

## **NO LONGER STRANGERS: These are the Days**

**Ephesians 5:15-21**

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I.

There is at least one thing older adults understand that younger folks can't yet fully understand and that is this: *the days are long, but the years are short.*

For children and teenagers, the days and the years can feel long. Young children have yet to learn of time. If you surprise them with a trip to Disneyworld, it better be the day before you leave, or what awaits is weeks of questions and nagging about when you will finally leave for the happiest place on earth.

Talk to a teenager and what they want is what is ahead—to drive, to graduate, and to go out on their own. For most, it cannot happen fast enough. It happened way too fast for those of you who have or will soon drop your child off at college.

Talk to a college student, and it is about the first job, the first apartment, and finding the right person to one day make a life with.

Talk to a newlywed, and they'll tell you to stop asking when they'll start a family. Their moms already ask enough.

Of course, these are generalizations, but for most of us, there is some truth.

We often count down the days until something we want more comes along. Some of you have a countdown app on your phone that treats each day as a mere speed bump on the road to where you'd rather be. Our attention is focused on what is just over the horizon or 'round the bend. We often say, "If I can just get through this – week, month, season, then ..." In the meantime, we miss the gifts, lessons, and beauty amid today's messiness and the ordinary. There are presents in the present that impact the future. As author Annie Dillard wrote, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we will spend our lives."

II.

Many people have made end-of-the-world predictions throughout history. There were many convinced the Mayans predicted the end of the world to be December 12, 2012, but that date came and went. Harold Camp predicted the end of the world at least twelve times, creating great fear and loss in many people, but the world outlived him with his death in 2013.

There was even a domesticated hen in Leeds, England, in 1806 that drew significant numbers of people to visit and leave in despair of the coming Judgment Day. The hen laid eggs inscribed with the message, "Christ is coming," something people could pay a penny to view for

themselves. However, it was soon discovered that the eggs were not, in fact, prophetic messages but the work of their owner, Mary Bateman. This criminal and con artist had been writing on the eggs in corrosive ink and reinserting them into the poor hen's body.<sup>i</sup> That hen wasn't the only one laying eggs about end times throughout the centuries.

Perhaps you don't have a bomb shelter in your basement or follow prophetic hens on Instagram. Still, there is a fascination among many with the end of the world, evidenced in part by the abundance of end-of-the-world themed books, shows, video games, and movies like Independence Day, A Quiet Place, Don't Look Up, The Book of Eli, and, of course, Shaun of the Dead.

Why are we fascinated and entertained with the idea of our looming destruction? Perhaps it is because this genre briefly wakes us from sleepwalking through life. In the movies, people realize the world is about to end and suddenly start changing their lives. They quit their soul-robbing jobs or try to repair broken relationships before it's too late. They say to others what they've always wanted to say but were too afraid or too busy to say before the world was in the shadow of a giant asteroid. Knowing it might be the end, movie characters are spurred to action, suddenly reprioritizing their lives.

Then, when the world doesn't end after all, they live their lives with a new perspective, changed people who won't take things for granted anymore—or so we like to believe. The credits roll before we know if this new way of living takes or not. But based on real life, I'd wager most go back to sleepwalking through life.

### III.

The audience for this letter to the Ephesians lived in a time when they believed they were experiencing the end days. They weren't trying to predict the end or look for signs. They just assumed Jesus' return would come up any day now. This was the Apostle Paul's conviction. Jesus had died and came back three days later from death. There was no reason for Paul in the 1<sup>st</sup> century to assume we'd still be kicking it here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With this belief that Jesus's return was near, Paul's letters and letters written by his students and companions are always filled with urgency, and this letter to the Ephesians is no different. The author says we should be wise and careful about how we live to "make the most of the time." Rather than wasting our time on foolish things or numbing our senses with too much wine, we should be Spirit-filled, worshipful, walking in love, and above all, spending time giving thanks to God in and for all things.

Jesus, as recorded in Mark 13, was clear in his teaching that no one except the Father knows the day or hour, not even the Son nor the angels in Heaven. Because of this, Jesus said, we should always be prepared. One of my seminary professors had this sign over his office door that read, "Jesus is coming ... look busy!"

Since we don't know when or how, rather than being caught off guard, missing what really matters, and suddenly desperate to do and live as we've meant to live all along, Jesus calls us to live as prepared people who are always ready. This sounds exhausting, even impossible. Like having your house on the market, ready for potential buyers to drop by any time, while still doing daily life with three young kids and a dog.

But I don't think Jesus meant for us to live in a state of constant alert, stress, and panic. I think he meant living each moment with the kind of peace that comes when your relational house with God and others is in order, the kind of love that comes when you walk in love and daily obedience to the will of God. I think he meant living each day with the kind of hope that comes when you trust, because of Jesus, that death is not the end of the story and the kind of joy that comes from gathering together as one family to sing songs of gratitude to God at all times and for everything.

#### IV.

More than a list of behaviors to do and not do, our text today is a poetic meditation on measuring time well. We are to make the most of the time, or as the King James Version reads, "redeem the time."

Time is one of our most precious gifts. We think about money a lot – who has more and who has less, and how to be among the former rather than the latter. But when it comes to time, we're all on a pretty level playing field. None of us know how much we have of it, and we all have the same amount to spend at a time. Everyone has 24 hours in a day, as they say. It must be cared for, paid attention to, and made the most of. We are to not sleepwalk through life but rather wake up, sober up, and live lives of love and obedience as Christ taught us. Be filled to overflow with God's Spirit, sing songs of praise as a community no longer strangers, be grateful in all things, and be respectful to one another out of respect for Christ. This is how we make the most of the time.

We shouldn't need end-time movies to wake up and pay attention. We shouldn't need end-of-the-world predictions or prophetic egg-laying hens to spur us to reprioritize our lives and recover our Jesus focus.

Some of you can testify today that you don't need an end-time movie to wake you from slumber. You've been rudely awakened by a test result, phone call, or a brush with death that made the fragility and preciousness of these days far too real for you.

When you ask anyone who has been told their days or the days of someone they love may be far less than they had hoped or planned, they'll tell you what matters most with the time they have left - relationships.

This week, I've spent time with three families in preparation for funerals for loved ones. In those conversations, after death has interrupted their days, I hear this: what matters most are the people we love and the people who love us. If there is regret at the end of this life, it is never

around spending too much time with loved ones, caring for others, or tending to their relationship with God. No one regrets not working more, making more money, or owning more things. There is regret only that more time was not given to relationships.

The days are long, but the years are short. To make the most of our time, to redeem the time is to live as this chapter in Ephesians began: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and **walk in love**, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (v. 5:1-2)

V.

Friends, our end is coming. When and how it all plays out isn’t the most important thing, nor is it ours to know. As followers of Jesus, we’re to make the most of our days for these are the days. As Eugene Peterson wrote, “We stay present, attentive, and receptive. We gather here each Sunday in worship and love to listen to God’s word read and preached, and to sing and to once again get our story straight, to recover our Jesus focus. We find ourselves in the singing and giving thanks, in the greetings and the prayers, freshly renewed by the Spirit to practice resurrection in the company of the Trinity. We are not adequate to live a life of love out of our own will or resources. Trying harder doesn’t do it. Enter the Spirit. God provides God’s Spirit to live the life of God in us, and we are reoriented around the center that holds. When we leave the church, dismissed by the benediction, we are far less likely to be intimidated by the evil in the world.”<sup>ii</sup>

At the end of a worship service where renowned preacher Dr. Fred Craddock was guest preaching, a bluegrass band played a rousing rendition of that great 1932 gospel hymn, “I’ll Fly Away.” *Some glad morning when this life is over, I’ll fly away. To a home on God’s celestial shore. Just a few more weary days, and then I’ll fly away. I’ll fly away.*

After the song, Dr. Craddock stepped up to the center of the chancel, cracked a smile, and began his benediction with the words, “In the meantime ...” Laughter filled the room, but then silence as he repeated the words, “In the meantime, live simply, love generously, serve faithfully, speak truthfully. And leave the rest to God.”<sup>iii</sup>

The meantime. Our only time. So, let’s make the most of it. To time, we say, “Slow down. Slow down. Slow down.” But God’s Spirit whispers back, “Wake up. Wake up. Wake up!”

These are the days. Let us redeem them for the glory of God and the good of the world.

Melissa Hatfield © 2024

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/list/10-failed-doomsday-predictions>

<sup>ii</sup> Eugene Peterson. “Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ.” William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 2010, 223-224.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://second.aspireonemedia.com/media/3661/10878/65377>