

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise,¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-20)

How Can We Escape?

My mother reads hundreds of books every year. But she only reads fiction. She's often said, "I read to escape." A pastor I know said something similar. He was talking about TV. He only watches comedies because after a long day of church issues and people's problems, he said, "I just want to laugh." Most entertainment helps us escape. Instead of thinking about your life, you can think about the characters on TV or in the novel you're reading. Their problems occupy your mind instead of your own for a little while.

Do you think that works? Obviously, it does to some degree. According to some statistics I found on the internet, the average American watches four hours of TV every day. Over 65 years, that would translate into nine years in front of the TV. When you add the hours reading novels or going to movies or playing video games, you get a pretty compelling argument for people escaping through these activities. But at best, those things are only a temporary respite. And sometimes, not even that. People who suffer from clinical depression often spend endless hours staring at the TV and it doesn't make them feel any better. There has to be a better solution. My friends, **how can we escape?** St. Paul tells us this morning.

I.

Why do we need to escape? Is life so hard that we need relief from its cares and worries? You know the answer is yes. Why is life so hard? That's a very important question. You can't solve a problem unless you understand what the real problem is. **How can we escape? We need to understand the days we live in.**

St. Paul says, "**Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.**" That's just as true today as it was the day he wrote these words. The days are evil. Last week, a 29 year old woman turned up who was kidnapped when she was 11. She's been held prisoner and sexually abused for 18 years. She has an 11 and a 15 year old daughter who had never seen a doctor or been to school. The days are evil. After eight years of fighting, one day last week was the deadliest day for U.S. forces in Afghanistan since the war began. The days are evil. I've made 50-plus hospital visits since the year began and many more visits on members who are too ill to come to church. The days are evil. And I haven't even mentioned the threats to our children from drugs or the financial realities facing our country or the spectacle that is Detroit politics.

Why are the days so evil? Evil has two meanings. In one sense everything we suffer is an evil. Disease is an evil we have to bear. Death and poverty, family problems and natural disasters are evils that plague this life. But usually we use the word evil in a more pointed sense: the devil is evil. Child molesters are evil. Bullying people who are weaker than you is evil. Both kinds of evil come from the same root: sin. When God created the world it was perfect. There was no evil of any kind. There were no child molesters or bullies. There were no diseases or natural disasters. Everything was perfect.

But Adam and Eve sinned. God gave them one simple command: don't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But the devil got them to think that this simple command was cruel. How could God deny them anything? They figured they'd be better off if they disobeyed. So they ate. When they did, they ruined everything. Sin entered their hearts. They became evil. Instead of loving God and running to him, they ran from him and hid. They began to lie and make excuses and blame all their problems on other people. Does sound familiar? We inherited the evil in their hearts. And as a result of their sin, God cursed the creation he had made. Every problem and disaster came.

Every generation faces suffering and sorrow and grief. Every time we think that we've solved the world's problems, new ones appear. We wipe out small pox and make polio and typhoid fever and malaria almost unknown in the United States and what happens? People die of AIDS and cancer and heart disease. We learn to produce more food at a better price than any society has ever seen and what happens? Obesity becomes

the number one health issue crushing our economy. You cannot wipe evil from this world. You can't eliminate disease and death. And you can't eliminate hatred and violence either.

The days are evil and it's our fault. We sin every day and we make our lives harder. The sin of the people around us torments us. And the sin that has broken God's world grinds on us. We Christians are not immune. God never promised us that we would be exempt from the sufferings that others face. But St. Paul is not writing to make us feel hopeless. He's being realistic so that he can remind us of God's solution to this horrible problem. The days are evil. But God is good. And he loves us. He has provided the solution to the evil we face. His solution is Christ. I was at Sunday school teachers meeting last week and one of the teachers was laughing about the fact that no matter what you ask, preschool kids think the answer is "Jesus!" It probably seems to you that I'm the same way. Well, you know what? The Bible says that from the lips of children and infants God has ordained praise. Jesus is the answer for every evil we face every day in our lives here.

Jesus is the answer to the evil I'm guilty of. He had no sin. He was the Son of God. But he took on real human flesh and he lived here. And because he was God, his perfect sinless life counts for us. It replaces the life of every sinner who's ever lived. And Jesus died for all I'm guilty of. He paid for my pride and my unwillingness to follow God and my excuses and blaming others. He paid for it all when those Roman soldiers nailed him to a cross and God the Father poured hell out on him. He paid for it all when he died. He rose to tell us it's all paid for. It's all gone. In God's eyes, our evil no longer exists. Jesus did that for all people everywhere.

Jesus is the answer to all the evils we face. When he returns, he's going to remove all evil from this world. We'll have a new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness. We will live forever in perfect joy in that new world. But the solution Jesus gives us isn't just for the life to come. Jesus is the answer now. He hears our prayers. We don't know how much suffering he has spared us simply because we asked him to. When he says "No" and makes us suffer something, he promises that he is working for our benefit in that hardship. He promises that he is going to turn every hurt and sorrow into spiritual gain. And most important of all, he is working in our hearts every time we hear the gospel to strengthen us and to comfort us and to carry us through the evils of this life. We face nothing alone! Jesus stands beside us in everything!

II.

St. Paul tells us not to be foolish in this sinful world, but rather to make the most of every opportunity. He tells us to understand what God's will is for us in this life while we wait for Jesus to reveal himself to the world. He's talking about the one true escape that God gives us. **How can we escape? We need to fill up on the Holy Spirit.**

There are other ways that people try to escape. Paul says, **"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."** Paul's warning against drunkenness does not mean it's a sin to drink alcohol. But it is a sin to get drunk. Why? Certainly, you can point to the destruction of your liver and your brain cells. You can point to the danger it presents when you drink and drive. But Paul points to something else: debauchery which is fancy word for sin. When I was in the army, we called it "beer goggles." The more you drank the better some members of the opposite sex looked. And guess where that led. A lot of bad behavior comes from drunkenness – I went to a wedding once in which the groom had a black eye because he got drunk the night before. We all know the stories about sleeping around, getting arrested, the list could go on and on.

Why do people get drunk? Often to escape. Many times, they're running from bad memories – an abusive childhood, or sins they've committed and the guilt they feel over whatever they've done. Other times, they're escaping their current lives. They hate their job, their marriage, their lack of a relationship – whatever. But there are other escapes which are just as bad as drinking or its twin drug abuse. How often don't we sit on the couch wolfing down potato chips or eating ice cream right out of the container because we're depressed? How much self-destructive behavior do we engage in because we're unhappy – like driving too fast or arguing with people who care about us or breaking things?

None of these things helps. In fact, they make things worse because they lead us to sin more and sinning never makes our lives better. Almost always, sinning more causes more evil to come into our lives. Certainly, it strengthens the sin in our hearts that fights against our faith. We Christians have another option. God never promised us a free pass but he did give us a weapon for fighting against the evil of this life. He promised us an escape from hurt and sorrow even while we have to live with hurt and sorrow. He gave us the gospel. That's

what Paul means when he tells us to fill up on the Holy Spirit. He's telling us to fill up on the good news that God loves us and that he has already conquered all that hurts us.

How do we do that? Paul says, "**Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.**" My friends, everything we do here is designed to reinforce the good news of Christ conquering all evil for you. When you don't sing the hymns, you cheat yourself and you cheat the people around you. Your voice lifted up in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs touches the hearts of those around you because those songs tell about Jesus. That gospel provides an escape from sadness and grief. It comforts the people you love even when hard times attack.

Paul says, "**Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" True praise is singing to God in gratitude for what he has done for us in Christ. Notice, you sing and make music in your heart. It doesn't have to be out loud to benefit you. Knowing and playing that music in your heart and mind turns your attention away from the things that hurt and toward the things that heal.

The gospel is the best medicine there is. The days are evil. But God's love is the one power in the universe that can enter our hearts and comfort them. It is the one power in the universe that can give us joy when we hurt. Christians do hurt and Christians do grieve. But joy is being glad that God has worked for us and that he has better things in store for us. Joy is seeing God's love even while I have to see the hurt and sorrow here. To put it in everyday terms, joy is what you feel when you go into the hospital because you have chest pains. It turns out to just be indigestion. But in the process of learning that, the doctor discovers there's a blood clot in your chest and if they don't remove it right away, you could die. So now, you have to have a scary procedure. But that procedure is a thousand times better than dropping dead at dinner the next night. You don't like going to the hospital. You don't like needing the procedure. You don't like filling out the paper work saying who's going to make decisions for you if something goes wrong. But you are glad – joyful – that God used indigestion to reveal something you didn't know was there waiting to kill you.

True Christian joy runs far deeper than that. It's knowing that Christ is there for you in all the hardships of life. One of the best ways to learn and to share that joy is singing. The great hymns of the faith recount Christ and his love for us. More people remember the gospel through their words than through any sermon I will ever preach. Learn those hymns. Sing them in your heart. Sing them to each other. Fill up on the Holy Spirit – which means hear the gospel, take communion, confess your sins and hear the good news that you are forgiven. That is God's escape from all that torments in this life. Amen.