

TWO MINUTES TILL MIDNIGHT

FEARLESS LIVING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES



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How close are we to the end of the world?

Since 1947, a magazine called the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has kept the “Doomsday Clock” to show how close we are to global catastrophe. As the situation in the world gets better or worse, the hands of the clock are set closer or further away from midnight. On January 25, 2018 the clock was set at two minutes till midnight, the closest it’s been since the height of the Cold War in 1953. The scientists cited the proliferation of nuclear weapons as a major reason to adjust the clock.

We are dancing with disaster.

Recently Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his country had developed a new “super-missile” that can’t be stopped by conventional defense systems. Footage accompanying the announcement seemed to picture a missile heading toward the US.

Consider these headlines:

“When Will We Have Another World War? History Says Soon.”

“Battered, Bruised and Jumpy—The Whole World is on Edge.”

“Is the Global Economy Facing a Financial Armageddon?”

The situation in the world has become so unstable that catastrophe could happen at any moment. We’re hearing people use words like “Armageddon” and the “End of Days” to describe what may lie ahead for planet earth.

No wonder many people are preparing for the worst.

When I was a child, my mother taught me a bedtime prayer I said every night. It goes like this: “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Although I never thought about it when I was young, it’s a heavy thing for a five-year-old to pray, “If I should die before I wake.”

What if that bedtime prayer finally came true? What if, after years of rising and shining, the sun doesn’t come up for you? What if you knew this would be your final day on earth? What if you knew you would not live to see another sunrise? What would you do? How would you live?

What if the scientists are right, and we are truly only two minutes away from midnight? What if World War III breaks out? Those questions are not as farfetched as they used to be.

Something like that was on Peter’s mind when he said, “**The end of all things is at hand**” (1 Peter 4:7). The phrase certainly includes the day of our death. *But his words go beyond that to encompass the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.* How close are we to that day? The New Testament tells us his return is not far away:

“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here” (Romans 13:12).

“The Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:5).

“The Lord’s coming is near” (James 5:8).

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

How soon is soon? If you have read *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C. S. Lewis, you may remember this conversation between Lucy and Aslan, the lion who is the Christ-figure in the story:

“Do not look so sad. We shall meet soon again.”

“Please, Aslan,” said Lucy, “what do you call soon?”

“I call all times soon,” said Aslan; and instantly he was vanished away.

Are We There Yet?

We can say the same thing about the Lord’s return. Since God does not reckon time the same way we do, we know Christ’s coming was “soon” 2,000 years ago, and 1,000 years ago, and 500 years ago, and 50 years ago, and five years ago. Think how close we must be now. As we travel onward, the Lord’s coming is always close and coming closer at the same time.

When Billy Graham preached on the Second Coming of Christ, he often told the story of a grandfather clock whose chimes rang every hour, once for one o’clock, twice for two o’clock, and so on. One night the clock malfunctioned, causing the chimes to ring thirteen times. A little boy heard it and raced through the house yelling “Get up, everyone get up! It’s later than it’s ever been.” How true that is. It’s later than it’s ever been, and we’re closer to the Second Coming than ever before.

If we believe that, what difference should it make? In 1 Peter 4:7-11 we discover four principles for fearless living in uncertain times. This is God's message to those living "two minutes till midnight."

1: KEEP YOUR EMOTIONS UNDER CONTROL SO YOU CAN PRAY.

"Be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray" (v. 7).

The Greek word translated "clear minded" is the word used for the man with the legion of demons after Christ healed him (Mark 5:1-20). With the demons gone, he was in his "right mind." *The term describes a state of emotional control so that under pressure, you don't wilt or waver or give in to anger or fear or otherwise lose your composure.* It's what happens when the Golden State Warriors are trailing late in the game. As the seconds tick away, the Warriors remain cool, calm, deliberate and determined. There is no fear in their eyes. The crowd counts down the seconds: 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1. Steph Curry takes a shot from five feet beyond the three-point line. As Dick Vitale would say, "Nothing but net, Baby!" The Warriors win because they kept their composure in a pressure situation.

Many people can't take the pressure of life. They just can't handle it. They get stressed by the constant flow of information. Worldwide 269 billion emails are sent each day. That doesn't include text messages, tweets, Facebook posts, or any social media at all. It's overwhelming to think about.

It feels like the national blood pressure has gone up a hundred points in the last several years. Critical impatience has replaced our usual self-assurance. I see it every day when I drive in traffic. In the old days, if you paused for a second when the light turned green, people waited patiently. Now they hit the horn, and then they hit it again. We get angry quicker, and when we get angry, we lose our temper.

To survive you need to be clear-minded so you can see things in their proper perspective. Why? Peter says **"so that you can pray."** When you are always uptight, always running from one thing to another, stressed to the max, it's easy to become distracted, bothered, and controlled by your circumstances. What happens? You can't pray. Your mind won't stop whizzing and worrying. When we are wound up like a top, we can't slow down or focus long enough to pray.

I ran across a sentence that grabbed my attention: "If we live without prayer, we will die without hope." It's not easy to persevere. Complaining seems to come naturally to most of us. But the moment we start to pray, suddenly we can hear music a mile away, we remember a conversation we had last week, and before long, we're not praying because we have been distracted. The point is: *In light of the approaching end of the age, don't*

panic—pray! Keep it together between your ears so you can pray. Start praying early in the morning—as soon as you wake up—before the pressure of the day wraps its arms around you. Start with prayer, and you’re likely to remain cool, calm and collected all day long.

2: BE QUICK TO FORGIVE THE STUPID THINGS PEOPLE DO.

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins” (v. 8).

The word “deeply” might be better translated “fervently.” It pictures a runner straining for the tape, a basketball player leaping for a rebound, or an outfielder stretching for a fly ball. It means “stretched-out love.” It’s love that goes on and on and on. We must make that sort of effort because true love is difficult. It costs something. Once you get to know another person, real love means going to the wall for them, stretching to the limit, putting yourself in a place where you can be hurt.

That’s why Peter says, “**Above all, love each other deeply.**” We are to love each other with a stretched-out love because “**love covers a multitude of sins.**” Every time someone wrongs me I have two choices. I can deal with it, forgive it, and move on, or I can drag that person through the mud and stir up all kinds of dissension.

Love refuses to wash its dirty laundry in public. Love handles it privately, it goes out of its way to veil sin, to treat it discreetly. It is exactly the opposite of hatred that exposes weakness and humiliates someone else. Love deals with sin publicly only as a last resort.

First there is love, then there is forgiveness, then there is silence. Love has a short memory and sealed lips. We need this truth because others will fail us a “multitude” of times. Love isn’t surprised when close friends fail, isn’t surprised when promises aren’t kept, isn’t surprised when others write unkind emails, and isn’t surprised when we are criticized unfairly. *Fervent love expects others to fail, expects to be hurt, and expects to be used unfairly.* It goes on loving anyway.

Over the years I have performed many wedding ceremonies. The same thought comes to me each time when I see the radiant bride standing before me with the slightly befuddled groom at her side. I look at them and think: “They don’t have a clue.” How could they? I didn’t have a clue when I got married. You learn so much in just the first few weeks, and still, you don’t know much at all. Even after a few years, you’re still learning and growing. Marlene and I have been married for 43 years, and we’re learning all the time. No one really “has a clue” when they get married. *If your marriage is going to succeed, love will have to cover a multitude of sins.*

The same is true of the church. No church can survive very long unless the members decide that love will cover a multitude of sins. The same is true where you work. No one can stay at any job for any length of time unless love covers a multitude of sins. This applies to every part of life. Because sin is everywhere, love must stretch out to cover it. Without that “stretched-out” love, we will never be able to live together.

Too many people get their feelings hurt too easily. A touchy Christian is a contradiction in terms. Here’s the worst of it. While you sit at home stewing in your juices because your feelings got hurt, the person who hurt you is out having a good time because he doesn’t even realize he hurt your feelings.

In a practical sense, what does it mean to “cover” the sins of others? Here are a few suggestions:

- You don’t talk about it all the time.
- You don’t try to intimidate people.
- You don’t keep reminding others of their sin.
- You pray for God to bless them.
- You move forward with your own life.

This is a big part of your job description as a Christian. You are to cover the sins of others. If that seems hard, just go and do for others what Jesus has done for you. We are to extend grace to others as God has extended grace to us. We who have been showered with God’s grace in Christ are to give to other undeserving sinners (who have sinned against us) the same outpouring of grace. From God to us to others. Grace to us, grace to others. This is God’s plan.

3: STOP COMPLAINING AND START SHARING WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN YOU.

“Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling” (v. 9).

The word hospitality means kindness shown to strangers. That was vitally important in the early church because they didn’t have buildings. In that day traveling Bible teachers and evangelists would come to a town and stay with a local family. They had to because they didn’t have a Sheraton or a Hilton or a Holiday Inn. The inns they did have were filthy and dangerous. The first Christians depended on hospitality as they spread the gospel. Welcoming other believers into your home was a matter of honor.

But there is a qualification. We are to do it **“without grumbling.”** The Greek word means to “mumble under your breath.” But why would anyone grumble about hospitality? Most of us don’t look at our homes the way the early Christians looked at theirs. They saw their homes as not only a shelter for their families but also as a tool for ministry. They understood

God had given them a place to live not just to get away from the world but also as a means for ministering to others.

Far too many of us view our homes as a shelter for our family and nothing more. If we crack open the doors at all, it is to entertain a few close friends. *But hospitality and entertaining are two different things.* Opening your home to close friends is a given. You start there. But Peter is talking about using your home to minister to those you don't know very well. It certainly includes Christians from other nations. But it also includes refugees, missionaries, families in need, unwed mothers, and displaced children needing a place to stay.

God gave you a home for two primary reasons: *First, as a shelter for your family and second, as a tool for ministry.* It was never meant to be a monument to your net worth, a badge of your status, or a refuge in which to hide from the world. It is not a castle in which you entertain your relatives and chosen friends, or a museum for your china, a gallery for your pictures, a garden for your flowers, a playground for your kids, or a showroom for your furniture. God gave you a home to shelter your family and to minister to others.

Your home is your single best tool for evangelism and Christian ministry. Hospitality is one way to show fervent love for other believers. If you don't know where to start, invite someone to eat lunch with you today. Or if that scares you, do it next Sunday. As the end of all things draws near, it will become increasingly important for Christians to open their homes to each other.

There is one final point Peter makes about living in the last days.

4: USE YOUR GIFTS TO BLESS OTHERS.

“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others” (v. 10).

In that little phrase we learn three things: 1) Every believer has a spiritual gift, 2) Your gift may not be the same as anyone else's, and 3) You are to use your gift to serve others. Verse 11 categorizes spiritual gifts into two groups—the speaking gifts and the helping gifts. Speaking includes anyone who teaches the Word of God, whether publicly or privately, whether to a group or one-on-one. It includes speaking from a pulpit or in a small group or to a Sunday School class. Peter says, if you speak, make sure you speak the very words of God. Let your words be based on God's Word.

Helping gifts include everything else in the church, such as cooking a meal for a new mother, cleaning up after a church event, driving the bus, counting the offering, stacking chairs in the dining room, serving at a satellite campus, changing diapers in the nursery, visiting the sick, calling a friend on the phone, writing a note of encouragement, giving money, praying, counseling, ushering, singing, or volunteering to drive kids to camp. It includes any of the 1,001 other things that keep the

church going. Whatever your gift is, do it in the mighty strength which God supplies.

When you stand before the Lord someday, he is going to ask you, "What did you do with what I gave you?" You won't be quizzed about anyone else, but you will have to give an account of your stewardship.

Ponder these questions:

- How are you using the gifts God has given you?
- Who have you helped along the way?
- Is your church better and stronger because you are here?
- Are you wasting God's gifts or are you using them for his glory?

In World War II, a French village had a statue of Jesus in their town square. When the bombing came, the statue was damaged, and pieces were broken off. They stored the pieces, and after the war they began to rebuild the statue. It had cracks now, but they appreciated it even more. To their dismay, the only pieces they couldn't find were the hands of Jesus. That troubled them because the hands had the nail prints and that was significant to them. They thought they would have to take the statue down, until one person placed a gold plaque at the bottom of the statue that read, "He has no hands but ours."

He has no hands but ours.

He has no eyes but ours.

He has no lips but ours.

He has no feet but ours.

We are the body of Christ in the world.

Peter says, "**The end of all things is near.**" We know the end times will be turbulent days. The world will seem to be turned upside-down. Long-held standards will fall. Men will be afraid. Morals will be jettisoned. Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.

Do you know what time it is? It's time to get ready for the coming of the Lord!

- In these earthshaking days, clear your mind for prayer.
- In these turbulent times, be quick to forgive.
- As you see the end approaching, open your home to others.
- As the days draw near for the return of Christ, use your spiritual gifts to serve others.

The signs are everywhere. The countdown has begun. Trumpets sound in heaven as the King prepares to leave his palace. On earth, his children pray with new excitement and new understanding these words from the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom Come."

It won't be long now.

One final word. If Jesus comes back today, will you be ready to meet him? If you say, "I hope so" or "I'm not sure," you aren't ready. If you don't know him, you aren't ready to meet him. But you can be ready by trusting him as your Savior. Run to the Cross. Put your hope in what Jesus Christ did when he died on the cross and rose from the dead. Lay aside your trust in anything you have done and trust in Jesus Christ alone.

Do it now before it's too late.

There is an old fable about a time when Satan was training three apprentice devils. He asked the first one how he proposed to deceive people. "I will tell them there is no God." "That will never work," Satan replied, "since everyone knows there is a God." The second one volunteered that he would tell people there is no hell. "That won't work either. Everyone knows there must be a hell." Then the third apprentice devil spoke up. "I will tell them there is no hurry." Satan smiled and said, "You will deceive millions."

That has been one of Satan's chief tactics. He wins multitudes by convincing them they have plenty of time to think about God, plenty of time to come to Christ, and plenty of time to be forgiven. But it is not true. Today is the only day you have. It may be your last day. There has never been a better time for you to come to Christ.

At Billy Graham's funeral, Anne Graham Lotz spoke of the significance of her father's death, calling it a "shot across the bow." It's a message from heaven saying, "Wake up, church. Wake up, world. Jesus is coming!" She's certainly right that it's time for all of us to wake up.

What if we are living not in the last days but the last hours?
What if Jesus were to come this week, this month, this year?

Christians can face the future with optimism. The world looks at all the problems and says, "Is there any hope?" For those who know Jesus Christ, there is enormous hope. These are great days to be alive, the greatest days in all human history. We may be the generation privileged to see the return of Jesus Christ.

There's never been a better time to be a Christian.
There's never been a better time to tell someone else.

If we truly are just two minutes till midnight, let's rededicate ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. May this be a day when we say, "Not less for Jesus, but more."

Jesus is coming.
Are you ready?

GOING DEEPER

1. If you kept in mind that “the end of all things is near,” how might that change your life?
2. “A touchy Christian is a contradiction in terms.” What does that mean?
3. Why is it important to show hospitality without grumbling?
4. “Jesus is coming. Are you ready?” How would you answer that question?

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