

## **The Biblical Concept of "Time"**

**Human beings are creatures of "time," and we are preoccupied with that theme. We wear watches so that we can keep account of "time." We ask regarding the criminal: "How much 'time' did he get?" And we muse: "How much 'time' do I have left?" Our music contemplates this theme. We sing that "time goes on," and at the same time lament that "time has stood still since we've been apart."**

**The concept of time has been problematic for philosophers. There is even considerable controversy among biblical scholars as to precisely how "time" is employed in the divine scheme of things.**

### **The Beginning and the End**

**One thing is certain, the Scriptures make a distinction between the "temporal" and the "eternal." Paul says that the things that are seen are "temporal" but the things not seen are "eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). In describing God, the psalmist declares: ". . . from everlasting to everlasting, you are God . . ." (Psa. 90:2). Yet, in the same context, of man it is said: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten . . ." (v. 10). "Time" clearly does not relate to God and man in the same way.**

**Eternity is endless, but time is measured by a "beginning" and an "end." The Bible commences with these words: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Jesus once said: "But from the beginning of the creation, Male and female made he them" (Mk. 10:6).**

**By way of contrast, in some sense, there will be an end. In the Parable of the Tares, Christ said that the "harvest" represented the "end of the world" (Mt. 13:39). Elsewhere the Lord announced: "He that rejects me and receives not my sayings, has one that judges him: the word that I spoke, the same shall judge him in the last day" (Jn. 12:48).**

**In an epistle to the saints at Corinth, Paul discussed the concept of the future resurrection of the body, which, he affirmed, will occur at the time of the Lord's "coming" (1 Cor. 15:23). In that connection, the apostle writes: "Then comes the end, when he shall deliver the kingdom to God . . ." (v. 24).**

**There is a span, an era, between the "beginning" and the "end," which, for lack of a better expression, is called "time." Carl F.H. Henry characterized time as "the divinely created sphere of God's preserving and redemptive work, and the arena of man's decision on his way to an eternal destiny" (p. 524).**

### **The Flow of Time**

**Some folks, both of the ancient world and in the modern era, have viewed "time" in a sense that is different from what is portrayed in the Bible. In the Scriptures, time is represented as a linear experience, whereas many have contended that time is cyclic, that is, it involves a series of revolutions that occur again and again. Let us look at this closer.**

***“There are three beliefs about what happens after death: annihilation, which holds that nothing happens because there is no reality outside the world of matter; resurrection, the Christian belief that a person’s mortal body is transformed into an immortal one; and reincarnation, which theorizes that death is a passage to cyclical but unending rebirth” (Chandler, p. 262).***

***The notion of cyclical time is common to religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, and it has become popular in the modern “New Age” movement.***

***For example, in the Eastern Yogic tradition, Hindus believe that when a person dies, his soul (which, allegedly, is eternal) “transmigrates” into a different body. This may happen hundreds of times, but, hopefully, with each new “reincarnation” the soul is progressively purged by one’s “Karma” until finally, it merges with “God,” who is the “Soul of Souls.” This aspect of Hinduism is called the “wheel of life.”***

***In summary, eastern mysticism views human existence as a “wheel” with continuous revolutions; biblical revelation affirms that human existence is proceeding down a “road” that has an ultimate goal. Another way to analogize the contrast is to suggest that Christianity sees life as a three-act play, consisting of birth, death, and immortality. Hinduism, on the other hand, views man’s existence as an endless, cyclical drama (Bach, p. 22).***

***How, then, might one define “time” from the biblical perspective? Time may be represented as a historical era, commencing with the creation (Gen. 1:1), and concluding (so far as its present constitution is concerned) with the second coming of Christ, at which point the present world order will have been terminated (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8-13). Perhaps another way to explain it is to suggest that “time” is a historical parenthesis within eternity.***

#### ***The “Phases” of Time***

***There are different ways of looking at the time that is consistent with biblical revelation. It is, for instance, advantageous to divide pre-Christian history into periods that are marked by significant events.***

***Paul spoke of the “times” that preceded the redemptive mission of Jesus (Eph. 1:10). The apostle employs the term kairos (frequently rendered “seasons” - KJV), which generally denotes an era characterized by certain features (cf. Vine, p. 708). There was, for example, a “period of beginnings” that featured the early centuries of earth’s history, during which significant events like the creation, the fall of man, the great flood, etc. occurred. There was a span that might be characterized as “the Hebrew family,” in which the lives of certain prominent patriarchs were chronicled. The Hebrews passed through a stage known as “Egyptian bondage,” followed by “the wilderness wandering,” and then the “conquest of Canaan,” etc. There was the era of the united kingdom, and subsequently that of Israel and Judah. And so, Old Testament history was delineated by distinct “times.”***

***On the other hand, it is also possible to view human history in terms of “phases.” Three distinct phases may be considered.***

## **Preparatory**

***There first was a phase that may be described as the preparatory period of history. This embraces all of that time before the first advent of Christ, during which God was working out those providential events which would facilitate the Savior's mission.***

***Consider, for example, Paul's point in Galatians 3. The apostle affirms:***

***"But before faith came, we were kept in ward under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterward be revealed. So that the law becomes our tutor [schoolmaster - KJV] to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor" (v. 23-25).***

***The word "tutor" translates the Greek term paidagogos, and neither "tutor" nor "schoolmaster" does justice to the significance of the original word. The Greek means "a servant leader," and it signifies the role of a slave who functioned as the "custodian" (RSV) of the child, being responsible for the moral and physical well-being of the youngster until he reached the age of maturity (cf. Vine, p. 422; Barclay, p. 33-34).***

***The Old Testament regime, with its hundreds of prophecies (cf. Lk. 24:27,44), and its great collection of "types," i.e., pictorial aids (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6; Heb. 9:1-10) wonderfully prepared the ancient world for the arrival of the Savior. The explosive growth of the early church was no accident.***

## **Fulfillment**

***Following the preparatory phase of human history, there was the fulfillment era. This was a time when the divine plan of salvation was set into motion. The early portion of Mark's Gospel account affirms that Jesus came into Galilee preaching the "gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled" (1:14-15). Paul described the culmination of Jehovah's redemptive system in the following way: ". . . [B]ut when the fulness of time came, God sent forth his Son . . ." (Gal. 4:4).***

***The apostle has a more elaborate statement in Ephesians 1:9-10. There he argues that God has made known to us the mystery of his will. The term "mystery" denotes the more obscure suggestions of the divine plan in Old Testament times, as compared with the full revelation of that system under the New Testament economy.***

***The heavenly plan was focused "in him" (i.e., in Christ), in anticipation of a forthcoming "dispensation." "Dispensation," as here used, refers to a "plan of salvation" (Arndt, p. 562; cf. McCord's Translation). The divine "plan of salvation" was to become effective when the "fulness of the times" was realized, at which point "all things" were to be "summed up" in the work of Christ.***

***The writer of Hebrews asserted that Christ, "at the end of the ages," was manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (9:26). With the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's great system of deliverance from sin was implemented. It only remains for honest human beings to submit to***

***the conditions imposed.***

### **Consummation**

***Ultimately, the consummation of the divine purpose for history will occur. "Time" is moving towards a goal that will be realized at the time of Christ's return. In that connection, Paul affirms: "Then comes the end when he shall deliver up the kingdom to God . . ." (1 Cor. 15:24). What is "the end" here contemplated? It is the end of the world, the consummation of the work of redemption.***

***The Lord's return will signal the end of:***

***(1) Time (as that term is used concerning earth's history) - Jesus spoke repeatedly about the coming "last day" (Jn. 6:39-40,44,54; 12:48).***

***(2) The Universe - The created universe will "perish" (Heb. 1:11). The elements will be "dissolved" (2 Pet. 3:10-11) and "pass away" (Mt. 24:35; Rev. 21:1).***

***(3) Earthly Suffering - All the ravages associated with this sinful environment will be eliminated (Rev. 7:16-17; 21:4).***

***(4) Physical Death - Death, as man's final enemy, will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26).***

***(5) Deceptive Teaching - The deceptive doctrines that have confused and destroyed souls will be vanquished (Rev. 20:3).***

***(6) Opportunity for Salvation - The door of opportunity for spiritual reconciliation with the Creator will be closed (Mt. 25:10; Heb. 9:27).***

### **The Nature of Time**

***There is a considerable misunderstanding in society concerning the nature of time. Time simply is; it cannot do anything. Time provides the historical framework in which things happen, but time has no innate ability itself. To express the same thought in different words: time is quantitative, not qualitative. This is the most important distinction with several implications.***

### **Creation**

***It is common for materialists to assert, in attempting to explain the origin of the material universe, that, given enough time, the inorganic matter might create itself. A similar view is entertained regarding the commencement of biological life. Some years ago, Dr. George Wald of Harvard University penned an article titled, "The Origin of Life," which appeared in the prestigious journal, Scientific American. Wald argued that it is possible that "life" spontaneously generated itself. How was that "miracle" accomplished? Hear him explain it.***

***"However improbable we regard this event [the accidental origin of life], or any of the steps which it involves, given enough time it will almost certainly happen . . . Time is the hero of the plot . . . Given so much time,***

***the 'impossible becomes possible, the possible becomes probable, and the probable virtually certain. One has only to wait: time itself performs the miracles(p. 49; emp. WJ).***

***This is an absurdity that defies all logic. How can mere "time" provide the process by which the inorganic is transformed into the organic. There is not a shred of evidence that such ever has happened or that it could. Time may facilitate, but it cannot create.***

### **Regeneration**

***If the concept of Darwinism were true, and nature's "evolutionary powers" were continuously refining earth's biological creatures, one might anticipate that species would be getting progressively vigorous. After all, evolution's major principle is supposed to be developed utilizing natural selection, i.e., the "survival of the fittest." The fact is, however, the whole record of earth's history is a sad scene of degeneration. This is indicated both by the biblical record and in the "library of the rocks," i.e., the geologic record.***

***According to the Genesis account, before the Flood, the patriarchs lived much longer than we do. Adam was 930 when he died, and Methuselah was 969. Some, influenced by theological modernism, argue that these numbers are inflated (Clayton, p. 11-13), but there is no reason to adopt such a view. The Mosaic narrative has been demonstrated to be reliable in numerous details. Archaeological data from ancient Sumer tell of kings who once reigned for fabulously long periods. While these texts contain obvious exaggerations, "they may well be a legendary account of the fact revealed in the Bible that people did live to greater ages in early times" (Free & Vos, p. 38).***

***In addition, a pattern of degeneration is seen in the fossil record relating to both plants and animals.***

***bq. "The fossils, regarded as a whole, invariably supply us with types larger of their kind and better developed in every way than their nearest modern representatives, whether of plants or animals" (Price, p. 206).***

***This fact is not even disputed. Several examples illustrate the point. Some ancient locusts had a wingspan of over seven inches; dragonflies had bodies more than a foot long, with wings spanning some two feet. There were frogs in the ancient world close to ten feet long. The mammoth was twice the weight of the largest modern elephant and a third taller. The great Canadian geologist, Sir William Dawson, declared that the geological record reveals that "degeneracy is the rule rather than the exception" (Price, p. 211).***

***Some speculate that "given enough time" man will overcome his physical ills and human longevity will once again span centuries. That is a fantasy. Three thousand years ago the human lifespan was seventy to eighty years (cf. Psa. 90:10). Even in our modern America, the healthiest nation on the planet, we have not been able to expand these figures. "Time" has been impotent to heal us.***

## **Redemption**

**As we again contemplate the fact that time is only quantitative, and not qualitative, we must make the following observation. Many people, observing that the guilt of their religious and moral misdeeds appears to be assuaged with time, labor under the illusion that the calendar somehow has redemptive power. That is not the case. No amount of “time” can atone for sin. One eventually may be able to live with his sin more comfortably — after all the conscience can be seared (1 Tim. 4:2) — but the culpability for the evil remains.**

**Jesus once told a parable about a man who owed his master a debt of staggering proportions — about 10 million dollars in modern currency. When the problem was detected, and he was faced with the prospect of being sold into slavery (along with his family), he fell before his lord and pled: “. . . Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything . . .” (Mt. 18:26). He felt that “time” could remedy his problem.**

**In that story, the king represents God and the debtor is every person who has sinned (which is each accountable individual). The point is this: There could never be enough time to pay off the sin debt. “Time” can’t handle a problem of that nature. “Time” never remedied a single sin in the several thousand years of pre-Christian history. This is evidenced by the fact that evil required the death of the Son of God, and Jesus’ sacrifice was for “all” (1 Tim. 2:6). No one was thus exempt from that need.**

**Another aspect of this matter is this: “Time” cannot alter true morality. It is common to hear folks argue that whereas abortion was once viewed with horror, now such is accepted because we are living in a different “time.” Capricious divorce, at an earlier age, was disdained; now, it is commonplace. Sexual scandal on the part of public officials used to be severely censured; now, who cares? — so long as the economy is healthy. A popular song of some years back said: “. . . time changes everything . . .” There are things that time cannot change, and moral responsibility is one of them.**

## **The Accommodation of Time**

**As we observed earlier, though time itself possesses no intrinsic power, it can provide the opportunity for other forces to work effectively.**

**For example, God, who fearfully and wonderfully designed the human body (Psa. 139:14), has built within the biological mechanism remarkable recuperative abilities. But, unlike the case of a miracle — which produces an instantaneous effect — in the providential order of things, time is required for the body to heal. Too, time soothes many wounds of the heart which, in the event of a tragedy, may seem unbearable initially.**

**There is another aspect of time that is intriguing. It facilitates the acceleration of knowledge on the part of human beings. We differ from all other biological organisms in that we accumulate knowledge with the passing of each generation. We can accomplish things today (e.g., space travel, transplant surgery, computer technology) that our ancestors never dreamed of centuries ago.**

***By way of contrast, your dog or cat has no greater intellectual capacity than did his ancestors of two millennia ago. This implies two things:***

***(1) Humans are unique; they are not mere animals. They have intellectual powers unparalleled.***

***(2) We have a serious responsibility to use our knowledge wisely — in the service of God. There is a high price to pay when we do not!***