

# The Incommunicable Attributes of God: Eternality

Psalm 90

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on August 11, 2013

## Introduction

- ❖ In Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, there is a scene where Bilbo Baggins is deep in the caverns of the Misty Mountains and engaged in a game of riddles with a creature called Gollum. Bilbo is essentially playing for his life, and for a while neither is able to best the other. They keep going back and forth answering each other's riddles.
  - ▶ There is one that Gollum tells that always stuck with me. He says, "***This thing all things devours: Birds, beasts, trees, flowers; Gnaws iron, bites steel; Grinds hard stones to meal; Slays king, ruins town, And beats high mountain down.***"
  
- ❖ My first thought is that it must be some kind of mythical monster. If you're familiar with *The Hobbit*, you know there's a dragon at the end, and throughout there are trolls and goblins and all sorts of creatures. So the answer must be something along those lines.
  - ▶ But Bilbo surprises us with the answer. He says, "*Time.*" Time devours all things: birds, beasts, trees, flowers. Time gnaws iron, bites steel, grinds hard stones to meal. Time slays kings, ruins towns, and beat high mountains down.
    - **Time is a formidable foe that always wins in the end.** Kings and queens, despots and dictators, presidents and prime ministers, the most powerful people on the planet – have all fallen victim to time. Time is a respecter of no persons. Slowly but surely every one of us must submit to its power.
  
- ❖ We all feel it. Time takes its toll on us. **As it ticks on, we're confronted by physical limitations.** When I was in college, I'd go to the gym, work out, play basketball, go for a run, and still have energy for more. But now just the thought of doing that exhausts me. And then we look in the mirror and see the effects of time, the presence of wrinkles, the graying of our hair, or the loss of it altogether. Time takes its toll on us.
  - ▶ And not just physically. **As time passes so do opportunities.** Chances and possibilities present themselves and if we don't take them, they pass us by often never to return again. Time is a constant source of consternation, of great anxiety and regret for many people – either because it passes too slowly or too quickly, or we feel like we never have enough or that we're always racing against it.
  
- ❖ Time is a formidable foe that always wins in the end. We might as well surrender to it now because no one can beat it or control it. **Correction, I should say no creature can beat it or control it. For this is One who can. He's the Creator.** He's the Great I AM. He's the self-existent, self-sufficient, absolutely independent Supreme Being.
  - ▶ And we have the privilege of knowing him through his self-revelation in Holy Scripture. Last week we began a series on the incommunicable attributes of God. And we explained that an incommunicable attribute is one that is unique to God alone and largely foreign to us. So unlike the attributes of love, wisdom, goodness, or mercy – we're talking about the ones he *does not* communicate to us. That's why we call them 'incommunicable'.

- ❖ Classically there are four: God's independence, his eternity, his omnipresence, and his immutability. This morning we're looking at God's attribute of eternity. We'll follow the same outline as last week. I'll begin by defining terms, then I'll demonstrate this attribute in Scripture, and lastly I'll draw out three implications.
  - ▶ Now our goal is not just to build up your theology. Yes, we want to build your *theology* but so that it leads to *doxology* (to worship). The goal of right theology in the head is to create right affections for God in the heart and to translate into right actions of obedience in our daily lives.

### Defining God's Eternality

- ❖ We begin with definitions. This is how we're going to define his eternity: **God is eternal in that He has no beginning or end; nor is He limited by time in any other way.** Now I realize there is a pretty big and ongoing debate among Christian philosophers and theologians regarding God's relationship to time.
  - ▶ Is God located *in* time or does he stand *outside* of time? Is time itself eternal and thus God lives and moves and has his being *in* time OR is time part of his creation and thus God preexists time itself? Is God timeless? A lot of what I've read in theology books go back and forth on this point, and most of the debate is argued on philosophical grounds or even comparing Newtonian and Einsteinian physics.
- ❖ I think how you answer these questions has an impact on our theology. Usually people debate this point because they're really debating issues like predestination and free will. But that's not my focus this morning, and I have no interest in espousing philosophy or physics. As Christians, our doctrine of God should not be based on philosophical or scientific arguments.
  - ▶ They can inform us, but our doctrine must be based on what God teaches us about himself in Scripture. And I think it's only fair to concede that Scripture doesn't offer an explicit answer to whether God is timeless or located in time. But I do believe there is enough biblical evidence to show that God's relationship to time and his experience of it is much different than ours. That's what matters.
- ❖ Notice there are two parts to our definition. **The first emphasizes the infinite nature of God in respect to time versus our finite nature.** Every human being as a birthdate, and all of us will have a date to mark our death. But God is different. God, in his own being, is eternal, which means he was never born and will never die. **There has been never a point in time when he did not exist, and there will never be a point when he will cease to exist.**
  - ▶ If you were here last week, you can tell this attribute builds off of God's self-existence. No one or no thing caused him to exist since he has life and being in himself. He has no beginning. And his eternity says that, likewise, he has no end.
- ❖ There is a second aspect to this attribute. **Not only is God *not* limited by a starting or end point, God is not limited by time in any other way.** Think about how time affects us. It takes a toll on our knowledge. Over time, our memories fade. I can barely remember what I did last weekend, let alone last year or over the last 20 years!

- ▶ And because of the constraints of time, I don't know the future, and even what I can anticipate is totally fallible. So that means my knowledge-base is pretty much limited to the immediate present and to the not-so-distant past (and there only in selective chunks or what has been recorded).
- ❖ Time constrains my knowledge. But God is different. **Time has no constraints on God so he knows perfectly what to us is experienced as the past, the present, and the future.** As theologians put it, he sees the past, present, and future with *equal vividness*. His memory of every detail in the past is just as clear as his knowledge of every detail in the present, as well as his foreknowledge of every detail in the future. Because God is eternal, God is omniscient.
- ❖ Theologian John Frame puts it well when he describes the big difference God and the rest of us when it comes to time. He says that we look at time as a limit on our choices. It hinders us. It frustrates us. **But God looks at time as a tool in accomplishing his purposes. God is the Lord of time.**<sup>1</sup>
  - ▶ Frame says even if you're not comfortable speaking of God being "outside" of time, when it comes down to it, the only conclusion you can draw from Scripture is that, in whatever sense God is present in time, he is present as the Lord of Time. Time doesn't constrain him. He's not limited by it. God's in control. And we're not.

### Demonstrating God's Eternality

- ❖ I need to show you this in the Bible, so turn to Psalm 90, a psalm written by Moses himself. ***Did you notice this whole psalm is about time?*** And it's basically contrasting our experience of it with God's. God is eternal; man is temporal. God remains and lasts forever; man is fleeting and blows away like dust.
  - ▶ Let's read vv1-2 again. "*Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*"
- ❖ Here Moses confirms our definition of God's eternity. He begins by tracing God's existence all the way back before all the generations of man, and then keeps going back before the mountains were formed, and then further back before the universe came into being.
  - ▶ It's like Moses is straining to look down the corridor of the past and he can't see a beginning for God, and then he strains to look as far as he can into the future and sees no end for God. So he concludes, "*from everlasting to everlasting you are God*". You have no beginning or end. You're eternal.
- ❖ Even the first verse of the Bible affirms this truth. Genesis 1:1 states, "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*" So there's no question Scripture teaches that the universe had a beginning, and this verse implies that God existed "before" that beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, pg. 556)

- ❖ Now that doesn't prove God is timeless or that time was created along with the heavens and earth. But it's hard to imagine what the experience of time would've been like before the creation of the heavens, of planetary bodies in motion. Our understanding of time is measured by the orbit of the Earth around the sun and the moon around the Earth. *But before these planetary bodies existed, can we even rightly speak of there being time?*
  - ▶ **The bottom line is God's relationship to time and his experience of it as Creator is starkly different than ours as creatures created in time.** Look at how Moses describes us in v10, "*The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.*"
- ❖ What a contrast from v2! And throughout Scripture we encounter affirmations of God's eternity. Deuteronomy calls him, "*the eternal God*" who holds his people safe in his "*everlasting arms*" (Deut. 33:27). Isaiah calls God "*Everlasting Father*" (Isa. 9:6) as well as "*an everlasting rock*" (Isa. 26:4). Daniel calls him "*the Ancient of Days*" (Dan. 7:13).
  - ▶ And in 1 Timothy, it says he is "*the King of ages / King eternal*" (1 Tim. 1:17). In Revelation it records God himself saying, "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.*" (Rev. 22:13)
    - Alpha is the first letter in the Greek alphabet and Omega is the last. God is saying, "*I don't have a beginning or an end. I am the beginning and the end.*"
- ❖ That just blows my mind. Do you remember Elihu, one of Job's friends? It blew his mind when he tried to contemplate God's eternity. In chapter 36 of Job, he says, "*How great is God – beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out.*" (Job 36:26) In other words, you can't wrap your mind around God's eternity. Give it up and just worship and say, "*How great is God!*"
- ❖ **Now we said earlier that God being eternal also means time doesn't limit him in any way, especially his knowledge.** We said that he sees the past, present, and future with equal vividness. I see this being affirmed in Psalm 90:4, "*For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.*"
  - ▶ If I really focused and thought hard enough, I think I could remember pretty much everything that happened to me yesterday. But if you asked me about what happened on this particular day last year, then forget about it. Or imagine if I were somehow able to live for a thousand years. There's no way I'm going to remember a single detail of what happened one thousand years ago!
- ❖ But listen to what Moses is saying. "*For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past.*" That means God can know all the details of all the events spanning a thousand years as clearly as we can recall the events of yesterday – all with equal vividness.
  - ▶ In fact, Moses says that to God a thousand years are like a "*watch in the night*", which was only about 3-4 hours. *So how much can you remember of the past 4 hours?* A good chunk? Well God's knowledge of the entire past, present, and future is just as clear, just as vivid – in fact, more so.

- ❖ That's what it means for God to be eternal. It puts no limits on him, no constraints. So time never frustrates him. But it frustrates us all the time! Have you ever wished you could just stop time? Or reverse it? Or slow it down? Or perhaps you prefer to speed it up?
  - ▶ When you can't wait for the school bell to ring or for the weekend to come, time seems to crawl like molasses. But when that deadline or that exam date is looming, time seems to fly by.
- ❖ **But for God, time never passes too slow or too fast.** The Apostle Peter makes reference to Psalm 90 and says, "*with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*" (2 Pet. 3:8) So God is never helpless just waiting around for seconds to tick, and on the other hand, he's never rushed or hindered by the clock to accomplish all that he planned.
  - ▶ **For God, everything happens at just the right time – in the fullness of time.** He's never frustrated, never anxious. He has no regrets over time. He always has enough to accomplish all that he wants. That's what you can do when you're eternal.

### **God's Eternity is a Disturbing Reality**

- ❖ So we've defined terms. We've demonstrated from Scripture, and now let me draw out three implications. I want to show you how God's eternity is a disturbing reality, a comforting reality, and a life-altering reality.
- ❖ **First, God's eternity is a disturbing reality, especially for those who don't know Jesus as their Savior and Lord.** If you look back at Psalm 90, it's obvious the first six verses are focused on God's eternity, but then in v7 it seems like Moses shifts gears and starts talking about God's wrath. But it's really not a change of topic. **It's his mention of God's eternity that triggered Moses to contemplate the disturbing reality of God's wrath.**
  - ▶ The connection is found in v3. "*You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!"* Now that mention of returning to dust is an echo of Genesis 3. Having rebelled against God, in trying to be like him to supplant him, Adam and Eve are cursed and told they'll eventually die. They will "*return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" (Gen. 3:19)
- ❖ The point is this: **Death is God's judgment against sin, and since we're all subject to death that means we're all under God's judgment.** We're under his wrath. So we read in vv7-9, "*For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh.*"
  - ▶ Now if that's not bad enough, the New Testament's teaching on this matter is even more disturbing. We often forget (or don't realize) that Jesus, the most loving man who ever lived, spoke more about hell than any other man in the Bible.
- ❖ **He taught that God's judgment against our sin doesn't just end at bodily death.** He often talked about a place called hell where sinners will be consciously punished for their sins. The Bible calls it a "*second death*" (Rev. 20:14).

- ▶ And the way Jesus describes it is horrifying. He depicts hell as a fiery furnace where “*there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Mt. 13:42). But the most disturbing thing Jesus taught about hell is that it’ll be eternal. He describes it as a place “*where your worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.*” (Mk. 9:48)
  - And he also talks about how the unrighteous “*will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*” (Mt. 25:46)
  
- ❖ **I think the idea of eternity is the most disturbing thing about hell.** Just imagine if one grain of sand represented one year and all the sand on Galveston Beach was the length of time you would have to spend in hell. Now imagine if at the end of each year one grain of sand is removed from the beach; thereby shortening your stay.
  - ▶ Of course it’s going to take a long time to clear the beach. But not forever. At least there’s hope that after millions of years the sand would eventually be removed and then you’d be free. All your hope would rest on enduring until that final year.
    - But all hope is lost when Jesus utters that one word: *eternal*. No rest. No reprieve. No hope of deliverance.
  
- ❖ *And why?* Because the Righteous Judge is eternal. There’s no hope in hoping that someday his wrath will fizzle out or somehow he’ll go away and take his wrath with him. **Because he’s eternal, God’s memory of our sins will never fade.** There’s no hope in hoping that maybe, after enough time, he’ll forget.
  - ▶ That’s not going to happen. God will never have a senior moment. He’ll never forget our sins. That means his wrath will eternally haunt you forever. That is a terrifying, horrifying, disturbing reality for all sinners.
  
- ❖ *Why would Jesus speak this way?* Out of love for you. To warn you to flee from this wrath. Think about it. It would be unloving to see your neighbor’s house going up in flames in the middle of the night and not scream out at the top of your lungs, “*Get out of the house!*”
  - ▶ And that’s why Jesus is warning us about hell in this way because we’re sleeping in a burning house. What we need more than anything is to wake up to this reality. That’s why Jesus uses such disturbing language. He’s trying to jar us back to our senses.
    - And the moment we realize our peril and cry out, “Jesus save me!”, that’s when we learn the true nature of love. That’s where we see Jesus entering the house and pulling us out, at the cost of his own life.
  
- ❖ The point is this: **The eternal wrath of the eternal God will follow you forever with dogged persistence.** You’ll never shake it. It’ll always be there punishing you forever. **Your only hope is if somehow that wrath can be fully exhausted and eternally satisfied.**
  - ▶ Well that is exactly what Jesus has done for us. He bore our wrath and died our death on the cross. With his own life, Christ offered *for all time* (for all eternity!) a single sacrifice for sins (Heb. 10:12). And now the promise of God is that if you trust in this Jesus, you will not perish but have everlasting life.
    - *Friends, do you trust him? Have you cried out to him for rescue?*

## God's Eternity is a Comforting Reality

- ❖ So God's eternity is a disturbing reality, but once Jesus rescues you, everything changes. What once was frightful now takes on a different reality for the Christian. **God's eternity becomes comforting.**
  - ▶ This really is the whole point of the psalm. Where do you turn when life is hard, when you're under pressure, under attack, overwhelmed? A Christian knows to turn to God, the eternal God who is "*from everlasting to everlasting*".
    - That's where v1 is pointing us. "*Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.*" The Lord can be our dwelling place, our refuge, our stronghold – all because he is eternal. That makes all the difference.
  
- ❖ If you're in God's arms you're safe, but only so long as he lives. **The only reason believers would ever have reason to fear is if our God (our dwelling place) were to come to an end and cease to exist.** Then we're on our own. Then we're in trouble.
  - ▶ But as Deuteronomy 33:27 says, "*The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*" So take comfort in knowing that no matter what hardships you face, no matter how great your enemies, how fierce your critics, you're in the embrace of the eternal God who upholds you with everlasting arms.
  
- ❖ Here's another comforting thought. Just think of all the times you've been frustrated because the timing didn't work out. Things didn't go according to plan, to your timetable. So you thought you'd have a job by now. You thought you'd be married by now or at least in a serious relationship. You thought you'd have a bunch of kids by now. You thought your kids would be out of the house by now.
  - ▶ Understandably, you're frustrated. The timing was off. **But since God is never frustrated by time – since everything happens for him at just the right time – we can take comfort in knowing that his timing is always on.** Everything is going according to plan, to his plan and his timetable.
  
- ❖ If God were bound by the constraints of time like us, then we would not have this assurance. So thank God he's not like us. Thank God he's the Lord of time.

## God's Eternity is a Life-Altering Reality

- ❖ There is one more implication. For the Christian, God's eternity is a comforting reality and **a life-altering reality.** Once the eternal nature of God really sunk in for Moses, he turned to God in prayer. I want to highlight one request in particular.
  - ▶ Look at v12, "*So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.*" When you realize how fleeting this life is compared to eternity, your heart's prayer will be for wisdom – the wisdom to live your life knowing your days are numbered.
    - When you're young and you think you're invincible, you think you'll live forever, it's easy to be careless with time. We waste our time, our days, our months, even our years.

- ❖ It's because we think this life is eternal when it's really the next. We live for this life. We put all our eggs into this basket – this present life that the Bible describes as a mist that appears for a moment and then vanishes into the immeasurable vastness of eternity (Jas. 4:14).
  - ▶ But ask anyone who's battled cancer or any other life-threatening disease, anyone who was forced to begin numbering their days, and they'll testify to how it altered their lives. They'll tell of how they learned to appreciate every new day, how they no longer took anything for granted, and how they were intentional to not waste a single moment that God gave them.
  
- ❖ **Let me conclude with a challenge – to number your days by viewing them in the light of eternity and God's eternity.** The sands of time are sinking, my friends. We only have one life to live, and the sun will soon set on it. Eternity stretches out before you with no end. For those saved by the grace of God, your eternity is secure. You know how you'll spend it.
  - ▶ ***But how will you spend the short number of years in this life in such a way that it will echo in eternity?*** How are you spending your days and what are you spending them on? Facebook and Twitter? Playing video games, watching television, keeping up-to-date with all the latest news, gossip, and trends?
  
- ❖ Teach us, O Lord, to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Let me ask you: What is one change you can make this week to make better use of your time? One change perhaps in your devotional life or family life or your ministry here at church, at work, on campus, or in the community. ***What are you going to do with your time that will make all the difference for eternity?***