

## Time and Time Again: A Biblical Doctrine

### II Corinthians 6: 1-10

I have often asked children, “how do you tell time?” And the usual answer is, either – “I look at the clock” – or “I ask my Mother.”

And one method is about as accurate as another – for “telling time” isn’t as simple as it seems. There is so much confusion on the subject – biological time and astronomical time, so that there is time and time again. But let us look at it from the New Testament point of view. There are three basic time words in the New Testament.

1. The least important word for “time” in the New Testament is the very one we moderns attach the most significance to – it is CHRONOS, meaning temporal duration, the passing of hours, days and weeks. CHRONOS is the “time” we claim we never have enough of – we wish we had more CHRONOS for work, for play, for sleep. CHRONOS is what we are afraid of losing our share of – we watch our balding heads, our hardening arteries, our failing powers – and depend on God and geriatrics to give us more CHRONOS – more chronological, more clock time. Indeed we are clock hounded – clock pursued – waking, working, eating, playing, sleeping, all under and forever under the tick-tock, tick-tock of those inescapable clocks – “my schedule, my day, my week, my agenda” we say – and often shudder. We live time-haunted lives – fleeing wildly, madly before the demon-god CHRONOS – often trying to escape him by everything from tons of cosmetics to gallons of cocktails.

But, Christian man at the beginning – New Testament man was not really bothered by time in this sense. He was not persecuted by, nor did he make a demon-god out of Chronos.

The ages of the Christ and His disciples were thought too unimportant to mention – for they did not measure their maturity or youth in years. Was Peter 20 – 30 – 50 – when he first answered Christ’s call – or when he denied him? It did not matter. The satanism called statistics had not yet arisen. The New Testament seldom even attempts to identify the year, season or month of an event – and more seldom still – the day and hour. How did our Lord tell Chronos (clock time)? Jesus may have had an Egyptian gnomon (sun sticks) – or if the day was cloudy – an hour candle or sand glass – or even a clepsydra (water clock) – but he probably didn’t have any of these time gadgets – for they were as expensive as they were inaccurate and considered

inessential. And it apparently never bothered him that his whole contemporary calendar-clock system was clumsy and confusing.

As far as the New Testament is concerned – Chronos is artificial time anyway, and you know what – it still is! Even medical science is beginning to look askance at this “life-by-the-clock” that we lead – this forcing our bodies to rise and shine every morning, fall asleep every night – when our natural metronome – our metabolism and heartbeat, etc., may be trying to follow an altogether different pattern. No wonder our nerves often rebel against enforced schedules – no wonder our hearts turn and attack us – attack the artificial system we try to make them beat by.

Clock time is not biological time and some of us would probably live a longer Chronos if we weren't so forced by it. Aside from missing planes and trains and TV detectives – life by Chronos is a mixed blessing. I often wonder if life would not have been both simpler and sweeter if that seventeen year old Italian boy in 1581, Galileo by name, had kept his mind on the service and the sermon, instead of timing the swinging chandelier in the Cathedral of Pisa by his pulsebeat – thereby discovering the pendulum – which is Latin for “swinging.” We moderns have been “swinging” artificially along by it – ever since – and not always too happily.

2. The second word for “time” in the New Testament was considered much more important by early Christians than mere Chronos. It was called Kairos and if we consider it less important – it is to our loss. For this is what you may call real time – or realistic time—not artificially measured by a clock like Chronos. KAIROS or real time, the New Testament measured not by chronology – but by its content of God-given opportunity (time measured by its character). If Jesus never knew about split-seconds and minutes – and told artificial, Chronos time clumsily by new moons and sun and shadow and sand – he knew a great deal about Kairos – real time – and could tell it with far more accuracy than we can. For Kairos means time told by its content of opportunity. The Old Testament speaks of

the time of harvest (Jeremiah 1:16)

the time of rain (Ezra 10:13)

the time of marriage (I Samuel 18:19)

the time of birth (Genesis 38:27)

the meal time (Ruth 2:14)

the time of war (I Chron. 20:1)

the time of duty (Genesis 24:11)

the time of death (I Samuel 4:20)

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 gives a long catalogue of “times” that have no reference to chronology – but to content – opportunity: each a time for some purpose:

a time “to be born – to die”

“to plant – to pluck up”

“to kill – to heal”

“to break – to build”

“to weep – to laugh”

“to mourn – to dance”

“to build walls – to tear them down”

“to embrace – to refrain from embracing”

“to get – to lose”

“to keep – to cast away”

“to keep silent – to speak”

“to love – to hate”

a “time of war and a time of peace”

The New Testament – like the Old – sees time as Kairos – as concrete (not abstract – like Chronos) – as filled with many and varied opportunities – and the important point is – all God-given (whether they be life or death – war or peace) and all to be responded to by man as God would have him.

This real view of time according to content – can mean much to us. For example – it can enable us to see life whole – in long perspective – rather than in little units – small tick-tock parcels. When you see life in the long view – as a gift of God – all under His Providence, His care – all in His plan – then – to the soul comes the peace of perspective – a holy calm – with life rising above the tension of scurrying minutes, above the hectic hours, above the fearful days – upon a broad dimension of time – that not only gives serenity to the soul – but restores common sense to daily decisions. Also we no longer judge all of life by one hour’s quarrel, by one week’s disappointment, or by one year’s failure – we no longer wish to end it all. We put away the poison and pistol! For God will bring another Kairos time – another opportunity – another

time to heal and build, to laugh and dance and love again – yes, we shall be glad we did not end our life through judging it all by one low, one dark moment.

How often we would be delivered from depression, from despair – blues – as from fretting, fuming, if we saw our lifetime as Kairos time – God-given in character – taking each content as it comes from God – responding as God would have us to each light and dark, good and bad opportunity. How calm the days would flow then – no matter the storm – how free from neurosis. “Our times are in Thy hands, O Lord.” Or again, when time is Kairos – instead of Chronos – it is no longer important how old we are – but how we are old. Chronology now plays second fiddle – character comes first. The questions now are: “Am I responding to my present God-given opportunities as God would? Am I creative in my work – kind in my ways – are my days honest, loving and full of grace?”

We may cheat Chronos with cosmetics, vitamin therapy and what not – but not Kairos. For Kairos isn’t measuring how long we live – but what we are living for – how well we meet the God-given contents of our times.

But – there is a more fundamental meaning of Kairos in the New Testament, for the basic, the decisive opportunity open to man in the New Testament is the coming of Jesus Christ – in whom the Old Testament promises of God are fulfilled – this Kairos from God is the gift of Messianic time. Jesus opened his teaching in Galilee by saying, “the time is fulfilled.” He read from Isaiah the description of the New Israel and the New Covenant in the coming Messiah and said: basic Kairos time of opportunity – “now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of Salvation.” (II Corinthians 6:2 quoting Isaiah 49:8).

Jesus wept because Jerusalem did not understand that His coming was the “time of (her) visitation.” (Luke 19:44) – that to accept the opportunity he brought them in history was Salvation – that to deny it was disaster.

To choose and to follow this Christ figure is still our greatest opportunity in time – to become “the people of God” in him ourselves, today.

Now I know this New Testament information may not be entertaining – but it is essential to Christian salvation. It is to see that today, now is the Kairos – the time of opportunity – to respond to God’s gift of himself in Christ Jesus – and by faith to live his life after him.

New Testament time as Kairos is not tidily divided into past, present and future – as is Chronos where the minutes tick away never to be recovered. For the Christian the past is not

irretrievable – in Christ there is forgiveness for the past. And the future is not an unknown – it is known to God – who controls the outcome of history and will be victorious in it.

The Christian, therefore, is delivered of fear – no nightmares bubbling up out of his yesterdays – no dread of tomorrow with its diseases, its death, even its atomic destruction. For time is in God’s hand – and that hand is as strict but as forgiving, as kind as the hand of Jesus Christ.

Now I know that these New Testament categories may sound strange to our 20<sup>th</sup> Century ears – but they are not strange to our need.

For in the terror and tension of life, the Christian always has and always will live in a different time dimension from his pagan contemporaries – and so has a God-given calm, even in the midst of ungodly confusion – a serenity – a peace “which the world cannot give or take away.”

Wrote Francois de Fenelon, the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Archbishop of Combrai, “we sleep in the arms of God, when we yield ourselves up to His providence, in a delightful consciousness of His tender mercies; no more restless uncertainties, no more anxious desires, no more impatience at the place we are in; for it is God who has put us there and who holds us in His arms. Can we be unsafe when He has placed us, and where He watches over us a parent watches a child?”

Last week I heard a man speak who had been a prisoner of the Communists – he said that he could not have taken the mental and physical torture and the isolation – except for the fact that his faith placed him out of his tormentor’s reach – in a different dimension of time.

This involves a third word:

3. for time in the New Testament. It is AION or eternity. This is the reason the Christian fears neither pain nor death – for in the most real sense he is beyond them both. The Kairos, the opportunity of salvation in Jesus Christ, if responded to in faith enables the Christian to step from this world into the world to come at any point in history – and have eternity, eternal life, as a present possession, “now.”

If you think all this too First Century, too abstruse, too impractical, maybe you have not yet lived in the twilight zone of pain that will not stop – problems that will not solve – death that will not delay.

But if you have ever tasted what the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Sicilian, Giovanni Florio (in the Second Fruits, 1591) called the “Ten Pains of Death” – then you will grasp the value of an eternal

perspective. It was descriptive of the pitiful life of the peasants – but there is a sense in which we all live the life of peasant need. If you have ever known what it means

“To wait for one who never comes,  
To lie in bed and not sleep,  
To serve well and not to please,  
To have a horse that will not go,  
To be sick and lack the cure,  
To be a prisoner without hope,  
To lose the way when you would journey,  
To stand at a door that none will open,  
To have a friend who would betray you,  
these are the ten pains of death.”

Which take the dimension of faith in God – which take an eternal perspective to face.

Let me summarize it all this way –

From the point of view of Chronos – time for me, for you, for our country is running – all too swiftly – and that is sad.

But from the point of view of Kairos – we yet have the opportunity to respond to God in Christ – and live his life of love – in faith, without fear.

So that we may literally step from time into eternity – Aion – into God’s everlasting keeping – to share in his ultimate victory, come what may. Should our own “earthly house of this tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, one that is eternal in the heavens.” What strength is in this faith.

Chronos is running out, but Kairos, the opportunity for choosing God in Christ is here and now – choose ye then this day whom ye will serve – choose God in Christ now – for it is for Aion – for ever and ever. Amen.

February 19, 1961