

Time And Life

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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Since creation, time has always fascinated mankind. Shortly after creation, men had devised time-keeping devices and calendars based on the orbits of the earth and moon. They could easily predict the cycles of the moon and the changing of the seasons. As men's scientific and mathematical understanding increased, so did his ability to understand and calculate time.

In our modern age, the same is true yet to an even greater extent. Beginning with H.G. Wells book, *The Time Machine*, the science of time has led visionaries, writers and scientists to develop theories about time. Physicists like Stephen Hawking, author of *A Brief History of Time* and other books on time and origins, spend their entire lives trying to devise workable temporal theories.

Even our popular culture is obsessed with time. Each of the four *Star Trek* series have had several episodes each season that deal with what they call "anomalies in the space-time continuum." Someone falls into or comes out of a space-time rift from the past or the future, and the intrepid crew of the *Enterprise*, *Voyager* or *Deep Space Nine* must deal with all the ramifications that interfering with time brings. Other movies and shows—*Sliders*, *Back to the Future*, *Quantum Leap*, *Time Bandits* and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* to name a few—also appeal to our curiosity about time travel.

Of course, in our day-to-day lives, we look at time in a completely different way. We look at it very simply: past, present, future—and never the three shall meet. We often try to "save time" or "make time" or "waste time," but in reality, it goes on at its steady, relentless pace.

We may wish we could go back in time and change events, but we know we cannot manipulate time. In practical terms, time is linear. What has been done cannot be undone. We must make the best of the present, facing the future determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

God and Time

How does God look at time? How does He view the passage of minutes, hours, days, months, years, centuries, millennia? Is God concerned about time? Does He control it?

The human mind cannot conceive of a time without time. For all intents and purposes, time has always been. Man cannot explain the origin of time, just as he cannot explain the origin of space, energy or matter. These are all explained by the power of Almighty God, but humans cannot conceive what it was like before then.

Isaiah writes that God "inhabits eternity" (Isaiah 57:15), that is, He dwells in perpetuity or lives eternally, continually. Moses puts it a different way in Psalm 90:2, "Even from everlasting to everlasting [or *age to age*], You are God." However, the way Isaiah constructed the phrase, "inhabits eternity" can mean that God moves freely in time; any period of time is accessible to Him. He made it and has power over it. Whether this was Isaiah's actual intent is unknown.

Understanding this is made more difficult because Hebrew has no general word for "time." *Ad*, the word used in Isaiah 57:15, simply means "duration, perpetual, continuity." This is similar to the idea

behind the name *Yahweh*, translated "LORD," which means "He who is." This corresponds to "'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,' says the Lord, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty'" (Revelation 1:8). God is, has always been and always will be, no matter how men perceive time.

Another of God's names, "I AM" (Exodus 3:14) also implies that men cannot truly understand His relationship to time. Robert Young, author of *Young's Analytical Concordance*, writes of this word, *hayah*, "A name indicating rather the *unsearchableness* of God than his mere *existence*, as commonly supposed" (p. 506, his emphasis). As Paul points out in Romans 11:33, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"

God's eternity allows Him to work out His plan over the whole expanse of time. From the most remote past, He has planned, created and fulfilled each step of His purpose to bring about His ultimate goal, the birth of sons and daughters into His Family (II Corinthians 6:18). God Himself explains how this works:

Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure," . . . Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it. (Isaiah 46:9-11)

Because of God's endless life and His power over events and lives of men, He can prophesy a thing to occur in ancient times and bring it to pass today. Only a Being unconstrained by time could carry out such a long-term feat.

Nothing Is Impossible

This gives greater meaning to Jesus' statement in Mark 10:27: "But looking at them, Jesus said, 'With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.'" A God who has no restraint upon His life or power can do awesome things!

Psalms 90 gives us probably the best biblical perspective of time. This Psalm, the only one attributed to Moses, compares how man and God view time and life. His conclusion, of course, is that man and God look at time from entirely different perspectives. It is this difference in point of view that makes a huge difference in how we conduct our lives.

Moses begins by asserting that God is everlasting and almighty (verses 1-2). He can destroy men's lives, and a thousand years later, He resurrects them to life with a word (verses 3-4)! Thousands of years can pass, and God can still bring people back from the dead! Man has no power over death, but God can, has and will overcome time and death by the power of the resurrection. To God, these thousands of years pass swiftly "like yesterday . . . like a watch in the night."

This is far different from man's point of view. "The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away" (verse 10). Ethan, the Psalmist of Psalm 89:47-48, echoes this in his plea to God:

Remember how short my time is; for what futility have You created all the children of men? What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave? Selah.

God is eternal and all-powerful; man is temporary and weak. God sees time passing quickly, yet with a grand purpose. Man, on the other hand, seeing the same swift passage of years, groans in frustration, "Life is futile!" Man sees his death quickly approaching, and he considers himself powerless to stop it (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12).

However, men have a desire to live forever. Solomon writes, "[God] has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Thus, the swift passage of time is a bitter enemy, and death is the end. They have no real hope beyond it. Even though they profess a belief in life after death, they still fear the grave. Why?

Psalm 78:22 provides the answer: "Because they did not believe in God, and did not trust in His salvation." Men fear death because they do not believe that God can save them! They cannot boldly accept death because they are uncertain about the afterlife. They are hopeless and terrified.

Conversely, if we believe that God is our Savior and that eternal life is assured as long as we continue in His ways, death should be a beginning, not an end! God looks positively upon the death of His children: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Psalm 116:15). He is happy that His children have succeeded in their quest for His Kingdom, and now all their trials and pains will be but a memory.

Time and death are no barrier to God! Solomon says comfortingly, "[When a person dies,] the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7; see 3:21; Job 32:8). He keeps that spirit intact and ready to clothe it with a body at the resurrection of the dead (I Corinthians 15:35-49). Nothing is impossible to God!

The Faithful Dead

The Bible gives us several examples of how righteous men of God regard death. Job did not fear death; in fact, he felt death would be a relief from the struggles, infirmities and trials of physical life.

Oh, that You would hide me in the grave, that You would conceal me until Your wrath is past, that You would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait, till my change comes. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands. (Job 14:13-15)

He knew that God would raise him at the appointed time, the first resurrection. He was sure in his redemption; he trusted God to forgive, save and resurrect him. Further, he understood that his life in the Kingdom would be so much superior to his physical life:

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in [from, without, see the Amplified Bible] my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:25-27)

David is another Old Testament example of a righteous man who longed for life beyond the grave:

I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16:8-11)

He makes a similar statement in Psalm 17:15: "As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness."

In the New Testament, Paul was ready anytime God chose to let him die. He writes, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. . . . [T]o depart and be with Christ . . . is far better" (Philippians 1:21, 23). In comparison to the sufferings and persecutions of his physical life, he actually desired the better life that death would eventually bring.

In II Timothy 4:6-8, Paul shows his faith in God's ability and promise to save him, to redeem him from the flesh:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

He knew that his next conscious moment after death—"on that Day"—he would be part of the resurrection to immortality! Each of these men, as well as many other saints in times past, had the "full assurance of faith" and "[held] fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:22-23).

"A Heart of Wisdom"

Have we reached this point? Are we ready to die in faith? Do we believe that God will save us and give us eternal life?

It is certainly natural to fear death, but through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we have been released from this bondage (Hebrews 2:14-15). Death—hopeless and final—really has no claim on us! We will still die physically, but the grave will not be able to hold us once God commands us to rise to immortality (I Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Some may have wondered how the saints in ages past could have died so peacefully in martyrdom—in sometimes very painful and gruesome ways. Here is the answer! They trusted God! They had accepted and believed God's view of death and time, and relied upon His power to bring their resurrection to pass!

In this light, it is interesting to notice how Moses concludes his comparison of God's and man's views of time in Psalm 90:12: "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." We can take this in at least two ways.

1. We most commonly think of this in relation to Paul's admonition in Ephesians 5:16 to "[redeem] the time, because the days are evil." We say this means "use your time wisely because you only have so much of it." This is not wrong.

2. The second way grows out of the clause "that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Wisdom is the right, proper, godly application of knowledge and understanding. It is how we live with or apply what God has revealed to us. Thus, if we properly "number our days," we will live wisely.

To understand this second meaning, we can paraphrase the verse like this: "Help us to understand time and life as you do, so that we can live wisely." If we look at our lives, at our sojourn in the flesh, at our day of salvation, from the same perspective that God does, *we will make the right decisions.*

Paul explains in I Corinthians 2:6-16 that "we have the mind of Christ" because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Now notice what Jesus' godly mind accomplished, acting in faith and hope and love:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. . . . [He] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name . . . to the glory of God the Father.
(Philippians 2:5, 7-9, 11)

The mind of Christ allowed Him 1) to become a man and take on all the weaknesses and temptations of humanity, and 2) to submit to a torture and death as no man has ever experienced. Why? To give glory to God the Father! For this He is exalted above all others.

It is this same mind, this same trust in the Father, that Christ's disciples must have. If we believe that Christ's return is imminent, we must also believe that some will suffer cruelly, even to the point of martyrdom. If we have the mind of Christ, which was willing to obey God to the point of death, death's sting will be "swallowed up in victory" (I Corinthians 15:54-58).

Whether or not we suffer persecution or martyrdom, it is a great consolation to know and believe and trust in God's perspective of time and life.