

The God of Time

by Ronald L. Dart

As I understand my basic science, time can speed up or slow down depending on the speed at which an object travels. Now, I'm not entirely *comfortable* with this, but they say it has been scientifically demonstrated, so we pretty well have to take that as a starting point. But my first proposition is that, fast or slow, time is a one-way street. There is no such thing as time travel, nor will there ever be. Now, I've heard they've done something of the sort *like* time travel with quantum mechanics, but that's nothing at all like moving a *person* forward and back in time. Time travel is a useful literary device, because it allows an author or a filmmaker to develop ideas that could not otherwise be developed. Hey, I'm as big a Star Trek fan as anyone, and I enjoy the time travel episodes. But in the *real world*? It will *never* be done.

Now, the reason for this is utter simplicity: Neither the future nor the past *exist*. You know, in order to *go* somewhere, "somewhere" has to be out there. If you're going to *go* to France, France has to be over there. If you're going to go to Italy, Italy has to be over there. And so if you're going to go to the past, or to the future, they've got to be there. But the only reality that exists is...right now, and it's escaping from us at an *alarming rate*. I can't go back into the past and see my father again. He's not there any longer. Right now, the only way I could go back to my father is to visit the cemetery where he is *buried*. I had my chance to love and honor him while he lived, and it's gone. And even though I may get that chance again in the future, at *the present time* it's denied to me. Time travel is impossible because *there is no other time* to travel to.

Now, I've heard people speak of God existing "outside of time". They draw a mental picture of God sitting on a hill, where he can see the entire timeline of man. He sees it like a road. We can't see around the next bend, but God sees it all and knows *precisely* what's going to happen in the future. But let me pose a thought problem here: As I write this, I am sitting in Tyler, Texas in a recording studio. Can God see me right now, this minute, in, say, Mexico City? Well, of course not. I'm not *in* Mexico City. I am *here*. Now, have I limited God, then, by saying that, since I'm right here, God can't see me down there? No, the question is absurd, and everyone knows its absurdity. But here comes the stinger: Can God see me next year? No, not really. I am not *there*. I am *here*. Now, am I limiting God? Can't God travel in time? Can't God see the future?

Whether God can or not, we might discuss that, but first you may want to write this down so you don't forget it, because it's important: God does not *do* things merely because he can. For God to travel into the future, or even for God to see the future, the future must *exist*. It must be there. There would have to be a timeline upon which *every* decision of *every* man far into the future has already been made. It's already there. It's known to God. And if God can know it, it's there to know. Now, for God to be able to travel to or see the future, the future must exist *right now*. And if that's true, it has already been determined how long you will live, and how you will die, and you can't change it. Effectively, it means you have no choice about how you will live the rest of your life. It is *already written*. You know, there have been theologies that assert just that: You have no choice. It has already been written whether you'll be saved or lost, whether you will go to heaven or to hell, and there is not a blessed thing you can do about it. I was engaged in an Internet discussion about this, and one fellow opined that, "Well, we have complete free will to make decisions, but God *already knows* what those decisions *will be*." Now, that's enough to give me a headache. For God to *know* what those decisions will be, they must already be fixed in place. Effectively, you must have already made the decision, without knowing it, for God to know it.

Now, if you're confused by all this, good for you. You *ought* to be confused by it, because it's confusing. Now, let me take you to the Bible and tell you a story. We'll start this story with an assumption: the assumption that the Bible is *true*, and that God has no intention to mislead us in *any way* with *any story* we read in the Bible.

There was once a man named Jonah. *Everyone* knows about Jonah. God told him to go to Nineveh and give them a prophecy. And we all heard and read, maybe in Sunday school, how he fled by ship, and how they had a great storm. And the men threw him over the side to end the storm, and he ended up in the belly of a *great whale*. You've heard that. But after he was vomited up on the dry land, God spoke to him again. And this is where the story gets *really* interesting. God told Jonah,

Jonah 3

² Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the preaching that I bid you.

³ So Jonah arose, and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.

I think he means by that it took you three days to walk across this city.

Jonah 3

⁴ And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

Now, I have to presume, based upon the account, that this is the preaching that God told him to preach when he went walking into Nineveh. The idea, then, for some people is that God told Jonah to preach this because he had traveled into the future, or had looked at it on video, and had seen what was in store for that great city. He has sat on the mountain of time and looked down and saw what was coming to Nineveh. But, assuming that, *why* did he send Jonah? What was the point? Let the poor people alone until the evil day arrives, because it's going to come anyhow. Telling them would accomplish *nothing* if the story was already written and fixed—in other words, if the future already existed, and God had seen it.

Now, here is the theory of time we are examining: The idea is that the future exists, God can see it, and God knows what it's going to be—whether because he traveled there or because he watched the video. But now we have a rather large problem here. The problem is the people of Nineveh. Continuing with the story in Jonah 3, verse 5:

Jonah 3

⁵ So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

I mean from the biggest muckety-muck of the kingdom even down to the lowest laborer.

Jonah 3

⁶ For word came to the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from

him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

⁷ And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water:

I mean, even the poor *cows* weren't allowed to eat anything or drink anything. And they were probably beginning to let their feelings be *known* about this before very long. This is serious business to them.

Jonah 3

⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God: yes, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.

⁹ Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

Well, what do you know...

Jonah 3

¹⁰ And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do to them; and he did it not.

Now, I can't think of anything more devastating to the theory that God sees the future already in place. If it was already in place, then that would have included the repentance of the people of Nineveh, and the truth that the city was not going to be destroyed. But if that were the true future of Nineveh, how could God possibly tell Jonah to go in and preach, "Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown!"? I hope you see we've run into a brick wall here. The logic and the Scripture is *conclusive*: It's a dead end, it's not possible. Nineveh's future was not *there* to be seen. It was being *determined* by the actions of the people and the response of God *to* the actions of the people. These people had turned their back on God a long time ago. The evil, the violence, the corruption of that city was proverbial. And God had had enough of it and was going to destroy it. But he did one thing first: He told them.

I want to offer a *different* view of time, and one that does not face the kind of logical impasses we've been talking about.

So how then does God foretell the future? He certainly does. He does it with *regularity* in the pages of the Bible. How does he do that if the future doesn't exist? And maybe even more important (and perhaps very revealing of his purpose) why does he bother to tell Man what that future is going to be? Well, the first part of the question: How does he do it? That part is simple. If you had a big enough computer, and enough facts to feed into it, even you and I could do a *very good job* of forecasting the future. Our problem is that the thing is so complicated, we couldn't put together a computer that big. But apparently God can do that; he has all the computational power he needs. And simple forecasts can explain *a lot* of prophecy. I mean, my wife knows what I'm going to say before I say it. She can absolutely predict what I'm going to do in certain circumstances. (At least she says she can.) And if that's true, well, you take it on to a much higher level, then forecasting explains a lot.

But God has one more asset that you and I don't have: God can tell us what's going to happen, and then he can make it happen—bring it to pass, cause it to go forward. So what was coming down the road for

the great city of Nineveh was a set of circumstances that were heading her straight toward *destruction*. And God made a decision to carry out that destruction in 40 days. There was no need for time travel, no need to see a video of the future. And God *told* Nineveh what that future was going to be for the simplest of reasons: It was to give them a chance to change the future—to make it something other than what it was going to be. Great, long passages of prophecy in the Bible are there for *just that reason*. They say, “If you people keep going the way you are going, destruction lies at the end of the road (unless God brings that destruction on early).”

Now, Jonah knew all this, and he really wasn’t very happy about it. In the fourth chapter of Jonah, once he realized that 40 days had come and gone and God had obviously relented. We’re told that...

Jonah 4

¹ [...] it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

² And he prayed to the LORD, and said, I pray you, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before to Tarshish: for I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repent you of the evil.

“I know how kind-hearted you are. I know how quick you are to change your mind.”

Jonah 4

³ Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech you, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

“I mean, my whole reputation depends on being a prophet. Who’s going to ever believe me again?”

Jonah 4

⁴ Then said the LORD, Do you well to be angry?

Jonah didn’t even answer. He...

Jonah 4

⁵ [...] went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.

I guess the thought it might still come.

Jonah 4

⁶ And the LORD God prepared a plant, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief [*And to give him a little relief from the heat*]. So Jonah was exceedingly glad for the plant.

⁷ But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it attacked the plant so that it withered.

⁸ And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, so that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. [*The heat's killing me!*]

⁹ And God said to Jonah, Do you do well to be angry about the plant? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.

¹⁰ Then said the LORD, You have had pity on the plant, for which you have not labored, neither made it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:

¹¹ And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also many cattle?

“There are *all kinds* of people in that city who have no responsibility for the corruption that’s there. And certainly the cattle don’t have any responsibility for it. Now, you need to get over this!”

Now, this is a *real* historical example I just gave you. *Now* I’d like to take you to a place where I can show you the principle laid out in a *clear* statement of prophecy. It’s found in Jeremiah, chapter 18:

Jeremiah 18

¹ The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying,

² Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause you to hear my words.

³ Then I went down to the potter’s house, and, behold, he worked a work on the wheels.

⁴ And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter [*Something went wrong.*]: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

⁶ O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? said the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

It just says God can do whatever he wants to do. He then went on to say...

Jeremiah 18

⁷ At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it;

Just like he did with Nineveh—said, “Hey, it’s coming, folks. I’m taking this city down.”

Jeremiah 18

⁸ If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do to them.

Now, there's a whole lot in this particular passage. First, God does not destroy nations for no reason at all. They are destroyed when they have become so corrupt they no longer deserve to exist. And the prophecy is given to them to give them a chance to do something *different*—to repent of their evil ways. If they do, God says that the prophecy will not come to pass. And the small truth that arises from that is that prophecy is not about inexorable future events that can't be changed. It's not about some idea of a future written in advance—that it's all there. The future *is not there*. He went on to say more. He said,

Jeremiah 18

⁹ And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it;

“I'm going to make it a big and grand place.”

Jeremiah 18

¹⁰ If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, with which I said I would benefit them.

Wow. So you can even have God come down, take a look at your nation and say, “Hmm, good people. I

like you people. You're doing fine.” But then all of a sudden *we* turn around and do wrong. Then all the good things that God said about us—all the good things that might come—will go frittering away.

Jeremiah 18

¹¹ Now therefore go, speak to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus says the LORD; Behold, I am shaping evil against you, and devise a plan against you: return you now everyone from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good.

¹² And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own plans, and we will everyonedo the imagination of his evil heart.

“There is no hope”, they say, “so why bother repenting?” You know, in a way, this is what people say who insist that the future already exists, and that the prophet has seen it. “God went out and saw what's coming. It's coming down the pike at us. There's no way to get away from it. He saw it, told the prophet, the prophet told us. So what's the point? It's going to happen. Why do we need to repent?” It's not that way, folks. What the prophet has seen is what *will* happen *if there is no change*. And that is what *Jonah's* message was: “There's a bridge out ahead! You need to hit the brakes.” So when the people heard this message from Jeremiah—“No, don't tell me there's no hope. There *is* hope if you'll just change and turn around”—how did they respond?

Jeremiah 18

¹⁸ They said, “Come, let’s make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let’s attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says.”

So, when you read a book like Revelation, you can conclude that much of it may be a prediction based on human behavior, and the rest is divine intervention. It *will happen*, but it will not happen because God *already saw it*; it will happen because it is inevitable, unless something changes. It will happen because the rest of it God will bring to pass. And the folly of trying to set *dates* for the events of Revelation is that *things change*. For example, the city of Nineveh where Jonah preached was finally overthrown after all—a long time later, but it *did* go down. So Jonah turned out to be right in the end, except for that 40 days thing. Jesus’ disciples asked a *comparable* question. He warned that the day would come when the temple would be destroyed. And the disciples asked the obvious question, “When will this happen? How will we know that it’s near?”

I’ve long since learned and observed that God’s watch does not run at the same speed ours runs at, and he doesn’t look at time the way we look at it; but Jesus disciples absolutely wanted to know when, Jesus said, “I’m gonna tell you boys the truth about this temple you see here. The time is coming when there will not be left one stone on top of another that will not be *thrown down*” [Matthew 24:2]... Well, we would want to know just like they did, “Lord, when’s this gonna happen? How will we know it’s close?” Well, he followed in Matthew 24 to give them a *litany* of end-time events—about all the stuff that was going to happen, including a time called “the Great Tribulation”, but when it came to the question of when—what’s the timing involved in all this—he said this (and it’s in Matthew 24, verse 32):

Matthew 24

³² Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near:

³³ So likewise you, when you shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.

³⁴ Truly I say to you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

³⁵ Heaven and earth shall pass away, but [trust me, boys,] my words shall not pass away.

But then he said something *really* fascinating. He said,

Matthew 24

³⁶ But of that day and hour knows no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.

Now, there’s nothing arcane here. There’s nothing secret or hidden. What he is saying is you will see the harbingers of the last day, *but the timing is subject to change*. A lot of people have taken this to mean that God has a calendar up on the wall, and he’s actually put an **X** through the day of Jesus’ return, but he keeps that secret even from the angels—but he has a day; it’s appointed when he’s going to do it. I think what God has marked on his calendar is the predictable direction of human events and where they’re going to take us, but he has not taken away from Man the possibility of repentance. And as long as that possibility is there, however unlikely you may think it is, *it has to be honored*. Sooner or later, God will have to intervene; but we can’t know when that will be for the simple reason *it is not set in concrete*. Jesus has already said in this prophecy, in Matthew 24, he said,

Matthew 24

²² And except those days [of tribulation] should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.

in other words, if God lets things run their normal course, we will end up killing everyone. If he had let Nineveh run its normal course, it would have been *destroyed in 40 days*. The return of Christ is a rescue operation. He is coming back to save us from ourselves. But the date? That's not known, because we have to have room to repent. And I get the feeling that there are some preachers who will be a lot like Jonah: They will be downright upset if the people repent and God relents. (Well, maybe God can let those preachers have their own holocaust and save the rest of us.)

So God is in charge of time. He is the God of time. The future does not exist. It's being created one moment at a time—by decisions *we* make and by decisions *God* makes in response. That being true, then the decisions you make become *very* important. Your future is *not* already written. You are writing it *right now* with the way you live your life—with the decisions you're making. There is no "fate" out there waiting for you inexorably, you can turn right or left at the next corner. You could stay home or you can go out. You have choices *all around* you *all the time*. The people Jeremiah spoke to were *wrong* when they said there is no hope. After David's adulterous fling with Bathsheba, after her husband was killed by David's machinations, God told him through Nathan the prophet that the child that Bathsheba was pregnant with would die [**2 Samuel 12**]. That is a prophecy. It *did* come to pass. But even though it did come to pass, even though it was the truth, David never said, "There is no hope." He immediately, when the child fell sick, began to fast and to pray. He lay on the ground in sackcloth. And then the child died. And his servants were almost afraid to tell him because he had reacted so severely when the child was alive; what would he do when the child was dead? But David said, "No. I fasted just in case God would change his mind and relent" [v. 22].

You and I should be very careful about the history that we are writing today. Tomorrow is in your hands.