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Is there a better way to begin a new year than by taking account of the time you have been given—past, present, and future—and meditating on how you use it as a child of God? Within the incomprehensible vastness of eternity, God formed a creature called time. Have you ever stopped to meditate upon that? The six thousand years or so in which time has existed are difficult enough to comprehend.

Now try to describe or imagine eternity.

You can’t.

It’s difficult to describe eternity without thinking of it in terms of time. Even using the term “vastness” to describe eternity does injustice to it because it implies that eternity has a certain size or limit.

What about time? If you were to haul out your dictionary and look up the definition of time, you might get something along the lines of “a non-spatial continuum that is measured in terms of events which succeed one another from past through present to future.” Does the concept of time still seem abstract? That’s because it is. Time is difficult to define because there are so many angles from which you can approach it. Assuming we all know what time is, but we find it difficult to define (even with help from Merriam Webster), let’s move on.

Apart from a formal definition, what words or phrases come to mind when you think about time? The words you come up with reflect how you live. Do you live every moment for yourself? Then you would describe time as cheap, plenteous, and mine. You would confess “I can always grow up later,” “time I enjoy wasting is not wasted time,” and “free time is my time.” Do you live out of a true faith in Jesus Christ? Then you would describe time as precious, valuable, temporary, fleeting, and a gift. You would confess “my time is not my own” and “My times are in thy hand” (Ps. 31:15).

Are you a young adult, fresh into the workforce? Are you a student making your way through junior high or high school? Are you a college student living away from home for the first time in your life? Are you a young father or mother? Are you a single adult seeking a spouse? Are you an elderly person lying on your deathbed? We could continue adding to the list, addressing all stages and walks of life. No matter where you are at in life, your use of time is important. It becomes even more important when you realize that your existence within time is but a blip on the radar of history. Time is fleeting, and it only goes one direction. There are no mulligans. What are you doing with the time you have been given?

Connected to the biblical view of time is the concept of God-given opportunities. Recall the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. The master was going away, so he called his servants and gave each of them talents “according to their several ability.” You can think of talents as opportunities to serve and ability as natural gifts. Consider where God has you at this point in your life. In the time you have been alive, he has used each event in your life for the purpose of shaping and molding you as an individual within the body of Christ. He has also given you natural gifts such as intellect, speech, music, or teaching. The reality is that natural gifts vary in amount from person to person. God has also provided you with opportunities to serve him, which is where time comes in. Opportunity is essentially time. Think of all the opportunities available to you to serve God through serving others in the body of Christ. Did you take advantage of that time? Did you use it wisely? Or do you see time as “your own?” Don’t be like the foolish servant and bury your God-given opportunities in the ground.

Reflect upon time. Value time. See time as a gift. See time as part of God’s creation. Exercise godly stewardship of time. See time as opportunity and use that opportunity like the faithful stewards of Matthew 25.

I don’t have much time.

No, I did not just receive a fatal diagnosis. I simply don’t have much time to keep your attention. According to Microsoft Canada, the average human attention span is only eight seconds (28). I would have a better chance writing to goldfish (attention span: nine seconds). Unfortunately, we do not have any goldfish that subscribe to Beacon Lights. I checked.

That phone you were just tempted to check has reduced your attention span to almost nothing. The devices we find so addictive are changing our brains. I know this not only because experts have said so, but because these devices have changed mine, and not for the better. If you want to test this, start reading a book and see how quickly—and often—your mind wanders and is distracted. I can’t say I wasn’t warned. Nicholas Carr didn’t just send a warning shot across my bow four or five years ago when I read his book The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains. It was a direct hit. But you know how it is—you read a book, it convicts you, and a month or two later, you’re back to your old habits.

I had another wake-up call when I read Jon VanOverloop’s article in the June 2018 issue of Beacon Lights. If you haven’t read it, you should, and if you can’t remember it, you should re-read it.

I was so convicted by his article that I was convinced the time for talk was over. So I went later that week to the Verizon store with my iPhone 7 and told them I wanted to downgrade—to a flip-phone. After I spent too long convincing him I was not out of mind or worthy of being institutionalized, he found a flip-phone buried somewhere in the back. “I’m sorry sir, this device is from the Pleistocene. We can’t transfer data to it; you’ll have to do it manually.” Maybe he didn’t use those exact words, but something similar.

When I got home that night, I was confident I had made the right decision. Everyone else was convinced I was nuts, but what do they know? And then a text message came. From a number I didn’t recognize because I didn’t have any contacts stored. I opened it. “Cannot read media.” Uh-oh. Now what? And then another text came—same message. It was about this time that a cold sweat broke out. I tried to listen to a voicemail. It took me about 30 seconds to get through the programmed message telling me every detail of the message, except the message itself. Messages continued to come in, the majority of which I couldn’t open. Emails? Ha. Forget about it.

I was at the Verizon store at 7:59 a.m. the next morning transferring service back to my iPhone 7, which I still have today. The struggle continues.

A book published last year explains my anxiety and, I have come to realize, our addiction to our phones. The book is Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked by Adam Alter. I have no idea if Adam is a professing Christian, but his book certainly does not purport to be religious in any way. However, his findings and writing are a powerful testimony to the dangerous age in which we live. This was foretold—read 2 Timothy 3:1.

Those reading this review will generally belong to two camps. The first group will say, “What is the big deal about technology? It amuses me, entertains me, helps me with shopping, work, communicating with friends and family, and I don’t plan on making any changes. What’s the big deal if I am addicted to Instagram, Facebook, or MySpace (yes, I’m talking to both of you).”

The second group will recognize that something is wrong. They can’t necessarily put their finger on
it, but they sense that watching four episodes of a show on Netflix in one sitting is not a proper use of a Christian’s time. When they consider what they did on their phone every night this week, they realize that it was all a gigantic waste of time. There was nothing redeeming about it.

I hope most of the readers will find themselves in the second camp; because there is something wrong. Many of us find our phones and other devices to be irresistible. This is by design—insidious, predatory, and addictive.

Why do you think Evan Williams, the founder of Blogger, Twitter, and Medium, bought hundreds of books for his children but refused to give them an iPad? How about Steve Jobs? He had just rolled out the iPad; a product he called “extraordinary” and one that offered an “incredible experience.” Yet, he wouldn’t allow his children to use it. The answer, according to Adam Alter, is that just like a seasoned drug dealer, you “never get high on your own supply” (1–2).

After making the obligatory “technology isn’t inherently bad” disclaimer, Alter goes on to show all of the ways that it is used in a destructive, corrosive manner. And yet, we don’t recognize it for what it is. Most people vastly underestimate the amount of time they are actually on the device. This might be defensible if we were using it to some profit. But for the most part, we aren’t; we are keeping track of farm animals, building our city walls and upgrading troops, matching candies, spending endless hours looking at photos, liking photos, commenting on photos, having our feelings hurt when our photos aren’t liked, loathing someone else for their photos that were liked, and so on. The vast majority of the time spent on these things have no value now or in the future.

There are great benefits to these devices. Unfortunately, we are “willing to overlook its costs for its many gleaming benefits” (39). One of those costs is that your device “weaponizes temptations” (19). Never in all of history has it been so easy to get your hands on the filth of the world. It makes our children more distracted and less empathetic (39–40), turns them into poor communicators (240), makes them much less capable of managing their emotions, and makes them less satisfied with their lives (233). Parents, do any of these fit your gaming son or daughter? And yet we give them to our youngest children. Even drug dealers wouldn’t do that.

These things have an impact, not only on our attention spans (which are shot), but also on our life in the church. We are, for the most part, no longer readers. We are not able to read, study, and meditate on the word of God the way we should. This means we will lack the ability to discern true doctrine from false, we will not draw close to God in a true knowledge of him, and we will not be able to think deeply about a subject for long before becoming…look! A squirrel!

An entire generation is being raised to be of little use as possible to the church.

Many of us have been using our devices with reckless abandon, not identifying the danger, and therefore, over time, we have become addicted to them. Alter quotes Hilarie Cash, a co-founder of reSTART, a gaming and addiction center, “Remember: once your cucumber brain has become pickled, it can never go back to being a cucumber.” Alter points out that this is a “cute way of saying something very confronting: that it’s impossible ever to completely escape the aftereffects of addiction.” Or as Cash puts it, “If you only ever spend time online, a part of you withers away” (229–230).

Although the consequences are dire, that is not the end of the story. There are solutions and ways to wean ourselves from these devices. One way is to not have them glued to our side at all times. Alter points out that it is “the people who are forced to exercise will-power who fall first. Those who avoid temptation in the first place tend to do much better” (265). We recognize the truth found in this statement because it is the solution of the Bible as well regarding temptation; we should run from it (1 Cor. 6:18). How true is Alter’s insight—“Surround yourself with temptation and you’ll be tempted; remove temptation from arm’s reach and you’ll find hidden reserves of willpower” (275).

There are other solutions but there is no quick fix; there is no app or self-help video to fix us overnight. You have to come up with the solution that works for you, and be disciplined enough to follow through. The most important thing is simply to acknowledge there is a problem. That’s it. If you don’t think there is a problem, then read Irresistible by Adam Alter and The Shallows by Nicholas Carr.

It is time to follow the admonition of Romans 13:11, “And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep.” You may not know how to explain the meaning of “redeeming the time” found in Ephesians 5:16, but one thing is certain, what we are doing on our phones and devices isn’t it. We are being swallowed up by vanity, but we have been too engrossed in our phones to notice.
GOD, THE CREATOR OF TIME

“A fickle-minded man, whose thoughts were all astray because of his conception of time past, might wonder why you, who are God almighty, Creator of all, Sustainer of all, and Maker of heaven and earth, should have been idle and allowed countless ages to elapse before you finally undertook the vast work of creation. My advice to such people is to shake off their dreams and think carefully, because their wonder is based on a misconception.

How could those countless ages have elapsed when you, the Creator, in whom all ages have their origin, had not yet created them? What time could there have been that was not created by you? How could time elapse if it never was?

You are the Maker of all time. If, then, there was any time before you made heaven and earth, how can anyone say that you were idle? You must have made that time, for time could not elapse before you made it.

But if there was no time before heaven and earth were created, how can anyone ask what you were doing ‘then’? If there was no time, there was no ‘then.’"'

Who is God as the Creator of time? This involves a discussion of the idea of “eternity” and the idea of “time.”

God, the Eternal One

God is the Eternal One. Eternity is an attribute of God. Eternity itself is part of the Godhead. Eternity does not exist outside of God, as if God is one who dwells in eternity. Rather, God himself is his own eternity. God is a triune God, who enjoys fulness of life and fulness of joy and fulness of activity within himself, and this is God’s eternal life. This is eternity. There is nothing eternal, besides God. God is the Eternal One.

What is eternity? Don’t fall into the mistake of thinking of eternity in terms of time, as if eternity is simply an endless amount of time that stretches both into the endless past and into the endless future. We may be tempted to do that. However, we may not do that. Time and eternity are ideas that are qualitatively different. Exactly as the Creator is infinitely transcendent above his creatures, so eternity is infinitely transcendent over the idea of time. After all, time itself is a creation of the Eternal One.

What is eternity? God’s eternity can be understood as an “eternal present.” Don’t picture God’s eternity as if it were a long, stretched out moment of time where nothing happens. Rather, picture God’s eternity as if God is constantly living “in the moment.” For example, we have those moments in our lives where time just seems to “fly by” and we lose all sense of time because we are so caught up in the moment. These are often the thrilling moments of life, where we are fully enjoying ourselves, and we are full of activity. That’s how we should picture God’s eternity: God constantly enjoying fulness of life and activity and joy, as the three persons of the Trinity enjoy each other’s fellowship in the Godhead. God’s own fulness of life with himself is his eternity.

More could be said.

Time, God’s Creation

Time is a creation of God. Just as plants and animals are creatures of God’s handiwork that God can hold in his hand, so also all of time and history is a creature of God’s handiwork that God holds in his hand. Time is a creature that God holds out in front of himself, and he is able to see all of it in one instantaneous (yet eternal) glance. And he is able to see it all and have a perfect grasp of every single moment that is contained in the whole. Yet, even as God stands above and controls and directs every moment of time to carry out his eternal pleasure, God is also present and immanent in every moment of time; God is with us in each moment of time. And God condescends to us creatures of time and fellowships with us in time. He does this constantly and he did this in a most wonderful way through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who subjected himself to all the realities of time in order to give us everlasting life. This is God’s amazing covenant of grace (Isa. 57:15).

There was a beginning to time. Our Bibles begin by saying, “In the beginning…” When did time begin?

1 Augustine, Confessions, Book XI, 13. For an extended meditation on time, see Augustine’s Confessions, Book XI.

2 1 Tim. 1:17; Ps. 90:2; Ex. 6:3; James 1:17, etc.
Time began when God began to speak creation into existence around 6,000 years ago. And what was there before God’s work of creation? As Augustine says, that is a foolish question because the word “before” implies the very idea of time. And “before” God’s work of creation there was no time, but there was only the Eternal God. To put it more strikingly, we can put it this way: God cannot even be said to “precede” his creation in time, because that implies that there was a time before creation, which is simply not the case. We simply cannot comprehend God’s eternality; such knowledge is too wonderful for us.

What is time? First, we can speak of extrinsic time. By extrinsic time we mean the different ways in which we measure time and change. For example, in Genesis 1:14 we read that God created the sun, moon, and stars, so that by them we can keep track of time. A day is one rotation of the earth on its axis. A year is how long it takes for the earth to orbit the sun. This is extrinsic time. God created extrinsic time. God created the days, the months, and the years, as we know them, and he created them for us. He made us creatures of time, exactly so that we might enjoy the Sabbath day, and number all our days and learn to apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Second, we can speak of intrinsic time. Intrinsic time refers to the fact that all creatures have a past, a present, and a future. It doesn’t matter how you measure time (whether by the sun, moon, or earth’s rotation); all creatures can be divided into different parts of their existence, namely, their existence in the past, their existence in the present, and their existence in the future. From this point of view, time is simply the succession of moments. God created intrinsic time at the very moment he began the work of creation.

But what is time? We can put it this way: Time is the unfolding of the eternal counsel of God. God’s counsel is God’s eternal good pleasure, according to which he willed and conceived all things that are ever realized or occur in time. And it is God’s counsel that determines, controls, and guides time along its appointed course, to its appointed goal. So when did God create time? God created time when God began to carry out his eternal decrees to bring glory and honor to his name through the path of sin and grace, and through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. And God is creating time in every single moment of our own existence, as God continues to bring his eternal decrees to pass. In the very upholding and maintaining of his creation, God is creating time. In a very sublime sense, all our times are in God’s hand (Ps. 31:15).

The Significance

The significance? God is the Lord of time: trust God in all your times (he’s in control of every event, and he is with you in every moment). God is the giver of every moment of time: serve God with each moment God gives you. God is the one who created time to the praise and delight of his name; use every moment of time to praise his eternal worth.

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**HOW SHALL WE LOOK BACK?**

“Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it, Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us” (1 Sam. 7:12).

Whether it is the Vietnam War memorial in Washington DC, or the memorial of the Civil War in Arlington, VA, or even that of tombstones of our loved ones who have gone to glory, we human beings have a habit of using stones as memorials. Such was the case also with Samuel, who on the occasion of a wonderful victory given Israel by Jehovah, set up a stone of thankful remembrance, calling it “Ebenezer,” and saying, “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.”

So, with the passing of another year and at the start of a new one, I ask you as I ask myself, if we had a stone that marked the occasion, what would we engrave on it? Would we, with the same spirit of thankful remembrance, call it “Ebenezer,” and have the words, “Hitherto hath the Lord helped me” engraved on it?

It is important for us to remember that Samuel wasn’t thankful to God only for the joyful occasion
of victory. It is easy for us to remember only the good and joyful events of our personal lives in the year gone by and thank God for them. But what about the unhappy events? Shall we forget that they ever took place, and thank God only for the good and joyful events? That would not do. Even saying that the Lord helped us through these unpleasant events and failing to thank God for them is not enough.

To be sure, in erecting that Ebenezer stone, Samuel gave thanks to God for both the good and the bad events that had taken place in the recent history and life of the Old Testament church. Let us not forget what led to the amazing victory God gained for them over the Philistines at Mizpeh. It all went back to the sad history of a crushing defeat at the hands of the Philistines at Aphek. At that time, the Israelites, led by the wicked sons of Eli, Phinehas and Hophni, had foolishly brought the ark of the covenant to the battlefield. They thought that by bringing the symbol of Jehovah’s presence out of the temple and into battle, God would be present on the battlefield and give them the victory. However, in so doing, they had sinned terribly against God. Not only was God angry with the desecration of temple worship at Shiloh by Phinehas and Hophni, but also he was now angry with the Israelites for putting their trust in the ark of God rather than in him, the God of the ark. As a result, God’s hand of chastisement was heavy. He caused the Israelites to suffer a heavy defeat to the Philistines. Thousands of them, including the two sons of Eli, were slain that day. The ark of the covenant was taken by the Philistines. And the priest Eli, on receiving news of the defeat and death of his sons, also died.

How was Samuel, and how are we going to thank God for bad events such as this? There is only one way. And that is the way of faith. A faith that embraces God’s astounding way of bringing us good through the bad, especially seen in the terrible suffering and death of his Son, our Savior, on the cross. A faith that embraces the promise of God that he works all things together for good to those who love him (cf. Rom. 8:28). And therefore, a faith that embraces the fact that God is pleased to use the bad events of our lives for our good. In a word, we do not give thanks to God for the bad events in and of themselves, that is, in isolation. But we do so in light of the greater good that God accomplishes through it for us. When Samuel and the people of God saw the Ebenezer stone, they were not only to remember with thankfulness the amazing victory at Mizpeh but also the way they were led to that victory, begun by their terrible defeat at Aphek. For surely, by the time God had given them victory at Mizpeh, they had learned not to put their trust in their ungodly king, Saul. They had learned not to put their trust in the ark of the covenant, but rather in the God of the ark. They had learned not to remove the ark from the temple, which is where it belonged. They had learned these lessons and were sorry for their sins and failures. That’s how Samuel and God’s people gave thanks to God for both the good and the bad each time they saw the Ebenezer stone.

And that must also be our approach at the start of this New Year with regard to every single event—good or bad—that has taken place in our lives, in the past year and beyond. It is only in such a way that we will call our stone “Ebenezer,” and have the very same words etched on it. It is only in this way that it is not only a stone of thankful remembrance but also of joyful hope for the year ahead. That’s how we, the children of the living and true God, are to look back.

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Seth Bleyenberg

**A FOUNDATION FOR OUR FUTURE**

We all possess a sinful nature that drives us to gratify all of our desires immediately. Our sinful natures ask us, “Yea, hath God said?” just as the serpent asked Eve in the Garden (Gen. 3:1). As we pose this question to ourselves, we seek to elevate ourselves over God by presuming the right to determine what is good and what is evil. Having many new decisions to make in young adulthood, this drive for immediate gratification can be especially harmful. Our lives are filled with change as we begin to take on more responsibilities. If we live for immediate gratification, we set ourselves up to live in service of sin.
As Christian young people, we must remember our Creator and seek wisdom in the days of our youth. While we live for the moment, time is flying by. We often fail to consider the kind of future we are building for ourselves with our present decisions. We are not only building our financial future. We are not only building a future marriage or career. We are building the foundation for our whole future, including our relationship with God.

Sometimes we get the notion that we will shape up as adults. We think that in our youth we can afford to forgo a close relationship with God because we think that there will be more time for that later. We may have our token devotions and our daily prayers that never really change with our lives, but we are often too caught up in ourselves so that we forget the necessity of keeping God’s honor and glory central in our lives. When it comes down to it, we think that our relationship with God can be developed later in life, after we have had our self-serving time.

The primary problem with this is, of course, the apparent lack of interest that we are displaying toward God. How could we treat our heavenly Father, Master, Lord, Elder Brother, and Lover with such disregard? When we do this, it is to us that Christ himself speaks in Revelation 2:4, when he says, “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”

How can we think that our communion with God may be pushed off to later? What implications does that have about the importance of the relationship? Is schooling, work, entertainment, or even an important earthly relationship of greater importance than our relationship with our loving Father? Our first love must take priority.

The second danger of failing to commune with God in our youth is that we set up bad habits for ourselves. We are always forming habits to simplify the amount of work that our brains have to do every day. When we form habits, they are often very difficult to break, because without intentional action, we will do what they direct us to do. What we do now contributes to our automatic responses to similar scenarios in the future. This knowledge ought to incite more intentional action in every area of our lives. If we do not read our Bibles as we move through young adulthood, it becomes increasingly less likely that we will start reading our Bibles later.

Since our habits are being formed right now, it is more important to consider what we are doing right now than it is to make big plans for future changes. Planning is advisable, as it provides direction, but we often like to think of all of the things we plan to do in the future because it seems to take away our sense of responsibility in the present. After all, if we are going to do so much tomorrow, why bother doing anything today? More important than planning for our futures is our carefulness about how our present actions will affect our futures and how our present actions reflect on who we are. If we are not willing to hear and apply God’s instruction now, we will probably not be willing to do so tomorrow. To provide a more mundane example of the same idea, if we are not willing to put our clothes away today, we will probably not develop sudden industriousness tomorrow. While maintaining the centrality of God’s glory in our walk, we need to live today as though we are the people that we hope to be tomorrow.

How are we to live in our youth? Solomon instructs us in Ecclesiastes 12:1 to remember our Creator in the days of our youth before the days come when we have no pleasure in the things of this life. A few verses before this passage Solomon writes of the sweetness of light and how pleasant it is to behold the sun (Eccl. 11:7). He tells us to rejoice in our youth and to walk in the ways of our hearts (Eccl. 11:9). Yet in Ecclesiastes 11:8, Solomon says that “if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.” When we grow old, we will look back on our lives, and many of our days will have been dark. The joys of our past youth will no longer bring us joy, and God will give us more and more hardship with our old age. If our lives are centered on the joys of living, then we will live lives of vanity.

Therefore we need to remember our Creator and seek wisdom in our youth. The exhortation of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 12:1 can be linked to the prayer of Moses in Psalm 90:12: “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” In our youth, we need to realize the
brevity of our lives and apply ourselves in wisdom to that which is important rather than that which is expedient. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (cf. Ps. 111:10, Prov. 1:7, Prov. 9:10) because in fearing God we acknowledge our frailty and God’s power, especially regarding his omniscience. Without the fear of God, we are proud and arrogant in our own decisions to choose for ourselves what is good and what is evil. When we live in pride, we turn our love on that which is truly evil and bind ourselves to it (Prov. 8:13). This is foolishness, for it fails to bow to the will of the Creator, who is the source of all wisdom and understanding of truth. Remembering our Creator in the days of our youth brings us before the throne of God, where we learn the fear of the Almighty. When we fear God, we learn to do our duty as he has instructed us, rather than doing the things that we selfishly desire. As Solomon says at the close of Ecclesiastes, the conclusion of the whole matter (of meaning in life) is to “fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl. 12:13).

In our youth, we face many new challenges. We have choices laid before us every day. We can serve Jehovah, or we can serve ourselves. We can focus on improving our present actions, or we can ignore them and develop habits of laziness toward life and communion with God that will haunt us for the remainder of our lives. We can use the new choices in our lives to chain ourselves to impulsive sin, or we can grasp the word of God, coming to it every day with a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Ps. 51:17) ready to receive new instruction from our great Father. Let us serve God now, and ground ourselves in his word, that we may grow all our lives long in communion with him.

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Matt Koerner

REDEEMING THE TIME

Think for a moment about how you spend the majority of your time. For most of us, work and school likely consume much of it. But what do you do when you’re not working? When the school day ends, when you put your infant down for a nap, when you’ve finished your homework for the night, how do you spend your time? Do you ever think about time itself? You should! The word of God has much to say about time and how we spend it. Paul tells us to “Walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15–16). In this context, the word translated “redeeming” connotes the idea of making the best possible use of something. We are to use time as best we can, and Paul calls this living wisely. The reason he gives is that we live in evil days. The temptations around us to waste our time are fierce and many—becoming too dedicated to sports, spending every chance we have with friends, and digital distractions, just to name a few. We also do well to remember that our time is limited—our days are as grass (Ps. 103:15). Time is one of God’s many wonderful gifts to us, and as such, we should treat it as we do our other gifts—the way of the parable of the talents (Matt. 25). This means both recognizing that God has graciously given us something beautiful and our using it to glorify his name.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs us, “seek ye first the kingdom of God” (Matt. 6:33). This verse serves as a guiding principle for how we are to redeem our time. The temptation is always strong to use our “free time” for ourselves. This is not to say that we never may enjoy a bit of time alone or with friends engaging in some form of recreation (in fact, engaging in recreational activities on occasion is itself a way of redeeming our time). But our primary focus ought to be service to God. Think about that phrase “free time” for a moment. What does that imply? There are times each day when nothing is going on, and we have to decide how to use the opportunity. But by using the words “free time,” we hint at the idea that our time is our own, to do with as we see fit. Not only is our schedule free, we say, but we are free. For a few minutes each day, when we aren’t in class or when we’re on break from work, we are autonomous, sovereign, and free. Therefore,
we can decide what we want to do with that time, and there’s nothing wrong with using it however we please. When we remember Jesus’ words, however, we reprioritize. While we have been freed from our former lives of sin, we ought not to see ourselves as free to live however we please. We were not freed simply to wander untethered from any identity. Our identity is now in Christ; we are no longer servants of sin but of God. Therefore, he determines how we should live, and we obey (see Romans 6:18–22).

This includes how we spend our time. Again, the point is not that we never do anything for ourselves or anything that we find entertaining or enjoyable. But we are to seek the kingdom first! Practically speaking, this means doing good works. These too are activities which we should find enjoyable. The Heidelberg Catechism states that doing good works allows us to both thank God for his goodness and to praise his name. How then can we *not* love to do such things?

We also must briefly consider specific ways of redeeming our time. To begin, we should note that redeeming the time does not only apply once we put down the pencil at the end of our last class or clock out after work. Even while working, we must be redeeming our time. We are imperfect beings, of course, and we will not always be able to maintain focus or apply ourselves fully to our work. There are times when taking a break is the best way to redeem the time: we read it is “vain” for us to stay up too late or get up too early to work—sleep is a gift too (Ps. 127:2). But our calling as a student, mother, or laborer is to be faithful, honoring God by diligently working to the glory of his great name: “Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

We should also redeem our time with spiritual work. Be active in your church. Volunteer for that committee. Visit an aged saint. Seek first the kingdom. Be intentional about setting aside time daily to meditate on the word of God. And pray often. We ought never to be too busy for devotions. There are even times when we commune with God for only an instant; this is an example of redeeming our time even on a very small scale. In Nehemiah 2:4, King Artaxerxes asks Nehemiah what he is requesting, and Nehemiah immediately prays to God before answering the king. That prayer was momentary, but it was pleasing in the eyes of the Lord.

There are many other ways in which we can redeem God’s gift of time not mentioned here because of space. Challenge yourself to find a few more and apply them in your life moving forward. Remembering that the days are evil and that the time God has given is a gift, let us walk in wisdom: “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” (Ps. 90:12).

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1 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 32, Question and Answer 86, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005) 120.
January 8  Read 2 Chronicles 34

In this chapter, the people of Judah find the book of the law and are fearful about God’s judgment, because their fathers hadn’t been keeping that law. In verse 22 they go to Huldah the prophetess, asking her what God has to say to them. Huldah tells them that judgment will indeed come upon the wicked people of Judah for their disobedience, but that it will not happen during Josiah’s reign because he humbled himself before God.

We read of many prophets in the Bible, but not prophetesses, so I thought it interesting to see where else we read about one of these special, godly women. In Exodus 15:20 we read that Miriam the prophetess led the women of Israel to dance in praise to God. Deborah was not only the fourth judge of Israel, but also a prophetess, as we read in Judges 4:4. Although we aren’t told much about her, Isaiah 8:3 tells us that Isaiah’s wife was a prophetess. Finally, Luke 2:36 tells us about Anna, the only prophetess we read about in the New Testament. In closing, why do you think God sometimes used women to prophecy to his people? Sing or pray Psalter #163.

January 9  Read 2 Chronicles 35

As I’ve mentioned before, it’s striking to see how often the words of Proverbs 16:18 ring true throughout the Bible: “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.” In 2 Chronicles 35, Josiah led Judah in restoring the Passover. In fact, verse 18 says, “And there was no passover like that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”

Josiah was on the mountaintop of faith, but immediately after we read of his downfall. Pharaoh Necho was on his way to fight the Assyrians. He told Josiah that God had told him to do this, and that he had no interest in fighting Judah, but Josiah insisted on attacking. His pride got the best of him, and he didn’t bother consulting God. As a result, Josiah was killed in battle. We must be on constant guard against pride, for that sin can destroy us in a moment. Sing or pray Psalter #161.

January 10  Read Zephaniah 1

Zephaniah 1:18 says of the wicked, “Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD’s wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land.” Throughout scripture, we see instances of this “speedy riddance.” In 1 Kings 20, the Syrian king Benhadad laid siege to the city of Samaria. He was so confident of victory that he continued partying with his generals even when Israel came out to fight. The result was that God delivered the Syrian army into Israel’s hands, and they had a great victory. Another example that comes to mind is when Nebuchadnezzar became like a beast in Daniel 4:33. He had begun to think of himself as greater than God, and God emphatically put him in his place. Then we have the story of Belshazzar bringing out the precious cups of the temple in Daniel 5. No sooner had he mocked God and his people than the writing on the wall appeared. Can you think of other instances where God brought this speedy judgment on his enemies? Sing or pray Psalter #156.

January 11  Read Zephaniah 2

The last verse of this chapter reads, “This is the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none beside me: how is she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in! every one that passeth by her shall hiss, and wag his hand.” This reminded me of a documentary about the deserted town of Pripyat, where workers at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl lived before the catastrophic disaster that spread deadly radiation all over the area. Despite these dangerous radiation levels, wildlife is thriving in the abandoned metropolis.

What do you think God is teaching us when men are destroyed and their habitations become a place...
for beasts to live? For one, I think we see how man’s pride leads him to his own destruction. Also, when nature reclaims an area, it can remind us that God is the creator and the one in control of history. Maybe things like this even point to the destruction at the end of the world, and God’s replacement of this creation with the new heavens and earth. What do you think? Sing or pray Psalter #200.

January 12 Read Zephaniah 3

Our Reformation Day lecture this year was titled “The Coming Antichrist Apocalypse.” Our speaker talked about how the antichrist will come and lead all people to eradicate the church and worship him. It will seem as if he’s unstoppable, but then God will return on the clouds of glory. God will command the antichrist and his wicked followers to stand before him, and there won’t be any resistance. It will be no contest. The antichrist kingdom will be cast into hell for eternity, and the victory over sin will be complete.

Zephaniah 3:8 talks about this final destruction. The verse reads, “Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the Lord, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy.” The nations will convince themselves that they are God, but when God declares the time for judgment has come there can be no disobeying. He is in complete control, and they are nothing. Sing or pray Psalter #182.

January 13 Read Jeremiah 1

We recently heard a presentation by one of our ministers who visited South Korea on a mission trip. What I learned there was astounding. Did you know that 30% of South Korea is Presbyterian? There are more Presbyterians there than in the rest of the world combined! The two specific denominations our delegation visited were larger than all the Reformed churches in the US combined! What an amazing and humbling thing it is to learn that God’s word has been spread so extensively throughout the nations that we can find much larger Christian denominations in the formerly pagan Far East!

I thought about this as I read that Jeremiah was ordained to be “a prophet unto the nations,” in verse 5. Already in the Old Testament God began sending his word out to the nations surrounding Israel. Although Jeremiah prophesied from Judah and his words were meant primarily for the people there, yet he also had words for the Babylonians, Egyptians, and Moabites. May it cause us to praise our heavenly Father as we see the extent to which the nations have received this word in the 21st Century. Sing or pray Psalter #238.

January 14 Read Jeremiah 2

According to my study Bible, this chapter ends Jeremiah’s introduction and begins the declaration of God’s judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem. Although much of the book’s tone is very negative, that doesn’t mean that Jeremiah was a pessimist. He was, however, a realist, and Judah’s real situation was that they were ripe for judgment. Punishment would come soon, and Jeremiah was sent by God to warn them. As we will read in later chapters, the false prophets made lying claims of peace, but Jeremiah spoke the truth. Throughout the book, Jeremiah’s faithfulness stands in stark contrast to Judah’s wickedness. He bravely preached his unpopular message, even in the face of persecution. Like Paul, Jeremiah was rejected by his own people and was greatly grieved by the unrepentance he was met with. Unlike Paul, however, Jeremiah had no faithful friends who supported him in his work. In a recent lecture, we were reminded that we must be prepared to give up everything for the cause of the gospel. Jeremiah was prepared to make that sacrifice. Are you? Am I? Sing or pray Psalter #234.

January 15 Read Jeremiah 3

Jeremiah 3:1 reads, “They say, If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man’s, shall he return unto her again? shall not that land be greatly polluted? but thou hast played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to me, saith the Lord.” Calvin explains that Jeremiah is rebuking the Jews for divorcing their wives for small reasons or for no reason at all. In contrast, God seeks to be reconciled with his people who have gone a whoring after other gods, like a husband who receives his unchaste wife again with a full pardon.

Calvin goes on to say, “God shews that he would be reconciled to the Jews, provided they proceeded not obstinately in their sinful courses.” Of course, we know that God doesn’t depend on us to repent. However, Calvin seems to say that he does here. If Calvin were here today, how do you think he’d explain that statement? Do you think there’s a proper way to explain it? Sing or pray Psalter #217.
January 16  Read Jeremiah 4

A true friend is loyal and always looks out for your well-being, but a false friend will turn against you in a moment. Jeremiah 4:30 ends, “thy lovers will despise thee, they will seek thy life.” Calvin says the lovers specifically mentioned here are Egypt and Assyria. When Assyria threatened them, the Jews looked for help from Egypt and when Egypt threatened they looked for help from Assyria. However, both wicked nations were simply looking out for themselves and would quickly turn on the Jews if they deemed it advantageous to them. Jesus had this in his ministry as well. The people were excited to hear him and see the wonders he did, but when they found out he hadn’t come to create a heaven on earth, they hated and tried to kill him. Similarly, people thought Paul was one of the gods when he performed a miracle and were ready to worship him, but when they found out he was giving all the glory to God they stoned him instead. What kind of friends are we? Do we defend our brothers and sisters or backbite and slander them when it has the potential to make us look good?

Sing or pray Psalter #241.

January 17  Read Jeremiah 5

Jeremiah 5:30 reads, “A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land.” What is this wonderful and horrible thing? Well, the next verse explains, “The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?” It was a horrible thing that the priests misled the people, and the people were content to be misled. The priests heard the lying words of the prophets but saw that these words gained them earthly possessions and favor and did nothing to stop it. John Calvin compares this situation to the Roman Catholic Church, where the leaders purposefully spread fallacies in exchange for their own gain.

It makes sense that these developments would be called horrible, but why wonderful? How could the apostasy of the people possibly be described as wonderful? In answer to this, Calvin says that wonderful here means full of wonder and amazement, or astounded. It’s astounding to see how far God’s people have fallen. The same words clearly apply to the church world today, as the earth becomes ripe for judgment. Sing or pray Psalter #228.

January 18  Read Jeremiah 6

A while back I heard a sermon on Jeremiah 6:16, which reads, “Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein.” The minister brought out that the old paths here refer to God’s law and precepts. Someone who does not choose these paths says, “I want to make new paths.” The image is of a traveler at a crossroads. He has a choice to make, the old paths or the new paths. Judah had chosen the new paths. They’d rejected God’s word, and Jeremiah had been sent to warn them of impending judgment.

The same message comes to us today. What decision will we make at the fork in the road of our earthly pilgrimage? Every day there are more temptations for us to take the new paths. Life down that way seems so easy and pleasurable, and the Bible tells us the life of a Christian is hard. However, let us follow the old paths, for it’s only in that way that we will experience rest. Sing or pray Psalter #228.

January 19  Read Jeremiah 7

About a week before his crucifixion, Jesus cleansed the temple for the second time in his ministry. After overturning the tables of the moneychangers and the dove sellers Jesus said to the people, “It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves” (Matt. 21:13). Jesus was quoting Jeremiah 7:11a, which reads, “Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?” Jeremiah was rebuking the temple leaders in this passage, for they went through the motions of religion, but stole from the people and oppressed those in need.

This is the same kind of thing that was going on in Jesus’ day. According to Gertrude Hoeksema, since the temple tax was a half shekel, which wasn’t coined anymore, the people had to go to the money changers to get the temple tax. These money changers charged high rates for this service. There was also a lot of money in the sacrifice of animals. You had to pay to get your animal professionally inspected for blemishes, or you could buy one they supplied for a very high price. Sing or pray Psalter #223.

January 20  Read Jeremiah 8

Jeremiah 8:11 says, “For they have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.” This same phrase
at the end is found in chapter 6:14 as well. Calvin says this verse is clearly directed at the priests and prophets. He points out how serious it is when those who are supposed to be leaders instead direct people in the wrong way.

This reminded me of the false prophets when Ahab and Jehoshaphat went to fight against the Syrians (2 Chron. 18). Jehoshaphat had an idea he shouldn’t really be partnering with wicked Ahab, so he asked if Ahab had any prophets who could tell him God’s will. Ahab assembled 400 of his top liars, who all assured Jehoshaphat that God would give them the victory, no problem. Jehoshaphat still wasn’t convinced, so he asked Ahab if there were any slightly more trustworthy prophets around. Ahab admitted there was one, but he always had mean things to say, so Ahab kept him locked up. Jehoshaphat requested Micaiah be brought, and, after Micaiah first mockingly told Ahab what he wanted to hear, he pronounced God’s decree that they would be defeated. Sing or pray Psalter #266.

**January 21**  
**Read Jeremiah 9**

Verse 23 warns us against putting our trust in earthly things, whether that be wisdom, might, or riches. Matthew Henry mentions Goliath and Ahithophel as good examples. Goliath trusted in his might, believing no one could defeat him. He was greatly offended when little David came out against him, but all it took was one small stone, and the giant was dead. Ahithophel was an extremely wise man and a trusted friend of David. He was so wise, in fact, that 2 Samuel 16:23 says that the counsel of Ahithophel was “as if a man had inquired at the oracle of God.” Yet, he chose to side with rebellious Absalom, his advice wasn’t taken, and he ended up killing himself.

After the negative comes the positive. Verse 24 continues, “But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.” We don’t glory in ourselves, we glory in God, for he is the one that rules all and directs everything according to his perfect plan. Sing or pray Psalter #265.

**January 22**  
**Read Jeremiah 10**

Verse 2 reads, “Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them.” I first took the “signs of heaven” described in this verse to be synonymous with the signs of the times. With that I mind, I wondered how the heathen are dismayed at those signs? I remember a Dordt College professor talking about how the world isn’t sitting around in fear of judgment, and it’s definitely true that they live their lives as if it never even crosses their minds.

However, after reading Calvin, I realize I had misinterpreted this particular verse. The “signs of heaven” should be taken literally here. The Chaldeans and Egyptians were attentive observers of the stars. When someone viewed the stars and claimed a calamity would come upon them they were afraid, but they brushed off the coming judgments spoken by God’s prophets. The world today has their big-ticket issues they spend all sorts of time discussing and worrying about, yet they don’t stop to think about their rejection of God’s commandments. Sing or pray Psalter #300.

**January 23**  
**Read Jeremiah 11**

When I was in junior high, our teacher took us to a cow-killing. It might sound slightly morbid, but I think the idea was to understand more fully where our food comes from and see what the butchering process is like firsthand. I remember how the cow was just standing there eating away, and one of the two guys just pressed a .22 to her temple and fired. The cow immediately went to her knees without a sound, and the other man walked up and slit her throat. Then they immediately started cutting off limbs with their enormous butcher knives. I couldn’t believe how fast and efficient it all was. The cow didn’t know what hit her.

In this chapter, we learn that the wicked people of Jeremiah’s own city plotted to kill him. In verse 19, Jeremiah compares himself to a lamb or an ox who doesn’t know they’re being brought to slaughter. However, God revealed the plot to Jeremiah at the last moment and saved his prophet. Our enemies love to catch us unawares with their attacks, but God will always care for the sheep of his pasture. Sing or pray Psalter #299.

**January 24**  
**Read Jeremiah 12**

God compares Judah, his heritage, to a lion and a speckled bird in verses 8 and 9. Calvin explains that they are like a lion in that they have attacked God viciously. One’s heritage should be delightful to him, but God’s had become utterly horrible. They thought themselves immune to judgment, just as we can be tempted to in the Protestant Reformed Churches,
but God’s wrath would come upon them.

There’s some disagreement about the meaning behind the speckled bird. Matthew Henry suggests it refers to birds of prey that are constantly fighting, to birds speckled with innocent blood, to those speckled because of the mixing of pagan and true religion, or to those who were preyed upon by others because they look different. There’s some good application that can be made using these suggestions, but Calvin doesn’t agree with any of them. Instead, he says that speckled birds illustrate birds that are wild. God had gathered Judah to be his own, domesticated people, but they had rejected him like wild, untamed birds. These wild lions and savage birds would soon receive their judgment, for all the birds and wild beasts of the earth were ready to obey him. Sing or pray Psalter #295.

January 25  Read Jeremiah 13

We read about a vision that God gave Jeremiah in the first eleven verses. God told the prophet to take a girdle and hide it in a hole by the Euphrates River. After many days, Jeremiah returned to find that the girdle was ruined. God concluded the vision by saying this is what would happen to the Jews. According to Calvin, this scene had to be a vision, because it would have taken Jeremiah much too long to make the trip to and from the Euphrates multiple times. That river here refers to Assyria and Chaldea, where the Jews would be captive. The hole in the rock demonstrates the people’s disgrace, and the time the girdle was left there pictures the time of captivity. Just as the girdle came out ruined, the captivity marked the end of the Jews being God’s chosen people. Just as a girdle is worn close to the body, God had kept Israel and Judah close to him. In another connection, a girdle can be ornamental, like the Jews were commanded to shine forth God’s glory. They prided themselves in being Abraham’s seed, but their wickedness had caused them to be cast off and destroyed. Sing or pray Psalter #281.

January 26  Read Jeremiah 14

This chapter speaks of the great drought that came upon Judah because of their sin during the latter part of King Josiah’s reign. Verse 16 specifically talks about how people will be dying so rapidly that there won’t be anyone to bury them. I remember studying in history how this was a real problem during the Black Death of the Middle Ages. Estimates differ, but this disease could have literally wiped out half of Europe’s population. Entire villages were taken off the map. Interestingly, the surviving Europeans then traveled over to America a few hundred years later and brought an even worse outbreak with them. Since Native Americans had zero resistance to European diseases, like smallpox, unbelievable numbers of them died shortly after the Europeans landed. In fact, it’s estimated that disease killed 90 percent of the Indians in New England. With numbers like that, there’s no one left to do the burying.

These stories remind us that life without God is death and destruction. Satan claims 100 percent of those whom Christ has not saved from this epidemic. How humbling it is to think that we have been chosen when such mind-boggling numbers of people have not. Sing or pray Psalter #280.

January 27  Read Jeremiah 15

Do you think Manasseh was saved? Jeremiah 15:4 says Judah would be scattered throughout all the nations because of his sin, and sin he did. Amongst other things, Manasseh put an idol in the Holy Place of the temple, offered his own children as sacrifices to Molech, and fiercely persecuted God’s people, making Jerusalem red with the blood of the saints (2 Kings 21:16). He was even worse than the heathen nations around him. Also, Jeremiah brings out that he was Hezekiah’s son, who brought religious reform to Judah, and judgment is even greater for those who grow up under the truth and reject it. Calvin says the repentance towards the end of his life wasn’t genuine.

However, I remembered from Bible class last year that Gertrude Hoeksema looked at this a little differently. According to her, Manasseh repented and God forgave him, but he was unable to make Israel turn back to Jehovah after teaching them to worship idols for 50 years. As evidence, she points out that he tried to undo as much as possible, and we read that God “was intreated of him and heard his supplication” (2 Chron. 33:13). What do you think? Sing or pray Psalter #292.

January 28  Read Jeremiah 16

In Jeremiah 16:2–4, God tells the prophet not to have a wife and children because they would all die horrible deaths. John Calvin and Matthew Henry seem to disagree about the application here. Calvin says that these verses aren’t meant to commend celibacy, but simply to show that the land wasn’t even worthy of marriage. God was showing the people of Judah that they deserved to be exterminated from
the earth. On the other hand, Henry says that this shows it may not be advisable to marry in such dire situations as Jeremiah was in. As supporting evidence, he points to verses like 1 Corinthians 7:26 and Luke 23:29.

What do you think? Is there an argument for encouraging people not to marry when persecution is great, and life is extremely difficult? If so, consider that the lives of God’s people have been fraught with danger throughout history, so where would you draw the line? If not, how would you explain why it’s still good to marry and bear children even in the face of severe trials? Sing or pray Psalter #298.

January 29 Read Jeremiah 17

During Bible times, business transactions were often done at the gate of the city. In Ruth 4, Boaz met the nearest kinsman at the gate to take on the responsibility of marrying Ruth. Parents were commanded to bring a rebellious son to the city gate so the elders could pass judgment, as we read in Deuteronomy 21:18–21. Finally, David gave instructions to his troops from the city gate (2 Sam. 18:1–5).

Jeremiah 17:27 forbids doing business on the Sabbath day by relating it to the city gates. Here, we read that if the people enter into the gates on the Sabbath day that God will destroy the city with fire. This pronouncement of harsh judgment shows how much God abhors those who break his sabbath day.

In what ways are we in danger of “entering in at the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day?” For the most part, we know enough to stay away from outright business on Sunday, but there’s always the temptation just to answer those couple emails or daydream about that big project when we should be listening to God speak to us. What other ways do you think we can break this commandment? Sing or pray Psalter #349.

January 30 Read Jeremiah 18

In the first six verses of this chapter, Jeremiah is told to go to the potter’s house. He watches the potter take a vessel off the wheel that didn’t turn out right. When the potter saw this, he put the vessel back on the wheel and fashioned it the way he wanted. God explained to Jeremiah that he is the potter and his people are the clay. He is in complete control and can mold his people any way he wishes.

This made me think about the importance of visual illustrations. God could have just told Jeremiah that he was in control of his people, but using the physical example of the potter made it much more real and memorable. The same is true in parenting and teaching. When we give real-life examples in our teaching, it tends to make a stronger impression. As we are currently studying in Bible class, Jesus himself did this with all his parables. Again and again, he used earthly examples to illustrate heavenly truths. Sing or pray Psalter #347.

January 31 Read Jeremiah 19

Eating one’s own children must be the most disgusting of all sins. Jeremiah 19:9 says the Jews would do this as part of their judgment, demonstrating how their fall was utterly complete. This stomach-churning act is threatened in Leviticus 26:29 and Deuteronomy 28:53 and said to have occurred when Jerusalem was defeated by the Chaldeans (Lam. 4:10). We all know the story of this during the Syrian siege of Samaria, as recounted in 2 Kings 6:26–29. The king is walking despairingly along the wall and a woman calls up to him. She says she and a friend agreed to eat their children. They had eaten her son yesterday, but now the friend hid her child and wouldn’t give it up. Calvin points to an account of Josephus, a Romano-Jewish scholar and historian, where cannibalism by Mary of Bethzuba was witnessed during the final defeat of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. The Roman soldiers found Mary after she’d killed her son and eaten half. When they discovered what she had done she tried to appease them by offering them a share. These stories show just how severe God’s judgment comes upon his people who rejected him. Sing or pray Psalter #331.

February 1 Read Jeremiah 20

How could verses 13 and 14 of this chapter possibly follow one another? The prophet is praising God for delivering his people, and then he’s suddenly cursing the day he was born and the man who brought the message. Calvin explains that Jeremiah isn’t being inconsistent here, but instead is demonstrating the depths he was delivered from, thus fitting with the theme of thanksgiving in verse 13. Not only was Jeremiah fighting against the enemies around him, but he was fighting an inward battle as well. Calvin says it was a serious sin for Jeremiah to speak this way, but that the source of his zeal was right, because he was greatly troubled at the people’s rejection of God’s word. Job also cursed the day he was born when he was in the depths of his afflictions in Job 3. Matthew Henry draws from Psalm 39:1–2 when he advises, “When the heart is hot, let the tongue be bridled.” I think that’s something we can all work
**February 2** Read Jeremiah 21

This chapter and the one before it both speak about Pashur who opposed Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 20, Pashur, the son of Immer, smote Jeremiah and put him in the stocks when he heard his prophecies of impending judgment. When he took the prophet out of the stocks the next day, Jeremiah told him his name would now be Magormissabib, meaning “terror on every side,” as he and his house would be carried away captive to Babylon and die there.

At first, I had assumed the Pashur of Jeremiah 21 was the same person, but this Pashur is the son of Melchiah. He was one of the chief priests in the temple court during the reign of Zedekiah, and the king sent him with others to Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord when Nebuchadnezzar was planning his attack on Jerusalem. Later, in Jeremiah 38, Gedaliah the son of Pashur (probably this one), was one of those who advised Zedekiah to kill Jeremiah for his supposed hate speech against the nation. This led to Jeremiah being thrown into a miry pit. No doubt, Jeremiah received much persecution at the hands of these wicked men. *Sing or pray Psalter #327.*

**February 3** Read Jeremiah 22

In verse 13, the people are rebuked for taking advantage of each other and not loving their neighbor as themselves. It reads, “Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbour’s service without wages, and giveth him not for his work.” As Calvin puts it, those in authority “employed their neighbors, as though they were slaves, in building houses and palaces, for they denied them their wages. But nothing can be more cruel than to deprive the poor of the fruit of their labor, who from their labor derive their daily support.”

In his explanation of this verse, Calvin says that the Jews were treating their neighbors like slaves. This leads into a discussion on the interesting topic of slavery. Slavery is referred to often in the Old Testament, so why would Calvin rebuke them for it here? Can slavery still be done properly today? How about the slavery that existed in our own country before the Civil War? Can slavery then and now be a part of our society without breaking Jeremiah’s command to care for the neighbor? *Sing or pray Psalter #323.*

**February 4** Read Jeremiah 23

Jeremiah 23:5–6 give us the promise of Christ’s coming. We are told that Christ will come as a “righteous Branch” out of David to rule the earth, execute judgment, and save his people. As verse 6 ends, Christ’s name will be “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” Calvin explains that Jeremiah and the other prophets mentioned Christ whenever they sought to encourage the remnant in a time of great wickedness. The remnant need not despair, because in Christ the promises were sure.

We just had a sermon on Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” It was brought out that the passage doesn’t say, “through Christ which has strengthened me.” That wording would distance us from Christ. The image is not of Christ handing us all the strength we need at the beginning of our life, but of Christ who we are joined to and from whom strength flows into us for each trial as it comes. When we have the confidence that we are in Christ, then we have nothing to fear, for we know his promises are sure. *Sing or pray Psalter #317.*

**February 5** Read Jeremiah 24

Two things stood out to me as I read this short chapter. First, we see here again how God uses simple analogies in teaching us. As we are currently studying in Bible class, throughout his ministry Jesus used parable analogies to teach his people things about the kingdom of heaven. In this chapter, the good figs represent those who were already taken into captivity, and the bad figs represent those still in Judea. God could have just told Jeremiah that his people were with the group in captivity, but using this imagery made the teaching more effective.

Second, in verse 5, God says that he sent the remnant into captivity for their good. As Matthew Henry puts it, this is a great example of how “the same providence which to some is a savour of death unto death may by the grace and blessing of God be made to others a savour of life unto life.” This affliction was very difficult for God’s people, to be sure, but it purified and strengthened them until they were ready to return to the promised land once again. Similarly, the trials God places in our lives prepare us for our place in heaven. *Sing or pray Psalter #302.*

**February 6** Read Jeremiah 25

As we discussed earlier in the book, Jeremiah speaks
judgment against nations surrounding Israel and Judah as well. Egypt is mentioned first in this chapter, as Israel had looked for deliverance from them when Assyria threatened. Then, other nations are brought in, showing that God is in complete control and will always judge sin. Verse 21 mentions the nations of Esau and Lot: Edom, Moab, and Ammon. Following are nations who had come to Judea in ships. Verse 22 begins, “And all the kings of Tyrus,” indicating that the judgment could come at any time and was not directed towards just one king. After mention of some other surrounding nations, verse 26 says that God would use the Chaldeans to bring these judgments, which Calvin says is seen from the phrase, “and the king of Sheshach shall drink after them.” Although God will use Babylon to bring these judgments upon the nations, they will experience God’s wrath after they have completed his purpose for them. God always uses the wicked world for his purpose and brings his just judgment upon them when the cup of their iniquity is filled.

Sing or pray Psalter #206.

February 7 Read Jeremiah 26

At the end of this chapter, the priests and false prophets rise up against Jeremiah, demanding he be put to death. As they said, Jeremiah had spoken of the temple’s destruction, and hadn’t God decreed he would dwell in the temple forever (Ps. 132:14)? These false teachers claimed none of the other prophets spoke like that, so why should Jeremiah be allowed to continue?

These words prompted the elders and common people to come to Jeremiah’s defense. They gave the example of the prophet Micah during the reign of Hezekiah, who spoke words similar to Jeremiah and was spared.

Next, the example of the prophet Urijah is included. There is disagreement about whether this example is given by the elders or the false prophets. Calvin says that both arguments have their merits, but he believes the elders are still talking here. As he sees it, the elders are imploring the false prophets to put an end to the cruelty before the judgment of God comes upon them. Read that section again. Who do you think gives the Urijah example? Whatever the case might be, Jeremiah was spared to continue his work.

Sing or pray Psalter #207.

Bryce Kooienga

UPDATE FROM THE FEDERATION BOARD

Greetings from the Federation Board! As the executive board, it is our duty to keep you informed on what we are doing and what we plan to do this year. This also serves as a great reminder of who the Fed Board members are.

Each member is nominated by the previous board and elected by the delegates from the Young People’s societies at the annual young people’s convention. The new members on the Fed Board this year are Austin Brower (Vice-President), Aaron Van Dyke (Vice-Treasurer), Kara Zwak (Vice-Secretary), and Prof. Gritters (Spiritual Advisor). We are thankful the Lord has provided wise and capable members to serve the church and the young people in this way. A special thank you to the retiring members: Brandon Kaptain, Daniel Gritters, Katie Van Overloop, and Rev. Van Overloop.

The duty of the Fed Board is to serve the young people, and we do this in several ways. The Board oversees the work done in planning the upcoming Young People’s Convention. We also oversee three committees that serve the young people of our denomination in special ways: Beacon Lights, the Protestant Reformed Scholarship Committee, and the Young Calvinists. These are hardworking groups that enjoy coordinating events, writing and reading articles, and making decisions to benefit the young people. Each year, we also collect dues from the Young People’s societies. These dues help fund Beacon Lights, PR Scholarship Committee and help reduce the convention cost. We are also in charge of planning two mass meetings each year (Thanksgiving and Easter) and the annual pre-convention singspiration.

A thank you goes to the Iowa area churches (Doon, Hull, Calvary, Sioux Falls, and Edgerton)
for the work they did to host the 2018 convention. We are thankful for the spiritually edifying week that they planned. We look forward to working with Southwest PRC and Providence PRC in the planning of the 2019 convention, which will be held in Hillsdale, Michigan, the Lord willing.

The Fed Board takes our work seriously to serve the young people. We encourage you, young people, to continue to actively be a part of the young people’s society so you may grow in your spiritual life and grow closer to fellow believers. We ask that you pray for the Fed Board in this upcoming year’s work. We are thankful for the Lord’s blessings of wisdom and guidance in our work.

From the Pastor’s Study Rev. Jonathan Mahtani

THE GRAY AREAS OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

In my last article, I defined and explained the main teaching of Scripture concerning Christian liberty. Contrary to popular opinion even among conservative Christians, true freedom as defined by the Bible is not the right to do whatever we please. Rather, it is the rescued condition of the believer from Satan’s bondage of selfish sin, pride, and guilt unto the sweet, selfless service of Christ. It is important that we keep this main idea in our minds, even as we consider a slightly different aspect of Christian liberty in this article.

As one of its sub-topics, Christian liberty includes what the Reformers like John Calvin called “adiaphora.” Although not the main idea of Christian liberty, Scripture does speak about certain gray areas in the Christian’s life—activities that of themselves are not (or are no longer) explicitly forbidden. God gave specific prohibitions in the Old Testament ceremonial and civil laws which believers today are not bound to. Along with that, God has also freed his people from all man-made rules added to Scripture’s moral code and imposed painfully upon the conscience. We are not required to obey such rules of “touch not; taste not; handle not” (Col. 2:21). Paul rather emphasizes, “For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:4–5). Rare steaks, a glass of wine, clothing manufactured with today’s fashions, different music genres, smartphones, sports played and watched, many useful products and entertaining technologies of our culture are not evil of themselves, but parts of God’s creation that we may enjoy.

However, while God does not forbid them, neither does he allow our hasty indulgence in all things. In fact, he has set principles to guide our enjoyment of pleasures on this earth. Too often, Christians claim their liberty and rashly gratify their desires, forgetting or ignoring Scripture’s teachings. John Calvin warns, “The moment any mention is made of Christian liberty lust begins to boil, or insane commotions arise, if a speedy restraint is not laid on those licentious spirits by whom the best things are perverted into the worst.” Andrew Fausset comments along the same lines: “More are ruined by the unlawful use of lawful things than even by things absolutely unlawful.” We must carefully guard our hearts as we engage in any gray areas of Christian liberty.

Below are six questions based on Scriptural principles that you and I must ask ourselves honestly before engaging in any perceived liberty. Before I drink a beer, smoke a cigarette, watch a show, play a video game, view/send/post content on social media, listen to that popular song, kiss my significant other, wear that outfit, attend that concert or party, beg for candy on Reformation Day, engage in a controversial activity on the Sabbath, or buy an unnecessary luxury, I should be thinking carefully about these biblically based questions.

First, we should ask, “Am I sure God’s moral law does not address this?” While we do not have

1 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendriksen Publishers, 2008), 549. Calvin has more worthwhile things to say on the topic of Christian Liberty in Book Three, Chapter 19 of his Institutes.

to obey the ceremonial and civil laws of Israel, God continues strictly to require our obedience to his ten commandments found in Exodus 20 out of thankful love. Many activities that confessing Christians claim as liberties are actually contrary to the Decalogue! For example, lustful behavior while dating, underage drinking, doing business on the Lord’s Day, “a bad habit” of smoking immoderately, and many more actions often claimed to be Christian liberties are not gray areas but are actually black areas clearly against the law of God. Our naturally deceptive hearts are skilled at obscuring God’s law and inner passions to excuse the sin we crave. Thus it is important that we reevaluate whether what we quickly construe to be a Christian liberty is not restricted by God’s law.

Secondly, we should ask, “Is my goal really God’s glory?” “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Doing everything for God’s glory must not become a mindless cliché as many have made it. To glorify God means much more than merely looking and sounding like a moral person while playing sports or shopping for clothes. It means that our hearts sincerely desire God’s good reputation, far above our winning. It means that our souls yearn for Jesus’ beauty reflected, far above our attractiveness. It means that we want God’s righteousness, love, justice, truth, and every virtue of his to be magnified even if it makes us small in the sight of others. “For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:20). Out of gratitude for so great a Savior, our utmost desire must be his highest honor. If his glory is not our heart’s goal, then as much as we claim something to be our liberty, so much is it sin. Is “hallowed be thy name” your heart’s prayer as you enjoy life’s blessings?

Third, we should ask, “Will this help or hinder the cause of Christ’s church and kingdom?” Too low on our priority list as we indulge in our liberties is Christ’s kingdom. Yet Jesus clearly exhorts us, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God” (Matt. 6:33). We often think that Christ’s church and kingdom work are totally unrelated to liberties we take for fun. But music choices, what we wear to the beach, time spent gaming—each and every action, private or public, is either going to serve his church or hinder his kingdom. How we enjoy our liberties will affect the witness of our churches and the peace of our congregations. There are times, therefore, that we must practice self-denial, even refraining from things lawful for the good of Christ’s church and kingdom. “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 14:17).

Notice that the first three questions parallel the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. If we cannot pray while we enjoy any liberty, we must seriously re-think our participation in any activity. Now we take a look at the next three yet more specific questions.

Fourth, we ought to ask, “How is this affecting my own spiritual and physical welfare?” “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). In discussing Christian liberty, Paul explains that while many kinds of food, drink, and things of this earth are permitted by secular laws and God’s laws, we are not to conclude that all these things will help us spiritually and physically. In fact, many things immoderately received can easily become powerful idols under which we become addicted. Alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana might be legal at my age and in my state, but are such addictive substances good for my spiritual and physical condition? Is my conscience clear as I obtain such things, so that I am “holding faith, and a good conscience; which am “holding faith, and a good conscience; which is “hallowed be thy name” your heart’s prayer as you enjoy life’s blessings?

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But it is not only my own welfare that I should be concerned about. Fifth, we ought to ask, “How will this affect my brother or sister in Christ?” This is the focus of Paul when he discusses Christian liberty in passages like Romans 13–14, 1 Corinthians 6, 8, and 10, and Galatians 5. Will my unnecessary enjoyment of (fill in the blank) edify our brother/sister, or will it offend and be a stumbling-block? Especially think about those younger than you in your family, church, and school who unknowst to you admire you. Is my example helping them towards the path of righteousness or leading them astray? Before we flaunt our freedoms, let us take Jesus’ words seriously: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6). What is my witness like before
the church and before the world?

Finally, we ought to ask before we enjoy a perceived liberty, “With whom does this bring me into fellowship?” “What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14b). Paul warns the members of the church not to partake of lawful food and drink while in fellowship with the ungodly. Too many young people blindly excuse their participation in lawful activities without observing the company they are in. Who are you hanging out with and laughing with as you are enjoying lawful activities? You yourself might not be doing anything wrong as such, but your fellowship with the ungodly (even church-goers whose behavior mimics the world) condones their behavior. “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33).

Far too often, young people view Christian liberty as license to do anything in the realm of gray areas.

I remember having this erroneous perspective as a teenager, and it is with great regret and sorrow that I now cry with the Psalmist, “Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy mercy remember thou me for thy goodness’ sake, O Lord” (Psa. 25:7). From my heart I earnestly plead with you: As we live in a world multiplying many lawful things, let us be faithful in honest self-examination before we enjoy our freedoms. Let us, freed from the selfishness of Satan’s bondage, live as selfless servants of our Lord. And in doing so, let us never imagine self as better than others or contributing to our salvation, but always conclude, “We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do” (Luke 17:10).

Rev. Mahtani is the pastor of Cornerstone Protestant Reformed Church in Crete, Illinois.

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Church News Melinda Bleyenberg

**BAPTISMS**

“Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” Mark 10:14

The sacrament of holy baptism was administered to:

Rowan Lee, son of Mr. & Mrs. Ryan & Hannah Gritters—Byron Center, MI

Anna Kate, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Rick & Carmen Mingerink—Byron Center, MI

Alex Jacob, son of Mr. & Mrs. Tim & Pam Boverhof—Byron Center, MI

Asa Todd, son of Mr. & Mrs. John & Ashley Cleveland—Byron Center, MI

Connor Matthew, son of Mr. & Mrs. Matt & Leah Ferguson—Edmonton, Alberta, CAN

Mason James, son of Mr. & Mrs. Scott & Rose Ferguson—Edmonton, Alberta, CAN

Tessa Eileen, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Blake & Lindsey Wierenga—Georgetown, MI

Samantha Grace, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Brian & Jessica Kammenga—Georgetown, MI

Jensyn Eileen, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. David & Alexa Wassink—Georgetown, MI

Josiah Matthew, son of Mr. & Mrs. Jason & Jill Holstege—Hudsonville, MI

Shaya Grace, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Jason & Alyssa Butler—Hudsonville, MI

Jackson Scott, son of Mr. & Mrs. Scott & Jori Van Putten—Hudsonville, MI

Lila Ann, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Troy & Mandy Vanden Bosch—Lynden, WA

Emmeline Louise, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Tim & Liz Thompson—Southeast, MI

Allie Nicole, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Kevin & Amy Kuiper—Southwest, MI

Gale Owen, son of Mr. & Mrs. Matt & Kim Kuiper—Southwest, MI

Warren Grant, son of Mr. & Mrs. Tony & Laura VanDonselaar—Southwest, MI

**CONFESSIONS OF FAITH**

“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.” Matthew 10:32

Public confession of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ was made by:

Caitlin DeVries, Caleb Rutgers—Hope, MI

Collin Dykstra, Quenton Griess, Ethan Kamps, Caleb King, David King, Ryan Kuiper, Jordan Vink and Nelson Vink—Trinity, MI

**MARRIAGES**

“For this God is our God forever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.” Psalm 48:14

Mr. Nick Ikerd and Miss Jessica Holstege—Georgetown, MI

Mr. Kyle Schut and Miss Frances Holt—Hudsonville, MI

Mr. Aaron Freeman and Miss Nicole Westing—Hudsonville, MI

Mr. Jake Schwarz and Miss Jessica Bleyenberg—Loveland, CO
TREES OF THE BIBLE (2) CEDARS OF LEBANON

One of the trees mentioned often in the Bible is the cedar of Lebanon. Cedar is a very versatile type of wood. It is very resistant to rot and is strong for use in building.

The particular type of cedar that is called the cedar of Lebanon only grows in what is today Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. It can grow to be over a hundred feet tall and up to eight feet in diameter. That means it is a very majestic looking tree. Tall and broad with many huge branches spreading wide across the sky. This tree could withstand winds and storms and wouldn’t easily be knocked over. Yet the Bible says that God’s strength is stronger than this cedar. He can break the cedars (Ps. 29:5).

In ancient times, cedar wood was traded between countries all over the Mediterranean as far away as Egypt. The ancient Egyptians used the cedars for building ceremonial and sacred barges. The Bible mentions in 1 King 5 how King Hiram of Tyre traded cedar wood with both David and Solomon, and that wood was used for building the temple. Nations valued this wood, and it was expensive, like gold or precious stones. In the Old Testament (Jer. 22) when God says that he will break the cedars as part of his judgment, this means that God will destroy something expensive and important to that nation.

God also uses the cedars of Lebanon as a picture of his people. Psalm 92:12 compares how God plants the cedars and causes it to grow, so his people are planted by God in his house and will grow when nourished by his word.

Stand tall like a cedar of Lebanon. God has planted you by the rivers of living water, and because he has chosen you, you will not be moved or broken. Instead, you will grow like a majestic tree since you have been given the majesty of Jesus Christ.

Across
2. Cedars can grow to be ________ feet in diameter
4. God’s people are like ____________ of Lebanon
5. Cedars can grow to be a hundred feet ________

Down
1. The Cedars of ____________
3. Cedars of Lebanon were used by Solomon to build the ____________

Tricia is a member of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church in Byron Center, Michigan.
SOUTHWEST PRC & PROVIDENCE PRC
YOUNG PEOPLE’S CONVENTION 2019

WATCHING
- AND -
WAITING

AS IN THE DAYS OF NOAH

“AND AS IT WAS IN THE DAYS OF NOAH,
SO SHALL IT BE ALSO IN THE
DAYS OF THE SON OF MAN.”
-LUKE 17:26

AUGUST 12 - 16

CAMP MICHINDOH - HILLSDALE, MI