

Ephesians 5: 15-16 – Time

Prayer

Time – one of my favourite Pink Floyd tracks – *Shorter of breath and one day closer to death...* Do you know the song? Brilliant stuff if not everyone's cup of tea. From our reading in Ephesians – *Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.* The big theme in this part of the letter continues to be *-How then should we live?* By making the most of our time. I remember an African friend telling me about the convention in the theatre in his homeland. With a black cast if they want to portray a white man, all the actor has to do is to keep glancing at his wrist. How do others see us? Dominated by the tyranny of time. How many of us feel we have loads of time? Are we busy? It's a different question altogether to think about – how fulfilled and fulfilling is our time?

Paul encourages his readers to live wisely. And living wisely includes making the most of our time. This is nothing original or new for Paul. It's a theme that is deeply engrained in the great wisdom tradition in the Old Testament. There's that famous passage from Ecclesiastes 3:

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven;
a time to be born and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down and a time to build up;
a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek and a time to lose;
a time to keep and a time to throw away;
a time to tear and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence and a time to speak;
a time to love and a time to hate;
a time for war and a time for peace.*

In the sermon on the Mount Jesus told us not to worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow brings worries of its own. So there is a very strong theme through the Bible encouraging us to be wise in our use of our time. An older translation of our Ephesians passage has it – *redeem the time*. We should claim the time to make the most of it. Fundamental to the Bible's teaching about time is that it is a gift from God. It's a gift over which we have no control. None of us can possibly know how much or indeed how little time God has for us into the future. Without wanting to be morbid we are wise if we remember we are mortal – *one day closer to death...* James Galway, the flautist, after a near fatal car accident said: *I decided that henceforward I would play every concert, cut every record, give every TV programme as though it were my last. I have come to understand that it is never possible to guess what might happen next; that the roof might fall in at any time, and that the important thing is to make sure that every time I play the flute my performance will be as near perfection and full of true music as God intended and that I shall never be remembered for a shoddy performance.*

Every moment of every day is a gift from God and we are accountable to him for it. Before his twentieth birthday the American philosopher/theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote out a long list of resolutions to be his guide through life. Number 70 of that list – imagine number 70 and not the last! – *Resolved – never to lose a moment of time but to improve it in the most profitable way I can.* He may be someone you wouldn't want to go on holiday with! But it doesn't have to be manic and intense with no time for relaxation. It can be helpful to realise that the New Testament has two words for time – *chronos* from which we get the word *chronology*. This is a measurement word – the tick-tock of the clock, the bell that marks the hours. It's time in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, years and decades. The other word for time is *Kairos* and this is a quality word rather than a quantity measuring. We know that times do differ in quality and value. Five minutes of sleep compared with five minutes of toothache or five minutes of hard exercise or the last five minutes of a game that your team is winning 1-0. In our Ephesians text Paul tells us to redeem the *Kairos* – the opportunities, the quality of each moment.

And he gives us the reason – *because the days are evil*. It's a rather strange phrase. It certainly does not mean that time itself is evil or an illusion – as some eastern religions have it. Rather it is a very vivid way of saying that we are surrounded by evil – and that's not loads of wrong-doing, but simply life where God is not taken into account. A Frenchman's epitaph once read: *Here lies a man who went out of the world not knowing why he came into it.*

It was certainly true of Jesus and true of many Christians down the ages that they were aware that every moment was a gift from God. Near the end of his life Paul wrote to Timothy – *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*. For each of us the past is gone. Maybe we look back with great joy, maybe with regret or more likely both joy and regret. But that is beyond redemption now; we can do nothing with what has gone. But we do have the future that God has for us, and we are responsible and answerable for that.

But it probably does need underlining again that making the most of the time or redeeming the time does not mean filling every available space and moment with activity. There is nothing particularly godly or honouring to God about a manic lifestyle any more than it honours God to squander our time. It is a matter of finding the right balance. Here's a resolution I came across that I found helpful – *God, my loving Father is the God of all things. He is present and at work in every bit of my family life and in every detail of my own experience. I must let God be God; I must allow God to be the Lord of each and every part of my life. Therefore I will try to pay attention to his presence and to respond accordingly.* That's the challenge not just for now but to take into the week ahead.

Lastly making the most of our time really needs to include allowing space for God to surprise us. Dom Helder Camara wrote these words:

*Accept surprises
that upset your plans,
shatter your dreams,
give a completely different turn to your day,
and – who knows – to your life.
Leave the Father free
Himself to weave the pattern of your days.
Amen*