

## **Who...Us?**

1 Peter 4:12-13, 5:6-11

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Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

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When is the last time you thought much about the end of the world?

I remember precisely when it was for me.

It was May 21, 2011, at 6:00 pm Central Time.

A man named Harold Camping – using his own mathematical formula to interpret the signs of the times – predicted that starting at 6:00 pm on the East Coast, and then on every hour in time zones moving west there would be a rapture of the faithful followed by the destruction of the world.

At the appointed hour of the prophecy Lindsey and I were living in Louisiana.

That night we were at the pool for a crawfish boil.

We watched the clock tick closer to 6:00.  
And then...nothing.  
Life went on.  
The world continued to turn.

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The truth is that from the moment the resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven, the people of God have been wondering when he would come back. And what that would look like. And what we should be doing in the meantime.

A lot of what we have in our Bibles after the four gospels is concerned with this question. The First Letter of Peter is certainly concerned with it. First Peter was written to Christians who very much found themselves in the minority in their culture. It was written in a time when being a follower of Jesus was odd – even dangerous. Even so, Peter wrote, they were considered to be a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”

Frankly, some of the things we read from this part of the Bible sound strange to our modern ears.

*Keep alert.*

*Do not be surprised by the fiery ordeal that is taking place.*

*Shout for joy when God’s glory is revealed.*

These are the kind of things you say when you think that the end is near. And in other parts of the letters:

1 Peter chapter 2: *Slaves obey your masters.*

Ephesians chapter 5: *Wives submit to your husbands.*

1 Corinthians chapter 7: *To the unmarried and the widows, it is better to remain unmarried.*

You cannot understand these verses if you don’t know the context into which they were written. The Bible isn’t for upholding slavery, promoting sexism, and against marriage. Rather, if the end is near, there is no need to make long-term commitments, it is a waste of time to upset the social order, it is best to maintain the status quo and wait.

When we read from this part of the Bible what we are doing is literally looking at someone else's mail. We have letters to the church in Corinth, and Ephesus, and Rome. We have notes sent by Peter and Timothy. We have an account of John's really strange dream in the book of Revelation.

And it is tempting – when you read someone else's mail – to dismiss their thoughts as out of touch, or wrong, or naïve. It is even easier to think that these ancient words that anticipated an event in Jesus' second coming that hasn't yet happened means that they have no real impact on our lives – here, 2,000 years later.

Except, for some reason, the church has taken letters and verses like these and called them scripture. And what we say about scripture is that that “all of it is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

So, what do these admonitions about how to suffer while we anticipate the end of the world have to do with us?

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One of the things I notice from my time on mission trips to various parts of the world is that the Christians I have met there don't wrestle with this question.

My friend from Malawi who helped start a church and a medical mission that displaced the local witch doctor doesn't have a hard time understanding what the Bible means when it talks about suffering for the sake of the faith.

The leaders of Saint Joseph's Home for Boys in Port-au-Prince Haiti understand the struggle as they pull orphans off the street and fight against the corruption of the Haitian government.

The many of us who have been to the Yucatan Peninsula can attest that our sisters and brothers in Christ there cope with realities that we have a hard time imagining.

Just a few blocks away at the Charlotte Rescue Mission, men and women of faith are battling the demons of addiction and poverty. Children who will be in the halls of our church this summer for the BELL program overcome huge obstacles just to keep pace in school.

*But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.*

It has been my experience that those who live their lives and their faith on the margins of our society have an easier time understanding verses like this one than I do.

It has also been my experience that those who are on the margins are far more eager than I am for God's radically different future, because their experience of the present is much more difficult than mine.

If I am being completely honest, one of the reasons I struggle with all this talk about the end of the world is because I like the world. I love my life. I love my family, my job, my house, my routines. There are plenty of things about the world that I would like to change, but for the most part, my experience of it is pretty good.

For reasons that are complicated and almost impossible to understand, I am, and – I would venture to say – we are unfamiliar with the kind of suffering that First Peter describes in this passage because when our lives are pretty good we don't have a lot of incentive to engage in the conflict which is always necessary for things to change.

What I have learned this week as I studied the scripture is that the people to whom First Peter writes did not suffer so much for what they *believed* as much as they suffered for what they *did* because of their belief. When this letter was written, the small band of Christians who lived amidst the Roman Empire were not a threat because of what they *thought*. They only attracted attention – and were made to suffer – because of the *actions* they took when they lived their faith out in the real world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, Theological, de la Torre, Westminster/John Knox, 2011.

And the fact that I have a hard time identifying with this kind of suffering suggests to me that I have some more work to do when it comes to taking my faith seriously enough to live it out.

Still – I wonder about the end of the world.

I struggle the idea that is popular in our culture that one day – when we least expect it – Christ will come back to rescue the faithful and then God will pull an control-alt-delete on the rest of creation. So all we need to do is wait, and hope, and bide our time.

But when you read it carefully – this is not an accurate picture of what the Bible says about God’s ultimate plans for the future.

What scripture says is that “anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.” What scripture says is that the God who was at the beginning is not yet finished with his creative masterpiece – and that in days to come, the former things will pass away for the sake of things new.

What scripture says is that the God of all grace and glory will restore, and support, and strengthen, and establish those whom he has made.

We stay alert and steadfast in the faith because there are some things in this world that will pass away whenever it is that Christ comes to make all things news.

Those things that will pass away – those former things – are in fact the cause for so much of the world’s suffering:

Violence  
Racism  
Greed  
Apathy

But they will not last.

They will be separated like the chaff from the wheat.

Purified by the refiner’s fire.

And in the meantime – as the end of the world relates to us - perhaps the struggle against these is worth more of our suffering.

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