

Chapter 3

God's timing is not like ours

There is an African poem, its title and authorship now forgotten, describing the difference it made to the pace of village life when an alarm clock took the place of a cockerel's cry as the daily wake-up call. The owner of the clock had to arrive on time for his job in the city so he needed to make an early start. He set off in smart suit with briefcase in one hand and umbrella in the other – and of course, someone else would probably have got up even earlier to carry water or make a meal for him before he left. I once saw someone very like the subject of the poem as he walked back home through a Ugandan forest, his smart city clothes oddly out of place among the wild greenery of that lovely countryside.

This all made me wonder how much longer it would be before others in that village followed his example and became like workers in the West for whom it is all 'go, go, go'. Whatever our occupation, so many working hours tend to be spent hurrying from one kind of appointment to the next and any free time is filled with as much action as we have energy for. We certainly need some kind of time-keeper, whether a simple wrist watch or something more advanced, to help us make sure that we get through the plans for the day. Yet to look back at the early history of God's chosen people is to find that our Maker has not been in such a hurry.

The old, old story

The story begins in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis with a concentrated account of God's creative work as he produced our world, the 'days' spoken of being his idea of time, not our 24 hours.¹ The climax of his work was the creation of man ('Adam') and later woman ('Eve'). He made these human beings 'in his own image', telling them to 'fill the earth and subdue it'.² To start with he put them into a beautiful garden where he walked and talked with them to their shared enjoyment.

We must remember that like all the other books of the Bible, Genesis makes no claim to be a scientific textbook. Its first chapter tells us not so much the precise *how* of creation as the *why* of it – why God created a universe at all and then produced living organisms to live on the earth and in the air and sea. It tells us about *God*, the Creator, the authority and power of his word, his pleasure in making something good, his separation of light from darkness and plants from people, providing for all the needs of his creatures before he finally asked human beings to take care of his creation. He had a plan for humanity and, in broad terms, conveyed from the beginning what it was, making it clearer over the centuries that followed. The often forgotten but all-important fact is that God first designed human beings to be like him, ‘in his image’.

Each one of us is intended to enjoy a loving relationship with God and with other people, and to take care of his world. Later we’ll look more closely at what this could mean, but for now let’s not get hung up on whether we should take the account literally or as a poetic description. As you read the story, remember that its purpose is to tell us more about God himself, why he acted as he did and how human doubt and disobedience broke up his intention for an on-going loving relationship.

Not good to be alone

Very early on, the Bible story introduces the importance of companionship. Before God made Eve for Adam, he had said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone’.³ This is borne out by psychologists and psychiatrists today as well as being true of personal experience. Prolonged solitary confinement is a form of torture. Frail old people or abandoned babies can quickly deteriorate when they are parted from former families or a settled home. Loneliness and boredom can lead to depression and even death, something I have seen in badly resourced orphanages overseas. In one of them, half the children I saw were expected to die every year. In an atheistic culture, they had a degree of physical care but a great shortage of loving personal interaction.

Fortunately, genuine personal care can prevent such deprivation. All age groups thrive by finding people who love them and provide them

with interest. We come into being through and for relationships, both between one another and, supremely, with our Father God. Even those who live alone can be rich in friendship, a blessing not to be overlooked or neglected even if, like all close relationships, it has to be nourished to stay strong. Some of the sad little children in one of the deprived institutions I visited were transformed into happy, smiling little people simply by regular stimulation and care from an understanding and loving woman. Before she came they had suffered a love-deficiency. Made in the image of a God of love, we have been well designed to supply each other's needs.

A good start that ended in tears

Looking back on mankind's early days in Eden's lovely garden, communication between the Creator and his human creatures was unclouded and personal. After an unspecified time this special relationship was spoiled by doubt and disobedience on the part of Eve and Adam. They had been free to enjoy all that was in the garden, except for the fruit of two particular trees – one would give them the knowledge of good and evil and to eat its fruit would lead to death. They had so far only ever known good.⁴ Then, like so many others ever since, they yielded to the temptation presented by Satan, the enemy of souls, and took what had been forbidden.⁵

The man had been first to be warned of the fatal consequences of disobedience if he took fruit from that particular tree, and he must have repeated this to the woman. Later she was strongly tempted to doubt what God had said, so she tried a bite of the fruit, liked it and persuaded Adam to have some, too. The results affected their own relationship, but worst of all they lost that previous precious closeness with God. In turn he could no longer trust them to honour and obey him. So he sent them out of his garden, to experience hard labour, painful parenthood and the previously unknown prospect of death. This dramatic change in their lives is known as 'the Fall'. Later, the families and communities they founded would display the same fractured relationships and the same rejection of their Creator. One act of disobedience, based as it was on doubting God's word, brought disaster to the entire human race.

'Me, me, me' often hurts 'you, you and you'

Even those who choose not to accept the story as given must surely see how true it is for all of us, that from childhood onwards, we have an inborn tendency to rebel and go our own way. The childish cries of 'I want' and 'me first' indicate attitudes that do not always mature with the years. I suspect that they are still active around the committee tables of hospitals or big businesses – as grown up people, whether politely or not, compete for funds for their own little empire. Wherever it is found, self-will, by lacking thought for others, is likely to cause lasting pain.

Often, one false step can cause trouble for more than just the one who took it. Sometimes those about to take such a step, like young children, are not in full possession of the facts and need more explanation. A little boy I had cared for all his life needed to take regular medication, but at seven years old decided that he would instead hide or throw it away. As he said later, 'Nobody else has to take this stuff with his food'. His parents were worried by his subsequent ill health, but when he admitted what he had done it was clear that he had grown old enough to understand a fuller explanation about why he needed regular treatment to stay well. He saw the point, faithfully took his treatment, and recovered.

On a larger scale, disobedience to God's revealed laws is not the private affair we may imagine it to be, even if it matches the way everyone else behaves. It produces spiritual sickness in individuals and social disturbance around them. Yet, like the child's medication, God's laws are for our own good. We each need to study them to help us understand and keep them, for the benefit of all.

History is still repeated

There is a traceable, though often unacknowledged, connection between a national turning away from God and the rise in poverty, debt, divorce, illegitimacy, crime and even ill health. Many of the Old Testament prophets made this kind of connection, but their warnings fell on deaf ears. In the surgeries of general practitioners and

psychiatric or other clinics, many presenting symptoms could be traced back to spiritual disorder if only those heading the teams would consider this possibility. Lack of forgiveness alone can cause such bitterness of spirit that serious physical symptoms can follow. Any associated anger may explode into high blood pressure or worse, hurting more people than the one who is angry. Internationally, such embitterment produces war and bloodshed.

I used to think that the warning about the sins of the fathers being visited on subsequent generations of children was rather unjust.⁶ Why should their descendants suffer for parental sin? The fact is that they do. Recently I met a small boy some years after his father had left for his homeland, leaving the child and his loving mother to cope alone. He was hurt that the father rarely kept arrangements made to phone him, and other children never hear from an absentee parent at all.

There must be many such in our society who are scarred by someone else's lack of faithfulness. This not only confirms God's warnings about what will follow wrongdoing, but it should also turn us round to consider his great faithfulness and willingness to forgive us our failures. God has a heart of love that will last forever.⁷ He longs to bring people back to walk in step with him, spiritually healthy again and at peace with each other. He is full of long-suffering and patience. He gives time for his disobedient people to repent.^{8,9}

For further thought

- Does the connection between spiritual and social health make sense?
- Would you be surprised if your doctor asked about the state of your spiritual life? What 'soul-medicine' would you prescribe to keep someone spiritually fit?

References

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------|
| 1. 2 Peter 3:8 | 6. Numbers 14:18 |
| 2. Genesis 1:27-28 | 7. Jeremiah 31:3 |
| 3. Genesis 2:18 | 8. 2 Peter 3:9 |
| 4. Genesis 2:16-17 | 9. Romans 2:4 |
| 5. Genesis 3:6 | |

