

The Eternity of God

Children often say amusing things about God. Here are a few statements made by grade school students asked to describe God. One said, "God is an old man who lives way up in the sky." A second child said, "God is a very special person who lives in the clouds and all the dead people are his helpers." Another piped up, "God is an old man with a white beard who is tall and nice." The fourth one explained, "God is the only one without a birthday because he was the first one."

Interesting answers, for sure! But do they square with what the Bible says about God? In some ways, yes! In some ways, no! The Bible does say that God has lived a long time—forever, in fact! Daniel 7:9 calls Him "the Ancient of Days," Moses echoing this thought in Deuteronomy 33:27 where he comforts us, "The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms." But no, God is not old, for He doesn't age like we mortals. The best way to explain it is to say that God is eternally young, as full of life and joy and power today as He was when He spoke the universe into existence. Hebrews 1:10-12 affirms this: "You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands; they will perish, but You remain; and they all will become like a garment, and like a mantle you will roll them up; like a garment they will also be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end."

So far in our study of God, we've meditated on His holiness, His goodness, His faithfulness, His knowledge, His justice, and His patience. But in this and the next two posts, I want to glory the Lord by talking about His eternity. This is one of the divine mysteries that ought to humble us and fill us with awe because of its depth and the impossibility of fully grasping it with our minds. For how can the finite hope to comprehend the infinite! And yet, it is imperative to believe what the Bible says about this topic because of its impact on our faith and worship.

Meaning of God's Eternity

When I was a boy, my dad tried to help me understand God's eternity by likening it to a giant boulder that lies to the far north in the land of Svithjog. This boulder is 1,000 feet high, 1,000 feet wide, and 1,000 feet long. Once every 1,000 years, a little bird comes along and pecks at it to sharpen its beak. My dad said when that rock is worn away, the first day of eternity will have passed. I like his analogy but it too falls short in this sense. As long-lasting as that rock may be, even it has the possibility of being worn away. Whereas God had no beginning, nor does He age or will His life ever expire. As Revelation 4:8 explains, God is a timeless Being who has always been, ever is, and always shall be. This is a concept that is beyond our ability to comprehend. Nevertheless the Bible says it is true.

Consider Moses' words in Psalm 90: "Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God." To appreciate what he's saying, it's important to remember the context. This was written during the wilderness wanderings before God's people entered the Promised Land, while they were still homeless, living in tents, and without a place to call their own.

And yet, Moses reminds them that they do have a place of refuge and comfort, and that's the Lord Himself. For no matter where we go or what life brings our way, the one thing we can count on is God. For He has been "our dwelling place in all generations." Or said another way, God's goodness is not limited to one age or people. The Lord "is rich to all who call upon Him, for whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Rom. 10:13)

Before I met Christ, I used to think, "O, if only I lived in the time of Moses or the apostles, it would be so much easier to believe—seeing God do all those fabulous works among His people!" Then I realized, if God is God, His goodness never ends. It continues forever. Why? Because from everlasting to everlasting He is God! In fact, the Hebrew word is interesting here. It literally means, "From vanishing point to vanishing point, You are God!" The human mind can look backward in time until time itself begins to fade, and it can look forward into the future until it collapses from exhaustion, and God is still there, beyond what our minds are able to conceive, because from everlasting to everlasting He is God!

You see, the life of God is fundamentally different from the life of man. The Bible says we are immortal beings, for when God breathed into Adam the breath of life, man became a living soul. This means that even though our bodies wither and die, our souls continue forever—either with God or apart from Him. So to a certain extent, we can imagine what it's like to live forever. But to conceive of Someone who has always been without ever having had a beginning, that's a thought which is beyond our understanding, for God alone is eternal.

C.S. Lewis likened it to a sheet of paper extending forever in two directions. He said to draw on that paper a short line representing time, for just as that line begins and ends on that infinite piece of paper, so time finds its beginning and end in God. He's already lived all of our tomorrows, just as He's lived all of our yesterdays, for He has no past or future. Instead, He lives in an everlasting now. What that means, I have no idea, but I believe it—that God exists outside of our space-time continuum. As Genesis 1:1 proclaims, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," indicating that when time began, God already was, seeing the end from the beginning in one great eternal view. "For I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning." (Isaiah 46:9)

You say, "All of this is very heady stuff, but what good is it? And how is knowing this going to help me?" I believe it's extremely practical and important. And in my next post I'll explain why. I hope you'll return to read more and that you'll share it with someone who may not yet know Christ in a personal way.

Lessons from God's Eternity

In my last post I made the point that God is eternal and we are not. I also took a stab at explaining what eternity means. But I ended on this note: "So what? So God is eternal! What difference should that make to me?" I believe it ought to make a huge difference, and in this post I'd like to describe the

first way it should impact us. **It should make us humble.** In Psalm 90:3, Moses paints a picture of our lives compared to God's. Referring to the Lord, he says:

“You turn man to destruction, and say, ‘Return, O children of men.’ For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night. You carry them away like a flood; they are like a sleep. In the morning they are like grass which grows up; in the morning it flourishes and grows up; in the evening it is cut down and withers.”

God's life is so much greater than ours that Moses says it's like a thousand years compared to a “watch in the night.” How long was a night watchman required to stand guard? 3 hours! By that measurement it means no one has ever lived even one day in God's sight, for how long have the oldest humans lived? Read the first chapters of Genesis and you'll find the average age of those who lived before the Flood, like Adam and Seth, was 900 years. The reason they lived so long is a study in itself. Likely it was due to the idyllic environment and the short time sin had to do damage to their bodies. But regardless of the reasons, imagine what it would be like to live that long! Think of the events you'd have witnessed if you were born 900 years ago in the year 1112! You'd have seen the Crusades, the Protestant Reformation, the birth of America, and all the scientific inventions of the 19th and 20 centuries, not to mention our Civil War and two world wars.

And yet, according to the standard set by Moses—a thousand years being equivalent to a watch in the night—this means that Methuselah, the oldest man who ever lived (969 years), lived only 2 hours and 54 minutes from God's perspective. So what does that say about our meager 70 or 80 years? It means we should be humble, for as verse 10 goes on to say:

“The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off and we fly away.”

James expands on this in his epistle. Speaking to some very self-assured and cocky business types, he warns: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there, and engage in business, and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.”

When I read that passage, I think of a conversation I had with another minister several years ago when I was serving in my first pastorate. The other minister had just arrived in town and was in the process of planting a new church. So I asked him about his goals. Having come from a big church where his father was the pastor, he said, “I plan to have a thousand members by the end of two years!” I have to admit, I was a little intimidated and not a little irritated. After all, I'd been working tirelessly for two years in that town and had seen some significant growth. Our size had doubled from 75 to 150 in attendance on Sunday mornings. But we had no expectations of reaching a

thousand members. But I didn't say anything. I figured, "If God is in this, He will empower him to do just what he says." So I decided to wait and watch. And at the end of two years, not only didn't he have a thousand members, he had given up and left the area.

Why did he fail? Two reasons: First, he failed to recognize that planting a church in the rocky soil of the Pacific Northwest is more difficult than starting a church in the Bible Belt, which is where he was from. Second, he failed to recognize that "unless the Lord builds the house, they who build it labor in vain." That isn't to discourage us from setting big goals and striving to do big things for God. After all, if you aim at nothing, that's what you'll hit! The missionary William Carey advised, "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." But at the same time we need to remember our relative smallness in the process, making sure that we get our goals from God and we balance our faith with the fact that every good and perfect gift comes from Him, and that He ultimately decides where and how He's going to bless. Or as James says in his epistle, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that."

How should we react, then, when we realize how great the life of God is? The doxology says: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. World without end. Amen. Amen." Our first reaction to this mind-boggling fact should be humility, realizing that our lives are but a raindrop falling in the ocean compared to the eternity of God. But that isn't the only way we should respond.

It should make us repent. We don't talk much about repentance anymore. In fact, the very word may convince a few to put this post aside and wait for me to address a more positive and upbeat topic. I understand that. Repentance has never been a popular topic. For one thing, it forces us to think about our sins, which is apt to bring feelings of guilt, failure, and shame. And who wants to wallow in emotions like that! Furthermore, it reminds us that God is not only a God of love, He is also a holy God who cannot tolerate sin in His presence. Moses refers to this in Psalm 90:7-8 where He continues: "For we have been consumed by Your anger, and by Your wrath we are terrified. You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your countenance."

That's an unnerving thought. Isn't it? The bright light of God's holiness is this very moment shining on all your secret sins, the ones no one else knows about, exposing their ugliness. Hebrews 4:13 confirms this: "For there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." What makes our condition even more frightening (Hang in there! It gets worse, but it'll get much better in a moment.) is that it's an eternal God we've offended who vows to repay each one of us according to our deeds. For those of us who love God, that's comforting because it means we'll be forever blessed. But for the person who finds himself estranged from God, that's a terrifying fact because it means His wrath will never end. Jesus warned: "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; but he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (John 3:36)

Stephen Charnock, the Puritan theologian, described our pickle like this: "That the Judge and Punisher lives forever is the greatest grievance to a soul in misery and adds inconceivable weight to

it, for while God's power makes our punishment sharp, His eternity renders it perpetual; ever to endure is the sting at the end of every lash." Or to say it another way, if no one can love with the intensity of our eternal God, imagine what His wrath is like! Hebrews 10:31 warns: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." What a motivation to pray for and tell everyone we know of the love and forgiveness freely available to them in Jesus!

If you can bear it, here's one more reason why we need God's mercy. Not only does He see our sins, both visible and secret, but they are always before Him. You and I are forgetful creatures. We walk into rooms and wonder what we're after. So we tend to forget the sins we committed 10 or 50 years ago. But God doesn't. God is eternal, which means our sins are ever before Him as if they took place just moments ago. What's more, that's where they'll remain until: 1) We turn to Jesus as our Savior and the slate is wiped clean. "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sins." (1 John 1:7) 2) We confess our sins to Him, which keeps the fellowship sweet. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

I know. It's taken me awhile to get to the good news. But here it is: You don't have to stay stuck in your sinful habits and addictions, nor do you have to be estranged from God. Like the father of the prodigal son, He's out on the porch looking for you, eager for you to come home. How do you do that? It's simple but not pain-free. Agree with God that you've sinned by trying to live life without Him. That shouldn't be hard. As Dr. Phil would say, "How's that been working for you?" It hasn't worked at all. But now you have a chance to start again. So why not take it. Turn from the failed solutions you've tried in the past and ask Jesus to give you the power to live as He's always wanted. And He will!

Moses prayed like this in Psalm 90:13, "Return, O LORD! And have compassion on Your servants. Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." God never ignores a sincere request like that, for He is infinite in mercy and forgiveness, just waiting for us to recognize our need of Him. Sure, there will be temptations to drift back to the old life. That's a part of the recovery process. But stand firm. Surround yourself with others who've made the change and trust God to do for you what you could never do for yourself, for "God is the one who began this good work in you, and I am certain that he won't stop before it is complete on the day that Christ Jesus returns." (Phil. 1:6 CEV)

We've been pondering the mystery of God's eternity in this message and the responses we ought to have to it. Here is my final suggestion for now: **It should make us wise.** After emphasizing how short and difficult life is, Moses concludes in verse 12: "So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker: "He who dies with the most toys wins!" We smile at that because so often that's how we behave. We get so caught up in planning for the future and the day we finally get to retire that we forget about forever. Not that planning for the years ahead is wrong. God is a meticulous planner, so planning how to provide for ourselves and our families is not only smart,

it's godly. My reminder is that in all of our planning, let's not forget about eternity because we're going to spend an awful lot of time there!

Part of Christian maturity is recognizing that since we're going to live forever, we don't have to get it all right now. Just as we teach our children to delay their gratification so they can save for something they really want, we need to invest our lives in things that last forever. The wisest place to do that, Jesus said, is heaven where our treasures are safe from moth, rust, thieves, and downturns in the economy. This was also John's advice in 1 John 2:15-17, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever."

I don't believe John was suggesting that it's wrong to own and enjoy the things of the world. For "every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from" our Father in Heaven who "gives us richly all things to enjoy." Then what's his point? John is saying: Don't let the thrill of earthly pleasures and possessions distract you from what truly matters. Thomas a Kempis's advice was wise: "Let temporal things serve your use, but let the eternal be the object of your desire."

C.S. Lewis added: "If we consider the staggering rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea, we are far too easily pleased." Let's not make that mistake! The brevity of life and the vastness of eternity should make us wise, leading us to invest our lives in things that truly matter—like the cultivation of our character and leading our friends and family members to love Christ too.

The other thing we'll do if we're wise is learn to be patient. For if the God we serve is eternal, it means we can take the long view of things. Ours is the instant generation. We pop microwave popcorn. We eat instant pudding. We surf the internet where we can immediately access information and entertainment. So it's easy to expect all of life to be that way. "That debt I'm trying to pay off, that habit I'm trying to break, that illness I'm fighting, that relationship I want to restore, that ministry I'm trying to build—if God is in this, it shouldn't take long at all!" But then we read the Bible, and we find that though God wants us to "redeem the time because the days are evil," He Himself is not in a hurry. Instead, so often what He asks us to do is to slow down and wait on Him in prayer. "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care on Him, for He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:6-7 NKJV)

The truth is: Most of the important things in life take time. For example, if you want to grow a squash, all you need is a few months. But if you want to grow a giant oak, it'll take a little longer. In fact, the really tough thing to accept is that some things may never be completely resolved in this life. I was talking to a dear Christian friend who was discouraged due to a chronic back problem she suffers. "Pastor, why is God letting this happen to me? Have I don't something wrong?" she asked. "No," I said. "God isn't punishing you." I know her, and I know she's sensitive enough that if God

wanted to get through to her, all He'd have to do is whisper a few words to her heart and she'd obey Him. Instead I encouraged her to ask God for healing and get all the medical help she can, but if healing doesn't come right way, this may be one of those things God asks us to bravely bear as we live out our lives in a broken world. I then quoted 1 Peter 5:10, "After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

Imagine, for example, that you're talking to the son of a wealthy man who is frustrated because at age 19, he has to wait two more years to inherit his father's fortune. What would you say to him? I'd say, "Be patient, friend, and wait! For in no time at all, you're going to be rich!" That's what God's eternity is saying to us who love Christ. "Be patient and wait because that thing that is bothering you—that pain, those bills, that worry—won't last long. For as a prince or princess of the Most High King, you're about to inherit a kingdom that will never end!"

But then I don't want to be simplistic because I know how great the pain can be and how hard it can be to wait. For that reason I want to close this message by pointing you to the One with all the grace and power He needs to comfort you and strengthen you as you wait. Read the following words very slowly reaching out to Him in wisdom, humility, and repentance, and enjoy His grace and peace.

Slow me down, Lord. Ease the pounding of my heart by the quieting of my mind. Steady my hurried pace with a vision of the eternal reach of time. Give me, amid the confusion of the day, the calmness of the everlasting hills. Break the tension of my nerves and muscles and inspire me to send my roots deep into the soil of life's enduring values that I may grow toward my greater destiny. Remind me each day that the race is not always to the swift; that there is more to life than increasing its speed. Let me look upward to the towering oak and know that it grew great and strong because it grew slowly and well.