

§ 3. Doctrine of God

Lecture 5

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. 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 temporal and 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, the last book before the book of Revelation in the New Testament.¹ 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.”

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 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 who 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 being atemporal. So this isn’t a question that can be decided biblically; rather, this is a philosophical 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.

START DISCUSSION

Student: When the Scripture you just quoted from Jude spoke that God existed before space-time (in other words he existed before; that is kind of stating that time began at

¹ 5:05

some time). So he could have been existing before there was such a thing as this realm of space-time and then be in it as he created it.

Dr. Craig: Yes. The difficulty is how are we going to understand this? How are we going to unpack it? Because taken at face value it would seem to be a contradiction to say that God existed before time because “before” is a temporal relationship, right?² So to exist before the beginning of time in a literal sense would be a contradiction in terms. Obviously, the Bible isn’t a philosophy book and therefore we need to try to understand what Jude is trying to say. That will involve some sort of philosophical reflection to try to make sense of it. That is what we are going to try to do.

Student: There is someone who came up with an idea which I had already agreed with – God must have his own time. Let’s simplify it and say his own time. If you define time as what takes place between non-simultaneous events then obviously there was time before space-time was created because if God has a thought and then another thought those are two non-simultaneous events. Something had to fill in between it. If you want to call it something else, OK, but it seems to me that God has to have that time even before he created the universe. You could say what about time and distance is relative and all of this. Fine. That would be another time in my concept. But before he created that, he would have had to have done that. In Jude 25 which you cited, in the NIV it says “before all ages.” Brad just checked. The Greek is *aión* – Strong’s 165. The Greek meaning of that is the same as our meaning of “epic” – like the Roaring 20s. A time that had a certain characteristic, but no perhaps definite beginning and end, but an age. Generally when Christ in the New Testament says, “Lo, I am with you even to the end of the age” that is where that is – meaning when he comes back for us. Rather than saying that verse, I don’t think that is a strong argument that God preceded time but rather that he preceded all ages or all of the things which he created in the universe.

Dr. Craig: All right. That wasn’t a comprehension question. What you have begun to do is to enter into systematic reflection upon this. I think many of your comments were very helpful. I would say, with respect to *aión*, the use of the word “ages” can mean different things in different contexts. If you look at how this is used with respect to God and time, there are a number of verses that seem to suggest that prior to the beginning of any of the ages that God existed alone and that he then create these. It may be that you’ll want to say that he existed in a time of his own that is different from the sort of physical space-time that, I think, the other questioner was talking about. We’ll hold that thought for now and come back to it.

Student: The line that represents time – does it always have a value to it? Like today, time to me means seconds and minutes. Is that what it represents? Infinite time always has a value to it?

Dr. Craig: If by value you mean that they can be intervals that can be specified in it, we are talking about this kind of time that will have metric units like days, years, seconds, and so forth. So, right, that is what we are talking about. Is that what you are asking?

Student: Yes. I am just really confused about that. Then time can't always exist because before the universe was created how was time measured then?

Dr. Craig: OK, we are getting into exactly, as I say, these systematic questions. What the last questioner wants to say is that God has a sort of time of his own and that even if this time of our universe did have a beginning, say at the Big Bang for simplicity sake, nevertheless perhaps God pre-existed the beginning of physical time in a sort of metaphysical time in which he exists. That is a question that deserves to be explored.

Student: Isn't it a little more accurate to define time not as a straight line but as a circle?

Dr. Craig: I don't think that would be right on a Christian point of view, at least, because on a Christian point of view time or history is not circular.³ Quite the opposite. It has a goal, or a *telos*, which is to be reached in the Kingdom of God, the establishment of an afterlife, heaven and hell, and so forth. So there is a creation and then there is an end toward which the world is striving and moving. The Christian concept of time is linear. It is not circular. The view that time is circular would be a view that would be associated more with ancient Greek cyclical thought that everything will repeat itself over and over again – that there is no goal or destiny toward which the universe is tending, but everything just happens over and over again. But even if that were true of human history, it seems to me that what that would give you would be still something like where the events would repeat over and over again but there still would be a linear time. For time to be literally circular would mean that some event E is both before and after itself, which seems to be absurd. How could E be before itself and also after itself? If time is circular that would be the implication which seems crazy. If E has already occurred then it can't be before itself. I think the idea of cyclical or circular time is absurd really. Time (if it exists) is going to be linear even if the events in time recycle over and over again.

Student: I understand what you are saying. I guess what I am saying, and I didn't express it very well, is eternity would best be defined as a circle. It has no beginning; it has no end. No matter what point on the circle you pick you can go to the left, right, up, or down. Whereas time, if you take it as a created event, does have a beginning, does have an end, and is defined.

³ 15:13

Dr. Craig: I have difficulty, again, with this idea of it being circular because that seems to mean that things are both before and after themselves. If you want to pick a geometry for a timeless God's existence, I think a single point would be a better geometrical representation of eternity. There is no before; there is no after; there is no earlier or later. There is just that single state. So I would say if you want to represent eternity geometrically, then rather than any sort of a line it would just be a point.

Student: I always think of time as something that we use as a surrogate for measuring change. If God is changeless then the God-time is irrelevant because there is no change. If God has a thought and another thought, he doesn't change with his thoughts. All his thoughts are simultaneous.

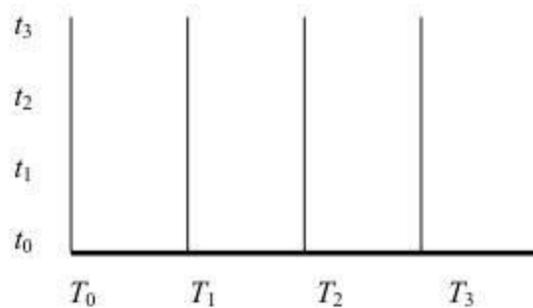
Dr. Craig: OK, see this is a very different view than Bob's. This is nice because we get here an example of where two people, both Christians, have different conceptions of divine eternity. One thinks of God as thinking in a sort of linear way one thought after another which, as Bob says, obviously sets up a before and after relation. Whereas you say, no, God doesn't think sequentially like that. All of his thoughts are in this single, in a sense, simultaneous point. That exactly illustrates these two different conceptions of eternity. Many theologians would agree with you that a changeless God is simply timeless. Others, especially more contemporary theologians would agree with Bob that God is in time and goes through a temporal sequence. As I say, this is an issue on which orthodox Christians disagree. But at least these differences are helping us, I think, to see very clearly the contrasting views.⁴

Student: I would refer to Romans 4:17, one of my favorite verses, God calls the not-being as being or calls all things as though they are. I see God as living in the infinite now. He doesn't have a time sequence of events, but he can call all things as though they are even though they aren't.

Dr. Craig: That verse that you are referring to where it says God calls into existence the things that do not exist is probably a reference to his creation of the world from nothing. This is an expression of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. I don't see that that would decide the question that we are talking about here as to whether God's existence is atemporal or temporal. Either of these views will see God as creating the universe from nothing. The universe doesn't have a material cause. God created all the matter and energy as well as everything that is made out of matter and energy, as well as the angelic realms. So I do think that this is an issue that we are not going to be able to decide biblically by quoting proof texts. This is going to be a philosophical theological question to which we will have to give arguments.

Student: Is there an alternative view here? You said God is outside of time or he is in a temporal time that says God is at every point in our temporal time at the same time. Ultimately, he is in our temporal time but he is at the same point because he can see the past, present, and future.

Dr. Craig: It is very hard to make sense of what you just said because you said God is at every time at the same time. Well, now, which time is that? Is it at 3 o'clock that he is at every time? That wouldn't make sense. How could he be at every time if he is at that time? I think the only way to make sense of what you said would be if we had two dimensions of time or a kind of hypertime. [*draws a diagram on the whiteboard illustrating hypertime*]



You can imagine there is another time dimension. What you could say is at every moment of hypertime, God exists at every moment of our time. That would avoid the contradiction. You are saying that God exists at every moment of time at the same moment of time. But you are talking about two different times. You are talking about ordinary time and hypertime. The difficulty, I think, in that is not only is it sort of extravagant in postulating these hypertime dimensions for which we have no evidence (there is no reason to think these hypertimes exist), but in a sense it only kicks the problem upstairs because now you have a God in hypertime who is just existing at one moment of hypertime after another. So it is the same problem all over again.

Student: Another way to say it is: is he omnitemporal?

Dr. Craig: To be omnitemporal is just to be everlasting throughout infinite time. That is one of the views. That is one of the two views we are talking about.

Student: Which one of those views would that be then?

Dr. Craig: That would be the view where I originally drew a line and said God exists at every point on the time line. Without beginning and without end. But what I heard you saying was that God exists at every point in time at the same time, which to me sounds like this sort of hypertime view which is a possibility – you can make sense of it – but as

I say I think it is extravagant and ultimately it just kicks the problem upstairs. It doesn't really solve it.⁵

Student: I guess it really gets down to what is the true definition of time?

Dr. Craig: Well, not necessarily. I will say something about that. But I don't think that Bob and Brad differ on their definitions of time. They just conceive of God's relationship to time differently. I don't think it is a definitional matter here. It is just that one person thinks of God as being in time like us. He is enduring from one moment to the next. The other person thinks, no, God is just completely outside of these dimensions. He is not in time at all.

Student: Could you comment on God's relationship to time and his ability to answer prayer?

Dr. Craig: This, I think, gets into the question of divine omniscience and his foreknowledge of the future. Some people have argued that God must be timeless because this is the only way in which you could explain his knowledge of the future given human freedom and indeterminacy. He is outside of time and all of time is spread out before him. That is how he knows the future, and so that is how he can answer your prayers before you pray them – because he has foreknowledge of the future. I don't think that is a good argument. When we get to omniscience and we talk about divine foreknowledge, I'll try to give an account of how God can foreknow the future without being timeless. But you are certainly right in drawing our attention to the fact that some people have said that this is why they believe God is timeless because that explains how God can know a contingent future and so can answer prayers in advance of their being prayed.

Student: In terms of God's eternity, is it wise to state it such as God exists in eternal now?

Dr. Craig: This is a very common expression – isn't it? – for those who think God is atemporal – that God exists in the eternal now. I think we need to understand that this is metaphorical. It doesn't mean that there is a time in which God exists and this time is composed of only one instant. But it is kind of like an instant, as I said, in that on the atemporal view eternity is sort of like a point geometrically. In that sense it is like the present, which is also like a point geometrically. In that sense people speak of God's eternal now in the sense that it is on the analogy of a single temporal instant. As long as we understand the metaphor and the analogy, I think it is unobjectionable. But we shouldn't think that there is literally a sort of time in which God exists which is a now, but it is like the now. It is like the temporal present in that it would be a single point.

Student: A line has infinite points, and a plane has infinite lines, and a space has infinite planes. So if we look at time as agent of changes, it has infinite space. If we take snapshots of a space and a time is just an infinite of those spaces, can we not in this kind of dimensional expansion think of God in a higher dimension than time. So it has infinite time and yet he is a dimension above.

Dr. Craig: This is a good question. We can picture geometrically our space-time as a cylinder in which time will be the vertical dimension, and then the two horizontal dimensions will represent our three-dimensional space. We've suppressed one of the three dimensions of space because we being three-dimensional creatures can't draw a four-dimensional cylinder. So we suppress one of the dimensions of space and let that be time. Then we use the analogy of a disc, and this disc would be a three-dimensional space. We could imagine that this cylinder goes on forever and has existed forever in the past so that time would be infinite and you would have these spatial cross-sections as it were of space as time goes on.⁶ I think what you are suggesting is maybe this cylinder is embedded in a higher dimension in which God exists. So God is out here so to speak and that this space-time – this four-dimensional thing – exists in this embedding higher dimensional reality in which God exists. There are some theologians who hold this view. Hugh Ross, for example, holds this. Or at least he says he holds it. When you press him on it and point out some of the problems with this point of view, he will quickly retreat and say this is just a metaphor – *I don't literally mean God is in a higher dimension; it is just a metaphorical way of speaking of a timeless God.* I think it would be better to see this as a model or illustration of a timeless God who just doesn't exist in four-dimensional space-time. He just transcends time. We shouldn't think of this as embedded in some higher dimension, but rather God is just timeless. He is just atemporal. But you are certainly right in drawing our attention to this alternative.

Student: When you have the two-dimensional graph of hypertime versus current time, and now this graph, don't you open the door for a multiverse explanation of the universe? Does that cause a problem?

Dr. Craig: I don't see how this opens the door to that. It seems to me that it is quite possible to say that God has created other space-times besides our own. That would seem to be legitimate. But I don't think that that is implied by this or dependent upon this. There is just an independent question that God may have created other space-times besides ours.

Student: Is it possible that one of the other space-times that he created besides ours would be that which the angels inhabited?

⁶ 30:18

Dr. Craig: Well, the difficulty there would be if you put these angels in some other space-time then it is hard to see how they would have any interaction with us because they are in a different space-time. So if we want to say that angels are involved in our history and space and time then we need to keep them here rather than sequester them someplace else where they couldn't have any kind of causal connection with us or any kind of temporal relation.

END DISCUSSION

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.⁷