

# Time in This World and Time in the Spiritual World

A simplified account,  
developed from a Bible study given at Mt Zion Evangelical Church, Redbourn, on June 30, 2004

Version 3.0, April 13th 2008

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This is a simplified account of a concept of ‘spiritual time’ and its application to interpreting Bible verses and theological statements.

I have worked on the concept of time in physics, and this has led on to theological applications.  
*Note: technical work in physics and mathematics lies behind the suggestions made here.*

The ideas are *not* put forward as the “only right interpretation of the Bible”, but as hopefully consistent with the Bible. I know that some people will disagree with me.

This paper discusses time in this world, time in the spiritual world, how these two times are related, and applications to biblical and theological passages. Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

## 2. STATEMENTS ABOUT TIME

A preacher might come to a point where a sermon touches on the relationship of God to time. Then we might hear, “God is outside time”. Or, in a hymn we may sing, “when time shall be no more”.

On the other hand, consider:

Eph. 1:4 he chose us in him before the foundation of the world ...

Jn. 17:5 and now Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made. (cf. v.24)

1 Pet. 1:20 He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake.

In these passages it sounds as if God was experiencing time ‘before’ creating the world.

Some theologians have developed the idea that God has both an eternal pole and a temporal pole. This is an attempt to say that God is not *in* spiritual time, but acts in spiritual time. After all, God is a Trinity of three Persons.

*Note: That is to say, God is not in time (of any sort), but what will be called spiritual time is in God. i.e. is part of his life.*

But some take a different view. Long ago, St Augustine wrote: ‘God created the world with time, not in time’. I.e. time started when the universe started.

***To focus our minds***, let us try to resolve the apparent conflict between

- the temporal interpretation of ‘before the foundation of the world’ (Eph. 1:4) and
- St Augustine’s view that ‘God created the world with time, not in time’.

To do this I am going to distinguish between  
 - *clock time* (time in this world, or the time of physics), and  
 - *spiritual time* (time in the spiritual world).

The meaning of the word '*time*' itself needs to be clarified. First of all, what can it mean to speak of two kinds of time? I do not mean the reading of a clock, as in 'it is 8 o'clock', but the sort of thing we experience as a sequence of events, with past, present and future.

So as a minimum definition of 'time', I suggest:

Any sort of '**TIME**' is a sequence of happenings.

This means that any sort of time has past, present and future; and that there is a 'flow of time'. Other characteristics may differ.

### 3. CLOCK TIME AND SPIRITUAL TIME

#### 'Pressure of time'

**Ex. 1** Suppose you have to give someone a birthday present. The pressure is on to deliver the present on the day, if not before, or else feel bad about it.

This is the 'pressure of time', which we are often conscious of in this world, but it is hard to think that spiritual time is like that. We should not expect spiritual time to exert pressure on anyone.

#### Measurement of time

Another very important property of clock time is that it can be measured. When it is 8 o'clock, then in 10 minutes it will be 8.10.

I should like to suggest that spiritual time is not measured. How can that be?

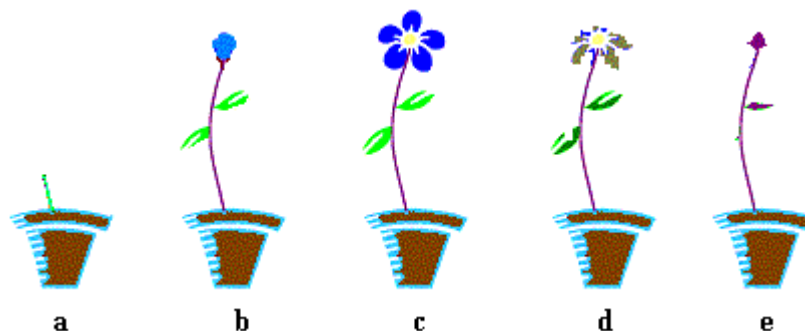


Figure 1. Flower time

**Ex. 2 'Flower time'**: a sequence without any measure. The instants of this invented flower time are the different states of the flower, as in Fig. 1. The plant goes through the states a – e,

and intermediate states, but there is no intrinsic measure of the flower time between any two states.

If spiritual time is not measured, we are saved from a lot of problems (such as infinite past time for God).

### The present in this world

The present means what is happening 'now', and it divides past from future. There is a continuous sequence of different presents as clock time goes on

Some people believe that the present is not really out there, but is only in our minds. But many people, including myself, are convinced that the commonsense view is correct, and there is a continually changing present in the physical world.

How is this present defined?

You might think that when the clock reads 8 p.m., the past is all times before 8 p.m. today, and the future all times after that. But Einstein taught us that, strictly speaking, we can only be sure of this for one person, although it will be approximately true for a group of people (and things) near to each other. Einstein showed clearly that clock time cannot define a present for the whole universe.

Another way of looking at Einstein's results is that *a present need not have the same clock time in all places!*

**Ex. 3** A **radio signal** from Redbourn to London. - it must not reach London in *the past there*. But the radio signal takes time to get there (quite a small time).

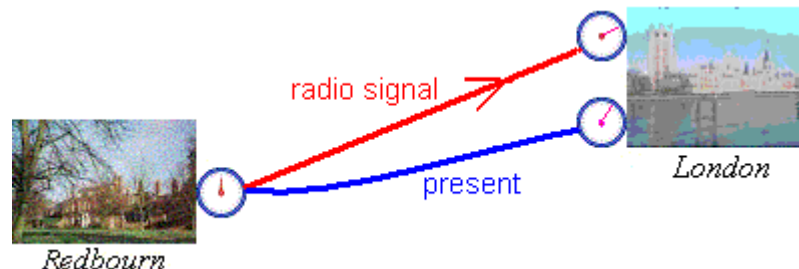


Figure 2. Present with different clock times

- ? A radio signal sent from Redbourn takes 1/20,000 sec to reach London.
- ? In Redbourn the present in which the radio signal leaves is at a certain clock time.
- ? Suppose that present is later in London by *less than* 1/20,000 sec.
- ? Then the radio signal reaches London in the future, and all is well (Fig. 2).

Hence there can be a sequence of presents happening in this universe.

### Eternity

Ps 90:2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.

Ps 93:2 Thy throne is established from of old; thou art from everlasting.

Mk.10:29-30 Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

So God continues without beginning and without end, and believers will have the life of eternity. Hence spiritual time is like that: beginningless and endless.

### **God's time?**

What about Mal 3:6 "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed"?

Adam Clarke's Commentary says, 'The new dispensation of grace and goodness, which is now about to be introduced, is not the effect of any change in my counsels; it is, on the contrary, the fulfilment of my everlasting purposes; as is also the throwing aside of the Mosaic ritual, which was only intended to introduce the great and glorious Gospel of my Son. / And because of this ancient covenant, ye Jews are not totally consumed; but ye are now, and shall be still, preserved as a distinct people-monuments both of my justice and mercy.'

I.e. it is God's character that does not change. So verses such as this make no problem for the idea that God relates to some sort of time.

Above all, think of **the atonement**:

Mk 15:34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

So, on the cross Jesus was separated from the Father for a certain time. Then he was restored to fellowship with the Father again.

It is, to say the least, difficult to think of the Father and Son experiencing both separation and union in an eternal timeless moment. It is easier to think of some sort of time here.

## **4. HOW THE TWO SORTS OF TIME ARE RELATED**

### **God as Sustainer**

Heb. 1:2b-3 ... a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. Hence we may expect God to oversee the happening of things in the universe.

### **Flow of time**

Jn 1:1, 4 In the beginning was the Word, ... ... In him was life...

So we can have a theory that God is the source of the flow of spiritual time, and that in spiritual time he is the source of the change from past to present in this world. This causes the flow of clock time. There does not seem to be any other explanation for the flow of any sort of time!

Now, it is possible that here, again, there are **surprises**. (*The rest of this section is not essential to the interpretations proposed in this paper.*) It is possible that in spiritual time our present changes a little, and then spiritual time goes on a bit without any change in our present! Then our present changes a bit more, and so on. In this physical world we would not notice these pauses.

How can this be?

**Ex. 4 A TV play with commercial breaks.** While the play is on the time sequence of its story continues. When adverts start, that time sequence stops, and after the adverts it starts where it left off.

**Ex 5. Toy time.** We have all played with Teddy bears, or other toys. Suppose it is a Piglet. We make Piglet walk and sit and eat, etc. For Piglet the world goes on in an invented ‘toy time’ while we are with him. Then we go off to do something else and leave Piglet on his own (Fig. 3). At clock time  $t_1$ , toy time stops at  $T$ . Piglet’s world then stop, but he doesn’t know anything about that. Later on, at clock time  $t_2$  we come back and make Piglet do

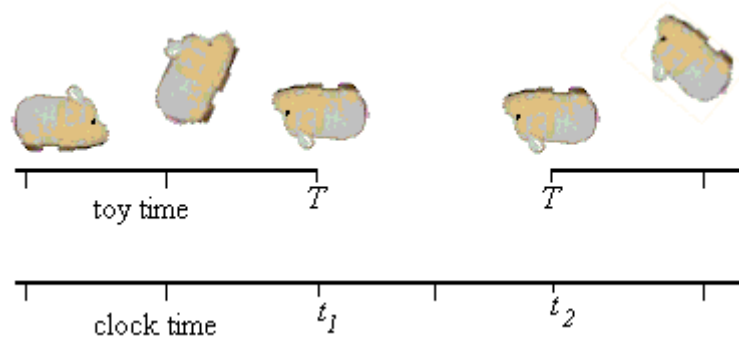


Figure 3. Toy time

something else, starting again at toy time  $T$ . For us there was a gap, but in Piglet’s experience, as it were, there is no gap.

## 5. APPLICATIONS

The problem we started with - ‘he is before all things’ – makes perfect sense if ‘before’ applies to spiritual time. Similarly for other verses.

St Augustine: ‘God created the world with time, not in time’. His thought may be restated as ‘God created the world with clock time, not in clock time’. It is now also possible to hold the more refined view that ‘God created the world with clock time and in spiritual time’.

‘From everlasting to everlasting’ may be understood as referring to beginningless and endless spiritual time.

### Final blessedness

2 Pet 3:12f ... the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

1 Cor 15:44 It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

In the 'new heavens and a new earth' i.e. a new 'earth and sky', a new universe, we shall be moving about in our spiritual bodies. Hence there will be a sequence of happenings, i.e. some sort of time. But probably there will also be a new *physics*, so we have *no idea* what that time will be like.

Spiritual time will be related to time in the new world. We don't know how, but perhaps something like the relation of spiritual time to clock time.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The concept of two very different kinds of time enables us to clarify certain biblical and theological statements.

*Note: The minimal definition of 'time' in Section 3 shows the world 'time' as a generic term.*

The question of divine sovereignty and human freedom has not been looked at in this paper.

*Note: What is called Open Theism is different from the ideas presented here.*

