



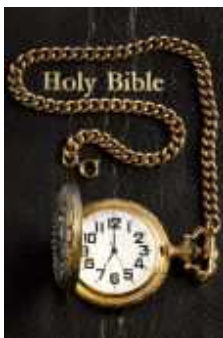
What Is Time?

“He has set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”
Ecclesiastes 3:11

What is time? Who can easily and briefly explain it? Who even in thought can comprehend it, even to the pronouncing of a word concerning it? But what in speaking do we refer to more familiarly and knowingly than time? And certainly we understand when we speak of it; we understand also when we hear it spoken of by another. What, then, is time?

Saint Augustine

Someone once called time “a historical parenthesis within eternity.” There is no way that we can escape its control, no way that we can stretch its boundaries, and no way that we can avoid its influence. What in our lives can we say is not



affected by time? At conception the clock begins ticking until birth, precisely nine months later. Every day lasts 24 hours, no less and no more. Our age is determined by the number of years we have lived. Our days are divided into minutes and hours as we arrive at work at a certain time, we eat lunch at a

designated time, we struggle through rush hour because everyone else is on a schedule too, and to relax, we turn on our televisions to watch programs that begin at precise times. Airports are crowded with people carefully noting the flight arrivals and

departures. We are well aware that every food will spoil at its own time. Farmers purchase seeds aware of the number of days until they mature. Trees sprout and drop leaves at the same time each year. We know precisely when there will be a full moon, and when the tides will recede. Truly everything around us is subject to the ticking of the clock.

Over the years we have brought time into our language. We know what is meant by bedtime, dinnertime, playtime, daytime and nighttime. We enjoy halftime, mealtime and summertime, and wait impatiently for showtime and springtime. There are also timeless clichés that deal with it. For instance, we all know that time is money so we seldom have time to burn. We race against time for fear that time is running out. Closing time upsets us at least for the time being. We also become pressed for time because we try to always be right on time!

We know what time is, but how do we define time? A dictionary puts it this way: “Time is the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole.” A comedian said it this way, “Time is nature’s way of keeping everything from happening all at once.” Although difficult to define, most people have a simple concept of time. It is a rhythm that our lives follow, and it includes three ever-changing moments we call the past, present, and future. For the believer, however, there is more to it. The idea of time becomes far more important,

because the Bible deals not only with the restrictions of time here on earth (our past, present, and future), but also with the idea of **timelessness** that it calls eternity (where there is neither a past, present, nor future). For the Christian, death is the bridge that connects the temporal and the eternal, the place bound in time with the place outside of those boundaries. Meanwhile, our limited (time oriented) minds struggle with such heavenly concepts. *“He has set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from the beginning to end”* (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

How does time play an important role in your life? Are you a clock watcher? How is the Christian’s view of time different from that of the unbeliever?

Beginning and End of Time

Isn’t it interesting that the third word in the Bible already deals with the concept of time? ***“In the beginning. . .”*** tells us that prior to this moment, there was no time measurement. If we follow the activity during each of the six days of creation, we find a sequencing of time taking place in the repeated words: “and there was evening, and there was morning.” Thus, time was set in motion at creation.

Evolutionists claim that our world began not at the beginning of time, but **WITHIN** or **DURING** time. (They estimate that happened maybe millions, maybe billions of years ago.) God tells us that this world began **WITH** time. (Read Job 38 and discuss the unfathomable wonders of God’s creation.)

On day four of creation, God gave special significance to time as he created the sun, moon, and stars. Although time was already in motion, these three wonders were intended not only to give light to the earth, but also to aid in measuring time. *“Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years”* (Genesis 1:14). Before the day of wrist watches and wall clocks, the sundial measured the movement of the **sun** and gave a fairly accurate reading of the time of day. By following the movement of **stars** around the North Star, man learned to also calculate time and seasons. Lunar clocks which study the phases of the **moon** and tide movement also provide accurate measurements of time. Not only do these heavenly bodies provide us logical divisions into days and years, but they also provide seasons for us to plant and harvest our crops. Thus, the sun, moon and stars were created to assist us in dividing our time into days, years, and seasons.

But these three timepieces will not last forever. In fact, they will announce the end of time, each playing an important role as judgment day nears. Jesus said, *“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. . . the heavenly bodies will be shaken”* (Luke 21:25,26). At the end of the world these three timepieces will be snuffed out. Jesus further tells us in Matthew 24:29, *“Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’”* That moment will mark the end of time as we know it. This world’s time will cease. Instead we will be alive in eternity, where these time pieces will no longer be necessary, *“The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp”* (Revelation 21:23).

Name ways in which the sun, moon, and stars can be used to tell time.

Time in Eden

In the beautiful Garden of Eden God placed the tree of life that would offer eternity to those who ate from it. However, after the fall, God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden and therefore had to *“guard the way to the tree of life”* (Genesis 3:24). With that punishment came all sorts of problems. Sin would now taint God’s entire creation, and time was no exception. Time would now bring about terrible consequences as the world would begin to age. Man and woman would now begin to experience wrinkles, graying hair, aches, pains, and illnesses that come with old age. *“Men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age”* (Zechariah 8:4). Memories of the past would begin to haunt them, and worries of the future would bring grief to them. Homes would age, clothing would wear out, and food would spoil over time. Animals would grow old and die, all as a result of the unstoppable aging process. After the fall, earth began to witness an unavoidable consequence of time—aging. *“In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth. . . they will all wear out like a garment. . . but you remain the same, and your years will never end”* (Psalm 102:25-27).

Yet we are thankful that along with God’s curse came a hidden blessing. Thanks to the passing of time, people would now have a time of grace, a time to discover the love of God found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God did not want

his creatures to live on this earth forever under the curse of sin. What would life be like if sinful man could never die? Instead God turned this curse into a blessing that would eventually lead to eternal life in heaven, where we will once again have an opportunity to eat from the tree of life. *“To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God”* (Revelation 2:7).

Name some ways in which sin has affected time. How can death be considered a blessing? What if we would never die while in our sinful state?

Man’s Time

Everyone has a place reserved on the earth’s timeline. God has designated a beginning and an end of life for every man and woman. (The only exceptions are Enoch, Elijah, and those who are living on the last day.)

For each of us, time is a movement that shows continual change. We move from the future to the present and from the present to the past. There is no way we can ever relive moments that have already passed, or see things in the future before they happen. Those are the constraints within which we live. People live in a world of beginnings and endings.

The unbelieving world thinks it can control time and its so-called destiny. But that is one of Satan’s lies. The Bible tells us that *“Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails”*

(Proverbs 19:21).

No cryonic suspension (keeping life frozen), life support, or special scientific methods

can avoid God’s timeline. *“Man’s days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed”* (Job 14:5).

Knowing that God is in control of our time serves to keep us aware of just how fleeting our time here on earth is. *“Show me, O Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you”* (Psalm 39:4,5).

Regardless of the number of years we live, God has a special plan and purpose for each of us. As his people, we number our days that we might

use each of them to the fullest for his glory and for his kingdom. As believers, we gladly surrender our time to God’s divine knowledge. *“My times are in your hands,”* writes David (Psalm 31:15). *“You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. . . All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be”* (Psalm 139:15,16). While we do not know what the future holds, we know who holds the future. Our future will be filled with wonders we could not have anticipated, but with the Lord, we know it is always for our good. God’s children will never encounter anything that God has not already seen and known.

One time in our lives that we will all experience is the moment that we die. There is no escape from the curse that was handed down at Eden. Scripture makes this point clear. God has appointed for everyone to die. *“Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”* (Hebrews 9:27). We all know that death can happen suddenly without warning or it can arrive after a long and painful illness. God reminds us repeatedly of the brevity of life. We read, *“Our days on earth are like a shadow”* (1 Chronicles 29:15); *“My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle”* (Job 7:6); *“My days are swifter than a runner”* (Job 9:25); *“Each man’s life is but a breath”* (Psalm 39:5); *“You are a mist that appears for a little while”* (James 4:14). And again, *“The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass; and we fly away”* (Psalm 90:10).

How does God play a part in our daily schedules? How does God view those who claim they have the right to determine the length of people’s lives, like abortionists or those who practice assisted suicides?

God’s Time

“How great is God—beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out” (Job 36:26). God experiences time unknown to us. *“For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night”* (Psalm 90:4). *“With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day”* (2 Peter 3:8). God’s nature is without a beginning or an end. He is free from all restraints of time. He is eternal. As mentioned, time always includes change. But God is changeless. He does not dwell within the laws of time. *“In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the*



earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end" (Hebrews 1:10-12). We sometimes think of God existing forever into the future, and forever into the past. Yet that is an incorrect explanation of God's eternal attribute, for that future and that past are all part of the Lord's "now". To him there is no past, present, or future. Jude mentions God's timelessness when he writes, "*To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!*" (Jude 25). Author C.S. Lewis wrote, "Our life comes to us moment by moment. One moment disappears before the next comes along: and there is room for very little in each. That is what Time is like. And of course you and I tend to take it for granted that this Time series—this arrangement of past, present, and future—is not simply the way life comes to us but the way all things really exist. We tend to assume that the whole universe and God Himself are always moving on from future to past just as we do. God, I believe, does not live in a Time-series at all. His life is not dribbled out moment by moment like ours: with Him it is still 1920 and already 1960."

It was mentioned that the third word in the Bible laid out the concept of time. It is equally interesting to note that the fourth word hints of eternity: "*In the beginning God.*" The term God leaves the feeling of a continual, ever present being. When Moses was about to explain God's commands for Pharaoh to his fellow Israelites, he asked God who should he say sent him? "*God said to Moses, 'This is what you are to say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you''*" (Exodus 3:15). God did not box himself into the restrictions of earthly time by saying, "I was. . .", "I will be. . .", or "I am the God of the past, present or future." Instead he explained his eternal quality as man could best understand it. God sees all events from creation to the Last Day in one glimpse. Someone once put it this way. There are two ways to view a parade. One might sit at the roadside and watch the parade as it passes by. That person sees the bands at the beginning, the cars and clowns at the middle, and the final entry at the back of the parade. The other way one might view that same parade is from an airplane. From that vantage point the entire parade can be viewed at once, the beginning, middle and end. So it is with God as he sees the "now" of this world.

As part of the eternal godhead, Jesus also existed before time began. "*Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began*" (John 17:5). Jesus echoed Moses' words when the Jews wondered how he could possibly have seen Abraham. "*I tell you the truth, ' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am!''*" (John 8:58). In Revelation 1:8, Jesus also put the concept of eternity into our timely terms of past, present and future when he said, "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.*" (See also Revelation 4:8.)

The barrier between time and eternity was crossed when Jesus became a man. Paul alludes to that fact when he writes, "*When the **time** had fully come. . .*" (Galatians 4:4). That meant that Jesus would be bound by the same restrictions as the rest of us. From the moment of conception, Jesus was placed under the rule of time. The duration of Mary's pregnancy was nine months. After 40 days Jesus was presented in the temple. At age 12 he was taken to Jerusalem. At 30 he began his ministry. He learned to wait, to be on time, to need scheduled food and sleep, to experience night and day, months, seasons and years, just like the rest of humanity. Paul wrote of this "humiliation" of Christ when he said that Jesus, "*made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death*" (Philippians 2:6-8).

How is God's time different from our time? We know that as a man Jesus lived in the state of humiliation which included living within the bounds of time. Name some instances in Jesus' life where he had to succumb to the boundaries and expectations of time.

What Is Eternity?

"*Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to everlasting shame and everlasting contempt*" (Daniel 12:2). It is always difficult to discuss the attributes of God and his creation because the mind of man is so inferior to God's. Understanding God's omnipresence (everywhere at the same time), the depth of his love, his triune being, and his creating and sustaining power are far beyond our limited comprehension. "*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*' declares the Lord. '*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways*

and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8,9). So it is with the concept of eternity. Because our minds have only existed within the limits of time and are thereby bound by the restrictions of time, it is not possible for us to imagine the expanse of eternity. However, that doesn’t keep God from telling us about eternity. God’s Word places the fact of eternity squarely before our eyes. The word eternal is found over 80 times in the Bible, and forever is used more than 300 times. God wants us to be certain that this life is not the end of our existence. There is more to come. As Paul wrote, *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”* (1 Corinthians 2:9). As God’s people we are already living in eternity and the most and best is yet to come.

Among all living beings, there can only be one of three possibilities. First would be those with no beginning and no end. That is God. Second would be those who have a beginning but will have no end. That would include the angels and human beings. Finally, there are the creatures of the animal kingdom, the birds, fish, land animals, insects, etc. They have been designated as having a beginning and an end.

Being eternal, God is able to bestow eternity on his creation. Sadly, for many people that will mean an eternity in hell. Although the torture that will take place in hell will be unimaginable, it is the idea, the very thought, of spending an eternity in hell that is very troublesome. That is because God clearly tells us that the entire unbelieving world realizes that there will be an eternity: *“He has set eternity in the hearts of men,”* (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Some try to escape that thought by claiming that God is too good and loving to sentence anyone to hell forever. Others claim they will be reincarnated again and again, so they can escape the final judgment. Still others totally deny the existence of hell by claiming that death will simply be the end of it all. But hell is a real place, and will really be

eternal. *“They will be punished with everlasting destruction”* (2 Thessalonians 1:9). *“The smoke of their torment rises forever and ever”* (Revelation 14:11).

But what about those believers who have already died? Are they now awaiting the final judgment? Because God’s people are now with their Lord, they are also beyond the restraints of time. Waiting for judgment, the final resurrection, or to be with those they loved will not happen. God’s people experience an immediate eternal joy and happiness that will never fall under the restrictions of time again. *“Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise’”* (Luke 23:43). Never again will there be death, pain, sin, fear, guilt, sadness, loss, tears, aging, toil, sweat, or sorrow. The time for those things will be over.

Living beyond time, God’s people will never worry about what troubles the future will bring (*“An anxious heart weighs a man down”* Proverbs 12:25), because there will be no more future. Haunting memories of the past will be forgotten, (*“The former things will not be remembered”* Isaiah 65:17). The guilt of the past will also be erased. (*“My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear”* Psalm 38:4).

Heaven instead will offer the believer an eternity of praise and service to God. The crowns awarded to God’s people will never tarnish or rust because those things must happen over time, and we all know **heaven is eternal**. *“When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of glory that will never fade away”* (1 Peter 5:4). *“This is what he promised us—even eternal life”* (1 John 2:25).

Do you feel unbelievers try to dismiss thoughts of eternity? Explain. Why is it difficult to imagine what eternity will be like? What areas of our lives that are currently affected by time will be absent in heaven’s eternity?