
²⁹ But this I-say, brothers-and-sisters; The time is wrapping-up. From-now-on...

³¹ those using the world [*should-be*] as not using-it-as-their-own,
for the present-form of this world is-passing-by.

From 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

A friend was visiting a famous pianist in his apartment, and time was quite late (and probably a few drinks had been consumed). At this point the pianist told his friend that he could tell time by his piano. The friend wasn't convinced so the pianist proceeded to prove his point. He immediately began playing a loud resounding march. In only a few moments there was a loud banging on the apartment wall, and a voice on the other side screamed, "Stop that noise! Don't you know it's 1:30 in the morning?"

Time is important to us, isn't it? Have you ever thought or said, "Stop wasting my time?" or "Is it that time again?" or "I hardly have time to breathe" or "I'll catch you some other time" or "It's about time" or "All in good time" or "Make up for lost time" or "I'm pressed for time" or "How time flies" or "I wished I had more time"...

A famous race car driver, Mario Andretti, as he talked with reporters before driving his last race at the age of 54, said, "It's not my fault that the years go by. If I could make a deal with somebody and buy five or six years of this life, I would." Think of it--trading his millions for just a few more years of peak performance racing. He couldn't buy time, and neither could one of the world's richest, if not the richest woman in the world. As she lay on her death bed, the best doctors in the world at her side trying to save her life, Queen Victoria, whose British Isles were at the peak of their glory, cried out, "My kingdom, my kingdom for an inch of time."

I can tell you two things about time which you already know. The first is that once the time is over, you lose it. You cannot go back in time. Like sands through the hourglass... The other thing about time is that the farther you travel in your journey of time on this earth, the faster it seems to pass by.

In our Scripture Reading for this day (1 Corinthians 7:29-31) the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul says two important things. First, "Time is wrapping up". Second, "the present-form of this world is-passing-by". But, as we think about every breath we take, and how each breath brings us another moment closer to our passing from this life, it is helpful to see what God is actually saying here through the Apostle Paul. Whilst there is a 'moral imperative' here to 'use your time wisely on this earth to give glory to God', there is a deeper truth that is 'good news' that our 'time is in God's hand' (Psalm 31:15).

Our 'time is in God's hand', and there are two related ideas in our Bible Reading today (1 Corinthians 7:29-31): "the appointed time has grown short" (verse 29) and "the present form of this world is passing away" (verse 31).

As we think first about the ‘moral imperative’ in the Bible Reading (that is, “How we are to use every moment of our lives to the glory of God”), it is helpful to remember that in the language of the New Testament (Greek) there are two words for time—‘chronos’ and ‘kairos’. Chronos has to do with chronological time—minutes, hours, days, etc. When we say that we will do something at a particular time, we are using chronos time. Kairos, on the other hand, has to do with crucial time or a decisive moment. When we talk about “missing the boat,” (by which we mean missing the opportunity of a lifetime), we are talking about kairos time. When we say, “Now is the time to act!” we are talking about a decisive moment—kairos time.

In the Bible Reading for today God is saying that the ‘kairos time’ (time for action) is ‘wrapping up’. In other words, ‘the right time’ to ‘do the right thing’ is always in ‘the now’, in ‘the moment’, and not some ‘future moment’.

As we think of this phrase ‘the time is wrapping up’, we are being called to live differently as God’s people. The ‘world attitudes’ toward everyday life and its affairs must be replaced. This brings us to the paradoxical statements in 1 Corinthians 7:29–31. We should buy, yet be as though we have no possessions. We should deal with the world as though not dealing with the world as we know it. That is, we may make use of the things this world has to offer, but we shouldn’t accept the world’s values and principles when they get in the way of God’s kingdom.

The ‘world attitudes’ of ‘the flesh’ is that we work to make life more comfortable and satisfying for ourselves. The new attitude is that we seek to release the things in our possession for use where they will make the world more as God desires it. And, as we know, if there is any wisdom acquired in aging, it surely must include the importance of using time wisely. And for any who claim a faith in Christ Jesus, this also means using the every moment of our life to the glory of God. As God has said through the Apostle Paul, “The present-form of this world is-passing-away”.

Now there is a fortunate connection between Second Reading (1 Corinthians 7) and the Gospel for this day (Mark 1:14-20). In Mark 1:15, Jesus proclaims: “The time (kairos) is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Here Jesus is saying that God’s reign is breaking into human history.

In First Corinthians 7 the Apostle Paul speaks into situations that have to do with sex and money. In 1 Corinthians 7:1-24, Paul seeks to reorient the Corinthian Christians with a focus on living in a way that brings glory to God. The people of Corinth had several questions: Should a married couple refrain from conjugal relations? Paul answers, “Don’t deprive one another” (7:5). Should the unmarried remain that way? Preferably! (7:8-9). Should Christians who are married to unbelievers divorce their spouses? No! (7:10-16). Should slaves seek freedom? Paul answers “Brothers, let each man, in whatever condition he was called, stay in that condition with God” (7:24). And what these Bible passages are really calling us to do is to have an ‘end-time’ (that is, one day our life will be over) perspective.

As Christians, we so often find it difficult to live in a world that celebrates sex, money, and power as ultimate values without being affected by that perspective. However, events occasionally intrude on our lives and force us to think more deeply. When the doctor says “cancer”—or when we learn that our child has been in a bad

accident—or when a spouse dies—suddenly the things that seemed so important a few minutes earlier fade into the background. In the crisis, we quickly reorient ourselves to that which is truly important. This text calls us to live that kind of refocused life as a matter of course.

When Jesus said, “The time (kairos) is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news,” He was pointing to a ‘new kingdom’, which is God’s eternal kingdom that always lives in that sense of ‘right time’. And we are called to remember that this is the kingdom ushered in by Jesus’ death and resurrection. Through the Apostle Paul God is reminding us that while we have one foot in this world, the other sits firmly in God’s eternal. An old gospel song captures it this way:

“This world is not my home; I just a-passing through.
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me from heaven’s open door,
and I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.”

To understand this a little better in a ‘good news sense’, it is helpful to look at what Paul says in “The present form of this world is passing-by”. For some, this may seem like everything is ‘wearing out’, and ‘reaching its use-by-date’. But it is instructive to look at the only other place in his writings where Paul use this term “form” (in Greek, schema). In Philippians 2:7, Paul notes that Christ was found in human “form.” And what this suggests is that whilst we may look at this world with a certain way of ‘seeing’ (that things get old and wear out and sometimes we think we might have to ‘change things’), God wants us to see that He has come into this world in Jesus in our ‘form’, but to bring about a ‘new form’ (or a ‘new reality’). And in that Christ Hymn (Philippians 2:6-11) we are reminded that Jesus “being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted Him.” God has brought about a new way of ‘seeing things’ in ‘the world’ in the person and work of Jesus, who is God’s one and only eternal Son, and our Saviour.

In our Bible Reading this day (1 Corinthians 7:29-31) God is encouraging us to “Hold Lightly to the Things of This World.” Hold lightly to the things of this world, for the present ‘form’ is ‘passing away’.

“The appointed time has grown very short,” Paul says. Paul says, the “present form” of this world is passing away. So where do we find our stability, where do we find our security, in a world that is passing away? In one place only: In God. Today we say with the psalmist (Psalm 62:5-6): “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from Him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.”

Last Wednesday, January 20, a new president took office. But the President’s work started well before then. Since the election he’s picked people for his cabinet, gathered teams of advisors, formulated plans. And he has a busy schedule ahead of him for ‘time is short’. The new President wants to act quickly to stimulate the economy, to refocus the fight against coronavirus, and to bring change.

We've seen that in the political sphere these past weeks, but what about your spiritual focus? Where is your energy concentrated? Where are your efforts channelled? Through the words the Holy Spirit gave the Apostle Paul, He challenges us to examine our focus and to live our lives knowing that the time is short. Yes, the time is short, so focus. But a Gospel approach calls us to focus on Jesus.

Just a few years after Paul wrote his letters to the church in Corinth, Christians suffered some of the most intense, evil persecution the world has ever seen. The Roman Emperor Nero even doused Christians in wax and set them on fire as human candles for his decadent parties. I mention this disturbing anecdote from history because it illustrates how difficult it was for Christians living in the first century, just as it is difficult for Christians in many parts of our world today. Paul told the Corinthians to live as though the time were short. And he told them to be focused on Jesus.

There is an old song called 'What is this world to me', and within this song there are these verses:

"The world seeks after wealth, And all that mammon offers.
Yet never is content, Though gold should fill its coffers.
I have a higher good, Content with it I'll be:
My Jesus is my wealth, What is the world to me!

"What is the world to me! My Jesus is my treasure,
My life, my health, my wealth, My friend, my love, my pleasure,
My joy, my crown, my all, My bliss eternally.
Once more, then, I declare: What is the world to me!"

Jesus is our treasure. The world offers many things, but the world's treasures do not last because, as the apostle Paul writes, "The present form of this world is passing away." It may be that from an earthly perspective, we will not always have health or wealth or treasure. But we have Jesus. He brings a 'new form' of life to us. He is our wealth, our treasure, our joy, and our crown of life. And His love for us will never pass away.

You can treat the things of this world with a lighter grip, for God takes a tight grip on us through the work of Christ our Saviour. He has taken our 'form' upon Himself. Our heavenly Father has provided us with a new life, a clean slate on Judgment Day, and a joyful eternity. So now when Jesus calls you and says, "Follow Me," you are free to leave your nets (metaphorically speaking) and go where Jesus leads. You are free to let go of the "stuff." You are free to love others, to forgive them, to serve your neighbour, because you are sure of your standing in Christ. The 'present form of things is passing away'. This is good news. This is our security. This is faith. This is our freedom. This is what God gives us in Jesus. What a wonderful gift this is! Amen.

Gracious Father, Your holy Word tells us that our times are in Your hands. As we walk through this life, fill us with Your Spirit, and help us to set our eyes on heavenly things; in Jesus' name. Amen.