A Time to Gain and a Time to Lose

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The Bible tells us that the first gift of God was the gift of time: “Let there be light, and there was light . . . the first day” (Gen. 1:3, 5). The first creation was, then, the rhythm of time, when life began in the world. Significantly, the first time that the word **natan** (give) is used in the Bible it is in the context of the fourth day of creation when God “gave” the luminaries in the heavens “to rule over the day and over the night” (Gen. 1:18). It is also interesting that the first gift of God to humans was not a precious object or a beautiful house to see and enjoy. Human history begins with a gift of time: the Sabbath. It is that first lesson of creation that Solomon remembers and meditates on at the end of his journey when he says, “There is a time for everything” (Ecc. 3:1). He is not expressing here the idea of fatalism, implying that there is nothing humans can do about the events that fall upon them. Nor is he teaching opportunism, implying that there is a proper time for every human work, for we do not choose the time of birth or the time of death (Ecc. 3:2). The Hebrew syntax of the phrase suggests instead that time is the gift of God: “time is given to everything” (lit. trans.). Looking back at the “times,” the good times and the bad times, Solomon discovered that indeed **all those times, good and bad, were the gift of God**. In this observation from the wisest man of human history, a whole philosophy of management of time is suggested.

**The Gift of Good Times**

That the “good” time is a gift of God obliges us, of course, to an attitude of gratefulness and humility. For we owe all this good to God and not to our merits. Yet, the best way to respond to that gift is first of all to recognize it as such. It is our responsibility to see this time as the gift of God. This lesson is given by Jesus when he urges the people to “discern this time” (Luke 12:56). We need to learn to open our eyes and be attentive to those special times which are sent by God for our happiness and fulfillment, otherwise we may miss the opportunity of the “good” time. We should learn not to see the bad in the good and not to turn the blessing of God into a curse. It is, therefore, our duty to receive it and enjoy it and not feel guilty about it. Be happy of your good times. But it also means a duty to do something with this gift. Jesus’ parable of the talents reminds us that we should not hide the gift; we should not only see it as a gift, but also share it with others. We should not keep our time to ourselves. We should share our time with our family and with other humans. Cry and laugh with them, teach them, listen to them, but also simply sit with them. We should learn to have time for others. The best gift to our children is not our money or even our genes; it is the time which God has given us to spend with them.

Managing our time means that we should learn to multiply this time, that the ‘quality time’ may become ‘quantity time.’ The physician or the nurse who spends one hour assisting a sick person will allow the patient to live for many more years. The teacher who gives a one-hour lesson will shape the student for life. The pastor who gives a one-hour Bible study will open a listener’s understanding to the grace of eternal life. All these examples, among many others, illustrate how our time could be productive. It is not enough to have “good” times. We should strive to shape them into “better” times. It is not enough to have a fresh salad and rich vegetables to produce a good meal; we need the right recipes. We should not content ourselves with the time that is given to us. We should learn to exploit the gift and stretch it into a bigger one. The duty to see the good in the time that is given to us means that we should detect and sort out the productive, that which...
has a future, from the non-productive, that which has no promise. We are often so lost in the mass of our daily activities that we miss the perception of the broader horizon and dismiss what is important and has the potential of fruitfulness. We are so busy with the need of our small duties and the eagerness to enjoy our present rewards that we ignore greater needs and more profound joys. As a result, we keep trampling on one spot and never move beyond ourselves. Ultimately, our busy life will invade our times and nothing essential will be left, not even this little “good” time given by God.

The Gift of Bad Times

As much as it is easy to conceive that God gives us good times, it is more difficult to assume that He is also the One who gives us bad times. Yet, the poet of the book of Ecclesiastes plays on this tension and likes to repeat that God is also present on the negative side of life. When Solomon says that “there is a time to gain and a time to lose,” in Ecclesiastes 3:6, he means that God gives the good as well as the bad. The same idea is defended by Job against his wife: “Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” (Job 2:10). Although he knows that, “an enemy has done this” (Matt. 13:28), the believer of the Bible knows also that God controls everything and that He should be blessed not only when we gain but also when we lose. For even when we lose, God is believed to be present. Even our bad times are to be received as gifts from God. This view contains an appeal to faith and hence to serve God even in the time of adversity and in spite of it (Dan. 3:18). But there is more. When the Bible says that God gives also the bad times, it is also to invite us to detect the good in them. We are not just encouraged to believe “by faith” that there is something good in this ‘bad,’ in spite of what we can see (Heb. 11:1-3). This perspective also contains a lesson of hope. We trust that God will use His power and His creativity to turn even this bad time into something good (Gen. 50:20). Implicitly this faith and hope also suggest an active response on our part. We are called to imitate God and work on these bad times and seek there positive elements. This does not mean that we shall close the eyes to that sad and negative reality. On the contrary this means that we will have to confront that reality. That God gives us ‘bad times’ means that He gives us the responsibility and the capacity to change them into something good. According to Ecclesiastes, this is the task that God has given to occupy the time given to the sons of men (Ecc. 3:10).

Managing the Gift of Time

Certainly, the challenge is great. How can we manage God’s gift of time? How can we exploit His good gift and how can we change His bad gift? While the text of Ecclesiastes raises the problem, it also provides us with a direction. At the end of the poem on the gift of time, the biblical author speaks of another gift of God that is precisely related to the gift of time. “Also He has put (natan “given”) eternity in their hearts” (Ecc. 3:11). It is that sense of eternity, the nostalgia of the lost Eden, that will give us the imagination and the strength not only to stretch our little good gift into a better one, but also to change our bad time into a good gift, thus making us, in this time, witnesses to eternity.