

Jonathan Edwards on the Preciousness of Time

Edwards teaches that time is a thing that is exceedingly precious. Dated December, 1734

Ephesians 5:16, "Redeeming the time."

Christians should not only study to improve the opportunities they enjoy, for their own advantage, as those who would make a good bargain; but also labor to reclaim others from their evil courses; that so God might defer his anger, and time might be redeemed from that terrible destruction, which, when it should come, would put an end to the time of divine patience. And it may be upon this account, that this reason is added, Because the days are evil. As if the apostle had said, the corruption of the times tends to hasten threatened judgments; but your holy and circumspect walk will tend to redeem time from the devouring jaws of those calamities. — However, thus much is certainly held forth to us in the words; viz. that upon time we should set a high value, and be exceeding careful that it be not lost; and we are therefore exhorted to exercise wisdom and circumspection, in order that we may redeem it. And hence it appears, that time is exceedingly precious.

SECTION I - Why time is precious.

Time is precious for the following reasons:

First, because a happy or miserable eternity depends on the good or ill improvement of it. Things are precious in proportion to their importance, or to the degree wherein they concern our welfare. Men are wont to set the highest value on those things upon which they are sensible their interest chiefly depends. And this renders time so exceedingly precious, because our eternal welfare depends on the improvement of it. — Indeed our welfare in this world depends upon its improvement. If we improve it not, we shall be in danger of coming to poverty and disgrace; but by a good improvement of it, we may obtain those things which will be useful and comfortable. But it is above all things precious, as our state through eternity depends upon it. The importance of the improvement of time upon other accounts, is in subordination to this.

Gold and silver are esteemed precious by men; but they are of no worth to any man, only as thereby he has an opportunity of avoiding or removing some evil, or of possessing himself of some good. And the greater the evil is which any man hath advantage to escape, or the good which he hath advantage to obtain, by anything that he possesses, by so much the greater is the value of that thing to him, whatever it be. Thus if a man, by anything which he hath, may save his life, which he must lose without it, he will look upon that by which he hath the opportunity of escaping so great an evil as death, to be very precious. — Hence it is that time is so exceedingly precious, because by it we have opportunity of escaping everlasting misery, and of obtaining everlasting blessedness and glory. On this depends our escape from an infinite evil, and our attainment of an infinite good.

Second, time is very short, which is another thing that renders it very precious. The scarcity of any commodity occasions men to set a higher value upon it, especially if it be necessary and they cannot do without it. Thus when Samaria was besieged by the Syrians, and provisions were exceedingly

scarce, “an ass’s head was sold for fourscore pieces of silver, and the fourth part of a cab of dove’s dung for five pieces of silver.” 2 Kin. 6:25. — So time is the more to be prized by men, because a whole eternity depends upon it; and yet we have but a little of time. “When a few years are come, then I shall go the way whence I shall not return.” Job 16:22. “My days are swifter than a post. They are passed away as the swift ships; as the eagle that hasteth to the prey.” Job 9:25, 26. “Our life; what is it? It is but a vapour which appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” Jam. 4:14. It is but as a moment to eternity. Time is so short, and the work which we have to do in it is so great, that we have none of it to spare. The work which we have to do to prepare for eternity, must be done in time, or it never can be done; and it is found to be a work of great difficulty and labor, and therefore that for which time is the more requisite.

Third, time ought to be esteemed by us very precious, because we are uncertain of its continuance. We know that it is very short, but we know not how short. We know not how little of it remains, whether a year, or several years, or only a month, a week, or a day. We are every day uncertain whether that day will not be the last, or whether we are to have the whole day. There is nothing that experience doth more verify than this. — If a man had but little provision laid up for a journey or a voyage, and at the same time knew that if his provision should fail, he must perish by the way, he would be the more choice of it. — How much more would many men prize their time, if they knew that they had but a few months, or a few days, more to live! And certainly a wise man will prize his time the more, as he knows not but that it will be so as to himself. This is the case with multitudes now in the world, who at present enjoy health, and see no signs of approaching death. Many such, no doubt, are to die the next month, many the next week, yea, many probably tomorrow, and some this night. Yet these same persons know nothing of it, and perhaps think nothing of it, and neither they nor their neighbors can say that they are more likely soon to be taken out of the world than others. This teaches us how we ought to prize our time, and how careful we ought to be, that we lose none of it.

Fourth, time is very precious, because when it is past, it cannot be recovered. There are many things which men possess, which if they part with, they can obtain them again. If a man have parted with something which he had, not knowing the worth of it, or the need he should have of it; he often can regain it, at least with pains and cost. If a man have been overseen in a bargain, and have bartered away or sold something, and afterwards repents of it, he may often obtain a release, and recover what he had parted with. — But it is not so with respect to time. When once that is gone, it is gone forever; no pains, no cost will recover it. Though we repent ever so much that we let it pass, and did not improve it while we had it, it will be to no purpose. Every part of it is successively offered to us, that we may choose whether we will make it our own, or not. But there is no delay. It will not wait upon us to see whether or no we will comply with the offer. But if we refuse, it is immediately taken away, and never offered more. As to that part of time which is gone, however we have neglected to improve it, it is out of our possession and out of our reach.

If we have lived fifty, or sixty, or seventy years, and have not improved our time, now it cannot be helped. It is eternally gone from us. All that we can do, is to improve the little that remains. Yea, if a man have spent all his life but a few moments unimproved, all that is gone is lost, and only those few remaining moments can possibly be made his own. And if the whole of a man’s time be gone, and it be all lost, it is irrecoverable. — Eternity depends on the improvement of time. But when once the time of life is gone, when once death is come, we have no more to do with time; there is no

possibility of obtaining the restoration of it, or another space in which to prepare for eternity. If a man should lose the whole of his worldly substance, and become a bankrupt, it is possible that his loss may be made up. He may have another estate as good. But when the time of life is gone, it is impossible that we should ever obtain another such time. All opportunity of obtaining eternal welfare is utterly and everlastingly gone.

SECTION II - Reflections on time past.

You have now heard of the preciousness of time; and you are the persons concerned, to whom God hath committed that precious talent. You have an eternity before you. When God created you, and gave you reasonable souls, he made you for an endless duration. He gave you time here in order to a preparation for eternity, and your future eternity depends on the improvement of time. — Consider, therefore, what you have done with your past time. You are not now beginning your time, but a great deal is past and gone; and all the wit, and power, and treasure of the universe, cannot recover it. Many of you may well conclude, that more than half of your time is gone. Though you should live to the ordinary age of man, your glass is more than half run; and it may be there are but few sands remaining. Your sun is past the meridian, and perhaps just setting, or going into an everlasting eclipse. Consider, therefore, what account you can give of your improvements of past time. How have you let the precious golden sands of your glass run?

Every day that you have enjoyed has been precious; yea, your moments have been precious. But have you not wasted your precious moments, your precious days, yea, your precious years? If you should reckon up how many days you have lived, what a sum would there be! And how precious hath every one of those days been! Consider, therefore, what have you done with them? What is become of them all? What can you show of any improvement made, or good done, or benefit obtained, answerable to all this time which you have lived? When you look back, and search, do you not find this past time of your lives in a great measure empty, having not been filled up with any good improvement? And if God, that hath given you your time, should now call you to an account, what account could you give to him?

How much may be done in a year? How much good is there opportunity to do in such a space of time! How much service may persons do for God, and how much for their own souls, if to their utmost they improve it! How much may be done in a day! But what have you done in so many days and years that you have lived? What have you done with the whole time of your youth, you that are past your youth? What is become of all that precious season of life? Hath it not all been in vain to you? Would it not have been as well or better for you, if all that time you had been asleep, or in a state of nonexistence?

You have had much time of leisure and freedom from worldly business. Consider to what purpose you have spent it. You have not only had ordinary time, but you have had a great deal of holy time. What have you done with all the Sabbath-days which you have enjoyed? Consider those things seriously, and let your own consciences make answer.

SECTION III - Who are chiefly deserving of reproof from the subject of the preciousness of time.

How little is the preciousness of time considered, and how little sense of it do the greater part of mankind seem to have! And to how little good purpose do many spend their time! There is nothing more precious, and yet nothing of which men are more prodigal. Time is with many, as silver was in the days of Solomon, as the stones of the street, and nothing accounted of. They act as if time were as plenty as silver was then, and as if they had a great deal more than they needed, and knew not what to do with it. If men were as lavish of their money as they are of their time, if it were as common a thing for them to throw away their money, as it is for them to throw away their time, we should think them beside themselves, and not in the possession of their right minds. Yet time is a thousand times more precious than money; and when it is gone, cannot be purchased for money, cannot be redeemed by silver or gold. — There are several sorts of persons who are reprov'd by this doctrine, whom I shall particularly mention.

First, those who spend a great part of their time in idleness, or in doing nothing that turns to any account, either for the good of their souls or bodies; nothing either for their own benefit, or for the benefit of their neighbor, either of the family or of the body-politic to which they belong. There are some persons upon whose hands time seems to lie heavy, who, instead of being concerned to improve it as it passes, and taking care that it pass not without making it their own, act as if it were rather their concern to contrive ways how to waste and consume it; as though time, instead of being precious, were rather a mere encumbrance to them. Their hands refuse to labor, and rather than put themselves to it, they will let their families suffer, and will suffer themselves. Pro. 19:15, "An idle soul shall suffer hunger." Pro. 23:21, "Drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags." Some spend much of their time at the tavern, over their cups, and in wandering from house to house, wasting away their hours in idle and unprofitable talk which will turn to no good account. Pro. 14:23, "In all labour there is profit; but the talk of the lips tendeth only to poverty." The direction of the apostle, in Eph. 4:28 is, that we should "labour, working with our hands the thing that is good, that we may have to give to him that needeth." But indolent men, instead of gaining anything to give to him that needeth, do but waste what they have already. Pro. 18:9, "He that is slothful in his work, is brother to him that is a great waster."

Second, they are reprov'd by this doctrine who spend their time in wickedness, who do not merely spend their time in doing nothing to any good purpose, but spend it to ill purposes. Such do not only lose their time, but they do worse; with it they hurt both themselves and others. — Time is precious, as we have heard, because eternity depends upon it. By the improvement of time, we have opportunity of escaping eternal misery, and obtaining eternal blessedness. But those who spend their time in wicked works, not only neglect to improve their time to obtain eternal happiness, or to escape damnation, but they spend it to a quite contrary purpose, viz. to increase their eternal misery, or to render their damnation the more heavy and intolerable.

Some spend much time in reveling, and in unclean talk and practices, in vicious company-keeping, in corrupting and ensnaring the minds of others, setting bad examples, and leading others into sin, undoing not only their own souls, but the souls of others. Some spend much of their precious time in detraction and backbiting; in talking against others; in contention, not only quarreling themselves, but fomenting and stirring up strife and contention. It would have been well for some men, and well for their neighbors, if they had never done anything at all. For then they would have done neither good nor hurt. But now they have done a great deal more hurt than they have done or ever will do good. There are some persons whom it would have been better for the towns where they live, to

have at the charge of maintaining them in doing nothing, if that would have kept them in a state of inactivity.

Those who have spent much of their time in wickedness, if ever they shall reform, and enter upon a different mode of living, will find, not only that they have wasted the past, but that they have made work for their remaining time, to undo what they have done. How will many men, when they shall have done with time, and shall look back upon their past lives, wish that they had no time! The time which they spend on earth will be worse to them than if they had spent so much time in hell. For an eternity of more dreadful misery in hell will be the fruit of their time on earth, as they employ it.

Third, those are reproved by this doctrine, who spend their time only in worldly pursuits, neglecting their souls. Such men lose their time, let them be ever so diligent in their worldly business. And though they may be careful not to let any of it pass so, but that it shall some way or other turn to their worldly profit. They that improve time only for their benefit in time, lose it; because time was not given for itself, but for that everlasting duration which succeeds it. — They, therefore, whose time is taken up in caring and laboring for the world only, in inquiring what they shall eat, and what they shall drink, and wherewithal they shall be clothed; in contriving to lay up for themselves treasure upon earth, how to enrich themselves, how to make themselves great in the world, or how to live in comfortable and pleasant circumstances, while here; who busy their minds and employ their strength in these things only, and the stream of whose affections is directed towards these things; they lose their precious time.

Let such, therefore, as have been guilty of thus spending their time, consider it. You have spent a great part of your time, and a great part of your strength, in getting a little of the world; and how little good doth it afford you, now you have gotten it! What happiness or satisfaction can you reap from it? Will it give you peace of conscience, or any rational quietness or comfort? What is your poor, needy, perishing soul the better for it? And what better prospects doth it afford you of your approaching eternity? And what will all that you have acquired avail you when time shall be no longer?

SECTION IV - An exhortation to improve time.

Consider what hath been said of the preciousness of time, how much depends upon it, how short and uncertain it is, how irrecoverable it will be when gone. If you have a right conception of these things, you will be more choice of your time than of the most fine gold. Every hour and moment will seem precious to you. — But besides those considerations which have been already set before you, consider also the following:

First, that you are accountable to God for your time. Time is a talent given us by God; he hath set us our day; and it is not for nothing. Our day was appointed for some work; therefore he will, at the day's end, call us to an account. We must give account to him of the improvement of all our time. We are God's servants; as a servant is accountable to his master, how he spends his time when he is sent forth to work, so are we accountable to God. If men would aright consider this, and keep it in mind, would they not improve their time otherwise than they do? Would you not behave otherwise than you do, if you considered with yourselves every morning, that you must give an account to God, how you shall have spent that day? And if you considered with yourselves, at the beginning of every

evening, that you must give an account to God, how you shall have spent that evening? Christ hath told us, that “for every idle word which men speak they shall give account in the day of judgment,” Mat. 12:36. How well, therefore, may we conclude, that we must give an account of all our idle misspent time!

Second, consider how much time you have lost already. For your having lost so much, you have the greater need of diligently improving what yet remains. You ought to mourn and lament over your lost time. But that is not all, you must apply yourselves the more diligently to improve the remaining part, that you may redeem lost time. — You who are considerably advanced in life, and have hitherto spent your time in vanities and worldly cares, and have lived in a great measure negligent of the interests of your souls, may well be terrified and amazed, when you think how much time you have lost and wasted away. — In that you have lost so much time, you have the more need of diligence, on three accounts.

1. As your opportunity is so much the shorter. — Your time at its whole length is short. But set aside all that you have already lost, and then how much shorter is it! As to that part of your time which you have already lost, it is not to be reckoned into your opportunity; for that will never be any more; and it is no better, but worse to you, than if it never had been.

2. You have the same work to do that you had at first, and that under great difficulties. Hitherto you have done nothing at all of your work, all remains to be done, and that with vastly greater difficulties and opposition in your way than would have been if you had set about it seasonably. So that the time in which to do your work is not only grown shorter, but your work is grown greater. You not only have the same work to do, but you have more work. For while you have lost your time, you have not only shortened it, but you have been making work for yourselves. How well may this consideration awaken you to a thorough care, not to let things run on in this manner any longer, and rouse you up immediately to apply yourselves to your work with all your might!

3. That is the best of your time which you have lost. The first of a man’s time, after he comes to the exercise of his reason, and to be capable of performing his work, is the best. You who have lived in sin till past your youth, have lost the best part. So that here all these things to be considered together, viz. that your time in the whole is but short, there is none to spare. A great part of that is gone, so that it is become much shorter. That which is gone is the best; yet all your work remains, and not only so, but with greater difficulties than ever before attended it. And the shorter your time is, the more work you have to do.

What will make you sensible of the necessity of a diligent improvement of remaining time, if these things will not? Sometimes such considerations as these have another effect, viz. to discourage persons, and to make them think, that seeing they have lost so much time, it is not worth their while to attempt to do anything now. The devil makes fools of them; for when they are young, he tells them, there is time enough hereafter, there is no need of being in haste, it will be better seeking salvation hereafter; and then they believe him. Afterwards, when their youth is past, he tells them, that now they have lost so much, and the best of their time, that it is not worth their while to attempt to do anything; and now they believe him too. So that with them no time is good. The season of youth is not a good time; for that is most fit for pleasure and mirth, and there will be

enough afterwards. And what comes afterwards is not a good time, because the best of it is gone. Thus are men infatuated and ruined.

But what madness is it for persons to give way to discouragement, so as to neglect their work, because their time is short! What need have they rather to awake out of sleep, thoroughly to rouse up themselves, and to be in good earnest, that if possible they may yet obtain eternal life! Peradventure God may yet give them repentance to the acknowledgment of the truth, that they may be saved. Though it be late in the day, yet God calls upon you to rouse, and to apply yourselves to your work. And will you not hearken to his counsel in this great affair, rather than to the counsel of your mortal enemy?

Third, consider how time is sometimes valued by those who are come near to the end of it. What a sense of its preciousness have poor sinners sometimes, when they are on their deathbeds! Such have cried out, O, a thousand worlds for an inch of time! Then time appears to them indeed precious. An inch of time could do them no more good than before, when they were in health, supposing a like disposition to improve it, nor indeed so much. For a man's time upon a deathbed is attended with far greater disadvantage for such an improvement as will be for the good of his soul, than when he is in health. — But the near approach of death makes men sensible of the inestimable worth of time. Perhaps, when they were in health, they were as insensible of its value as you are, and were as negligent of it. But how are their thoughts altered now! It is not because they are deceived, that they think time to be of such value, but because their eyes are opened. And it is because you are deceived and blind that you do not think as they do.

Fourth, consider what a value we may conclude is set upon time by those who are past the end of it. What thoughts do you think they have of its preciousness, who have lost all their opportunity for obtaining eternal life, and are gone to hell? Though they were very lavish of their time while they lived, and set no great value upon it; yet how have they changed their judgments! How would they value the opportunity which you have, if they might but have it granted to them! What would they not give for one of your days, under the means of grace! — So will you, first or last, be convinced. But if you be not convinced except in the manner in which they are, it will be too late.

There are two ways of making men sensible of the preciousness of time. One is, by showing them the reason why it must be precious, by telling them how much depends on it, how short it is, how uncertain, etc. The other is experience, wherein men are convinced how much depends on the improvement of time. The latter is the most effectual way; for that always convinces, if nothing else doth. — But if persons be not convinced by the former means, the latter will do them no good. If the former be ineffectual, the latter, though it be certain, yet is always too late. Experience never fails to open the eyes of men, though they were never opened before. But if they be first opened by that, it is no way to their benefit. Let all therefore be persuaded to improve their time to their utmost.

SECTION V - Advice respecting the improvement of time.

I shall conclude with advising to three things in particular.

First, improve the present time without any delay. If you delay and put off its improvement, still more time will be lost; and it will be an evidence that you are not sensible of its preciousness. Talk not of more convenient seasons hereafter; but improve your time while you have it, after the example of the psalmist. Psa. 119:60, "I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments."

Second, be especially careful to improve those parts of time which are most precious. Though all time is very precious, yet some parts are more precious than others; as, particularly, holy time is more precious than common time. Such time is of great advantage for our everlasting welfare. Therefore, above all, improve your Sabbaths, and especially the time of public worship, which is the most precious part. Lose it not either in sleep, or in carelessness, inattention, and wandering imaginations. How sottish are they who waste away, not only their common, but holy time, yea the very season of attendance on the holy ordinances of God! — The time of youth is precious, on many accounts. Therefore, if you be in the enjoyment of this time, take heed that you improve it. Let not the precious days and years of youth slip away without improvement. A time of the strivings of God's Spirit is more precious than other time. Then God is near; and we are directed, in Isa. 55:6, "To seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call upon him while he is near." Such especially is an accepted time, and a day of salvation: 2 Cor. 6:2, "I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in a day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

Third, improve well your time of leisure from worldly business. Many persons have a great deal of such time, and all have some. If men be but disposed to it, such time may be improved to great advantage. When we are most free from cares for the body, and business of an outward nature, a happy opportunity for the soul is afforded. Therefore spend not such opportunities unprofitably, nor in such a manner that you will not be able to give a good account thereof to God. Waste them not away wholly in unprofitable visits, or useless diversions or amusements. Diversion should be used only in subserviency to business. So much, and no more, should be used, as doth most fit the mind and body for the work of our general and particular callings.

You have need to improve every talent, advantage, and opportunity, to your utmost, while time lasts; for it will soon be said concerning you, according to the oath of the angel, in Rev. 10:5, 6, "And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and sware by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer."