

Preparing for the New Year

Ps 90: 12; Eph 5:16

1. Intro

With 2013 about to burst into our lives, today is a great opportunity to engage in some reflection on the dying year and perhaps consider some resolutions for the bright new one. To do this, I will turn your attention to a two texts of scripture that direct our attention to the vital role of time in our lives.

We all recognize, I'm sure, that a new year is an important event, even though it is just a number. Since our lives are divided into years, a new one is to be acknowledged and rejoiced over. It represents the fact that we have sustained our lives and survived the ups and downs of the past year. That is something to celebrate.

And a new year is of course a strong reminder to us all that time has passed. Most of us remember celebrating the birth of 2012 and now we are seeing its passing. A year has gone, at times perhaps seeming to fly by or even just crawl along.

But what is time? What is this invisible thing we call time that has passed? That is a profound question, one that can exercise great minds. We in our simple way try and make sense of time by dividing it up into manageable chunks; and so we have our years, months, weeks, and days, etc. All our clocks, watches, and calendars allow us to think we have some control over time. But do we? That is unlikely. For time is a very fluid, hard-to-define concept. For example, just try to define the present. Is it what I am saying now? Yes, but I have already said it, and so it has already become part of the past, part of what we remember. Past, present, and future time flow through our lives in a seamless, continuous stream and we cannot tell where one begins and another ends. And time becomes more complex when we consider how different creatures that live shorter and longer lives besides ourselves see time. A species of cicada, for instance, lives 18 years hidden away in a tree. One day, it comes out, mates, and then dies. It must have a peculiar view of its strange time span. Or take a giant land turtle, which can count its life in a couple of centuries. And then, as you explore time in space, you find that time can speed up or slow down according to how light is bent by the forces of gravity. So that time becomes something that can be relative; not constant or absolute.

We ourselves tend to view time subjectively. A couple of seconds waiting for an elevator door to close can seem like ten, which is why that "close door" button gets pressed so much; an hour in an exam can seem like ten minutes. Some busy folk don't seem to have enough time to do what they want, and others have time on their hands. Did this year seem to you to fly by or did it crawl? They say time speeds up when you get older, and that may be true, because you realize for sure that you have less of it coming your way.

What is more important for us, as believers, is not mere chronological time but time as viewed by the Bible. Someone has defined Biblical time as “the divinely created sphere of God’s preserving and redemptive work and the arena of man’s decision on his way to an eternal destiny.” That gives time a whole new dimension. It makes all our decision-making in time have eternal consequences. With that sobering thought, let us focus our minds on preparing for the new year.

I have just two heads to help us in our thinking.

II. Valuing our Time

First, the new year is a reminder to us to rightly value our time. Psalm 90 is a somber, serious call to see time in the right way. Its central verse is the psalmist’s plea to God on behalf of all believers to enable them to “number our days.” Now numbering here is not to be taken in a wooden, literal sense, for one can easily count the years, months, weeks, days, and even seconds of a life lived with a few calculations. What the psalmist means is numbering our days in the sense of evaluating their worth, their significance. This is linked with having a “heart of wisdom,” that is, having a mind that is characterized by its insight, prudence, and mastery of life. This heart characterized by wisdom is able to discern the true value of time.

How? Quite simply, by ever recognizing and acting on the one great reality of life – that one’s life is limited or finite. The psalmist tells us this clearly in v 10: “The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty if we have the strength.” And he continues that these years: “quickly pass and we fly away.” This is a sober recognition of the comparative **brevity** of life and is a source of true wisdom. The estimated life span of 70 – 80 years in the OT times was probably the maximum, and the average life span in the agricultural societies was much lower. However, that estimate is still close to today’s average life expectancy, which is around 76. It is 83 if you live in Japan; 53 if you live in Malawi. People do tend to live longer today, but the Bible’s statement still holds true.

But you may say: “One’s limited life span is a perfectly obvious fact. Why is such a self-evident fact a basis for wisdom?” For the simple reason that the world in general tends to be in denial of the reality of the limited nature of our existence. The brevity of life is not a pleasant thought; it spoils the great party of life. Death is a taboo subject, especially in a materialistic, youth-centered culture such as we live in today, in which no one likes to accept aging. Today, everything is done to enhance one’s youthful looks, retain one’s figure and skin tone, and maintain one’s attraction to the opposite sex, which is all very profitable for the cosmetics and fashion industry. But like the proverbial ostrich, which is said to bury its head in the sand, so many today bury their heads in the sand, trying to ignore and fight off the inevitable approach of “time’s winged chariot.” This practical denial of one’s finiteness is in Biblical terms to have a “heart of foolishness.”

The reality is that we are essentially creatures of time, like butterflies living for years instead of days. We live in time and are marked constantly by its passage, gradually and imperceptibly. Our bodies are constantly degenerating. That flowing, glossy black hair will eventually start to show flecks of grey. That taut, supple skin will start to wrinkle and crinkle and dry out; etc. The body's movements will slow; the joints will stiffen, etc. Children can be useful – if not very welcome -- reminders of this process. I was sitting in our car with my 9-year old granddaughter, Erin, some time ago when she looked at me and said very bluntly: “Grandad,... you’re old!” I may have kidded myself about the aging process, but there was no kidding Erin. It felt like I had committed the ultimate mistake of life by getting old.

It is always healthy -- and wise – to remind ourselves of this reality and not be delude by what the world says. You sometimes read of scientists talking optimistically that they will end aging or overcome death by reviving frozen corpses and curing them from whatever disease killed them. Around a hundred years ago, the great escapologist Harry Houdini vowed publicly that after he died, his spirit would manifest itself on earth. He was a spiritualist and believed in life after death. But he who made daring escapes from impossible situations never escaped the chains of death. We must never delude ourselves concerning the truth about the realities of life and death.

In Europe during the 15 and 16 centuries, when a portrait or an illustration of a rich or famous person was done, the artist would often add the words at the bottom somewhere from Is 40: “All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.” This was a sober reminder of the reality that life is short and all human glory is fading. These are not words the glossy fashion magazines would want to add to their pictures of smart young people! But it's the truth that should be etched on them all. The truth is that the Lord has stamped the invisible words “mortal’ on us, which neither science nor human ingenuity can erase.

Now, in reminding you of this reality, I am not trying to depress you or make you feel gloomy. Far from it. For, what naturally follows from this recognition of the brevity of life is that we should see **time is as a very precious gift from God**. As someone said, present time is just that -- a present, a divine gift. Each moment, each hour, each day – how precious they are! “Time is money,” says the astute businessman who values his time. Time may not be money for the believer, but it is golden. Time, time – the most valuable commodity not sold on the stock markets of the world. Someone once said: “I would stand on the street corner, hat in hand and beg people to throw me all their wasted hours.” Time is precious. How much do those who know they have not long to live value the time they do have; every minute with their loved ones is of great worth. The heart of wisdom treasures time.

III. Managing our Time

Not only should we greatly value our time, we should manage it in a proper way. This is what the NT, with its Christ-centered perspective on time, exhorts us to do loudly and clearly.

A text that pinpoints the importance of managing our time is Eph 5:16 (See also Col 4:5) . Paul tell us to always be “Making the most of every opportunity,” adding” because the days The ESV has: “Making the best use of your time.” The REB has: “Use the present opportunity to the full.” The Gk verb means to redeem or buy up the time, so the Amplified Version has: “Buying up each opportunity.”

Here, Paul says clearly stresses **the need to use our time efficiently**; our time is not to be squandered and thrown away but fully utilized, maximized. As Benjamin Franklyn said: “Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that’s the stuff life is made of.” There are 24 hours in a day, so how can we use them in the best way to honor and glorify God? That is the fundamental question that we must all answer.

This will of course involve planning and prioritizing. Many things around us beckon for our attention, but as believers, we have to learn to discriminate and focus on what is most pleasing to the Lord and beneficial for his service. We have to decide what areas of our Christian life need strengthening, how we can serve others, and what it is God would have us do with our gifts and talents. We then need to have discipline and determination to carry out our plans and maintain our priorities. The three great enemies of the efficient use of our time for God are: lethargy, complacency, and inertia; this trio of enemies always needs to be overcome with the opposing trio of discipline, dedication, and drive.

There is nothing uniquely Christian about time management. One can go on the Internet and quickly find advice on developing time management skills. The world’s successful people all plan and prioritize and show steely discipline and determination; that is largely why they have got where they are. They have developed habits that help them to maximize their time. Likewise, Olympic athletes getting ready for the next games will be rising early, putting in the hard yards of practice, and constantly fine-tuning their bodies for maximum performance. The world we live in is constantly pushing employees to do more in less time.

As Christians, we should do no less. With our great commitment to the Lord and the need to ever work out our salvation in Christ before him in humble obedience, we also need to develop time management skills so that we can make “the most of every opportunity.”

The text also implies the **need for us to use our time with a sense of urgency**. Paul gives as the reason for carefully using our precious time the fact that “the days are evil.” The Roman world in which his readers lived was certainly very evil. Roman society was cruel, oppressive, and morally perverse and the revolting practice of idolatry was everywhere. In the light of the all-pervasive evil around them, Christians had to be constantly on the guard, constantly growing, constantly going good by acting as salt and light. It was a matter of urgency that they did so. Nothing has changed in this regard.

Morally and spiritually, the fallen world has not changed, for indeed it cannot without the grace of God. The world is still an evil place because the hearts of men and women are ever inclined to godlessness, violence, and immorality. That was God’s verdict on mankind prior

to the flood he sent on earth (Gen 6:5). The indictment then was “every inclination of the thoughts of his (man’s) heart was only evil all the time.” “Only evil...all the time” – what a tragic state, what an indictment! Nothing has changed that indictment. Paul in Romans 2: 29 declares of mankind: “They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity.” And he goes on to further describe the wickedness in man’s heart, listing sins both outward and inward.

The same sins are with us. Just this month, we witnessed in Connecticut, US, the most appalling killing of young children by a disturbed young man. In the same month in Delhi, India, a young man and woman on a bus enjoying a pleasant night out were attacked in the most savage, bestial way imaginable. There are visible consequences of man’s corrupt nature all around us and there is an increasing potential for evil as technology advances. The Internet is now regularly exposing children as young as 6 and 7 to pornography. Terrorists routinely use the Internet to promote their suicide bombings and massacres. The most vile language and sexual conduct is routinely heard and displayed in our sophisticated media in full 3D vision. Depraved relationships that the Bible condemns are now being sanctioned and given full recognition by society. And so one can go on.

But Paul’s list also includes evil that is less obvious. He refers to the evils of greed, deceit, malice and being arrogant or proud, etc. Such evils are clearly as bad as murder in God’s sight. In this context, we must remember that Our Lord’s greatest condemnatory statements were not aimed at the thieves, adulterers, murderers, and drunkards around him but the proud Pharisees, the religious elite! Theirs in a real sense was the greater evil. And ask yourself this question: What is it that characterizes the ultimate source of all evil in the world – the Devil? Answer: deceit, the lie. That is his trademark. Such unseen, less obvious evil pervades our world, corrupts the image of God in men and women, and saddens the heart of God.

Of course, such a pessimistic view of our age is unpleasant and depressing. But we should never be deluded into thinking that the state of the world is not as the Bible describes. We are confidently told by atheistic experts and academics, for instance, that science and technology are paving the way for wholesale moral improvement and enlightenment. Those who advocate such a rosy view have an optimistic view of human nature; they wrongly assume people are rational and reasonable and you only have to appeal to their better natures to change the world. Such thinking is plainly delusory. The facts are all against it. History shows that science and technology lead eventually to more terrible wars, greater violence, heightened moral perversity, and more extensive crime, etc. We only have to look around to see that.

We must see human nature as God sees it, through his glasses. And in God’s sight, sinful human nature is not just morally and spiritually corrupt and getting worse, it is under his judgment and headed in the direction of eternal death, and that by choice. As Paul declares: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth...” (Rom 2:18). What people decide in space and time, here

and now, has eternal consequences, either of judgment or eternal life. To use the words of Joel: "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision. For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision" (Jo 3:14) That is the solemn truth behind the words: "the days are evil."

I have deliberately taken time to underline the perilous, tragic state of the world we live in not to depress you but to try and underline the urgent need for us to make our precious time count and to not fritter it away on unprofitable things! Given the deteriorating state of the world, two urgent challenges face us. First, there is the challenge of ensuring that we are in the world but not of it. The world and its influence is strong, ever directing our focus to the material, the here and now, and the self. How we must strive to keep ourselves unpolluted from its influence, with our eyes focused on Christ Jesus and the glory to come. We must heed the call to "come out from among them and be separate!" (2 Cor 6:17)

Second, there is the challenge of being light in a dark world, (Phil 2:16). With lost souls heading for perdition all around us, what can you and I do make the light of God shine, to strengthen the knowledge of God, Christ, and his Word among others, to promote Christian values in the market place of ideas, and to seek out the lost and point them to the Savior? The world is in crisis; we cannot stand idly by.

Let me point you to a Christian who was outstanding in using his time wisely and well coupled with a sense of urgency to serve his generation; one who never stood idly by. I refer to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who lived in the 18 cent. I have been re-reading his lengthy journals detailing his constant travelling and preaching around the British Isles and have been left amazed at how much he packed into his life. He did more in a week than some people in a decade and seemed to live not just one life but half-a-dozen. His work ethic was amazing. Some might say he was a driven man. What impelled him was the urgent need to preach the gospel to his lost, ignorant generation. Typically, you read of him getting up at 4 a.m., preaching at 5.00 a.m., riding twenty miles or so to the next town, preaching again in the afternoon and then in the evening, getting up at 4 a.m. the next day -- day in and day out. Just reading his accounts is exhausting! You want to say: "Take a break, John. Chill out for a while. Don't push yourself so hard." But Wesley was relentless, unflinching, and uncomplaining, whatever the weather or conditions or his state of health. He seemed to waste no time. He would read while he rode and write letters, books, sermons at inns and houses. And his aim was to preach Christ to every person he could find.

Wesley's motto was: "Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can." That's a motto he lived and died by. It's one worth emulating.

Conclusion

So, in the light of the brevity of our lives and the preciousness of the time given to us, and in view of the pressing call to use our time wisely and well in a dying, sin-laden world, let me ask you prayerfully reflect on the year ahead. In your spiritual life, what areas do you need to spend more time on -- prayer, intercession, studying the Bible, outreach, personal holiness, ministry to others? What needs to be improved? What can and should be done better and

more intensely for God? Is there lost time that needs to be made up? These are just a few of the questions we should ask ourselves.

Let me close by quoting some of the new year resolutions compiled by another 18 cent. Christian, the great Christian minister, preacher, and philosopher, Jonathan Edwards. These are available on the Internet and make worthwhile reading. Some of his resolutions were:

“Resolved, never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live. Resolved, to be endeavoring to find out fit objects of charity and liberality. Resolved, always to do that, which I shall wish I had done when I see others do it.

Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can. Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life. Resolved, that I will live so as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.

Resolved, to inquire every night, before I go to bed, whether I have acted in the best way I possibly could, with respect to eating and drinking. Resolved, to ask myself at the end of every day, week, month and year, wherein I could possibly in any respect have done better. “

May the Lord give you a blessed and prosperous new year and enable you to redeem the time in a world desperately in need of his light and salvation.

