

STEWARDS OF TIME

Studies in Colossians

Study 7

Trevor Faggotter

'Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time' (Col. 4:5).

TIME AND ETERNITY

Speaking of Jesus the Risen Messiah, Paul in Colossians 1:17 says: 'He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.' He is before all things because he is indeed the eternal Son of God, the co-creator of the world, and thus the Lord of time and space. This Son of God, Jesus, this incarnate God the Son—born of Mary—has entered our confined arena of time and space, and he has conquered death forever.

Jesus Christ's Cosmic Victory over human sin and death, and his triumph over the powers of evil—the elemental spirits of the universe, and the agitators of despair and depression—is of such magnitude and proportion, that we are 'receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken' (Hebrews 12:28). It is an everlasting kingdom.

Jesus lived out his earthly life and ministry with eternity in his heart: 'I know where I have come from and where I am going' (John 8:14). He lived with a profound sense of his role as the en-fleshed Word of God going out to all nations, and of his task in gathering the elect through the good news of God's salvation and gift of eternal life.

His 33 years of life were lived with a view to others, and their eternal destiny:

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:16-18).

In his true humanity, Jesus had a sharp focus from which we need to learn. As the man who had a genuine, dynamic sense of eternity and community and love and fellowship in his heart, he did not fear death. As such, he was not in bondage to *time* in the way that most human beings are—as the writer of Hebrews says, we are '*subject to lifelong bondage*' through the fear of death. Jesus was not therefore compelled to get the most number of years out of his earthly life, nor to frantically reach everyone immediately before he died. And so it was that Jesus *finished* the dying-atoning, guilt bearing work, and calling of his earthly life at 33 years of age.

He said: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15:24). However this confined focus upon Israel was with a view to a cosmic victory of global significance for all the Gentiles, the nations of the world. We see this plan in clear in Paul's mind in places such as Romans 15:12, and again Isaiah says, '*The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the **Gentiles**; in him the **Gentiles** shall hope*' (See also Romans 1:5, 13; 3:29; 15:9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 18, 27; 16:4, 26).

'HEY COLOSSIANS—SNAP UP YOUR OPPORTUNITIES!'

At the heart of Christian life is the joyous enthusiastic desire to make God's love and grace known, through the Word of the Cross, by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Colossians 4:5, Paul writes: '*Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time*'. For a keen, busy person, who occasionally wastes a bit of time, here or there, this may seem like a light, commonsense exhortation. However, it is not merely one management point among many on how to live a successful life, but rather it is a word, which Paul found necessary to write to exhort the Colossians to conduct themselves wisely in their ministry to the wider world. Wisdom is the way in which one uses the knowledge that they have of the Father, of Christ Jesus, of his Spirit, and God's will for humanity. The Colossians were not to be frivolous in their witness to the Lord. 'Proclamatory life must be lived to the full'.¹

In Ephesians 5:16, there is a similar phrase also translated—'making the most of the time'—but it has a slightly different context, namely the *evil* of days lived apart from God's plan and his will:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:15-16).

Ralph Martin writes:

Every moment is a precious gift to be exploited and capitalized to the full. The verb in Paul's Greek phrase (as in Eph. 5:16) is drawn directly from the commercial language of the market place (Gr. *agora*). The Greek is *exagorazomenoi* where the prefix *ex* denotes an intensive activity, **a snapping up of all the opportunities**² (Gr. *kairos*, a moment of truth and destiny) which are available at the present moment . . . Another possibility . . . is to take the verb in its more customary New Testament sense: to 'rescue' the time from the evil condition in which the present has fallen. This may be a good suggestion for Ephesians 5:16 in view of the following reason: 'because the days are evil'. But the context in Colossians seems to require the sense of 'exploit', 'use to the full' . . . The Christian's stewardship of time as God's priceless commodity is the teaching here, with a call to invest our energies in occupations which will be a positive and attractive witness to those outside the Church's fellowship.³

Living in careless or deliberate cooperation with evil powers has its effects. Living the lie, in rebellion, and in rejection of the true God is not a neutral matter. Christ has come into this world to bring his gracious Presence to bear upon the world, in order that we might be drawn back into the plan and purposes of God. To destroy the works of the devil is to pave the way for the works of God to be established in the earth. This forwards anew God's sovereign plan, namely the Edenisation of creation unto glory.

Sowing to the Spirit brings forth fruit from the Spirit, and not increase in corruption.

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. 8 If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith (Galatians 6:7-10).

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *The Fulness of Christ*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1987, p. 57

² My added bold emphasis

³ Ralph Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Century Bible, Oliphants, London, 1974, p. 127

APPLICATION

Whenever death is near, or a tragic event changes the course of life, we usually stop, 'be still', and reflect for a while upon our own lives, and what we are doing in them, and with them, and then we probably pray afresh, that we might make the most of them. In one way or another, most people do gain a sense of the brevity of life. Moses was aware of the 70 or 80 years that most people are given in this life, when he prayed: 'teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart' (Psalm 90:12). Any unbelieving person can sense that life is brief. The Christian who has been given days here to be lived unto the Lord, when seeking to be obedient, soon begins to discern what it is good for them, to be about.

- Life is like a roll of toilet paper, the closer your get to the end, the faster it goes (Anonymous);
- 20% of people identify as ...chronic procrastinators (Hara Estroff Marano);
- 'If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the devil gets the victory through the day. I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer' (Luther).

Psalm 90:1-12 Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. 3 You turn us back to dust, and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.' 4 For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. 5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; 6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. 7 ¶ For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. 8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. 9 For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. 10 The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. 11 Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

12 So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

Often we just get on with the job of living. However, to take some time to deliberately seek the Lord's direction in the use of our time is something that can bear much fruit.

WHAT THEN, IS THE MOST APPROPRIATE USE OF OUR TIME?

It seems to me that Christian lives need not all be spent in 'church work'. Indeed that can become a lopsided focus, if our sense of participation in creation is minimised. The preacher or teacher Koheleth, is most helpful here as he sees an appropriate place for all things. The wise person knows or learns how to adapt to each occasion:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 14 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted . . . 14 I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so, in order that men should fear before him.

JOHN WESLEY AND THE USE OF TIME

Many people do find considerable weaknesses in some of John Wesley's theology. However, it seems clear that he was a man who was good at organisation and administration, and he certainly gave himself to a diligent use of his time. We may not agree with all he says, but, in regard to making the most of the time, he exhorted his people to make serious effort in their lives. We can learn from his sermon below:

Redeeming the time. Ephesians 5:16

1. 'See that ye walk circumspectly,' says the Apostle in the preceding verse, 'not as fools, but as wise men, redeeming the time;' saving all the time you can for the best purposes; buying up every fleeting moment out of the hands of sin and Satan, out of the hands of sloth, ease, pleasure, worldly business; the more diligently, because the present 'are evil days,' days of the grossest ignorance, immorality, and profaneness.

2. This seems to be the general meaning of the words. But I purpose, at present, to consider only one particular way of redeeming the time, namely, from sleep.

3. This appears to have been exceeding little considered, even by pious men. Many that have been eminently conscientious in other respects, have not been so in this. They seemed to think it an indifferent thing, whether they slept more or less; and never saw it in the true point of view, as an important branch of Christian temperance.

That we may have a more just conception hereof, I will endeavour to show,

I. What it is to 'redeem the time' from sleep.

III. The evil of not redeeming it. And

III. The most effectual manner of doing it.⁴

Wesley says:

4. I advise you, Fourthly, be steady. Keep your hour of rising without intermission. Do not rise two mornings, and lie in bed the third; but what you do once, do always. 'But my head aches.' Do not regard that. It will soon be over. 'But I am uncommonly drowsy; my eyes are quite heavy.' Then you must not parley; otherwise it is a lost case; but start up at once. And if your drowsiness does not go off, lie down for awhile an hour or two after. But let nothing make a breach upon this rule, rise and dress yourself at your hour.

5. Perhaps you will say, 'The advice is good; but it comes too late! I have made a breach already. I did rise constantly and for a season, nothing hindered me. But I gave way by little and little, and I have now left it off for a considerable time.' Then, in the name of God, begin again! Begin to-morrow; or rather to-night, by going to bed early, in spite of either company or business. Begin with more self-diffidence than before, but with more confidence in God. Only follow these few rules, and, my soul for yours, God will give you the victory. In a little time the difficulty will be over; but the benefit will last for ever.

6. If you say, 'But I cannot do now as I did then; for I am not what I was: I have many disorders, my spirits are low, my hands shake; I am all relaxed,'— I answer: All these are nervous symptoms; and they all partly arise from your taking too much sleep: Nor is it probable they will ever be removed, unless you remove the cause. Therefore, on this very account, (not only to punish yourself for your folly and unfaithfulness, but) in order to recover your health and strength, resume your early rising. You have no other possible means of recovering, in any tolerable degree, your health both of body and mind. Do not murder yourself outright. Do not run on in the path that leads to the gates of death! As I said before, so I say again, In the name of God, this very day, set out anew. True, it will be more difficult than it was at the beginning. But bear the difficulty which you have brought upon yourself, and it will not last long. The Sun of Righteousness will soon arise again, and will heal both your soul and your body.

7. But do not imagine that this single point, rising early, will suffice to make you a Christian. No: Although that single point, the not rising, may keep you a Heathen, void of the whole Christian spirit; although this alone (especially if you had once conquered it) will keep you cold, formal, heartless, dead, and make it impossible for you to get one step forward in vital holiness, yet this alone will go but a little way to make you a real Christian. It is but one step out of many; but it is one. And having taken this, go forward. Go on to universal self-denial, to temperance in all things, to a firm resolution of taking up daily every cross whereto you are called. Go on, in a full pursuit of all the mind that was in Christ, of inward and then outward holiness; so shall you be not almost but altogether, a Christian; so shall you finish your course with joy: You shall awake up after his likeness, and be satisfied.

⁴ <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/93/>