

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

The Glory and the Dream: Toward Godly Aspiration and Grateful Contentment “Promise and Time, I”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Ephesians 5:1-6; Genesis 12ff.

Take a first look.

I. Time ... and Timing ... Are Everything.

We are living in the stream of history. Though it seems like we can stop the flow of that river in a photograph or a video recording, we cannot really do it. The photograph or the video recording only creates a memory that can be viewed or replayed again. Everything is in flux. The haircut I give myself today will be different next week, because my hair begins to grow again immediately (yes, I am one of those freaky people who cuts his own hair). The shoes we buy for our kids or grandkids will be ready to donate to someone else in about 6 months, since their feet just keep growing. The makeup my wife applies today will need to be removed and reapplied tomorrow, if not “touched up” later today—well, unless she has it tattooed on her face, but even that would change over time as skin ages and stretches. Not that she needs any of these things, mind you, having such natural beauty as “The Fairest Flower in All the Land.” There must be a poem written for her by that title somewhere (oh, that’s right, I wrote one!). The point is: time is a flowing river, not a still pond.

II. Only God stands outside of time. You can take that subject up in the writings of C. S. Lewis or other philosophical folks. What concerns us here is that we must take life “one day at a time.” I took the working title of this series and the book that has emerged from this study, *The Glory and the Dream*, from William Wordsworth’s poem, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. Lines 51-57 run like this:

... But there’s a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Wordsworth, the eventual Poet Laureate of England, was struck with a severe case of longing for the emotion evoked by that place in the past that suggested to him something more, something transcendent. He was looking at a field and a tree that he had remembered as a boy. He looked down at a pansy near his feet. Something was missing: “the glory and the dream” that had stabbed his heart as a boy was no longer there. Where did it go? Why did it leave? Will it return? For Wordsworth, that stab of longing for that ephemeral something that had gone away was an “intimation of immortality.” There must be something somewhere (or Someone) toward which that powerful emotion, recollected in tranquility, points.

III. Something akin to this “sweet desire” for something beyond the temporal world, yet a desire evoked by elements within that world, is what fueled C. S. Lewis’s journey to Christian faith. He drew the title for his spiritual autobiography from another Wordsworth line in the same poem I

have quoted from. Lewis entitled his book, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*.¹ “Joy” is the term Lewis used somewhat technically to describe what he had referred to as “sweet desire” in his allegorical tale, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*.² He argued that such stabs of longing for something that this world cannot quite satisfy are evidence that should be seriously considered as we think about our place in the cosmos. A desire for something that this world cannot satisfy strongly suggests that there is another world toward which that desire is aimed. For him, “This Desire was, in the soul, as the Siege Perilous in Arthur’s castle—the chair in which only one could sit. And if nature makes nothing in vain, the One who can sit in this chair must exist.”³

IV. We live in time, and we long for the eternal, the timeless, the permanent. Here is the challenge of our present human life.

Take a closer look at Promise and Time from Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1, et al.

I. We Must Learn to Discern both Chronos and Kairos. Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Ephesians 5:16

1. There is a longing for the eternal in every heart. Ecclesiastes 3:1-11. The Hebrew Philosopher in the book of Ecclesiastes (i.e., Qoheleth in Hebrew) writes (**Ecclesiastes 3:1** (ESV), “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” And then, he illustrates in that lovely and memorable poetic passage (vv. 2-10), drawing sharp contrasts but reminding the reader that each side of the contrast has its “time”: “a time to be born, and a time to die . . . , a time for war, and a time for peace.” Then, he draws this clear distinction: We live in time, but we long for the eternal. **Ecclesiastes 3:11 says** (NIV, my emphasis), “[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. *He has also set eternity in the human heart*, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”⁴ How exactly has God “set eternity in the human heart,” and how does “eternity” express itself in our experience of passing reality in the stream of time? Wordsworth, Lewis, and Professor Qoheleth seem to agree that part of the answer to those questions is that we all have a constant desire for something that is lasting, something that does not pass with the seasons or even with the end of one human lifespan. Yet, there is nothing in this world that can truly and finally satisfy that longing: “no one can fathom what God has done *from beginning to end*.”

The entire book of Ecclesiastes seems to be the sober reflections coming from a systematic attempt to find in temporary things the satisfaction that can only come from The Eternal. Early in Ecclesiastes, after getting a few laments of “futility of futilities” out of his system, he revealed that he set himself to seek wisdom and its opposites of “madness and folly”

¹ From the poem that begins with these words published in his *Poems* in 1815. It can be read in full here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50285/surprised-by-joy>.

² The Preface to the 1943 edition of *The Pilgrim’s Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1933, 1943, 1958) is worth the price of the book. Lewis defines what he will later come to call Joy, a longing for that which can only be satisfied by God. See his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Harcourt Brace, 1955).

³ Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, p. 10.

⁴ The Hebrew word translated “eternity” has a rich interpretive history. For a thumbnail of the general options, read the footnote in the NET Bible. They are basically these three interpretations, considering factors of grammar and etymology: (1) “eternity,” (2) “the future,” (3) “darkness,” or even possibly (4) “knowledge.” This might be one of those “pay your money and take your choice” matters, since all of these options can be seen to fit the context. Most translations take the first option, though the NET takes #3 and the NIV puts the variation of #3, “ignorance,” in a footnote.

(1:17, ESV). He found that whether he was chasing pleasures, trying to become a Wise Man, or just working hard for a living, he felt like he was chasing the wind (2:17, 26). I suspect that if any of us got so unlucky as to sit down next to this dude at a party, we would lose the buzz rather fast. He had “been there and done that” on just about every conceivable path, and he could wax quite melancholy about it all. Qoheleth would have probably played Kansas at all his parties anyway: “Dust in the wind—all we are is dust in the wind.” Or, “Carry on my wayward son.” *Don’t sit next to Qoheleth, he is Captain Buzzkill.*

2. Temporary things are merely temporary and can be enjoyed only as such. They cannot satisfy this longing for The Eternal. They can be great while they last, but they have a diminishing return.

A—We must not try to get temporary things to satisfy the longing for the eternal.

I—The debauched old soul who lives out his days in a drunken or drug-induced fog is a case in point, or consider **Hugh Hefner**, champion of the “playboy philosophy,” who lived his later life in—and out—of pajamas, or think of the **business magnate** who finally stands at the top of his material mountain and then to everyone’s surprise throws himself off of it into **the volcano**. Encore anxiety? Or is it simply the realization that everything temporary that these people lived for, clawed for, and sacrificed for was a dream. They finally awoke, fell into despair, and brought the pain to a grisly end—or so they hoped it would end. Even Dr. Qoheleth finally confesses that only God can satisfy the soul’s deepest yearning (This theme echoes throughout the book: See Ecclesiastes 3:14-15; 5:1-7; 6:10; 7:13-14; 11:9; 12:1, 12-14). But this is where he returns in the End: “Fear God and keep His commandments”—the pilgrim’s *regress*, back to first principles, back to the Creator of life Himself.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (ESV): “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

3. But we must live in the stream of time. We engage God, though He is eternal, in the day to day of our human experience. Our hopes and dreams take shape one day at a time. We look at our lives and see the possibilities of what human life can be, and we want more of those possibilities to become reality. We set out to make that happen. Hopefully, we are beginning to adjust our aspirations to center on God’s purposes and revealed perspectives, which we glean from salvation-history. In short, hopefully, we are reading our Bibles and learning what really matters in this brief life. What we find to be true, repeated frequently in sacred Scripture, is that God works in human lives according to a clock that is not always in sync with ours. We schedule our work, our vacations, our career paths, our families, and then *stuff happens*. A car accident, an unexpected illness, the death of a loved one, the closing of the business for which we have worked for 15 years, infertility—*stuff happens*. Our aspirations get derailed, delayed, or seem to be permanently quashed. Sorry, I have just finished a review of Ecclesiastes, so it may take me a minute to recover from the gloom.

4. Time and timing belong to God, and we must seek to take this into account each day. As with many terms, the ancient Greeks developed different words to give shades of meaning to a common idea. For the idea of *time*, they had both *Χρόνος* (*chronos*) and *καιρός* (*kairos*). **Chronos represented time measured by the clock.** The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament writings, often referred to as the Septuagint, uses both of these Greek words to translate the Hebrew in Ecclesiastes 3:1 (FVJ): “To all things a time and a season (*chronos* and *kairos*), to every matter under the heaven.” **Kairos denoted time as an occasion**

rather than as an event—not just a day, but a day of significance *Chronos* happens every minute. *Kairos* gives extra importance to some of those minutes.

The Apostle uses this term when he calls his Christian readers to become people of wisdom. In Ephesians 5:15-21, he urges wise behavior in this broken world. Note especially vv. 15-16 (FJV): “¹⁵ Therefore consider carefully how you^p continue to live, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ buying up for yourselves the timely moment, because the days are evil.” What I have translated as “buying up for yourselves the timely moment” has been more simply translated “redeeming the time.”

When the Apostle Paul suggests we “redeem the time,” he uses the term *kairos* for the word “time.” Other modern translations try to get at this specialized term:

- New International Version (see New Living Translation): “making the most of every *opportunity*.”
- English Standard Version (cf. Holman Christian Standard Bible, New American Standard Bible): “making the best use of the *time*.”
- New English Translation: “taking advantage of every *opportunity*.”

As *chronos* ticks past, we come across these moments of *kairos*, when *time* yields to *Timing*. Living in a world of passing time, we should seek to be ready for those important moments.

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II. Chronos and Kairos: A Biblical Example

As we have seen, God is concerned with what kind of people we are becoming, not only what projects we attempt. What we *are* will determine what we will *do* and *how* we will do it. As we develop virtue, our behavior will become virtuous. As virtuous behavior becomes habitual, we are shown to be virtuous people. It really is not a matter of either character *or* action, but it is the development of the kind of character that leads to the right kind of action. Such character is shaped over time (*chronos*). Virtue is forged in those meaningful moments and occasions (*kairos*) that put our character to the test. While the clock is ticking, we often wonder what God is up to. We are in good company when we do. The narratives of salvation-history give us insight on the interplay between the promise of God and the passing of time. Lord willing, we will explore four of these stories, 1 now and 3 next time. The first is about ...

Abraham the Father of Faith. Genesis 12ff.

1. The calling of God to Abraham was amazing! When Abraham was first called by God to set out for The Promised Land, he was 75 years of age (see Genesis 12:4). Considering that he lived for 175 years (Genesis 25:7), we could consider him early middle-aged at that moment of calling. Here is what the LORD said to Abraham: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3, ESV). We can appreciate the gravity of this calling, even while the promise seemed so powerful and appealing. “Leave everything and everyone you have ever known and head out for a land that I will show you ... later.” Even the destination was a little vague. But the promise was spectacular: “I will make of you a great nation ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Pretty heady stuff. We are told that when Abraham and his entourage came to the land of Canaan, the Lord appeared to Abraham and told him, “To your offspring I will give this land” (Genesis 12:7, ESV).

2. The passing of time was hard to endure. Time passed and the initial excitement waned. A famine made Abraham leave for Egypt for a while. Then his nephew Lot separated

from him, moving his family toward the now infamous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. This was followed by a war in which Lot and his family were taken as slaves. Abraham had to save his nephew by warfare (Genesis 14). After all of this, the LORD came to Abraham in a vision and repeated his promise. Abraham complained aloud to God. He wondered how he could become a great nation when he did not even have one child to his name by that time. The LORD showed him the stars in the sky and said, "So shall your offspring be." This brought Abraham to a crisis of faith: "And he believed the LORD, and he [the LORD] counted it to him [Abraham] as righteousness" (Genesis 15:3, ESV).

Genesis 15 records some important factors that would play into the entrance of Abraham's family into The Promised Land. For one, his family would not take possession of the land for more than 400 years in the future. That had to be quite the factoid for Abraham to assimilate. God explained to Abraham that anything sooner would be a travesty of justice for those already living in the land: "for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete," the LORD told him (Genesis 15:16, ESV). In other words, the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and the falling of the judgment of God on the sin of the people living in the land would come together at just the right time—4 centuries into the future. This is an important matter to keep in mind as we think about the justice involved in the conquest of Canaan by the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel. God was planning to use Abraham's descendants to bring judgment on the current inhabitants of the land, but it had to wait until their sin was "complete," until they reached a point of no return. Judging from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 18-19), some of the people seem already to have fallen that low. Yet, there were still people who were not hardened in their sinful thoughts and actions. They would have 4 more centuries before the ax would fall, through the conquest by the people of Israel over the land (see also Leviticus 18:24-30).

I wonder how this expanded and clarified promise struck Abraham? 400 years! That's a long time to wait. He knew he would be long dead by then. In fact, it would be the "fourth generation" that would come back to Canaan (Genesis 15:16).

I—For perspective, this would be the same as if God said to William Shakespeare, "I am going to bless these plays you have written, but not until the year 2000. At that time, they will be performed all over the world, but not until then." Uh, OK. Would he have kept writing under those terms?

3. The lack of any visible fulfillment of the promise tested Abraham's faith. One of the complicating matters of the whole affair was that Abraham still did not have even one child. I don't want to be guilty of TMI, but this could have been a daily issue for Abraham and his wife Sarah.⁵ At first, I suspect that there was some delight in the renewed intimacy between Abraham and Sarah. "Let's get that 'great nation' started, Sweet Cakes!" After a few years, the specter of infertility began to raise its painful and ugly head. Maybe after the encounter of Genesis 15, they had renewed hopes and vigor, but as we see from the evolution of the story, that did not last. The very next chapter, Genesis 16, tells the story of The Hagar Solution. *Chronos* kept clicking by and ... no *kairos*. So, Sarah came up with that "great idea," a convenient and legal plan: Abraham should take Hagar her servant as something of a "wife" and see if she can produce a child. If so, then, *voilà!* the promise of God would be fulfilled. You know, sometimes God needs a little helping hand from human ingenuity. The problem with this human plan to fulfill God's promise was that it was not The Plan. We have already explored this short-circuit to the long route of God's promise, but can we blame them, really? Between the original promise and the birth of Ishmael to Hagar and Abraham, 16 long years—*long years*—

⁵ At that point in the story, she was still called Sarai, but you can read the narrative to get this interesting transition: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah.

had passed. The promise was renewed once (recorded in Genesis 15), but that is the only word from the LORD throughout that 16-year period of waiting. And then, just to put an even sharper edge on the blade that cut Abraham and Sarah to the heart, *another 9 years* would pass before The Plan came together in the birth of Isaac, the Son of Promise.

A—How long are we willing to wait for God’s purposes to take shape in our lives?

I fear that we modern folks, and especially we modern Americans, have no patience for the long game. We are nearly ready to call the FBI’s Missing Persons Division when our **text messages** are not answered within the hour. We are irritated if they are not answered immediately. My daughter complained when she was teaching at the university that students would send her an email message at 10 p.m. and would be upset that it was not answered that evening, despite her repeated reminders that she had *office hours* in which they could ask their questions.

I try not to complain too much about instant information, since I, too, look things up on the search engine loaded on my smart phone and enjoy having that basic info immediately at hand. I feel a little undressed if I walk out the door for the day without my phone in my pocket. So, yes, I am a casualty of the Digital Age (and I don’t think “casualty” is really overstating the matter). Sorry for lumping you into this, too, but our attention spans are badly stunted these days. We just don’t want to wait ... for anything. We are in the age of instant everything, expecting every moment to be charged with ultimate pleasure and value, and God and life really do not work that way. We do not always know why God has not answered the prayers we have kept offering or has not given us the answer that we desire—assuming we have the perseverance in faith to offer the same prayers over and over without just giving up.

Take it home (applications).

I. God is at work in our lives and in His world on His timetable.

God is working *His* Big Plan, including how each of our lives fits into it. He *did* finally come through on His promise to Abraham and Sarah to have a Son, at just the right time and way. By the time it happened, they were beyond human hope that it could still become a reality. Yet, there came both the promise and the dramatic, if not to say miraculous, fulfillment of the promise. Again, I wonder how that first bedroom conversation went for the disillusioned couple after the angel visit when Abe was 99 and Sarah was 89? “Next year at this time you will have a son.” But I digress. The truth is that God works in the world and in every human’s life on His timetable. The “on His timetable” part is the hard element. It is harder now in this instant age, but it has always been difficult.

II. We must trust Him. Can it be said of us what was said of Abraham, “He believed the LORD, and he [the LORD] counted it to him [Abraham] as righteousness”? (Genesis 15:6)?