



It's About **T:ME**

BY STEVE W. LEMKE

“IT’S ABOUT TIME!” WE SAY WHEN someone for whom we have been waiting a long time finally appears. We all experience the phenomenon that time seems to go by so slowly when we are waiting for something, but time flies by when we are having fun. The clock ticks at the same pace all the time of course, but we *experience* time differently. Some times are more meaningful than other times.

Related to Terms

The original language of the New Testament had two words to express these different perspectives on time. *Chronos* refers to the actual metric clock time, while *kairos* refers to meaningful times or the proper time. Both words appear in Acts 1:7 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1 and are translated “times” (*chronos*) and “epochs” or “seasons” (*kairos*). This article will explore how the New Testament uses these two key words relating to time. Although the two words overlap in meaning somewhat, a distinctive focus or nuance of meaning differentiates these biblical words.

At least eighty-one times, the New Testament writers used various forms of the word *chronos*, which typically refers to the actual time.¹ For example, Matthew 2:7 records Herod asking the wise men what “time” (*chronos*) the star appeared in the East. He simply wanted to know when they saw the star, or, in one translation, the “exact time” (CSB). Herod later had the boy babies age two and under massacred, based on time (*chronos*) the wise men had mentioned (v. 16).

Scripture usually uses *chronos* to refer to a specific moment or period of time. For instance, Luke recorded, “Now the time [*chronos*] had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she had a son” (1:57, CSB; see also Luke 8:27; John 5:6; 14:9; Acts 7:17; 13:18; 14:28; 15:33; 18:20,23). Sometimes, however, *chronos* refers to an indefinite length of time or “for a while.” For instance, speaking to a crowd, Jesus said, “The light will be with you only a little longer. Walk while [*chronos*] you have the light so that darkness doesn’t overtake you” (John 12:35, CSB; see also Luke 18:4;

John 7:33; Acts 19:22; Rev. 6:11). *Chronos* refers in some instances to a broader span of time, sometimes translated “as long as” (Acts 1:21; Rom. 7:1; Gal. 4:1). Some forms of *chronos* refer to a delay in time. Revelation 10:6 says, “He swore by the one who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it: ‘There will no longer be a delay’” (CSB, emphasis added; see also Matt. 24:48; 25:5; Luke 1:21; 12:45; Rev. 6:11).

The Greeks honored *Kairos* as a god, praising him with hymns. An altar at the entrance to the stadium at Olympia and statues in many cities honored *Kairos*. Greeks depicted *Kairos* as an adolescent male with winged feet and an unusual hairstyle (a long lock of hair in the front and short hair in the back). For the Greeks, the forelock of hair symbolized a decisive opportunity. For an individual to “take the forelock by the hand” meant to take advantage of a unique opportunity.²

To speak of time, the Greeks referred to *kairos* as a decisive moment that individuals could use to enhance their own fortune. In contrast, the New Testament writers

TIMES AND SEASONS

“He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times [*chronos*] or periods [*kairos*] that the Father has set by his own authority.’”

(ACTS 1:7, CSB)

“About the times [*chronos*] and the seasons [*kairos*]: Brothers and sisters, you do not need anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.”

(1 THESS. 5:1-2, CSB)

Right: The scene in the right panel on the front of this whale-bone box depicts the Magi’s adoration

of the baby Jesus. The box dates to the 8th cent. AD. Herod asked what time (*chronos*) the star appeared.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/26/6)



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used the Greek term *kairos* to discern God's guidance for the best time to do things to build up His kingdom.

Jews and Christians alike understood time to be linear—that is, to have a beginning, middle, and end. Time always moves forward like an arrow toward a consummation. This linear view contrasts sharply with the peoples around them who saw time in a cyclical fashion, repeating itself over and over like the annual cycle of the sun and moon. God is not time itself, as the Greeks saw *Kairos*, but God created time and the days to measure time (Gen. 1:14-19). God exists outside of time, but enters into time whenever He chooses, most importantly in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God is Lord over time, and He ordains the times and seasons (Acts 1:7; 17:26).

The word *kairos* appears more frequently than *chronos* in the New Testament, about 150 times.³ It generally refers not just to chronological time, but the significance of a particular time. For example, Ephesians 5:16 urges Christians to “redeem the time” (*kairos*) in the midst of their evil age. The apostle Paul had something more in mind than literal time. He used “time” (*kairos*) to denote a spiritual evaluation of the time: “So don’t judge anything prematurely [literally, “before the time”], before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God” (1 Cor. 4:5, CSB). Christians have the opportunity to improve their own “time” by bringing the light of Christ to a spiritually dark world.

In Scripture, *kairos* denoted a “proper” or “propitious” time (Matt. 24:45; Luke 1:20; 12:42; 1 Tim. 2:6; 6:15; Titus 1:3; 1 Pet. 5:6), “right” time (Rom. 5:6), “acceptable” time (2 Cor. 6:2), or “appointed” time (Mark 13:33). God calls for events to occur at a right time. Not just any time will do.

Jesus lived His life consciously seeking to do things



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Above: Tower of the Winds, located in the Roman forum in Athens.

Built in the 1st cent. BC, the tower originally held a weather vane, a

water clock, and sundials. Rising in the background is the Acropolis.

in perfect synchronization with the timing of the Father. Early in his Gospel, Mark records Jesus proclaiming, “The time [*kairos*] is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15, CSB). This was not the only time Jesus showed a sensitivity to the timing of His Father. Knowing the Jews wanted to kill Him, Jesus told His brothers He would not be going to the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, “Go up to the festival yourselves. I’m not going up to this festival, because my time [*kairos*] has not yet fully come” (John 7:8, CSB).

Additionally, Scripture uses *kairos* to speak of Jesus’ final Passover with His disciples and how His time was near (Matt. 26:18); His crucifixion (Rom. 5:6); and

Left: At Paphos, in Cyprus, mosaic in the House of Dionysus depicts the four seasons.

Below: Marble relief depicting Kairos. The winged

feet are a reminder that Kairos represents an opportune moment, which could be fleeting.

Right: Entrance gate to the stadium at Olympia.



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His return (Mark 13:33; Eph. 1:10). Paul wrote, “About the times [*chronos*] and the seasons [*kairos*]: Brothers and sisters, you do not need anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:1-2, CSB). The biblical writers describe each event occurring at the right or decisive time; this means that God the Father appointed a specific decisive moment for these key events to happen.

Related to Task

When we think about doing God’s will, we are most often focused primarily on doing the right thing. While that is important, of course, to fulfill God’s will the action must be done at the right time and in the right way or right spirit. For any important conversation, such as a man proposing marriage to a woman, he will seek out the right time and place to “pop the question.” Sometimes a good or well-intentioned idea is poorly received or fails because a person follows through with the idea at the wrong time. The old saying, “Timing is everything” certainly comes into play in a lot of situations.

Sometimes Scripture uses *kairos* as the right time for the fulfillment of a prophecy. Referring to the words of

an angel, John said, “Then he said to me, ‘Don’t seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near’” (Rev. 22:10, CSB, emphasis added; see also 1 Pet. 1:11). The New Testament also uses this word to describe the meaning of a time or era in history. Jesus chided the people of His day because they did not discern the significance of their own time (Luke 12:56). Similarly, Paul called on Christians to discern the spiritual significance of their own time (Rom. 13:11). Further, he instructed believers to make good use of the opportune time we have with unbelievers: “Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time” (Col. 4:5, CSB). Scripture challenges all believers to discern the meaning from God’s perspective of the day in which they live.

To understand our own time properly means something more than knowing what time it is on the clock (*chronos*). Discovering God’s timing or the right *kairos* for our lives is one of the great challenges of the Christian life. We must learn to discern not only what God would have us do, but when He wants us to do it, so we may do His will at the appropriate time. 📖

1. James A. Swanson, John R. Kohlenberger III, and Edward W. Goodrick, §5989 χρόνος (*chronos*, time) in *The Exhaustive Concordance to the Greek New Testament* [TECGNT], (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 1015–16.

2. Gerhard Dellling, “καῖρός” (*kairos*, time) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 457.

3. §2789 καῖρός (*kairos*, time) in TECGNT, 492–93.

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