

At the End of the Year

Psalm 90:1-4, 10-12; 2 Timothy 4:6-8

December 29, 2019

You probably remember that Thomas Edison (1847-1931) was a great inventor. He was also a very positive person. On December 9, 1914, there was an explosion in the film inspection building at Edison West Orange Lab. A huge fire broke out and quickly spread to other buildings. It destroyed 13 buildings.

According to a 1961 Reader's Digest article written by Edison's son Charles, Edison calmly walked over to him as he watched the fire destroy those building and all the works his dad had done. Edison told his 24-year-old son, "Go get your mother and all her friends. They'll never see a fire like this again." When Charles objected, Edison said, "It's all right. We've just got rid of a lot of rubbish."

Later, at the scene of the blaze, Edison was quoted in The New York Times as saying, "Although I am over 67 years old, I'll start all over again tomorrow,"¹ and he did. He worked tirelessly well into his 80's.² He died when he was 84, and he had never lost his positive spirit.

A German theologian, Joseph Wittig, once commented that when we write people's biographies, we should start with their death rather than their birth. People have nothing to do with how they began their life, but they have a lot to do with how they end it. This is certainly true for Thomas Edison.

Edison grew up poor and had very little formal education, but he became one of the most famous persons in the world. It is not how we begin our life that is important but how we end it.

Psalm 90 is a beautiful poem to reflect on at the end of the year. I believe its theme is very appropriate for this time of the year. It begins by saying that God has been our dwelling place, our home, our security "through all the generations" (90:1). Even "before the mountains were brought forth," God is God (90:2). God has always been, and he has always been there for us.

This Psalm also acknowledges the difficulties of life: "The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong. But even the best years are

¹ <https://www.edisonmuckers.org/thomas-edison-fire-1914/>

² <https://www.history.com/topics/inventions/thomas-edison>

filled with pain and trouble; soon they disappear, and we fly away” (90:10). It speaks of the futility of life.

So, the Psalmist offers this prayer in verse 12: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” How does acknowledging the brevity of life help us to be wise? Well, for one thing, when we realize that we have only so many days and hours on earth, we will want to use them wisely, rather than wasting them.

One day, an elderly man gave his grandson advice about the importance of time. The boy saw a big bottle in his granny’s home. It held a lot of marbles in it. The boy asked his grandfather why he had those marbles. As a response he told this story.

He said, “You know, if you don’t have your priorities right, you may end up missing out on the things that really matter.”

“I was told that an average person lives 75 years. I wondered how many weeks that would be. So I simply multiplied 75 by 52 to find out how many weeks that would be. It was 3900 weeks. That means an average person would have 3900 Saturdays.”

“At that time, I was 56 years old, meaning I had spent 2,912 Saturdays already. I had less than 1,000 left if I am lucky enough to live to 75.”

“So, I went to a toy store and bought 1000 marbles and placed them in that bottle. Since then, I have been taking out one marble every Saturday. As the marbles diminished, I got to see how short life really is. That forced me to get my priorities right. Watching these marbles disappear helped me see how brief life can be. I know these marbles will all be gone one day, and if I have more Saturdays after all the marbles are gone, I will count them as bonus.”³

Some of you are enjoying the bonus. I hope all of us have lots and lots of healthy bonuses, but this story reminds us of the importance of priorities.

So, what is it that is important for the rest of our lives?

We may gain some wisdom from Paul. When Paul wrote the Second Letter to Timothy, he knew his remaining days were not very long. He knew he would

³ Contributed. Source unknown.

die soon. The wonderful thing about Paul is that he was not consumed by his past mistakes. Rather, he pushed himself forward and focused on finishing well. He said, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." That is how he summarized his life. He was basically saying that in spite of his weaknesses and past mistakes, he continued to push forward and finished his journey proudly. Wouldn't it be a wonderful to end our lives that way?

Paul was not a perfect person. He wasn't always nice before his conversion. Actually, he was a violent man who led a persecution crusade against early Christians. He participated in killing Stephen, by setting the stage for people to execute him. At that time, he did not see anything wrong with persecuting the Christians. This is the reason why Paul later called himself the "chief of sinners."

I am sure he regretted his actions, behaviors and attitudes toward Christians before he became a follower of Christ, but that was his past. He knew the power of God's love for the penitent sinners. He knew God forgave him, and the truly important thing is that he accepted God's forgiveness.

Many people struggle with guilt even after they have confessed and repented of their sins. Why? Because they have not accepted God's forgiveness. They think that their sins are so serious and grievous that they are not sure if God would forgive them.

What they are actually doing is that they think God is like them. They are unforgiving for other people's serious sins. They think God is like them, unforgiving and vindictive.

Even though the Bible clearly says that if we confess our sins, God is faithful, just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Still they have a hard time accepting it. When we repent our sins, we need not only to believe that God forgives us, but also to accept his forgiveness.

How do we accept his forgiveness? We accept God's forgiveness by forgiving ourselves. Forgiving ourselves is accepting God's forgiveness.

Paul accepted God's forgiveness, and he forgave himself. He chose not to waste his time and energy doubting God's love or God's forgiveness.

Counselor and life coach, Craig D. Lounsbrough said, “Any new beginning is forged from the shards of the past, not from the abandonment of the past.”⁴ He is right. We cannot erase the past, but we build the future by using the broken pieces of the past. We cannot go back and make a brand new beginning, but we can start now and make a brand new ending.

That is what repentance is. Repentance is starting to make a brand new ending. God can take the broken pieces of our former lives and use them to build something beautiful. God can use our suffering to make us better and more patient persons. He can take even our sins and use them for God’s glory.

God took Paul’s intolerance and self-righteousness and changed it. He made him to be a tolerant and forbearing person toward the Gentiles. He became Christ’s ambassador for the Gentiles.⁵

Then Paul says, “Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

We need to understand something here. In the New Testament, a righteous person is the one who lives in a right relationship with God and his or her neighbors. It does not mean a perfect person. As long as we live in this world, we will never be perfect, but if we live each and every day faithfully and obediently, then at the end of our lives, by God’s grace, all our imperfections will melt away. We will live in perfect harmony with God and all his creation. That is what the crown of righteousness is. That is the culmination of God’s saving act in Christ Jesus.

My friends, as we end 2019 and begin a new year let us accept God’s forgiveness and live each and every day faithfully until the day we meet the Lord face to face.

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/3228832-any-new-beginning-is-forged-from-the-shards-of-the>

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:20.