

God and Time

By Ward Fenley

When we discuss the subject of Time, we naturally begin our thinking processes around the idea of a clock, or the rising and setting of the sun. In fact, I would venture to say that if I were to ask the question, "What is Time?" many of us might first envision an old clock on a wall, at least those of us who have experienced some period of life before the digital age. Perhaps a person who was born in the 1970's or later might envision a digital alarm clock on a night stand, or even one on a microwave oven—some time piece upon which we regularly gaze. Regardless, the idea of the "clock" comes to mind when we are faced with the question, "What is time?"

But after any reasonable amount of consideration, we realize that a clock cannot possibly tell us what Time *is*. It can tell us "the time," but it cannot define Time. At this point we might conclude, superficially, that Time is the transpiring of events throughout history. However, this does not really help us, for events transpiring are merely *things* happening: a flower blooms, an apple rots, wind blows, a baby is born, an old man dies, the sun rises, or the sun sets. In other words, a flower blooming is not time any more than the sun setting. They are events which happen, but they cannot rightly be classified as Time itself. Now, we might be landing a little closer to a definition by saying that events happen *within* Time. So then we examine the word *transpire*. "Comes to pass." But again, this leads us back to our initial observation of things happening. A bird chirping transpires. A locomotive barreling across the desert transpires. We use the phrase, "the passing of time," or the "passage" of time. Again, events happen and then are past. But is some *thing* in the future Time? Or is some *thing* in the past Time? These are elementary questions which are all answered with a resounding "no."

We might begin to get a little closer to a definition by making a statement like, "the past, the present, and the future have been, are, and will be Time, respectively." (Perhaps we should ask, what else in our sphere of understanding has that quality? More on this later.)

Much philosophical and theological discussion has taken place concerning the meaning of eternity. We often describe God as eternal. Even the names יהוה (Yahweh or the LORD), and *ἐγώ εἰμι* ("I AM"), seem to strongly imply the quality of "self existence" or eternity. Even in the term *quality* we are reminded of the common description of *eternal life* as "quality and not quantity." But this begs the question: what is *forever*? As theists from the Christian philosophy, we believe God to be eternal. That is, we argue that God always has been and always will be. Most theologians refer to God as "timeless." But this again begs the question: If God is "timeless" then what is Time?" How can God be "timeless" if we do not even know what Time is, or at least cannot, with clear understanding, define Time? We cannot simply forsake this as unimportant minutia, for Time is obviously important to us; but unfortunately we often use the term thoughtlessly, not unlike those who use mindless slang, four-letter words, or vocables for filler while they search for something meaningful to say.

Theologians have seemed to engage in guess work throughout the history of philosophy and theology when they simply state, "God is outside of time," or "God created time, space, and material, and therefore God is not bound by time." But if we cannot properly define Time, how can we rightly say that God *created* it? Yes, God has created all things. But if we cannot pinpoint, or prove, Time to be a thing which did not always exist, then on what theological or philosophical basis can we say that God created it, let alone, that He is not bound by it? We know that God is at least bound by His character and decrees, for "God cannot deny Himself." Therefore, as we consider this issue of Time, let us be careful to not think of a clock, or a season of autumn to tell us what Time is.

THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF IMMORTALITY IF LIFE ETERNAL IS MERELY QUALITY

We often use the terms "everlasting" and "forever" to describe our eternal conscious existence with Christ. Now, here we must make some distinctions. First, God always has been, but we have not. There are some who will argue for our preexistence with God in eternity past, but none can speak to this, for there is no awareness or consciousness of it. And our preexistence is certainly not a hard and fast biblical position. Furthermore, consider this: if existence in the presence of God is characterized by praise, celebration, and gratitude for His mercy which endures forever—all of which are, generally speaking, consciously experienced by those who love Him—then we must consider it absurd to argue for a non-conscious experience of this prior to our conception, if indeed consciousness means anything as far as our relationship to Christ is concerned. God has operated in and through redemptive history and conscience to communicate the meaning and effect of His character and love to His children. There is nothing in Scripture to indicate otherwise. Certainly He loved us prior to the "foundation of the world;" but our consciousness of that love did not arise until that love was "shed abroad in our hearts." And remember: all of our consciousness came to be *in Time*. Isn't it amazing that we cannot conceive of God outside of Time? Try it. Try to imagine God, or anything for that matter outside of Time. It's impossible. Why? Because like God, Time is such that "none greater can be conceived." Simply put, our conception of Time is that it always has been and always will be. We cannot prove that there was ever a period before Time, nor can we prove there will be a period after Time, both empirically and metaphysically speaking.

Let us consider for a moment that Time was never created. Consider the possibility that Time always was and always will be. If that is true, then we don't really need to ponder what eternity was like without time, except that God was always there, never born, nor would ever die. Now, Jesus said that the one who believes in Him will never die. Under the Old Covenant, when believers would die, there was no more consciousness:

Isaiah 38:18 For the grave cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth.

Psalms 6:5 For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?

Psalms 30:9 What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall the

dust praise thee? shall it declare thy truth?

Psalm 88:10-12 Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Selah. (11) Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction? (12) Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

Psalm 115:17 The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence.

Aside from the obvious inability to experience God after physical death under the Old Covenant, we should infer that one who died could not experience Time either. However, Jesus strongly implied that consciousness would never cease for the one who believes in Him. This would coincide with the term "immortality," which, under the Old Covenant, only God possessed:

1 Timothy 6:16 Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.

However, under the New Covenant, not only do we see Him, but we are also said to have this immortality:

2 Timothy 1:10 But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel:

John 6:40 And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.

1 John 3:6 Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.

All these verses imply that what God possessed in regard to *life* in eternity past, He has now granted to those who have believed in Jesus Christ. And just as God has had eternal conscious immortality, He has given us eternal conscious immortality. Some argue that there is no consciousness for the believer in Christ after physical demise. But this would contradict Christ's words that whoever believes in Him will never die. It would make no sense to say that God has immortality and we have immortality, and yet God is conscious throughout eternity but we are not. God has brought us into the consciousness of our life in Christ upon faith in Him; and as immortality is an inherent quality of that life, our consciousness of it continues forever. Now, God alone possesses inherent immortality and inherent eternal life. And He is the only being who always was, for He was before all things and by Him all things consist. But in Christ, we come into eternal *future* existence. God has eternal past existence *and* eternal future existence. We now have eternal future existence *in* Him.

But death—the cessation of conscious existence--was a very real fear for those under the Old Covenant:

Hebrews 2:14-15 Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; (15) And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

And indeed, not only did they fear death, they all died:

Hebrews 11:39-40 And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: (40) God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

To live is to know God, which is a conscious experience:

John 17:3 And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.

And this life is a conscious experience of joy:

Psalms 16:10-11 For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. (11) Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.

In God's presence is the knowledge of Him and places us on the path of life. And we should note that we have this life now, as is demonstrated by the fact that it is not the path *to* life, as if our present path is a journey *toward* life, and separate from life. The path is the path *of* life. The path--and our present and everlasting conscious experience of it--*is* life. Jesus indicated this:

John 14:6 Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

This *coming to the Father* takes place through being on the path and in the life, both of which are Christ.

Jesus said that the one who believes in Him will never die. He also declared that we have passed from death to life:

John 5:24 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

And John also concludes:

1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

THE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE OF IMMORTALITY

So we know that life in Christ is a very real and experiential life. A problem arises,

however, with the word, "experiential."

We are beings who experience things and our actual knowledge of everyday physical life comes through our senses. Just as we try to imagine life without Time, it is difficult to imagine knowledge without senses. But here we must clarify the supernatural gift of faith and the nature of the kingdom of God.

When we think of the "experience" of Christ, we think of verses we read which give us the knowledge of what we have in Christ. For example, those of us who are believers in Christ know that we have been forgiven of all our trespasses:

Colossians 2:13-15 And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; (14) Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; (15) And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

Of course we never saw the death of Christ or physically experienced (smelled, touched, tasted) this forgiveness and having been raised up. But we know that the truth is the ultimate reality. And our conscience is purged:

Hebrews 9:14 How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

But there was obviously a time before the cross where the consciences of God's people were never truly purged:

Hebrews 10:1-4 For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. (2) For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. (3) But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. (4) For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.

That is, we now have something we have never physically experienced, but rather we have been given this knowledge of the forgiveness of sins:

Luke 1:77 To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,

Again, this knowledge is a gift of God. We could not know that we are forgiven of our sins without having been given this knowledge. But now we know it and by loving one another (forgiving each other) we assure our oft-wandering thoughts before Him:

1 John 3:18-21 My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. (19) And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall

assure our hearts before him. (20) For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. (21) Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.

This "love" is none other than the fulfillment of the law of Christ, which is to bear one another's burdens:

Galatians 6:1-2 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. (2) Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

John states that when we love one another, it helps assure us that we have passed from death to life. Sometimes we struggle in our thinking, wondering if we are "of the truth." But God says that through love, or forgiving one another, this boosts our confidence toward God. It is not saying that we always feel forgiven. But thankfully truth is a constant. Feelings change. We may not feel righteous, but we know that we are:

2 Corinthians 5:21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

We may not feel holy, unblameable, and unproveable, but we are:

Colossians 1:21-22 And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled (22) In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight:

There are many times in the Christian's experience that seem to contradict the truth of the above realities. But nevertheless, these realities are a constant in the kingdom of God. Through love and the recollection of the promises of God, our hearts are assured before God that we are of the truth and are alive in Him. God, of course, doesn't break those promises, nor can the effect of the cross, which accomplished the life, holiness, righteousness, and faultlessness before Him be revoked:

Romans 11:29 For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.

At this point we see that there is a clear distinction to be made between what is true and what we feel. Even when we don't feel that we are seated with him in heavenly places and forgiven of sin, we nevertheless are! That is the beauty and glory of grace: getting what we don't deserve in spite of ourselves. Now, there are clearly times when our feelings and reality intersect, and it is these times that we refer to as experiencing the kingdom of God. But because of finite knowledge, we do not always think about the kingdom of God. For example, if a fire breaks out in the kitchen, most likely our thoughts are only occupied with trying to put out the fire and not the reality of our eternal status before God as children made holy and forgiven. This could also be said of our various phases of sleep. We may dream, but there is a period, whether while napping, or getting a full eight hours of sleep where we are not conscious of...anything, except when we wake up. But truth remained the same through our sleep, as did Time, as did God, in spite of our unawareness or unconsciousness.

Jesus Christ is called "our Life," in Colossians 3:4, and "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," in John 14:6. Christ also calls Himself the "Resurrection and the Life" in John 11:25. If life in Christ is only "quality" as some suppose, and that quantity is insignificant, then how can we rightly argue that there is any continuity after our physical demise? Even Paul said, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (1 Corinthians 15:19). This is not to diminish what we have now. However, it is to emphasize that what we have now is immortal, and that we will not cease our experience and consciousness of the life we have in Christ when we physically expire. If this life were mere quality, then the word "immortality" would have little to no meaning. After all, if it is only *quality* that should concern us, then why even mention the word "immortality?"

The intention of this article is not to discuss the laws of physics and gravity, or broach the subject of quantum theory, simply because they are beyond the scope of the author's knowledge. Also, those particular elements of science do not necessarily speak to the nature of the kingdom of God (as we are discussing it here), nor the inexplicable nature of Time. There has been nothing in scientific discovery, at least to this point, that has proven that Time is a created thing, outside of which God exists. There seems to exist no such thing as "timelessness." If history is the *story* of events which have taken place in Time, and "timelessness" is a real mode of *existence*, then is the existence of God pre-time not historical? If not, then what is it? Also, if "timelessness" is a real mode of existence before space, material, and time, then what is existence, especially in light of the fact that material reality, biblically speaking, is inferior to spiritual (heavenly) reality? How can we conceive of *existence* outside of time? Perhaps the argument that God is outside of time is a mere theistic attempt to justify God's eternity. But what if God's eternity *is* Time and doesn't need explaining? Is it possible that this thing we call Time is actually God's eternal presence, yea, God Himself, abounding, encapsulating, and controlling the existence of all things, whether spiritual or material? How can we prove that the spiritual world is timeless? Instead of trying to justify God's existence by denying His *time-fullness* to those who question eternity, maybe we, as diligent theists, should begin acknowledging the beauty of eternal Time; in other words, the beauty of the eternal power of God to overrule and guide all things, visible and invisible, "by whom all things consist." We certainly must remain open to scientific discovery and empirical knowledge according to the gifts God has given to believers and unbelievers. I willingly grant that Time could be discovered as a created thing. Such a discovery, however, would not refute the beauty of the life and immortality we have in Christ. But at this juncture it seems most appropriate and theologically correct to acknowledge the real immortality of God within eternal Time, as opposed to arguing for a pre-existent "timelessness" and thereby risk diminishing redemptive historical events as unnecessary. For, a theology of "timelessness" seems to force such a diminishing. It could be argued that a theology of timelessness diminishes the foreknowledge of God and the immensity of His sovereign control of the past and present at all *times*.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

One other issue that has not been addressed is the glaring title of Jesus Christ as the Alpha and the Omega; that is, that He is the omnipresent God surrounding all

existence. It seems that God's omnipresence is in fact Time. God is the Beginning. He is the End. He is also the present. It is not that He is the *elements* in the past, present, or future, but that He *is* the past, present, and future. Compare these passages:

Revelation 4:8 And each one of the four living creatures had six wings about him, and within being full of eyes. And they had no rest day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God, the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

Revelation 1:8 I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the Ending, says the Lord, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Revelation 1:11 saying, I am the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last. Also, What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamos, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.

Revelation 21:6 And He said to me, It is done. I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who thirsts I will give of the fountain of the Water of Life freely.

Revelation 22:13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the Ending, the First and the Last.

There is clearly intent in these passages to indicate the eternal and sovereign nature of Christ and the New Covenant in contrast to the Old Covenant. However, it is not beyond the realm of interpretation to understand these passages as also identifying God as Time. God is not a clock. But God *is* existence. "He is before all things and by Him all things consist." All things are held together by God. This is probably referring primarily to the creation and establishment of *covenantal* elements; yet philosophically it cannot be denied that for matter to exist, God had to have all knowledge of the diverse atomic and sub-atomic properties of all things material. However, there is no scientific or theological basis upon which to argue that the beginning of the material world forced the beginning of Time, or that Time came into existence in conjunction with the creation of the material world, requiring us to conclude that Time is a created thing. In fact, Time could exist, and *did* exist, *before* the beginning of what we observe as God's "creation." Time always was and matter came about in the middle of the eternity of Time, much like God's eternal love was manifested in material history. Its concept (not its accomplished material existence) was always in the mind of God/Time but suddenly sprang into visible demonstration: the creation of the physical universe *and* the creation of the physical body of Christ, eventually leading to that physical body dying on the cross for the remission of sins. We cannot identify Time as anything other than always having been and always existing throughout eternity. Time is real. It is the Beginning and the End, Life everlasting, Immortality, and it seems to be distinctly possible that Time is indeed God. If the question of Time was not being discussed and the question arose: What entity is omnipresent, has no beginning or end, is invisible, and upon which death has no power? The answer is clearly God...and Time.

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