Opening Words

Imagine getting to the end of our lives, not the end of a day or the end of a week or month, but getting to the end of life and thinking, "I've wasted it all!"

178 Eph Live Obediently Because It is Smart

I was enjoying breakfast with a good friend. He is an appellate judge in the Western District of Missouri and a dedicated Christian. He is two months from retirement and when he retires he wants to use his remaining years in service for the Lord. We were talking about the blessings and curses of the modern technological age. The blessing is that the internet enables us to access scholarly information with rapidity so that we create studies from the Word of God with a greater depth of knowledge. The curse is that the internet enables us to access trivial information that can distract us and keep us from focusing on the projects at hand.

We talked about how in our remaining years we want to make the most of our time. We want to serve God with the strength he provides right up to our dying day. We do not want to waste a day, for what could be worse than getting to the end of our lives and realize that we have wasted our lives? I think we all know what it is like to waste a day. We get to the end of such a day, and we say with frustration and exhaustion, "What a waste. I got nothing accomplished that I wanted to do! Let me just go to bed and start over tomorrow." This could be because of interruptions over which we had no control or it could be because of bad choices we made. Either way, it is frustrating.

Imagine, though, getting to the end of our lives, not the end of a day or the end of a week or month, but getting to the end of life and thinking, "I've wasted it all!" I, at least, and I am sure many of you as well, do not want that to happen. When I get to the end I want to be able to say what Jesus said in John 17:4, "I glorified you on the earth having accomplished the work you have given me to do." Isn't that a good statement? Don't you want to say that and don't you want to hear the words of the Master, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Oh, my friends, to hear those words will make all the problems and trials and suffering worth it all.

So how can we make that happen? How can we make the most of our time? This is the subject of our message today as we continue thinking our way through these great words of Paul in Ephesians 5. Paul, for many verses, has been exhorting the church to live a holy life. He talked about the darkness of paganism out of which we were saved. He gave us practical guidance and steps to take. Now in chapter five he is giving us motivation to live a God-pleasing life. We should live this way because we are to fear God who will judge the world. We should live this way because of who we are in Christ. We are light in the Lord. Therefore, we are to live as children of light. Now he is going to tell us that God wants us to be men and women of wisdom rather than foolishness. Wise people make good choices and live for what matters most. Foolish people fritter away their lives and have nothing to show for their years on earth. Let's listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 5:15-17.

> Therefore, be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise men, making the most of your time because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is.

There's our word "walk" again. We have noticed that that is one of the most prominent words in the last three chapters of this book as Paul exhorts us to put our faith into practice. And here he tells us to be careful how we walk. We must take care because carelessness can and will distract us. Carelessness will cause us to lose time and focus. Carelessness will put us on paths that cause us to waste our lives. Paul tells us that he wants us to walk as wise men and then he defines what wisdom is, "making the most of your time." Some older translations use the phrase, "redeeming the time," and the idea is purchasing every moment so that we have a large stock, a large supply of time well spent that results in fruitfulness for the Lord.

But Paul then gives us a reason why we are to redeem or make the most of our time. He says, "the days are evil." He is referring to the prevailing culture in his time when evil had such a grip on society, and one never knew when evil would become overwhelming, bring suffering to God's people, and shut down precious opportunities to do the work of the Lord. Such has been the case throughout history. There are seasons of relative freedom in some countries where God's people can serve him openly and spread the Gospel far and wide without fear. We have enjoyed such freedom in the United States and in many countries of the world where evil is held in check. But in some countries evil overwhelms the established order and darkness descends upon a land. Doing the work of the Lord becomes difficult if not impossible as God's people go underground and sometimes into survival mode. One only must think of our brothers and sisters in China, North Korea, and in many Muslim countries where it is difficult to name the name of Christ. Yet, even there the work of Christ is progressing but at great cost.

It is hard to know when such evil will overwhelm the relative peace we enjoy and when the work of Christ will become more difficult for us. But until then, let's not wring our hands and moan and lament the problems in our world. Let's use the opportunities at hand to do the work of the Lord. And may I say that this is why we ask you to join us in prayer and in your financial giving that we might continue to make the most of our freedom now, because the days are evil as we continue in this great spiritual warfare.

Paul concludes his appeal to wisdom by saying, "So then, do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is."

What is the will of the Lord? There are two aspects to God's will. First, each of us has a will and it is important that we be men and women of God's word so that we will be filled with wisdom to discover God's will for our lives. It is also important that we receive wise counsel and listen to it so that we might make better decisions in life. We want to bring every aspect of our lives into conformity with God's will, trusting that He knows what is best and that His way of doing things is far better than ours. Of course, usually, the issue is having a heart that wants God's will more than anything.

I once read the biography of George Mueller, a Christian living in England in the 19th century. He wanted to be a missionary to a foreign land, but God kept closing doors to that and opening doors to providing for orphans in his country. He submitted to God's will, and his stories of faith and God's miraculous provision have been inspiring to millions who have read his story. Mueller became a well-respected Christian leader with great wisdom and when asked one day about the challenge of discovering God's will for one's life he replied, "90% of the battle, 90% of the issue of discovering God's will for one's life is getting one's heart into a position of complete submission to the Lord where one only wants what God's will is and nothing else. When a man or woman can get to that place, the other 10% of discovering God's specific will, will come easily."

Isn't that good! I have found it to be true in my life, and I must confess that at times it has been a struggle to submit totally to God's will. For some silly reason, I often thought I knew better than the Lord, or I thought, "surely this can't be God's will for me" and I would not follow His leading and would regret my stubbornness. Are you wanting to discover God's will for the details of your life? Follow the advice of George Mueller – 90% of the battle is getting your heart into the condition of glad submission to God where you say, "Whatever you want Lord, that's what I want." And then the rest will come.

The second aspect of God's will is this: God's will is His will for the whole earth. Jesus taught us to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven." We learn from this prayer and from many other passages in the Bible that, in addition to God's particular will for us, God also has a grand will for the whole earth, and that will is for His kingdom to come and be the only kingdom on earth.

Right now, there are many kingdoms and many wills. There is spiritual warfare in heavenly places, and it manifests itself through ungodly men and nations as people fight against the Lord. People do not want to submit their wills to God and make him Lord. Most leaders of the nations of the world do not want to submit their nations to the will of God and have him be the Lord of their nation. And sadly, many Christians are the same way. They are foolish and do not understand that God has a plan for this planet and it is called the kingdom of God. God's will is to restore earth to what it once was before sin came into the world.

You and I are part of God's restoration program for the world. As you and I submit to God and experience his blessing of peace, we model for the world what it could be like if every person, every family, every community, and every nation did the same. We know, of course, this will not be perfectly realized until Jesus comes again, but we can advocate for His will to be done on earth by our example.

We can also be alert to the opportunities God gives us to witness for Him and to encourage other believers. Recently I was on an airplane flight. I was busy at work preparing messages for this broadcast, but I noticed the elderly couple sitting next to me reading Christian books and I engaged them in conversation and had the loveliest fellowship with them. I gave them one of my books and encouraged them to listen to our broadcast. When I pulled out some brochures to give them, the man sitting across the aisle had been listening and said, "I would like one of those." And so, I obliged and hope that he will become a listener.

At the airport, I got a taxi for my ride home and I engaged the driver in conversation and noticed his accent and asked his country of origin – Somalia – one of the most closed countries in the world. We discussed Islam and Christianity, and when he dropped me off, I quickly ran inside my home, got a DVD of the Jesus movie that I had in the Somali language and gave it to him!

God has opportunities around us all the time. May he open our eyes to walk through the doors he opens for us so that we will wisely make the most of our time.