

## What time is it? – The significance of past, present & future in God's revelation of Himself & His salvation plan.



This may be a controversial piece but I hope it will bring a more Biblical understanding of the significance of time in God's dealings with us. It could be controversial because we live in an 'instant' age where we must have everything now, whereas God says 'wait'; it is probably controversial because we often have an unbiblical view that God is 'outside of time' whereas time is 'within God'; and it may also be controversial because we are not sure of the relationship between 'time' and 'eternity'.

And from a pastoral perspective, we can easily confuse two events in time. One is the point at which we leave these bodies and go to be with the Lord through death, and the other is the return of the Lord to earth. As we get older, the tendency is to think that the Lord's return is imminent whereas it is actually our own death that is becoming more imminent! We naturally hope that the Lord will come and get us in life, before we go to him in death, but it's easy to confuse these two events which will be experientially separate for most of us.

And when we consider the coming of God's Kingdom, confusion can arise because we are not sure of what to expect **now** with regard to that Kingdom, as opposed to what is **future**.

Further confusion arises if we adopt the Greek view that time is cyclical whereas time in the Bible is always a straight-line concept (more about that later).

I have also included something about human perspectives on time as well as Divine perspectives. Our attitudes to time, the passage of time and our use of time need, I think, a radical overhaul.

It may be that we are rushed, too busy and don't have enough time. Michel Quoist captures this well in his Prayers of Life: 'Lord, I have time' ~ M. H. Gill & Son Ltd. 1963, P.76.

“Everything was rushing, cars, lorries, the street, the whole town.  
 Men were rushing not to waste time. They were rushing after time,  
 To catch up with time, to gain time.  
 Goodbye sir, excuse me, I haven't time.  
 I'll come back, I can't wait, I haven't time.”

And for those with a materialistic mindset, where 'time is money', there is the danger of becoming trapped on a treadmill of acquisition. Time is then about repeated accumulation with every moment being squeezed in order to extract maximum profit and return.

Someone was telling me recently about a business man he had visited who had 4 Porsche cars in his garage and said he had bought the last one for £160,000 'on a whim'. He also told me what a miserable guy he was!

Hopefully we will come to see that time is a precious gift that God gives us.

But back to a Biblical, Divine perspective on time.

Because Biblical time is a straight-line concept, it follows that God's revelation of Himself and His salvation plan are tied to a continuous time process which embraces past, present and future. And the Bible itself is essentially a narrative with a beginning, middle and an end (but not an end of time).

### **'Time' Words.**

Throughout the Bible, the passage of time is expressed using words like: 'formerly', 'now', 'then', 'day', 'hour', 'season', 'years', 'time', 'age', 'ages', 'last', 'before', 'until', 'today', 'beginning', 'end', 'remember', 'forget', 'yesterday', 'forever'.

Some examples:

“Let them [the lights in the sky] serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years...” (Gen. 1:14)

“I [God] make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.” (Is. 46:10a).

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.” (Is. 43:18)

“On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives.....” (Zech. 14:4a)

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.” (Acts 2:17)

“..... we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Rms. 8:23)

“Salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.....” (Rms. 13:11)

“Each in his own turn: Christ the first-fruit; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come .....” (1 Cor. 15:23&24)

“The law, introduced 430 years later.....” (Gal. 3:17)

“When the time had fully come, God sent his Son.....” (Gal. 4:4)

“The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith....” (1 Tim. 4:1)

“[Christ] will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” (Heb. 9:28)

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Heb. 13:8)

“Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming.” (James 5:7)

“[We] are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Pet. 1:5)

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him....” (1 Jn. 3:2)

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” (Rev. 21:1)

Of course, we have to understand these verses in their context, but my point here is simply that all of these verses indicate something about the passage of time, so time must be important to God!

**‘In the beginning’; time; endless time and eternal life.**

~ The Bible begins with the words “In the beginning” but it doesn’t tell us about the beginning of time. When Genesis opens, God and time already exist. Time is within God; and because He has always existed, so has time.

And when God speaks of ‘eternity’, all He is referring to is ‘endless time’.

John's gospel begins with the words "In the beginning was the Word", but we know that the Word [Jesus] existed before the world was created (Jn. 17:5, 24; 1 Pet. 1:20) and had always existed in time because He was/is God. This is why to know God and to know Jesus Christ is to experience eternal life i.e. endless time spent in their presence (Jn. 17:2&3).

We begin to experience eternal life now when we believe in Christ (Jn. 3:14-16; 6:27&40; 10:28) **and** it is something we inherit in the future (Mt. 19:29) ~ a continuing gift in the present and for eternity.

When we say that God is the 'eternal God' we mean that he sits in time; we don't mean He is outside of time and that time is of no consequence to him. All of His revelation to us, in creation and salvation, is set in the context of time. The Bible knows nothing of a timeless God.

## **Divine & human perspectives on time**

### **1. Psalm 90**

In Psalm 90 Moses is considering time; it is uppermost in his mind. Again it is full of 'time' words like 'generations', 'everlasting', 'years', 'morning', 'evening', 'days'.

He begins by saying (verse 2) that God is from everlasting (time) to everlasting (time). But God, in His context of everlasting, eternal, endless time, may consider **our** periods of time differently; so for us 1000 years is quite a long time, but for God 1000 years is just like one of our days (verse 4).

So even though God's perspective on time may differ from our limited, earthly, perspective, nevertheless time is real and important to Him.

Moses considers our human lifespan to be seventy or eighty years (although he lived to be 120) and even they 'quickly pass' (vs. 10) so he wants us to 'number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom' (vs. 12). And then he asks a time question: 'How long will it be?' (vs. 13).

The psalm, therefore, sets our short span of time on earth in the context of the timelessness of God. It's a good psalm to use at funerals; it gives perspective.

### **2. Ecclesiastes 3: 1-11**

"For every appointed occasion there is time; and time for every purpose under the sky" (verse 1- from the Hebrew).

The Preacher then goes on to list a range of human activities some of which are one-time events (birth and death), some are rhythmical (planting and harvesting) and others cover a whole range of emotions and activities to do with work, rest, leisure, sex, war etc.

God must have included this section of His word partly to show us that our lives are bounded by time. There is no escape! And all of us are at different points on the (straight) time-line of our lives.

I remember when I once travelled regularly from one end of the underground Central Line to the other and back again – Epping to Ealing and Ealing to Epping. Assuming that Epping to Ealing represented half of my life's journey, I used to calculate which station I was at if the total return journey represented my life lived to be 70 years old! As I was already over 35 at that time, I was well on the way back and am now nearly ready to get off the train! But who knows ~ the journey may continue; the line may be extended?!

Another lesson we can learn from this passage is that all of the times and seasons of our lives provide different opportunities, pose different challenges and impose different limitations. God wants us to cooperate with Him according to the times and seasons of our lives. To fight against time may be to fight against God and indeed with the way He has created us.

### **Chrono-biology**

One of the ways in which we are made in God's image and likeness, I believe, is that time is built within us. Each of us has, in our brains, a bio-chemical, circadian, 24 -hour clock which is reset each day, for accuracy, by light from the sun entering our eyes, followed by darkness.

Of course, some of us are larks and others of us are owls – this is a function of our genes – but all of us need to work in synchronisation with our body clocks for maximum well-being.

Some of the things which can interfere with this clock mechanism working properly in our modern-day society are changing shift patterns at work, flying across time zones and 'always on' technology like T.V.'s, Games consoles, I-pads, computers, smart phones etc.

### **What is the 'age' in which we live?**

Jesus said that the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to us (Mt. 13:11), so what is this knowledge? What is the big reveal?

Surely it is that he is the Messiah who has come and, in the future, will come again (two comings, not one). Also, in him the 'age to come' (Mk. 10:30) has broken into this 'present evil age' (Gal. 1:4) so that we now live in a time when these two ages overlap.

This means that the kingdom is both now and not yet, inaugurated but not consummated. It can be entered now but is not yet fully established.

### **What are the 'days' in which we live?**

We now live in the 'last days' which started with the first coming of Christ ('in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son' – Heb. 1:2) and with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost ('in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people' – Acts 2:17).

To live 'in the last days' does not mean to live in the knowledge of the **imminent** return of Christ; rather Jesus was keen to dampen down his disciple's expectation and excitement concerning an early return.

His parables confirm that he would come 'unexpectedly' (Mt. 24:44), he would be a 'long time coming' (Mt. 25:5), it would be 'after a long time' (Mt. 25:19).

It's interesting, though, that the apostle John, in his old age, ramps up the expectation somewhat by talking, not of the 'last days', but of the 'last hour'. He writes: "This is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18).

Meanwhile Paul had been dampening down fervour among church members in Thessalonica some of whom appear to have given up work in view of their belief that Jesus' return was imminent, whilst others were unsettled and alarmed by reports that the Lord had already returned and they had missed the boat (2 Thess. 2:1&2)!

But rather than over excitement concerning his second coming, Jesus and Paul seem to stress patient endurance, watchfulness and self-control.

**Note:** In terms of the 'last days', the Bible speaks of two 'last days'~ one is the Day of Resurrection when Jesus returns and we are given our new resurrection bodies (see below), and the other is the Day of Judgement (Jn. 12:48).

## Jesus and Martha – John 11:21-27



This passage contains a lovely exchange between Jesus and Martha concerning the death of Martha's brother Lazarus. It is essentially about past, present and future. But whereas western thought tends to separate these three time periods, Jewish thought tends to combine them.

In common with many recently bereaved people, Martha first expresses the past regret of 'If only'. "If only you had been here (earlier), my brother would not have died." But then she moves immediately into the present: "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." What faith!

And then Jesus moves her into the future and says to her: "Your brother will rise again." Martha then stays in the future with him and answers: I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

And then Jesus does something surprising, he brings her into the present again and says: "I **am** the resurrection and the life." Then Martha is able to make a wonderful present confession of faith that Jesus is in fact the Messiah (the first woman to do so): "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

For Jewish people, past, present and future tend to roll into one. There is a degree of timelessness about their experience. They feel bound up with their history and with their yet unseen future.

So Paul is able to say that **I have been** co-crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20), **we have been** buried with him, **we have been** raised with him to new life (Rom. 6:1-7), **we are now** seated with him in the heavenly realms (Eph. 2:6) and **we will** also reign with him (2 Tim. 2:12a) .

The O.T. prophets often compressed time by bringing past events (e.g. the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law etc.) into the present and/or by bringing future events into the present. Habakkuk is a good example though it doesn't come across well in our translations.

He acknowledges that God is 'from everlasting' and says: God comes from Teman, (not 'came'), the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory is covering (not 'covered') the heavens and his praise is filling (not 'filled') the earth (3:3). These tenses are all present, not past.

And then he also moves seamlessly into the future: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." (2:14)

### **The Last Supper – Luke 22:7-23; 1 Cor. 11:23-34**



Jesus also merges past, present and future on the occasion of the last supper with his disciples.

This Eucharist (Thanksgiving) is first of all a remembrance, a memorial, a looking back to the first Passover for those disciples then, and to the death of Christ for us now. It is also a looking around (present) at our relationships with one another and an examination of our own hearts.

Finally, it is an anticipation of two future events: the coming of the Lord ('we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes') and the wedding banquet of the Lord when his kingdom finally comes ('I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes'). See also Rev. 19:7-9.

So in our Communion services, the entire redemptive time-line becomes clear.

Although I have maintained that time in the Bible is a straight-line concept always moving forwards towards an ultimate goal, God also wants us, in our use of time, to return, to remember, to re-discover and to be re-sourced.

Rowan Williams comments: "Time is a complex and rich gift; it is the medium in which we not only grow and move forward but also constructively return and resource – literally re-source – ourselves." (Being Human, Rowan Williams, SPCK 2018, p.78).

The fact that there is a merging of past, present and future, however, doesn't mean that we can't also identify events as differentiated and distinct points on a time-line. Past, present and future are not meaningless concepts. God wants us to differentiate time.



Throughout the Bible, on-going time is observed, punctuated and given boundaries by God. Some events are to be commemorated, some are to be forgotten, some marked with celebration, others anticipated etc.

And Jesus' arrival on earth (most likely born during the time of the Feast of Tabernacles) was followed by his death at the time of Passover which was followed by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. These are surely examples of God's working and choreography in time; linking key events in His salvation plan with the already-in-place (fixed) Jewish Festivals.

We also see that God is quite happy to associate himself with past, present and future time when he says: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is (present), who was (past), and who is to come (future), the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8).

An awareness of past, present and future is also necessary for **our** psychological health.

Our past contributes enormously to a sense of our present identity, (folks who lose their memory often lose part or all of their identity) and it is always important, in the present, to have a future hope, otherwise we can lapse into despair.

People with good psychological health know that they live in the present but can move easily into past remembrances and future anticipations.

I was reminded of this on a cruise ship last year. Each time we left our cabin we had to put a sign on our door which said: "We are out (*present*) making memories (*past*)."  
And when we were in, we turned the sign round and it then read: "We are in (*present*) planning new adventures (*future*)."

However, if we spend too much time in the past or too much time in the future, we may begin to lose a sense of present reality. Faith can then turn into fantasy.

It is important that we live in the present; that, like David, we serve the Lord in our 'generation'. We don't live in the past and we don't live in the future; we live in the present and God has a specific calling for us 'in time'.

Mordecai was surely right when he said to Esther: "And who knows but that you have come to royal position **for such a time as this**" (Esther 4:14b).

God does not enable us to escape from the period of time in which we have been born.

But the value of merging past, present and future, I believe, is that God is drawing us into His timelessness, into His endless time, into eternal life with Him. And this gives us a security and a sense of direction and purpose that is not possible outside of knowing Him.

**Progressive revelation through time.....the mystery of the past revealed in the present.**

We could say that the Old Testament is predominantly a fore-telling of, and a preparation for, the first coming of Christ. Jesus explained this to the two disciples on the Emmaus Road: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27). And to the Eleven: "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Lk. 24:44).

Peter also, looking back to the Old Testament prophets, sees them, imbued by the Spirit of Christ, as looking forward intently to the coming and sufferings of Christ (1 Peter 1:10-12). But their understanding of the revelation they had was limited.

In the present, however, Paul, and us, are now able to see and understand things which were 'not made known to men in other (previous) generations' (Eph. 3:4-6; Col. 1:25-27).

The mystery of the past has been revealed in the present. Indeed, whenever the word 'mystery' occurs in the New Testament, it is always in the context of something being revealed not something that is remaining hidden.

**Progressive revelation through time.....the mystery of the future revealed in the present - 1 Cor. 15:20-28; Rev. Chapters 21&22.**

These are two key passages in understanding God's activity in time and reveal a number of things: -

- 1) To date, only Jesus has a new resurrection body. In 1 Cor. 15:20 he is described as the first-fruit (singular) of those who have fallen asleep (died). Elsewhere Jesus is spoken of as the first-born (literally 'prototype') from among the dead' (Col. 1:15; Rev. 1:5).

Those Christians who have already died and have gone to be with Christ in heaven, and those Christians who are alive on earth when Jesus returns, will all get their new resurrection bodies at the same time on that precise day. What a special day that will be!

Everything is ordered in time.... each one in his own turn/order: Christ the **first-fruit** (singular again), then, when he comes, those who belong to him' (1 Cor. 15:23).

'We will not all sleep (die), but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye....' (1 Cor. 15:51&52). Presto - in quick time!

**So the basis of our future hope of resurrection is the past event of Jesus' resurrection.**

- 2) After this resurrection event ('then'), the end will come when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father but not before he has destroyed all rival dominions, authorities and powers at the end of his millennial reign (1 Cor. 15:24&25).
- 3) When (after) this has happened, the Son will be made subject to God who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all (vs.28).
- 4) This handing over of things to God probably coincides with the creation of the new heaven and earth and the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21&22) where God is pre-eminent.
- 5) The final state of the Kingdom of God is this new heaven, new earth and New Jerusalem in which God makes his (permanent) home.
- 6) God has not yet made the new heaven, the new earth or the New Jerusalem, though the plans for the city are already drawn up! (Heb.11:10). He has planning permission!

**Note:** The Bible has a beautiful symmetry (mirror image) in that the order of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis is heaven and earth and then human beings, whereas by the time we get to Revelation chapters 21 & 22 the new human beings have already been created before the new heaven and earth and the New Jerusalem, and are waiting to populate it.

### **‘Kairos’ and ‘Chronos’.**

In the New Testament it is important to understand two of the Greek words translated ‘time’.

**‘Kairos’** indicates a season or period of time which has certain characteristics.

For example, Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they did not know/recognise the time (‘kairos’) of their visitation. They were unaware of the content/significance of Jesus’ coming to them in time (Luke 19:44).

Peter speaks of a salvation ready to be revealed (on-going revelation) in the last time (‘kairos eschatos’ - 1 Peter 1:5). No! We don’t have it all yet!

Paul reminds us that the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ will be at the appropriate, specific time of God’s choosing (‘kairos idios’ - 1 Tim. 6:15). No! We don’t know when it will be yet!

Even the demons know there will be a specific time (‘kairos’) for them to be dealt with (Mt. 8:29).

**‘Chronos’**, on the other hand, indicates the duration of a period of time whether long or short. It is more to do with the precise length of time rather than the content. For example, Herod ascertained from the wise men ‘what time (‘chronos’ - Mt. 2:7) the star appeared.’ And, Jesus ‘saw him and knew he had been lying there a long time’ (‘chronos’ - Jn. 5:6).

Sometimes ‘kairos’ and ‘chronos’ are used together.

Luke uses both words in Acts 1:6&7 when the disciples are confused about the timing of events and ask: ‘[When the Holy Spirit comes], will that be the time (‘chronos’) when you restore the kingdom to Israel?’ But Jesus said to them: “It is not for you to know times (‘chronos’) or seasons (‘kairos’) which the Father has fixed by his own authority.”

The priority, when the Holy Spirit comes, is to be witnesses to Jesus rather than to know God’s precise timing of events.

Paul also uses both words together in writing to the Church in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:1). The Christians there also wanted to know about ‘times and seasons’ concerning the Lord’s coming; but Paul directed them towards holy living in the present together with an understanding that when the Lord did come in the future, it would be surprisingly unexpected.

## **What and where are we now?**

### **‘New Creations’**

As soon as we come to Christ and are found in Him, we are, in the present, new creations; the old has passed away, the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17). But in what sense are we ‘new’?

We are new in the sense that we have been born again, we have died to sin, we have been transferred from Satan’s kingdom into God’s, we have been adopted into God’s family, we are now counted as righteous in God’s sight etc.

But in another sense, we are still ‘old’. We still live in a groaning body that both Paul and Peter describe as a temporary ‘tent’ (2 Cor. 5:1-4; 2 Peter 1:13&14) and in a world that still ‘groans in travail’ as it waits for God’s future redemption (Rms. 8:18-25).

To deny this is to deny Scripture and to deny reality.

### **‘The Spirit within’**

We now live in the days when the Holy Spirit is wonderfully outpoured and is available for on-going filling. This enables us to be the kind of person Jesus was (character) and to do the things that Jesus did (conduct). As we abide in Christ, so the Holy Spirit produces His fruit in us and enables us to do the mighty works Jesus did.

But this also needs qualification. In this life we have the Holy Spirit as a ‘deposit’ guaranteeing what is to come; we don’t yet have the full package.

It’s an interesting picture Paul uses to illustrate this in Ephesians 1:13 & 14. Imagine you were a wealthy man who lived in a mansion and went to market one day to buy some sacks of wheat. You would have a personal seal that would be stamped on the sacks that you had bought and you would pay a deposit. This meant that those sacks belonged to you and one day would be delivered to your house.



This is how it is with the Holy Spirit. Paul says God has stamped us with His seal, the Holy Spirit, as a deposit, a down payment, guaranteeing that one day we will be delivered to His house. This guarantee is our (future) inheritance. Paul makes the same point in 2 Cor. 5:5.

In Romans 8:23 he uses a different picture to describe the Spirit within. He says that now we have the 'first-fruit (singular) of the Spirit'. The first-fruit was the beginning of the crop, not the full harvest.

For the full harvest and for the final delivery to God's house, we have to wait patiently with eager hope and expectation. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit convinces us that the wait will be worthwhile!

The old apostle John (the only one of the 12 to reach old age) puts it like this: "Dear friends, **now** we are children of God, and **what we will be has not yet been made known**. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure." (1 Jn. 3:2&3)

In this life, we are able to taste the goodness of the word of God, share in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, taste the heavenly gift and taste the powers of the age to come...but it is only a 'taster', an 'appetiser'; the main course is still to come! (Heb. 6:4&5).

### **Understanding time in the book of Revelation**

Before considering time in this book, it is necessary to clear up a misunderstanding about some translations of Rev. 13:8 which could be misunderstood to mean literally that Jesus 'was slain from the creation of the world' (NIV) i.e. outside of the time period when he was actually slain. Much better is the RSV translation thus: 'every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain'.

Christ was chosen before the creation of the world but his actual sacrificial death took place much later on in the 'last times' (1 Peter 1:20). We too were chosen in Christ before the creation of the world but we came to know him many years later! (Eph. 1:4).

It seems to me that Rev. 13:8 (and 17:8) is there simply to emphasise that God's **eternal** purposes are being worked out in the context of the **transient** powers of evil.

## **5 things about time in the book of Revelation: -**

**Firstly**, it is a revelation in time which covers past, present and future. John was instructed to write: "... what you have seen (past), what is now (present) and what will take place later (future) – (Rev. 1:19).

**Secondly**, although it moves across time periods and covers past, present and future events, sometimes with diversions and re-capitulations, overall it is a progressive revelation in time. Events happen sequentially culminating in the return of Christ to earth, his 1000- year reign, final judgement and then the new heaven and earth and the New Jerusalem.

**Thirdly**, the souls of those who had been martyred and were in God's presence cried out: "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" They were aware of time and were told to 'wait a little longer' (Rev. 6:10 & 11). Time exists in God's presence!

**Fourthly**, it is supremely a revelation of Jesus Christ who exists in time but is unchanging in time – "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

**Fifthly**, in the last two chapters of Revelation, God says about himself: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21:6) and Jesus says exactly the same thing concerning himself and adds that he is the "first and the last" (Rev. 22:13).

These two statements are nothing to do with the end of time but indicate the fulfilment of God's plan of revelation and salvation and Jesus' key role in it. God is the Initiator and Completer; Jesus the Pioneer and Perfector. It is done!

But what are we to make of the statements that all these things must 'soon take place' (Rev. 1:1; 22:6), that Jesus said he was 'coming soon' to the churches in Pergamum and Philadelphia (2:16 & 3:11) and three times in the final chapter Jesus announces he is 'coming soon'? (22:7, 12, 20).

### **'Coming soon?'**

'Soon' is a time word. But it is non-specific. How long is 'soon'? I understand the word 'soon', not as a specific period of time indicating that some event is fixed and imminent, but as a flexible, open-ended period of time which is dependent on events, circumstances, responses etc.

So when we see the word 'soon' in the book of Revelation, it is usually linked to a particular response that Jesus is looking for in his people e.g. reading, hearing and taking to heart the prophecy (1:1-3), repenting (2:12), holding on (3:11), keeping the words of the prophecy (22:7), continuing to be pure (22:14), not adding to or subtracting from the prophecy (22:18&19).

Jesus didn't know when he would be coming back so he couldn't have meant 'soon' in the sense of imminent. Rather he will come back quickly, at the appropriate time, when he is sent by his Father. When the time has fully come, God will send forth his Son (again).

Jesus was never interested in speculating with his disciples about precisely when he would return, though he did tell them to look out for certain signs. His emphasis was always on how we should be living if we thought his return *wasn't* imminent rather than if we thought it was!

'Soon' is more of a word to encourage us, in the present, to live holy lives, to act judiciously in these times in which we live. There has to be a sense of urgency. We are to act 'quickly', 'soon', 'at the appropriate time'.

Jesus used this same word when he was speaking of the need to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with an offended brother before we come to God. Settle matters 'soon', 'quickly', he says, 'before it is too late' (Mt. 5:25).

When Paul used the word 'soon' it was often in the context of not knowing precisely when or how long the 'soon' would be e.g. "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed ...." (1 Tim. 3:14).

And the writer to the Hebrews uses it in the same way: "I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he comes soon, I will come with him to see you" (Heb. 13:23).

This flexibility in timing is also apparent in what Peter writes about what will happen with regard to the return of Christ and the creation of the new heaven and earth (2 Peter 3:3-13).

He starts by saying there will be scoffers who say: "Where is this coming?" and then goes on to point out the different time perspectives between the Divine and the human. But he also indicates that we ourselves have a part to play in just when this 'Day of the Lord' will occur.



## Our Missionary Mandate

As we engage in mission, and work with God towards the accomplishment of His purposes, so, it seems, we can influence the precise time when Jesus will return. We are able to 'hasten the day'.

I was reading recently a fact file on 11 countries in South East Asia with a total population of 645 million. Of this number, 330 million are still unreached with the gospel. And there are still 1.5 billion people in the world who are waiting for the Bible in their own language.



There is still much work to be done and Jesus will not return until folks from every nation, tribe, people and language have had an opportunity to hear the gospel (Mt. 24:14).

So the missionary mandate continues with a sense of growing urgency, and these words of Paul spoken in Athens, words which speak to us again about past, present and future, remind us of the on-going task committed to us: -

“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30&31).

To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

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