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Redeeming the Time During COVID-19
by
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When the Apostle Paul was arrested and put in chains for months and even years, his remarkably energetic life as a trailblazing frontier churchplanter among the Gentiles came to a screeching halt. However, Paul redeemed the time by writing many of his epistles from prison, including the magnificent Book of Philippians. When the Apostle John was exiled to the tiny rocky island of Patmos, he redeemed the time by writing the Book of Revelation. When the Reformer Martin Luther was “kidnapped” by friends for his own protection and held in the drafty attic of the Wartburg Castle for three years, he redeemed the time by translating the entire New Testament into vivid German for his fellow Germans to read.

None of us is called to this level of timeless ministry, but COVID-19 has similarly put us all into a temporary holding pattern. One of the greatest stewardship responsibilities of our lives is captured in Ephesians 5:16 (KJV): “... redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” This passage is in the middle of Paul’s overall presentation of how we are to live a life worthy of the calling we have received (Eph. 4:1) and a further development of his command that we should pay very careful attention to the details of our daily lives, walking not as fools but as the wise (Eph. 5:15). The word “redeem” means to buy something out of danger—like a captive who’s been kidnapped, with the payment of a ransom, or a slave who’s in chains, with the payment of a price. The image is potent: the time will be lost if we don’t redeem it. And all the more, says Paul, because “the days are evil.” We are living in a world system concocted by the mind of Satan, the Prince of the power of the air, the spirit who is now at work in the disobedient (Eph. 2:2). The world system pulls on our souls continually by the “lusts of the eyes, lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life” (1 Jn. 2:16). That is why Paul says we must redeem the time, because if we don’t, it will be spent for evil. So it is with any extra time that these unique COVID-19 days are bringing us. So many aspects of our normal daily lives have been uprooted, postponed, cancelled, rescheduled, or put into disarray. Here at FBC Durham, many Bible studies and other events have been cancelled. We are also aware of many people whose companies have asked that they not come into work. Students in schools and colleges have not had classes. Beyond that, many normal weekly activities (like sports, music lessons, shopping, going out to eat, meeting friends at coffee shops) have stopped. All of this disruption produces both powerful temptations and remarkable opportunities. It is upon us to live the Spirit-filled life (Eph. 5:18) by which we can “redeem the time” and make the most of these days.

Resisting the Temptations of COVID-19

First, the temptations. It is an old saying that “Idle hands are a devil’s workshop.” If we are not actively serving the Lord, we are almost certainly serving the devil’s purposes and the

flesh's drives. We American Christians generally have more free time than most Christians in past generations have had. Yet now, many aspects of our recreational lives have certainly been altered by COVID-19. For example, all sports have shut down. When ordinarily millions of Americans would be filling out brackets for the NCAA basketball tournament and filling hours watching the games, that electronic diversion has been shut down, and all of that time has been freed up. But, the rest of the electronic world of entertainment and allurements is still up and running—electronic materialism (online shopping), and electronic gaming and electronic social media (Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and all the rest). Be very careful what you allow into your eyes! As Jesus said, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be filled with light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be filled with darkness. If, then, the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness" (Mt. 6:22-23)!. The digital world is ready, willing, and able to sweep you away.

Beyond this is the danger of anxieties and fears about the future. It is a great temptation to be anxious about tomorrow, to worry where all this is headed. These anxieties are insidious, crawling into our minds and hearts with questions about the future. We may become anxious about the economic future of the stock market, our jobs, our retirements, our society, our world, our future health, or the health of our loved ones. Scripture commands that we "be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to the Lord. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).

Secondly, we have to beware of the tensions that will begin to rise as family members live in close proximity with each other over days and days. We have heard that the divorce rate in China has skyrocketed in the wake of the coronavirus. As non-Christian couples have been quarantined together, they have been immersed in each other's sin natures more than ever before. It's easy for families to begin to bicker and fight and come apart at the seams. This is a time for Christian families to pull together around the Word and prayer. "Bear with each other, and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13).

The final temptation I'll mention is discontentment. It will be increasingly easy to grumble and complain about all that this virus has cost us... all the missed opportunities, events, and plans. The virus has been like the thief in John 10:10 that came to "steal, kill, and destroy." It is easy to forget that the Lord is in control of all the circumstances of our lives. Paul spoke of having "learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, living in plenty or in want" (Phil. 4:13). Essential to Christian contentment is a robust doctrine of providence—that God actively controls the smallest details of life on planet Earth. "Not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of your Father, and even the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Mt. 10:29-30). We have to believe COVID-19 is part of God's wise plan for the salvation of his elect worldwide. God is using the trials to wean us from earth and focus on him. He is also using the threat of death to cause many complacent sinners to flee to Christ worldwide. So resist the temptation to complain. Instead, more than ever before, pray without ceasing for God's wise purposes to be worked out in your life, your family, your church, and your world.

Redeeming the Opportunities of COVID-19

This brings me to the remarkable opportunities COVID-19 brings us. First, we have the opportunity to spend more time in prayer and Bible reading. We should do this with a specific eye to the challenges brought on by this plague. We should be praying for the sick and those caring for them all around the world. We should ask that God will use COVID-19 to save souls, as we just mentioned a moment ago. For those in the medical world, I am thankful for your courageous service to the sick and dying. Most are sick from other illnesses, none of which have taken any break at all because there is a new virus in the world. Doctors, nurses, and hospital workers have to continue to go to their jobs, facing a much higher risk of exposure. Secondly, we also have the opportunity to take stock of our hearts and see our idols exposed. Those who have made sports an idol have had that idol knocked from its pedestal. Good! So it is with so many worldly pleasures, like dining out. When these pleasures are removed, and we can see how much we've grown to rely on them, and we have a chance to come to a new level of holiness.

In terms of ministry, we are all aware that the general rule from the government is to stay at home. Obviously this will greatly curtail opportunities to minister to others. Obviously around the world, many Christians will be ministering directly to the sick and dying—family members, medical professionals, friends. Christians in these roles must be faithful to share the gospel and courageously and fearlessly serve the sick. For the rest of us, we know that this virus will not last forever, if the Lord would be pleased to heal us and end the trial. When he does, people will be left with many needs. Some of them will be economic... some small businesses will be struggling for survival, others will have folded forever. Many hourly wage earners will be severely hurting financially. These temporal needs will give Christians opportunities to love our neighbors as ourselves. Galatians 6:10 says, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those of the household of faith." When it comes to material needs, we have to look after our own (our family, and other Christians) first and foremost. But God may also open the door to care for outsiders, and when we do so, we may do it in the service of the gospel... that they might know the joy of salvation. In the end, that is the greatest opportunity this worldwide plague gives to Christians: the chance to speak of Christ crucified and resurrected to people who will someday die and stand before God in judgment. Everyday life can lull people into a false sense of security. Long after COVID-19 is over, the memory of these days will serve as an excellent open door for gospel proclamation.