

2. God's Relationship To Time

We've been talking about God's eternity. By way of review, we saw that God's eternity is affirmed in Scripture as God's being beginningless and endless. He exists permanently. But the Scriptural data are underdeterminative with regard to how God relates to time. Is God trans-temporal? Is he outside of time? Is God an atemporal being who doesn't exist in time at all? Or is God rather an everlasting being who exists omnitemporally – at every time? The Scripture doesn't make that clear. Therefore this issue is one that must be resolved, if possible, by philosophical theology. We need to look at arguments for and against divine timelessness and temporality.

I have written a number of books on this subject having studied it for about 11 years. One of these is called *Time and Eternity*. If you are interested in following up on this subject I'd recommend this book to you published by Crossway Books. In it I survey what I consider to be the most important arguments for God's being timeless as well as the most important arguments for God's being omnitemporal.

(b) Argument for God's timelessness: Incompleteness of temporal life.

Of all of the various arguments that have been offered for God's being timeless I think that the best argument is probably the argument from the incompleteness of temporal life. Temporal existence is terribly incomplete in that you do not yet have your future – it is merely potential. And you no longer have the past. It is over and done with. All you have is the present. That is a brief

fleeting instant that passes away as soon as it comes. So temporal existence is a fleeting sort of existence where you do not have the fullness of your entire life at once, but you just have a brief momentary slice of that life, one slice after another. The argument here is that this kind of incomplete existence is incompatible with the existence of a most perfect being, which is what God is. A most perfect being should have his life all at once so to speak. He should never lose his past or have a future that is yet to be gained. He should have his life all at once.

The fleeting nature of temporal life was brought home to me very powerfully and unexpectedly years ago as I read to our children, Charity and John, Laura Ingalls Wilder's book, *Little House In The Big Woods*. I want to read to you the final paragraphs of that book. She writes,

The long winter evenings of firelight and music had come again. . . . Pa's strong, sweet voice was softly singing:

‘Shall auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Shall auld acquaintance be forgot,
And the days of auld lang syne?
And the days of auld lang syne, my friend,
And the days of auld lang syne,
Shall auld acquaintance be forgot,
And the days of auld lang syne?’

When the fiddle had stopped singing, Laura called out softly, ‘What are days of auld lang syne, Pa?’

‘They are the days of a long time ago, Laura,’ Pa said. ‘Go to sleep, now.’

But Laura lay awake a little while, listening to Pa's fiddle softly playing and to the lonely sound of the wind in the Big Woods. She looked at Pa sitting on the bench by the hearth, the firelight gleaming on his brown hair and beard and glistening on the honey-brown fiddle. She looked at Ma, gently rocking and knitting.

She thought to herself, 'This is now.'

She was glad that the cosy house, and Pa and Ma and the firelight and the music, were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago.¹

That passage didn't hit my children with the same force that it hit me, engaged as I was in the study of time and eternity. But when I read that I was just bowled over. What makes the passage so poignant is that that moment that was so real for Laura Ingalls, that was now and could never be forgotten, is now gone! Pa and Ma are gone. The American frontier that they struggled to win is gone. Those happy golden days as she called them are gone forever never to be reclaimed. Time has a savage way of gnawing away at life making it terribly incomplete and evanescent. This sort of life, the argument says, is incompatible with the existence of a most perfect being which ought to have the fullness of life all at once and therefore to transcend time altogether.

I think that this is a powerful argument. In God's case, however, I think that the incompleteness of temporal life is diminished somewhat by his omniscience. For an eternal omniscient being, he

¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods* (New York: Harper & Row, 1932), pp. 237-238.

knows the future with all the detail that he knows the present and past. He knows everything. Moreover, he recalls the past in perfect detail so that he could mentally relive it as though it were present to him. For an omniscient being, the passage of time is not so melancholy an affair, I think, as it is for finite transient beings. Therefore, the incompleteness of temporal life in the case of God I think is not quite so melancholy and deficient a mode of existence as it might be for finite temporal beings.

Nevertheless, I think we have to admit that this argument does have some force and could motivate a doctrine of divine timelessness, unless there are arguments for divine temporality that are even more powerful and outweigh it.

(c) Argument for God's being everlasting: His changing relations with the world.

So when we turn to arguments for God's being in time, it seems to me that there are two especially powerful arguments for thinking that God is temporal and does not transcend time. The first would be based on God's changing relations with the world. God changes in his relationships with things in the temporal world.

Here it is important to distinguish between what we might call intrinsic change and extrinsic change. Something changes intrinsically if it changes in one of its non-relational properties – a property that it has in and of itself. For example, an apple might change from being green to being red. That would be an intrinsic change in the apple. An extrinsic change, by contrast, would be a relational change. Something might not change intrinsically but it would change in its relations to other things about it. For example, I was once taller than my son, John, but now I am shorter than

John. Is that because of an intrinsic change in me? No! I'm the same height I've always been, but I have become shorter than John as he has changed intrinsically and grown taller. I once stood in the relation "taller than" to my son, but now I stand in the relation "shorter than" to my son. So I have undergone not an intrinsic but an extrinsic change in my relationship to him.

In creating a temporal world, God would seem to undergo, if not intrinsic change, at least extrinsic change because in creating a temporal world God now stands in new relations like "causing the universe." God is now causally related to the universe, and he wasn't causally related to the universe existing without it.

Similarly he now has the relationship minimally of co-existing with the universe – a property that he did not stand in prior to creation. Indeed, there was no moment prior to creation. So God would undergo, it would seem, these sort of extrinsic relational changes insofar as he is related to a temporal universe. That would be sufficient for being in time.

To see the point, imagine a rock existing isolated in outer space. Let's suppose this rock is absolutely changeless. It is frozen at absolute zero. I know that is physically impossible, but this is just a thought experiment. Let's imagine this hypothetical rock that is absolutely changeless and isolated in outer space. Then imagine that a meteor whizzes by and another meteor whizzes by. Clearly the rock would not be timeless even though it is intrinsically changeless. Why? Because it changes in its relation to other changing things about it. First there was the one meteor going by, then later another meteor went by. The rock, though changeless intrinsically, would clearly be in time because it is related to

changing things. Since God is really related to a changing temporal world, God would undergo extrinsic change and therefore he would be in time. This seems to me to be a very powerful argument for God's being temporal.

Let me just add this. This relational change in God becomes especially difficult for divine timelessness when you think of the doctrine of the incarnation because in the incarnation the second person of the Trinity takes on a human nature. He now is related to this human nature in a way in which he was not before. There clearly seems to be a time at which the second person of the Trinity was not yet related to the human nature that Jesus of Nazareth had, and then there is a time after which he does have a human nature and is related to that human nature. That would imply that God is therefore in time in virtue of these changing relations even if he is intrinsically changeless. Even if he is intrinsically changeless he would still be temporal in view of his changing relationships with temporal things.

The second argument in favor of divine temporality would be based upon God's knowledge of tensed facts. What do I mean by tensed facts? By tensed facts, I mean facts that are related to the past, present, and future. For example, the fact that it is now 3:00. That would be a tensed fact. It was 2:30 a half hour ago. That is a tensed fact. It will be 3:30 a half hour from now. All of these would be tensed facts. As an omniscient being, God must know all facts. If there are facts about the world of which God is ignorant, then he could not count as omniscient. If there are tensed facts, then it seems to me that God would then have to know them because he is omniscient. He knows what time it is now. But if

God knows that it is now 3:00, he is obviously located at that moment in time to know that it is now 3:00. If he is located at 2:30, he'll know it is now 2:30. So there would be change going on constantly in God as these tensed facts change. The simplest way to think about this is just knowing what time it is. Doesn't God know what time it is? Of course! He knows what time it is now. If God were not in time, he wouldn't know whether now is the era of galaxy formation, or the time of life on Earth, or the time at which the universe is suffering thermodynamic destruction. He wouldn't know what is now happening in the universe if he is not in time. It seems to me in virtue of his omniscience God must know tensed facts and therefore must be in time. This would seem to imply not simply extrinsic but even intrinsic change in God; namely, God would be constantly changing in his thought life. He would know it is now 3:00, it is now 3:01, it is now 3:02. There would be a flow in the contents of consciousness in God as he keeps track of what time it is.

Far from being an imperfection in God, it seems to me that this kind of knowledge is a perfection in God. It is in virtue of his omniscience that God can't be fooled about what time it is; he is not frozen into immobility but he keeps track of what is happening in the universe. Therefore, he knows what is going on now.

These two arguments, if sound, I think provide very powerful grounds for thinking that God is in time and that therefore they more than counterbalance the argument for divine atemporality based on the incompleteness of temporal life.

(d) Evaluation of the arguments and a proposal

How shall we assess these two arguments for divine temporality? It does seem to me that there is one way of escape for the defender of divine timelessness. These arguments both assume that there are tensed facts about the world, about what is present, past, or future. And they assume that temporal becoming is real, that the temporal world really is changing. Things come into being and pass away. Whether or not you think that is true is going to depend on what theory of time you adopt. Whether you have a tensed theory of time (this is often called the A-Theory – that is just an arbitrary designation, not descriptive) or if you have a tenseless theory of time (this is usually called the B-Theory).

How can I explain the difference between these two theories? Let's start with the tenseless theory of time and then move to the tensed theory of time.

According to the tenseless theory of time, the difference between past, present, and future is just an illusion of human consciousness. There really is no such thing as the present objectively speaking. Nor do things really come into being and pass away. That, again, is just an illusion of human beings. Rather, everything in time is spread out kind of like a spatial line, and everything is equally existent. For the people in 1868, 1868 is now. For the people in 2015, 2015 is now. For the people in 5030, 5030 is now. If you say which one is really now, the answer is there is no real now. It is just each of their subjective personal perspectives, none of which is objectively true.

If we were to make a diagram of this theory we can let this disk represent space. Let's suppose that as you go back in time space is shrinking so that it shrinks back to a beginning at the Big Bang.

That would be the beginning of time and space. Let's suppose just for the sake of convenience that as you go into the future the universe re-contracts again down to a point at which time and space come to an end. On the B-Theory, or the tenseless theory, of time, time is merely an internal dimension that orders the spatial cross-sections of this space-time continuum. From the beginning at the Big Bang until the end at the Big Crunch it is all equally real. There is no temporal becoming. There are no tensed facts. Rather, for any cross-section of this that you pick the people at that point will think that that is now, and the people at that point will think that their point is now. But all of these are just subjective perspectives.

So on this tenseless theory of time it is very easy to think of God as existing outside of time. He isn't in this space-time continuum. Therefore, he doesn't change in his relationships to it. He is related to everything in time and space from beginning to end in a tenseless way. Indeed, in one sense this creation – this space-time world – is in a sense co-eternal with God. To say it comes into being just means it has a front edge. But God never exists without it. Time is simply an internal dimension of this thing. On this view God never undergoes extrinsic change because there really is no relational change between God and things in time. Similarly, there are no tensed facts to know. What God knows is the tenseless facts that X occurs at $t=7$ and Y occurs at $t=10$. Those are changeless. Those never change. His mind never undergoes a stream of consciousness. He has no past, present, and future. That is just an illusion of the people in time. On this tenseless theory these arguments don't go through because God never undergoes extrinsic or intrinsic change.

By contrast, on the A-Theory of time all that really exists is the present moment. Moments that are past or moments that are future aren't real. They are purely potential. The past has gone away, the future has not yet come to be. So all that really exists is the present. On the A-Theory of time if God is causally related to the world then he will undergo extrinsic change as the present moment changes, and he will know different tensed facts about what is now happening in the universe as time elapses.

So these arguments, I think, are good arguments depending on the tensed theory of time. The arguments for divine timelessness and temporality seem to me stand or fall on your view of time. Do you think that past, present, and future are objective features of reality? Or do you think that the difference between past, present, and future is just a subjective illusion of human consciousness and that nothing ever really comes to be or passes away?

In my book I weigh the arguments for and against these theories of time. Without trying to go into that this morning let me simply say that it is universally acknowledged that the A-Theory (or the tensed theory) is the common-sense view of time. This is the layman's view. Things really do come to be and pass away. There really is a present and that is different than the past and future. This common-sense view is rooted in our experience of temporal becoming – as we experience the passage of time and things coming to be and passing away. I see no reason to deny that experience. It seems to me that we are perfectly rational to go with what our experience tells us: that in fact, temporal becoming is objective and there is a difference between past, present, and future.

Moreover, I have a theological objection to the tenseless theory that I would press. That is I think it emasculates the doctrine of creation. On this view, as I say, the world is really co-eternal with God. It depends upon God – it is ontologically dependent upon him. God is independent of the world, but the world is not independent of God. The world depends on God for its existence. Nevertheless there is no state of affairs in which God exists alone without the world. To say that God created the universe just means that the universe has a front edge so to speak. This whole co-eternal object depends upon God for its existence. I think that really emasculates the Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing which says that there is a state of affairs in the actual world which is God existing alone. Nothing is with him. As Isaiah says, “Who was with me?” No one! Nothing! Then God speaks the world into being, and the world begins to exist in a tensed way.

Moreover, notice that on this view, in a very uncomfortable way, evil is never really extinguished. Evil exists here in the world. Even if later in history God’s judgment falls upon evil, evil is never really eradicated. It still exists at those earlier space-time points. But it is never really done away with. What this means is that Christ hangs permanently on the cross. The crucifixion never passes away. Certainly there is a resurrection later in the time slices. At a later time slice, Jesus rises from the dead. But the crucifixion never passes away. It is never over with. To me that is theologically objectionable. I think we want to say that God abolishes evil. He does away with evil. It is vanquished or annihilated. In order for that to happen you have to have a tensed theory. It won’t happen on the tenseless theory.

For those reasons, in my view God is in time. If time had a beginning, I would say that God existing alone without the world is timeless. So I can affirm that he has a kind of timeless existence. But I would say that is a contingent property of God, not an essential property. When he creates the universe in virtue of his real relations to the temporal world, he becomes temporal. So God without creation is timeless, but since the moment of creation he is in time.