

1 Corinthians 15:20-28
"The Christian Concept of Time"
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, TN

Have you ever taken the time to think about time? I would say that most people haven't. They say that a fish never sees the water it lives in, and we tend to take no notice of those most basic elements of our own environment. The more basic and pervasive something is, the less we notice it and the more difficulty we have finding words to describe it. St. Augustine long ago wrote,

"What is time? If no one asks me, I know. If I try to explain it to someone asking me, I don't know."

We may have trouble articulating our concept of time, but it is very important and certainly something worth discussing. A culture's concept of time has a lot to do with whether that culture is impoverished or wealthy, whether that culture is passively static or actively progressive, whether that culture is despondent or hopeful.

One of the blessings of Western civilization is that its concept of time is basically Biblical. This is something we take for granted, something we don't fully appreciate. We tend to be unaware that there ever was any way of viewing time other than the one we grew up with and have always known. Yet there have been very divergent ways of looking at time. The concept of time found in

the Old Testament, for example, was radically different from the concept of time found everywhere else in the pagan world which surrounded ancient Israel. And the concept of time found in the New Testament transformed Western civilization.

Back in 1999, as the year 2000 approached, **Newsweek** published an article entitled "2000 Years of Jesus." Here's a statement from that **Newsweek** article:

Time itself was transformed: where the Greeks and Romans thought of the universe as fixed and eternal, Christianity ... injected into Western consciousness the notion of the future as the work of God himself.

Back in 1998, the historian Thomas Cahill wrote the bestselling book, **The Gift of the Jews**. The subtitle of the book is "How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels." Now let me warn you that Mr. Cahill is not what we would call a Bible believing theologian. He explains away many of the miracles of the Bible; he does not view the Bible as the Word of God. Still this book is a fascinating and helpful read. It explains some of the crucial differences between Abraham's understanding of reality and the understanding that was prevalent in the pagan world of Abraham's day. A major emphasis in the book is the Biblical concept of time and history.

The pagan world from the Sumerians at the time of Abraham to the Greeks and Romans at the time of Christ had basically the same concept of time. The pagan world viewed time as insignificant and cyclical. Let me try to explain that, because

this pagan view is so foreign to us. This ancient pagan view is basically the same view of time still found today in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, but most in our culture are not familiar with it.

In this pagan view, historical time is insignificant. Everything that is really important had already happened outside of time in some pristine Golden Age or in some heavenly eternal realm. These significant eternal happenings were recorded in myths, such as the story of Gilgamesh or the story of Hercules. No one cared if these myths recorded events that had really happened. All that was important was that these myths embodied truths from beyond our meaningless world. Life on earth was viewed as but an earthly replay of these mythical dramas and a fleeting reflection of these eternal realities.

Life on earth was also viewed as an endless cycle much like the constantly repeating stages of the moon. Life was seen as filled with endlessly repeating cycles, such as the seasons of the year -- spring, summer, fall and winter -- and the seasons of life -- birth, marriage, parenthood and death. Life was a cycle of events which repeated the past, and the past merely reflected the fixed pattern of the eternal. History was a wheel of suffering which had no beginning and which was progressing toward no end. Humanity was seen as locked into this cycle of meaningless repetition, and there was no hope of escape. Humanity's plight was like that of a traveler lost in the woods who can never find his way out because he is traveling in circles and repeatedly retracing his steps.

Mr. Cahill says, "The Jews were the first people to break out of this circle, to find a new way of thinking and experiencing, a new way of understanding and feeling the world, ..." (p. 5). Now I wouldn't put it like that. I would say that God's covenant people, going back to Adam, were never enslaved to this pagan view of time. The pagan view of time is something that developed first in the city of Cain and later in the city of Babel on the plain of Shinar. God's covenant people always viewed time not as a meaningless cycle but as a linear flow, beginning with a purpose and proceeding to a meaningful end. History had a purposeful beginning in the creation recorded in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and history is progressing toward a meaningful end with the return of Christ prophesied in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible.

We are today on the verge of a new year, and this is a good time to think about the Biblical concept of time. I think our Scripture passage for today will be very helpful in that regard. Our passage for today teaches us how God wants us to think about the past, the future and the present.

Let's begin by looking at what our passage tells us about how God would have us view the past. Our passage for today focuses on the most significant event in the past, and that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The first thing I want to point out about this event from the past is that it really happened in actual history. This is not just myth. This is not just some story out of Grimm's fairy tales whose only purpose is to illustrate some basic life concept. This is an event which actually occurred in space/time history. In the early part of this

chapter, the Apostle Paul stresses the historicity of this event. He strives to give us overwhelming evidence that the resurrection of Christ really happened. In verse 6, Paul points out that on one occasion, over five hundred brethren saw the resurrected Christ, and the majority of these five hundred were then still alive. If any then had any doubts about the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, there were a multitude of living witnesses they could personally consult. This effort to root an event in history and to demonstrate that it really, actually happened, is something you will never find in the ancient accounts of pagan myths,

Paul goes on to say that if the resurrection of Jesus from the dead didn't actually occur in space/time history, then our religion is false and Christianity isn't true. Either Jesus rose from the dead, or the gospel is a lie and "we are of all men the most pitiable" (1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

We look at the past, and we see not fictional myths that enslave us but a real historical event that frees us and gives us hope! Paul says that the resurrected Christ is the firstfruits of the mighty harvest of the coming resurrection unto life. In an Old Testament harvest, the first harvested sheaf was presented to God as an offering. This first sheaf represented the whole harvest. It was the beginning of the harvest, the promise of the harvest, the pledge of the full harvest yet to come. And such was the case with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

When Jesus was born, He came in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3). This doesn't mean that Jesus was sinful or that

Jesus ever sinned. Jesus was without sin. Jesus was holy, harmless and undefiled. Though fully human, Jesus never had a sinfully corrupt nature that was inclined toward rebelling against God and sinning. Yet Jesus was born with a body that had a likeness to sinful flesh. This means that Jesus was not born with a body that was like Adam's body in his state of innocence before he fell into sin. Before the fall, Adam's body was not subject to sickness and physical death. Jesus was born with a body susceptible to the pain, misery and death which are a part of the curse which descended upon creation at the time of Adam's first sin. That is what the Bible means when it says that Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh.

When Jesus rose from the dead, He came forth from the grave with the same body in terms of identity but with a different body in terms of quality and character. His resurrection body consisted of the same flesh and bones as before, but these had been gloriously transformed. This transformation was more than merely the removal of the curse, more than merely a return to the level of existence Adam had experienced in his innocence before the fall. This change went beyond that to a higher, more glorious level of human existence. The resurrection body of Jesus is a "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44), a body more conducive to the working of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' elevation to this new, more glorious state of bodily existence at the time of His resurrection was the beginning of the new creation.

We have a foretaste of the new creation when we experience inner regeneration and our hearts are resurrected spiritually (Ephesians 2:4-6). We will experience the new creation in its

fullness when Christ returns and gives us resurrection bodies like unto His own. That will be the coming harvest of which the resurrection of Christ was the firstfruits. Jesus will then also purge the whole universe of all sin, and "the creation itself ... will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). Christ will at that time usher in a new heavens and a new earth which will be our home for eternity.

Paul goes on to explain how Christ is able to do all of this. He says,

"For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive."

Adam sinned, and this resulted in death coming upon all humanity because of Adam's unique relationship with all humanity. God first created Adam from the dust of the earth, and then created Eve from a rib taken from Adam's side. All humanity are descendants of Adam and Eve, and Eve also derives her existence from Adam. Thus all humanity ultimately traces itself back to Adam and to Adam alone. For this reason, God was able to use Adam as a representative for all humanity. When Adam fell into sin, he was then acting not only for himself but also for the entire human race. For that reason, the guilt of Adam's first sin is on both Adam and all his descendants. And with the guilt comes the judicial judgment of death.

Paul then proceeds to argue by analogy. Christ also is a covenant Head, not for all humanity but for all who believe in Him. Jesus also acted in the place of those under His covenant Headship when He suffered on the cross to pay for their sins. Because Jesus was obedient to the will of the Father even to the point of death, God rewarded Jesus with resurrection life. Based on what happened to those under the covenant headship of Adam, it is only logical that those under the covenant Headship of Christ will one day be made alive. Just as Adam's act of disobedience affected all who are in Adam, Christ's act of obedience must affect all who are in Christ. If Adam's judgment of death spread to all who are in Adam, then Christ's reward of resurrection life must also spread to all who are in Christ.

Paul says that by "Man [referring to Jesus] came the resurrection from the dead," and "in Christ all shall be made alive." The Greek word here translated "be made alive" is a word which always refers to the gift of life associated with salvation and which usually refers to the physical resurrection unto life. All humanity will be resurrected at the last day, but only God's people will experience a resurrection unto life with a glorified body like unto the resurrection body of Christ. This resurrection unto life is what Paul is talking about in this passage.

So we look at the past and we see the resurrection of Christ. From that, we learn that history is meaningful, real, and significant. Space/time history has been dignified by the participation of the Son of God in it through the incarnation. Our hope is not based upon some myth that probably never even actually happened. It is based upon a genuine concrete act that

occurred in real history according to the consistent testimony of a multitude of witnesses. We look to the past and find not a basis for bondage but rather hope for deliverance and hope for the future.

That brings us to our second point: how God would have us view the future. Verses 23 and 24 talk about the return of Christ as an end, the culmination of a process, the accomplishment of a goal. Time is not this meaningless cycle, this wheel of suffering from which there is no escape. Rather time is a linear process beginning with the original creation and going all the way to the return of Christ. We have a promise regarding this future based in the resurrection of Christ. Christ's resurrection is a pledge and promise that we as God's people will one day ourselves be resurrected with a resurrection unto life. And so the life we live has a purpose, a goal, an end. And it will be glorious. As we look to the future, we see not only deliverance from the curse with all its misery and suffering but also a coming day of total victory over all God's and our enemies. Verse 24 says that when Christ returns, He will put "an end to all rule and all authority and power." "Rule" and "authority" and "power" are words which are sometimes used to refer to the evil powers in the universe which are opposed to the kingdom of God in this age. For example, in Ephesians 6:12, Paul said,

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

At His resurrection, ascension and seating at the right hand of God, Jesus was exalted to a position far above all principality and power and might and dominion (Eph. 1:20-21). Throughout this age, Jesus is engaged in a reign of conquest which will culminate in His victorious return to earth. He will overcome all His opposition in this age. He will sit at the right hand of God the Father reigning until all His enemies are overcome, the last enemy, which He will overcome at His return, being death itself.

This passage says that when Jesus returns at the end of this age, He will deliver His kingdom to God the Father. The meaning of this statement becomes clear when one understands that this passage is looking at the kingdom as a reign of conquest.

Consider Psalm 110:1-2:

- 1 The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool."
- 2 The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies!

In this age, Jesus is making His enemies into His footstool, breaking them with a rod of iron, and dashing them to pieces like a potter's vessel (Psalm 2:9). This reign of conquest will one day end because there is coming a day when all the enemies will be vanquished. When Jesus has successfully finished this mission of conquest, He will deliver the kingdom to God the Father. There will no longer be any need for God to use the exalted Messiah as an Agent of conquest. From then on, God's rule of sovereign power over the universe will be solely a direct

rule of providence. Or, as the passage puts it, God will "be all in all." Jesus will continue in His role as Head of the Church, and in this sense will be the everlasting King.

As we look at the future, we again learn lessons about time. Time is linear, going toward a purpose and goal. It is not a meaningless, repetitious cycle. History is climaxing toward a goal. The life we live has eternal significance. Our labor in the Lord is not in vain. There will be a winning side in the struggle of the ages, and we are on it. We can look forward to the end of conflict and to victory.

We should live every day in the light of Christ's future return. It doesn't matter if Christ returns soon or ten thousand years from now. Either way, we will at that time appear before Christ and give an account of the life we have lived. We should be daily motivated by a desire to hear those words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." This means that we should be good stewards of the life we are living in the here and now.

And that brings us to our third and last point, which is how God would have us understand the present. We look at the past, and we see the resurrection of Christ. We look at the future and we see the return of Christ. We look at the present, and we see the reign of Christ. Christ in this age is progressively putting His enemies under His feet in a reign of conquest. Verse 25 says,

"For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet."

That is what Jesus is doing right now.

We read in the second Psalm that the nations have been given to the Messiah as His inheritance. Since the nations are His, He has given us the task of disciplining them for Him. This is a conquest not with a sword of steel but a conquest through the preaching of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is the most powerful weapon in all the world. It is "mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God"

As we preach the gospel, as we live the message of Christ, as we come together to worship God on the Lord's Day, we are an integral part of Jesus' rule of conquest in this age. I believe Jesus will be successful, and that the nations in this age will be disciplined through the preaching of the gospel and the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

So there we see the Christian concept of time. It is not a meaningless cycle. It is rather a concept of time rooted in a real historical event in the past which is the basis for all future hope. It looks at the future as a goal to which we are victoriously progressing. It looks at the present as a meaningful part of that ongoing conquest. That is our concept of time.

You can't be at peace with time until you are at peace with eternity. And the only way to be at peace with eternity is through the Lord of time, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I close this message on the eve of our new year with this exhortation, that this new year you look to Jesus. Look to Jesus for forgiveness. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin

for all those who believe in Him. Look to Him for deliverance. The Jesus who forgives sin is also the Jesus who delivers from the power of sin. He never does one without doing the other.