### God’s Eternal Nature

God’s eternal nature involves His limitlessness in relation to time. His existence is not delineated by time. He is without beginning and without end.[[1]](#footnote-1)

How can we define the concept of time? Ladd defines it as “the mental presupposition of the duration of events and of objects.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Similarly, Strong feels it to be “duration measured by succession.” So then, time is the means by which we measure the duration of some event or the interval between events.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**1. Biblical Data**

In the Old Testament, we observe a special Hebrew term for eternity – עוֹלָם (*olam*)*.* This word, however, does not always refer to eternity, but may apply to a long, but limited period of time (e.g. Ex 21:6; Jer 5:15). Yet, in light of other clear references to God’s eternal nature in Scripture, it is safe to say that in relation to God the term עוֹלָם(*olam*) denotes “eternity.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Greek word for eternity is αἰών (*aion*)(see Lk 1:70; 1 Tim 1:17; Eph 3:21). Like the Hebrew term עוֹלָם (*olam*), αἰών (*aion*) can also indicate a long period of time, as in Luke 1:70. When the word αἰών(*aion*) stands in the plural, however, or is repeated twice, it usually refers to eternity. Unlike the noun αἰών (*aion*), its related adjective αἰώνιος(*aionios*) is always translated “eternal” (e.g. 2 Pet 1:11).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Instead of directly speaking of God’s eternal nature, Scripture more often compares the duration of His existence with earthly events. For example, God’s existence is compared with human life expectancy: “For such is God, Our God forever and ever; He will guide us until death” (Ps 48:14). God’s existence is also compared with human history: “Your years are throughout all generations” (сf. 1 Cor 2:7; 1 Tim 1:17; Isa 41:4; 44:6).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Expanding this comparison, Scripture contrasts God’s existence with the duration of the created order. On the one hand, God, the Creator, existed before the universe (Isa 44:24; Eph 1:4), and, on the other hand, He outlasts creation (Ps 102:26-27). Psalm 102, in fact, highlights both aspects:

Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment. Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed, but You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end (Ps 102:25-27).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Finally, the following verses speak of God being eternal in a more direct manner. On the one hand, God exists from eternity past: “Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting” (Ps 93:2). He is the “Ancient of Days” (Dan 7:9; also see Isa 43:13; Hab 1:12). On the other hand, He has days without end: “But You, O Yahweh, abide forever, and Your name to all generations” (Ps 102:12).[[8]](#footnote-8) The following verses speak of eternity in both directions: “Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God” (Ps 90:2); “Who is and was and is to come” (Rev 1:4, 8); and, “To the only God our Savior… {be} glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever” (Jude 25).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Exodus 3:14 also hints at God’s eternal nature: “I Am Who I Am.” He is limitless, measureless, and defines Himself by Himself.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the Old Testament, God’s nature is often expressed in His names. In Gen 21:33, we encounter the name אֵל עוֹלָם (*El olam*), or “God of eternity.” In Isaiah Isa 40:28, we see a similar designation אֵלֹהֵי עוֹלָם (*Elohe olam*), also translated “God of eternity.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

In investigating the biblical witness of God’s eternal nature, it is interesting to note the contexts in which this aspect of God’s character is found. First, in the Psalms His eternal nature is often contrasted with the temporal nature of human beings (Ps 48:14; 90:1-4, 9-10; 102:11-12, 23-27). This demonstrates God’s glory and superiority to humans. Furthermore, the fact that God is eternal means that His kingdom also has no end. He is the Eternal King (Ps 93:1-2). In the book of Isaiah, this teaching serves to confirm that God is the only true God (Isa 41:4; 44:6-7; 48:12-14). Only an eternal being can claim to be such.

In the epistles, God’s eternal nature is mentioned in contexts dealing with His will being accomplished (Eph 1:4; 3:11; 2 Pet 3:8-9). The Eternal God can complete what He has begun. Finally, in Paul’s first letter to Timothy, God’s eternal nature inspires exclamations of praise (1 Tim 1:17; 6:15-16). God’s eternal nature is also often mentioned in the book of Revelation (Rev 1:8; 4:8; 21:6), usually associated with His almighty power, enabling Him to overcome any challenge and secure victory in any situation.

Finally, the following passages speak of the eternal nature of God the Son, Jesus Christ. Thus His deity is underscored: Micah 5:2; Isaiah 9:6; Revelation 1:17; 2:8; 22:13; Hebrews 1:8,11-12; 13:8; Colossians 1:16-17.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**2. The Relation of God and Time**

In discussing God’s eternal nature, the question arises as to whether God experiences time, or whether He exists in timelessness. Does God have a past, present, and future, or is it all the same to Him? Does He experience a succession of events, i.e., one event occurring after another?

Some hold that God experiences an eternal succession of events. According to this theory, God exists within time and experiences events in sequence. He has a past, a present, and a future, about which He already fully knows. Although He exists in time, He has no beginning of days or end of existence.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Adherents support this view with various arguments.[[14]](#footnote-14) First, the Bible appears to describe a God who experiences the passage of time and events in sequence. For example, He existed before the creation of the world and will exist after its destruction. Such words as “before” and “after” indicate passage of time. Second, the fact that God created the universe at a moment of time, and that God the Son became incarnate at a moment of time, seem to indicate God being active in time. Finally, God is a person. One characteristic of a person is the ability to think, which requires, as far as we know, sequencing. Thinking is a train of individual thoughts in an orderly sequence.

Furthermore, we often speak of God’s plan for people. Yet, from a logical point of view, we know that forming a plan must precede its execution. Therefore, it seems that God made His plans at one time, then executes them at another, thus creating a sequence. Additionally, the idea that God experiences succession of events better corresponds to our experience of prayer. We pray, then God answers, creating a sequence.

The Nicene Creed also seems to support the idea of “infinite succession”: “I believe… in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds.” The word “before” relates to time. Finally, some feel that the idea of a timeless God traces back not to the Bible, but to the philosophy of Plato.

What about the theory that God’s exists outside of time? It is claimed that in the beginning, God created time – it did not exist before that. God does not enjoy an unending *quantity* of days, but a different *quality* of existence – one without time.[[15]](#footnote-15) Therefore, this theory asserts that God does not experience succession or sequence of events. He perceives all things, past, present, and future, directly and immediately. The mediaeval scholastics taught that God has “a simultaneous possession of his total duration.”[[16]](#footnote-16) In Edwards’ words, God possesses “the immediate and invariable possession of the whole unlimited life together and at once.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

God’s existence outside of time does not disturb His ability to perceive succession. Strong writes, “God, in his totality as the Absolute Being, is conscious not, in time, but of time.”[[18]](#footnote-18) An illustration may help. A person could stand on the street watching a parade and perceive only one part of it at a time. This individual would thus perceive the parade in sequence: past, present and future. Another person could watch the entire parade simultaneously from the top of a building. Although this second individual perceives the entire parade at once, he or she can still distinguish the various parts of the parade that others are experiencing sequentially as past, present, and future, but is not limited by their perspective.[[19]](#footnote-19) Another example would be a writer of fiction, who knows the entire novel as a whole, while the readers perceive the sequential unfolding of events.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In response to the claim that God must first form a plan before He executes it, proponents of God’s timelessness state that God’s thought and actions are already accomplished in eternity, but appear in the context of time. Shedd explains, “God creates all things from eternity by one act of power, as he knows all things from eternity by one act of knowledge and as he decrees all things from eternity by one act of will,” and adds, “God’s causative energizing in both instances was eternal and therefore simultaneous; but the effects of it were successive and temporal.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

It is misguided to think that timelessness implies the eternal existence of creation. Even if God’s act of creation is accomplished in eternity, it manifests at one moment in time. Creation has a beginning. Concerning God’s ability to think, it is supposed that God’s thoughts have logical, but not temporal sequence. Therefore, He does not need to exist in time to think.[[22]](#footnote-22) His manner of thinking differs from ours. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isa 55:8-9). This may imply reasoning powers that do not depend on temporal sequence.

In the history of the Church, most Christian thinkers have held the view of God’s timelessness, including Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the Reformers, and most contemporary theologians.[[23]](#footnote-23) Augustine claimed that God created the universe not “in” time, but “with” time.[[24]](#footnote-24) John of Damascus wrote, “He is above the Eternal: for He, the Creator of times, is not under the dominion of time, but above time.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Aquinas felt that God perceives eternity as immediacy without succession, since the One who is not subject to change is not measured by time and does not experience succession.[[26]](#footnote-26)

What support exists for this view?[[27]](#footnote-27) First, one must inquire, “If God does experience succession, which would be His first action?” Succession requires an initial action, after which other events follow chronologically. Yet, God has no beginning. Therefore, how can He have an initial action? If one supposes that time has no beginning as well, then another problem arises. If time has no starting point, then how can it move forward? In order to progress forward, one must begin somewhere. In addition, the Bible reveals that God’s perception of time differs from ours (see 2 Pet 3:8; Ps 90:4).

In favor of this theory, supporters cite Revelation 1:4: “…from Him who is and who was and who is to come,” a sequence that does not follow a chronological order. In addition, the days of creation begin with the “first day,” giving the impression that time began then. In addition, we have no indication that time existed before creation. Genesis 1:1 simply reads, “In the beginning.” Furthermore, God’s knowledge of the future is consistent with Him existing outside of time (see Isa 46:10; Acts 15:18).

The doctrine of God’s timelessness also coincides well with the fact of His immutability. God, who does not pass through time, does not change. Change requires the passage of time. When the Bible speaks as if God passes through time, it does so for the sake of the readers, who themselves exist in time and cannot conceive of a timeless existence.

Exodus 3:15 is also a key passage. When God announces, “I Am Who I Am,” He is emphasizing His self-sufficiency and independence, from time. We may add the thought that God created “all things,” which would include time. In response to the objection that the doctrine of God’s timelessness traces back to Plato, we note that the Early Church did not passively accept all the Plato advanced, but rejected a number of Plato’s premises. A parallel also exists between God’s timelessness and His omnipresence. Similar to the fact that He is not located in one single *place*, He is also not located at one certain *time*.

The final proof offered for this understanding of God is that He is capable of innumerable, simultaneous perceptions. According to the doctrine of omnipresence, God is everywhere and able to perceive all things simultaneously. In a similar way, one may posit that God can perceive all that is happening at any *time* immediately and directly.

Along with the two theories of God’s endless duration in time and His timelessness, other views exist to characterize His eternal nature. Some say that God exists in an “eternal present,” from which He can perceive past and future as well. This theory has common features with those already discussed. On the one hand, as in the teaching of God’s timelessness, God experiences all phases of time directly. On the other hand, in common with God’s “endless duration,” this view locates God is a specific phase of time: the present. Bray feels that God’s experience of an eternal present means that our experience of present time affords us a foretaste of eternity.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Bloesch proposes that God has “his own ontological time and space,”[[29]](#footnote-29) which enables Him to fellowship with people. He “is not wholly independent of time and space,” but may “enter into” them.[[30]](#footnote-30) Erickson advances the view that, possibly, in relation to His transcendence, God is timeless, while in relation to His immanence, He is in time. In Erickson’s words, God is “ontologically atemporal/aspatial but actively or influentially present within the space-time universe.”[[31]](#footnote-31) A final view is the understanding that God does not exist in time, but time exists in Him. This would mean that God does indeed experience succession, but time does not exist outside of Him or independent of Him.[[32]](#footnote-32)

**3. Concluding Thoughts**

As is the case with other of God’s attributes, reflecting on His eternal nature yields practical value for the believer. While mentioning God’s eternal nature in Colossians 1:16-17, the context focuses on God’s excellence and supremacy. God has no equal or rival. Consequently, He is deserving of devotion and obedience. God’s excellence is also highlighted in 1 Tim 6:15-16, Job 36:26, and Rev 4:8-10. The following verses, Ps 48:14, Ps 93:1-2, and Rev 1:17-18, demonstrate that the Eternal God is impossible to overcome – He never suffers defeat. Consequently, those who are in Him are also undefeatable.

In the following passages, Deuteronomy 32:40-41, 2 Peter 3:8-9, and Revelation 10:6; 15:7; 22:12-13, mention of God’s eternal nature serves as a warning. The Eternal God does not immediately punish sin. He gives time for repentance, and sinners should avail themselves of that opportunity. Furthermore, according to Psalm 90:4, 10, 12, 17, and Ephesians 1:11, the Eternal God knows the end from the beginning and can lead us on the path to success. Knowing that God is eternal also strengthens our hope in eternal life, which the Eternal God provides for us (see Ps 102:11, 12, 24, 28).

1. Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 275-276; Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 5. – P. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Taken from Strong, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Verhoef P. Time, Eternity // VanGemeren W. A. New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. – V. 4. – P. 1252-1255; Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 761. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sasse H. *aion* // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995. – P. 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Strong, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Strong, p. 275; Henry, v. 5, p. 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Also see Deut 32:40; Rev 10:6; 11:17; 15:7; Ps 9:8; Isa 26:4; 40:28; 50:17; 57:15; Jer 10:10; Heb 13:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Strong, p. 275; Henry, v. 5, p. 242; Hodge C. Systematic Theology. – 1872. – V. 1. – P. 385-386; Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Henry, v. 5, p. 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Pieper F. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1953. – V. 1. – P. 446. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Erickson M. J. God the Father Almighty. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Henry, v. 5, p. 243-262. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nash R. H. The Concept of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983. – P. 12-13, 73; Henry, v. 5, p. 243-262.; Hodge, v. 1, p. 386ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Strong, p. 276-277; Henry, v. 5, p. 250; Grudem, p. 169; Chafer L. S. Systematic Theology. – Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. – P. 216; Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Noted in Shedd, p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Noted in Strong, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Strong, p. 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Grudem, p. 170-171; Henry, v. 5, p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nash, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Shedd, p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Strong, p. 276; Henry, v. 5, p. 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Exceptions to this rule include Duns Scotus and William of Ockham (Nash, p. 73). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Henry, v. 5, p. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 2.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Aquinas T. *Summa Theologica*, 1a, q. 10 a. 1 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963, p. 137-138). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Shedd, p. 278-282; Grudem, p. 169; Henry, v. 5, p. 243, 246, 256; Pieper; Erickson, God the Father Almighty, с. 116, 119, 123; Chafer, v. 1, p. 216; Hodge, v. 1, p. 386-388; Strong, p. 275-278. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bray G. The Doctrine of God. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. – P. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Erickson, God the Father Almighty, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Henry, v. 5, p. 240. The German author Emil Brunner thought the same (see Bloesch, p. 86). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)