

Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

Have you heard these? *What did the optimist say when he jumped off a building? So far so good.*

An optimist is a person, who keeps his car's motor running...while his wife goes shopping.

So, what did the optimist say after losing control on the left half of his body? I'm all-right.

An optimist thinks that the world he's living in is the best possible one. A pessimist is afraid that's really true.

The optimist says: "My cup runs over, what a blessing!" The pessimist says: "My cup runs over: what a mess!"

Our passage today is very short, three verses. The verses themselves are short. They're often overlooked because they're sandwiched between two passages that are very well known. Please turn in your Bible to Ephesians 5:15-17 (p. 978). Before we dig in, let me say that I believe that a Christian with a biblical worldview must be optimistic. *Why?*

1.A Christian is an optimist because we know that God is in control.

I often think about the early church and the culture in which it not only survived, but thrived. Most early Christians lived within the bounds of the Roman empire where there were horrible persecutions. It was literally a national sport to throw Christians to the lions as cheering crowds watched them be ripped apart. Roman roads were lined with crosses on which Christians hung because they wouldn't denounce Christ.

Not only was abortion acceptable, a father could kill his child at any age. All kinds of debauchery were completely accepted and practiced openly. The government was totally hostile toward Christianity and anyone who was a Christ follower. Yet, it was during this time of great opposition that the Church grew and flourished more than at any other time in Church History. They didn't expect the world to like them or be friendly to them and their values — and neither should we.

The movement of the Spirit of God is an unstoppable force. It doesn't matter how much opposition there is, God is sovereign. God is in control. He is King and will have His way. Some foolishly suggest that we need to have a "Christian" government for Christianity to thrive. How silly! It's just not true, as history proves. The places in the world today where the Christianity is spreading most rapidly are in countries where persecution is often the most extreme. It's disturbing when prominent Christian leaders make foolish statements about legislation or who is in power like, "If this fails, Christianity will fail." Nothing could be more absurd.

During 2019 I'm reading the Bible through again. The other day I read Psalm 2: *"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then He will speak to them in His wrath, and terrify them in His fury..." (Psalm 2:1-5).* It's as if God is saying, "Go ahead and rebel, and see if it makes any difference. You're pursuing madness. You're hitting your head against a brick wall and will end up destroying yourself." God is in control no matter how things look.

God doesn't owe America anything. There's no promise that our country will always be prosperous or safe, or that our government will always be tolerant of Christianity or those who practice it.

It does mean though that God is control of history. God will have the final word. That's our hope and confidence. *"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging"* (Ps. 46:1-3).

Or as the writer of Hebrews reminds us: *"God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"* (Hebrews 13:5-6).

I'm not sure what a person does without God. What would keep you positive in a world filled with conflict and trouble if you didn't know Jesus? Where would you go for strength and hope? We have the faith that says, *"Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Phil. 1:6).

We believe in a God who created the world and everything in it. We believe that He's given us His Word to show us how to live. We know that He loves and cares for us. We know that God the Father sent His Son into the world to save the world and that we have a returning Savior who will claim the world as His own, set up His righteous kingdom and invite us to rule with Him. We're confident that we have a Home in eternal glory. We believe that the God who began the world will also end the world and will punish those who are evil and reward the righteous. One day God will right every wrong. Jesus said, *"I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

2. How should we live in times like these? We don't have a crystal ball to predict what will happen in 6 weeks, 6 months or 6 years from now. The secret things belong to the Lord. Even on a small scale, we can't predict what will happen when the stock market opens tomorrow morning. Or even when or where the next war will break out. So, how are we to live in times like these?

Let's go back to Ephesians 5. Our text offers us three answers, each one filled with clear direction for the days to come. We face a strange situation in the world today, a seeming contradiction. Things are getting worse. Yet, there are great opportunities like never before for God's people. Can a believer really be an optimist? God's Word gives us the answer. Let's see how Scripture helps us answer those questions.

a. Watch your step. *"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise"* (5:15). To *"look carefully"* means literally to walk accurately or precisely. The King James used the old word *"circumspectly."* That's the idea of walking on a narrow path along the side of a steep mountain. Keep your eyes open lest you take a wrong step and plunge to your death.

Most often we trip not in the headlong pursuit of evil, but in our headlong pursuit of good. Sometimes we're guilty of living too fast. We make too many snap judgments, too many hasty decisions. We speak too fast, move too fast, react too fast. We answer before we hear the question and just keep on pressing the throttle of life forward because we've got too much on our plate and we dare not slow down.

It's even possible in the name of God to go too fast. We want to right the wrongs of the world too fast or try to win the world too fast. Because we speak too quickly, our words are hasty and ill-timed. We go before we're ready, speak before we have anything to say, teach before we're taught and build high before we build deep.

What happens when you hurry, hurry, hurry? You don't watch where you're going and you trip and fall. Most often we trip not in headlong pursuit of evil but in our headlong pursuit of good.

The answer isn't in downloading a new app or getting more organized, but in the ancient words of the Psalmist. *"Be still and know that I am God"* (46:10). When we slow down and get God involved, we discover that He can do more through us than we'll ever accomplish on our own.

b. Use the time wisely. *"Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil"* (5:16). Billy Graham (**picture**) was once asked what he was most surprised by in life. He answered, *"Its brevity."*

The original language of the New Testament, the Greek language, has two basic words for *time*. One refers to the passage of time in the sense that we talk about hours, minutes and second. "What time is it?" "It's 6:22 PM. We're leaving in eight minutes." That's one sort of time.

The other word refers not to the strict passage of time, but to the moment of opportunity that requires action. It's what Martin Luther King Jr. (**picture**) meant when he told the vast crowd gathered at the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. on that hot August day in 1963, *"We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now."* It's that phrase – the fierce urgency of now.

But that's not all. Paul says there is a particular reason we must *"use the time"* and grasp *"the fierce urgency of now."*

Check out that little phrase at the end of verse 16. *"Because the days are evil."* Here's another translation. *"These are desperate times!"* (The Message). Those of us living today have nothing on the ancient world. The Apostle Paul wrote these words while chained to a guard in a Roman jail. The emperor was a man by the name of Nero (**picture**), a perverse excuse for a king. Before too long Nero would set fire to Rome and blame Christians. Later he'd order for Paul to be beheaded.

Ephesus was a city wholly given over to paganism. It was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia. Located near the coast, Ephesus served as a center for international commerce. It was a prosperous, bustling, booming city. If there had been a Fodor's Guide to Ephesus in the 1st century, it'd have mentioned the famous Temple of Artemis (**picture**). That was the glory of ancient Ephesus. Artemis was called Diana by the Romans, but they referred to the same thing.

Artemis was the goddess of sex. Her temple was considered one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. The central portion contained a statue of a woman with many breasts, symbolizing unfettered sexual freedom.

When it comes to perversity, the ancient world is way ahead of us. People worked themselves up into a religious frenzy and then followed their perverted desires. One ancient writer said of the Ephesians, *"Their morals were lower than animals."* Astrology and sorcery joined with perversion produced a degraded form of idolatry.

Meanwhile clouds of persecution were rolling in on the horizon. As the gospel spread, it encountered opposition in the form of entrenched interests that saw Christ's followers as a threat. The crosscurrents of heresy threatened to undermine the purity of the gospel. It's what Paul meant when he said, *"These are desperate times!"* What would he say today?

Evil days tempt us to despair and encourage us to give up, saying, *"We can't do it"* because the day is dark, the hearts of men have grown cold, and there's nothing to be done.

By God's grace, I refuse to think like that. We tend to give up too soon. G. Campbell Morgan (**picture**) insightfully said, "*Days of moral corruption offer special opportunities for the prosecution of great enterprises for the kingdom of God.*" That's good news. The things that make it difficult for us to live as Christians are the things that also make us shine. Tough times are blessings in disguise. Days of moral compromise offer incredible opportunities for the gospel. When the world around us is going nuts, we have wonderful opportunities to display the life-changing power of Christ. The darker the night, the brighter the light shines.

Here are a few of the opportunities that God brings our way. If you're wise, you'll grab them...

Bible intake—Read your Bible each day. Listen to the Bible on your smart phone while you drive. Study the Word in a more in-depth fashion. Take advantage of the many fine Bible teachers on the Internet. Plug into one of our adult Grace Groups or one of the ones that meets every other week during a weeknight. The opportunities are abundant!

Prayer—Pray with your mate. Join us for one of our nights during our Prayer Emphasis week. Form your own small group for prayer. Pray through our church directory. Pray for your church leaders.

Read good Christian books—Set a reading goal. During our Luke study, we've suggested many books to help you expand your thinking on the message. There are countless good Christian books. If you're currently reading no books per year, set a goal of 2 or 3. If you meet that goal, up it to 5 or 6. If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it. Aim at growing through reading.

Discipleship—Take a newer believer under your wing and help him or her grow to maturity. Help teach or serve in a children's group or ministry. It will stretch you to grow!

Evangelism—Be ready to give a defense for the hope that is in you (1 Pet. 3:15). Read books or watch videos on how to share your faith.

Sharing material blessings—If you are not consistently, faithfully giving, you're not being a faithful manager of what God has given you and you're not storing up treasure in heaven. You should give enough so that it crimps your lifestyle, where you have to ask God to provide the extras for you.

Help others in practical ways—Take cookies to a new neighbor or a meal to a family when someone is in the hospital. Help an elderly person with yard cleanup or a ride. Make a dessert for our newcomer ministry.

Victory over sin—You'll face strong temptations to sin, which can either be a time of testing your faith, where you grow through victory; or a time of defeat. Be prepared, be armed, and grow through the testing.

Suffering—Suffering is an opportunity for growth and ministry. As you trust Christ more and depend on His grace through your trials, other believers are strengthened. Those who don't know the Lord will be drawn to Him.

c. Determine to do God's will. "*Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is*" (5:17). Have you ever watched the video of Martin Luther King Jr's final speech, the one he gave in Memphis on April 3, 1968, the day before he was assassinated. If you read it in its context, it's a remarkably hopeful message, given the pressure of those momentous days. But because we know what happened the next day, we tend to miss the optimistic tone. Though you can sense the unrelenting pressure of opposition and death threats, underneath there's hope.

Dr. King frames the whole message this way. Suppose God were to come to him and ask this question, "*Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?*" He goes on to survey all of human history, starting with Egypt, going on to Greece and Rome, then skipping the centuries to the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, then on to the days of Abraham Lincoln, then on to the very troubled times of 1968 when the whole fabric of the nation seemed about to unravel. Here is his imagined answer to the Almighty's imagined question:

Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy. Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.

He goes on to talk about what it means to live at such a crucial moment of history and applies it to the situation with the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis. As I read it, I could feel the power building to that final climax, the one where Dr. King utters words both poignant and prophetic:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

A thousand years from now, we'll still remember those words. I'm struck by this simple sentence in his final paragraph: "*I just want to do God's will.*" Those seven words summarize how we all ought to face the future, understanding the fierce urgency of now, grateful for the privilege of being alive for such a time as this, wherever God has placed us.

The final question is: *Are you an optimist or a pessimist?* Both, but mostly an optimist because I know that my loving Heavenly Father is in control of the circumstances of my life and this world. Sometimes the answer depends on where you are at the moment.

It's like being in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified. On Friday, pessimism reigned. But on Sunday, as the truth slowly dawned that the Lord had risen from the dead, as that one great truth broke through, as they began to believe the best good news anyone would ever hear, sorrow turned to joy, grief turned to laughter and despair gave way to hope. You and I need to remember that we live on this side of the empty tomb!

So, Christians are both pessimists and optimists, but we must be much more optimistic. Though we see what's happening in the world around us, we know that Jesus Christ conquered death and the grave. Because He lives, we too will live. While I wonder what the future holds in the short term, I know what it holds in the long term...and that makes me ultimately a biblical optimist. Jesus is coming back!

These are great days to be alive. Exciting days. Amazing days. Uncertain days. Frightening days. All those things are true at the same time. When we see evil advancing, remember what Jesus said. *"Let not your heart be troubled."* (John 14:1 KJV).

It's hard to believe that He's been gone nearly ten years. I miss him. But noted radio personality, Paul Harvey (**picture**) once said, *"In times like these, it helps to recall that there have always been times like these."* He was right. There have always been times like these. No matter what happens today, God's promises are true and will still be true tomorrow.

Conclusion: Think about this, as believers, we will outlive this world. We have joy because we know that this world is not all there is. When this world is over, we'll still be alive in the Kingdom of God. There's more to come. The Bible says, *"The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever"* (1 John 2:17). The Lord has said to us: *"For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"* (Jeremiah 29:11). God has promised us a hope and a future. Pity the poor person who doesn't have that eternal perspective.

Some of you may remember the name of professional ballplayer and pitcher, Donnie Moore (**picture**). Donnie Moore couldn't get over losing an American League championship series game. In a moment of total torment, he shot his wife and then shot himself.

But compare that with Christian ballplayer Dave Dravecky (**picture**). Dravecky not only lost a game but his career. After he gained national recognition as a pitcher for the San Francisco Giants, his pitching arm and part of his shoulder had to be removed because of soft tissue cancer. He and his wife Jan were committed Christians when this happened. They initially went through a dark time, but ultimately rebuilt their lives and helping others to do the same. It's the difference between someone who knows they have a future no matter what, and someone who doesn't.

Let me close with this. During World War II, W. E. Sangster (**picture**) pastored in London and was the leader of British Methodists. Every night people came to the church to sleep in its fortified basement during Nazi air raids. Every Sunday 3000 souls would fill the church to hear Sangster preach. The air raid shelter was at capacity, so Sangster and his family slept in the men's bathroom on the 1st floor of the church. His reputation spread overseas and he was invited to lecture in the United States.

But while he was in Texas lecturing, he began to have trouble swallowing and walking. He was eventually diagnosed with what was at that time called muscular atrophy. Near the end of his life, he was barely able to lift a finger. But after his diagnosis, he threw himself into his work. "I'm only in the kindergarten of suffering," he told people who pitied him.

Gradually, Sangster's legs became useless. His voice went completely. But he could still hold a pen, even though his hand shook badly. On Easter morning, just a few weeks before he died, he wrote a letter to his daughter. In it, he said, *"It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice to shout, 'He is risen' — but it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout."*

That's what it's like to have an eternal perspective of life. You're able to see beyond this temporary world. You understand what's important and what's not. You invest your life into the things that truly matter. So you, **Watch your step. Use the time wisely. Seek to do God's will every day.**

How can a believer be a pessimist when we're living in the greatest days of God's history? Who knows, we may be the generation that hears the trumpet call of God! Jesus may come back in our lifetime. He could come back today!

Because that's true, things will get better and worse at the same time. In any case, Christian friend, don't despair. *Carpe Deum.* Seize the day for God!