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What Time Is It in Heaven?

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The question might be brushed aside by saying: There is no time in heaven. In our mind the concept of heaven instantaneously combines with the concepts of God and eternity. God is eternal: that means, not only that He is without beginning and without end, "from everlasting to everlasting," Ps. 90, 2, but also that He is timeless. The notion of time embodies, besides the elements of a starting-point and a goal, such elements as progress, sequence, succession, and change. Yesterday is time, to-day is time, to-morrow is time; but while the concept of time is essentially the same in each instance, it is exhibited in varying phases. While an hour is time the same as every other hour, still there are not two hours exactly alike. Variableness is a constant concomitant of time. In His sovereign existence, which is absolute, even, ever-continuing duration, the eternal God is elevated above time and all measurements of time. He is "the King of the eons," 1 Tim. 1, 17. Past, present, and future are merged into one before the Great I Am, ever living in the eternal Now, Rev. 1, 4. 8; 11, 17; 16, 5; compare with Ex. 3, 14; Ps. 2, 7. A day and a millennium are to Him interchangeable terms, Ps. 90, 4; 2 Pet. 3, 8. This means "that there are no intervals of time with God, in whose sight the times of all the ages are, as it were, one undivided moment." 1) Or, as Bengel explains it: "No delay happens which is long to God. As to a very rich man a thousand guineas are as a single penny, so to the eternal God a thousand years are as one day; wherefore in the next verse [2 Pet. 3, 9] 'but is long-

1) "Quod nulla sint apud Deum intervalla temporum, coram quo omnium saeculorum tempora velut unum quoddam *ἀδιαίρετον* *νῦν* se habent." (Egidius Hunnius, Opp., T. I, fol. 85. Cited by Baier, *Theol. Pos.*, ed. Walther, P. I, p. 23.)

suffering' is added: He gives us space for repentance without annoying Himself. Comp. Ecclesiasticus 18, 10. 11. To sum up, the age-measurer (*aeonologium*), so to speak, of God differs from the hour-reckoner (*horologium*) of mortals. Its index shows at once all hours in the greatest activity and in the deepest repose. To Him time passes neither more slowly nor more quickly than befits Him and His economy. There is no reason why He should consider it needful either to delay or to hasten the end. How shall we understand this? If we could understand it, it would be unnecessary for Moses and Peter to add 'with the Lord.'"²⁾ Luther, in his usual practical manner, presents the matter thus: "Here on earth there is indeed a measurement of time, and there are sequences of time: the son comes after his father, and so on. To offer an illustration: Suppose a piece of timber is lying at some distance from you, and you are looking at one end of it. In that position your vision does not take in the entire piece; you are looking along the length of it. But if it is lying before you, and you are standing on it, your vision takes in the entire piece. In like manner it is impossible for us to comprehend life on earth because until the Last Day it progresses inch by inch. But in God's sight all things stand in their order in the twinkling of an eye. For in His sight a thousand years are as one day. Ps. 90, 2; 2 Pet. 3, 8. Thus the first human being is as close to Him as the one that is to be born last. He beholds all things simultaneously, just as the eye of man, too, can with one glance catch sight of, and coordinate, two objects that are at some distance from one another." (IX, 1245.) Well, then, seeing that time and eternity exclude each other, why ask such a useless question as this about time in heaven?

It is not a useless question. Though timeless Himself, God has very much to do with time.³⁾ He *began* time; that is what *בראשית*, Gen. 1, 1, and *ἐν ἀρχῇ*, John 1, 1, mean. He will *end* time. The *ἔσχατη ἡμέρα* (last day), John 6, 39 f. 44; 11, 24; 12, 48, *ἔσχατη ὥρα* (last hour), 1 John 2, 18, *καιρὸν ἔσχατον* (last time), 1 Pet. 1, 5, *ἔσχατος χρόνος* (last time), Jude 18, is a tem-

2) *Gnomon N. T.*, transl. by C. T. Lewis and M. R. Vincent; Vol. II, p. 777 f.

3) A similar situation confronts us when we study God in connection with the notion of space. God Himself is illocal; for He is before space, which He created together with the universe. Yet He declares that He "comes" to men, Ex. 20, 24; Is. 3, 13. 14; John 14, 23, dwells with them, etc.

poral unit which He has definitely fixed, Acts 17, 31,⁴⁾ so much so that Christ can speak of "that day and hour," Mark 13, 32.

Between these terminal points God *regulates* time. He has placed great chronometers in the heavens, Gen. 1, 14. *He* makes them go, Job 25, 3; Matt. 5, 4, 5; Ps. 65, 8. Evening dusk and morning dawn, day and night, seed-time and harvest, summer and winter, are His creatures, Gen. 8, 22; Jer. 33, 20, 25. Being His creatures, they obey Him also on extraordinary occasions: He can check their progress, Josh. 10, 12 f.; He can reverse their movement, Is. 38, 8; "He *changeth* the times and their seasons," Dan. 2, 21. He measures time to each human being; man's birth-hour and dying hour are matters of His forethought and prearrangement, Job 14, 5; Deut. 31, 14; Ps. 31, 16; 39, 5, though unknown to man himself, Eccl. 9, 12. He *shortens* life, Ps. 55, 24; 89, 45; 102, 24, and *prolongs* it, Ps. 91, 16. Every person has a most momentous reason to ask himself: What time is it in heaven — for me? Luke 12, 20; Ps. 52, 5—7; 90, 3; Jas. 4, 13—15.

Within the limits of created time God *orders and disposes* the events of history. Job was a good student of the world's history (which in his day was much younger than now) when he said: "With the ancient is wisdom and in length of days understanding. With Him is wisdom and strength; He hath counsel and understanding. Behold, He breaketh down, and it cannot be built again; He shutteth up a man, and there can be no opening. . . . The deceived and the deceiver are His. He leadeth counselors away spoiled and maketh the judges fools. He looseth the bond of kings and girdeth their loins with a girdle. He leadeth princes away spoiled and overthroweth the mighty. He removeth away the speech of the trusty and taketh away the understanding of the aged. He poureth contempt upon princes and weakeneth the strength of the mighty. He discovereth deep things out of darkness and bringeth out to light the shadow of death. He increaseth the nations and destroyeth them; He enlargeth the nations and straiteneth them again. He taketh away the heart of the chief of the people of the earth and causeth them to wander in the wilderness, where there is no way. They grope in the dark without light, and He maketh them to stagger like a drunken man." Job 12, 12—25. The rise and fall of the great world-powers answer to His beck and call. Dan. 2, 21; 7, 12; Ps. 75, 6, 7; Jer. 27, 4 ff.

4) Ἐσθησεν and ὄρισος in this text are of the same force: the day has been "set" (E. V., "appointed") and the Judge selected and delegated.

(Compare the "burdens" of the prophets to particular nations.) The evolutions of history are all in His hand, and He *chooses* "at what instant" He will speak for or against a nation, Jer. 18, 7. 9. 22. As we watch the passing show of the world's greatness,⁵⁾ its ambitious strivings, its restless plotting and scheming, its powerful combinations that carry the death-germ in them the moment they are born; as we hear the cry of distress of the oppressed and their anxious inquiry in the long-drawn-out suffering: What of the night? we have reason to inquire: What time is it in heaven for Lord So-and-so, for this coterie of sovereign thugs, or for that solemn society of sublime swindlers?

Time rises to its greatest dignity when it is seen as a great factor in the development of God's merciful plan for the salvation of sinful man. From the moment that He utters to conscience-stricken Adam in Eden the promise of the future Deliverer, the love of God begins to spin the golden thread of the Evangel and weaves it from generation to generation into the religious history of the race for its hope and joy. Prophet after prophet takes up the original message, adding now this, now that new element. As we listen to them from Moses to Malachi and catch the growing eagerness of each succeeding oracler, it is as if we heard the rustling of the wings of time whirring past us. The prophetic sequence is suddenly broken at "the five centuries of silence" from Malachi to John the Baptist that must have tried the souls of the faithful to the utmost. But when this period of anxious suspense is finally terminated, and with it all the four thousand years of yearning hope end in the night of the Nativity, that hour was *τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου*, "the fulness of the time." Gal. 4, 4. All the arrangements that had been made for the true religion prior to that moment had to be just so because of *τῆς προθεσμίας τοῦ πατρὸς*, the predisposition of the Father. Christ was not born an hour too soon nor too late, though it is likely that His advent in the flesh in the judgment of many came too late. So exactly was it timed that Babylonian sages reading the dial of the star-clock of the heavens could determine the time of the birth of the promised King of the Jews by "*His* star." Matt. 2, 2; Num. 24, 17; Is. 60, 3.

In the earthly life of the incarnate Son of God again everything is timed. His opening message in Mark 1, 15 calls attention

5) Ὁ κόσμος παράγεται, 1 John 2, 17, like a circus parade, each gaudy wagon with its bedizened group of actors and marvelous clowns disappearing as it turns the corner, and the noise of the blaring bands and strident calliope dies in the distance.

to the religious crisis that has arrived with Him. His period of humiliation had been fixed, Heb. 2, 7,⁶) and He was conscious of this fact throughout His ministry, Matt. 9, 15; John 7, 6. 30. 33; 8, 20; 12, 35; 13, 33. Gethsemane, Gabbatha, Calvary He views as preordained moments in His redeeming mission. Matt. 26, 45; Mark 14, 35; John 12, 27; 16, 31; 17, 1; comp. with Acts 4, 27 f. From the beginning to the end of His career Christ acts as if He is watching what time it is in heaven for Him.

With the fulness of times God has connected "a dispensation." Eph. 1, 10.⁷) Waiving exegetical niceties, we may call this the administration of free and full grace to sinners, the evangelical order of salvation by which, through the Word and ordinances of Christ the Kingdom of God is built up out of men who repent of their sins and believe the Gospel. As He began this dispensation, Mark 1, 15, so He arranged for its continuation, John 20, 21; Luke 24, 46—48; Mark 16, 15—20; Matt. 28, 19. 20; Acts 1, 8, until His second coming, 1 Cor. 11, 26. In His Great Prayer, during the night of the last Passover, Christ had prayed both for the unification of all believers and for their separation from the world. John 17. The same thought had occupied His mind during His last conversations with the disciples, and in this connection He had spoken to them of future peace and war, John 14, 17. 27; 15, 18—25; 16, 1—3. 20. 32; comp. Luke 12, 49—53, yea, of the final division that is to seal the everlasting fate of every man, Matt. 25, 31 ff. The history of the Church after His ascension is the execution of this program. The dispensation of the fulness of times is for this purpose, that God the Father might "gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth; even in Him." Eph. 1, 10. The sad division which had broken the harmony in the good world which God had created, the effects of the evil angels' apostasy and men's fall, are to be wiped out by the dispensation of grace which God has ordained on the basis of the finished work of Christ. Through Christ the family of God's children is being reorganized. Eph. 3, 14. 15. Silently as at the building of Solomon's Temple, 1 Kings 6, 7, — everything having been prepared and fitted to purpose beforehand,

6) βραχύ = a little while.

7) *Οἰκονομία τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν*, "dispensatio propria plenitudini temporum" (Calovius), an arrangement that is characteristic of, peculiar to, the era which has commenced with the coming of Christ, and by which God dispenses what has been achieved by Christ.

—there grows up among the nations of the earth the Invisible Church of the Redeemer — God, the *ecclesia una sancta catholica*. Before the divine universalism of the reconciliation which embraced the world, 2 Cor. 5, 19, “the middle wall of partition” between Jews and Gentiles goes down; those who had been far off from the covenant of mercy meet those who had been near on the common ground of the Savior’s atoning sacrifice; former aliens are admitted to citizenship in the commonwealth of God. Eph. 2, 11—22. National, religious, cultural, social distinctions that divide mankind vanish; for “Christ is all and in all.” Col. 3, 11.

For this work of building the Church the exalted Head at the right hand of the Father supplies everything that is needed. Eph. 4, 7—16. The activities of particular workmen are at times specially directed by His Spirit. Acts 13, 2. 46 f.; 16, 7 ff. 14; 18, 9 f.; 20, 23. He opens and closes the door for mission-work. Rev. 3, 7 ff. He foresees and foretells the rise of schisms, heresies, apostasies in the Church and prepares His Church to meet them. Acts 20, 29 f.; Rom. 16, 17; 1 Cor. 11, 18. Particularly the rise of the great Antichrist, his full development, his discovery and ultimate defeat, the increase of misleading teachings, the appearance of pseudo-Christ, the growing demoralization of mankind, are all taken cognizance of in this dispensation of the fulness of times. As John spreads before us his gorgeous visions in Revelation, we hear God computing the sequence of events in mysterious terms of time. Rev. 1, 1; 2, 21; 3, 10; 6, 11; 8, 1; 10, 7; 11, 3. 11. 13; 12, 6. 14; 14, 15; 17, 10; 20, 2. 5. 6; 22, 10. We are told that the devil is aware that his time is limited. Rev. 12, 12. For the end of this economy and therewith the end of all things is coming on apace, not only for Christ and His followers, but also for Satan, Antichrist, and their hosts. Matt. 24, 14; 1 Cor. 15, 24—28. In all these matters the Church, while conscious of the fact that the date of her Lord’s second and final coming, Heb. 9, 28; 10, 37, has not been revealed, Mark 13, 42, beholds the evidence that the consummation for which she is longing is approaching, and hopefully muses what time it may be in heaven, and takes comfort in the promise concerning the shortening of the days before the end. Mark 13, 20.

The pious fathers of the first centuries of the Christian era, in commenting on the *πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου*, the fulness of time, discovered no preparation on the part of mankind for the first coming of Christ. They observed that the birth of the Redeemer

was timed to suit *the utmost need* of the race. *Chrysostom*: "When they were just about to be destroyed, then it was that they were saved." 8) *Theophylact*: "When human nature, having experienced every form of evil, needed medical treatment." 9) *Meyer*: "The need had reached its height." This view is in full harmony with the appalling panorama of world-wickedness in Rom. 1 and 2 and with the records on this subject in the literary remains of classical antiquity. (See E. G. Sihler's *From Augustus to Augustine* and *Testimonium Animae, passim.*) Modern theological science pretends to have discovered "historical conditions" which made the birth of Christ a very opportune event. They argue that the development of Christianity is from "a principle inherent in humanity." The world was ripe for Christ and the type of religion which He proclaimed because the human mind had "advanced to the freedom of self-consciousness." 10) The first coming of Christ, it is held, was "conditioned by the need of certain preparations or by the necessity of the religious development of mankind which had reached a certain point." (De Wette.) This view is dictated by the rationalistic dream that Christianity is a product of contemplative efforts of the human mind and builds itself up out of successive types of *Kultur*. At its beginning Christianity swallowed up what was best in Egyptian, Greek, and Roman *Kultur*, casting aside what was inferior and irrelevant and ennobling what was serviceable to its purpose. This process is believed to be still in progress. Christianity is gradually absorbing the various forms of *Kultur* and out of the wreck of all of them will ultimately build up a Christian world-*Kultur*, with ingredients from all the great religions of history. This syncretistic cultural, religio-philosophical hodge-podge will be the Christianity of the future, and as we see it developing, we behold the dawn of the millennium.

How utterly unhistorical is this view! *Kultur* is a product of natural man. History records no instance of the *ἄνθρωπος ψυχικός*, 1 Cor. 2, 14, making any approaches to, or entering into any sort of a federation with the essential Christian teaching, as summarized, *e. g.*, in 2 Cor. 5, 19—21. The apostles of the Lord were not conscious of bringing about a "synthesis of Judaism and

8) Ὅτε μάλιστα ἐμελλον ἀπόλλυσθαι, τότε διεσώθησαν. Ad Eph. 1, 10.

9) Ὅτε πᾶν εἶδος κακίας διεξελθοῦσα ἢ φύσις ἢ ἀνθρωπίνη εἶδετο θεραπείας. Ad Gal. 4, 4.

10) Baur, *Neutest. Theol.*, p. 173.

Grecism with Christianity," but they were conscious of the fiercest antagonism which they had to encounter from both Jews and Greeks, 1 Cor. 1, 18—31. Their experience is recorded as the typical experience of the Christian Church in its contacts with the various forms of *Kultur*. The preaching of Christ Crucified saves men, not because of, but in spite of their *Kultur*. Whoever expects of *Kultur* anything else than enmity against the God who by Christ has been reconciled to His enemies, Rom. 5, 10, does not know the character of natural man nor of saving grace. The cross of Christ meets every type of *Kultur*, and overcomes it. It stands towering over the wrecks of time. The civilizations and *Kultur* of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome, Mohammedanism, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Scholasticism, the Renaissance, Modernism, etc., etc., are mere coexistences with Christianity. They have borrowed from Christianity; the Christ of yesterday and to-day is superior to all of them, Heb. 13, 8; but Christianity has taken no material from them for the building of the kingdom of God.

As the first, so will the second advent of the Lord be timed to suit the utmost need of mankind. The great material progress which the world has made in recent years has produced an ominous phenomenon: the intensification and consolidation of the forces of evil in the world. Sin was always and everywhere, but it was, so to speak, provincial in its operations before the great modern inventions were made, which have unbound forces hitherto unknown and have greatly reduced the distances between the various parts of the world. These inventions, together with the modern institutions of the press and the international university, do not only serve the Christian Church and her great spiritual interests, but far more the antichristian forces of the world. By their means every form of wickedness quickly becomes a cosmopolitan affair. Evil minds are being drawn more closely together, and the immemorial hostility to Christianity, to the Holy Scriptures, to the Gospel of grace for sinners for Christ's sake, to every essential doctrine of the Christian religion, shows unmistakable signs of greater aggressiveness. Issues and movements that are plainly anti-Biblical, antichristian, are in an incredibly short time turned into international problems, and the opposition to the Christian Church is conscious of its growing strength.

"Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound," Rom. 5, 20, this statement is not only a fact of the past history, relating

to the work of Christ on earth, but it expresses a principle by which the economy of divine grace works until the return of the Lord. There will always be more grace than sin. The prodigious growth, extensively and intensively, of the elements of evil in the world, the heightened efficiency of the agencies of ungodliness, and the defiant boldness of atheistic and antitheistic leaders of the masses of wickedness, will not annihilate the Christian Church. Matt. 16, 18; 21, 44; Luke 2, 34. The program of the enemies of Christ and His Church is an insane dream that will never be realized. But it is equally insane to dream of a world-conquest of Christianity in the sense that there shall be no more sin, no evil, no ungodliness on this earth. As the forces of Christ are clashing more fiercely with the forces of Antichrist in every department of human activity, and an actual persecution of the true believers in Christ has begun, the final decision of this strife by the coming of the Lord is brought nearer.

As in the days of His flesh, Matt. 16, 3, the Lord still wants men to "discern the signs of the times." That is the reason why He gave His disciples a special course in sign-reading in His eschatological discourses. The writings of the apostles show that the Lord's instruction was not wasted on them. They were all marking the flight of time and pointing to the closeness of the *parousia* of the Lord in glory, even against infidel ridicule. 2 Pet. 3, 3 ff. What time is it in heaven? may be called a question that has ever engaged the attention of Christian hope and faith. It is a pertinent and timely question in our day. It is part of that soberness and watchfulness which characterize the virgins that are listening for the cry at midnight, Matt. 25, 6, of the servants who are patiently marking evening, midnight, cockerowing, and morning for the return of the Master of the house. Mark 13, 35.
