse ii.

## **Theological Themes and Application**

The end is at hand. We must always be aware of the certainty of Jesus' second coming and live in a manner that befits this fact. While the New Testament as a whole, as well as Peter in this epistle, teaches that we live in a time of eschatological fulfillment, this section stresses that there is still to come a consummation. Both sides of the paradox must be upheld and Peter tells us to live life in view of the coming judgement and reward.

There are certain things that must be done in light of the fact of coming consummation. There are certain imperatives for Christian believers. These are as follows:

We are to be clear minded and self controlled for the purpose of prayer. Christians must have a clear head about them, neither given to drunkenness or fanaticism. Christians must take a sober look at reality in order to pray with the proper focus and intensity and for the proper things. We are to keep our head in all kinds of situations and be calm enough to take the proper action not based upon frantic emotion but on what is right for the situation. This again, is especially imperative for our prayer life. We must look at things with the proper mindset if we are to pray in God's will. God has everything in control, and so we must accordingly be self controlled. We are to love each other fervently. This is modeled by the nature of God who loves with an everlasting intense love. This is to be of utmost importance and is to be an outward love that has one another as its object. This love shows itself in many ways, one way is that it covers over sins and does not broadcast them.

We are to practice hospitality to one another without grumbling. Our hospitality is both an expression of fervent love as well as a display of the nature of God. It also meets very practical needs such as those that were met in the first century. As Christians, we must be open to aiding people in the same way without grumbling when we can.

God has given every Christian spiritual gifts to be used. These are not necessarily miraculous gifts but whatever they are, they are to be used for the good of the Christian community and outreach to the world. The stress is that we do not hoard these things for our benefit, but have the attitude that they are entrusted to us for the benefit of all and we will have to give an account for the way in which we used them. We are to be both reverent and joyous about being stewards of God's manifold grace and use it in whatever way we can. This is to be in the context of service of each other, even if in humble and debasing ways.

If we are given the ministry of speaking, in whatever context, we are to speak with the seriousness and reverence that would befit one who speaks oracles that come from God. If we are given the ministry of service, whatever the context, we are to serve wholeheartedly as if serving with the strength that God provides in abundance.

The purpose of our levelheaded prayer, love, hospitality, and service is the glory and praise of God. We are to do all things in a way that is glorifying to God and so that those who see us will likewise glorify God for his grace through us. In everything God is to be glorified. This glory comes through Christ. Christ has all glory and power forever. He is not separated from God the Father in his glory and power but both likewise have the same glory and power through one another. All of our acts and service are to be one to another, not inward but outward and reciprocal. The nature of God is seen in the kind of loving service he requires, which flows from his loving service to us. He is shown as the one who is love and who does cover all of our sins completely. He is shown as the one who is hospitable and welcomes us into his family without any desert on our part. He is the one who gives gifts to be shared abroad in the same spirit in which he gave them. He is the one who gives his manifold grace for our benefit and entrusts it to our care. He is the one who provides both the oracles and the strength to enable us to serve and speak. He is the God who has all glory and power and who is glorified in our acts.

## Excursus

### The meaning of "love covers a multitude of sins"

The phrase "love covers a multitude of sins," in I Pet 4:8 is somewhat a problem for interpretation. There are several possibilities for interpretation, each having its own strengths and weaknesses. The keys for interpretation lie in the meanings of the connecting conjunction ὅτι, the meaning of the word "covers", the reference of the word love in relation to sins, and the theology taught by all of the above factors.

The first view is that the love comes from the same person who's sins are covered. This takes covered to mean atoned for in the Old Testament sense of the word covered as seen in Ps 32: 1. In this interpretation the conjunction ὅτι has causal significance, giving ground for loving, in that by doing so, ones sins are atoned for. This view seems at first glance to be akin to James 5:20 and Luke 7:47. The obvious problem of this view is that it teaches salvation by works, which is untenable in light of the teaching of the New Testament as a whole.

The second view is to see the word love to refer to the love of God in his atoning for man's sins. This view would say that because God is such as to love in this way, we must follow his lead and do so also. This using God's love as a ground for our love is common in the Bible, but this view is weak in that God or his love is nowhere explicitly mentioned in this passage and it is a stretch to intimate such a meaning in this context.

The third view is to take the ὅτι to introduce indirect discourse as a quotation of Proverbs 10: 12. The plain meaning from the parallelism in proverbs is that love does not broadcast the sins of others, but instead covers them from common sight. This does not teach the condoning of sin but rather the prudence in not broadcasting sin through gossip or the like. The weakness of this view is that ὅτι used to introduce discourse usually comes with a verb of speaking or writing, etc., i.e. "he said that..." or "it is written that..." This type of formula is absent from the present passage.

There is a fourth option that takes ὅτι in a more natural sense without violating the theology of the Bible. This view takes the phrase to be a loose reference of Prov 10:12 without actually being a quotation requiring some kind of discourse formula. Peter's book is full of Old Testament quotations and even possibly a loose reference to a current proverbial expression (4:1b). This view would take the conjunction to be a marker of ground and the phrase to mean, "love one another because love acts in this particular way (which is beneficial) and we must live up to this standard." This view does not alleviate all the problems or give the easiest rendering, but based upon the preceding data, I choose it to be the best option in my opinion.

## **Excursus**

### **Peter's reference to the End of all things being near**

In I Peter 4:7, Peter says that the end of all things is at hand. This has presented problems to some as to its exact reference. Some have taken it to mean that Peter thought that the return of Christ would happen in his lifetime and was therefore mistaken. This view would call into question the authority of the Bible because this most certainly did not come true and has yet to come true after almost two thousand years. This view however is based upon unjustified speculation into the mind of the author and is unacceptable on the grounds that the language is explainable while still holding a high view of inspiration. Another view would take the word "near" in relative terms saying that "to God, a thousand years is as a day" and so to him this length of time is still within the concept of "near". This view however is not the understanding of time that the original author or readers would have had at the time and goes against the data.

A third view is that the reference is that each person would soon pass into eternity at his death and therefore the end is near for all. This view is clearly a condescension to an easy way out of the supposed problems and has absolutely no validity in the understanding of the original readers or the passage as a whole.

The supposed problems are alleviated if the passage is seen in light of the exegesis above, that the nearness was not a temporal reference as much as a reference of certainty and immanence. Peter is speaking of the παρουσία being next in line on the divine prophetic plan for history. Peter is not necessarily setting dates, but stating that after Christ, the rest of history is much like a footnote. The end of all things, to borrow an illustration, is no longer approaching history, but now running along side of history in fulfillment without complete consummation. Thus Peter can speak of its "having drawn near" without the problems that come from a strictly temporal reference. This eschatological meaning, as stated above, gives the best sense of the passage in the context of the eschatology of I Peter and the New Testament as a whole.