

TIME IS RUNNING OUT

"Brethren, the time is short" (I Corinthians 7:29).

You have observed no doubt that so much of our modern living seems to take the form of a race against time. We are forever competing with the clock or the calendar. Indeed this fact constitutes, for many of us, one of life's minor, if not major, irritations. To carry out this assignment, to read this book, to teach this lesson, to make this sale, or even to complete this vacation, we have just so much time and no more. There may be exceptions, but this is pretty much the rule in our hard-pressed, clock-punching world.

I heard of a young newspaper reporter who, after rushing back from the scene of a sensational crime, sat down to write his first important story for the paper that had hired him. His excitement was keen. His nervousness was obvious. A veteran of the staff, observing the young man's predicament, walked over, laid his hand on the boy's shoulder, and said: "Take your time, son. You've got two minutes before we go to press!" Two minutes to write a story that might determine whether he would hold his newly acquired job or not. Two minutes in which to shape an exciting news narrative into shape for an edition that would hit the streets before dawn! Two minutes in which to make up his mind what to put in, what to leave out, and how to say it!

Now whether we like it or not, life often treats us like that. God frequently makes us aware of the brittle brevity of life and the urgency of making up our minds what we are going to do about it. He used the Apostle Paul to drive this home to the Christians of the first century when vast uncertainties hung about their lives. The destruction of Jerusalem was not far away. The return of Christ was an eagerly expected event. The possibility of death was as ever-present as the air that was drawn into the lungs. Therefore the apostle cried, "Brethren, the time is short."

Paul felt that time, like the last bit of sand in an hour-glass was running out. He felt therefore that measures strong and serious -- yes, even extreme -- should be taken to make every precious moment yield its full sixty seconds of value. Are there not good reasons for believing that we should feel the same way in this day of destiny in which our lives have been cast?

I. Time Is Running Out For Our Civilization.

To start where the circle of our thought is the largest, we apparently are justified in looking at our civilization as a whole, and saying, "Brethren, the time is short."

It is not easy for our minds to conceive of the disaster that threatens now to engulf the world. This is particularly true of Americans, who never did develop any talent for pessimism. Optimism is a good thing -- a much better thing than a chronic, bilious pessimism. Yet optimism is not always the twin of common sense. There is a blind determination to look on the bright side that stupidly ignores actual dangers. Dr. W. E. Sangster, of London, tells in one of his books about a man whose wife was gravely ill.

When Dr. Sangster called on her, the husband said cheerily, "She is bound to get better. I am an optimist, you know. I always look on the bright side of things." "Nevertheless," reports the pastor, "I buried that man's wife before the week was out."

There ought to be some place allowed for the difference between being an optimist and being a fool. Our most discerning and realistic thinkers are giving us straight talk these days. They are warning us that nothing short of a tremendous spiritual recovery will save us from the shattering of our civilization. Dr. J. H. Oldham, of England, known for his keen interest in world affairs, says: "Nothing short of a really heroic effort will avail to save mankind from its present evils and the destruction which must follow in their train."

Sometimes it appears to me that the ominous rush of events and the tragic dribbling away of our golden hours are more sharply felt by the scientists than by representatives of the churches. If the politicians and preachers and priests, along with millions of money-grabbing, pleasure-intoxicated Americans, are dull to the fact that the time is short, the men who are working on the weapons of the next war are stingingly awake and are trying to wake up the rest of us.

II. Time Is Running Out For Our Nation.

Think, of our nation, and see if there isn't a solid message for the United States in this cautioning word of our text.

In many ways we have been a spendthrift people. The vast territory to which our fathers came seemed to hold endless possibilities for exploitation. We were reckless with our wild life. The law of action was: "Shoot and kill, and shoot and kill." So it came to pass that by the time the states and the Federal Government got around to the business of setting up game preserves, and parks, and establishing set times for hunting, some species of animals and birds had been rendered virtually extinct. It is stated on good authority that when the white settlers were forming their first colonies here, there were not less than seventy-five million head of buffalo roaming the land. Today there are approximately four thousand left.

Similarly, we have been reckless of our topsoil. What we have not exhausted by overplanting we have permitted to get away from us by a preventable erosion. Land experts estimate that for years we have allowed four hundred million tons of the "good earth" to be washed into the Gulf of Mexico annually. In our greed for quick profits we adopted, in farming, the law of "Plow and plant, and plow and plant." When the land gave out, we simply moved West and took more land. But that time is past. The Pacific Ocean has seen to that!

We have done much the same thing with our forests, where for years the law of operation was: "Cut and sell, and cut and sell."

Before I carry you any further let me pause to remind you that in these areas of our national life we have begun, in comparatively recent times, to wake up. We discovered that time was running out. With a wanton wastefulness we were destroying our natural resources, and the day of reckoning was just around the corner.

But we are moving fast in some other direction, with little indication that we realize that there too time is running out on us. Some years ago we embarked upon a national policy of "Spend and tax, and spend and tax." We need the courage to say to ourselves, "Brother Americans the time is short! We can't keep this up and hold on to the America that our fathers bled to create."

But fabulous debt and equally fabulous taxes are not our worst national threat. Our gravest peril is the general weakening of our moral fiber. This cancer of moral uncleanness has been spreading through our land. Are we going to check it or not? Time is running out on us.

III. Time Is Running Out For Individuals.

Let us turn to a consideration of our primary responsibility to life, recognizing that time in its irresistible march is forever catching up with us before we know it. The psychologist William Moulton once polled three thousand people on the question, "What have you to live for?" He was shocked and distressed to learn that ninety-four per cent of them were using the present only as a steppingstone to a future ambition. Many of them said they were just waiting for "something to happen." Others were biding their time until their children grew up. And still others were eagerly anticipating someone's death. Some were looking forward, impatiently, for a special trip or vacation and some were simply enduring the present twelve months until the new year came around. None of these people seemed to realize that mortal existence is but a grain of sand in the hourglass of heaven. They did not understand that the days, months, and years which seem to offer them a leisurely opportunity to wait, to work, and to repent, so soon tick away. Nevertheless, the fact remains that we have but a short time to live on this earth, in which to do the things that need to be done, before we go into eternity and meet God.

When you come to think of it, time is short, even at the longest. In comparison with eternity time is short. It is as a drop of water compared with all the oceans. Human life is short, even at the longest. The longest life is comparable to a tale that is told, to a dream that is dreamed, to a vapor that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away, and to a puff of wind that just fans the cheek and passes into space.

There is one remarkable thing about the flight of time which older people notice more than younger people, and that is the accelerated speed with which the years pass. They do not really go at a quicker rate than they did in the days of boyhood and girlhood, but it seems that they do. It is as though the momentum increased each year, as though the velocity was ever on the increase. No wonder Job exclaimed, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle." If we could realize the brevity of time, there would be some revolutionary consequences in our manner of living.

That remarkable woman, Helen Keller, once wrote an article for the Atlantic Monthly which she entitled, "Three Days to See." It might be a salutary thing, she suggested, if all of us were stricken deaf and blind for a few days of our lives. The entailing darkness and silence would teach us the lessons of gratitude

and appreciation. As Jesus long ago said, "Having eyes they see not, and ears they hear not." We fail to take in the bounty and beauty all around us. What would this great soul want to see if she had but three days of vision?

Helen Keller tells us that, first of all, she would call her dearest friends together -- the ones who have made life worth living for her -- and look deeply into their faces -- and hearts. In fact, she wonders if we "seeing people" could describe at all accurately the faces of five of our close friends. How well could you pass that test?

Then too, she would want to see the face of a little child and to look into the loyal trusting eyes of her Scottie and Great Dane dogs who have meant so much to her. After a walk through the wonder of the woods she would pray for the glory of a sunset. Yes, and then the glory of "the magnificent panorama of light with which the sun awakens the sleeping earth" -- a sunrise! "Oh, the things that I should see if I had the power of sight -- for just three days!" For those of us with dull eyes and slumbering senses, Helen Keller writes some pointed counsel when she says: "I who am blind, can give one hint to those who see: Use your eyes as if tomorrow you would be stricken blind." There you have it. "Live 'as if' -- the time is short."

The late Dr. George Truett of Dallas was a man of rare fervor and power in his evangelistic ministry. He fairly glowed with a passion for souls. Early in his ministry he cultivated the friendship of a dedicated young man with whom he would occasionally go hunting. On one of these expeditions he accidentally shot his friend, and the sorrow of this accident remained with him all through his life. However, Dr. Truett was wise enough to lay his sorrow on the altar of Christian service. From now on, he must live for the two of them -- his friend and himself. And this he did as few men could have done it. He literally moved thousands toward Jesus Christ and the Kingdom. To shake his hand was a benediction. For Dr. George Truett time was short! Now was the time of decision. Would to God we all had this sense of urgency!

"The time is short." "Time" here means the opportunity for doing the things that need to be done. "Short" means drawn together or contracted, that is, exceedingly limited, and, therefore, in great need of being utilized to the uttermost. And the time of opportunity at our disposal for doing the many things of tremendous importance that clamor to be done before we go into eternity and meet God is exceedingly contracted. The average person seems to think that whatever else may be scarce that there is plenty of time. The unsaved person thinks that there is plenty of time to repent and to be saved. The average Christian thinks that there is plenty of time in which to serve the Lord. But, "The time is short."

One of the finest sayings of Ralph Waldo Emerson has to do with the value of time. He said "One of the illusions is that the present hour is not the critical, decisive hour. Write it on your heart that every day is the best day of the year. No man has learned anything rightly until he knows that every day is Doomsday."

Today there is a voice calling to us: "The time is short! The time is short!" You may be in the exuberance of youth. That does not matter. The time is short. You may be in the prime of middle years. That does not make any difference. The time is short. You may be in the feebleness of old age. If so, that's all the more reason why you should listen: the time is short.

Because time is running out, there are two things that are very important:

1. Be prepared.

It is so important that we be saved. Most people expect to be saved some time. But, alas, many think that there is plenty of time in which to be saved. But there is not because the time is exceedingly short. Just how short the time may be in which any one of us can be saved, none of us can tell. Because time is running out, it is important that each of us be prepared to live and to die. Death is pursuing and will overtake each of us. It may seem very far away to you, but it's not. "There is but a step between me and death." You may not like or enjoy that fact, but it is a fact nevertheless. Only a fool shuts his eyes to facts because they are unpleasant. Be ready when God deems it best to call you into His presence.

2. Be busy in service for Christ.

The time we have in which to serve the Lord is very brief. Even if Christ should tarry and death linger, there are things which we have a capacity for doing today for which we shall not have a capacity in a short time. Each has some talent that he can use for the Lord, but the time in which he can do it is limited. Each day carries many golden opportunities into the tomb of time. Today is your opportunity.

Stephen Grellett spoke wisely when he said: "I expect to pass through this world but once. Any good thing, therefore, that I can do, or any kindness I can show to any fellow human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

After the death of Mr. Daniel S. Ford, former editor of The Youth Companion, they found on his desk, much worn with frequent handling, the following poem. The words are a fitting epitome of a man who had done so much to lift the burdens of others and inspire the youth of his day:

"The bread that bringeth strength I want to give,
The water pure that bids the thirsty live;
I want to help the fainting day by day;
I'm sure I shall not pass again this way.

I want to give the oil of joy for tears,
The faith to conquer crowding doubts and fears,
Beauty for ashes may I give away;
I'm sure I shall not pass again this way.

I want to give good measure running o'er,
And into angry hearts I want to pour
The answer soft that turneth wrath away;
I'm sure I shall not pass again this way.

I want to give to others hope and faith,
I want to do all that the Master saith;
I want to live aright from day to day;
I'm sure I shall not pass again this way."

The great Roman, Seneca said: "Let me live every day as though it were to be my last."

The anonymous poet should be speaking for us all when he says:

"Through this toilsome world, alas!
Once and only once I pass;
If a kindness I may show,
If a good deed I do
To a suffering fellow man,
Let me do it while I can.
No delay, for it is plain
I shall not pass this way again."

Won't you cease delaying the taking of your sin-sick soul to Christ while the opportunity is yours? Since you have heard His call, and you know that time is running out, receive Christ as your Saviour and serve Him faithfully to the end of your days.