

Successfully Navigating a Dangerous Path Ephesians 5:15-17

Last September, when the world was normal, Mindy and I visited Zion National Park where we saw some of the most breathtaking scenery we had ever beheld. Park rangers told us that if we wanted to get Zion's fullest, boldest experience we needed to hike Angel's Landing. We were also warned that it was not a hike for the faint of heart, a comment we took with a grain of salt. On our last full day in the Park we got an early start, and for the first couple of miles enjoyed a broad, smooth, meandering path that gently rose in elevation. We were holding hands, conversing on a variety of subjects, and pointing out features of the beautiful vistas in mid-stride. This is a piece of cake, I thought.

Pretty soon, however, we came to the base of some steep cliffs where the path abruptly turned into switchbacks carved into the solid rock. It wasn't long before I began to feel my age. After a couple of grueling hours, we made it to what we thought was the top. Little did we realize we had only reached the place where things *began* to get interesting. We discovered that in order to get to Angel's Landing we had to navigate a path on a narrow spine that, in some places, was only three or four feet wide. On either side of the ridge it dropped straight down for 1,500 feet. We also discovered that there were some precarious stretches on that path that required the use of both hands and feet, that required us to consider carefully what we would hold onto, how we would shift our weight, or where we would plant our feet for the next step.

When we came to these particular places Mindy and I were no longer holding hands, or conversing, or commenting on the magnificent beauty around us. Our senses were on high alert, every bit of our attention was focused on the path ahead of us, and we were carefully negotiating each and every step. Because we knew that one careless misstep, one accidental stumble, one mental miscue could spell disaster.

The Bible often uses the metaphor of a foot journey to describe the Christian life, and it is usually referred to simply as a "walk". In a culture and in an age where transportation within a city or between cities was done almost exclusively on foot, it is not surprising that the writers of Scripture would see parallels between walking and life itself. And often they allude to elements of a hike that are perilous and require vigilance.

That is precisely what Paul is doing near the end of his letter to the Ephesians. He says in chapter 5, **verse 15**, *¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.* (5:15-16 ESV).

I assure you that the walk Paul is describing in this passage is *not* a walk in the park. He is describing a walk that is fraught with peril—a walk that requires attentiveness and discretion. The reason I know this is because Paul just finished warning the Ephesian believers to keep their distance from the sinful, destructive behavior of their unbelieving peers. He lists some of those sins beginning in verse 3 and then warns that the wrath of God is coming upon those who participate in them.

Then he says to Christ followers, “Don’t become partners with those who indulge in these sins...(7);Take no part in these unfruitful works of darkness” (11).

Paul is highlighting the fact that Christ followers are distinctly different from people who don’t know Jesus, and this is because of the work Jesus has done in them. He said in verse 8, *“At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”* Before they met Jesus, Paul’s audience was in the same moral predicament as everyone else. He said of them in chapter 2, *“You were dead in the trespasses and sins² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (2:1-3).*

That’s a dismal description of who Paul’s audience once was. Dead in sin, controlled by the evil one and destructive passions, and children of wrath. But it’s not just them, it’s Paul himself, and it’s you and me. This is who all of us are before God’s gracious intervention—before God makes us alive with Christ, giving us a new nature. That new nature is *Christ’s* very nature, which is just the opposite of the suffocating self-centered, self-indulgent nature we are born with. That’s why Paul would say, *“At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (5:8).*

And how do we walk as children of light? That’s what Paul is getting at in verses 15f. He says, *¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”*

We may have been given a new nature—a nature that corresponds to the character of Christ—but we still live in a sin saturated environment surrounded by people who are indulging in sin. What’s more, the days in which we live are *evil*. When Paul says, *“the days are evil,”* he is not merely giving a social commentary on the moral state of affairs in Ephesus, a city known for its idolatry and immorality. He is telling them, and us, that the moral and spiritual climate in this earth realm is inherently evil, and, therefore, dangerous. And he is telling them, and us, that Christ followers are vulnerable.

Peter said it another way. *“Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8).* In other words, the devil is out to get us, and we are susceptible to his attacks.

But it’s not just the devil. If we are not vigilant, we can easily get blind-sided by temptation or be seduced by smooth-talking shysters who peddle the world’s ideas. We can get ambushed by lies or get waylaid by unexpected crises or painful trials that comes into our lives.

All this to say we are living in a dangerous world, and we are *all* vulnerable. And sometimes our vulnerability is simply the result of being careless or clueless. We’re unaware what is going on around us in the spiritual realm, or we are desensitized to the moral danger of things to which we are exposed, or we are lulled into a false sense of security because we think we are immune to becoming infected by it. And we let our guard down, or we fail to pay attention or think critically about things.

That's why Paul says, "*Look carefully then how you walk.*" The Christian life is not a walk in the park, it's more like the narrow spine en route to Angel's Landing. If you don't stay focused on the path in front of you, if you are not attentive and careful, you can stumble or lose your footing and fall and get hurt. So, Paul says, "Look carefully" where you are going. Make sure you see what is on that path in front of you. Make sure your footing is firm. Make sure you plant your feet on solid rather than slippery ground.

Once again, this *walk* is a metaphor for the Christian life. Paul is telling us that the Christian life requires mental focus because there are things that we will encounter that can trip us up, make us fall, and cause considerable damage. And so, Paul is saying, "You cannot afford to shift your mind into neutral. You must not be distracted by the things going on all around you, as interesting as they might be. The path is fraught with peril, and you need to be alert; you need to stay focused."

When I was a freshman at Biola College I was the designated hitter on the baseball team. That means I hit for the pitcher. So, when my teammates were on the field playing defense, I was in the dugout with the rest of the team. But my coach wouldn't let me do what the rest of the team did, even when our team was up to bat. While they sat on the bench I had to stand. While they chewed sunflower seeds and blew bubbles and told jokes, I wasn't allowed to talk to anybody. My coach told me that I couldn't take my eyes off the pitcher, and he made me hold my bat throughout the whole game.

At first, I thought this was just the way freshmen were treated. But then he said to me, "If you're going to be prepared to hit the ball, you need to study every move that pitcher makes. You need to analyze his wind-up and motion and rhythm and delivery. You need to try and figure out when he's going to throw you a fastball and when he's going to throw you a curve. And you need to visualize yourself swinging the bat on every pitch so that when it's your turn, you'll be ready."

That's what Paul is saying in verse 15. He is telling us that in order to successfully navigate the path before us we've got to be alert. We must see what is on that path in front of us. We must make sure our footing is firm.

Paul explains how to do this in the next phrase. He says, ¹⁵ *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise...*" Paul is using his words carefully here. He could have simply said, "*Look carefully then how you walk, as wise...*" and it would have essentially meant the same thing. But he knew that if he didn't say, "not as unwise but as wise," we might gloss over it or minimize it and not give this admonition as much weight as it deserves.

Wisdom is one of those words or concepts that can be so overused we can take it for granted and, therefore, miss its significance. But wisdom is so essential in the Christian walk that if we do not possess it we are destined to struggle and stumble and stagger through life, making very little progress because we are constantly veering off the path, taking frivolous detours that lead to dead ends.

So, what *is* wisdom? In keeping with this metaphor of a walk, wisdom is the ability to discern where you are going, where to plant your foot for the next step, how

to identify and avoid potholes and pitfalls on the path. Wisdom is the ability to discern what is firm, solid ground.

So, what *is* wisdom when it comes to living life? Sometimes we associate wisdom with intelligence, or common sense, or even intuition. There is nothing wrong with these things—they might be very beneficial qualities to have. But I assure you, this is not what Paul meant when he spoke about wisdom. Yes, wisdom certainly includes things like insight, discernment, and good judgment. But that's not all of it, and it's not even the most important part of it. There are many people who don't know the Lord who have insight, discernment and good judgment in a particular field, like finances or business or politics. What distinguishes the wisdom in Ephesians 5 from these things is that it is not a natural quality; it is a thoroughly *supernatural* quality. It comes from God, and there is something God-like about it! Wisdom is having God's mind or God's perspective about a matter. It is being able, to some degree, to think God's thoughts after him—not completely or perfectly, of course, but to some degree. Wisdom is being aligned with the will of God.

In fact, I believe that is precisely what Paul is telling us in **verse 17**. ¹⁷ *“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”*

In verse 16 Paul said, *“Not as unwise, but as wise...”* In verse 17 he says, *“Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”* “Unwise” and “foolish” are synonymous, and “wise” and “understanding the will of the Lord” are synonymous.

So, as it relates to our Christian walk wisdom is the ability to understand what God thinks or how God feels or what God wants in any given situation. Brothers and sisters think about this! I can think of nothing more important, more valuable, or more essential in life than being able to understand what God thinks or how God feels or what God wants when I encounter someone, or when I'm in a difficult situation, or I'm facing a crisis, or when I'm confronted with a problem. Because if I have wisdom, I will correctly know what to think, how to respond, what to say, or what to do.

That is what Paul is saying in **verse 16**. ¹⁵ *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,* ¹⁶ *making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.* The phrase, “making the best use of time,” is literally, “redeeming the time” or “buying up the time” in the original language. It's a metaphor which suggests that time is up for grabs, and unless Christ followers snatch it and use it for God's good purposes, it will be wasted by evil.

So how do we do that? I used to read the first part of verse 16 as though it was a command. That somehow, I needed to figure out how to make the best use of my time; that it was incumbent on me to make the most of every opportunity.

That's a lot of pressure, and, quite frankly, it produces a lot of guilt. But I have since learned that the grammar in verse 16 ties this phrase, “making the best use of the time” to verse 15, specifically the verb, “walk”. The word “making” or “redeeming” is a participle (a verbal adjective) that modifies the main verb—*walk*. And that is extremely significant in terms of understanding its application.

Here is what it means: We will make the best use of the time when we walk in wisdom. In other words, the key to redeeming the time is to get wisdom, and to let wisdom be the guiding principle of our walk. For when we are guided by wisdom, we

will automatically make the most of every opportunity. We don't have to try to do it; we *will* do it, because we are already seeing that circumstance, that situation, that person, that problem from God's perspective. We already understand what he thinks about it, what he feels about it, and what he wants to do about it.

You might be saying, "Well how do you know *when* you possess wisdom—that you actually have God's perspective and God's heart, and that you actually understand God's will about a matter?"

Good question!

I told you earlier that wisdom is a supernatural quality that comes from God. Wisdom doesn't come from experience, or education, or intuition; it comes from God. The way to get wisdom, then, is to get it from God. And Scripture tells us that God gives it to us when we simply ask for it in faith. James says, ⁵*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.* ⁶*But let him ask in faith, with no doubting...* (James 1:5-6).

We get wisdom when we ask God for it in faith. Period. If we don't ask Him for it, we don't get it and, consequently, we don't have it. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if you don't ask God for wisdom you had better not assume that your thoughts and opinions are completely aligned with the Lord's. At best, there is a mixture of your own natural wisdom emanating from your opinions and insights and emotions, etc.

But when we ask God for wisdom—when we ask God to replace our thoughts and opinions and perspective with His—His wisdom flows into us and flushes out our skewed, sin-tainted opinions and perceptions so that we are free to think God's thoughts after Him.

And that is how we are able to redeem the time for God's eternal purposes, that's how we walk as children of light, that's how we impact our peers, our culture, and our world for Jesus. That is also how we avoid the potholes and pitfalls on the path before us. We walk in wisdom. We let Him give us His mind and heart and align us with His will. And believe me, if we have His mind and heart then we will see the sinful influences and temptations that surround us as profoundly unappealing. We will *want* to avoid them.

So, may I make a suggestion? Get in the habit of asking God for wisdom.

- Ask Him for wisdom when you wake up in the morning and are getting ready to face the day.
- Ask Him for wisdom before you open your Bible so that you might have His perspective as you read it.
- Ask Him for wisdom before you turn on the news to get the latest updates about the Coronavirus so you can see this crisis from His perspective.
- Ask Him for wisdom before you have that conversation with your spouse about that sensitive issue that keeps causing tension.
- Ask Him for wisdom before you comment on Facebook (BTW, my definition of Facebook: the breeding ground of foolishness)
- Ask Him for wisdom before you enter that makeshift classroom in your home where you are tutoring your kids
- Ask Him for wisdom before you enter into that political discussion

- Ask Him for wisdom before you decide how to spend your stimulus check.

I could go on and on. God has opinions about what he would like you to do, how He would like you to respond, what He would like you to contribute in all these areas of life. And you can contribute something of eternal value—you can redeem the time if you walk in His wisdom. It's that simple.

If you were to come to me for counseling, or if you were to come to me to resolve a conflict, or help solve a problem, I'm convinced our meeting would be beneficial. But that's not because I'm such a good counselor or peacemaker or problem solver. I put absolutely no confidence in myself or my opinions, and neither should you. The reason I am convinced our meeting would be beneficial is because I begin every meeting by asking God for wisdom. There has never been a meeting that I have led in my twenty-three years at EBC that I have not started it by asking God for wisdom. In fact, I usually go one step further. I say, "Lord, I ask for wisdom, confident in your promise that you will give it. So please give it generously, and, while you're at it, incinerate my opinions, my judgments, and my assumptions. And Lord, if I slip up and insert something that is not part of your wisdom, I pray that whoever is sitting across from me won't even be able to remember it."

Dear brothers and sisters, we are light in the Lord, and because of that we are supposed to shine. But I want to remind you that we don't make ourselves shine; we only shine as we reflect His light.

When you look at a full moon on a clear night, it is beautiful, it is brilliant. But don't forget that the light you see is not the moon's light. The moon has no radiant quality in and of itself. What we see at night when the moon is shining is *reflected* light. It is a reflection that comes from this solar system's source of light—the sun.

In the same way, we shine not because we ourselves generate light. We have no radiant quality in and of ourselves. We shine solely because we radiate his light. And may we shine brightly, for his glory, amen.

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Main Idea: *Because Christ followers are surrounded by evil, they must carefully and wisely navigate the path before them*

Successfully Navigating a Dangerous Path (15-16)

The Christian life is no walk in the park

The days are evil (16b)

There is a dangerous adversary

The Manner in which we must Walk

Watching Carefully (15a)

Being Wise (15b; 17)

The importance of wisdom

The necessity of wisdom

The definition of wisdom

The practice of wisdom—"redeeming the time" (16a)

The getting of wisdom