

# The Eternity of God

By Bo Bolding

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*"The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." (Deut. 33:27)*

Scripture declares that God is eternal. In theological categories, eternity is treated as an attribute of God's essential nature. Defining and describing this attribute is not an easy task. In fact, any definition will fall short, for the simple reason that we have no way to understand what it means to be uncreated or to have no beginning. This does not mean, however, that any derived understanding will necessarily be inaccurate, only incomplete. But this of course is true with all theology.

In defining eternity as it relates to God's existence, a good starting point is to acknowledge His uncreatedness. That is to say, God is self-existing, with neither beginning nor end. There was no cause that brought forth God's existence, but rather creation owes its existence to God. That something was self-existent is the proof of the cosmological argument. "If anything does now exist, then something must be self-existent because from nothing, nothing comes."

The idea that God has no beginning or end is unexplainable but nevertheless conceivable. But to stop here with our description of eternity would be unsatisfactory. The next step is to ascertain the relationship between eternity and time. Does eternity transcend time? Are eternity and time mutually inclusive or exclusive? These questions form the essence of our inquiry. How one answers here, will effect the way one views other qualities of God's nature, such as immutability, omniscience, and transcendence. In other words, one's concept of eternity becomes a theological watershed to which other theological implications must flow. It is at this juncture that theologians are divided on the concept of eternity. Some have postulated that God is timeless, while others contend that time is essential to His nature.

## **Eternity as Timelessness**

Eternity as timelessness means that God transcends or dwells outside the dimensions of time. Past, present, and future lose their distinctiveness as they merge into one eternally fixed moment. There is no succession or duration for God. These characteristics apply to the created order, but not to the Creator. He enjoys the whole scope of knowledge, experience, events, and relations in one eternal moment. Yesterday is not past. Tomorrow is not future. Both are eternally present. It would seem that this view of eternity is favored because it anchors such doctrines as immutability, omniscience, and transcendence. Time or succession implies change. If God can have an experience now that He did not have a moment ago, it could be said that He has changed in some way, though not necessarily in His essential Being. Timelessness adds permanence and security, two qualities which bring hope in a world of constant change and uncertainty. If God lives above time, He would have a perfect account of all knowledge. Nothing could

be future and contingent for Him because He already inhabits the future. Just as we have a certainty of knowledge at the present, God has a certainty of knowledge of all the future, because the future for God coexists with the present. And if God is a timeless Being it would make Him qualitatively different from man in that He would not be bound by the restraints of time. It would make Him unique and Divinely otherly. This is the doctrine of transcendence.

Many argue, such as Ronald Nash, that the doctrine of Divine timelessness is a Greek concept originating in the philosophy of Plato, maturing in the system of Neoplatonism, and finding passage into Christian thought by way of Augustine, who he considers to be a Christian Platonist. In addition to Augustine, it was later held by Anselm, Aquinas, and the Reformers.

### **Eternity as Endless Time**

Eternity as endless time means that there is no beginning or end to the process of time. Time stretches infinitely into the past and will endure infinitely into the future. The present for God is the same as the present for us. God does things sequentially, whether thinking, acting, or relating. Past, present, and future are clearly distinguishable to God. The past is gone. The future is yet to be. All that exists for now is the present.

This view is favored for its simplicity and dynamism. It is easy to comprehend and it makes sense. Since we have left the past, enjoy the present, and move on to the future, it seems natural to us that God experiences the same. It also presents a God who is active and personal. He is an agent who continually transmits His energy to sustain the universe. He acts in the present world with no philosophical difficulties of how He does it. Temporal location is not a problem for a God who experiences time. Relationship with man is real and intimate. In addition, it would seem that a case for endless time would be more easily ascertained from scripture than would that of timelessness.

Samuel Clarke and Jonathan Edwards both held to the idea that God's eternal existence was everlastingness rather than timelessness.

Upon consulting a number of theology books in the 19th and 20th century, I discovered that neither position on God's eternity was only held by a hand full, rather each position had many advocates. In addition, neither view was strictly a Calvinistic or an Arminian doctrine. Both systems have had advocates of each view.

### **A Theology of Time**

To understand the concept of eternity, it will first be necessary to explore the biblical understanding of time. The nature of time has several different features or characteristics which can best be seen by examining the various time words in use throughout the bible.

#### ***Chronos and Kairos***

"Now as to the times (Chronos) and the seasons (Kairos), brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you." (I Thes. 5:1)

Two key time words are used in this passage, Chronos and Kairos. Chronos normally designates a period or space of time, whereas, kairos functions to characterize the content and quality of the time it indicates. "Kairos, whatever the duration of the chronos involved, highlights the significance of that brief or extended moment." In other words, chronos is a succession of time, whereas, kairos is a designated time. In modern terms, we might say that graduation day is June 15, and three months away. The amount of time being three months corresponds with chronos. The designated date and the occasion of the event corresponds to the kairos.

In using these two words, Paul is stressing the length of time (How long) and the definite period (What date) in which Christ will return.

### *Arche and Telos*

"I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning (arche) and the end (telos)." (Rev. 22:13)

This verse contains two other time words essential to our inquiry, arche and telos. Arche carries the idea of "a beginning," origin, or active cause. Telos is used to describe the limit, final result of a state or process, fulfillment, the aim or purpose of a thing, and the last in a succession or series. In essence, arche depicts the start of an event, to which, telos is the ending point of that event. Chronos, though not mentioned in this verse, would be the duration or succession of time between these two points, beginning and ending. Jesus is saying by these words that He is the One who is responsible for beginning the course of human history, and that He will be the One who will bring it to a close. He uses this terminology to admonish them to be ready (continue to practice righteousness) because He is coming soon to wrap up history and to render to every man according to his deeds. In other words, He is the Creator and Judge.

There are several other time words which have similar characteristics, but these will do for our purposes. In addition, Hebrew has a word that relates in meaning to the Greek word kairos, et. It depicts a fixed point of time. Like kairos, it connotes the proper or appropriate time, or a regular fixed period of time such as springtime (season). There is no equivalent Hebrew word for chronos, but the notion of succession and extension of time are implicit in other Hebrew words for day, year, and hour. Also, the idea of duration is evident in the Hebrew words for eternal and everlasting. We will look at these later.

The Bible is rich with meaning as it relates to time. To summarize, the following words mean:

1. *Arche* - Beginning, origin, active cause.
2. *Chronos* - Quantity of time, duration, amount, or extension of time, or succession of time.
3. *Kairos* - Quality of time, point or fixed designation of time which is marked by chief characteristics.
4. *Telos* - End, result, or fulfillment of time's process. Completion of a sequence or series.

### **The Meaning of Eternity**

Returning to our original question, are time and eternity mutually inclusive or exclusive? Surprisingly, both the Hebrew and Greek words for eternal or everlasting carry the characteristics of time. Aion (Greek) is the word used in the New Testament and the equivalent for Olam (Hebrew) in the LXX. It designates a long indefinite span of time, whether past or future. It can carry the idea of the duration of one's life from birth to death, which implies a definite period of time. It also very frequently refers to "remote time" or endless duration. In either case, a long duration can be a specifically limited time or an unlimited period of time. It can refer to an age or era as used in Jewish apocalyptic and New Testament eschatology. "Paul makes use of apocalyptic concepts in his eschatology. He uses the word aion to designate the course of the world apart from Christ and under the control of sin Christ 'delivered us from this present evil age' Gal. 1:4."

The primary meaning as it relates to our discussion in it's application to God is that of unending time, whether stretching back in the past or forward into the future. The concept of timelessness is foreign to the meaning of the word. It would be great if the search could end here. But the debate does not appear to end with just a word study. Though these words provide very interesting results, one might dismiss the conclusion that God lives in time on the grounds that these words are used to accommodate our own understanding, since we can only think in terms of time. It becomes obvious that this is more than a biblical inquiry, it is primarily a philosophical one.

### **The Problems of the Eternal Now**

The position of the timeless eternity, or what is commonly called the "Eternal Now" is problematic in the following ways:

1. It makes God static rather than dynamic.
2. It strips Him of personality and creativity.
3. It makes creation eternal like God, without beginning or end.

### **Static vs. Dynamic God**

A timeless God is a changeless, motionless God. Timelessness makes void any movement in the experience of God because it takes away the dimension of succession.

This means God loses some dimensionality. A cube is greater than a plane because it has one extra dimension. And a line is less than a plane because it has one less dimension. In the same way, to deny God the dimension of succession is to reduce Him to one non-flowing, fixed point. If such existence were possible, nothing would be new to Him. All of what we call the future would be as real for God as the present. This is because He would inhabit all the future. The future does not move towards Him and He does not move towards the future. The future is no different than the present for Him. Likewise, the past is not behind Him. He did not travel its history-making course. To God, the future is not yet to be, nor has the past already been. The past, present, and future dissolve into one coexisting present. All knowledge, experience, and relations are held in a simultaneous fixation. Admittedly, advocates of the eternal now would not stress the static nature of timelessness, but this seems to be an inescapable conclusion.

### *Can the Creator Create?*

If there is no succession in eternity, then God could not be a Creator. Without sequence, no event would precede or follow another. Therefore, God's thought and act of creating the world would have been simultaneous. Genesis records six days of creation. To us this reveals sequence. The first day came first followed by the second day. The sixth day came last, preceded by the first five days. But all of this is meaningless to God. For He created not the first day, then the second, followed by the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth day. Rather, they were all created simultaneously. Even still, nothing preceded the beginning of this world. To acknowledge a time in which the world did not exist is to borrow from the concept of time. In other words, to presuppose a beginning for something is to recognize a time when that thing did not exist, thus revealing succession.

We are told that God does not do anything in succession. All events stand equal in God's eternal presence, nothing preceding and nothing following. It is often said that God created time when He created the world. But one can and should ask, when was there a moment before creation. If there was none, then there was no real act of creation.

Lets look at this from another angle. Can God create a new thought that He never thought of before? If not, He never could. If He never could, He never was a Creator.

To create something implies a beginning (arche). Beginnings imply succession. For God to be a Creator, time must be real for Him. On the other hand, a timeless Being would be locked into a state of what is, not what can be.

### **The Eternal Creation**

If there was a time in God's conscious experience (life) that we did not exist and then did exist via a Divine creative act, then time (succession) is real. If there is no distinction between our pre-and post-existence for God, then time does not exist. Nothing is ever created. Nothing ever moves; not thought, not feeling, not choice. Time and activity are illusions and life is motionless.

A frequent error made by advocates of timelessness was to use time words to describe timelessness. But to do so is to attribute the characteristics of time to non-time, which of course is contradictory. For example, it is often said that God existed before there was a universe, and before there was time. Before is a time word. How can there be a before for a timeless Being? There cannot be a before for God since He is timeless, and by necessity there cannot be a before for creation, since this requires an act of God not previously performed.

Creation implies present existence and prior non-existence. If there is not a time in God's life when He did not experience mankind, then mankind is eternal. Our consciousness of the present would be deceiving. Time would be an illusion. For in reality, our entire existence is as real in the past and future as it is in the present. We are only conscious of the present, but God experiences our past as vividly as He experiences our future. The fact that God experiences every increment of our future life forces us to have a real existence already present in each stage of the future. This is certainly strange and bazaar, but nevertheless follows the assumptions of timelessness. In essence, man could be nothing more than an extension of God, a pantheistic notion.

### **Examination of Biblical Texts**

Advocates of the timeless eternity position appeal to certain texts to try and prove their case. We will examine a few of the most commonly used passages.

II Peter 3:8 "But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

This verse is thought by some to teach timelessness because a thousand years is just like one day to God. How could a thousand years seem like one day? It must be the case that duration and succession are removed so that the dragging of time is not felt. In addition, some might argue that the reason a day seems like a thousand years is because in the eternal there is no difference between a thousand years and one day. They all coexist into a single present existence. But is this a necessary or valid interpretation of the text?

This verse is intended to be an argument against mockers who in verse 3 & 4 will come (and probably are already present) saying, "Where is the promise of His coming," and also as a source of hope for Christians who look forward to His return. Peter offers reason for the delay of the Parousia, yet maintains an expectation for its coming. Bauckham says, "It was characteristic of the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic to hold in tension the imminent expectation and an acknowledgement of eschatological delay."

Peter continues in verse 9, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." His use of "a thousand years as one day" is meant to stress the patience of the Lord. Man's expectations are short and limited to his own lifespan, but God has endured all of human history. In light of this, a thousand years is short from His

perspective. He is not influenced by the passing of time, rather His patience is beautifully extended in order that more may come to repentance.

Though not a quote, this verse borrows the figure of "a thousand years as one day" from Psalms 90:4. "For a thousand years in Thy sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night." The same idea is present here concerning God's perspective of time. In the context, he contrasts the everlastingness of God with the age of the earth and the length of man's life. A thousand years is nothing in view of eternity (unending time). The inclusion of "when it passes by" recognizes the process of time or succession. Rather than teaching timelessness, these passages very strongly support endless time.

#### Revelation 10:6

"And swore by Him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer:" (KJV).

The Greek word for time in this verse is *chronos*. The argument follows that time was created for man while in this physical realm, but that it is going to come to an end as now foretold in Revelation. If *chronos* means succession or duration, and if it is going to come to an end, then there will be no more succession or duration. Time is just for this earthly plane, but not for the world to come.

Mounce says, "Most early writers interpret this statement as a metaphysical assertion about the end of time as a sequence of events. The translation of AV reflects this interpretation. This is not the meaning of time here." Following the sixth trumpet, John sees a mighty angel standing over the land and sea. Holding a small book in his hand, the angel makes a powerful oath by the Creator of heaven and earth. "The substance of this oath is the prophecy that there will be no further delay (*chronos*) but that when the seventh trumpet sounds the mystery of God predicted by the prophets will be fulfilled." Delay is the better rendering of *chronos* in this text, because as Mounce further states, "It would hardly be necessary for an angel to put himself under oath just to make an assertion about the timeless nature of eternity."

#### Revelation 1:8

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Some argue that this verse demonstrates that God inhabits all of time. In other words, He encompasses all the past, present, and future. But this is not tenable. The simple and clear meaning of this verse is readily taken at face value. The Lord was before all things, continues presently with the movement of history, and will endure to the end.

### **Eternity as Endless Time**

As already seen, a timeless eternity is unsupported by scripture and is problematic philosophically. In contrast, God is depicted as One to whom time is real and essential. All of the time words are used to describe His actions in the same way as used for man. And the words for eternity have proven to be not of a timeless nature, but one of endless time. All of this is not to suggest that there are not some problems philosophically with the concept of unending time. The primary problem is how to conceive of a Being who had no beginning and yet for whom time is real.

### **Time: Intrinsic or Extrinsic to the Nature of God?**

It is important to make a distinction here between God's existence and His creativity; between His Being (substance) and His Personality. God's uncreated existence cannot be durative, because time can only be predicated where there is a beginning. This does not suggest a timeless God and eternity. Rather, His existence cannot be measured by time because there is no beginning point to which a sequence can be fixed, only an infinity of existence extending into the past. But God as a Person can create new existences which have a beginning, a real time origination point. Duration can be measured from the beginning of Divine acts to their completion. One might ask how God's essential nature could be timeless (only in the unmeasured sense) and yet active in time. Obviously, this is why many opt for the eternal now concept. However, timelessness as used here is not in the sense of past, present, and future coalescing into one ever-existing present. Rather, timelessness implies the inability to obtain a beginning point for God's existence so that He remains measureless. This is conceivable for one who views God as creating time with every act. Time and timelessness in this sense are not incompatible, instead, they are eternal principles relating to God.

Time is a function of personality. It is the center of our thoughts, feelings, and volitions. Every thought, emotion, or choice elicits a new sequence. One thought follows another. One act succeeds another. Thoughts and actions move in successive order, one right after another. Therefore, time is intrinsic to personality. Often, time is defined as a structure that exists externally or outside of God. If time were extrinsic to God, we must object to His being a subject of it. However, any attribute that is intrinsic to the nature of God must not be viewed as a limitation. Because anything that is binding on God internally from His Being is simply by definition who He is and what He is like. For example, God cannot lie. Intrinsic to His nature is this character quality. This is a limit only in the sense that it is derived from within. It is not a limit in the sense of being controlled or deprived from without. Hence, time is an empowering attribute that serves God's love for creating new things.

### **The Compression and Expansion of Time**

Man has a feeling of being encumbered by time. We have 15 minutes to get to work. One hour to get a job done. We feel like there is never enough time to complete whatever task is before us. We can only do so much in a given allotted time. As we get older we discover the decay and weakness of our bodies. Certainly we don't want to ascribe these experiences to God. But is time the culprit? Time for God is not just different

quantitatively, but qualitatively as well. The environment in which we live inhibits our productivity in time. We live in a physical universe, according to which we are subject to all kinds of physical laws. For example, gravity and the degree of strength in our muscles limits what and how quickly we can do things.

These physical limitations on finite man hinder our abilities in time. It is being bound physically, not bound by time that restricts man. However, this is not an inhibiting factor on God since He is infinite and not restricted by physical limitations. He can perform an infinite number of works (acts) in a moment of time. In other words, He can compress time by increasing the frequency of successions in a given moment, or expand time by spreading out His activities over a longer duration (like the 400 silent years). Time simply describes the processes of His thoughts and actions, not the speed at which He does them.

### **Endless Time and Immutability**

Some are concerned that if God is entrusted with time that He might change in some way. It is assumed that all change will only prove an inferior and finite God, because all change is either for the better or for the worse. Since God is necessarily the greatest possible Being, He cannot change for the better. And to change for the worse would make God not the greatest possible Being. Morris asks, "But why think that all possible changes are changes in value? Can't there be value-neutral changes? As I write this sentence I change from forming one letter to forming the next, but I see no reason to think that such changes necessitate an increase or a decrease in my intrinsic value or metaphysical stature at all." Likewise, God can change from one activity to another without any value change in Him. Psalms 102:25-27 is a proof text for the immutability of God. God's handiwork will perish, but God will endure. They will wear out and change, but God will remain the same. But this passage also includes the element of time. It is said of God that His years will never come to an end, all the while He remains the same.

This passage teaches that God founded the earth and the heavens in the past, though they will disintegrate in the future, God will endure. This supports endlessness, not timelessness. Thus, endless time does not disturb the doctrine of immutability.

### **Conclusion**

We have given a brief overview of the two prevailing views of eternity, timelessness and endless time. The position of timelessness does not appear tenable because of its striking absence in scripture. It would seem that the "eternal now" is a philosophical construct designed to resolve certain theological tensions. But in its noble attempts, it has created more problems than it has resolved. In addition, it has violated the clear witness of scripture, where both God and man are depicted as active in time. At no point in scripture are we told that God created time, that He dwells in a timeless eternity, or that we should treat His time structured events as accommodations for feeble minded man. We are sometimes told that God only described His activities with time orientation because we

couldn't understand Him in any other way. If this be true, then we have no reason to speculate on what it could be. If we can't understand by direct revelation from God, then we certainly won't be able to understand it by reason and philosophy. We should be content to accept it the way God has described it, because this is the way He would want us to think about it.

This paper is certainly not exhaustive on the subject, but it has addressed the main issues and examined the most debated texts. I have taken the position on endless time primarily because of its presence in scripture. This is my standard no matter how difficult it is to reconcile with philosophy or theological formulas. It seems to me, that if timeless eternity is true, the burden of proof lies not with the view of unending time, but with the view of timelessness.