

God of Wonders: Alpha and Omega

This is the first message in a seven part series in which we're looking at God through the lens of powerful Biblical metaphors. All messages in the series are available on www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons

**A Sermon Preached by
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March 13, 2011

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. ...

[God] has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ... I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11, 14

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

Revelation 21:5-6a

Anybody have the time? It's hard to tell what time it is, even with a watch. Supposedly the time changed overnight, didn't it? But all we did was change our clocks. We can't control time by messing with our clocks any more than we can lose weight by adjusting our scales.

Nevertheless, most of us are obsessed with time—measuring it, managing it, stretching it, and saving it. And we use clocks like earlier generations used icons—as omnipresent windows into eternity. We've got clocks on our dashboards, wrists, phones, PCs, thermostats, radios, and microwaves. What's the classic retirement gift? A gold watch. Alien visitors, looking at the wreckage of our civilization someday in the distant future, might think that clocks were some kind of a god to us: the little idols are everywhere.

We've come a long way from sundials and hour glasses, but I'm not sure that we're much better at telling time than we ever were. We think that all our time management courses help us control time; instead it seems to control us.

Even a Christian brainiac like Saint Augustine had trouble getting a handle on time. "In his *Confessions*, he asks, "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not." Time is slippery. Have you ever tried to explain time zones to kids – how it can be one time in Pennsylvania but another time in Pakistan, *at the same time*?

And different cultures keep track of time in different ways. The Jewish year is only 354 days long, and for observant Jews this is the year 5771. For traditional Chinese people it is the year 4709, also known as the Year of the Rabbit.

For Christians, of course, this is Two Thousand Eleven, A.D, *anno domini*, the Year of our Lord. We reference time not so much by the travels of the earth around the sun as the coming of the Son to save us from our sin. For us, every year is the "Year of Our Lord." Using A.D. after a date is a simple statement of faith. For us, in a very real sense time changed when Christ was born.

Time is measured differently across cultures and religions. And even across the space-time continuum. Did you know that a year on Mars lasts

687 Earth days? A Martian year is almost twice as long as an Earth year. On Mars, I'd be in my mid-twenties. (I bet some of you are ready to book that flight to Mars now. "Honey, let's go there next winter. Florida is sooo crowded.") Even a space flight to nowhere would help you out. Scientists tell us that if an astronaut flew 2 1/2 years at the speed of light into space, then turned around, and flew back at the same speed for another 2 1/2 years, then five years would have been lived by the astronaut. But, when he—or she—exited his spaceship, 31 years would have passed on earth. Talk about time flying....

The tick-tick-tick of the clock seems like a constant to us, but the more we look at the nature of time, the more relative it seems. Time, it turns out, is a created thing, as flexible in the right hands as Playdough. The key phrase in that sentence, however, is "in the right hands." Only the One who created time can control it, manage it, or extend it.

God created time. The Bible tells us "In the beginning, God." Then a few verses later we see God creating "evening and morning, the first day." [Genesis 1:5]. Time as we experience it is a gift from God, a thing created for our benefit. And, as the writer of Ecclesiastes knew, the rhythms of life—the passing of days, seasons, and years-- gives structure to our lives and urgency to our days.

But our near obsession with making the most of every minute can blind us to what God is doing in our lives. Long ago, John Calvin warned us about the human tendency to become more interested in created things (like time) than in our Creator. Our fascination with time is a modern form of idolatry, forgetting who's really in charge and what's really important. Consider the cult of youth in this country. We will do *almost anything*—including injecting botulism into our faces—to slow "the ravages of time" and appear younger. Consider the cult of speed in this country. We take it for granted that doing *anything* faster is better. But is eating faster better? Is overnight delivery making business more relaxed? Do faster internet connections make us smarter?

Doing things faster simply accomplishes things faster; that's it. Efficiency and speed doesn't create more time; no matter how fast we live, we still have exactly the same amount of time each day as everyone else. Time can't be saved, it can only be used differently. You can save water. You can save energy. You can save pizza. But you can't save time—

otherwise after years of microwave ovens, 2 in one shampoo, 30 minute oil changes, quick-drying paint, and instant messaging we'd all be more rested, more peaceful, and less stressed.

In all our rushing around we feel like we're making the most of time, but we're losing our lives. When we're rushing to "beat the clock" we tend to make poor health choices—at least I do. We take the car instead of walking (which would be better exercise), we eat packaged processed food instead of cooking (which would be more nutritious), we overbook ourselves (and get stressed as a result). We're not taking better care of ourselves with all this time we think we're saving. And consider our relationships. Does e-mailing, texting, and Facebook lead to *deeper* relationships? We might have more "friends" than ever, but are they the kinds of friends we can call for help in the middle of the night?

We're moving so fast that it's really hard to see God at work in our lives. This is because God operates largely outside of time, at least time as we know it. God is outside of time in the same way that an artist is outside of his painting.

This is true for God the Father *and* God the Son. John 1 tells us that Jesus was in the beginning with the Creator and through him all things were created, even time. That's why Jesus can say in Revelation, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, who was, and is to come." [Revelation 1:8] Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Jesus is saying, "I am the beginning, the end, and everything in between. When the world was created, I was. When the world ends, I will be. *I am.*"

When Jesus walked the earth he had a whole different timeline than everyone else. For him, *time didn't run in a line at all*. Jesus never rushed, never hurried, and was never late. Now the disciples probably thought he was late that time he missed the boat and had to walk on the water to catch up. And Mary and Martha certainly thought Jesus was late when Jesus took his time getting to Bethany and Lazarus died in the meantime. But each time Jesus had another plan—an even greater plan -- in mind. God is not limited by what we call time any more than God is limited by any other so called law of nature. God says, "*I am the beginning and the end; I'll tell you what time it is, not your calendar, not your watch, not your Blackberry, Droid, or Day Runner, not your doctor, not even the coroner.*"

We can't make, save, manage, or turn back time. But the Alpha and Omega can. God started time "in the beginning," then paused it in the middle. Do you remember the time God stopped the sun in its tracks to give Joshua more time in the midst of battle. [See Joshua 10:12-13.] And for us, once time has passed it's over and done; there's nothing we can do to fix it. But God can redeem lost time. Through the Prophet Joel God says, to us no matter how terrible your past has been, I can fix that, "The years the locusts have eaten, I will restore to you." [Joel 2:25] Time is never completely lost with God. Are there years in your life that "the locusts have eaten"? God can give those years back to you—not necessarily by extending your life, but by restoring joy to you in the here and now and that makes all the difference.

God's timing is always perfect. We want things to happen right now, in our earthly lifetimes, but God looks at us from an eternal vantage point. God knows that our souls are immortal; he can take his time. When we get discouraged that there seems to be no end in sight to our suffering or that justice is long delayed, remember what the Psalmist said: "a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday" [Psalm 90:4] With God as the Alpha and Omega we know that one day justice will be served, one day we will be made whole. That day may seem far off as we measure time, but when it comes it will seem like it always was.

You see, when God does something in our lives it is accomplished in our time but its impact is not limited by time. Consider Jesus' death for our sakes. When, exactly did that occur? The Bible tells us that it was on a Passover Friday, likely around 3pm by the cock crow, during the reign of Pontius Pilate. From the standpoint of human history, that's when it occurred. From a divine perspective, however, that date is merely an historical curiosity, practically a coincidence. Jesus' death wasn't meant simply to cover Pilate's sin, but Abraham's sin, too (thousands of years before) and yours and mine (thousands of years after). From a perspective of faith we don't say that Jesus died on such and such a date, we say, with Saint Paul, [Romans 5:6] "*at the right time* Christ died for the ungodly." What happened on Good Friday long ago was the perfect intersection of God's timing and ours. That single historical event created hope for all time. As the writer of Ecclesiastes said, "Whatever God does endures forever."

Living by faith and not by the clock or calendar is hard because it's counter-cultural. Society pressures us into a different pace of life. We have to be careful that we don't give in, that we remember who the true Alpha and Omega is.

During World War II, Hitler's commanders imposed German time as they moved through Europe; they claimed territory by changing the clocks. Denmark was one of the countries that adopted German Standard Time (known as DST). The French resisted it at first, but they were officially on "Hitler time" by 1941. But the Nazi plan didn't always work; there were some French patriots in the resistance who stuck to the old French time, two hours behind Hitler's DST.

[<http://www.timeanddate.com/time/europe/daylight-saving-history.html> 12/12/10]

We can be like those patriots. When we say that we worship the Alpha and Omega we say that we don't worship our clocks or calendars; we trust *God's* timing.

So how shall we live as we count down the forty days of Lent and every day thereafter? Let's stop *counting*. Let's stop trying to *control* time. Instead, let's *experience* time as a gift from God. Give up wearing a watch or checking clocks for a day. Seek to be present with people as Jesus was fully present with them. Look for God to break into your life *today*.

Perhaps you've heard the little poem attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt:

*Yesterday is history.
Tomorrow is a mystery.
Today is a gift.
That is why they call it the present.*

Enjoy the Alpha and the Omega in the here and now. That's the only place we can find him. Amen.

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