

CHAPTER 4: Our Worldviews and Time

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”
(Jeremiah 29:11)

Whether or not we can believe deep in our hearts that God is willing and able to make changes today in our societies depends to a large extent on what we believe about “time.” If we have greater emphasis on the past, the present and future may suffer and it may be difficult to see change as possibly being a good thing. On the other hand, if we focus primarily on the future, today might disappear in frustration. Let’s look together at what the different worldviews believe about time.

Secular thinking and Time

For someone with a secular worldview, time is considered a valuable resource. In fact, it is often scarce and should be “saved” for it can be wasted or lost. Above all, “time is money” for work and wages are tied to it. In effect, employers buy the time of their workers for work is assigned, deadlines set and wages are paid on the basis of time. Employees “clock in” or “clock out” to prove they were present. There never seems to be enough time to get everything done and people living this way are dominated by the speed in which time “passes.” “Time saving devices” are invented and used, but often seem to increase the speed at which people live, not provide the extra time promised.

From this view point, time is linear. We can diagram it on a “time-line.” In other words, it has a beginning and an end, and it flows by at a steady rate without repeating itself. Therefore, it can be measured and planned for. It may *seem* to flow faster or slower, depending upon the activities taking place (or lack of activities), but in reality, it is constant and can be relied upon. Man has devised instruments to measure time in incredibly small increments, allowing such things as an Olympic foot race to be won by a tenth of a second. Up until the 1600’s in Europe people understood time to move upward, in a linear fashion toward God. But during the 1600’s it was turned sideways, so that it ran horizontally toward a secular pursuit of progress. People thought if they cooperated with the laws of nature, society would grow economically and technologically and they would create a new paradise, some kind of utopia.

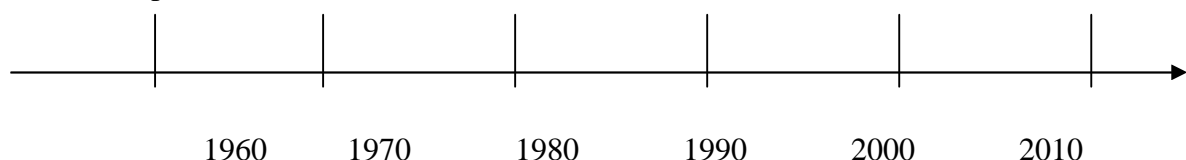


Figure 1

In this worldview time is very much future oriented and the goal is progress. It is the future, rather than the past that is important. The future is planned for as if it could be controlled and good times are expected someday in the future. Date books are kept to plan schedules often weeks and months in advance. For many people,

there is little emphasis on learning history or maintaining a family or national tradition. Old ways may be easily rejected in favour of something new. Mottos like “today is the first day of the rest of your life” and “plan ahead” are taught to children at a young age. In this view, time is closely tied to faith in progress and action.

America is probably one of the most extreme examples of this kind of thinking. In much of Europe roads might be built deviating around some old barn or another old worthless-looking building, all in the name of conserving history. In America old buildings likely would be knocked down immediately in the name of progress, with the happy thought, “off with the old, on with the new.” After all, it is the future that is important, not the past.

There is a greater emphasis on the value of youth in this worldview. At work, the young are thought to be more active and productive, and to hold more promise than do the elderly, despite their experience and sense of responsibility. Once a person retires, they are viewed as having little to contribute to society. When they can no longer care for themselves, they are often put in nursing homes and cared for by non-relatives. It is not unusual to hear an older person remarking “I’m only as old as I feel,” trying to deny that age is catching up with them.

We can see in this worldview that time is, indeed, a “scarce, valuable” commodity to be “bought,” “saved,” “lost,” “wasted” or “used” wisely or foolishly. It is always passing like the sands in an hourglass and there is no way to stop it. Eyes are set on a better future somewhere off in the distance and we are striving to reach it. This worldview is geared toward change and progress, with progress being understood as something materially better than what we have right now. In fact, it would be fair to say that often in this worldview a person’s very faith is in progress.

Animism & Time

The animistic worldview has a very different understanding of time. An African scholar, John Mbiti, studied 270 African languages looking at how words were used. He found that in all of the languages he studied there were no clear words for the future. There were plenty of different words to describe the long term past and dealing with ancestors and traditional values, but only a few to describe the present and even less to talk about the future. Often, the furthest into the future a language will go is to the next season. A missionary who has travelled to many parts of Africa has challenged the people to tell him if this is accurate about their mother tongues. At first, people often disagree, but when asked to tell us the words they use and then to explain how far into the future they reach, they all smile when they realize that yes; it is true even for their language.

In Liberian English, if you wanted to refer to something happening immediately, you would have to say, “now, now” with an emphatic tone to my statement. Just one simple “now” or even casually saying “now, now” means anytime in the next few hours or sometime that day. This one word is used to refer to a time period stretching over anything from the next 10 minutes to all day. In many Middle Eastern cultures, “to say “tomorrow” simply means to acknowledge

some vague moment in the future.” Again, if you really mean sometime in the next twenty-four hours, you need to say “tomorrow, tomorrow” twice to emphasis immediacy.

With the focus on the way things have always been time moves backward in this worldview while the future is relatively undefined. The value is on things that have happened in the past, on people who have come before and on the old way of doing things. Change is not a positive thing in this worldview. “Keeping the old ways” is important and new ways of doing things are looked on with great suspicion.

Another way of looking at time from this perspective is to see it as circular or cyclical. In many parts of Africa it is commonly believed that when an old man dies, he may be reborn as the next baby boy. I remember my confusion as I realized that several of the young children in my neighbourhood were named “Old Ma” or “Old Pa.” When I asked why they were called this, I was informed that they were the reincarnation or re-embodiment of a grandfather or grandmother in the family. Sometimes it was just the next baby born after the old person died. At other times, it might be a grandchild who resembles the grandparent. Time, in this view, is going around in circles. There is birth, life, death, birth, life, death, birth, life death, in an endless circle. It is not going anywhere. Or it will often be expressed as: “My father was a farmer, I am a farmer, my son will be a farmer.” We can substitute many words in that sentence for “farmer” like, carpenter, drunk, teacher, religious leader, etc. But still, life goes on in an endless circle.

Figure 2

Circular View of Time:

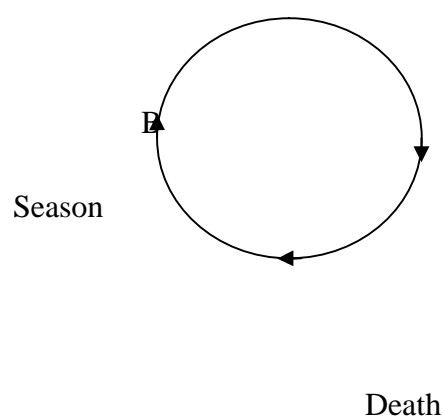
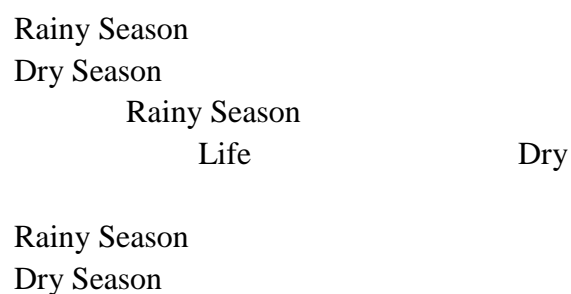


Figure 3

Cyclical View of Time:



The world can also be defined in cycles; for instance, the rainy season is followed by the dry season, which is followed by the rainy season, which is then followed by the dry season, which is ended by the rainy season, which is followed, of course, by the dry season. You get the point.

We were running a roof-patching project in Monrovia, Liberia, the wettest city in the world (570 cm annual rainfall). The best time in my Western mind to fix a roof is when it is *not* raining. But during the dry season the roof is not leaking, so who needs their roof fixed? However, let it be a few weeks before the rains were expected, and all of a sudden, we were inundated with requests, many more than we could possibly handle before the rains began. We would try to work in the rain, but it was extremely difficult, so most of our “dry season” work was accomplishing what people had brought to us during the previous rainy season. In animistic thinking, the present problem is the one to deal with. Because of this, there is no reason to fix a roof in the dry season. It is not leaking. With so many other pressing problems today, they could not afford the luxury of dealing with “tomorrow’s” problem. It is clearly, and rightfully, not important to fix a roof in the dry season as there are many other more urgent issues to deal with today.

The Biblical Worldview of Time

Our God is bigger than time because he created it (see Gen. 1:3-5). In fact, he is outside of time. It has no constraints on him. He is, indeed, the beginning and the end (Rev. 1:8). It is God who changes the times and seasons (Dan. 2:21). He was totally involved in the past; He is totally involved in the present; He will be totally involved in the future. Time does not run out for God. Indeed, “one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day.” Think about that statement for a moment. If you spent a thousand years contemplating one day, then you would surely know every tiny detail that happened during that day. God is so far outside of time that He can be that intimately involved in every detail of my life, of your life, of the lives of billions of other people today. On the other hand, He is also not in a hurry and what we might want done today, may be years in the making. I Tim. 6:14-15 tells us that Jesus will return when God brings it about in his own time. Time has no hold on God and it is not “running out” for him.

Unlike God, because we live in this world, as human beings we live “inside” time. Whether we recognize it, or not, time is moving on. In Psalm 90:12 we find Moses asking God to “teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Prior to this verse, (verse 10) Moses remarks that we live 70 or 80 years. Moses, himself, lived 120 years so I believe he was talking about the norm, not a rule or law. Some people live much longer than 80 years; others do not reach even 40. We are all under the curse of death and will die, but we should join with Moses in asking God to teach us how to use our days best.

Time is linear, but I believe it is more Biblical to think of the line running vertically, rather than horizontally, moving toward God and his purposes. Things do not go around in circles, to be repeated endlessly. Yes, the seasons come and go, but people do not remain the same. They get older and wiser and eventually they die, but only once. They do not return again as a baby. Jesus dying on the cross was a one-time historic event. It is not repeated time after time. The effect of that one event transcends time, but it only happened once.



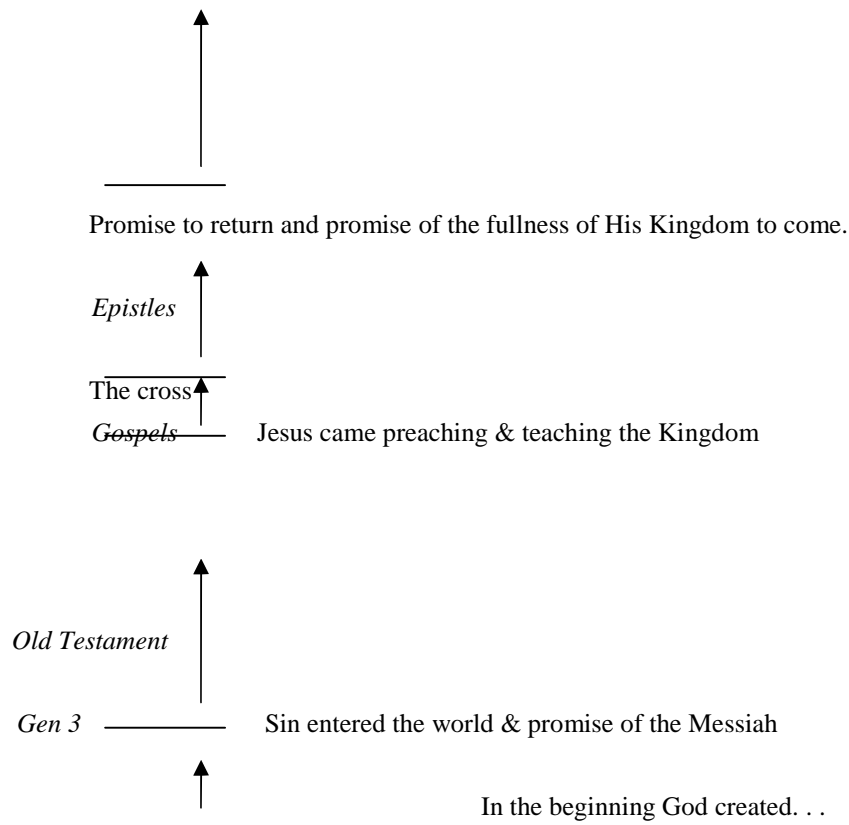


Figure 4

Although God is truly outside of time, our biblical time-line has a beginning, “in the beginning God created. . .” (Gen. 1:1). Creation began one day and things have never been the same since. When man sinned God immediately came with the promise of the Messiah who would come some day to redeem mankind. All of God’s people in the Old Testament were looking forward to see God’s promises fulfilled. In obedience Noah believed the flood would come, so he built the Ark. Moses believed God would deliver his people. David believed the Messiah would come from his family. The entire Old Testament builds toward what God would do to redeem his people. It was always looking forward. When we look at the New Testament, we see the Gospels looking toward the Cross. Once Jesus was raised from the dead, we see the rest of the New Testament (the Epistles) talking about how we should live today and looking forward to his return. This is the state we are in today, looking forward to when God will send Jesus to return and to see Satan overthrown and Jesus sit on the throne as the supreme ruler over all the earth. This view of time leaves room for progress, for vision, for growth and for development. We can believe that things are going to get better because we have a future hope.

I once heard someone say, “The world belongs to those who offer it hope.” We are the people of hope because we have a true picture of the future. Proverbs 23:18 tells us “There is surely a future for you, and your hope will not be cut off” and God says in Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you. . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”

As Christians we have been saved (a past historical act when we accepted Jesus into our lives), and we have a “future hope” that we will be saved, that we will realize the fullness of that salvation when we die or Jesus returns (whichever comes first) and we will go to heaven. See Titus 1:2, 3:7; and I Thess. 5:8. On the other hand, the Bible tells us that the wicked are without God and without hope (Eph. 2:12). Proverbs 24:18-19 tells us “Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out.”

One of my favorite chapters in the Bible is Hebrews 11. This is often called “the faith chapter” because it is full of people who were looking ahead to what God was going to do. However, they did not see the results they were hoping for. Look at what it says about them in Hebrews 11:13-16:

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

I also want to be someone that God is not ashamed of so I must also trust in the promises that God has made and have faith, looking forward toward those things. While these people would remember the past, they did not dwell on it, only seeing what had been done. On the other hand they were not looking ahead just to see what kind of material progress they could make, either. They were looking for the fulfillment of God’s will. We may get the idea that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and some of the others in the beginning of the chapter received what they were looking for. It is only those poor unnamed people later in the chapter who did not receive the fulfillment of the promise. But verses 39 and 40 tell us that NONE of them received it. They were looking for God’s kingdom to come and we now join them, still looking for God’s kingdom in its fullness. To the extent that we believe and look for God’s will, we are also aliens and strangers on earth and, in effect, “outside of time” ourselves. We are building toward a future that cannot be seen in fullness today.

Once again, we must realize that the secular and animistic worldviews have taken the truth about time and carried it to extremes, thus distorting what God intended for us. The secular worldview would have us focus primarily on the future and building for a better future. But when we get so wrapped up in the future and working toward progress that we lose our perspective, life becomes distorted. We easily move toward anxiety and worry over materialistic things. What Jesus told us in Matthew 6:31-34 is especially appropriate today:

“So do not worry, saying ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and

your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

We must not worry about “things” but look to the bigger picture, understanding God’s eternal purposes and believe and work toward those purposes in our lives and in the lives of those around us. “Seek first the Kingdom of God,” that is, the presence and reign of God in our lives and the lives of others.

The animistic worldview, on the other hand, struggles with believing that change might be positive. With a biblical view of time there is room for progress and growth that takes you forward into God’s will. Proverbs 29:18 tells us “without a vision the people perish.” We are the people with the vision of what God wants to do on this earth. We cannot allow ourselves to be chained to the past. We must grab hold of this idea of working toward the future kingdom God will bring to this earth. Martin Luther, a great theologian, once said that if he knew God was coming tomorrow, today he would plant a tree if that was God’s will for today. Let us be doing today the kingdom things God wants to build for tomorrow.