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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 54

On Eternity

"From everlasting to everlasting thou art God." Psalm 90:2

1. I would fain speak of that awful subject, -- eternity. But how can we grasp it in our thought It is so vast, that the narrow mind of man is utterly unable to comprehend it. But does it not bear some affinity to another incomprehensible thing, -- immensity May not space, though an unsubstantial thing, be compared with another unsubstantial thing, -- duration But what is immensity It is boundless space. And what is eternity It is boundless duration.

2. Eternity has generally been considered as divisible into two parts; which have been termed eternity a parte ante, and eternity a parte post, -- that is, in plain English, that eternity which is past, and that eternity which is to come. And does there not seem to be an intimation of this distinction in the text "Thou art God from everlasting:" -- Here is an expression of that eternity which is past: "To everlasting:" -- Here is an expression of that eternity which is to come. Perhaps, indeed, some may think it is not strictly proper to say, there is an eternity that is past. But the meaning is easily understood: We mean thereby duration which had no beginning; as by eternity to come, we mean that duration which will have no end.

3. It is God alone who (to use the exalted language of Scripture) "inhabiteth eternity," in both these senses. The great Creator alone (not any of his creatures) is "from everlasting to everlasting:" His duration alone, as it had no beginning, so it cannot have any end. On this consideration it is, that one speaks thus, in addressing Immanuel, God with us: --

Hail, God the Son, with glory crown'd Ere time began to be; Throned with thy Sire through half the
round Of wide eternity!

And again: --

Hail, God the Son, with glory crown'd Ere time shall cease to be; Throned with the Father through
the round Of whole eternity!

4. "Ere time began to be." -- But what is time It is not easy to say, as frequently as we have had the word in our mouth. We know not what it properly is. We cannot well tell how to define it. But is it not, in some sense, a fragment of eternity, broken off at both ends -- that portion of duration which commenced when the world began, which will continue as long as this world endures, and then expire for ever -- that portion of it, which is at present measured by the revolution of the sun and planets; lying (so to speak) between two eternities, that which is past, and that which is to come. But as soon as the heavens and the earth flee away from the face of Him that sitteth on the great white throne, time will be no more; but sink for ever into the ocean of eternity!

5. But by what means can a mortal man, the creature of a day, form any idea of eternity What can we find within the compass of nature to illustrate it by With what comparison shall we compare it What is there that bears any resemblance to it Does there not seem to be some sort of analogy between boundless duration and boundless space The great Creator, the infinite Spirit, inhabits both the one and the other. This is one of his peculiar prerogatives: "Do not I fill heaven and earth, saith the Lord" - - yea, not only the utmost regions of creation, but all the expanse of boundless space! Meantime, how

many of the children of men may say,

Lo, on a narrow neck of land, 'Midst two unbounded seas I stand, Secure, insensible! A point of
time, a moments' space, Removes me to that heavenly place, Or shuts me up in hell!

6. But leaving one of these unbounded seas to the Father of eternity, to whom alone duration without beginning belongs, let us turn our thoughts on duration without end. This is not an incommunicable attribute of the great Creator; but he has been graciously pleased to make innumerable multitudes of his creatures partakers of it. He has imparted this not only to angels, and archangels, and all the companies of heaven, who are not intended to die, but to glorify him, and live in his presences for ever; but also to the inhabitants of the earth, who dwell in houses of clay. Their bodies, indeed, are "crushed before the moth;" but their souls will never die, God made them, as an ancient writer speaks, to be "pictures of his own eternity." Indeed all spirits, we have reason to believe, are clothed with immortality; having no inward principle of corruption, and being liable to no external violence.

7. Perhaps we may go a step farther still: Is not matter itself, as well as spirit, in one sense eternal Not indeed a parte ante, as some senseless philosophers, both ancient and modern, have dreamed. Not that anything had existed from eternity; seeing, if so, it must be God; yea, it must be the One God; for it is impossible there should be two Gods, or two Eternals. But although nothing beside the great God can have existed from everlasting, -- none else can be eternal a parte ante; yet there is no absurdity in supposing that all creatures are eternal a parte post. All matter indeed is continually changing, and that into ten thousand forms; but that it is changeable, does in nowise imply that it is perishable. The substance may remain one and the same, though under innumerable different forms. It is very possible any portion of matter may be resolved into the atoms of which it was originally composed: But what reason have we to believe that one of these atoms ever was, or ever will be, annihilated It never can, unless by the uncontrollable power of its almighty Creator. And is it probable that ever He will exert this power in unmaking any of the things that he hath made In this also, God is not "a son of man that he should repent." Indeed, every creature under heaven does, and must, continually change its form, which we can now easily account for; as it clearly appears, from late discoveries, that ethereal fire enters into the composition of every part of the creation. Now, this is essentially edax rerum: It is the universal menstruum, the discohere of all things under the sun. By the force of this, even the strongest, the firmest bodies are dissolved. It appears from the experiment repeatedly made by the great Lord Bacon, that even diamonds, by a high degree of heat, may be turned into dust: and that, in a still higher degree, (strange as it may seem,) they will totally flame away. Yea, by this the heavens themselves will be dissolved; "the elements shall melt with fervent heat." But they will be only dissolved, not destroyed; they will belt, but they will not perish. Though they lose their present form, yet not a particle of them will ever lose its existence; but every atom of them will remain, under one form or other, to all eternity.

8. But still we should inquire, What is this eternity How shall we pour any light upon this abstruse subject It cannot be the object of our understanding. And with what comparison shall we compare it How infinitely does it transcend all these! What are any temporal things, placed in comparison with those that are eternal What is the duration of the longlived oak, of the ancient castle, of Trajan's Pillar, of Pompey's Amphitheatre What is the antiquity of the Tuscan Urns, though probably older than the foundation of Rome; yea, of the Pyramids of Egypt, suppose they have remained upwards of three thousand years; -- when laid in the balance with eternity It vanishes into nothing. Nay, what is the duration of "the everlasting hills," figuratively so called, which have remained ever since the general

deluge, if not from the foundation of the world, in comparison of eternity No more than an insignificant cipher. Go farther yet: Consider the duration, from the creation of the first-born sons of God, of Michael the Archangel in particular, to the hour when he shall be commissioned to sound his trumpet, and to utter his mighty voice through the vault of heaven, "Arise, ye dead, and come to judgement!" Is it not a moment, a point, a nothing, in comparison of unfathomable eternity Add to this a thousand, a million of years, add a million of million of ages, "before the mountains were brought forth, or the earth and the round world were made:" What is all this in comparison of that eternity which is past Is it not less, infinitely less, than a single drop of water to the whole ocean -- yea, immeasurably less than a day, an hour, a moment, to a million of ages! Go back a thousand millions still; yet you are no nearer the beginning of eternity.

9. Are we able to form a more adequate conception of eternity to come In order to this, let us compare it with the several degrees of duration which we are acquainted with: -- An ephemeron fly lives six hours; from six in the evening, to twelve. This is a short life compared with that of a man, which continues threescore or fourscore years; and this itself is short, if it be compared to the nine hundred and sixty-nine years of Methuselah. Yet what are these years, yea, all that have succeeded each other, from the time that the heavens, and the earth were erected, to the time when the heavens shall pass away, and the earth with the works of it shall be burned up, if we compare it to the length of that duration which never shall have an end

10. In order to illustrate this, a late author has repeated that striking thought of St. Cyprian: -- "Suppose there were a ball of sand as large as the globe of earth: suppose a grain of this sand were to be annihilated, reduced to nothing, in a thousand years: yet that whole space of duration, wherein this ball would be annihilating, at the rate of one grain in a thousand years, would bear infinitely less proportion to eternity, duration without end, than a single grain of sand would bear to all the mass!"

11. To infix this important point the more deeply in your mind, consider another comparison: -- Suppose the ocean to be so enlarged, as to include all the space between the earth and the starry heavens. Suppose a drop of this were to be annihilated once in a thousand years; yet that whole space of duration, wherein this ocean would be annihilating, at the rate of one drop in a thousand years, would be infinitely less in proportion to eternity, than one drop of water to that whole ocean.

Look then at those immortal spirits, whether they are in this or the other world. When they shall have lived thousands of thousands of years, yea, millions of millions of ages, their duration will be but just begun: They will be only upon the threshold of eternity!

12. But besides this division of eternity into that which is past, and that which is to come, there is another division of eternity, which is of unspeakable importance: That which is to come, as it relates to immortal spirits, is either a happy or a miserable eternity.

13. See the spirits of the righteous that are already praising God in a happy eternity! We are ready to say, How short will it appear to those who drink of the rivers of pleasure at God's right hand! We are ready to cry out,

A day without night They dwell in his sight, And eternity seems as a day!

But this is only speaking after the manner of men: For the measures of long and short are only applicable to time which admits of bound, and not to unbounded duration. This roles on (according to

our low conceptions) with unutterable, inconceivable swiftness; if one would not rather say, it does not roll or move at all, but is one still immovable ocean. ;For the inhabitants of heaven "rest not day and night," but continually cry, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord, the God, the Almighty, who saw, and who is, and who is to come!" And when millions of millions of ages are elapsed, their eternity is but just begun.

14. On the other hand, in what a condition are those immortal spirits who have made choice of a miserable eternity! I say, made choice; for it is impossible this should be the lot of any creature but by his own act and deed. The day is coming when every soul will be constrained to acknowledge, in the sight of men and angels,

No dire decree of thine did seal Or fix the unalterable doom
Consign my unborn soul to hell, Or
damn me from my mother's womb.

In what condition will such a spirit be after the sentence is executed, "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels!" Suppose him to be just now plunged into "the lake of fire burning with brimstone," where "they have no rest, day or night, but the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever." "For ever and ever!" Why, if we were only to be chained down one day, yea, one hour, in a lake of fire, how amazing long would one day or one hour appear! I know not if it would not seem as a thousand years. But (astonishing thought!) after thousands of thousands, he has but just tasted of his bitter cup! After millions, it will be no nearer the end than it was the moment it began!

15. What then is he -- how foolish, how mad, in how unutterable a degree of distraction -- who, seeming to have the understanding of a man, deliberately prefers temporal things to eternal who (allowing that absurd, impossible opposition, that wickedness is happiness, -- a supposition utterly contrary to all reason, as well as to matter fact) prefers the happiness of a year, say a thousand years, to the happiness of eternity, in comparison of which, a thousand ages are infinitely less than a year, a day, a moment especially when we take this into the consideration, (which, indeed should never be forgotten,) that the refusing a happy eternity, implies the choosing of a miserable eternity: For there is not, cannot be, any medium between everlasting joy and everlasting pain. It is a vain thought which some have entertained, that death will put an end to neither the one nor the other; it will only alter the manner of their existence. But when the body "returns to the dust as it was, the spirit will return to God that gave it." Therefore, at the moment of death, it must be unspeakably happy, or unspeakably miserable: And that misery will never end.

Never! Where sinks the soul at that dread sound
Into a gulf how dark, and how profound!

How often would he who had made the wretched choice wish for the death both of his soul and body!
It is not impossible he might pray in some such manner as Dr. Young supposes:

When I have writhed ten thousand years in fire,
Ten thousand thousand, let me then expire!

16. Yet this unspeakable folly, this unutterable madness, of preferring present things to eternal, is the disease of every man born into the world, while in his natural state. For such is the constitution of our nature, that as the eye sees only such a portion of space at once, so the mind sees only such a portion of time at once. And as all the space that lies beyond that compass is invisible to the mind. So that we do not perceive either the space or the time which is at a distance from us. The eye sees distinctly the

space that is near it, with the objects which it contains: In like manner, the mind sees distinctly those objects which are within such a distance of time. The eye does not see the beauties of China: They are at too great a distance: There is too great a space between us and them: There fore we are not affected by them. They are as nothing to us: It is just the same to us as if they had no being. For the same reason, the mind does not see either the beauties or the terrors of eternity. We are not at all affected by them, because they are so distant from us. On this account it is, that they appear to us as nothing: just as if they had no existence. Meantime, we are wholly taken up with things present, whether in time or space; and things appear less and less, as they are more and more distant from us, either in one respect or the other. And so it must be; such is the constitution of our nature; till nature is changed by almighty grace. but this is no manner of excuse for those who continue in their natural blindness to futurity; because a remedy for it is provided, which is found by all that seek it: Yea, it is freely given to all that sincerely ask it.

17. This remedy is faith. I do not mean that which is the faith of a Heathen, who believes that there is a God, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him; but that which is defined by the Apostle, "an evidence," or conviction "of things not seen," a divine evidence and conviction of the invisible and eternal world. This alone opens the eyes of the understanding, to see God and the things of God. This, as it were, takes away, or renders transparent, the impenetrable veil,

Which hangs 'twixt mortal and immortal being.

When Faith lends its realizing light, The clouds disperse, the shadows fly;

The invisible appears in sight, And God is seen by mortal eye.

Accordingly, a believer, in the scriptural sense, lives in eternity, and walks in eternity. His prospect is enlarged: His view is not any longer bounded by present things: No, nor by an earthly hemisphere; though it were, as Milton speaks, "ten-fold the length of this terrene." Faith places the unseen, the eternal world continually before his face. consequently, he looks not at "the things that are seen;" --

Wealth, honour, pleasure, or what else This short-enduring world can give;

these are not his aim, the object of his pursuit, his desire or happiness; -- but at "the things that are not seen;" at the favour, the image, and the glory of God; as well knowing that "the things which are seen are temporal," -- a vapour, a shadow, a dream that vanishes away; whereas "the things that are not seen are eternal;" real, solid, unchangeable.

18. What, then, can be a fitter employment for a wise man than to meditate upon these things frequently to expand his thoughts "beyond the bounds of this diurnal sphere," and to expatiate above even the starry heavens, in the field of eternity What a means might it be to confirm his contempt of the poor, little things of earth! When a man of huge possessions was boasting to his friend of the largeness of his estate, Socrates desired him to bring a map of the earth, and to point out Attica therein. When this was done, (although not very easily, as it was a small country,) he next desired Alcibiades to point out his own estate therein. When he could not do this, it was easy to observe how trifling the possessions were in which he so prided himself, in comparison of the whole earth. How applicable is this to the present case! Does any one value himself on his earthly possessions Alas, what is the whole globe of earth to the infinity of space! A mere speck of creation. And what is the life of man, yea, the duration of the earth itself, but a speck of time, if it be compared to the length of

eternity! Think of this: Let it sink into your thought, till you have some conception, however imperfect, of that

Boundless, fathomless abyss, Without a bottom or a shore

19. But if naked eternity, so to speak, be so vast, so astonishing an abject, as even to overwhelm your thought, how does it still enlarge the idea to behold it clothed with either happiness or misery! eternal bliss or pain! everlasting happiness, or everlasting misery! One would think it would swallow up every other thought in every reasonable creature. Allow me only this, -- "Thou art on the brink of either a happy or miserable eternity; thy Creator bids thee now stretch out thy hand either to the one or the other;" -- and one would imagine no rational creature could think on anything else. One would suppose that this single point would engross his whole attention. Certainly it ought so to do: Certainly, if these things are so, there can be but one thing needful. O let you and I, at least, whatever others do, choose that better part which shall never be taken away from us!

20. Before I close this subject, permit me to touch upon two remarkable passages in the Psalms, (one in the eighth, the other in the hundred and forty-forth,) which bear a near relation to it. The former is, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him or the son of man, that thou visitest him" Here man is considered as a cipher, a point, compared to immensity. The latter is, "Lord, what is man, that thou hast such respect unto him Man is like a thing of nought His time passeth away like a shadow!" In the new translation the words are stronger still: "What is man, that thou takest knowledge of him!" Here the Psalmist seems to consider the life of man as a moment, a nothing, compared to eternity. Is not the purport of the former, "How can He that filleth heaven and earth take knowledge of such an atom as man How is it that he is not utterly lost in the immensity of God's works" Is not the purport of the latter, "How can He that inhabiteth eternity stoop to regard the creature of a day, -- one whose life passeth away like a shadow" Is not this a thought which has struck many serious minds, as well as it did David's, and created a kind of fear arise from a kind of supposition that God is such an one as ourselves If we consider boundless space, or boundless duration, we shrink into nothing before it. But God is not a man. A day, and million of ages, are the same with him. Therefore, there is the same disproportion between Him and any finite being, as between Him and the creature of a day. Therefore, whenever that thought recurs, whenever you are tempted to fear lest you should be forgotten before the immense, the eternal God, remember that nothing is little or great, that no duration is long or short, before Him. Remember that God ita praesidet singulis sicut universis, et universis sicut singulis: That he "presides over every individual as over the universe; and the universe, as over each individual." So that you may boldly say,

Father, how wide thy glories shine, Lord of the universe -- and mine! Thy goodness watches o'er the whole, As all the world were but one soul; Yet counts my every sacred hair, As I remain'd thy single care!

Edited by Shane Campbell with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology at Northwest Nazarene University.

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Table of Contents

[Español](#)

[What is Wesleyanism?](#)

[John Wesley](#)

[The Journal of John Wesley](#)

[The Life of John Wesley by John Telford](#)

[A Compendium of Natural Philosophy](#)

[The New Testament - John Wesley's Translation](#)

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[The Sermons of John Wesley \(1872 Edition\)](#)

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[The Letters of John Wesley](#)

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[Charles Wesley](#)

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