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## The Time is Shortened

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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*"But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both those that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it..." 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.*

It is necessary that we should not misunderstand Paul's words, for he would never contradict himself. He who wrote: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church..." would never write anything that set aside or lessened the force of such a grand description of marriage relationship. Clearly he did not wish to minimise the importance of marriage; nor did he mean that weeping or rejoicing or other human activities should be obliterated; his remarks are set over against the existing situation in Corinth and they are introduced by the word 'But'. "But this I say, brethren, the time is shortened" (RV).

In his letter the apostle had been forced to deal with many unhappy features of current experience in the Corinthian church. There were so many inconsistencies, even contradictions, and so much which denied the Lord, that it was as though he became utterly wearied of it all and felt obliged to cry out in protest against using so much time and energy on the quibblings and carnality of God's people. He felt that he could not afford the time which he was having to give to the negative task of admonishing, correcting and remonstrating. He wanted to get busy with the positive matters of life in the Spirit, and groaned at the sheer waste of time produced by the internal conditions at Corinth.

For this man, who ever had his eyes on a wider horizon, there was still so much to be done. Paul was so aware of the tremendous forces at work against Christ and against His testimony that he felt that they were in an emergency situation. In his day there were signs of a great crisis in which Christian testimony might be curtailed; he sensed in the very atmosphere the tension which eventually brought him to martyrdom. Being conscious of the emergency state in which public witness, the work of the Lord, would be severely suppressed and the antagonistic forces would overflow the world in their attempt to destroy the testimony of Christ, he could not refrain from crying out about it to his brethren: "But... the time is short!". He wanted them to get clear of their internal problems and difficulties so that they could buy up all possible opportunities for Christ. We need to be freed from self-preoccupation, so that we can redeem what time there is, for at best it is all too short.

I suggest to you that in this connection the Scripture is very meaningful for us now. There are so many problems, questions, differences of opinion, personal clashes, *but...*! 'But' brothers and sisters, 'the time is short - too short to be wasted on things of secondary or third-rate importance.' Even marriage, the sorrows and joys of life, possessions, fashions, earthly interests - it is not that they are wrong but they provide a subtle snare to distract us from the real business of our Christian living. Nothing, from the inner circle of our domestic relationship to the widest circle of world events, must ever be allowed to interfere with our testimony for Christ. Those blessed with wives must not allow them so to fill their lives that the happy domestic circle becomes a preoccupation which absorbs all their time. There are some that weep, but they must not let their sorrow paralyse them with regard to the Lord's interests. There are those who can rightly rejoice, but they must watch that their delight does not subvert them, so that they give it priority and find themselves turned aside from their main concern which should have been for the glory of Christ. There is much in the world which can rightly interest. The Corinthians had already been told that "All things are yours; whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world..." (1 Corinthians 3:22). But Paul also told them that they must not abuse this gift, not use it to the full, not let it be their prime concern. Brethren, the time is short, and we must not allow anything in any department of our lives to encroach upon the interests of the Lord.

This is the cry of a man looking back and knowing that for him time would not last much longer. Paul was always feeling the cold hand of the past reaching out to remind him of those wasted years which he so deeply regretted. He had spent such a valuable part of his early life in travelling along the wrong road, fighting against the Son of God; and he deplored those barren years. How much energy - and religious energy at that - had been utterly wasted! His soul was filled with sorrow about the failures, the lost opportunities of the past, and he was stirred to make sure that this should never happen again. He cried out in protest against the possibility of further shortening. Life is not as long as all this, that one can afford to have more failures, more lost time, more misspent energy. Life here on this earth is all too short. The man who looked back and grieved over those periods of his experience when his energies were bent on a course which brought no glory to his Lord, had to cry out in dismay at the prospect of still more waste.

It is also the cry of a man who was looking around, being made conscious of the overwhelming need which everywhere abounded. Paul was deeply distressed over the crying spiritual need of Christians who seemed so muddled and powerless, as well as over the appalling condition of men without Christ, multitudes who had no vital experience of the transforming power of the gospel. And time was passing so rapidly. The demands on every hand were so great that it seemed most culpable to give them anything less than full and undivided attention. So it is today. Only the gravely insensitive can fail to register the seriousness of the circumstances which surround us. The needs are so great

and the important thing to remember is that our remaining time is very short, and so are our opportunities for doing the Lord's work. It seems that the Corinthians were so taken up with their own affairs that they failed to realise how spiritual opportunities and values were slipping from their grasp. Paul was aghast that this should be so. He was no passive spectator himself, no self-interested neutral, but a man who realised the supreme importance of working the works of God while it was still day. He cried out against the paralysing work of Satan among Christians and the great power of darkness in the world. "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving", he affirmed (2 Corinthians 4:4), and this darkening, blinding work of the devil forced him to warn his brothers that the time was drawing to an end.

His words were also the appeal of a man looking on into the future with eager expectation but who yet appreciated how much still remained to be done in these shortening days. His own course would soon be finished, and he felt that if he spent all the moments of all his days in utter devotion to Christ, it would still be woefully inadequate and he an unprofitable servant. The time was so short that he knew that at the end he would feel regretfully that if he could have his life all over again he would use it to so much better advantage. This might be a general and very natural emotion, but for Paul the important thing was to minimise it and be saved from unnecessary regrets at the end of his brief career. So it was that he urged his brothers at Corinth to join with him in making everything subservient to the one great consideration of the work of Christ.

Some of them were doubtless still young in years and therefore not so conscious of the swift approach of the end of earthly life, but the call to them was just as valid, for at best life passes all too quickly and the Spirit of God would surely impart to them something of His own urgency to buy up every opportunity for glorifying Christ. The Christians of those days lived in constant expectation of the return of the Lord Jesus in glory. "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" they were told, the trumpet would sound for the termination of the gospel age (1 Corinthians 15:52). The Second Coming has not yet taken place, but to many of us it appears quite imminent, so that more than ever we need to take note of the fact that the time is shortened. It may well be that as we move rapidly towards that great day we shall find that there will be a closing in upon Christian testimony, with all kinds of new limitations being imposed on the servants of the Lord, and then Paul's 'But' will be even more relevant. It stands over against all the petty and unworthy preoccupations of Christians like those Corinthians who were inclined to fritter away the precious moments still remaining to them in unprofitable disputations and childish self-indulgence. Most of the matters raised in this letter would never have arisen if the believers had kept their priorities right and not forgotten how rapidly time is diminishing and eternity drawing near. The same applies - and even more so - to our own day and age. Brothers, there is no time to spare for the many unimportant and time-wasting differences and disputes which beset the Church of Christ and dissipate its energies. There is something far more important on hand. The Lord's interests demand that we have done with all that has no eternal value and get on with the real business of life, which is the bringing in of the kingdom and of the King.