

BELPRES CHURCH

It's About Time

Exodus 18:5-27

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Great to see all of you here. Thank you for being here and braving the icy roads and all of that stuff. And those of you joining online, thank you for joining us as well.

A couple of years ago, there was a survey done to determine which of the past US presidents was the best known and the least known. And it turned out the least known was Chester Arthur from the 1880s. Nobody has heard of poor Chester. But maybe it isn't fair, because Chester Arthur played a key role in something that affects literally every single person on the planet, every single minute of our lives. Because see, Chester Arthur got together a conference of international experts to establish agreed upon, universally agreed upon time zones, so that we could all tell time better.

So Chester Arthur fans, if there is such a thing as a Chester Arthur fan club, you know, they might have a point if they said he shouldn't be so obscure, given that he played such a key role in everything from the time stamps on our e-mail to what time we have to show up at the airport to catch a flight. Did Millard Fillmore do that? He did not. You know what else Fillmore didn't do? Anything, he pretty much didn't do anything at all.

If I were to ask you the question, what is the greatest obstacle to our spiritual growth, the greatest obstacle to experiencing Jesus' power, hope, courage, and joy, if I were to ask you the greatest obstacle of our spiritual growth, you might say time, partly because the opening anecdote about Chester Arthur manipulated you to say time, but also because it's true. Or more accurately, what we choose to do with our time.

Now, some of us have a lot of time, but are we using it for things that are really life-giving? Are we using our time for real Sabbath rest, not just distraction? Or a sense of meaning and purpose that comes from helping other people? Do we use our time to connect to Jesus in ways where we experience him as real, not just ideas and theologies in our head? And then, of course, there's a whole bunch of us who would say, I'd love to

do all of those good things. I just don't have any time because I'm so very, very, very good. You passed, A plus, right?

Busyness is a huge obstacle to spiritual growth because we don't have enough time to do the things that would cause us to grow spiritually. Pastor John Mark Comer says that when the devil shows up, he doesn't come with a pitchfork and a tail. He shows up as that extra hour at work in the office to get ahead. Or one more activity for the kids so they get a great resume, so they can get into that great college. Or the dopamine rush that is our phone. If the devil can't make you bad, he will make you busy.

And many of us wish we had more community in our lives, not just, and also in this church. We've heard that. But then a lot of times when we do things here that would foster community, y'all are too busy to come to them. What are we supposed to do? And there's tons of data that some of the worst offenders on this being too busy thing are pastors. Other pastors, not me. Other bad Colin, he's the problem.

We're too busy to have peace instead of anxiety, energy instead of feeling drained all the time, meaning and purpose instead of feeling like we're stuck in a rut. Or we have lots of time, but we're not using it in ways that are life-giving. We're doing a sermon series called Loss is Game about how living sacrificially is often harder, but it is also much bigger, deeper, and richer, and better, because sacrificial living is not deprivation. Sacrificial living is letting go of something, often good things, so that we can experience God's better things.

And of all the things God may call us to sacrifice so that we experience those better things, time is maybe the hardest one for a lot of us. For some people, I put myself in this category, easier to give money than time. Because there's some real consequences to sacrificing our time to do the things of God. We may miss out on something that we really want to do. Or we worry that if I don't work 60 plus hours a week, I'm not gonna do well enough in school, or at work to get into that great college, or to get that promotion, or even to keep my job. There are real consequences to sacrificing time. We're afraid if we limit our kids' activities, then they're gonna miss out on something that's really important for their future, and we don't want our kids to be the only ones left out.

See, we see the things we will lose if we sacrifice our time, but we so rarely ask, what are the God's better things that he wants to give us that we just don't have time for? Leadership coach Stephen Covey says, we achieve inner peace when our schedule aligns with our values. Does your schedule align with your values?

And I know some of you are caught in work situations where if you don't perform every single day, you may lose your job. And in some cases, that may mean you also lose your immigration status, which is super scary. But one of the things I've noticed is people in this church who are in those situations often still make time. They find ways to make time to be with Jesus, to be in worship and to be in community because those things are so beneficial to every other part of their lives. Y'all just make time for it.

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Because see, time is really just another word for priorities. To say I don't have time for something is just a way of saying it's not as important to me as my grades or my job or my kids' activities. Not as important to me as the hours I spend on my smartphone. The average US American spends three to four hours a day looking at their phone, and then another couple hours a day watching TV of some kind. That's over a week, a month spent scrolling social media or consuming news that makes us scared and angry because that's a good feeling, or online shopping or binge watching.

Your smartphone tracks how long you spend on it. Did you ever look at that? It's super sobering and slightly depressing to look at. It's like, wow, I spent that much time. The second thing time is just another word for is my life story. Cuz what our lives are about comes down to how we have spent every minute of our days. I don't think any of us would want to say my life story was all about work and entertainment, but it may be that sometimes our schedules do say that.

In fact, I have a suggestion. This afternoon before the Super Bowl, maybe just sit down and go through the last month of your calendar and add up how many hours you spent on each thing because that will reveal where our priorities are and what our life is adding up to. Now, no doubt, right now you're thinking, hmm, pastor, I have to do all these things. I have to do school. I have to do work. I have to do all these kids' activities. And the answer is, yes, some of those things we have to do, but do we have to do them as much as we think we do? Or do so many of them? Or do them as perfectly as we think we have to do them?

Because a lot of times we say we're striving for excellence, but really we're just trying to control outcomes instead of waiting on God to fix some of our problems and the much bigger things that he can do through his power. See, the answer to the time problem is not more time. Back in the 1980s, some sociologists were predicting that because of all the labor-saving devices, dishwashers, washing machines, computers, some of them in the 80s were predicting that by now we'd only be working 27 hours a week. That doesn't happen anywhere except Portland and France.

If I had 10 more hours a day, I would fill them with all the same stuff. The problem isn't time. The problem is my choices. But God wants to give us better. He has something better for us. Connection with Jesus that brings us life and energy and joy. Soul rest, where we really feel truly rested, not just distracted. Community with deep friendships. Time to help others, which is so deeply rewarding when we do that. Discipline is choosing between what I want now and what I want most.

So what do you want most? Deep, deep down, what do you want most? Because it can be yours. Jesus wants to give it to you. That's part of what's going on in the passage we're gonna look at right now from the Book of Exodus in the Bible. It's about how we use time for God's better things. And in this passage, Moses has led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, and they are on their way to the Promised Land. And the text says, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came to him in the wilderness where he was camped.

Jethro had sent word to him, I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you. That sounds scary, doesn't it? I'm your father-in-law and I'm coming for you. Yikes. So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and told his father-in-law about everything the Lord had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and how the Lord had saved them. So here's a key to using our time for God's better things. Remember that God is good.

Jethro and Moses spent some time recounting how all the good things God had done for them by getting them out of slavery in Egypt. Key to living sacrificially with our time or anything else is do you trust that God is good? Do you trust that God is good? And that he wants your best? Because when we trust that, it's easier to live sacrificially with our time or anything else because we know the things he calls us to do will ultimately lead to his better things for us in our lives.

Then Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses, father-in-law, in the presence of God. They ate together. They spent time in community together, which increasingly US Americans have less and less of because we say we don't have time for it, which is just another way of saying community isn't as important to us as all these other things. But community is essential, not only for spiritual growth, but just for a happy life.

And one of the things I'm grateful for is to live in, to be part of a church where we've got so many immigrants from so many different cultures, where community is a much higher priority. And folks just make time for it, which we all can be learning from.

The next day, Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning until evening, all day in line, the biblical department of licensing.

When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "Why do you alone sit as judge while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"

Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and instructions."

"You don't understand, father-in-law, I have to do this. I have to work these many hours. I have to do all these activities. I don't have a choice."

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good." Always awesome to hear that from your father-in-law, right? "What you're doing is not good. You and these people who come to see you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you. You cannot handle it all alone."

So here's another key to using our time for God's better things: The need is not always the call. We think we have to do all these things—this thing, that thing, X, Y, Z. But sometimes we either don't have to do them at all, or we just need to do fewer of them, or

we don't have to do everything at an A-plus level. Because if we're trying to get an A-plus at everything, we're gonna get a D in some other things. D in family life, D in friendships, D in connection with God and growing spiritually.

Jesus said, "I only do what I see the Father doing." Which means he didn't heal every person, he didn't have a conversation with every person; he knew what God was actually calling him to do and not to do.

We all need a "need to do," "nice to do," and "never to be done" list. We need to ask God, "Is this truly my call? Is this need my call?" And sometimes it is. And when it is, even if it involves sacrifice, we need to make time for it because it's gonna lead to God's better things. But other times, the need is not our call. And someone else can do that thing better than we can. And if we do it instead of them, we will rob them of the opportunity to use their gifts, which is what Jethro tells Moses to do.

"Listen now to me, and I will give you some advice." This is how I'm gonna be with my son-in-law, if I ever get one. "You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and show them the way that they are to live and how they are to behave."

Which is another principle for how we use our time for God's best things: What is the highest and best use of my time?

So, in this chapter, what Jethro tells Moses is, "Look, Moses, for you, the highest and best use of your time is two things: Represent the people before God and teach them how to live." Okay? That's the highest and best use of your time.

Then he says, "Select capable men who fear God and who hate dishonest gain and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you. The simple cases, they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter. You will be able to stand the strain and all these people will go home satisfied because they didn't spend all day in the line at the DMV."

Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said, as my future sons-in-law will do. Or they won't be my sons-in-law.

There are other people, Moses, that can do this better than you, and if you do it for them, you're going to take away their chance to use their gifts. Delegate, my friend.

The list of things I could do in my job here is almost endless, and I have several thousand advisors happy to tell me how I should be using my time, which means I have to discern what is the highest and best use of my time in particular.

And when I was talking to the search committee about coming here, I wanted them to know I might be a little bit different than other pastors, that I would set aside a portion of

time every week just to be with people and to pastor them, and to disciple them, which a lot of senior pastors, especially of bigger churches, they just don't do because the leadership demands are so much, they don't have time for it.

But what I told the search committee was, "Look, if I think, if I'm in my office all day, all week, I'm not doing my job. I need to be out with people, understanding their lives, helping them grow spiritually." That's something God has called me to, and it gives me life, and I think it helps preaching because I'm in touch with what people are going through.

So that means that there are some things that a lot of other pastors would do that I don't do here. I am not a part of every decision that happens in this church. I joke that on a leadership scale with micromanaging on this side and abandonment on this side, I teeter perilously close to abandonment. I'm exaggerating a little bit to make a point, but the main point is there are other people who can make a lot of these decisions better than I can, which gives me time to pastor people and not just run a church.

We need to discern, which was the last sermon series we just finished about discernment, we need to discern what God is actually calling us to, and yes, there will be consequences to saying no to people. I disappoint people a lot with how I use my time. Maybe we don't get as promoted as quickly or things like that. There will be consequences, but we will have time for God, family, friendship, real rest, the stuff that makes life worthwhile.

And to help us do all of this, we have to have community. We have to have people around us, people we know love us to speak into our decisions, and will graciously say what Jethro says to Moses, "What you're doing is not good. Do you really need that kitchen remodel? Do you really need one more exotic vacation?" Because those things contribute to having to have certain jobs that require all kinds of long hours just to keep up with the purchases that we've made, locking us into lifestyles that we maybe don't want to have. Is that what you really, really, really want deep down?

So here are two action steps for this week. First, write out what your calendar would look like if it reflected what you say your priorities are. Now, many of us have to work and stuff like that. Put that in there, but there are other hours in a week than work. Write out what your calendar would look like if it aligned to what you say your values are. How would that be different than your current calendar?

And then second, just like last week, ask Jesus to help you see the better things he wants to give you. Don't be looking at what you have to sacrifice, okay? That's the wrong focus. Ask Jesus to show you, help you see the better things that he wants to give you and that probably you want deep down inside as well. Things like Sabbath rest that really restores. Not just distraction, but Sabbath rest so that you can have real energy. Time to be with Jesus, to connect with him in prayer and worship, because when we experience Jesus as real, it changes everything, it gives us a better outlook on life, it gives us more hope and courage and joy.

How about a schedule that instills Jesus' value in our kids? Because no matter what we say, we're telling our kids what really matters by our schedules. And sometimes our schedules tell our kids that Jesus takes a backseat to sports, school, and economic advancement. That's not what we mean to do, it's just what we get caught up in. But sometimes our schedules are telling our kids, we value things other than Jesus, we value things other than community.

So maybe that means our kids do fewer things, fewer activities. Maybe they missed some games on Sundays, so they can be part of corporate worship. When our kids were growing up, we sometimes missed games or swim meets on Sundays because church is important. Okay, and my kids turned out just fine. We scarred them in lots of other ways, but not this way.

Another of God's better things, time for meaningful community, where we get beyond news, weather, and sports, and get down to questions like, no, how are you doing, really? How goes it with your soul? So that we feel seen and understood and supported, but also community where we just have fun together and relax.

And then one last thing, one of the better things that God wants to give us is healing the world through Jesus' power. Because when we get to be a part of that, we feel a lot of meaning and purpose and like our lives add up to something that really matters. Ask Jesus to help you see the better things he wants to give you.

A woman who I'll call Jean, because that's her name, who used to go to our church, but until she and her husband moved to a different state, she sent me an email recently, and she said, she and her husband sit in the same exact place every Sunday at church. And the woman who always sits behind them, Wendy, is someone they've really come to love. Well, Wendy was diagnosed with ALS a couple of years ago.

I'll pick it up in Jean's words. This is what she said. "The Lord placed a call on my heart to visit Wendy in her home." See, Wendy's need really was Jean's call in this case, but she heard that from God.

"As is often the case, people don't visit because it takes courage to visit someone with this condition. ALS is a terrible disease. Her body is deteriorating, but her mind is still active, and her laugh behind her breathing mask remains engaging. I read scripture to her, and I pray with her. I also share stories, meet her grandchildren, and engage with her in ways that make both of us laugh a lot."

"As I reflect on this, my first thought is that I don't seek to visit people who are sick. My second thought is I wouldn't do this for just anybody. And then the final thought is the joy that comes from spending time—there's that word, time—with Wendy is beyond anything I could have ever imagined."

And I know it will get harder with each visit, and yet I know in my heart, God has given me Wendy as a gift, not a burden, a gift. I learned so much from her by how she trusts

God. Trust God that what she's living through is really hard, but that God is gonna bring good out of it some way.

Her family loves her so much and willingly lives sacrificially by giving their time to care for her. My time, there's that word again, my time has been impacted in good ways. My prayer life is deepened by caring for Wendy, and my trust in God expands with each visit, which changes the word sacrifice into God's blessings of indescribable joy.

Jean is sacrificing some time to do something that is really hard, but as she says, she's experiencing Jesus more deeply, she has community with Wendy in which both of them do a lot of laughing, her prayer life is deeper, she has meaning and purpose that comes from helping other people, and the word sacrifice has turned into God's blessings of indescribable joy. Not a bad list of God's better things she has gained by living sacrificially with her time.

See, we know what we'll lose if we sacrifice time for God's better things, but do we know what we'll lose if we don't? And what God calls you to, probably going to be different than Jean's story, but what is it?

What are the better things God wants to give you and that you long for deep down?

Whatever they are, to quote George Harrison, they're probably going to take time, a whole lot of precious time, but on the other side of sacrifice is indescribable joy. So Jesus, you hold eternity in your hands. You literally have all the time in the world.

So Jesus, help us to discern well what things you're calling us to, what things you are not calling us to, so that we can have time for the good things, the better things that you want to give us. Time to rest in you, time to be restored, time for community that gives us life, time to be part of your rescue mission to this world.

Jesus, help us to sort through our calendars, knowing that you long for better for us, and help us to see the things, the better things you want to give us so clearly, so clearly, that we will gladly step into them. We cannot do this without you, Jesus. So lead us and guide us into the abundant life that you died to give us. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- Why do you think Moses was working so hard? What was driving him?
- What would have appealed to Moses and the people about Jethro's advice? What might they not have liked about his advice?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Where do you think God might want you to change your routine?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.