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Discourse On the Eternity of God

by Stephen Charnock

[The following are excerpts from “Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God” by Stephen Charnock. Published by Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids: MI, 1979, in 2 volumes, vol. 1, pp. 285-299.]

3 . There is no succession in God. God is without succession or chance. It is a quality of eternity; “from everlasting to everlasting he is God,” i.e. the same. God doth not only always remain in being, but he always remains the same in that being: “thou art the same” (Psalm 102:27). The being of creatures is successive; the being of God is permanent, and remains entire with all its perfections unchanged in an infinite duration. Indeed, the first notion of eternity is to be without beginning and end, which notes to us the duration of a being in regard of its existence; but to have no succession, nothing first or last, notes rather the perfection of a being in regard of its essence. The creatures are in a perpetual flux; something is acquired or something lost every day. A man is the same in regard of existence when he is a man, as he was when he was a child; but there is a new succession of quantities and qualities in him. Every day he acquires something till he comes to his maturity; every day he loseth something till he comes to his period. A man is not the same at night that he was in the morning; something is expired, and something is added; every day there is a change in his age, a change in his substance, a change in his accidents. But God hath his whole being in one and the same point, or moment of eternity. He receives nothing as an addition to what he was before; he loseth nothing of what he was before; he is always the same excellency and perfection in the same infiniteness as ever. His years do not fail (Heb. 1:12), his years do not come and go as others do; there is not this day, to-morrow, or yesterday, with him. As nothing is past or future with him in regard of knowledge, but all things are present, so nothing is past or future in regard of his essence. He is not in his essence this day what he was not before, or will be the next day and year what he is not now. All his perfections are most perfect in him every moment; before all ages, after all ages. As he hath his whole essence undivided in every place, as well as in an immense space, so he hath all his being in one moment of time, as well as in infinite intervals of time. Some illustrate the difference between eternity and time by the similitude of a tree, or a

rock standing upon the side of a river, or shore of the sea; the tree stands always the same and unmoved, while the waters of the river glide along at the foot. The flux is in the river, but the tree acquires nothing but a diverse respect and relation of presence to the various parts of the river as they flow. The waters of the river press on, and push forward one another, and what the river had this minute, it hath not the same the next. So are all sublunary things in a continual flux. And though the angels have no substantial change, yet they have an accidental; for the actions of the angels this day are not the same individual actions which they performed yesterday: but in God there is no change; he always remains the same. Of a creature, it may be said he was, or he is, or he shall be; of God it cannot be said but only he is. He is what he always was, and he is what he always will be; whereas a creature is what he was not, and will be what he is not now. As it may be said of the flame of a candle, it is a flame: but it is not the same individual flame as was before, nor is it the same that will be presently after; there is a continual dissolution of it into air, and a continual supply for the generation of more. While it continues it may be said there is a flame; yet not entirely one, but in a succession of parts. So of a man it may be said, he is in a succession of parts; but he is not the same that he was, and will not be the same that he is. But God is the same, without any succession of parts and of time; of him it may be said, "He is." He is no more now than he was, and he shall be no more hereafter than he is. God possesses a firm and absolute being, always constant to himself. He sees all things sliding under him in a continual variation; he beholds the revolutions in the world without any change of his most glorious and immovable nature. All other things pass from one state to another; from their original, to their eclipse and destruction; but God possesses his being in one indivisible point, having neither beginning, end, nor middle.

(1.) There is no succession in the knowledge of God. The variety of successions and changes in the world make not succession, or new objects in the Divine mind; for all things are present to him from eternity in regard of his knowledge, though they are not actually present in the world, in regard of their existence. He doth not know one thing now, and another anon; he sees all things at once; "Known unto God are all things from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18); but in their true order of succession, as they lie in the eternal council of God, to be brought forth in time. Though there be a succession and order of things as they are wrought, there is yet no succession in God in regard of his knowledge of them. God knows the things that shall be wrought, and the order of them in their being brought upon the stage of the world; yet both the things and the order he knows by one act. Though all things be present with God, yet they are present to him in the order of their appearance in the world, and not so present with him

as if they should be wrought at once. The death of Christ was to precede his resurrection in order of time; there is a succession in this; both at once are known by God; yet the act of his knowledge is not exercised about Christ as dying and rising at the same time; so that there is succession in things when there is no succession in God's knowledge of them. Since God knows time, he knows all things as they are in time; he doth not know all things to be at once, though he knows at once what is, has been, and will be. All things are past, present, and to come, in regard of their existence; but there is not past, present, and to come, in regard of God's knowledge of them, because he sees and knows not by any other, but by himself; he is his own light by which he sees, his own glass wherein he sees; beholding himself, he beholds all things.

(2.) There is no succession in the decrees of God. He doth not decree this now, which he decreed not before; for as his works were known from the beginning of the world, so his works were decreed from the beginning of the world; as they are known at once, so they are decreed at once; there is a succession in the execution of them; first grace, then glory; but the purpose of God for the bestowing of both, was in one and the same moment of eternity. "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy" (Eph. 1:4): The choice of Christ, and the choice of some in him to be holy and to be happy, were before the foundation of the world. It is by the eternal counsel of God all things appear in time; they appear in their order according to the counsel and will of God from eternity. The redemption of the world is after the creation of the world; but the decree whereby the world was created, and whereby it was redeemed, was from eternity.

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2. God hath life in himself (John 5:26): "The Father hath life in himself;" he is the "living God;" therefore "steadfast forever" (Dan. 6:26). He hath life by his essence, not by participation. He is a sun to give light and life to all creatures, but receives not light or life from anything; and therefore he hath an unlimited life, not a drop of life, but a fountain; not a spark of a limited life, but a life transcending all bounds. He hath life in himself; all creatures have their life in him and from him. He that hath life in himself doth necessarily exist, and could never be made to exist; for then he had not life in himself, but in that which made him to exist, and gave him life. What doth necessarily exist therefore, exists from eternity; what hath being of itself could never be produced in time, could not want being one moment, because it hath being from its essence, without influence of any efficient cause. When God pronounced his name, "I Am that I Am," angels and men were in being; the world had been created above two thousand four

hundred years; Moses, to whom he then speaks, was in being; yet God only is, because he only hath the fountain of being in himself; but all that they were was a rivulet from him. He hath from nothing else, that he doth subsist; everything else hath its subsistence from him as their root, as the beam from the sun, as the rivers and fountains from the sea. All life is seated in God, as in its proper throne, in its most perfect purity. God is life; it is in him originally, essentially, therefore eternally. He is a pure act, nothing but vigor and act; he hath by his nature that life which others have by his grant; whence the Apostle saith (1 Tim. 6:16) not only that he is immortal, but he hath immortality in a full possession; forever without restriction, not depending upon the will of another, but containing all things within himself. He that hath life in himself, and is from himself, cannot but be. He always was, because he received his being from no other, and none can take away that being which was not given by another. If there were any space before he did exist, then there was something which made him to exist; life would not then be in him, but in that which produced him into being; he could not then be God, but that other which gave him being would be God. And to say God sprung into being by chance, when we see nothing in the world that is brought forth by chance, but hath some cause of its existence, would be vain; for since God is a being, chance, which is nothing, could not bring forth something; and by the same reason, that he sprung up by chance, he might totally vanish by chance. What a strange notion of a God would this be! Such a God that had no life in himself but from chance! Since he hath life in himself, and that there was no cause of his existence, he can have no cause of his limitation, and can no more be determined to a time, than he can to a place. What hath life in itself, hath life without bounds, and can never desert it, nor be deprived of it; so that he lives necessarily, and it is absolutely impossible that he should not live; whereas all other things “live, and move, and have their being in him” (Acts 17:28); and as they live by his will, so they can return to nothing at his word.

3. If God were not eternal, he were not immutable in his nature. It is contrary to the nature of immutability to be without eternity; for whatsoever begins, is changed in its passing from not being to being. It began to be what it was not; and if it ends, it ceaseth to be what it was; it cannot therefore be said to be God, if there were neither beginning or ending, or succession in it (Mal. 3:6): “I am the Lord, I change not;” (Job 37:23): “Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out.” God argues here, saith Calvin, from his unchangeable nature as Jehovah, to his immutability in his purpose. Had he not been eternal, there had been the greatest change from nothing to something. A change of essence is greater than a change of purpose. God is a sun glittering always in the same glory; no growing up in youth; no passing on to age. If he were not without succession,

standing in one point of eternity, there would be a change from past to present, from present to future. The eternity of God is a shield against all kind of mutability. If anything sprang up in the essence of God that was not there before, he could not be said to be either an eternal, or an unchanged substance.

4. God could not be an infinitely perfect Being, if he were not eternal. A finite duration is inconsistent with infinite perfection. Whatsoever is contracted within the limits of time, cannot swallow up all perfections in itself. God hath an unsearchable perfection. "Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" (Job 11:7.) He cannot be found out: he is infinite, because he is incomprehensible. Incomprehensibility ariseth from an infinite perfection, which cannot be fathomed by the short line of man's understanding. His essence in regard of its diffusion, and in regard of its duration, is incomprehensible, as well as his action: if God, therefore, had beginning, he could not be infinite; if not infinite, he did not possess the highest perfection; because a perfection might be conceived beyond it. If his being could fail, he were not perfect; can that deserve the name of the highest perfection, which is capable of corruption and dissolution? To be finite and limited, is the greatest imperfection, for it consists in a denial of being. He could not be the most blessed Being if he were not always so, and should not forever remain so; and whatsoever perfections he had, would be soured by the thoughts, that in time they would cease, and so could not be pure affections, because not permanent; but "He is blessed from everlasting to everlasting" (Psalm 12:13). Had he a beginning, he could not have all perfection without limitation; he would have been limited by that which gave him beginning; that which gave him being would be God, and not himself, and so more perfect than he: but since God is the most sovereign perfection, than which nothing can be imagined perfecter by the most capacious understanding, He is certainly "eternal;" being infinite, nothing can be added to him, nothing detracted from him.

5. God could not be omnipotent, almighty, if he were not eternal. The title of almighty agrees not with a nature that had a beginning; whatsoever hath a beginning was once nothing; and when it was nothing, could act nothing: where there is no being there is no power. Neither doth the title of almighty agree with a perishing nature: he can do nothing to purpose, that cannot preserve himself against the outward force and violence of enemies, or against the inward causes of corruption and dissolution. No account is to be made of man, because "his breath is in his nostrils" (Isa. 2:22); could a better account be made of God, if he were of the like condition? He could not properly be almighty, that were not always mighty; if he be omnipotent, nothing can impair him; he that hath all power, can

have no hurt. If he doth whatsoever he pleaseth, nothing can make him miserable, since misery consists in those things which happen against our will. The almightiness and eternity of God are linked together: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and ending, saith the Lord, which was, and which is, and which is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8): almighty because eternal, and eternal because almighty.

6. God would not be the first cause of all if he were not eternal; but he is the first and the last; the first cause of all things, the last end of all things: that which is the first cannot begin to be; it were not then the first; it cannot cease to be: whatsoever is dissolved, is dissolved into that whereof it doth consist, which was before it, and then it was not the first. The world might not have been; it was once nothing; it must have some cause to call it out of nothing: nothing hath no power to make itself something; there is a superior cause, by whose will and power it comes into being and so gives all the creatures their distinct forms. This power cannot but be eternal; it must be before the world; the founder must be before the foundation; and his existence must be from eternity; or we must say nothing did exist from eternity: and if there were no being from eternity, there could not now be any being in time. What we see, and what we are, must arise from itself or some other; it cannot from itself: if anything made itself, it had a power to make itself; it then had an active power before it had a being; it was something in regard of power, and was nothing in regard of existence at the same time. Suppose it had a power to produce itself, this power must be conferred upon it by another; and so the power of producing itself, was not from itself, but from another; but if the power of being was from itself, why did it not produce itself before? Why was it one moment out of being? If there be any existence of things, it is necessary that that which was the "first cause," should "exist from eternity." Whatsoever was the immediate cause of the world, yet the first and chief cause wherein we must rest, must have nothing before it; if it had anything before it, it were not the first; he therefore that is the first cause, must be without beginning; nothing must be before him; if he had a beginning from some other, he could not be the first principle and author of all things; if he be the first cause of all things, he must give himself a beginning, or be from eternity: he could not give himself a beginning; whatsoever begins in time was nothing before, and when it was nothing, it could do nothing; it could not give itself anything, for then it gave what it had not, and did what it could not. If he made himself in time, why did he not make himself before? What hindered him? It was either because he could not, or because he would not; if he could not, he always lacked sufficient power, and always would, unless it were bestowed upon him, and then he could not be said to be from himself. If he would not make himself before, then he might have made

himself when he would: how had he the power of willing and nilling without a being? Nothing cannot will or nill; nothing hath no faculties; so that it is necessary to grant some eternal being, or run into inextricable labyrinths and mazes. If we deny some eternal being, we must deny all being; our own being, the being of everything about us; unconceivable absurdities will arise. So, then, if God were the cause of all things, he did exist before all things, and that from eternity.

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5. How dreadful is it to lie under the stroke of an eternal God! His eternity is as great a terror to him that hates him, as it is a comfort to him that loves him; because he is the “living God, an everlasting king, the nations shall not be able to abide his indignation” (Jer. 10:10). Though God be least in their thoughts, and is made light of in the world, yet the thoughts of God’s eternity, when he comes to judge the world, shall make the slights of him tremble. That the Judge and punisher lives forever, is the greatest grievance to a soul in misery, and adds an inconceivable weight to it, above what the infiniteness of God’s executive power could do without that duration. His eternity makes the punishment more dreadful than his power; his power makes it sharp, but his eternity renders it perpetual; ever to endure, is the sting at the end of every lash. And how sad is it to think that God lays his eternity as a security for the punishment of obstinate sinners, and engageth it by an oath, that he will “whet his glittering sword,” that his “hand shall take hold of judgment,” that he will “render vengeance to his enemies, and a reward to them that hate him;” a reward proportioned to the greatness of their offences, and the glory of an eternal God! “I lift up my hand to heaven, and say, I live forever;” (Deut. 32:40, 41): i.e., as surely as I live forever, I will whet my glittering sword. As none can convey good with a perpetuity, so none can convey evil with such a lastingness as God. It is a great loss to lose a ship richly laden in the bottom of the sea, never to be east upon the shore; but how much greater is it to lose eternally a sovereign God, which we were capable of eternally enjoying, and undergo an evil as durable as that God we slighted, and were in a possibility of avoiding! The miseries of men after this life are not eased, but sharpened, by the life and eternity of God.

Use 2. Of comfort. What foundation of comfort can we have in any of God’s attributes, were it not for his infiniteness and eternity, though he be “merciful, good, wise, faithful?” What support could there be, if they were perfections belonging to a corruptible God? What hopes of a resurrection to happiness can we have, or of the duration of it, if that God that promised it were not immortal to continue it, as well as powerful to effect it? His power were not Almighty, if his duration were not eternal.

1. If God be eternal, his covenant will be so. It is founded upon the eternity of God; the oath whereby he confirms it, is by his life. Since there is none greater than himself, he swears by himself (Heb. 6:13), or by his own life, which he engageth together with his eternity for the full performance; so that if he lives forever, the covenant shall not be disannulled; it is an “immutable counsel” (ver. 16, 17). The immutability of his counsel follows the immutability of his nature. Immutability and eternity go hand in hand together. The promise of eternal life is as ancient as God himself in regard of the purpose of the promise, or in regard of the promise made to Christ for us. “Eternal life which God promised before the world began.” (Tit. 1:2): As it hath an ante-eternity, so it hath a post-eternity; therefore the gospel, which is the new covenant published, is termed the “everlasting gospel” (Rev. 14:6), which can no more be altered and perish, than God can change and vanish into nothing; he can as little morally deny his truth, as he can naturally desert his life. The covenant is there represented in a green color, to note its perpetual lushness; the rainbow, the emblem of the covenant “about the throne, was like to an emerald” (Rev. 4:3), a stone of a green color, whereas the natural rainbow hath many colors; this but one, to signify its eternity.

2. If God be eternal, he being our God in covenant, is an eternal good and possession. “This God is our God forever and ever” (Psalm 48:14): “He is a dwelling-place in all generations.” We shall traverse the world awhile, and then arrive at the blessings Jacob wished for Joseph, “the blessings of the everlasting hills” (Gen. 49:26). If an estate of a thousand pound per annum render a man’s life comfortable for a short term, how much more may the soul be swallowed up with joy in the enjoyment of the Creator, whose years never fail, who lives forever to be enjoyed, and can keep us in life forever to enjoy him! Death, indeed, will seize upon us by God’s irreversible order, but the immortal Creator will make him disgorge his morsel, and land us in a glorious immortality; our souls at their dissolution, and our bodies at the resurrection, after which they shall remain forever, and employ the extent of that boundless eternity, in the fruition of the sovereign and eternal God; for it is impossible that the believer, who is united to the immortal God that is from everlasting to everlasting, can ever perish; for being in conjunction with him who is an ever flowing fountain of life, he cannot suffer him to remain in the jaws of death. While God is eternal, and always the same, it is not possible that those that partake of his spiritual life, should not also partake of his eternity. It is from the consideration of the endlessness of the years of God that the church comforts herself that “her children shall continue, and their seed be established forever” (Psalm 102:27, 28). And from the eternity of God Habakkuk (chap. 1:12) concludes the eternity of believers, “Art not thou from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? We shall not die, O Lord.” After they are retired

from this world, they shall live forever with God, without any change by the multitude of those imaginable years and ages that shall run forever. It is that God that hath neither beginning nor end, that is our God; who hath not only immortality in himself but immortality to give out to others. As he hath “abundance of spirit” to quicken them (Mal. 2:15), so he hath abundance of immortality to continue them. It is only in the consideration of this a man can with wisdom say, “Soul, take thy ease; thou hast goods laid up for many years” (Luke 12:19, 20): to say it of any other possession is the greatest folly in the judgment of our Saviour. “Mortality shall be swallowed up of immortality;” “rivers of pleasure” shall be “for evermore.” Death is a word never spoken there by any; never heard by any in that possession of eternity; it is forever put out as one of Christ’s conquered enemies. The happiness depends upon the presence of God, with whom believers shall be forever present. Happiness cannot perish as long as God lives; he is the first and the last; the first of all delights, nothing before him; the last of all pleasures, nothing beyond him; a paradise of delights in every point, without a flaming sword.

3. The enjoyment of God will be as fresh and glorious after many ages, as it was at first. God is eternal, and eternity knows no change; there will then be the fullest possession without any decay in the object enjoyed. There can be nothing past, nothing future; time neither adds to it, nor detracts from it; that infinite fulness of perfection which flourisheth in him now, will flourish eternally, without any discoloring of it in the least, by those innumerable ages that shall run to eternity, much less any despoiling him of them: “He is the same in his endless duration” (Psalm 102:27). As God is, so will the eternity of him be, without succession, without division ; the fulness of joy will be always present; without past to be thought of with regret for being gone; without future to be expected with tormenting desires. When we enjoy God, we enjoy him in his eternity without any flux; an entire possession of all together, without the passing away of pleasures that may be wished to return, or expectation of future joys which might be desired to hasten. Time is fluid, but eternity is stable; and after many ages, the joys will be as savory and satisfying as if they had been but that moment first tasted by our hungry appetites. When the glory of the Lord shall rise upon you, it shall be so far from ever setting, that after millions of years are expired, as numerous as the sands on the seashore, the sun, in the light of whose countenance you shall live, shall be as bright as at the first appearance; he will be so far from ceasing to flow, that he will flow as strong, as full, as at the first communication of himself in glory to the creature. God, therefore, as sitting upon his throne of grace, and acting according to his covenant, is like a jasper-stone, which is of a green color, a color always delightful (Rev. 4:3); because God is always vigorous

and flourishing; a pure act of life, sparkling new and fresh rays of life and light to the creature, flourishing with a perpetual spring, and contenting the most capacious desire; forming your interest, pleasure, and satisfaction; with an infinite variety, without any change or succession; he will have variety to increase delights, and eternity to perpetuate them; this will be the fruit of the enjoyment of an infinite and eternal God: he is not a cistern, but a fountain, wherein water is always living, and never putrefies.

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