

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Lord help me to Use my time

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

Today we continue our series entitled Lord Help Me To... with a talk called Lord help me to use my time. All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise stated.

My wife laughed when I told her today's title! You see, I have a habit of leaving the preparation for these talks until the last minute, which seems to cause her great stress, while not bothering me in the slightest. We all have different approaches to time management, and I'm not claiming mine is any better than my wife's. The Bible is not interested in time management techniques, but it does have plenty to say about the importance of time.

The value of time

There are some common expressions that suggest time is being undervalued. We talk about marking time, when we are just idling along waiting for something more interesting to happen. We are all guilty of sometimes wasting time when we should be using it for something more valuable. We even find ourselves killing time, when we engage in some pointless activity to try and make time appear to pass more quickly. More positively we refer to saving time, hopefully to use it for something more important! Sometimes it is important to make time for somebody or something that should be a priority. An expression we find in our Bibles is, "redeeming the time." In fact, it occurs in one of the passages I want to focus on today. Let's read from Ephesians chapter 5 verses 14 to 16.

"Therefore He says: 'Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.' See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil."

Redeeming time

This passage, and the verses around it, contain a series of contrasts. We find sleep versus wakefulness, dark versus light, death versus life, night versus day, evil versus good and unwise versus wise; and they are all connected to our use of time. We need to shake off our sleepiness, rise from the dead and come into the light. We are to live carefully or watchfully, being wise, and this will involve 'redeeming the time.' All these things are important because the days we live in are evil and we are to work actively for what is good.

Some modern translations replace 'redeeming the time' with phrases like, "making the most of every opportunity" and that does capture the concept, and put it in easy-to-understand, modern English. However, it loses a little of what lies behind the expression Paul actually used. The Greek phrase translated 'redeeming the time' uses language borrowed from the marketplace. It would have been used for purchasing a person out of their slavery, and this is the way Paul uses the word 'redeem' in Galatians chapters three and four when he talks about Christ redeeming us from

the law and its curse. So, redeeming gives us the concept of value and a price to be paid. How are we to understand this in relation to redeeming time? Well, it means, as a minimum, that time has intrinsic value, and it will cost us something to purchase it back. But we need to consider the second half of the sentence to properly understand the phrase. It is because we live in evil days that we must redeem the time. If we fail to take positive action, we will be swept along by the malign influence of the culture we live in, as it acts on our sinful nature. Any good intentions we may have, will be swamped by our busy lives, and our tendency to act selfishly and live for the here and now.

We often stress the importance of time in relation to the gospel. For example, we quote 2 Corinthians 6:2, "Now is the accepted time; ...now is the day of salvation". I preached from this at a recent memorial service because I believe the Bible makes it clear that there is an urgency for people to get saved while they still have the opportunity. But we also need to understand the importance of time in the life of a believer once they **are** saved. We need to be encouraged to buy up the opportunities of living faithfully for the Lord Jesus. That will take thoughtfulness, wisdom, prayer, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the power of a new life in Christ. The bad news is that none of this happens automatically, or without effort. The good news is that we have all the things I have listed, available to us as believers in the Lord Jesus.

Let's read our second passage for today from Romans chapter 13 verses 11 and 12.

"And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light."

Like the passage we looked at in Ephesians, this section has a series of contrasts, some we will recognise from the Ephesians passage. We have sleep versus wakefulness, night versus day, darkness versus light and disorderly versus orderly. If anything, there is even more of a sense of urgency in these verses. We are pictured as having been napping for too long, and the day has moved on much further than we thought.

Slightly unexpectedly, we have not been napping in the day, so that evening is closing in quicker than we expected. It is in fact night-time; but the night is nearly at an end, and the day is about to dawn. The allusion is to the Lord's return. The night is the period of Jesus' absence from His world, and the day will dawn when He returns. The fact that He is returning is, of course, a really good thing, but it means that our opportunities to live for Him in this world are time-limited. We are exhorted to throw away the actions of the rest of the world, that only knows the darkness, and to strap on the armour of light that is appropriate to those who are children of the day, because our Lord is the One who brings the Day.

How we spend our time is the ultimate measure of what is genuinely important to us. I might continually claim that my family are the most important thing in the world to me, but if I hardly ever spend any time with them, my actions are calling me a liar! Conversely, I can state that I'm not really interested in YouTube, but if I spend hours every day watching videos on there, my claims are undermined.

Investing time

So, we have established that time is valuable and that it takes effort and commitment to redeem it for worthwhile things. Clearly God wants us to make the best use of the time He gives us. We might say that having saved and redeemed time, we need to consider how best to invest it. Let's quickly step through nine things all Christians should consider investing their time in.

1. Other people

Investors in People is a standard encouraging training and development of staff in the workplace. It was started in the UK in 1991. I reckon that the apostle Paul got there over 1,900 years earlier! I'm endlessly impressed with the many things Paul fitted into his incredible schedule. He obviously asked the Lord to help him use his time early in his Christian life! One of Paul's priorities was people. He invested in Timothy, Titus, Aquila and Priscilla, and many more. He taught these people, prayed for them, gave them jobs to do, encouraged them, and occasionally ticked them off when necessary! Paul took his own exhortations about redeeming time seriously and loved to invest that time in other people. You and I don't have the level of spiritual gifts that Paul had, but we can share his attitude towards investing in other people.

2. Another generation

Some of the people I listed under point one, are referred to by Paul as his 'sons'. The word 'sons' indicates Paul was involved in their salvation or discipleship, but it is also the indicator of an age difference. Timothy and Titus were a generation younger than Paul, and he worked to ensure that his knowledge and responsibilities were passed on to them. We can also think of how Moses worked with and developed Joshua or Barnabas with John Mark. When we invest time in the next generation of believers, we, like Paul, Moses and Barnabas before us, are looking beyond the horizon of our own lifetime, to God's ongoing work.

3. Heavenly things

It is one of the Bible's paradoxes that we are encouraged to spend our finite amount of time in this life adding to our store of treasures in heaven, that we will enjoy for eternity. We are hybrid beings. We are very much creatures of time, in that we follow a trajectory of birth, maturity, aging, and death.

We think in terms of time and find it hard to grasp the concept of a God who has always been there, or ourselves existing in heaven forever and ever without any end. And yet, we are appalled at the thought of our lives, or those of our loved ones, coming to an end, and have a deep instinct to want to go on forever. This is due to the two, contrasting facts of our receiving our lives from the eternal God, but having become separated from Him by our sins. It is because we now have our sins forgiven, and the vital connection with our Creator, who we now know as our Father, re-established, that we can invest time today in ways that mean we will benefit forever in God's presence. Some of the points that will follow are ways that we can do this.

4. Bible study

I might easily have given this section the heading 'God study' because that's what real Bible study is. We don't just read our Bibles for information, or for entertainment. The Bible is the main way for us to find out what God is like and what He wants from us. A few things can be deduced about God from creation, but we could only ever know Him properly if He chose to reveal Himself. He did so, in the book we call the Bible. You might counter that God's ultimate self-revelation was in Christ Jesus. That is true, but what we know about Jesus, we know from the Bible.

It's tempting to think we can delay finding more out about God until we see Him face to face in heaven, since it seems only logical that we will know Him much better then. But that ignores the fact that God has always insisted, in the Old Testament as well as in the New, that what He has made known about Himself, and His will, should be studied, respected and obeyed. To act as if it is more important in this life to do a range of things that have no lasting significance, rather than spend time getting to know Him, is to demonstrate a shocking set of priorities.

5. Prayer

Prayer and Bible study belong together. We shouldn't be studying our Bibles without praying to the God that we seek to get to know through the Bible. Similarly, praying to Him without ever bothering

to read what He has written, would be very odd! I suspect that both public and private prayer are among the most neglected of Christian activities. One of the reasons for this, is that they take time to do properly. You will sometimes hear people refer to a 'time-poor' generation; usually meaning people who may have enough money for their needs, but never seem to have enough time to do everything they want to. Of course, we all get the same amount of time each day, although not the same number of days! The problem is not so much the amount of time we have, as the number of things we want to do! In practice, we end up doing the things that mean most to us, and, unfortunately, prayer is not often one of them. The title of our talk suggests that we are making a prayer to our Lord to teach us how to make better use of our time. Perhaps one element of this prayer should be a request that He will encourage us to use more of our time praying!

6. Service

You probably immediately thought about some obviously Christian service when you heard this heading. Teaching at Sunday school perhaps or helping the elderly in the congregation. But I have in mind anything that the Lord has given us to do. If He asked us to do it, then it is service for Him, by definition. Thus, it might be getting your kids ready for school, doing your job to pay the bills, or listening patiently to the stories of a lonely person you have heard many times before. We all have responsibilities that we need to spend our time on – sometimes they absorb huge amounts of our time. Certain times in life are busier than others.

The truly quiet time, when we will have hours and hours to do everything we dream about, will probably never happen. Don't be too frustrated, if you are going through one of those hectic times in life, if what is making you hectic is something you really should be doing. On the other hand, while time might not be money, as the saying has it, far too much time can be spent trying to acquire money! So, check that your busyness is not being caused by trying to maximise how much you earn.

7. Knowledge

Right back before the Fall, mankind was given both the desire and ability to investigate and understand what God had made. How could Adam manage the garden, and the plants and creatures it contained, without seeking out knowledge about them? I'm sure God put the urge to make and create things into the man He made in His own image, and that involves gaining understanding about materials and manufacturing. Ever since being a child, I have loved to read. This sometimes diverted me into reading things that weren't helpful, or at times when I should have been doing something else, but it also gave me a supply of knowledge and understanding that I can use to serve the Lord in many ways. We live in an age where many parts of the sciences and the arts have been partitioned off from God, and we are told that belief in Him is not compatible with true knowledge or self-expression. Nothing could be further from the truth! Only the person who knows Christ as his Saviour, and God as his Father, can really understand the wonderful universe He has made, or express the proper glories of human existence. Don't be afraid to invest time in activities that deepen your understanding of the wonders of all of God's creation.

8. Wisdom

There is an old joke that knowledge means realising that tomatoes are fruit, and wisdom means knowing not to put them in a fruit salad! The point is that wisdom is understanding how to apply knowledge in real life. Proverbs is the Bible book that has most to say about wisdom, including, in chapter four verse seven,

“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom.”

If I was asked to try and summarise how to acquire wisdom, I would say, get experience in obeying God and staying close to Him. And you can't really get experience without investing some time. The writer of Proverbs is very emphatic about the priority of wisdom. My previous five points

could be understood as various ways of increasing our wisdom. There is a happy, virtuous circle in that, if we spend time increasing our wisdom, we are bound to get wiser about how we invest our time, and so we will increase our wisdom further!

Time can't be created or destroyed: it just is, then it's gone, with no possibility of bringing it back again. So, it is imperative to manage our time wisely. Part of that wisdom is to recognise that we can never change what we have already done, and that endless regrets about the past just eat away more of the present, wasting even more time!

9. Refreshment

Don't let anything I have said so far make you think that the perfect Christian life involves using every second for transparently 'spiritual' activities and driving ourselves ever harder. God made rest part of the natural order from the very beginning. We were made to need sleep, and time to reflect and relax. You will never acquire much wisdom if you never make any time to ponder and consider! You are more likely to damage both your physical and your spiritual health.

That doesn't mean that there is no danger of wasting lots of time in certain activities. I'm tempted to mention specific things like the internet as great time wasters. But the internet can be very useful when used for the right things and in a thoughtful, controlled manner. I made a similar point about reading earlier. The truth is that it is not the activity as such that is the problem, it is whether I have it under my control, or it is controlling me. Relevant questions to ask ourselves about any activity that we undertake are:

- What value is it bringing? Remembering that refreshment does have some value.
- How does it contribute to my priorities, and is it helping me align my priorities with God's priorities?
- Who is it helping? Taking us back to our first couple of points about investing in others.
- A time-audit. That sounds very grand, but the idea I have in mind is the equivalent of the budget you have for your money. Periodically, I review what we spend our money on by simply working through our direct debits and credit card statements to see where all the cash goes. A time-audit would be simply working through an average week, tracking how your time is spent. It might help you spot areas where more time is 'leaking away' than you realised!

Miscellaneous thoughts

That leaves me with a few loose ends that I couldn't fit into the main structure of this talk, but they seemed too important to throw away!

A lesson about time from the God who is eternal

God is never in a rush. It has been rightly pointed out that the only part of the Bible where God appears to be in a hurry is the Parable of the Prodigal Son, when the father runs to meet and greet his returning, lost son! God cannot run out of time like we do of course, but He invites us to share His larger perspective and be more ready to wait for His timing. It took a long lifetime, containing some tough experiences, for Abraham to fully develop his faith in God. It seems that some good things need lots of time to develop. Many of us have a habit of trying to run ahead of God and attempting to help His plans along with our own interventions. That seldom worked out well for Bible characters like Jacob and it usually doesn't work too well for us either!

More time isn't always better

Just look at Hezekiah! Hezekiah begged God to let him live a little longer, and God generously gave him fifteen more years. You might have expected the king to use those years carefully and wisely; but instead, they were the years when he foolishly showed all Judah's treasures to the visiting Babylonian envoys and was told that the Babylonians would one day carry them all away as plunder. Make best use of the time you have rather than thinking you could do better with more.

When time isn't really wasted

Moses spent 40 years looking after somebody else's sheep in a desert, far from anywhere. Was that wasted time? It would appear not. They were years when Jehovah was teaching Moses both how to lead God's people, and how to remain humble. Two very valuable lessons that clearly took time to get right!

Would anybody dare to suggest that the so called 'hidden years', when Jesus was growing from a child to a man, were wasted because no one saw them, and we have no records of what happened? I would hope not. I may not understand the value of that time, but God the Father does.

Final thoughts

The young tend to think they have 'all the time in the world.' It soon passes! It is better to live remembering that we have an eternity ahead of us that really will last forever, and to invest time now for the most benefit in heaven. Ultimately, we must have eternity clearly in view to be able to use time in this world properly. So, when God answers your prayers about using your time wisely, which I'm sure He will, don't be surprised when He sets you pondering on eternity and heaven as a first step!

Heavenly Father, we confess that we all too frequently waste time on things that are not essential. Many of us also spend too much time on ourselves, instead of on those You have asked us to care for. Forgive us what we have done in the past and give us grace and wisdom to make the future different. Teach us what our real priorities should be and help us to do those things gladly, enjoying Your company with us while we do them. We ask these things in Jesus' name and so that we will live more and more like He did, Amen.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on Lord help me to use my time, talk number T1232.

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