

CROSSING THE RIVER

26th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 5:15-17

Our son loves football. He loved it when he played it in high school. His senior year their team was really good. They lost only one game during the regular season and it was a close loss they could have won. Then came the playoffs. They won their first two playoff games easily, both of them blowout wins. They got to the CIF semifinal game and it was against the one team that had beaten them. But by this time it was the week of Thanksgiving. The players had been working ridiculously hard really since May. Toby was tired. All of them were. While the other students were off for Thanksgiving vacation, they had practice every day. They had a practice at 8 AM on Thanksgiving morning! Toby felt that should have been outlawed by Congress. That week in a frank moment he said to me, "Dad, I really want to win this game. I want to beat that team, and I want us to go on and win CIF. If we win this one I'm pretty sure we'll win the championship game. But I am really kind of worn out. If we don't win I think it will be all right because I'd really like to have a break. I'm ready for it to be over."

The game came down to the last minute, and his team had the chance to kick a field goal to go ahead by one point in that last minute. But two false start penalties in a row moved them back out of field goal range. So they had to try to go for a first down on 4th and 12, and the desperate attempt failed. They lost by 2 points. After the game when we saw Toby he was disconsolate. The finality of it had hit him. His high school football playing days were over forever. It wasn't just the end of a long season of football, it was the last time he would ever play. He said, "Dad, I thought I was ready, but I'm not. I don't want it to be over."

Even though you know in your head that your playing days will end, somehow you kind of feel like it will always be there. And when it ends suddenly the shock of it is great. No more chances. It's all over and you can't do a single thing about it. You want it back, but it's too late. Unfortunately there is a much larger matter where this reality comes into play. It is not merely a sport. It is life itself. We will learn about this reality in Ephesians 5:15-17.

SEIZE THE DAY

In verse 16 Paul says, "making the most of every opportunity." I'm not a fan of that translation. It makes me wonder what opportunities Paul is referring to. Is it an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of some new investment opportunity? Is it an opportunity to go to a really good college, or to nab a great job? None of those are remotely related to Paul's true concerns. A different translation might help us. The word translated "opportunity" actually meant "period of time" or "season." What Paul literally said was that we should make the most of the *season*.

The Greek word translated "making the most of" was *exagorazo*. The root of that term was the noun *agora*. Wait, isn't Agora a town up near Thousand Oaks? This has something to do with a city up near LA? No, the Greek word meant "market." The verb, which is used in verse 16

meant to do what you do in a market, which is to buy stuff. So Paul said we should buy the season? What does that mean?

The season is this life you have here on this planet. We typically think of this as the only life we're going to have, but that is not true. Jesus said that we have a far more significant and infinitely longer life ahead of us in the kingdom of God. So while our lives right now seem like all there is, the truth is that this is just a season.

A season doesn't last forever. It is a discrete period of time with a beginning and an end. At the end of March, the Major League Baseball season began. While to some it might seem eternal, the fact is that teams play 162 games over 6 months and then the season is done. There are only a couple of weeks left of this season, as it will conclude at the end of the month. There will be post-season games, but they are indeed after the season. The regular season is over. There will be Major League games in 2020, but they will not be a part of this season.

Just like there will be more baseball games in the future, but they won't be a part of this season, we will have more life after this life, but it won't be a part of this season, the season of life in this age on this planet. Paul is telling us, don't be like the Padres and waste yet another season like they do every year. Make the most of this season that you have.

Summer is almost technically over, but our cultural summer season has already ended in a way. For me, every year I feel the urgency of "buying up" the season during the summer. I love the warm weather and long days, and despite San Diego's mild climate, the real summer weather is only a few months, and I always feel like I need to get out and enjoy it. Another great aspect of summer is the fruit. In particular, the past few years peaches have been my obsession. I love peaches. I drive Laurie crazy going on the great peach hunt every year because I hate it when you see beautiful looking peaches in the grocery store, you buy them, but when you get them home and eat them they're a big disappointment. I want those sweet, juicy peaches that are what peaches are supposed to be. And I get frantic finding them and buying them because I know very well when September rolls around, peach season will be over and you won't get good peaches anymore. It is a limited season. My motto is, *when it's peach season, eat peaches*. Because when it's over, it's back to apples, oranges and bananas.

Paul is telling us that our lives on this planet are kind of like peach season or the summer. It is a discrete time that is distressingly short. Just like I want to not waste the beautiful weather in summer or miss out on delicious peaches during peach season, Paul says we should not waste the time we have on earth. We must make the most of it.

Isn't it cool that God wants us to make the most of our lives? We know that's true from other parts of Scripture. Jesus said he came so that we could have the fullest possible life. In other words, he wants us to make the most of the life we have.

There is a flip side to making the most of our lives. This is a command, so we have a choice whether we obey or not. We can choose not to make the most of life, which means we can waste it. Paul says we should “be very careful” about how we live. In other words, pay attention to what you are doing and how you are living, how you are spending your life. Paul said that because it is awfully easy for us to just sort of put our brains on autopilot and go through our days doing what comes naturally, just doing what feels good, reacting to events as they come and just trying to survive. If we do that we likely will come to the end of it and realize that we have not maximized our time in this life.

I was surprised to learn from Michael that on occasion the pilots will be instructed by the airline to do an auto landing on one of their flights. In other words, just have the plane land itself. So it seems that flying an airliner has to be a piece of cake job because the pilots are just sitting there watching the plane go on its own. That’s where the catch comes in. Unfortunately you know how every now and then your phone or your computer hiccups and does something it isn’t supposed to do? Well aviation technology systems are far more complex, and they have the same problem. They don’t always do what they’re supposed to do. In fact, pilots have to be on the alert for the autopilot going rogue. Michael says he hates it when they have to do an autoland because he’s always worried that the plane isn’t going to do it right, and that would be a disaster. Just like pilots can’t put the plane on autopilot then quit paying attention, so we can’t put our lives on auto and quit paying attention and expect to maximize our lives. Paul says if we want to make the most of our lives we are going to have to be alert and purposeful about how we live. We should be alert and thinking about where we going, watching our steps, because that is the only way to live a wise life, to master life and make the most of it.

This raises the question of what it means to make the most out of life. Does it mean to become somebody important in this world? Some people think that’s what it means, and if you fail to do that then you’ve wasted your life. Some think it means becoming “successful,” which usually comes down to doing well in a career that nets you a lot of money. Some people think it means to have more excitement in your life than the average person. Some think it means to do something meaningful. Some think it means to have more fun or be happy. It is critical that as we think carefully about how we live, we need to have a clear idea of what it means to make the most of life. For the moment I’m going to let you think about that. We will identify what Paul said was making the most of life in a few minutes.

The question is, why do we need to pay attention? Why can’t we live without thinking about it and just do what comes naturally? Doesn’t it seem like that would be the most free way to live? Paul tells us why we need to pay attention.

REALIZE THE DAYS ARE EVIL

You always want to pay attention to the words used when you are reading the Scripture. In this passage the word “because” should jump out at you. When you see “because” you know what follows gives the reason why what was previously said was important. Paul has just told us that we should not live on cruise control but should pay attention so that instead of wasting our lives we make the most of them. Now he explains why we have to be so alert and intentional. It is because the days are evil.

But what does it mean for the days to be evil? Is it that these are terrible times and that makes life horribly difficult? Or is it that there are evil people doing awful things? Keep this statement in context. Paul has just instructed us to be careful about how we live so that we might make the most of the season of our lives. The days are evil means the natural flow of this life is toward living here in a way that we waste them.

Yes, but what does it mean to waste life? It means to not have experienced what life is supposed to be. It is to have lived without peace, without joy, and without having the meaningful experience of a life well lived invested in the things that matter most, that which is eternal. Just doing what comes easily will not end with you experiencing real life.

Have you ever been to a water park where one of the features is the lazy river ride? It is typically a meandering channel several feet wide that winds through a large part of the park. They call it a lazy river because they generate a current in the channel. So you float in an inner tube and the current gently moves you along at a two or three mile per hour pace. You are always going to go where the current takes you because that current is relentless.

Paul says this world is a bit like that ride. It has a current and it’s moving you along. At every moment of every day of your life that current is pushing on you. It is relentless. When he says the days are evil he means it is taking you in a direction that is not for your good. Just go with the flow and the result will be an evil one for you. Only the current of this world is far less benign than a gentle lazy river ride that just slowly, soothingly carries you around in a giant circle.

When I was 12 years old our family took what was the epic vacation of my childhood. We spent two months traveling across the USA. At one point we visited Niagara Falls. I have a very clear memory of standing by a railing at the edge of the Niagara River, near the point where it began its plunge over the falls. I could look down and see that massive volume of water moving at a powerful pace before plummeting down to the rocks below. It was awesome to see, and almost a little scary, because I could envision being caught in that torrent and helplessly swept over the falls to certain death. I could see that the current was so swift and so strong that no human could resist it. Paul was telling us the current of this world is more like

that than it is like a lazy river ride. The current is swift and incredibly strong, and it is rushing us toward a massive cataract that ends with our destruction.

God is the ruler of all. That being the case, why is it that the current of this world naturally carries us to an evil end? These verses clearly tell us that is not God's desired outcome for us, so why is the world the way it is? There are two things that have a significant part in creating the world's current that we need to be aware of. The first is human nature. Human nature has been distorted from God's original design. It all started with a desire back in Eden to assert independence from God, to not submit to his rule in one's life. Eve chose that, and now it is embedded into our nature. That choice has introduced significant changes into human nature. One is that we are now subject to death, which was not an aspect of the original plan. The other is that we have inherited a persistent tendency to assert our independence from God. We want to live our own way.

It's like that default tendency is now a part of our DNA. My DNA determined that I would have blue eyes, light skin, light hair, average height and male pattern baldness. I'm fine with blue eyes, but I wish I could have been a bit less pale and more able to get tan, wish I'd had more hair and that what I had, didn't abandon me, and I really would have liked to have been at least three or four inches taller. Oh, and that I would have had more athletic ability. I didn't choose the traits I got. They were just the cards I was handed. Along with those traits I got a trait shared by every human. It was that stubborn bent toward going my way instead of God's. All of us have that propensity to want to live apart from God and do our own thing. Collectively that tends to create a society that does not move one to knowing and obeying God.

The second factor is an even more sinister force. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul referred to Satan as "the god of this age." Who creates the current in human society in this age? It is Satan! In John 12:31, Jesus referred to him as the "prince of this world." And in 1 John 5:19, John wrote, "the whole world is under the control of the evil one." Every institution, every nation, every custom, every tradition, every society on earth is under the control of the evil one. That does not mean they are all inherently evil. But it does mean he will use them for his foul purposes. They may even be intended for some good purpose, but somehow Satan will either distort them or even use them somehow to divert us away from God's intent for us. He cleverly will use good things and make them the enemy of the best.

I will give you an example of this. It is a good thing that there are people who seek to devote their lives to the service of God as pastors, missionaries or full time Christian workers. That is a great thing, but Satan can even use that. I've seen several pastors who were gifted people who got caught up in the fact that ministry is their chosen career. In order for them to "make a difference for the kingdom of God" they want to be "successful" in ministry. Of course success in ministry is defined as having a large ministry that draws attention because of its size. So growing and expanding becomes the focus, because what they really want is to feel like they

themselves are a success. In the pursuit of growth and success they become autocratic, domineering leaders. They end up doing damage to people and in many cases the whole thing blows up in a very public and spectacular fashion, to the harm of thousands of people. Somehow, Satan gets into a good thing and distorts it so it actually becomes something evil.

It is crucial for us to remember what Satan is all about. What was his goal in Eden when he made his first appearance in the Scriptures? Was it to help people? No. It was to lead the humans to make a choice that would be cataclysmically destructive. That's because he irrationally hates God. He wants to defeat him. He takes glee in inflicting harm on God's work. He thinks it proves he is smarter than God. *He knows God loves people, so he loves to see people ruined, because he thinks it hurts God.* He thinks it defeats him and makes himself the winner. This hate driven irrationality is behind everything he does.

This force is at work every minute of every day at every single place in this world. It is subtly at work in our governments, schools, corporations, our families, neighborhoods, clubs, charitable organizations and even our churches. It is this force that creates the current in human society. So if we just go along with the current, what do you think will happen? Will we make the most of life? Is that what Satan wants for us? No way. He has created a powerful current that is designed to sweep us helplessly away over the waterfall.

There is something of a principle here that is generally true in life. Do you maximize life when you just go with the flow, just do what feels good, do what comes naturally? I know not everyone is like me, but let me tell you what would happen to me if I just went the easy way and did what feels good to me. I would eat very few vegetables. I would eat as many jelly doughnuts as I could get from Smith's bakery in Bakersfield. I'd have them ship them to me if I had to. I would get bleary eyed from watching nearly every football game that is on TV. I would never, ever exercise. And I'd spend money like a drunken sailor. If I did those things it would feel really good to me. In the short run. But it would ruin my life. I'd destroy my health and become a useless, brain-dead person. I'd become penniless. Pretty much every good thing in my life at some point has required a decision to put in effort to do something that is hard and not much fun. Just going with the flow never accomplishes that. Should it surprise us that this principle applies broadly in life?

I'd like to give you a picture of where we are in life. I want you to imagine yourself crossing a river. You are tired and terribly hungry. But just on the other side of the river there is an inn. If you can just get there you will have a warm fire to sit by, a filling meal, and a warm bed to sleep in. The inn is situated right by the perfect place to ford the river. The river has a swift, powerful current. But just at this place it is shallow enough that you can walk across it. It is a bit deep, but you can stand in the middle at the deepest point. As you cross you feel the pull of that current. The deeper in you get, the greater its pull on you. You realize that if at any point you fall, the current will sweep you downstream, and just a few yards downstream it becomes

significantly deeper. You would not be able to stand, nor resist its current as it sweeps you toward deadly rapids. Paul says that's where we are in this world. Walk carefully, stand firm, because the current is evil and powerful. And if it sweeps you away it is not carrying you to a place of rest, plenty, peace and fulfillment, but to your destruction.

APPLICATION

What can we do to make the most of the season we have left?

UNDERSTAND THE WILL OF THE LORD

In verse 17 Paul presents us with a choice. Don't be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. You have two options. One is you can be foolish. The Greek word Paul used here is interesting to me. It is the Greek word *aphrones*. The root of it is *phrenes*, which originally meant "diaphragm." Huh? It turns out that early on, the diaphragm was regarded by Greeks as the seat of intellectual and spiritual activity. When you tack the prefix "a" on the front of a word it meant "not." So *aphrones* meant essentially no spiritual or intellectual activity. Thus it meant literally "not thinking." It means you just do what feels good, do what comes naturally. What will be happening is you will be swept along in the current of this world. It's not taking you to a good place.

The other option is the opposite. You can have intellectual and spiritual activity. You can think. You can think about what the world you live in is designed to do to you. And especially you can think about and understand what the will of the Lord is. What is the will of the Lord? The Bible specifically tells us some of the will of the Lord. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 it is that you give thanks in all things. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 it is that you should be "sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality, that you should learn to control you own body in a way that is holy and honorable."

That last passage states a general idea then a specific application of it. God's will is that you be sanctified. To be sanctified is to be set apart for special use. It is to be different, special, set apart for God. Paul then applied that to our sexuality. But the larger picture is that we see ourselves as existing to serve God and live his way. This is God's will for you, that you serve and obey God.

I get that, but we need to take this a step further. Why is this God's will for us? Well, because it is what will bring creation back into its original perfect intent. It is what will begin to set things right so that what rules in creation is love, peace and goodness, because it is ruled by the Good One, The Holy One, the Loving One, God himself.

If that's what is happening, what will it bring about in our lives individually? It will bring about a love of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and so on. It will give us an important

role in the greatest undertaking in creation, of God redeeming not just humanity but all of creation. Here's what we need to see. God's will for us is that we have the best possible lives we could ever have. To have that life we must have hope, meaning, love, joy and be totally at peace with him, with ourselves, and with the world around us. This is God's will for us. It comes by us being set apart for his will.

So if you want the maximum out of life, if you really want to get the most out of life, the way you do it is you make God's will the focal point of life. You think always about what God wants you to think, to be, to say and to do. The more that we do this, the more we will make the most out of the life we have on this earth. We will accomplish more of real significance, we will experience more joy and definitely more peace, and we will be much more of a blessing to other people. Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Mastering life begins with fear of God, with being in awe of him and seeking to serve and honor him in everything we are.

Around 15 years ago I was part of an ordination council, something I did once or twice a year back then. The most memorable man who ever came before any of those councils I served on was a guy named Steve. He was in his 40's, was married and had a couple of kids. He had served in some parachurch ministries for much of his adult life and then had joined the staff of a church. He had applied to be licensed as a pastor of a particular denomination. What made him memorable was something that came out during the course of our interview with him. We learned he had a blood disease. He'd had it for some time, but he also informed us that recently his doctor had told him there was no cure and they had run out of treatment options, that he had probably a year to live. Let me tell you, that brought the usual process of that kind of interview to a screeching halt. Everyone on the council was stunned. What do you say to something like that? Finally, one of the men said, "Steve, why in the world are you bothering with being licensed? Given your circumstance why are you putting yourself through this?" Steve said, "I guess I can best answer that by relating a story. The day after I got the news about my prognosis I met with a guy that I am discipling. When he heard what was going on he said, 'Why are you here? Why didn't you call and cancel our meeting?' I told him, 'Because this is worth giving my life to. Nothing has changed. Why wouldn't I want to keep doing this with the time I have left?'" No one had any questions about his suitability for ministry after that. We all were humbled. One man asked him how he was dealing with knowing he would soon die. He said, "If it weren't for my wife and kids I wouldn't be sad at all. I'm really excited to see the Lord face to face." That was a man who was making the most of the season.

BEGIN AT THE END

In 1 Corinthians 9:24 Paul wrote, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize." There is an important principle there. You have to ask what it is you want. That is what should determine what you do. If what you

want is to win the prize, then that will determine how you run. You will run with focus, determination and all-out effort.

For us one of the best things we can do is ask, “what do I want my life to count for?” Last year I attended a couple of funerals that honored two great people who walked with God. What came through in both funerals was the lasting impact those two people had and will continue to have for many years even though they were gone. Their children and grandchildren stood up and talked about the kind of people they were, what that meant to them, and how it impacted them. As I listened I was thinking the same thing I’m sure everyone else there was thinking. What will they say about me when it is my funeral?

That is a terrific question to ask. What do I want to accomplish while I am alive? I was looking at one of those lists that asks, “What do I want to do before I die?” It was a bucket list kind of thing. This particular list included things like, attend a major sporting event, swim with dolphins, watch a rocket launch, visit Congress, drive across the USA, write a novel, give a speech in public, learn to juggle, catch a ball at a major league baseball game, make a hole in one in golf, and run a marathon. I related to most of the things on that list and I’ve already done a number of those. I’m certain I’ll never get a hole in one and don’t really care, and I have no desire to run a marathon. But I’ve attended both a World Series and a BCS National Championship football game. I’ve driven across the US, visited Congress, learned to juggle at one point, *definitely* given speeches in public, and have written a couple of novels. So I just need to catch a ball at a ball game and swim with dolphins I guess.

But the thing is, whether I do those things or not will never determine whether I make the most of my life. I could do all of them, and not make the most of my life, or I could make the most of my life and not do any of them. I could do all those things and at my funeral people would have nothing much to say about me. I need to think about what is going to matter when it is all said and done, then I need to let that be what determines who I am and how I live day after day.

BE CONTENT

Our lives will end up being a collection of days. The way to make the most of a life, is to make the most of each day. How do we do that? The English Standard Version translation of Psalm 118:24 is, “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Today is the day God has given me. I am where he wants me to be. What he has given me today is what he thinks I need, what is enough for me to filled with joy and peace. So I will accept it as a gift from him and rejoice in this day today. I will make the best of this day, right where I am. The temptation is to live in the past, ruing errors or missed opportunities, or to always be looking to the future, either in fear or thinking it will only be when something good happens, then we’ll be happy. The problem with living in either the past or future is we never have joy and peace today. And you will pile up a lifetime of days with little to no joy and

peace. You will have wasted your life. The way to have a life of joy and peace, is to have it today, be content with where God has you today. It is to say, “this is the day the Lord has made. I will be glad in this day!”

In his book, *I Once Was Blind But Now I Squint*, pastor Kent Crockett relates how he was reminded of this lesson. He was at a retreat with guys from his church. A speaker there was a successful author. Kent met him and asked him if he was a pastor or had another job and wrote while doing that job. The man responded that he wrote full time. Kent said that that next year, he went through a number of difficulties in his ministry and discontentment plagued him. He wished he could be like that writer. He would envision himself sitting on a porch with a view of mountains, tapping away at his computer, content in his work as a writer. He was not content in his life. A year later he was unable to go to the conference, but a number of men from his church went. They reported to him that they had seen that author again. He had hit very hard times. His books weren’t selling; he was out of money. He had missed several months of mortgage payments, he was deeply discouraged, and he didn’t know what he was going to do. The guys at the conference generously pitched in and gave the man enough money to pay off his debt, but that was a short term solution. Kent was stunned. He had been dreaming of being in that guy’s place, only to find out it would be a terrible place to be. He concluded, “Contentment in life is not found in a perfect set of circumstances, but by choosing to be happy in every situation.”

One of the most famous verses in the Bible is Psalm 23:1. “The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.” I like the New Living Translation of that better: “The Lord is my Shepherd. I have all that I need.” Here is a truth that is at the heart of contentment and is crucial to making the most of life. **If the Lord is not enough for us, then nothing ever will be!**