

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

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

Exodus 2-5; Philippians 3:7-11; Jeremiah 29:11; 2 Peter 3:4-9

Take a first look.

I. The passing of time is a challenge for personal faith. The clock keeps ticking, and sometimes nothing seems to be happening of any real importance. “Does anybody really know what time it is?” sang Robert Lamm of the band Chicago in 1969-70. It feels that way sometimes. But we must not be fooled. God is at work. His plans will not fail. His purposes will be fulfilled in our lives and in His world.

II. We have observed that there are two facets of time: time measured by the clock—*chronos* in Greek, and time measured by its significance—*kairos* in Greek. Both are used to translate the original Hebrew of **Ecclesiastes 3:1: “To everything a *time (chronos)*, and to all things a *season (kairos)* under the heaven” (FJV).**

III. Time (*chronos*) passes while we wait for timing (*kairos*) to be fulfilled. We have seen this in the story of Abraham (see Part I). God called Abraham to leave everything he had ever known and go to a land that God would show him. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation that would be blessing to the whole world. Though he was already middle-aged at the time, he believed the promise from God. Yet, 25 years passed before Abraham and his wife Sarah had their first son. That is a long time to wait. Yet, God fulfilled His promise in the miracle of Isaac—little “Laughter.”

IV. Abraham was not alone in the stories of Scripture about waiting for God’s purposes to be fulfilled in His timing. Let’s take a closer look at other scenes from Scripture that inspire patience and perseverance, as well.

Take a closer look at Promise, Time, and Timing in the story of Moses.

I. Moses became the Prince of Egypt and the unlikely deliverer of God’s people. Exodus 2-5

1. *Timeline: Fast forward from Abraham and Sarah to about 3 and a half centuries later.* The scene has shifted from Canaan to Egypt. You can review the early history of Moses from the book of Exodus (especially chapters 2-5).

2. *Moses was providentially saved from infanticide in Egypt and was raised by the daughter of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.* Then he was nursed by his own mother (one evidence of the truth of the story is that you just cannot make this stuff up).

3. *At age 40, he went out to look on the burdens of his true people and see what he could do to help them.* Clearly, the influence of his biological mother was at work in this aspect of the plot, or how would he have known that the people of Israel were his true people? He came upon an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, looked this way and that, and struck down the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand (Exodus 2:11-12). As one man quipped, it might take a

while to deliver the Hebrews one Egyptian at a time; but I would add, heck, you have to start somewhere.

4. When this became news, even the Pharaoh wanted to take Moses down, and so he fled far away to the land of Midian. This was to the east all the way across the Sinai Peninsula. He ran until he could barely keep running. He then settled in Midian as though he would live out his days in the relative obscurity of that distant place. Doubtless, flashes of his former life of royal luxury crossed his mind from time to time, but these probably became a dim and fuzzy memory.

5. Then, 40 years later, God called Moses from a burning thorn-bush. Moses had new people now. All those wonderful stories that his mother must have secretly told him about his birth and true identity had faded into a meaningless blur. Those stories were as far away as the palace in Egypt. Now, he was nothing but a sheep herder. Long before, herding sheep was abhorrent to the Egyptians (see Genesis 46:34). Was it still? *How low can you go!?*

And then the Burning Bush. The Voice in the fire claimed to be that of the LORD, the Self-existent One, "I Am Who I Am." "Lead My people out of slavery into the Promised Land." Moses had become so demoralized that he gave the LORD every excuse he could think of as to why he was the wrong guy for the job. "Who am I now?" "They won't believe me when I tell them this implausible story." "I am not an eloquent man." And in the end, "Please send someone else!" (See Exodus 3-4). That final statement is what we all do when we have run out of viable excuses but *still* do not want to follow God's calling on our lives. I hope that you do not mind the pointed conclusion, but here it is: From God's point of view all these excuses are BS. Moses finally quit whining and surrendered. He was now 80 years of age, and he had nothing left of his former glory but the calling of God. And in his hand was what was formerly his shepherd's staff. It was now called "the staff of God" (see Exodus 4:20). This was not the end of Moses' story, because for the next 40 years, he wandered about the desert with the people of Israel before God would allow them to enter the Promised Land. *Time and timing.*

A—As with Moses, God can still fulfill His purposes in our lives, if we are willing to surrender to Him.

I—The Apostle Paul could compare notes with Moses. Look again at his letter to the Philippians (from which the foundational ideas of this study are drawn). Paul wrote about his own human pedigree in chapter 3. As Ben Witherington, III, observed in his book *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus*, the people of the first-century world evaluated a person's value, and hence social power, from three criteria: *gender, generation, and geography*.¹ A man born to the right father in the right city was a shoe-in for power and prestige. Paul seemed to have all of this—until he made his crazy declaration of faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ. Then all those human benefits were of no importance. After his dramatic conversion, almost overnight he became a spiritual and cultural pariah to all the people whose affirmation he had courted before. The man who had hunted down the followers of Jesus became himself the prey. All he had left was ... the Lord Himself, and a willingness to trust Him and obey His calling. Here is how he put it (**Philippians 3:7-11**, FJV):

But whatever things were gain for me, these things I have come to consider loss on account of the Christ. But more than that, I am even considering all things to be loss on account of the surpassing greatness of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, on

¹ Ben Witherington, III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 31. He quotes from a study by Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), pp. 153-74.

account of whom I have suffered the loss of all things; and I consider them rubbish, in order that I might gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness from law but rather that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God on the basis of that faith—to come to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering, to be conformed to His death—if somehow I might make my own the resurrection from the dead.

Added to this, he acquired a chronic illness that would not go away despite his repeated prayers for healing. He wrote (**2 Corinthians 12:8-9a**, ESV), “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” So, Paul expressed his resigned response of faith in a paradox: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10b, ESV). *Aspiring for more, grateful for less.*

Now fast forward about 6 centuries from the time of Moses and the Exodus to a time around 6 centuries before Jesus was born. The people of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, were finally at their end.

II. God sent His people into exile for 70 years. Jeremiah 29:11

1. The people of the nation were being punished for their idolatry by being sent into exile. The prophet Jeremiah is called The Weeping Prophet for all the tears he shed for the impending judgment from God coming on His people. They had turned away from the LORD and had become morally and spiritually corrupt as a result. God’s judgment was soon to fall upon them, and Jeremiah was sent to announce that judgment. He spent 40-plus years crying out for corporate and personal change, with little or no response. If modern standards for church-growth and church-planting were applied to Jeremiah, he would be judged to be a dismal failure. He spent 4 decades at earnest service to God and the people and had nothing to show for it except tears, scars, and humiliation.

Yet, he was right where he belonged doing exactly what God had called him to do, with predictable results. God had told Jeremiah right from the start that he would become blue in the face prophesying against his own people and no one would listen (see Jeremiah, chapter 1). To make this worse, God told Jeremiah repeatedly *not* to pray for the people, because it was too late. Their sin had become too entrenched.

Jeremiah 7:16 (NIV): “So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you.”

Jeremiah 11:14: “Do not pray for this people or offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their distress.”

Jeremiah 14:11-12: “Then the LORD said to me, ‘Do not pray for the well-being of this people.’¹² Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague.”

If success is determined by measurable results in the here-and-now, Jeremiah failed. However, if success is determined by faithfulness to our calling, he was wildly successful. What more could we joyfully anticipate than the words found in Jesus’ parable of the talents: “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matthew 25:21, 23, ESV)?

2. God promised that the people would return to their land after the exile in 70 years. Jeremiah 29 records the text of a letter that the LORD commissioned Jeremiah to write to the people of Israel who had been carried away into exile. It seemed that all was lost. Their entire history lay in a heap. Jerusalem and the great temple built by Solomon were burned to the ground. These survivors must have been disillusioned to the extreme. And here came a messenger from that pesky prophet Jeremiah, who had told them that all these terrible things

would happen, and whom they had not believed. Now, he sent them a prophetic letter. Perhaps they were expecting something like, “I told you so!” But instead, he gave them hope. He told them to “build houses ..., plant gardens ..., take wives and have sons and daughters ... seek the welfare of the city” where the LORD had sent them into exile, and “pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:5-7, ESV). He told them that 70 years would pass before they could return to the land. But after that time, “I will visit you,” the LORD assured them, “and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place” (v. 10, ESV). Then comes that famous and oft quoted saying (**Jeremiah 29:11, ESV**), “**For I know the plans I have for you ... to give you a future and a hope.**” This promise is great reassurance for those people who were suffering the consequences brought on by their rebellious unbelief and the moral corruption and the judgment of God that came with it all. But *it would not be fulfilled until those 70 years had passed*. *Chronos* would give way to *kairos* in their future, *but not for 7 decades*.

A—God has good plans, but they might take longer than we expect, and they might involve suffering.

I—We must learn to “plan with a pencil.” When we now read Jeremiah 29:11, we can certainly take away the insight that God is merciful and that His good purposes are going to work out for His people in His good time. That is not a bad thing to have on our t-shirts. But, if we are sensitive to the historical context of that statement, we will also remember that His good purposes may include some remedial punishment and a time of waiting that might even go beyond our own lifespan. We do not get to notate on our planning calendars just when God’s merciful intervention will happen. We can write down our hopes and plans, but we should do so with a *pencil*. As God rearranges our schedules to fit The Plan, we will most likely get to **erase much of what we have written in the datebook**. Even with a digital calendar, the principle of *Planning with a Pencil* is a sound one for those who believe in the sovereignty, mercy, love, and purposes of God. Now, let’s take an even wider and longer look.

III. Here comes the Messiah ... in a few centuries.

1. The coming of the Messiah/Christ is a repeated theme in the Hebrew Scriptures.

One of the strong supports for faith in Jesus is the number of times the prophetic writings of the Old Covenant Scriptures point ahead to the coming of the Anointed One, the Messiah/Christ. He would be Prophet-Priest-King, all in One, “anointed” by the Creator-God for His task (“Christ” [Greek] and “Messiah” [Hebrew] mean “Anointed One”). Many of these prophecies are cited by the authors of the books of the New Testament as evidence for the claim that Jesus was and is the Christ that was expected to come. Many Christian interpreters of the book of Genesis find the first such prophecy embedded in the story of the Fall of Humanity. Genesis 3:15 (ESV) records the LORD saying to the serpent-tempter,

“I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”

About the best that the Tempter could do in the long run would be to bruise the heel of the Promised One. The Promised One would “bruise” or crush the Tempter’s head. Sounds like maybe it goes worse for the snake in that encounter. This hint of a future Savior shows something of the same pattern of hope-in-judgment proclaimed by Jeremiah and other prophets during the epochs before Jesus’ coming. They often seemed to say, “Yes, this is a bad day, but just wait; a future is coming that will be glorious.” Or, in the hearing of the first human couple,

“Well, it looks like the snake wins today, but he will get his due in the long run.” Yet, it would be millennia before that promise would be fulfilled.

2. It would be a long time before those prophecies were fulfilled. Thousands of years passed between the first prophecy and its fulfillment, between the first generation of humanity and the coming of Jesus. Every time the promise of the Messiah was repeated, it both reinforced hope and generated possible disillusionment—since it still lay in the distant future. Isaiah’s prophecies regarding the Messiah (notable Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6) are significantly quoted in the New Testament Writings. The estimate of time that elapsed between Isaiah’s prophecies and the coming of Jesus is about 7 centuries. The time recorded between the final prophecy of the Old Covenant Writings (Malachi) and Jesus’ coming is about 4 centuries. 4 centuries of ... *silence*. That is a lot of *chronos*.

Then, suddenly in the flow of history, a moment of *kairos* comes: an angel of the Lord appears to a band of inconsequential shepherds, and that angel gives this astounding message (Luke 2:10-11, ESV, my emphasis): “Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born *this day* in the city of David a *Savior*, who is *Christ the Lord*.” The waiting was over; the Christ had come! Still, the angel came to announce His *birth*. It would be 3 full decades before the impact of that coming would be felt and understood. *Chronos* would yield to *kairos*, but not until the boy had become a man.

A—The prophecies regarding the Messiah should remind us of two things: (1) God keeps His promises, and (2) He does so *in His time*.

I—Paul compares this to the rite of passage from child to adult, or from orphan to adopted child in Galatians 4:1-8. In verses 4-5 (FJV), it says, “But when *the fullness of the time (chronos) came*, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under law, in order that He might redeem those under law, that we might receive the adoption.”

“When the fullness of the time came,” *chronos* gave way to *kairos* and the Messiah was born!

IV. Here Comes the Son ... Again. Acts 1:11; 2 Peter 3:1-11

1. We now await the return of Jesus Christ in power and glory. Acts 1:11. After the final appearance of Jesus to His disciples after He was raised from the dead, he was taken up into glory. Here is what the angel told the disciples on that occasion (**Acts 1:11, FJV**): “**Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the heaven? This Jesus who was taken up into heaven, in this manner will come in which you saw him going into the heaven.**” Since then, a lot of people have “[stood] looking into the heaven” to try to figure out just *when* Jesus will be back (“Come, Lord Jesus!”).

2. No one has correctly guessed the time yet. An earnest Baptist layman named William Miller got out his pen and paper in the early 1800s and figured that Jesus would come again in 1843. His calculations were ingenious, convincing to a lot of people on both sides of the Atlantic, and quite wrong. The Adventist Movement was born of his efforts to determine the exact time of Jesus’ coming.

Another 130-ish years went by and the spirit of Adventism was revived. In 1970, Hal Lindsey published his book, *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, with a new approximate date for Jesus’ return. Lindsey and others of the same prophetic stripe calculated a time in the late 1980s or soon thereafter for the return of Jesus, based on the time that Israel was reconstituted as a nation in 1948. The *Left Behind* books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins were released to

a very wide readership from 1995-2007, and many read them as having the same authority as the New Testament. Not by me, however, because, though these Christian men were well-meaning, they were writing an End Times interpretation of the future as though it had already happened. And it has not happened. So, ...

A—We should put away our calculators and be ready always for the return of Jesus. This is what *aspiring for more* and being *grateful for less* demands.

I—Here’s why: Jesus Himself told us to do so. In a short essay entitled, “The World’s Last Night,”² C. S. Lewis summarized the teaching of Jesus clearly and well:

“His teaching on the subject quite clearly consisted of three propositions. **(1) That he will certainly return. (2) That we cannot possibly find out when. (3) And that therefore we must always be ready for him.**”³

These principles bear repeating in our time and place. We should keep our hands on the plough in the field of the Lord and cast an eye upon the horizon from time to time. “Come, Lord Jesus!”

Let’s give the final word today to the Apostle Peter (**2 Peter 3:4a, FJV**): “Where is the promise of his coming?”⁴ Peter says that this question by “scoffers” is evidence of “the last days.” In other words, why the long delay? Then, he affirms that the reason for the delay in Jesus’ coming again rests in the nature of God’s sense of time and timing, along with His desire to save people:

“But stop letting this one thing escape you^p, beloved, that in the sight of the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. The Lord of the promise does not hesitate, as some people consider hesitation, but He is being patient toward you^p, not wishing anyone to perish but all people to make room for repentance.”

In the meantime, as we wait and hope for people everywhere to “make room for repentance,” we should live fully and expectantly (**2 Peter 3:8-9, FJV, my emphasis**):

“With all these things being destroyed in this way, *what kind of people ought you^p to be in holy ways of living and acts of godliness⁵, while waiting for and hastening the appearance of the day of God*, by which the heavens will be destroyed with burning and the elements will melt in the heat? But we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth according to His promise, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:8-9, FJV).

We are surely taught to expect God to bring about His purposes for humanity, but it will be in His good and proper *time*. How much *chronos* must pass before this *kairos* arrives? We do not know and cannot know. So, let’s be ready now and always.

Take it home (applications).

I. We must trust God to work out His great plan in our lives and in His world *in His time*.

II. We must live as His holy people while He does so.

² Find this essay in C. S. Lewis, *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁴ NIV translates, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised?” NET, “Where is his promised return?”

⁵ Both of these Greek terms are plural. As A. T. Robertson points out, this is the only place in the NT where either one is plural. Both *conduct* (ἀναστροφᾶς) and *godliness* (εὐσεβείας) have multiple manners of expression.