

Simplify Your Life!

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Isaiah 57:15 proclaims, "For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.'" This verse—wonderful, grandly mysterious and full of import—exceeds our comprehension because it is something beyond human experience. What does it mean to inhabit eternity? No human can adequately explain it, and we are humbled to realize from verses like this how insignificant we are beside the awesome grandeur of our God.

We can say that eternity sums up all of time—past, present and future; it stretches endlessly in each direction from when we find ourselves living. But God *inhabits*, lives in, all of time! In contrast, we are aware of only a tiny fraction of the past and virtually ignorant of the future.

God knows beginning **and** end. In fact, since He knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10), He is in control of the entire timeline; otherwise, He could not know how things will end. In comparison, we know by experience that we are in control of so little. Events frequently do not work out as we hoped. What a difference there is between God and us!

Eternity, according to *Webster's*, means "time or existence without beginning or end." We have applied this term to endless time so we can "measure" and grasp it to a limited extent. We do this because time, to almost everyone, is very important. To us of all people, time should be extremely important. We need not be frantic about it, but we should be concerned about its proper use. Why? Because *how we use it* will determine whether we will join God in His eternal Kingdom.

Mastering Time

Because God is Creator, time belongs to Him. As it relates to man, time began with the creation of the heavenly bodies, for we measure it by their movements. God has given each of us a slice of time to use as we choose. In this regard, time is life, and if we master the use of time, we are well along the road toward mastering life.

There are many clichés, aphorisms and idioms relating to time: "Time marches on." "Time waits for no man." "Time is what we save so we might waste it." We have "time on our hands" and "time to kill." Others try to "make time." All of us try to "find time." The young wish time would go faster, while the old wish to slow it down. Some try to turn back time and others seem suspended in it.

Reminders of the passage of time are everywhere: clocks, watches and calendars; the movements of the sun, moon and stars; the passing of seasons and the cycles of life. We are constantly aware that time moves inexorably forward, and we cannot stop it.

We see wrinkled skin, balding heads and gray hairs. Aching muscles that used to meet vigorous demands with ease now complain upon even slight exertions. Our eyesight dims and blurs, and our

ears no longer hear as sharply. We witness the birth of children and grandchildren and the deaths of friends and relatives. Even seeing a young person after several years and noting how much he has grown can be a shocking experience.

Inevitably, we wonder when our time will end. Time is absolutely irreversible and irreplaceable. All of us are running out of it, and God says to redeem it (Ephesians 5:16; Colossians 4:5).

In order to accomplish our goals, it is vital to get control of time. But life is full of time robbers, scheduling conflicts and unexpected events that demand the use of our time. Very frequently, in fact every day, demands upon our time force us to make choices among them. When this happens, we wish that we had more time, or that things would be scheduled with more consideration, or that we were more efficient and effective in using it. We regret having procrastinated.

Extra time is something God can give. In the fifth commandment, He promises, "Honor your parents, and I will lengthen your life" (Exodus 20:12). That's more time! But if we make the right choices, He will smooth our paths so that we make the most efficient use of the time we now have.

How Much Time Do We Have?

How much time do we have before we flee or Christ returns? One, five, ten, twenty years? No one knows. But at least one well-known evangelist in the church of God claims we have 500 years left! I do not believe that for a moment.

People who accuse and scoff at us for saying the return of Christ is near are guilty of the very accusation they are making. That is, they, too, are speculating about how much time is left before Christ returns! But they have compounded their fault by "[putting] far off the day of doom" (Amos 6:3), thus diminishing the sense of urgency God intends by keeping His Son's return always seeming to be imminent.

In Psalm 90:1-4, Moses compares the timelessness of God with the brief mortality of man:

LORD, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. You turn man to destruction, and say, "Return, O children of men." For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night.

Perhaps only Isaiah 40 can compare with this psalm in presenting God's grandeur and eternity in contrast to our frailty and mortality. Moses' point, however, is that *God's eternity is the answer to our problem with time* .

One might think that we hardly need to be reminded of this. But when the misconception that we are already immortal ("You shall not surely die") is combined with our innate and powerful proclivity toward abusing time, it is urgently necessary that God emphasize this on occasion.

God often underscores the brevity of our lives. Job laments: "Now my days are swifter than a runner; they flee away, they see no good. They pass by like swift ships, like an eagle swooping on its prey" (Job 9:25-26). In Psalm 39:4-5, David prays:

LORD, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am. Indeed, you have made my days as handbreadths, and my age is as nothing before You; certainly every man at his best state is but vapor. Selah.

And finally Asaph writes, "For He remembered that they were but flesh, a breath that passes away and does not come again" (Psalm 78:39).

The rapid passage of time is something we need to be serious about. We cannot live as though there is no day of reckoning because judgment is now upon the household of God (I Peter 4:17).

Learning to "Number Our Days"

In Psalm 90:12, Moses asks God, "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." The phrase "number our days" expresses the thought of putting in order, arranging the use of, or prioritizing time because the end of one's life is fast approaching. Moses wanted us to remember that our remaining number of days grows smaller each day.

He reminds us because we rarely make a conscious relationship between sin and our mortality. We are so busy living for the moment that we fail to see a connection between our conduct and our finite lifespan. Moses appeals for help that we might be wise and live by faith. Proverbs 4:5-6 urges us, "Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you." Because it bears so profoundly upon our accountability to God, using time properly may be the greatest of wisdom.

Romans 13:11-12 carries this thought down to our day, expressing the urgency of our situation:

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.

Priorities, Priorities

An illustration I read once regarding life and time deeply impressed me. The author wrote that our life is like an hourglass, but not an ordinary one. In this hourglass one can see the bottom half into which the sand falls, but the top half is opaque, obscuring how much sand remains. In addition, each person's hourglass holds a different amount of sand.

How much sand remains in your hourglass? Nobody knows—that is the issue! We must make the best use of an amount that is a mystery to us. How can we do this? The first step is also the most obvious: Set your priorities right.

What was the first of the Seven Laws of Success? Set the right goal! Jesus clearly established the highest-priority goal for His disciples in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." He did this because He knows that the main goal, our highest priority, determines the preparations, efforts and zeal for reaching it.

Suppose someone offered us a tremendous sum of money, perhaps billions of dollars, but the exact amount would be determined by how well we could learn to speak German in two month's time. We would embark on the most intense crash-course program of learning in our life! We would study

from morning to night, burn the midnight oil, listen to language tapes, carry flash cards wherever we went and seek out fluent German speakers so we could practice with them.

During those two months, no one could drag us near a time-wasting television program. We would probably allow nothing to interfere other than necessary physical activities to sustain life itself. All for money!

Notice what Jesus says earlier in Matthew 6:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (verses 19-21)

Consider these scriptures in the context of what Jesus says in verse 33. Our hearts are in the things to which we devote ourselves, the things we spend our time pursuing. He is helping us prioritize by stating and illustrating principles that will help us make right choices in managing time.

Every day another 24 hours or 1,440 minutes or 86,400 seconds is credited to our account, and we have to spend them. Whether we are a billionaire or a dirt farmer, except for those who die that day, all have the same amount of time. Jesus says how we spend it shows where our heart is.

Wasted Time

Unfortunately, Satan has devised a world in which, if we are not careful, we can become so engrossed with inconsequential matters that we have no time for matters of true importance. Time oozes away. Some things, such as eating, sleeping, working, rest and recreation, are necessary and time well spent. Wasted time is another matter altogether!

One of the greatest time wasters is sickness. The majority of people in our culture seem to believe that sickness "just happens." As if nothing can be done to avoid it, we think we are hapless and helpless victims of invisible "bugs." If we "catch" one, we just go to the doctor, and he takes care of it.

While some are undoubtedly afflicted with genetic defects that predispose them to certain illnesses, for most of us, sickness results when we do not diligently follow the laws of health. When we are sick, time that can never be replaced is slipping away. Though it takes time to study the laws of health to understand their right applications, it is spent productively. In the long term, it can extend our lifetime, and in the short term, as our health improves, we make more efficient and effective use of what we already have.

Of course, Bible Study and prayer are very high priority activities. But Satan also knows this! He also knows it would be very difficult to change our minds regarding their value if he confronted us directly. So he makes use of subtle, indirect approaches, and all too often he succeeds in diverting our attention from these high priority concerns.

Jesus addresses this within the parable of the Sower and the Seed:

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. . . . Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.
(Matthew 13:7, 22)

He is not saying that the cares of this life and riches are intrinsically evil; they are neutral. However, involvement in or pursuit of them may be easily overdone and cause great spiritual loss. Jesus is giving a warning to people with too many interests. The most important interests, the spiritual ones, almost invariably get crowded out.

Even a person heavily involved in charitable works may be misusing time (Luke 10:40-42). Another may be so intent on his business that he is too tired to study or pray effectively, or for that matter, to think of anything else. Such a person—one who should heed Jesus' warning—has allowed other things to control his life.

In many cases, our worst enemies are not the obviously bad things, but the necessary and even the good things which we allow to be overdone. In athletics, is not the second best athlete always the strongest enemy of the first? So it is in prioritizing. Much of the time, our chief problem is a lack of commitment to the highest priority; we allow the secondary priorities to steal time from the primary one.

Consider the man in the parable of Luke 12:20-21:

But God said to him, "You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

He was a fool because he did not have enough understanding and character to know when enough is enough. In his lust for more, he burned up his time on lower priority concerns and neglected building character.

Focusing Our Attention

When Herbert W. Armstrong told us we needed to simplify our lives, he did not mean we should be any less busy. He meant that we should be busy doing fewer, higher-priority things.

Again, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says:

The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (Matthew 6:22-24)

Jesus urges SINGLE-MINDEDNESS! The teaching here involves *simplicity of intention in living one's life*. In light of verse 33, verse 24 shows we must focus our attention on our highest priority. When that is done, it indicates devotion to purpose and undivided loyalty to the object of that purpose.

In geometry, it is impossible to draw more than one straight line between two points. Though other lines may start at the same point, only one will reach the second point. All others end up somewhere else. Likewise, a person who tries to focus on several goals at once has no clear orientation, and he will wind up elsewhere.

Some commentaries note that the ancients believed that light entered a person through the eyes, the "windows" of the body. If the eyes were in good condition, the whole body benefited from the unimpeded light. If the eye were not sound or "single," the whole body's effectiveness was diminished. Thus a person who single-mindedly pursues God's Kingdom and His righteousness will have moral healthiness and simple, unaffected goodness.

What Are Your Dreams?

Ecclesiastes 5:1-3 adds interesting instruction regarding use of time.

Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice is known by his many words.

At first glance, verse 3 appears to say that dreams are an echo of our daytime activities, that anxious days cause troubled sleep. While that is certainly true, the verse appears in the context of how to worship God. Thus Solomon advises, "Prioritize and keep your life simple!"

"Walk prudently" means "watch your moral conduct." Frequently, "hear" is used synonymously with "obey," and the "sacrifice of fools" is allowing fellowship to degenerate into mere socializing without serious regard toward walking prudently and hearing God.

Hastiness in prayer is speaking ill-considered words before God. Though we pour out a prayer to Him in anguish, we may not think about the possible effects of our words. We can also do this by praying carelessly, ignorant of the seriousness of our communication with God.

What causes hastiness in prayer? A multitude of business. The busy fool pours out a flood of useless words because his mind is crammed with all the details of his business. This evil excess misuses important time with God and obscures the effectiveness of simple, heartfelt and thoughtful prayer. When our minds are so full of our own activities rather than with the purposes of God, we often pray to Him like fools who talk incessantly about things of no consequence, or we endlessly repeat ourselves.

"Redeeming the Time"

Paul writes of "redeeming the time" in Ephesians 5:16. *Redeem* means "to buy up for oneself" or "buy up an opportunity." When connected to "time," it means "to buy or take advantage of an opportunity." Since we are dealing with time, and it inexorably passes on, we must make the most of each opportunity. If an opportunity is missed, it cannot be recalled.

Paul might as well be saying, "God's way is not just for a few hours on a Sabbath, but the will of the Lord applies in every situation in life." He is urging us to take advantage of every situation to imitate God. Every second of our lives is precious in the building of godly character.

This has nothing to do with literally gaining time. It may be illustrated, though, with the example of the savvy merchant who takes advantage of every opportunity to make a profit. Businessmen often say, "Strike while the iron is hot." Or, in our consumer culture, we watch the advertisements to take advantage of a sale.

How can we determine how to take advantage of time? In much the same way we take advantage of a sale. We decide what we want and then we watch carefully. If we want to buy a product, we will generally survey the market and then decide which particular brand and model we want to buy. Then we keep a careful watch until the sale of our choice occurs.

Likewise, we must survey what is controlling our time and we must decide what is important to us. Is it our relationship with God, family, job, socializing, recreation or entertainments? In what order of priority would we put these and other interests? Next, we must survey each of the major categories more specifically and insert particular activities into them. This is very important because the "small" activities drain most of our time away almost unnoticed.

The Bible's View of Time

The Greeks looked upon time differently than we do. They thought of it as being circular, like a wheel revolving with constant and endless repetition, and their idea of immortality was more akin to reincarnation. Life had little or no meaning to it except for what they could gain from it in the present, so they fashioned their religions with that in mind. There was no way for them to break out of this endless repetition.

Ecclesiastes 1 shows a similar repetition, but the Bible views time as more lineal. Though the cycles of life continue with each generation, time is moving to a purposeful conclusion. It is moving toward the Day of the Lord, the resurrection of the dead, the birth of God's children into His Family and the establishment of His Kingdom on earth. Are our lives also moving toward the same purposeful conclusion?

Because of principles like "whatever we sow, we shall also reap," the future is purchased by how we spend time in the present. Time management expert Arnold Bennett writes, "A sense of the value of time, that is, the best way to divide one's time into one's various activities, is an essential preliminary to efficient work. It is the only method of avoiding hurry." Benjamin Franklin adds, "Great haste makes great waste." The object is not merely to work fast, but to work effectively.

Evaluate how you use your time to determine whether your current practices reflect the Kingdom of God as your highest priority. We must perceive the use of our time from this perspective or godly things will surely be pushed to the background by other "more pressing and immediate" concerns. The cares of this world will surely dominate our lives.

Merely knowing does not guarantee that the proper use of time will simply fall into place. It will take mental effort to survey honestly what is really important—and a great amount of discipline to carry it out. Do not offer the sacrifice of fools to God.

Remember what the apostle Paul writes in II Corinthians 6:1-2:

We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you."

Always consider this in conjunction with I Peter 4:17, that judgment must begin at the household of God. Our time is now.

Concentrate your efforts at getting control of your time and life with this thought in the foreground. Restrict the activities you intend to focus on to a few, and be, with God, the master of your awesome destiny! Never forget that, to a very great extent, eternity is purchased by how we spend our time in the present. Time is priceless—don't waste it!