

Chapter 7

The Eternity of God

This day our hearts approve with gladness what our reason can never fully comprehend, even Thine eternity, O Ancient of Days. Art Thou not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, mine Holy One?

We worship Thee, the Father Everlasting, whose years shall have no end; and Thee, the love-begotten Son whose goings forth have been ever of old; we also acknowledge and adore Thee, Eternal Spirit, who before the foundation of the world didst live and love in coequal glory with the Father and the Son.

Enlarge and purify the mansions of our souls that they may be fit habitations for Thy Spirit, who dost prefer before all temples the upright heart and pure. Amen.

The concept of everlastingness runs like a lofty mountain range throughout the entire Bible and looms large in orthodox Hebrew and Christian thought. Were we to reject the concept, it would be altogether impossible for us to think again the thoughts of prophets and apostles, so full were they of the long dreams of eternity.

Because the word everlasting is sometimes used by the sacred writers to mean no more than long-lasting (as ~~the~~ the everlasting hills~~the~~), some persons have argued that the concept of unending existence was not in the minds of the writers when they used the word but was supplied later by the theologians. This is of course a serious error, and, as far as I can see, has no ground in serious scholarship. It has been used by certain teachers as an escape from the doctrine of eternal punishment. These reject the eternity of moral retribution, and to be consistent they are forced to weaken the whole idea of endlessness. This is not the only instance where an attempt was made to slay a truth to keep it quiet lest it appear as a material witness against an error.

The truth is that if the Bible did not teach that God possessed endless being in the ultimate meaning of that term, we would

be compelled to infer it from His other attributes, and if the Holy Scriptures had no word for absolute everlastingness, it would be necessary for us to coin one to express the concept, for it is assumed, implied, and generally taken for granted everywhere throughout the inspired Scriptures. The idea of endlessness is to the kingdom of God what carbon is to the kingdom of nature. As carbon is present almost everywhere, as it is an essential element in all living matter and supplies all life with energy, so the concept of everlastingness is necessary to give meaning to any Christian doctrine. Indeed I know of no tenet of the Christian creed that could retain its significance if the idea of eternity were extracted from it.

From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God, said Moses in the Spirit. From the vanishing point to the vanishing point would be another way to say it quite in keeping with the words as Moses used them. The mind looks backward in time till the dim past vanishes, then turns and looks into the future till thought and imagination collapses from exhaustion: and God is at both points, unaffected by either.

Time marks the beginning of created existence, and because God never began to exist it can have no application to Him. Began is a time-word, and it can have no personal meaning for the high and lofty One that inhabited eternity.

No age can heap its outward years on Thee;

Dear God! Thou art; Thyself, Thine own eternity.

Frederick F. Faber

Because God lives in an everlasting now, He has no past and no future. When time-words occur in the Scriptures they refer to our time, not to His. When the four living creatures before the throne cry day and night, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come, they are identifying God with the flow of creature-life with its familiar three tenses; and this is right and good, for God has sovereignly willed so to identify Himself. But since God is uncreated, He is not himself affected by that succession of consecutive changes we call time.

God dwells in eternity but time dwells in God. He has already lived all our tomorrows as He has lived all our yesterdays. An illustration offered by C. S. Lewis may help us here. He suggests that we think of a sheet of paper infinitely extended. That would be eternity. Then on that paper draw a short line to represent time. As the line begins and ends on that infinite expanse, so time began in God and will end in Him.

That God appears at time's beginning is not too difficult to comprehend, but that He appears at the beginning and end of time simultaneously is not so easy to grasp; yet it is true. Time is known to us by a succession of events. It is the way we account for consecutive changes in the universe. Changes take place not all at once but in succession, one after the other, and it is the relation of *after* to *before* that gives us our idea of time. We wait for the sun to move from east to west or for the hour hand to move around the face of the clock, but God is not compelled so to wait. For Him everything that will happen has already happened.

This is why God can say, *I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning.* He sees the end and the beginning in one view. *For infinite duration, which is eternity's self, includeth all succession,* says Nicholas of Cusa, *and all which seemeth to us to be in succession existeth not posterior to Thy concept, which is eternity....* Thus, because Thou art God almighty, Thou dwellest within the wall of Paradise, and this wall is that coincidence where later is one with earlier, where the end is one with the beginning, where Alpha and Omega are the same.... For NOW and THEN coincide in the circle of the wall of Paradise. But, O my God, the Absolute and Eternal, it is beyond the present and the past that Thou dost exist and utter speech.

When He was a very old man, Moses wrote the psalm from which I have quoted earlier in this chapter. In it he celebrates the eternity of God. To him this truth is a solid theological fact as firm and hard as that Mount Sinai with which he was so familiar, and for him it had two practical meanings: since God is eternal, He can be and continue forever to be the one safe home for His time-driven children. *Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.* The second thought is less

comforting: God's eternity is so long and our years on earth are so few, how shall we establish the work of our hands? How shall we escape the abrasive action of events that would wear us out and destroy us? God fills and dominates the psalm, so it is to Him that Moses makes his plaintive appeal, ¶¶¶ So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. ¶¶¶ May the knowledge of Thy eternity not be wasted on me!

We who live in this nervous age would be wise to meditate on our lives and our days long and often before the face of God and on the edge of eternity. For we are made for eternity as certainly as we are made for time, and as responsible moral beings we must deal with both.

¶¶¶ He hath set eternity in their heart, ¶¶¶ said the Preacher, and I think he here sets forth both the glory and the misery of men. To be made for eternity and forced to dwell in time is for mankind a tragedy of huge proportions. All within us cries for life and permanence, and everything around us reminds us of mortality and change. Yet that God has made us of the stuff of eternity is both a glory and a prophecy yet to be fulfilled.

I hope it will not be found unduly repetitious if I return again to that important pillar of Christian theology, the image of God in man. The marks of the divine image have been so obscured by sin that they are not easy to identify, but is it not reasonable to believe that one mark may be man's insatiable craving for immortality?

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:

Thou madest man, he knows not why;

He thinks he was not made to die

And Thou hast made him: Thou art just.

So reasons Tennyson, and the deepest instincts of the normal human heart agree with him. The ancient image of God whispers within every man of everlasting hope; somewhere he will continue to exist. Still he cannot rejoice, for the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world troubles his conscience, frightening him with proofs of guilt and evidences

of coming death. So is he ground between the upper millstone of hope and the nether stone of fear.

Just here the sweet relevancy of the Christian message appears. ¶¶¶ Jesus Christ ... hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. ¶¶¶ So wrote the greatest Christian of them all just before he went out to meet his executioner. God's eternity and man's mortality join to persuade us that faith in Jesus Christ is not optional. For every man it must be Christ or eternal tragedy. Out of eternity our Lord came into time to rescue His human brethren whose moral folly had made them not only fools of the passing world but slaves of sin and death as well.

Brief life is here our portion,

Brief sorrow, short-lived care;

The life that knows no ending,

The tearless life is there.

There God, our King and Portion,

In fullness of His grace, We then shall see forever,

And worship face to face.

Bernard of Cluny