



CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction: The Attributes of God	13
1. The Eternal God	17
2. The Omnipotent God	31
3. The Unchanging God	47
4. The Independent God	59
5. The Incomprehensible God	75
6. The All-Knowing, All-Wise God	91
7. The Omnipresent God	107
8. The Glorious God	123
Conclusion: Knowing God through His Attributes	139
Notes	143



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THE ETERNAL GOD

I remember the sense, as a child, that the long summer holidays were never-ending. I have rather misty memories of sun-soaked days that ran one into the other. Once the thrill of liberation from school wore off a little, the prospect of many long days stretched ahead, perhaps with not enough activity to fill them, and a sense that they would never fully run their course. Inevitably, boredom set in at some point. Now, as an adult looking back on those long summer days, they seem to have come and gone in an instant—and I could wish to have even a few of them back.

Having the right perspective on time is important, both in ease and in trial. In both seasons, it is important to see that time is finite. We need to treasure the joys and endure the trials with patience. As adults, we look back on our childish perspective and wish we knew back then what we know now, but no amount of life experience will give us a fully mature perspective on time. Ultimately, to think rightly about time and to have the right perspective on the seasons of life we actually need the perspective of

eternity. If we do not understand eternity—which is an attribute of God Himself—we will become over-immersed in our finite joys and over-burdened by our time-bound trials.

Psalm 90 opens with a resounding affirmation that the God of Israel is the eternal God. The God whom His people have known for generations is the God who has always been, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (v. 2). God’s eternal being stands before and above the creation itself, and for Moses (who wrote the psalm), it is the eternity of God that gives the proper perspective on the brevity of life and on the suffering it brings. Having remembered the eternity of God, Moses turns to the brevity of the life of humanity, “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble” (v. 10). Moses then prays for the right perspective on time. A perspective, he says, that brings wisdom: “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (v. 12).

Moses was one who understood that the perspective of God’s eternity makes sense of time and strengthens the people of God for trial and endurance. He had seen the people of God endure centuries of slavery in Egypt. He witnessed the long wait for their liberation as Pharaoh dragged his heels. And he experienced the decades of testing in the wilderness as they anticipated their entry into the promised land. Through all this, Moses’s confidence was grounded in the eternity of God. He sought actively to instill that confidence in the people of Israel: “The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deut. 33:27). They, however, failed to learn the lesson. And the story of the wilderness wanderings is that of a people who did not endure trials in faith, at least in part because they did not grasp the eternity of God. Their trials were temporary, but God’s people were in the hands of the God who always was and always will be—and

so they could trust Him to carry them through and bring them to eternal dwellings.

The truth that Moses sought to teach the people is the consistent testimony of Scripture, “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever” (1 Tim. 1:17); “I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8). God is eternal, the Scriptures teach us. But what does that really mean?

OUTSIDE OF TIME

At its core, God’s eternity means that He is unbound and unlimited in relation to time. You and I are time-bound creatures, always living between an unchangeable past and an unknowable future. We are unlikely to often think about it, but it is essential to who we are. That is not so for God. Time is part of His creation, and as Maker of all things, He cannot be bound by time.¹

Consider how the book of Genesis opens: “In the beginning God created . . .” It makes sense to assume that “the beginning” to which the writer refers is the beginning of time. It is, as it were, when the stopwatch starts rolling, and for that watch to move there needed to be the conditions that God established on the first day:

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Gen. 1:3–5)

It takes days and nights, light and darkness, and the rotation of the earth for time to be counted. Time, as we understand it, only began with the creation events recorded here. And so, if time itself is part of God’s creation, then His own existence as Creator must

stand above and before the creation. His own eternal existence must be timeless itself.

The idea of time is actually something we struggle to grasp. By that I do not mean that some people are bad at timekeeping or poor at punctuality, but rather that all of us struggle to understand the notion of time and to articulate what it means. But as time-bound creatures, we struggle *all the more* with the notion of eternity. We cannot really imagine any kind of experience or reality that is not defined by time. The very concept almost overwhelms our rational capacity. Yet that is exactly who God is: He is eternal.

This is why God's eternity is central to our understanding of Him and why it is at the heart of His revelation of Himself. When Moses asked God how he should refer to Him before Pharaoh, the Lord said to him, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14). God is the Great I AM. There is nothing to add, nothing to take away. He is the absolute existence—no development, no change, no growth, no reduction. There is nothing relative about God. He is in no sense constrained. He simply *is*. Therefore, when God came to earth and entered human history through the incarnation, Jesus the Son of God declared this same identity for Himself. John recorded it clearly in his gospel, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Abraham had a beginning, but before him, says Jesus, "I am." Absolute existence unbound by time.

Part of the reality of being time-bound creatures is that we experience everything in a progression. We move from one moment to another, encountering new things and new experiences all the time, and changing all the while as we pass through time. But it is not like that for the unchanging, eternal God. He, at once, holds time in its totality and sees history as a whole. God stands above time as the eternal One and as its Creator, but it is also true that He interacts with us *in* time. He is present and involved in the world, engaging with us as time-bound creatures. More than that, in the person of His Son, He

has entered into human history. God speaks in history; reveals Himself in history; makes promises, gives warnings, responds to the sin and repentance of His people. He is patient in the unfolding of His will.

All that is true, but at the very same time, He remains the eternal One. The distinction between time and eternity is not something we can pin down very well, but various people have tried at least to illustrate it in some way. So, for instance, consider the difference between a river, through which water travels, and a lake, where it is held.² We experience our own existence in time as a river. Time flows, and we only see or touch part of it at any given moment. For us, time is never static. As Isaac Watts's great hymn puts it, "Time, like an ever-rolling stream, / bears all its sons away; / they fly, forgotten, as a dream / dies at the op'ning day."³ In this sense, for us, time is a river.

For God, however, the whole of history is more like a lake or an ocean. He can see and comprehend the whole in a way that we never could in our finite existence. It is all there, gathered at once before His eternal gaze. When the Scriptures declare that He is the "Alpha and the Omega . . . the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:13; see also Isa. 46:9–10), it is not simply that God was there at the beginning and will be there at the end. No; His eternity encompasses it all. He *is* the beginning and He *is* the end, even now.

Unlike us, God does not look back wistfully on the past. Neither is He consumed by the present or troubled by waiting for the future. He sees all of time as a vivid whole before His eyes: creation, the fall, the flood, the call of Abram, the monarchy, the exile, the incarnation, the early church, the medieval period, the Reformation, the World Wars, the technological progress of the twenty-first century, and much more besides. None of history is lost or filed away in the distant past. As the psalmist says, "A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night" (Ps. 90:4).

GIVING PERSPECTIVE TO THOSE OF US IN TIME

I do not pretend to be able to understand or fully conceptualize all of that—we all have huge limitations in our understanding of these things. Nonetheless, from what the Scriptures tell us, these things must be true of the God who made time, who is eternal, who never changes, and who knows the end from the beginning. If all this is true, what does it mean for His people? *What are the implications for us?*⁴ There are, of course, many, but let me suggest four key implications. The first is that the eternity of God gives us *perspective*.

Notice again the outlook that the psalmist has on human life in light of God's eternity:

You return man to dust
and say, "Return, O children of man!"
For a thousand years in your sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning:
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers. . . .

The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away. . . .

So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom. (Ps. 90:3–6, 10, 12)

His point is clear. We need the perspective of eternity if we are to live wisely in this world. The legendary businessman Warren

Buffett is one of the most successful investors in history. Buffett is quite an interesting character study on a number of levels, but if you know anything about him, you will know that at the very core of his genius is his long-term outlook. When asked his ideal time frame for holding an investment, his answer was simply, “Forever.” Of course, companies and stocks will not last forever, and we know that full well. However, Buffett is able to make strategic investments that pay off handsomely because while the rest of the crowd is looking at what is happening today on Wall Street, Buffett is thinking about the prospects for a given company over the coming decades. His time frame is radically different from the average investor; that has been the key to his success. If we are consumed by the things that are immediately before us—the events going on around us today and the pleasures of the present time—if that is where our attention lies, we will make bad choices, unwise investments, and foolish mistakes. But as we consider our lives in light of the One who is eternal, we gain a heart of wisdom. That is what the psalmist saw.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul gave a very intriguing exhortation. The immediate context is actually a discussion of marriage, but Paul wanted his readers to see that our perspective on everything in this world is shaped by the fact that this world is not eternal:

This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:29–31)

We are all naturally focused on the short term in our outlook, easily dazzled and consumed by the things immediately before us. But as we look upon the eternal God and hear His promises of a life to come, of heaven above, of a new creation in which we will live with Him, our eyes are lifted to see the bigger picture. His promises teach us to say no to the pleasures of sin, which are so fleeting, and no to the idols of this world, which will fade away. More than that, these realities also teach us to value knowing, loving, and serving the eternal God.

We all veer toward finding pleasure and fulfillment in the measly things immediately before us because we fail to lift our eyes to the bigger realities—the greater joys—that the Lord sets before us. The eternal God has spoken to us in His Word. He has entered our world in the person of His Son. He has invited us to receive eternal life and to join in His kingdom, which will have no end. By all this, in His grace He teaches us to number our days aright and He gives to us a heart of wisdom. The eternity of God gives us perspective.

SOVEREIGN OVER TIME

The second implication is that the eternity of God gives us *confidence* in God and His Word. For many of us, one of the most high-trust relationships in our lives is the relationship we have with our dentist. We need to trust and believe that the person who is allowed to wield needles and drills within our open mouth is competent, knowledgeable, and trustworthy. When my family moved to a new community some years ago, one priority for us was to find a good dentist. It just happened that the dentist closest to our house was someone with whom we had a family connection going back many years. He was well respected in the community and everyone was jostling to get on his list. He invited us in and we had our checkups. We were quickly persuaded he was

the best dentist we had ever encountered. However, we had only been there a little more than a year when he told us that he was planning to retire. For the time he was our dentist we had a high-trust relationship, but it was a transient one.

Believers have no greater relationship of trust than our relationship with the Lord Himself. We take Him at His word, we stake our future on His promises, we entrust our very selves to Him for this life and the life to come. At the core of our willingness to do that is the belief that the One whom we trust can never cease to be. The One whom we trust has power over the future, so that His promises and His plans can never be frustrated.

All this is true, yet it is important to see that our confidence is not simply that God is *everlasting*, so that He will be around as long as time endures. No, our confidence goes further: it is that our God is the eternal God, the God who exists beyond time and holds time in His hand. You see, God's eternal nature teaches us that His plans are in no way subject to change or variation. He is the God who simply is. So, for instance, when He promises to save us at a final day, He sees that day already. That final day is, in some sense, present to Him now, and so His saving work is as good as complete.

Or, to look at it from another angle, when God accepts you into His family—when He sets His love upon you—His eternal nature means that His acceptance is in no way dependent upon your future performance. It is not as though He might change His mind if, down the road, you fail Him. No, when He saves you, He sees your life as a whole. He knows what you will do and what you will become. And despite all the future failings and sin that He knows are yet to come, He sets His love upon you. The present and future work of God are part of the coherent activity and reality of the eternal God who simply is. Later, in chapter 3, I will give more detail to the idea of God's unchanging nature

(His immutability), which is closely linked to this theme of God's eternal nature. But the glorious truth to meditate on for now is, as Hebrews says, that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

I recently came across a news article with the reassuring heading, "Why the Canada Pension Plan Will Still Be Solvent When You Retire." In a world of depressing news stories, it was a very nice headline to read and, no doubt, many of the article's readers will take comfort in it. We can all have those niggling doubts that our future financial plans will fail us. Plenty of company pension pots have been raided; plenty of retirement plans have run out of money; and the truth is that anything can happen. But when we trust ourselves to the eternal God who does not change—who is the same God now who holds the end of time in His hand—we know that the future is secure and we can stake everything on His promises. Scripture proclaims the supremely comforting truth that "The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27). Here is our security for time and for eternity; here is our refuge in the storms of life, our sure and steadfast hope: we know One who is eternal and whose arms beneath us are everlasting. The eternity of God gives us confidence.

SOVEREIGN OVER ETERNITY

The third implication is that the eternity of God gives us a *warning*. Psalm 90 asks, "Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?" (v. 11). As the psalmist reflected on the sheer immensity of the eternal God, he naturally exclaimed that God is capable of wrath appropriate to His majesty. Of course, when we examine the Bible honestly, we see that this is true. We see that the eternal God is capable of wrath that does not end.

If I were to take a poll to find the most unpopular Christian doctrine of all, I think there would be very little competition: the doctrine of the everlasting punishment of the wicked is surely the least popular and the most despised teaching in the Bible. When we do wrong and cause hurt and offense in human relationships, we hope that the storm will pass, the injury fade, and the wrongdoing be forgotten. Similarly, when it comes to sin before God, we might hope that the passing of time will make our wrongdoing smaller in His sight. But the eternal God sees all of history before Him. Psalm 90 reminds us that the eternal God sees all our sin before His eyes, “For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence” (vv. 7–8).

The Puritan Thomas Watson wrote that the eternity of God is “thunder and lightning to the wicked,” and that “God lives for ever; and as long as God lives he will be punishing the damned.”⁵ The Bible makes it abundantly clear that this is true. No one is more frank about the matter than Jesus Himself. In the parable of the sheep and the goats he says, “Then he [the King] will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matt. 25:41). And again, “If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’” (Mark 9:47–48). The God who judges sin lives forever and His enemies will never reach the day where they can escape His judgments.

This is a sobering, even frightening, thought. At the same time, it is a truth that we need to reckon with in a serious way. Perhaps you are someone who would call yourself a Christian, but you know that you are denying the Lord by your lifestyle and rejecting Him by embracing sin. You might be living in active defiance against Him. If so, let me urge you and plead with you to consider

what it really means to turn away from the eternal God and to face His unending wrath. Again, Thomas Watson drove home the force of this truth:

Thoughts of eternal torments are a good antidote against sin. Sin tempts us with pleasure; but, when we think of eternity, it may cool the intemperate heat of lust. Shall I, for the pleasure of sin for a season, endure eternal pain? . . . Is sin committed so sweet as lying in hell for ever is bitter? This thought would make us flee from sin.⁶

One of my pastor friends sometimes shares the story of going to see a member of his congregation who was pursuing an adulterous relationship. He was set on leaving his wife for another woman. My friend pleaded with him not to do it, but the man gave him the most harrowing reply, “I would prefer to go to hell than give up this relationship.” The man knew enough of God’s Word to know the nature of the choice he was making. He was rejecting the Word of God—he was willfully defying the eternal Judge—and he was embracing a punishment that would not end.

Reader, if you are living in rebellion against God and holding on to some sin that you know defies Him, if you are not submitting your life to Him, let me plead with you to simply consider the reality of God’s eternity. What could be more important? What could be more urgent? And if you have not yet turned to Christ for forgiveness, let me plead with you as well: take seriously the warnings of the Bible and do not risk the judgment of the eternal God.

THE HOPE FOUND IN THE ETERNITY OF GOD

If the eternity of God gives us perspective, confidence, and a warning, then it also, finally and briefly, gives us *hope*. C. S. Lewis

writes of the “surprise” of the passing of time, “Notice how we are perpetually *surprised* at Time. (‘How time flies! Fancy John being grown-up and married? I can hardly believe it!’) In heaven’s name, why? Unless, indeed, there is something in us which is *not* temporal.”⁷

Most of us have experienced surprise at the passing of time. Something within us even mourns it. It means getting older, it means change, and it often means loss. The Scriptures tell us why we feel this way. We find the passing of time hard because “he has put eternity into man’s heart” (Eccl. 3:11). We feel we were not made to die and we long for eternity. We long for life that lasts and for a reality that will endure beyond this passing world and its variation, loss, and decay. We all know that longing. And the answer to it is not found in the sports car or plastic surgery of the midlife crisis. It is not found in success or wealth or fame. It is not found anywhere in this world. It is found only in the eternal God who holds time in His hand. You and I had a beginning and we are bound by time. But here is what we can do in the face of our temporality: we can know and relate to the eternal God who has the power to give us life that will not end. Jesus tells us that eternal life is tied to knowing the eternal God. “And this is eternal life,” he says, “that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

The eternal God came into the world in the person of His Son, who gave His life to pay the debt of our sin that we might be set free from the judgment of sin and the terror of hell and be released for an endless future of joy with Him. The promises of God are great; the warnings of God are terrible. But for us who know Him, He is our dwelling place, our refuge, and our eternal hope.

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