

Making the Most of Your Time

“Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, 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” (Eph 5:15-17).

What does the phrase in Ephesians 5:15-17 mean “making the most of your time”? When faced with a puzzling passage, one approach is to read the same passage in a different Bible translation.

While the above translation comes from the New American Standard Bible (NAS), the New King James Version (NKJV) translates the phrase “redeeming the time”. The Greek verb “*exagorazō*” underpins both translations, and it means “to redeem”. The Bible speaks of “*exagorazō*” redemption in the context of liberation from a negative condition (see the article: Liberation Redemption... the Subjective Aspect of Atonement at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/2JesusChrist/AtonementLiberationRedemption.aspx). In this context of the first century when one might buy the freedom of a slave, Paul exhorts the Ephesians to “buy back” time.

Why does one need to liberate or buy back one's own time?

In our contemporary culture, “to make the most of your time” means to live life to your full potential before you die.

However, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul exhorts, “make the most of your time, because the days are evil.” Paul seems to suggest a different reason for making the most of your time. But what does it mean, “because the days are evil”?

To gain a better sense of context, it is worthwhile to read before and after the passage, and the Bible reader may discover that Ephesians 5:15-17 is part of a chiasm (Eph 5:10-17). The chiasm can be seen here:

A. 10) trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

B. 11) Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; 12) for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret.

C. 13) But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light.

X. 14) For this reason it says, “Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead,

C'. And Christ will shine on you.”

B'. 15) Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, 16) making the most of your time, because the days are evil.

A'. 17) So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

With this Hebrew literary device, the inflection point of the chiasm (Eph 5:14) would be the focus of interest by the Bible interpreter.

Written to Believers, the chiasm discourages the participation of sinful behavior yet recognizes that many do. The exhortation to “awake and arise” uses sleep in a metaphoric sense as to be indifferent to one's salvation and dead to symbolically represent a spiritual deadness.

Understanding the background of Ephesus may provide a deeper understanding to Paul's exhortation.

Situated at the mouth of the Cayster River, Ephesus was an important seaport and trade center for Asia and the Roman Empire. Economically rich and prosperous, it was one of the largest cities in Asia Minor with an estimated population of 250,000. Culturally advanced with performing arts, the Temple of Artemis (Diana) was the most prominent feature of Ephesus and recognized as the Seventh Wonder of the Ancient World.

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In a larger biblical context, Paul exhorts Believers to “be imitators of God as beloved children” (Eph 5:1-9). Behave in a manner worthy of holy people for which you have been called (Eph 4:1).

Conduct yourselves with a self sacrificing love for others.

Avoid behaviors that demonstrate selfishness and a lack of concern for others.

Avoid sexual immorality and impurity.

Avoid greediness and the inordinate desire for wealth, possessions or another’s possessions.

Avoid improper speech that disparage and belittle people.

Avoid filthy language, foolish talk that lacks good sense or vulgar joking.

Always appreciate God and people with a thankful heart.

Do not consort with non-Believers who are the objects of God’s wrath.

Be discerning and do not be deceived by insincere compliments by those who seek your favor for their own selfish ends.

Conduct yourselves as a holy people with goodness, righteousness and truth.

Christians about Ephesus lived in a populous society that was wealthy, cultured and steeped in a socially embracing religious cult. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was a warning and an exhortation to avoid the temptations of Ephesian society.

Idolatry was openly practiced with pagan worship, sexual immorality and greed which all reflected a selfish perspective in life that sought immediate gratification; all of these objects were valued more than God. Improper speech devalued human beings and flattery was used to manipulate others for one’s personal gain.

It is in this context that Paul speaks of “the days are evil” (Eph 5:16), and in recognition that Believers cannot help but to partially indulge. The temptations of Ephesus in the first century are not too different from today.

Christians have become desensitized to the moral wrongness of culturally accepted values and behaviors and susceptible to the natural inclinations of human beings.

In quoting, “Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead”, Paul is exhorting Believers to liberate their time from sinful behavior and make the most of their time as imitators of God. And in Ephesians 5:17, Paul explains how, “so then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

To “understand the will of the Lord” requires knowledge, which Paul is exhorting through Bible study, Christian fellowship, prayer and discipleship. Through this process, God provides wisdom and knowledge so that a Believer can discern His will (Eph 1:8-9; Col 1:9).

An example of this is gaining a sense of God’s moral standard, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt 5:27-28).” This reveals that God’s moral standard goes beyond the observable behavior; it includes the mind.

Because the time is evil, Believers who are not grounded in God’s word can be carried away by sinful people or succumb to “other scripture” (2 Pet 3:16-18).

God’s will for us to be a holy people and instrument for His blessing to others requires time for study, practice and reflection.