

January 1, 2006  
Isaiah 62:1-5, Galatians 4:4-7  
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“The Fullness of Time”

The end of the year always seems to catch me by surprise. I see it coming; but I never feel quite ready to let go of the old year and take hold of the new. It will take me several months to date my checks correctly. There are piles on my desk that I had hoped to clear and letters to write to friends near and far. It will take me some time to accept that I did not accomplish all in the past year that I had hoped to complete. Several days ago, I was filling my car with gas. When I went inside to pay, the man behind the counter said, "Well, we've come to the end of the year, at least as we humans measure it."

I pondered his words, "as we humans measure it." We do have many ways of measuring the passage of time. I understand that this year one second will be added to the atomic clock to keep the way we measure time in harmony with the universe. We have more subjective ways of meaning time. We gather with friends to celebrate birthdays. We go to college reunions. On New Year's Eve, we go to parties, overindulge ourselves, sing Auld Lang Syne and watch the ball drop in Times Square. When I was growing up, New Year's Day always included traditional dishes like pork, collards and hoppin' John, a Carolina low-country dish made of black eyed peas and rice.

There are other ways we measure the flow of time. We measure our children's heights and mark their growth on a special wall or door frame. We look at pictures in family albums and then look at ourselves in the mirror. We cannot hide the passage of time. We hear the sound of the old clock ticking on the wall, parceling out the moments of our lives. We count years in school or years until retirement. When we remember friends and family members who are no longer with us, we think about the words of the familiar hymn, "Time like an ever-flowing stream soon bears us all away."

We are not so sure anymore that time is an ever-flowing stream. We used to think that all time is linear, that one moment flows into the next. Does time flow in a straight line from the past to the future?

Albert Einstein shattered our illusion that time is constant and absolute. His general theory of relativity taught us that gravity and motion can impact the shape of time. When you add quantum mechanics to our understanding of the universe, space and time become what K.C. Cole has called "jittery and uncertain." Physicists tell us that time, like space, is not the constant we once thought. Nathan Seiberg of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton has said, "I am almost certain that space and time are illusions. These are primitive notions that will be replaced by something more sophisticated." Physicists are working on string theory as a new way of understanding the nature of the universe's structure and connectivity. The universe is composed of multi-dimensional vibrating strings folded in

upon themselves. (Article by K.C. Cole, "Time, Space Obsolete in New View of Universe," from the Los Angeles Times, 11/16.1999).

Whatever happened to the comforting sound of the grandfather clock in the hall? Time presents us both a problem and a possibility. Our lives are lived in time. We cannot escape the passage of time. Our lives move from birth to death. Our days are numbered. The Bible says that there is wisdom in learning this basic truth. We have only so much time. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul talks about the problems and the possibilities of time. He recognizes that so much of the time, we live as captives in time. Paul says we live as minor children who have not come into the fullness of life. He says that we may as well be captives or slaves who are not free. We are enslaved by our passions, our foolish notions, our illusions about ourselves and our world. We are enslaved by sin and held captive to its power. We are not living the life God intended for us to live.

Then Paul says a remarkable thing. He says that in the fullness of time God sent forth his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus came into this world, born under the same constraints of space and time as every human being. He, too, knew the measure of time. In coming into our world and living this life with us, he shattered the bondage that time places upon us. In the midst of time, we may know the fullness of time. In other words, in a moment in time, God's eternity breaks into time and transforms the character of time forever. Eternity is not endless time or time ticking away forever. Eternity is the fullness of time in which all times meet and find their completion.

Centuries ago, the great Christian theologian, St. Augustine, was onto something when he was reflecting on nature of God's eternity and our life in time. Augustine knew that the past, present and future do not actually exist as separate times. He knew that time is a part of the created order and time did not always exist. In Book XI of *The Confessions*, Augustine writes that in the fullness of time or eternity, "Nothing moves into the past: all is present." He goes on to say: ... it is abundantly clear that neither the future nor the past exist, and therefore it is not strictly correct to say that there are three times, past, present and future. It might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things. Some such different times do exist in the mind, but nowhere else that I can see. The present of past things is the memory; the present of present things is the direct perception; and the present of future things is expectation. (Book XI, 20).

All our times are in God's hands.

When God sends his Son into the world, God shatters the limitation of time and brings into the creation the true possibilities of time. The true possibilities of time come when we live in time as if eternity is now and all time is one. We live in God's eternal presence in the midst of the ebb and flow, the ticking, the bending and the vibrating of time.

So that whatever has been, is, or will be is present with us now in God's time. God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts that we might live in time as Jesus lived in time, as a beloved Son of God. We live in time as if passage of time were no longer something to be feared or regretted. Even death does not remove us from God's eternal now. In death, we

move into the fullness of God's time, where we see clearly that all that ever was or ever shall be is not lost but held together in God.

Many years ago, as we humans measure time, a good friend of mine had a reoccurrence of the cancer he had successfully battled five years before.

He was married and had a young son. This time, in spite of all the prayers for healing and everything the doctors tried to do, he could not overcome the cancer. He died several weeks before Easter. When Easter came, I felt as low and discouraged as I could be. It was one of the worst times of my life. At the Easter service, I heard the minister say, "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed." Suddenly it hit me. Christ is, indeed, risen. And if Christ is risen, then my friend is risen with him.

We are heirs with Christ. I realized that my friend was not gone but was with Christ in the fullness of God's time, where past, present and future are all one. The Spirit of God's Son lifted the insupportable burden from my heart and I felt at peace.

Here, we break bread and take the cup, a moment in eternity given to us in time. As we share this meal, the Spirit of the Son cries within our hearts, "Abba, Father." The Spirit reminds us that we are God's beloved children. We are heirs now of all the promises of God. In life and in death, we are set free from the captivity of time to live as sons and daughters of God. We know the words of our closing hymn are true:

God of the coming years, through paths unknown We follow Thee; When we are strong,  
Lord, leave us not alone; Our refuge be.

Be Thou for us in life our daily bread, Our heart's true home when all our years have sped.

All the moments of our lives and all the times that ever were are made whole and complete in the fullness of God's time.