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A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven

Stephen Olford writes about a story which records that the noted botanist, Linnaeus, once devised a clock of flowers. Each of the blooms opened in turn at a set time of day. God has a similar order and beauty in the garden of life. Carefully, steadily, He unfolds the petals of time before us so that we may extract from them the nectar of His mercy and the honey of His never-failing blessings (Bosch 1976).

It is this orderliness of creation which inspired the Preacher (author of Ecclesiastes) to affirm, "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven" (3:1). Quite obviously, it is God and God alone who winds up the clock of the universe and manages its intricate machinery. This is the only answer which satisfies the Bible, history, and personal experience. He alone regulates time, and He alone relegates time.

It Is God Who Regulates Time. While time is a human concept, since God is infinite and inhabits eternity, time is nevertheless a gift of His divine agency. Without God there wouldn't be man, and without eternity there wouldn't be time. It follows therefore, God sovereignly determines that time. Solomon tells us that "[God] has made everything beautiful in its time" (Eccl. 3:11). God chose to determine time, He spoke out of eternity and said, "In the beginning" (Gen. 1:1), and time began. And at some point, in the future God will again speak, and time shall be no more. So, Solomon adds, "I know that whatever God does, it shall be

forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him" (Eccl. 3:14).

So, we see that we have nothing to do with time. Its beginning, duration, and termination are totally outside of our comprehension and control. For this reason, time should be regarded by everyone as a precious commodity. Ted S. Rendall (1964) tells of seeing an hourglass in which the sand was represented by dollar signs. Then he goes on to recall that "after spending an evening too lightly, Robert Murray McCheyne wrote in his diary: 'My heart must break off from all these things. What right have I to steal and abuse my Master's time? The word "redeem," is crying to me.'

The saintly McCheyne had heard the voice of his Master speaking to him from Ephesians 5:15 and 16, "Walk circumspectly, redeeming the time, because the days are evil." Redeem; that is the keyword for the Christian's attitude to time. The word gives direction and demands diligence. Time is being put up for auction. There are many bidders, and we must "redeem" it, buy it for ourselves, in order that we may put it into service for the King. Since God sovereignly determines time, we are committed to redeem it for His glory. Let us never have to say, "I wasted time."

But more than this, time is seasonally divided by God. The creation story reveals that "God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So, the evening and the morning were the first day" (Gen. 1:4–5).

Later, in the unfolding record of history, we read that God said, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease" (Gen. 8:22).

This is the mighty sovereign work of our great God. We have the daily, nightly, weekly, and yearly seasons, or divisions, of time. In

the providence of God, time is regulated for our good and for His glory.

Thomas H. Stebbins notes that “Whether our name is Billy Graham or John Doe, each of us receives an equal allotment of 168 hours per week. The difference is in how we spend it. None of us would throw away bits of money; dimes, nickels or pennies, but all of us are guilty of throwing away five minutes here or a quarter of an hour there in our ordinary day.”

Stebbins suggests six principles to promote good stewardship of time: 1. Define your goals—both short-range and long. In two minutes, write down an all-inclusive list of your lifetime goals; personal, family, career, financial and spiritual. In the same length of time, answer the question: “How would I like to spend the next four years?” On a third sheet of paper, answer the question: “If I knew I would be struck down by lightning six months from today, how would I live until then?”

With proper time management there is no real reason why you should not start doing most of your preferred activities at once.

2. Pursue Your Priorities. It is all too easy to let the urgent crowd out the important, and the important the imperative, until the important and the imperative are postponed or omitted altogether. The only way out is a plan. So, divide the next four or five years into one-year segments. List what must be done in each segment to accomplish those goals which you believe to be God’s will for you. Then get a calendar and work on it a month at a time. A weekly schedule is helpful too.

3. Utilize Your Delays. A University of Wisconsin analysis shows that the average person spends three years of his lifetime just waiting. A Gallup sample of a hundred people selected at random indicated that every one of them expected to do some waiting in the meaning of the words, “a time for every purpose under

heaven" (Eccl. 3:1), is all-important to those who want to live for God. What the Preacher is saying is that time is relegated to the fulfillment of God's purpose.

Primarily, the word "purpose" or "pleasure" has to do with God's design for the creatures of His hand. There is the creative purpose of God. "He has made everything beautiful in its time" (Eccl. 3:11). This was the divine verdict on everything that God created. He saw everything that He had made and "it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). That is why Solomon says, "I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him" (Eccl. 3:14).

Into that paradise of beauty, however, Satan came and spoiled it all. The plain fact is that "through one man, sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12).

Heaven's answer to this marring of God's creative purpose was immediate and redemptive. Following the fall of man, therefore, there was introduced the redemptive purpose of God. We read that "He ... put eternity in [men's] hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end" (Eccl. 3:11).

Only the New Testament can interpret these words, for it is the gospel alone that tells us that because of the Savior's work on the cross and His triumphant resurrection, God can put not only eternity, but life and life more abundant into man's heart. (John 10:10).

So miraculous is this work of grace that man's unaided mind can never tell how God's Spirit works. This is what Jesus meant when He said: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound

of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

If this redemptive purpose is rejected by man, then the solemn consequence is the corrective purpose of God. "God requires an account of what is past" (Eccl. 3:15), declares the Preacher, and then adds: "Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment, wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there. I said in my heart, 'God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work'" (Eccl. 3:16-17).

There is no recourse for those who finally reject the way of salvation. This is the day of grace, and when it is over, nothing but judgment awaits the unbelieving and unrepentant. Therefore, the gospel reminds us that "now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

Time is not only relegated to the fulfillment of God's purpose, but time is relegated to the achievement of God's glory. There is "a time for every purpose under heaven" (Eccl. 3:1). Those two words "under heaven" are not only a reference to this earth, but they are also a reminder that everything that happens on this planet is under the eye of God, and therefore, to be done to the glory of God.

Now this is certainly a strange sounding doctrine in the light of the confusion, corruption, and chaos of our modern day! But notwithstanding this, it is still true that God is sovereign, and therefore, will have the last word. God cannot be God and be defeated.

So, we learn from Scripture that God has ordained that the works of man shall praise Him. The Psalmist observes, "All Your works shall praise You, O Lord, and Your saints shall bless You" (Ps. 145:10). God has so ordered things that everything He has made

will ultimately praise Him. This, of course, is especially true of His own people who have become part of the redemptive purpose. Jesus says to us, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). And Paul informs us that "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

You and I must understand that God has "predestined us..., according to the good pleasure of His will, to praise the glory of His grace" (Eph. 1:5-6). And what goes on in our lives is a constant object lesson to the principalities and powers in heavenly places who observe, in the church, the manifold wisdom of God (see Eph. 3:10).

Truly, God has ordained that the works of man should praise Him. But more than this, God has ordained that the wrath of man shall praise Him. Once again, it is the Psalmist who affirms that "the wrath of man shall praise You" (Ps. 76:10). Indeed, the verse starts with the word "surely". "Surely the wrath of man shall praise You." This is hard to believe, but it is true. God is so wise and strong that He can turn anything to ultimate good and glory. Think of the life of Joseph (Gen. 30—50). You will recall that he was the favorite son of Jacob, his father, and even before his teen years, God had revealed to him the role that he was to play in the years to come. You will also recall how his brothers rejected the interpretation of his dream; in fact, they became jealous of him, even to the point of attempting to destroy him. At last, they sold him to some Egyptians traveling on their way back to their country. To cover their sin, they took Joseph's coat of many colors, dipped it in the blood of a slain animal, and presented it to their father with a report that he had been the victim of some wild beast.

But God was with Joseph and prospered him until he became the prime minister of Egypt. Then in the providence of God, these same brethren of Joseph had to travel to Egypt to buy food to save their old father and their families in a time of famine.

Eventually Joseph revealed himself to his brethren who, in turn, feared lest he should fall upon them and slay them for their cruelty and wickedness. But, instead, he addressed them with these wonderful words: "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

God turned the wrath of man to His eternal praise. Then reflect on the death of Jesus. No one ever lived such a life of purity, nobility, and humanity. He blessed the little children, He fed the hungry, He healed the sick, He raised the dead, He preached good news to the captives, and yet, at the last, He was nailed to a Roman cross. Watch Him as He carries His wooden burden through the north gate along the Via Dolorosa and up the hill of Calvary. His back is bleeding, His face is bruised, and He staggers due to loss of blood. Presently He arrives at Golgotha, and He is made to lie down upon that gibbet while nails are hammered through His holy hands and feet. The cross is raised and jolted into the ground to dislocate every bone in His body. But looking into the faces of His enemies, He prays, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Whatever evil men perpetrated, He turned into good.

He transformed the very cross on which He died into a throne of grace so that He might mediate eternal redemption to a race of hell-deserving sinners. Through that cross, the wrath of man was turned to His eternal praise. Therefore, believers can always say, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love

God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

We can affirm, then, that our God is the God of sovereignty and destiny. He alone can regulate time; He alone can relegate time. To believe in this God is to be delivered from the emptiness and hopelessness of materialism. To believe in this God is to be lifted into the glorious dimensions of divine sovereignty and destiny, and with the hymn writer to sing:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise. Walter C. Smith

Think on These Things (Phil. 4:8) Time is a fragment of eternity given by God to man as a solemn stewardship. The Bible tells us that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body [life's time-span], according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). In the light of this, we need to redeem the time (Eph. 5:16). It was Augustine of Hippo who said, "Time never takes time off."