

Between  *and*
TICK TOCK

What the Bible says
about how it all begins,
how it all ends,
and everything
in between.

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For the parishioners of St Mark's Darling Point, Sydney

Philippians 4:1



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Preface

The idea for this book came from a conversation with a friend of mine, Rev Dr Peter Sanlon. He had in mind a series of books for non-specialist readers that would show how deeply interconnected Christian doctrine is. The best way to understand, say, the cross, is to see how it affects, and in turn is affected, by the way we think about creation, our humanity, and the last things. Peter had the idea for three sections in each book: *Look*, in which you'd get an overview of what the Bible says; *Link*, in which you'd see how each doctrine meshes with all the others; and *Live*. This last section is vital, because Christian doctrine is not an abstract or irrelevant thing. It shapes how we live in profound and immediate ways.

That explains the three-part structure of this book 'Between Tick and Tock'. I've also added three Appendices, because the doctrine of creation and new creation is beset by controversial issues around the role of science, the last things, and what we may call 'the spiritual creation' – angels, demons, and so on. Avoiding these juicy topics seemed like a bad idea! I've offered my take on these three issues, but I hope that a reader won't be put off by finding something to disagree with in those pages.



Look

1. Between tick and tock

When I was growing up, our church used to hold its weekends away – which we rather quaintly called ‘house parties’ – in a grand, stately home to the west of Sydney.

I vividly remember that house with its many corridors and its sweeping lawns and its rose gardens and its big open fireplace with gigantic logs burning away. But I particularly remember the grandfather clock that stood in its entrance hall. The grandfather clock was a somewhat solemn presence, doing its duty hour by hour. Just as a child could spend a hour gazing into the open fire, so it was transfixing to watch the swing of its heavily weighted pendulum. The clock marked the seconds with an opening beat – a ‘tick’ – and a closing beat, which was its opposite – a ‘tock’. And as I sat watching the slow swing of the pendulum, I couldn’t help feeling that the upswing of the tick was almost like a question that asked for the downswing of the tock as its answer. The tick on its own would just hang in the air, unresolved. It almost *needed* the tock.

You get the same feeling when you come to the closing bars of a piece of music. There are patterns of chords that, when you play them, seem almost to tell us what the final chord must be. There *has* to be a resolution. We anticipate it in our minds, and a good composer will tease us a little by not giving it to us quite when we expect. But the game of music involves a beginning

which points towards an end. And when we are in the middle of it, when we've heard the beginning, we are pulled inexorably towards the end that must surely come. Musicians call these resolving sequences of chords 'cadences'.

Both of these experiences grab us because they remind us about the very human experience of living in time. The clock and the piece of music both tell us that there is a beginning; and that if there is a beginning, then it points towards some ending. We live in the middle of time, in between some beginning and some ending, some start which anticipates some conclusion. And just as the upswing of the clock's tick is a prophecy of its down-swinging tock, so the idea that we've begun at some point is a pointer towards an inevitable end.

That's where we have to live. We can't really choose a different, timeless existence for ourselves – just as we can't choose to live in a place without air. Time is a part of our very being as human creatures. 'Where can we live but days?' writes the great English poet Philip Larkin; and the answer to his question is, naturally, *nowhere*. Time is our home. But time is finite, as far as we can understand it. It has brackets around it. Beginning and end.

This is a cosmic as well as a personal reality. We know that everything around us was not always that way. It must have begun somewhere, somewhen. And with that, we know that it won't last eternally, either – at least not as it is. All things must pass. The universe expands, and at some stage it will be done with expanding, and will contract, and everything we recognise will be destroyed.

This is what happens to us, too. Our parents tell us about our birthdays. They know that we did not exist from the beginning

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of all things because they were present at our coming into being. And with that knowledge comes the knowledge that the upswing, the tick, of birth is to be answered by the downswing, the tock, of death. Our growth into life is an anticipation of our leaving it behind, one day.

And this is our curse as human beings, because even though we are bracketed by some beginning and some end, we can imagine what it might be like for it not to be so. We have a deep longing to transcend our limits. We dream of not being defeated ultimately by time working its cruel alchemy on our bodies, but rather of living on. The miracle of our consciousness seems like it is poorly matched to our bodies. Our hunger for life does not usually abate even when our bodies shrivel.

As an Anglican parish minister, I've presided at many funerals. One of the things I notice is that even the most hardened atheist cannot finally come at the thought of the disintegration of the human personality. It is one thing to argue that there is no life after death in the pub over a few drinks. It is quite another to stand beside the coffin of a loved one and say the same. The sense that human being is made for something more than this end is so deeply rooted, so powerful, that even non-religious people feel they have to reach for something – usually some vague sense that the dead person is now 'up there'.

What we say to ourselves about the beginning and ending of all things is also a way of making sense of the middle. It's a way of finding meaning. If we can understand what the tick anticipates, and trace its direction, then we can grasp something of what the swirl of events in between might mean. Shakespeare's Macbeth, when he was at his lowest ebb, speculated that life is 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and

fury, signifying nothing'. That was because he had become convinced that his life was heading towards a calamitous ending. He had been fooled into thinking that his destiny was rather different, and had pursued a ruinous and murderous course of action 'in the middle'. That sense of what an ending might be shapes our understanding of what we should do in the meantime. The 19 terrorists who flew into the World Trade Center in 2001 understood themselves as heading, not towards a fiery end, but through a fiery ordeal to a paradise granted to them because they had committed their act of destruction.

Human experience, that is to say, seems to shape itself into a story of some kind. Stories, as we know from a very early age, have different endings. A tragedy and a comedy end differently. They may both begin with 'once upon a time', but only one of them may end with 'and they all lived happily ever after'. And the end of the story transforms the meaning of its middle. It is no surprise to us that Hamlet dies. He's not principally an action hero, but a tragic hero. His quest to avenge his father is both necessary and doomed. If (say) Bruce Willis were to offer a version of Hamlet, it would be a very different story. It would mean something else – our understanding of the action in the middle of the play would be entirely different. We would be admirers of Hamlet's self-discipline and his courage – how does he overcome his feelings of self-doubt and the moral complexity of his situation?

What then, should we think about endings and beginnings? The problem is that, although the natural world seems to suggest to us that there *is* a connected and meaningful story, it doesn't reveal to us without ambiguity what that story might be. Staring at an extraordinary sunset has left many human beings

Look

thinking there simply must be more to existence than the mechanical round of life and death. Something transcendent seems to radiate through the natural order, seems to permeate it with beauty and purpose. But ... what is it? We cannot easily tell. And for every scene of beauty, where everything seems fitting and ordered, we will also be able to recall instances of banality and terror.

Christian theology starts with the premise that this intuition we have about the order and beauty and purpose of the creation is right, and that it has been confirmed by the Creator himself. He has reached over the gap separating time from eternity, and has spoken to us. What meaning is there in human life? We cannot deduce it, though we can suspect that it is there. But if it is *revealed* to us, then that's a different matter. Then we are given a starting point for understanding ourselves and our world, and a frame around which we can organise our thinking.

This book is about what God reveals to us in the Bible, and about what Christians have tried to understand, about the beginnings and the endings of all things. Our purpose is bound up in the question of why we were made by the creator in the first place, and from what. What kind of world is it that we are in? And where is it heading? Can we expect the original purpose given to all things to be reached? What might give us that confidence, since we can't see the present from the future? We will return to the Bible's response to these questions in due course. But it is worth saying from the outset that the Bible plunges us right into the world in the middle. It is a book written by and about and for people who experience life in between the tick and the tock. While it describes for the world before

the tick and after the tock, it does so by stretching language as far as it will go. It does not claim to transport us to another realm of existence. Rather, its claim is always the opposite: that the eternal one, himself not subject to time, enters time and discloses himself to us.

In other words: the Bible tells us a particular *story* about the beginning and end of all things, and about our own beginning and end. Narrative (or plot, or story) will be vital categories for us to keep in mind, because the Bible does not give us a set of abstract principles or philosophical theorems. Even as we isolate propositions to consider, we must never forget that Christianity tells a story about events that it claims happened in history, and about a particular ending that it claims will come. Even the great creeds of the Christian church, which look as if they just list a set of truths, tell a great story: the story of the Creator and his creation; of the redeemer, Jesus Christ, who was born, suffered, died, rose again and ascended, and who will come to judge the world; and of the Holy Spirit, who, in the middle of time between the end the beginning, ministers to the people of God.

2. Alternative ticks and tocks

Human beings have a deep sense that there is a beginning and an end – both to all things and to themselves. And what they think these are shapes what they understand themselves to be doing in the in-between time. At the same time, there's a profound sense that human beings have always shared that they are made for something more than the limits of time. That paradox tells us a great deal about human experience.

What are some of the ways that human beings have

described the origins of all things and the future to come? What are some of the stories we tell each other?

a. Polytheism

Polytheism, as is well known, involves the worship of many gods. Many, if not most, human cultures in history have been polytheistic in their outlook. Polytheists often do say there is one god or deity who is bigger than all the rest, or older, and who may have been the originator of the others. But the myths of polytheistic religions usually see the creation of the world and of human beings as the by-product of a divine struggle.

Take the Babylonian creation myth call *Enuma Elish*. It starts with two gods, a husband and wife called Apsu and Tiamat. Apsu is the god of fresh water and Tiamat god of the oceans, who looks like a sea-serpent. Then several other gods are created, and they take up residence in Tiamat's body. But these gods make such a racket that Tiamat and Apsu become really angry. Apsu wants to have them killed, but Tiamat warns Ea, who is the most powerful god living in his body. Ea puts a spell on Apsu, and has him killed, which means that Ea is now the chief god. He marries Damkina and has a son called Marduk.

Marduk is an even greater god than those before him. And – to cut a very long story short – Marduk eventually challenges Tiamat to a battle. Victorious over her, he cuts her dead body into two, and makes the earth and the sky from the pieces. He then proceeded to create the patterns of the stars and the planets, sun and moon. From the blood of another defeated god, Kingu, mixed with clay, Marduk made human beings to do the work of the gods.

Meanwhile, in Scandinavia, they told the story somewhat like this. Odin is the oldest and most powerful of the gods,

and has always ruled all things. He created heaven and earth, and human beings. But there was a time before him. When there was nothing, the frost giant Ymir came into being. Ymir was evil. Odin, who had emerged from the ice, hated Ymir and, with his brothers, killed him. The narrator takes up the gruesome tale:

From Ymir's flesh, Odin and his brothers made the earth, and from his shattered bones and teeth, they made the rocks and stones. From Ymir's blood, they made the rivers and lakes, and they circled the earth with an ocean of blood. Ymir's skull they made into the sky, secured at four points by four dwarfs named East, West, North and South... From Ymir's brains, they shaped the clouds.

These dramatic tales, though they are very different, contain some telling similarities. For one thing, the creation emerges from a violent struggle between good and evil. It is a by-product of something else. If the earth is really the fallen body of a giant, or the slain corpse of a sea-monster, what kind of a thing is it? It has a kind of terrible, even awesome beauty, but not much more. It is not intentionally made, but accidentally happens.

And what of human beings? They inhabit a lower realm where they have to, in some way, hope that the gods do not inflict more harm on them with their hidden and heavenly politics. The best we can do is try to appease the spirits and divinities that surround us and inhabit the things around us. Most polytheistic religions practice some system of sacrifice in order to please the relevant god or goddess.

And what kind of end can we expect? If struggle between the gods began creation, then we can expect that renewed

struggle will probably end it. Mostly in polytheistic religions, the individual soul carries on in a shadowy place of the dead. It may be that some great souls ascend to divinity themselves, but to become a god means becoming a participant in the divine wrangle that pits god against god. It may be, that as the dead, we will be able to have some influence over life on earth.

b. Pantheism

An equally ancient alternative to polytheism is pantheism. Now, sometimes a polytheist and pantheist may overlap in their beliefs, or live inside the same religious super-structure. Is Hinduism polytheist or pantheist, or example? The best answer is probably 'yes'!

Pantheists believe that God, or divinity, and the world are not separate. God is not distinct from the universe but rather is identical to it. God is not 'up there' but rather 'all around'. The epic *Star Wars* takes place in a basically pantheistic universe permeated by 'the force' – a mysterious divine-like being that is accessible through mystical powers of concentration to the Jedi. In *The Lion King*, too, we hear talk of 'the circle of life', a kind of divine presence that fills all living things.

For pantheists (though we have to generalise here, because pantheists are quite diverse), the being of the universe has no beginning and no end. Ordinary theists will think of God as having attributes like omnipresence and omnipotence and eternity. If you transfer these on to the universe, you start to 'get' pantheism. Pantheists see the cosmos as eternal – history is not a line from chaos to order or from order to chaos, but rather a circle. There is no particular final end point; neither was there any particular beginning. There is in fact a series of beginnings, which were endings of other beginnings,

themselves also endings (if you see what I mean).

Traditionally, pantheists see that the goal of human life is to become one with the universe – which means the individual has no ultimate significance. If all is god, then I am god, or at least, I share the divinity of the universe – but this is not a kind of narcissism. Quite the opposite is the case: my goal is to dissolve into the universe and become part of it. Mind you, the more westernised pantheism becomes, the more the individual returns, because we westerners just can't imagine a universe where we are not the centre.

Albert Einstein was a self-declared pantheist. For him, this meant that he did not believe in a personal God, though he was not an atheist. He declared that he did not believe in life after death. He said once: 'I believe in [a] God, who reveals himself in the harmony of all that exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind.'

He also wrote:

Scientific research can reduce superstition by encouraging people to think and view things in terms of cause and effect. Certain it is that a conviction, akin to religious feeling, of the rationality and intelligibility of the world lies behind all scientific work of a higher order. [...] This firm belief, a belief bound up with a deep feeling, in a superior mind that reveals itself in the world of experience, represents my conception of God. In common parlance this may be described as 'pantheistic'.

What does human life look like in such a world? The God who is revealed in the 'harmony of all that exists' sounds on the face of it a peaceable character. But think about the 'natural' world for a moment: how harmonious is it? What does the pantheist

make of what we might call 'evil'? Is it part of the 'harmony', or not? If it is, then this harmony is not very comforting, for the forces of the universe have conspired to produce an unyielding and unsympathetic experience for many human beings. As Einstein says, the deity he believes in isn't much concerned with the doings of human beings – so we are pretty much left to interact with whatever God is by observing the natural world. Which makes scientists akin to priests of course.

Furthermore, the pantheist is committed to trying to understand good and evil somehow from what exists around him or her in the universe. There is no source of intervening revelation to give guidance, but only what the human mind can reason from the ground up. And yet, this proves a very difficult thing to do, in fact – to move from what 'is,' to what 'ought.' There are examples of cannibalism in the animal world, for example; but does this justify cannibalism among human beings? Few would agree that it does.

c. Naturalism

Naturalism is the view that there is only the material world and nothing else. There is no force outside the natural world that caused it to come to be; and only the physical chain of causes and effects will end all things. Theologically speaking, naturalists are atheists. Their worldview has no place for God as a designer or shaper. There is no meaning given to the order of things from outside.

The current consensus among naturalist philosophers and scientists is that the universe began some 14.5 billion years ago with the so-called 'Big Bang' – an explosion of an extremely dense point of matter. The extraordinary forces unleashed then have produced a universe so large that the extremely finely

balanced conditions on Earth – which seem so unlikely to have come about by chance alone – were at least somewhat probable. A naturalist would argue that the sheer size of the universe, and the time available, mean that life on an earth-like planet had to happen sometime. It's just as if you asked me to roll five double sixes in a row on a set of dice. The probability of this happening is very low, but, given enough time – it may take a year – it will come to pass. That's why, to increase the probability of life existing, scientists now talk about other universes.

Life then emerged on planet Earth, and, piece by piece, bit by bit, evolved. There was no hand to guide this process, no divine eye watching over it or planning it out. The arrival of human beings relatively late on the scene is product of a massive winnowing process. We have been moulded and refined by the need to pass on our genes.

Now, in principle, naturalists may change their minds about all this, since they are committed to the idea that the natural world is what we have to work with, and we may discover more evidence – or be swayed by a different interpretation of the evidence. Nevertheless, the current story told by naturalists is very widely held. The 'tick' that sets everything in motion was not a personal design or decision, it was the explosion of physical forces that did not think of anything. What our minds emerged from is not other minds, but from a combination of physical forces acting on matter over billions of years. We are not, then, as beings, made for any particular purpose. We are just *here*, to make of our existence what we will, or at least, what we can given the limitations bequeathed to us by the circumstances in which we live. As Richard Dawkins writes in his best seller *The God Delusion*:

Look

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.

And the 'tock'? Well, the physical decay of the universe is already set in motion. Our sun will run out of fuel. The forces of the expanding universe will one day be spent and everything will collapse back in on itself. And that will be that. But our own personal demise is closer than that. We will die, and that will be the end of our conscious self, since there is no life after death. The span of life we have been given by the universe is simply what it is. And it is in these years that we must live, and love, and find pleasure such as we can, and do what we are called to do.

Most naturalists don't end up as nihilists. That is, most naturalists, even Richard Dawkins, find the pull of talking about the meaning and purpose of human life too strong to resist. They will talk about human rights, and about the mission of human beings, and so on. Full bore nihilism is a very hard creed to like. Mostly, we hunger for purpose and meaning, so we might as well invent a purpose while we are here, before the grim *tock* of death brings down the shutters on our small glimpse of conscious life. Marxists, for example, don't believe in God, but do imagine that history has a particular trajectory, pulling us towards a Marxist utopia, in which there is finally no private property. Existentialists urge human beings to make their own individual meaning out of their circumstances.

Hedonists simply say we should ‘look on the bright side of life’ and just enjoy the ride while it lasts. All of these versions of naturalism fight against the inevitability of the hard landing that is death.

3. The Christian story

We’ve explored three alternative ways to think about the tick and tock of human existence. How we think things began, and how we imagine that they’ll end, shape what we think we are doing in the middle of time. Are we living in a world that is planned, and if so, what is the plan and who is the planner?

It almost goes without saying that the Christian Bible has a distinct sense of time and its meaning. Christians live with a sense that they are created, and that the creator is a personal God who has destined the cosmos for his glory. The tick that the Bible describes is a distinct point of beginning, full of intent and purpose. The creator God sets all things in train, and then shapes them to their final purpose. We cannot, in Christian thinking, work this out simply by studying the world itself. We can get a sense from the world that there is an eternal destiny and a divine person, but not much more (Rom 1:18). In order to understand the shape of the story, we need the story told to us by the one who knows it. It needs to be revealed to us. That is why we turn to the pages of the Bible to understand what God says about himself and the world.

But before we do that, I want to pause a little to reflect about how we do this. One of the controversies that has dogged the Christian church in the last century and a half is the difficulty of squaring the accounts of Genesis with what modern scientific consensus is claiming about the origins of the world and of

human life. I'll say a little bit more about that in Appendix A. This controversy has had the effect of placing undue emphasis on the opening chapters of Genesis for our understanding of the beginning of all things. What we should not fail to notice is that there are other passages of the Bible – in particular Psalm 104, Job 28, and Proverbs 8 – that paint their own pictures of the creation. We also need to read these Old Testament texts, as Christians are always called upon to do, from the perspective of the New Testament. What we are trying to do in reading Scripture is to understand it as a whole. We need to synthesise these accounts rather than neglect some in favour of one.

Here, then, is an outline of a Christian theology of the tick and the tock.

a. God is not the world

The first principle of a Christian view of the world is that God is not it, and it is not God. When Genesis 1:1 kicks off the Bible by saying 'In the beginning' – words which are echoed by John in the beginning of his gospel – it is saying that there was a time before the creation existed. The creation begins. God does not begin. He is not made. He simply *is*. And though he creates the world, he does not create it as an extension of his being. It is different in nature to him. He has a divine nature; the cosmos, while it shows his imprint and reveals his character, does not have a divine nature.

An easy way to see this is to note how Israel was called upon to worship the one God, the Lord, exclusively and uniquely. The world was not subject to the competitions of many gods for supremacy. And neither was it permissible to worship idols, which are themselves parts of the created order. This point is made very sharply by the prophet Isaiah. He describes

a carpenter cutting down a tree:

Half of the wood he burns in the fire;

over it he prepares his meal,

he roasts his meat and eats his fill.

He also warms himself and says,

‘Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.’

From the rest he makes a god, his idol;

he bows down to it and worships.

He prays to it and says,

‘Save me! You are my god!’ (Is 44:16-17)

You could never worship the God of Israel this way, because he does not inhabit material objects in this way. He is fundamentally different from the creation. He is invisible. He is spirit.

As a side note, it’s interesting to note how often objections to the existence of God imagine him as an object in the physical universe. This is the problem with the ‘who made God?’ objection. This would be a problem if God were like any other object in the material world. But the biblical understanding of God is not of him as a part of the material universe. He *enters* it, and engages with it, for sure. But he is not constrained by the laws of physics since he is not part of the realm that is governed by these laws. Who made God? No-one. He is eternal.

b. He creates by his word

How does God create the world? Some parts of the Bible talk poetically about the way he moulds things, as if he took pre-existing material and shaped it:

The sea is his, for he made it,

and his hands formed the dry land. (Ps 95:5).

Other passages use words like ‘create’ and ‘make’, which don’t tell us much about how God created the world.

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But Genesis 1 gives a vivid description of the means by which God created all things. It comes in the formula 'And God said...and it was so' which is used throughout the passage. The creator creates by speaking. His fundamental activity in creating the universe is talking. He says it, and it is.

This tells us a great deal. In the first place, the creation is not formed as an accidental by-product of a primeval struggle between the gods. The creation is not the fallen corpse of a sea-monster or a giant. It is no by-product. It is the intentional creation of a supreme being who is in full control of his actions. It is created without struggle. This means that the creator is supremely powerful to order and to purpose his creation. It has a plan and a purpose that come from its creator. It is designed by a designer, carefully and beautifully.

In Proverbs 8, the writer uses the device of personifying God's wisdom as his companion in the creation:

I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
when he gave the sea its boundary
so that the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.

(Prov 8:27-29)

That's another way of saying that God created the world by his word. It is a product of his wisdom. It comes from his genius and from no-one else.

We'll return to this theme in chapter 2, because it is incredibly significant that Jesus is called 'the Word of God' in the New Testament.