

# Buying Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11: Luke 5:12-16

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Pentecost

19 September 2010

Last Friday marked a significant day in the bid to rescue the 33 Chilean miners trapped for the past 6 weeks half a mile underground. The first of the three rescue drills reached the spot where the men took refuge after the cave-in on August 5<sup>th</sup>. But, of course, it is going to take many more weeks, even months, before the drills are able to bore successively wider holes to allow them to be brought to the surface.<sup>1</sup>

As I think about these miners, I wonder how they are dealing with the challenge of time. Time must weigh so heavily upon their minds. The waiting must seem eternal. Although they know that, barring a catastrophe, they will finally be rescued, how they must wish that they could make time go faster! How they must wish that they could somehow get rid of or sell that period of time between the present and the moment they are rescued!

Nor is it only those caught up in such exceptional situations who face this problem. There are many ordinary people in everyday life for whom time hangs heavily upon their minds and hearts. People who are sick in hospital. The elderly in seniors' residences or nursing homes. Prisoners serving a sentence in jail. Family waiting for a loved one to return from service in Afghanistan. The unemployed middle-aged man desperately waiting for word about a job so he can begin supporting his family again. For such people, time never seems to go fast enough.

Of course, the majority in today's society would say they suffer from the very opposite problem. Far from having too much time, they have too little time. Far from wanting to sell time to make it go faster, they want to buy time because they just never have enough.

For instance, the young mother – always stressed from trying to balance a job with bringing up her children – she would give anything at the end of the day to be able to buy an extra hour just to relax. Or, the community volunteer who wants to be able to serve different organisations, he would love to buy an extra day every week to do justice to each cause. Or, how about the lawyer preparing for an important trial who would love to buy an extra month to be able to strengthen her case. Most of us, whatever our situation in life, would love to be able to buy time for some reason or another. I know I would love to be able to buy an extra few hours each week to do more visiting or to prepare better for a Sunday service.

“Buying time”, of course, is a figurative expression. But just suppose we could actually, literally, buy time.

In his book, *A World To Love*, George E. Knowles tells of a man who dreams that he comes to a large, impressive building, something like a bank, that has a

brass sign on it advertising “Time For Sale”.

The dreamer sees a very sick-looking man, breathless and pale, going in the front door. “The doctor told me I was 5 years too late going to see him,” the man says to the teller. “So I want to buy 5 years of time to allow the doctor to save my life.”

Then comes a woman, distraught and disillusioned, who says to the teller, “God has given me great abilities and talents which I have not developed. Please sell me 10 years so I can go back and still be the person I could have been.”

As the dreamer watches there comes a young man. “My company,” he says, “has given me an important new job with much greater responsibility. But I don't feel prepared for this promotion. Please give me 2 years of time because I want to be ready to take the job when I start it.”

“And so,” says the dreamer, “people come in a steady procession: the ill, hopeless, despondent, worried, unhappy – and the wonderful thing is they leave smiling, with a look of unutterable pleasure on their face, for they are able to buy what they so desperately need: time.”<sup>2</sup>

Buying time might be fanciful, perhaps. But who among us would not want to do this if it were possible? Perhaps we could go back and right some wrong. Or, take advantage of a missed opportunity. Or, spend more time with a loved one. Or, allow the cure for a disease to be discovered.

The idea of buying time is one way of appreciating anew God's gift of time. But another method is to think what can happen in different periods of time. Someone once wrote the following:

- To realise the value of one year: Ask a student who has failed his final exam.
- To realise the value of one month: Ask a mother who has given birth to a premature baby.
- To realise the value of one week: Ask an editor of a weekly newspaper.
- To realise the value of one day: Ask a daily wage worker who has 5 kids to feed.
- To realise the value of one hour: Ask the lovers who are waiting to meet.
- To realise the value of twenty minutes: Ask a preacher.
- To realise the value of one minute: Ask a person who has missed a bus.
- To realise the value of one second: Ask a person who has survived an accident.
- To realise the value of one millisecond: Ask the person who has won a silver medal in the Olympic 100

metres.<sup>3</sup>

Time is a precious commodity but, unfortunately, we can so easily become obsessed with it. “Time is money,” we often say. “Time is of the essence.” We constantly look at our watches. We become neurotic if we are late for an appointment. Pity help the person who keeps us waiting at the checkout. And isn’t there more than a little road-rage near the surface when the driver in front prevents us getting to church in time? We have become rushaholics in our world today, addicted to time-urgency.

In his book, *Timelock*, psychologist Ralph Keyes says if you are feeling the hectic pace of life, wondering how time has become such a god that controls our lives, then blame the building of the railroad 200 years ago. To provide a reliable and safe service, time-keeping became an important priority. And it became even more important with the subsequent advent of the industrialised and technologically-advanced society.<sup>4</sup>

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have become subject to a state of “timelock”, akin to gridlock on the roads. A state of time congestion and time traffic jams. The demands of time are so great we are unable to wring one more second out of a crowded calendar. We rush from one commitment to another, hustling to get everything done in time. And the result is not just some passing minor annoyances in life but, more seriously, the many stress-related illnesses people suffer from these days.

So managing time is a very serious business and we have to do it well. But how do we do this? How do we value time in the right way without over-valuing it to the point where we become slaves of time?

Perhaps we have to develop a new sense of time. We have to become more aware of the natural rhythm and pace of life. Quite simply put, we have to get more in tune with God’s time and walk through life at a pace more in keeping with the divine tempo. The tempo so well emphasised in that beautiful passage from Ecclesiastes 3. “Everything that happens in this world,” says the writer, “happens at the time God chooses. He sets the time for birth and the time for death. The time for planting and the time for pulling up ... the time for dancing and the time for mourning ... the time for silence and the time for talk.”<sup>5</sup> Just reading the passage itself, with the wonderful rhythmic cadence of its contrasting couplets, gives one a sense of the completely different, and much more harmonious, time-scale of our Heavenly Father. He truly is a different drummer. And we must walk to his beat.

When we read the Gospels, it doesn’t take long to realise that Jesus walked to the beat of that different drummer. He knew from the outset of his ministry that he did not have much time to do all that he had to do. He knew that he had so much to teach, so many sick people to heal, so many to bring to faith in God. Yet, he knew

full well that there were many powers and principalities, threatened by his words and actions, who would waste no time in seeking to get rid of him. So time was short for Jesus’ ministry and he knew he had to manage that time well.

Often, of course, when we are aware of the shortness of time for something we want to do in life, we tend to throw at it all the energy and activity we can muster in a full frontal assault. Something we might have expected Jesus to do. But no, he managed his time in a very different way. He retreated to meditate and pray in lonely places beside the lake or on a hillside or in a garden<sup>6</sup> to spend precious moments in his heavenly Father’s presence, to get in tune with God’s time, to make sure that he was working in harmony with the divine tempo. And from these periods of withdrawal, he emerged refreshed and energised, calm and unhurried, able to achieve much more than if he had simply launched himself into a frenzy of frantic activity.

Oh, if only we would copy the example of Jesus. Spending quiet moments in prayer and in quiet meditation. Listening to the divine heartbeat. Getting in touch with the rhythmic pulse of him “in whom we live and move and have our being.”<sup>7</sup> How much more effectively we would be able to manage our time! How much calmer and less hurried we would be in our daily lives! And how much better our lives would go from day to day!

Yes, let’s decide here and now to get in touch once again with him who is really in control of our time. For when he’s in control, we’re in control.

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*St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church*

*Peterborough, Ontario*

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<sup>1</sup> Ivan Alvarado, “First rescue drill reaches trapped Chile miners”, Reuters, Friday September 17, 2010, <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE68G4R320100917>

<sup>2</sup> George E. Knowles, *A World To Love* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1990), 113. Cf. King Duncan, “Who Will Be Crying At Your Funeral?”, [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com). Adapted.

<sup>3</sup> King Duncan, *Ibid*. Adapted.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Keyes, *Timelock* “How life got so hectic and what you can do about it.” Harper & Collins 1991

<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1ff

<sup>6</sup> Luke 5:16; Matthew 14:23; Matthew 26:36; Luke 6:12; Luke 9:28

<sup>7</sup> Acts 17:24-28