

## Purchasing Time

On December 27, 2011, my 83-year-old grandmother succumbed to cancer. It had been a long and difficult battle for her. I have many great memories of my grandmother. Many childhood memories of spending summers at grandma's house, sitting at her breakfast table while she made Mexican pancakes for us (think *crepes*). Her passing has been a catalyst and the culmination of a series of events that has caused me to ponder more acutely my own mortality and the insecurity of life.

The first and second events have to do with two dear friends of mine who have battled and are battling cancer (respectively), both are young, both live healthy, both are dear sisters in Christ. The first is not only physically healthy but physically active, riding her bike for thirty miles at a time, running long distances, and going on strenuous hikes whenever time permits. Yet at age 37 this non-smoker was diagnosed with stage-three lung cancer. She fought the battle, prayed hard, and today is a cancer survivor.

My second dear sister is battling cancer at this very moment. She is also young, vibrant, and lives a healthy and active lifestyle—but cancer is an equal opportunity disease.

The third event was the sudden death of a pastor and his wife who were closely connected to a church I attended for many years. In 1976 they planted a church in Austin, TX, which has grown into a healthy blossoming body of believers. Yet on November 29, 2011, they were both instantly taken from this world in a head-on collision. They were 64 years-old, healthy, energetic, and had a passion for God and his people.

Life is fleeting and unsecured. None of us are guaranteed next year, next month or even tomorrow. September 11, 2001 was a painful reminder of this. But human finiteness being what it is, most of us have forgotten the lessons of 9/11. Most, that is, except the survivors of 9/11, the disabled veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, and

their families. From time to time, however, we are reawakened to the precariousness of life and the preciousness of time as in the film *Courageous* (Sherwood Pictures, 2011). In one particular scene, the son is strongly urging his father to run in a 5K father-son race with him. The father is adamantly opposed to participating in the race. But then as a gesture of good intention says to his son, "This is not the only 5K race they're going to have; there's going to be others." As the film unfolds, the tragic irony of his statement is revealed—*there are not always other races to run.*

In Ephesians 5:15 & 16 the apostle Paul exhorts us: "Look carefully then as to how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil" (my translation). The underlying Greek word for redeem is an intensive form of

the verb *agorazō* which means 'to purchase.' However, it would seem strange to our English ears to read: "Look carefully then as to how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, purchasing the time because the days are evil." For this reason most English translations render the verb with something like *making the most of your time* or *making the best use of the time*. However, when this is done the weight of Paul's words do not land on us with full force.

To be sure, time cannot be purchased or bought back. Time marches on. Once it is gone it's gone. So what does Paul mean when he encourages his readers to *purchase* or *redeem* the time? When we purchase something we give something of value in exchange for a product or service. What we give and what we receive in return are not the same. The amount we give must be equal in value to the service or product we desire. Furthermore, what we receive in exchange for what we give is finite. Whether a product or a service, neither will last forever so that in the end both that which is given and that which is received will be gone. Nevertheless, the value of that which is given must equal the value of that received.

For example, if I pay five dollars for a meal at a fast food restaurant, once the five dollars is handed to the cashier that money is forever gone. I will, however, have in its place a meal. However, once that meal is eaten then both the five dollars and the meal are forever gone. Yet I will have thought that the loss of both was well worth it. The loss of my five dollars in exchange for a meal that is now also gone was a worthy price to pay because now I am happy and satisfied. The same can be said of a service. Once a service is rendered, the finished product remains, but only for a time. Eventually re-servicing will be needed.

In the epistle of James we are told time is a gift that comes to us from God (1:17). It is something which God provides for us—a service—as a result of his grace. Whether we realize it or not, how we choose to spend our time is the value we place upon the gift which God has given us. We all inherently recognize that some activities are more worthwhile (more valuable) than others. A father who spends an hour playing catch with his son in the front yard has esteemed more value to that hour than a father who spends an hour on selfish pursuits. A person who spends an hour in prayer has done more worthwhile work than a person who pointlessly browses the internet during that same course of time. A person who spends his Saturday afternoon ministering to the homeless has afforded more worth to his time than someone who spends the same afternoon fishing alone. This is not to say we can never enjoy some R&R. Rather, it begs the question—*How much time do we spend on ourselves as opposed to serving God and others?* Time is a gracious service God provides for us. What we do with our time reflects the degree of value we place upon it. In essence, how we live says to God: *'This is how much I value the time you have given me'*. There is a commercial transaction taking place. God gives us time. What are we willing to give in return?

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Photo by Peter Henlein

