

§ 3. Doctrine of God

4. Eternity

We've been talking about God's infinite attributes. We completed last week our study of divine aseity. Today we want to turn to a new attribute of God, namely, God's eternity.

a. Analysis

(1) Scriptural Data

We want to look first at some scriptural data concerning God's eternity.

First of all, the Scriptures teach that God exists without beginning and end. Psalm 90:1-4:

LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst
formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to
everlasting thou art God.

God exists beginninglessly and endlessly.

Second, the Scriptures indicate that God's eternity contrasts with the transitoriness of man. Psalm 102:11-12 and 25-27:

My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like
grass. But thou, O LORD, art enthroned for ever; thy name
endures to all generations. . . . Of old thou didst lay the
foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy
hands. They will perish, but thou dost endure; they will all
wear out like a garment. Thou changest them like raiment,
and they pass away; but thou art the same, and thy years have
no end.

Here you have a beautiful comparison between the eternity of God, beginningless and endless, and the creation that God has made which is transitory.

Psalm 90:5-6: “Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.”

Here human life is compared to a dream which is evanescent in its existence. It vanishes the moment that you awake. Or the grass that in the morning is fresh and flourishing but then is burned and scorched by the evening. Similarly, our existence is so transitory in comparison with God’s eternal existence.

We might compare here as well Job 36:26 which says, “Behold, God is great, and we know him not; the number of his years is unsearchable.” Compare that with Isaiah 41:4: “Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he.” Here God is the eternal one who was there at the beginning and there at the end of human history. He is the one who endures forever whereas human existence is fleeting and transitory.

Finally, in a difficult to express way, the Scriptures seem to teach that God existed before time began. Although there are a number of passages like this, let’s look at just one of them. Jude 25. Here the author says, “To the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” What an interesting expression on the author’s part. He gives glory to God before all time (before time began), now (presently), and forever into the future. This

suggests that time itself had a beginning and God in some difficult-to-express way existed “before time began.”

(2) Systematic Summary

(a) The Bible does not distinguish God’s being timeless or everlasting.

Let’s talk about a systematic reflection upon this biblical data. The Bible teaches that God is eternal, as we have seen, but it does not make it clear as to how God is eternal. What do I mean by that? There are two ways in which something can exist without a beginning and without an end. One would be to exist throughout infinite time. If we imagine time like a line which has no end but goes on forever and which has no beginning, then something could be beginningless and endless by existing throughout all time, without beginning and without end. That would be one way of being eternal – to be beginningless and endless throughout infinite time.

The other way would be to exist outside of time altogether. If we say that God isn’t on the time line anywhere, then he doesn’t have any temporal location and doesn’t have any temporal duration. He would be beginningless and endless simply because the concepts of beginning and ending wouldn’t apply to a being who isn’t in time. A being who transcends time and so isn’t on the time line would have neither beginning nor end because he doesn’t endure through time.

As I say, the biblical data leave it an open question as to whether God is eternal in the sense of being omnitemporal throughout

infinite time or simply being timeless or atemporal. So this isn't a question that can be decided biblically; rather, this is a philosophico-theological question. This is where the biblical exegete can take you only so far, then he has to hand the task over to the philosophical theologian if we are to go any further.

The core idea of eternity that both of these concepts encapsulate would be to exist eternally is to exist without beginning or end, or to exist permanently. That is the core idea of eternity. But then there are at least two modes of existence that could fit that definition: either an omnitemporal mode throughout infinite time, or else an atemporal mode of existence. The Bible doesn't settle that question.

Let me wrap up by saying that the question of God's relationship to time is an extremely difficult one that has puzzled theologians for centuries. What I'll do next time is offer what I conceive to be the best argument for God's being timeless, and then I will offer what I think are the best arguments for God being temporal. Then we will explore how these ought to be assessed and what is the best understanding for God's relationship to time. That will be the next time in which I'll meet with you.