

# Time

## Introduction

I talk with people a lot. Some subjects come up a lot: they often speak of their lives and their beliefs, and how the two work together. Other subjects don't often come up as such, but 'hover' in the background. People rarely raise the subject of time; when they do, it is usually as a given: this is just the way things are; this is the way God acts and interacts with us.

They rarely consider that their beliefs and assumptions about time are just that – beliefs, not facts. They often appear to have quite a basic grasp of a deep and difficult subject, and have given little thought to how it works out in the complicated details of their lives.

It seems to me that Christians are often imprisoned by their concept of time, in much the same way that some infants will not crawl onto a transparent section of floor (a 'visual cliff'), because they 'know' that venturing in that direction will cause them to fall. And maybe a more comprehensive understanding of the subject might enable some people to explore new territory, both spiritual and emotional, and perhaps enable them to discover new possibilities in their lives.

## The Use of Time

### *A balanced diet*

Past, present and future all matter. But they matter in different ways: depending on what you are interested in, sometimes only one or two of them seem important – in that context. But draw back, see the wider picture, and all three are always essential.

Some spiritual disciplines and some theological traditions focus on limited aspects of time. Just like a healthy diet requires that you consume a balanced variety of food, so a health spirituality requires that you engage in an appropriate way with each of past, present and future – so that your engagement is constructive, effective and adequate for your needs.

### *Present*

The practice of 'mindfulness' is promoted in many different contexts these days. It is essentially a secular repackaging of some traditional Buddhist meditation techniques, and encourages people to focus on the here and now. There are, of course, many other ways to do this, but the popularity of this practice probably indicates that a large number of people are lacking in their everyday engagement with the present.

Much traditional evangelicalism focusses a great deal of attention on the way that our sins (in the past) have been forgiven through Jesus' death on the cross (in the past) and on our hope (in the future) of spending eternity with Jesus. Even when there is talk about the Holy Spirit giving us power in the present to resist sin, the 'present' being talked about is really more like 'this life' than 'here and now', so it is actually another promise for the future.

One feature of the Charismatic movement was the attention given to the experience of worship, of enjoying God's presence, meeting with Him here and now. It enabled the present to be a living, vital part of your faith, linking the past and the future.

But while we have discovered how to give time to enjoying God's presence in times of worship, few of us have gone on to discover and practice the presence of God in each moment in everyday life, so memorably described by Brother Lawrence.

## ***Past***

We need the past. Just looking back is not enough: you need to look back in the right ways and for the right reasons. Your past, your history, is your identity – without a past, you don't know who you are. When we discover a new identity in Jesus, we discover a new relationship with our past, but our 'old' past does not cease to exist: it no longer controls us, but it continues to influence our present in all kinds of ways.

My history is my identity, both as an individual and as part of a group: my culture and my heritage also help to shape me; the actions and experiences of my ancestors and forerunners shape the context in which I live today. We celebrate Waterloo and are shamed by Amritsar, because our nation did these things.

How I use the past matters. If I only look back to remember sins which need to be forgiven, my identity is horribly distorted. Yes, I have done dreadful things at times, but I have also done (with God's help!) some brave and wonderful things: if I do not remember and celebrate the good, I disrespect the God Who was working through me and I fail to understand who I am in Christ.

Laying aside, perhaps, many stories about time travel, the one thing we confidently know about the past is that it cannot be changed. Except ... this is only true on a fairly trivial level. Most of the time, what really matters is not the actual past, but the story we tell about our understanding of what we remember about the past– or, worse, about what we imagine happened.

Anyone who has been involved with couples' counselling will know that two people can come away from an event with very different memories: you can listen to the two accounts and doubt that they are talking about the same thing. It is easy to attribute such differences to malice and manipulation, but the truth is that our memories are always selective, and it is not surprising that different people will select different aspects of the event as being the most significant.

We can be terribly confident – and completely wrong – about what is going on inside the other person; it can be very hard to accept that our understanding, and the story we tell as a result, may be wrong, but recognising that we may have been mistaken, or only partly right, is a vital step we need to make. It matters, because

allowing the past to change is one of the main ways in which we can change the future.

We cannot live in the past, but every now and then it is necessary to revisit it, so that it can be changed. You will be familiar with such conversations ...

“You criticised me for making us late.”

“I asked you what the time was.”

“You asked me the time in order to make me feel bad because you were cross for being late.”

“I didn’t mind being late; I only asked because I was going to unload the dishwasher if I had time before we left.”

Much psychotherapy is about changing *what is possible* in the future by changing *the way we feel* about the past, by changing *our understanding* of the past. The more accurate and helpful our understanding of the past is, the better equipped we are to live in the present and so create a worthwhile future.

## **Future**

We also need the future. While we must live in the present, in the sense of giving it our full attention, experiencing the here and now, our life cannot solely be in the present: we must make choices, and our choices must depend upon the future we want to create.

Some people live in the light of a future that is very clear; for others, the future is cloudy; and for yet others, it may hardly be articulated at all. I suspect that, for most of us, different aspects of the future have differing degrees of clarity. There are both benefits and dangers associated with both clarity and the lack of it.

If you don’t know where you want to go and what you want to do, you cannot prepare yourself to achieve anything which needs to be worked at. The other side of the coin is that it is much easier to be spontaneous – you can be far more open to exploring the unexpected possibilities which arise.

When you have a clear picture of the future, it may be desired or feared. Politicians the world over know that the easiest way to motivate people is to create a vivid picture of a feared future, and tell them what they must do to avoid it.

If you can see a desired future and you can see a way to make it happen, then you can prepare and plan and work to achieve it – you may fail, but in failing one thing you may achieve another: if you aim at the stars and miss, you may reach the moon. There is always a danger that you may succeed, achieve your dream and then discover it isn’t what you hoped for after all. And if you are clear about your dream but can’t see a way to make it come about, you may find yourself basking in the warm glow of the imagined future and never lift a finger to try and make it happen.

We can use the future in many different ways: it can be productive and creative, or it can result in destruction, lethargy or despair. How we – and our leaders – use the future critically affects the future we create. The different options have been understood for a long time, but we rarely train people to do this well.

# The Reality of Time

Many people believe that, in an important sense, time is not real. Some people believe this on theological grounds, others have scientific reasons.

## *God and Time*

In almost every conversation I have with a Christian about time, they confidently tell me the one thing they are sure about: God is “outside time”. And, if God is outside time, then time is essentially an illusion. After all, God sees things as they really are, and if God sees everything from the outside, as one eternal, unchanging ‘now’, then that is how the universe really is.

I ask how they know that God is outside time, and nine times out of ten they assure me that this must be the case because otherwise God would not be able to predict the future. Sometimes I’m told: it’s like a film – the characters in the film live through it minute by minute, but God can see the whole film, from beginning to end.

This may be true. I don’t want to be dogmatic about things I don’t understand – and the nature of God and how He relates to time is way beyond my pay scale. But I am reasonably sure that this picture is not what the Bible teaches us.

The Bible tells us about a God Who exists in time, Who learns things and changes His mind. God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, then provides a ram at the last minute. Why? To find out what Abraham will do: “Now I know that you fear God” (Genesis 22:12). In the next book, God tells Moses that He will destroy the Israelites and start again with him, and Moses persuades God to change His mind (Exodus 32:14). The Bible consistently talks about a God Who reacts to what we do and interacts in a meaningful way with us, changing His plans in the light of our words and actions.

You can (and people do!) argue that this is simply the Bible’s way of talking about a God Who is outside time, but it is hard to do this and take the Bible seriously. The Bible could have told us about an unchanging God, outside of time, but it doesn’t. If the Bible is deliberately lying to us about God’s interactions with us, if there is only the pretence of an interaction, the appearance of a relationship, it is hard to know what part of the Biblical revelation we can rely upon.

In fact, this unchanging God Who is outside time, is a familiar figure in the ancient world, but this is the God of Plato, not the God of Abraham. It is important not to confuse the two. Greek philosophy became part of mainstream Christian theology within a few centuries, and the unchanging God Who is outside time is subsequently taught by many Christian teachers, but you do not encounter this God in the pages of the Bible.

You don’t need a God Who is outside time in order to have a God Who can tell us about the future. I can tell you about the future, and I’m certainly not outside time: I can tell you what time the sun will rise tomorrow morning and the date of the next full moon. I can even tell you, to a high level of accuracy, where I will be worshipping next Sunday morning.

I can tell you about the future, partly because I understand enough of the way the world works to know what to expect, and partly because I am able to make plans for the future and – mostly – carry them out. God understands the workings of the world far better than I do, and when God makes plans to do something, nothing and nobody is big enough to get in the way.

## ***Science and Time***

Many people believe that science has proved that time does not exist. This is not entirely unreasonable, as it is fairly easy to find articles written by real, respected scientists, who make this claim. However, you can be a good and respected scientist and an expert in your field, and still not have a good understanding of the philosophy of science.

Science offers us models of the world which enable us to predict what will happen in certain situations. Science cannot tell us that the current model is right, only that it has not been shown to be wrong – so far. And the model is only a model: it is only true insofar as the predictions it enables us to make are accurate.

When I was at school, I was told that scientists have discovered that the world is made up of atoms, which are tiny things like a very small solar system: a central mass (the nucleus) like the sun, with a number of much smaller masses (the electrons) circling round it like the planets. It turns out that this picture contains aspects of truth, but it is deeply misleading in other ways – but that is not a criticism: every good model tells us some things well, but fails to tell us other things. Only reality gives us every aspect of reality.

Scientists often talk as though scientific laws (as we have formulated them) constrain reality: you hear things like “Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle prevents us from” measuring something, when it would be more precise (some might say ‘pedantic’) to say that Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle tells us that we cannot measure it. Scientific laws do not prevent us from doing things – reality does, and the scientific laws simply describe what reality seems to allow ... given our current state of knowledge.

But even good scientists sometimes confuse the map with the territory, the sign with the meaning. We know that entropy increases with time, so a scientific way of describing the direction of time is that it moves towards increasing entropy – you can distinguish between the past and the future in this way. But this leads some people to identify time with increasing entropy, and therefore suggest that when entropy finally reaches a maximum, time will be no more. Ignoring the question of whether maximum entropy can every be reached, this simply confuses the signifier (entropy) with the thing signified (time).

Discussions of General Relativity talk about ‘space-time’ as a four dimensional reality, but this is often misunderstood. Calculations using relativity and space-time produce accurate results which have been consistently verified in every experiment and observation so far undertaken, but this does not mean that time is ‘simply’ another dimension. It means that our intuitive understanding of the way we travel through time becomes increasingly inaccurate the faster we travel: it means our intuitive understanding of time is wrong, but it does not mean that time does not exist.

Forgive me labouring the point, but it is an important one: we can do relativistic calculations which treat time as a dimension like the other three we are familiar with – length, breadth and height. And this makes some intuitive sense: to exist in the real world, an object needs to extend (and be located) in all three physical dimensions, and it also needs to extend and be located in time. But time does not operate in the same way as the three physical dimensions: we can control our movement in space – we can step forwards and sideways, we can jump up – but we cannot step into yesterday. We have no control over our progress through time, other than the changes imposed by relativity.

Similarly, it has been suggested that the universe had no beginning, because we can describe the universe as a static four dimensional reality which has no boundary – no start and no end, just as the surface of the planet we live on has no boundary: you can keep walking (/sailing ...) as far as you like, and you never reach the edge of the world. But the fact that you can describe the universe in these terms does not mean that the universe is no more than what you have just described. It is a description of reality, not a definition. While we may wish to, we cannot define time out of existence.

## The Shape of Time

I speak with a lot of people whose mental model of their journey through time looks like the letter ‘I’: past, present and future all line up, and you move directly from one to the next. I suspect that, for most people, a ‘Y’ shaped model is much healthier, and an “X” shaped model healthier still.

“I”

The ‘I’ model of time goes with the belief that God is outside time. Amongst other things, this means that God ‘sees’ the past, the present and the future. Which means that the future is fixed: God knows what you will do. Some people find it a comforting thought, but others find it oppressive.

At times in the Bible, God tells people what will happen in the future. This does not mean that God actually sees the future – at least, not in ways that we cannot. We can see into the future on the basis of what we know about the present, and we can determine to do things in the future. God knows more than we do, understands better how things work; God is bigger and more powerful than us and more capable of making plans come about. And it is entirely possible that, while we cannot know in advance which of two slits an electron will travel through, God may know.

It is possible to believe that the future is fixed without believing that you are powerless – after all, whatever happens will be shaped, in part, by your choices. When we watch a film, the characters in the film have (in the technical language) ‘agency’ – the events unfold as a result of their actions, but still the ending is fixed.

But, while this is possible, it is probably not very common: believing that the future is fixed must surely affect how you feel about it. After all, if you believe that your life is a story whose end has already been written, it is hard not to feel just a little bit trapped

Through the centuries, belief in a fixed future has gone hand in hand with a belief in destiny – as the ancient Greeks described it, the gods manipulate our lives according to their whims, and we cannot escape our fate.

Belief in a fixed future easily turns into fatalism, and Christianity allows no room for fatalism: we are constantly encouraged to choose what is right, to use our freedom wisely. But Christians have no need to struggle with fatalism, because the Bible does not teach the ‘I’ model of time: it does not tell us about a predetermined, fixed future.

## “Y”

I would like to replace the ‘I’ model idea of a single, fixed future and replace it with the ‘Y’ model: four distinct but related ways of engaging with the future.

- **Past, Present and Possibility.** The ‘Y’ illustrates just two possible paths, but the future can hold many things. What do you want it to be? What sort of future do you think God wants – for you, for other people, for the world we live in? Of all the many possible futures, which do you choose? Which do you want to make real? Which are you prepared to work for?
- **Past, Present and Plan.** Many things will just happen in your life, but other things will certainly not happen unless you plan to make them happen. Sometimes you plan to do something you want, and sometimes it is good to make a plan simply because the plan opens up new possibilities.
- **Past, Present and Purpose.** If you give your life to something important, something meaningful, nothing is ever the same again. Your purpose shapes your choices.
- **Past, Present and Promise.** You have obligations, you have made promises – both to yourself and others. You are free to choose what to do, but your choices have moral consequences, and morality matters.

Even when we have made promises, even when we have a purpose and a plan, the future holds many possibilities. We are creatures of habit, and habits are generally both good and useful – but doing things just out of habit is not a recipe for a fulfilled and productive life. You can ask yourself, and ask God: what should I do? Here and now? Today? This week, this year? The answer may surprise you.

You can pursue a plan while still being open to changing it – in fact, that is the only sane way to pursue any meaningful plan. ‘No plan of battle survives the first encounter with the enemy.’ Things change, some options disappear, new possibilities arise, old objectives seem less important. Children grow up, we lose friends and partners and jobs, we gain skills and experience and new people come into our lives.

## “X”

For some people, it may be enough to move from ‘I’ to ‘Y’, away from a single, unchanging future to one filled with possibilities and promises. But, for others, it is important to recognise that the past does not have to be fixed, either. It might be better to see time, not as a ‘Y’ but as an ‘X’, to be open to the possibility that the past, fixed though it seems, may also change.

Most of the time, what we see is what we look for. That is why great speakers and writers are so influential: they change what we understand, so they change what we are able to recognise, and they change what we see. Because we see more, the world we live in changes. History is not the past: it is *the story we tell about* the past, and that story can be revised and improved as we see more and understand more.

More than that, history is the story we tell about the parts of the past we remember, or the parts we focus on. As we remember more, focus on new areas, or discover new things, so history changes. My history is my identity, both as an individual and as part of a group, so as my history changes, so do I.

When people refuse the suggestion of counselling or psychotherapy, it is usually on the basis that ‘it won’t change anything’, as ‘the past is the past’. Despite all our evidence to the contrary, we often hold fast to the idea that the past cannot be changed, but changing your understanding of the past is the basis on which most of the schools of psychotherapy have been built: you talk about the past so that you can understand it differently, and many of the techniques employed are designed primarily to help you do precisely that.

Psychotherapy aside, if you want to change the future, the usual advice is: start now! Don’t put it off. But starting today may not be sufficient: you may need to understand the past differently, and to help others share this new perspective.

We learn whenever we discover new things. There is an increasing recognition of the importance of lifelong learning, a welcome change which is slowly finding its way into the church. But simply learning is not enough: we also need to change. As well as discovering new things, new truth, we also need to discover the limitations of the truths we already know.

Learning is important, but so is unlearning – discovering that the world is not the way we thought it was, that the principles we have relied upon are not always relevant, that the rules we have kept are not always right. The past has to be open to challenge, to re-assessment, or there is no growth, no real change.

And real change is, after all, what we need. We look back at our past, at the things we have done which make us feel guilty and ashamed, and we feel hopeless. But then God whispers: I know everything you are and everything you have done, and I have forgiven you. And everything changes.

## ***Next steps***

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated. There are three key questions. Is it helpful? Would you change anything? And would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form (<http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>) or join the conversation on the website (<http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>).