

Watch case: Christian hope for the future

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 27, 2003](#) issue

Time, like an ever-rolling stream / Bears all its sons away . . ." [or, as alt. would have it, "soon bears us all away"] would be a paralyzing line were it not for the hymn's opening invocation. "O God, our help in ages past . . ."

I thought of this "rolling" when my digital watch gave out. I wanted to replace it with a \$39.95 clone but walked away with a \$39.95 analog watch. The young clerk stared at my retiring watch in disbelief. She had never seen one before. I might as well have been asking for a crystal radio or a Studebaker wagon. I wanted the digital because it had an alarm clock to wake me from naps. (Secret: the clerk found an analog with a little digital alarm almost invisibly tucked in.) The late great theologian Joseph Sittler would have been pleased. "Marty, time is not broken into bits, as your digital watch breaks it. Like the analog, it flows—'like an ever-rolling stream.'"

Now I have grown curious about what watches are on the market. Over 20 expensive ones were advertised in the *New York Times* the other day. The most pathetic in a field rich in pathos is the Seiko ad pronouncing, "It's not your shoes. It's not your car. It's not your music. It's your watch that tells most about who you are." Or this: "Whether you need one or 100 or more, Smart Jewelers has the ideal watch . . ." There seem to be more watches advertised and sold than there are people to wear them. I have been wondering where all the watches go and what all the people whose watch "tells most about who you are" do with them.

Smart Jewelers helped inform me. They sell handmade watch cases "designed to safely store and protect your fine timepieces . . ." The Torino case alone holds 20 watches. I'm told that the people who have "100 or more"—those who own everything already, for whom the big U.S. tax cuts were legislated—know who is obligated to give them a gift. Go to their homes, I'm told, and you will see glass cases full of costly watches.

Another clue came from an old *Worth* magazine (December 2002). In Leonardo Jewelers' multipage ad the "his" page shows a single watch for "day," noting that "a man's love affair with watches is second only to his love affair with his car." Then for "evening and special occasions" two are offered, followed by "weekend," when two "durable fashion watches outfitted with the latest complications and gadgets will spark conversation." If that's what you need for conversation, that indeed tells a lot about who you are.

All this for measuring time which, remember, "like an ever-rolling stream soon bears us all away," leaving the watch cases to heirs who will be borne away in their time. At year's end such thoughts come as we reckon with the grief that comes with the passing of friends.

Yes, the Martys will party over these holidays and at the turning of the year. But we will also review the seasons. It's been a year filled with fright and near-depression brought on by our government's actions, international and domestic. Invoking "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" should bring a redemptive perspective and a measure of realistic hope, Christian hope, for the future. What watches cannot measure comes with the promise of the hymn's next line: our hope for years to come. That is a hope not stored in a watch case. As for time: let it roll.