

“The Days are Evil”

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Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰ giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

THE DAYS ARE EVIL

In verse 16 we read, “The days are evil.”
We could also translate that sentence,
“The days are full of hardship.”

Eugene Peterson paraphrases,
“These are desperate times.”

This letter to the Ephesians was written many years ago,
but this sentence resonates in every age.

It’s like Paul is talking directly to us.

These are desperate times.
Things are rough.
We are hard pressed on every side.

In that regard, our days don’t seem all that different from those days do they?

Each week I hear people say,
“I’m worried about our country.”

This is not normal.
These are desperate times.”

Folks have some tragedy take over their life.
Life gets pretty dark.
And they don't know where to turn.

Dark days come to everyone.

And when that happens
In the dark days,
in desperate times,
we sometimes just want to just quit.

We want to check out.
We want to just run away from our problems.

When times are desperate,
we are afraid and uncertain.

What can a person do when times are desperate,
when the days are evil?

BE CAREFUL HOW YOU LIVE

Paul has a suggestion.
He tells the Ephesians,

“When times are desperate,
don't give in.
Don't give up.

Instead, “Be careful how you live”.

When the days are evil don't be distracted by the noise.
Pay attention to those things that you can actually change.
Pay attention to your own way of life.

Don't sleepwalk through life.
Practice mindfulness.

Be aware of your feelings
and try to understand why you're doing what you're doing."

Don't become a part of a system that's on a destructive path.
Go in a different direction.

According to Paul, this is just a wise way to live.

A literal translation of verse 15 is something like this,
"Watch carefully where you're walking."

Wise people follow that advice literally.
They watch where they're walking.
They know that it's important to walk carefully.

Many of us have experienced this personally...

Just one wrong step,
and we're in a world of hurt.
Time in rehab.
Plans canceled.

It can happen to anyone, young or old.
I was thinking about this passage
as I took my evening walk this past week,
and guess what happened?

That's right.
The sidewalk rose up to greet me.
I smiled and said to myself,

"Be careful how you walk, Frank!"

But, of course watching our step
is a way of talking about caution in general.
In a dangerous world, careful living is a must.

For example, send a text while you're driving,
and you can be in a terrible accident.

One moment can turn your life and the lives of others upside down.

Be careful.

Watch your step.

Don't let yourself go when times are desperate.

Pay attention!

That's just common wisdom.

We teach our children to watch how they walk.

It's advice that we never outgrow.

And it's especially important when the days are evil.

REDEEMING THE TIME

But, Paul encourages the Ephesians to do more than just be careful in those evil days.

He encourages them to "make the most" of their time. A literal translation of this phrase is to "redeem the time".

Many cultures teach that a time of "desperation" can also be an opportunity to go in a new and better direction.

In the Christian faith, redemption in a time of desperation is an article of faith.

And it's most profound expression is the cross.

If ever there was an evil day,
Good Friday was that day.

People often ask me,
"Why do we call it Good Friday?
There doesn't seem to be anything good about it."

They have a point.

On that Friday, Jesus was rejected and crucified by the very people he came to save.

That day was so bad that the world turned dark at high noon.

But this dark time was the beginning of a new day.
This dark, evil Friday became, through the grace of God, Good Friday.

Friday was redeemed by Sunday.

The resurrection teaches us that the evil day will not triumph.
The resurrection teaches us that the time of desperation can become a
time of redemption

This is not just something that we think about.
This is not just about Jesus.
This is also about us.

This is a truth that we live.
Our “walk”, our journey through life
is informed by this story.

Evil times, desperate times
can still be redeemed by the power of God’s grace.

So, for Christians, careful living
is not just a life where it’s safety first, last and always.

Careful living is a life lived through the prism of God’s grace.

We evaluate everything in our life
through the lens of the cross and the resurrection.

Wise people don’t resign themselves to the evil that surrounds us.
Wise people look to Jesus.

Wise people understand
that the “will of the Lord” is revealed in the life of Jesus,

...especially in the cross and resurrection.

In desperate times, we’re careful.
We careful not to become a part of the evil times in which we live.

And we're careful to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

And, according to this passage,
the time to start living this way is now.

The word translated "time" in our passage is the Greek word, "kairos".
That word means the "opportune time".

We make the most of today because we believe in God's tomorrow.

Often we are lulled into thinking
that tomorrow will be just like today.
We forget the importance of time.

We think, falsely, that no matter what we do,
nothing will change.

But, for those who follow Jesus,
desperate times call for focus and purpose.

When the days are evil,
there is no better time to follow Jesus.

Now is the time.

When the day is darkest,
the hope of redemption draws near.

THE PROBLEM OF ADDICTION

But, sometimes we don't recognize the importance of this day.

We search for salvation in some other place,
and the day of darkness becomes an occasion for despair.

What happens when we fail to redeem our time?
What happens we don't have hope for redemption
and the times are desperate?

Quite often, we try to escape.

We try to (as an old song puts it):
“Make the world go away”.

And how do folks often do that?
We self-medicate.
We drink too much.

That’s a big problem today.
And apparently this was also a problem in the ancient world as well.

During anxious, desperate times
alcoholism will be on the rise.

Paul tells the Ephesians,
“Don’t get drunk with wine for that is debauchery...”

This verse would make a good temperance sermon.
I’ve heard it preached that way in the Baptist Church of my youth.

And, you now what?
Those Baptists had a point.
Drinking too much has indeed been the ruin of many people.

If you don’t believe it,
visit with the folks who meet here every Tuesday.

I’m willing to bet that most of us here today
have either personally struggled with alcoholism
or have a family member who has struggled with alcoholism.

It’s a serious issue.

But, this verse is about more than just drinking too much and losing control.

This verse is about the nature of addiction.
The important question
when it comes to addiction is why?
Why do we do it?

Why do we fill ourselves with wine (or other things for that matter)?

We have a need in our life that is not being satisfied.

When the days are evil,
when we're afraid of what might come next,
we often do things to excess.

We drink too much,
we eat too much,
we shop too much,
we work too much,

we play the lottery too much
...and so forth.

Evil days, desperate times,
tempt us to compulsively fill our life with things that don't satisfy.

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

So what do we need in desperate times?

This passage suggests that instead of being filled with wine, we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Ok, that sounds good.
So, how do we do that?

I like the way Eugene Peterson connects verses 18 and 19. It gives us insight into the action of the Holy Spirit.

Instead of drinking too much wine,
we substitute getting drunk in the Spirit.

His paraphrase of these verses goes:

“Don't drink too much wine.
That cheapens your life.

Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him.

Sing hymns instead of drinking songs!
Sing songs from your heart to Christ.”

When the Holy Spirit first came upon the apostles at Pentecost, some people thought they were filled with new wine.

Apparently there was an ecstasy that came with being filled with the Spirit

This sense of ecstasy and joy was not too different from the high that comes from the drinking of wine.

I must admit that we Presbyterians are a bit suspicious of too much ecstasy.

We prefer laid back worship.

We prefer to worship God more with our head more than our heart.

But, our faith needs an emotional as well as an intellectual connection.

How can we make that emotional connection?
How can we enable the filling of the Spirit?

SONGS OF GRACE

That's where music comes in.

One way to drink deeply of the Spirit of God in desperate times is to fill your life with spiritual songs.

“Sing hymns instead of drinking songs”.

I had a professor in seminary who made a vow when he was in high school.

He knew that the music he listened to expressed the hopes and fears of his generation.

And so he made a promise to himself to listen to the music of each generation

in order to understand what young people were thinking and feeling.

I asked him what he thought of the music these days.

He smiled ruefully and said,
“It scares me to death!”

Music often reflects the desperation many feel.
Every Saturday I watch the CBS morning program.
I especially like to hear the new musical artists
that are featured at the end of the show.

This past week the band played a nice tune.
But, then I began to listen to the words.

They were talking about committing suicide.

Desperate words for desperate times.

I think my professor was right.
It’s important to listen to the music of our time,
as difficult as that might be at times!

It can help us understand where this generation is coming from, their hopes
and dreams and fears and anger.

But, need to do more than that.
We also need to make our own music.
We need to sing about the grace of God.

According to the Bible hymns have real power.

In the 16th chapter of Acts,
Paul and Silas were in prison.
And what did they do in the middle of the night?

They prayed and sang hymns.

And while they were singing,
the ground shook, the prison doors flew open

and everyone's chains were removed.

The earthquake caused their jailer to tremble
and ask the apostles,

“What must I do to be saved?”

Spiritual songs can be the gateway to unanticipated blessings.

Spiritual songs can be a means of grace that fill us with the Spirit.

Spiritual songs can set the captives free.

Spiritual songs can transform broken lives.

Spiritual songs can cause us to come trembling to the Lord and ask,
“What must I do to be saved?”

FILL MY CUP, LORD

My father used to sing solos in the Baptist church of my youth.

And one of his favorites was Fill My Cup, Lord.

I can still see him filling the sanctuary with his powerful voice,
singing with his heart on his sleeve.

In a way that song taught me a lot about what it meant to have faith.

And so, as I wrote my sermon this week it occurred to me that this would
be the perfect song to express the essence of this sermon.

So, I emailed Jeanie and asked if she knew the song
and would she be willing to sing it.

Turns out that not only did she know the song,
she was praying about what she might sing today!

I like it when a plan comes together!

Before she sings, I want to say just a few words about this song.

It focuses on a story from John's gospel,
the woman at the well.

Most of you remember that story.

The woman at the well was rejected by everyone because of her immoral lifestyle.

She was (as we say) looking for love in all the wrong places.

And because she was the object of scorn
she came to the well when no one else was there.

But, one day Jesus was there.
And Jesus offered her water that would quench her thirst forever.

The song puts us in the shoes of that woman.
The song teaches us that we're like that woman.

We seek things that do not satisfy.

And when times are desperate,
when we find ourselves all alone under the hot sun,
we need a drink.

But, we need more than water.

We need to hear our Savior calling,
"Draw from my well that never will run dry."

And then the chorus invites us to participate,
to ask personally,

"Fill my cup Lord.
I lift it up Lord.
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul.

Bread of heaven,

feed me till I want no more.
Fill my cup.
Fill it up and make me whole.”

When we're filled with the Holy Spirit,
even desperate times can be an occasion for joy and thanksgiving. (20)

Lord, help us to sing your song.

Amen.