

Eternity of God

Stephen Charnock

In this section on the eternity of God, Charnock develops a thorough outline of his subject. His primary concern here is the extension of God's duration. In typically Puritan style he concludes the treatise with a section on the "use" of the doctrine, which is as valuable as the foregoing exposition because it shows how God is interested in applying doctrine to the life of the believer. Charnock points out, for example, the great psychological value of this doctrine, turning man's attention from temporal materialistic values to eternal verities.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. (Psalm 90:2)

The title of this psalm is a prayer; the author, Moses. Some think not only this, but the ten following psalms, were composed by him. The title wherewith he is dignified is, "The man of God," as also in Deut. 33:1. One inspired by him to be his interpreter, and deliver his oracles; one particularly directed by him; one who as a servant did diligently employ himself in his master's business, and acted for the glory of God; he was the minister of the Old Testament, and the prophet of the New.

There are two parts of this psalm. 1. A complaint of the frailty of man's life in general (v. 36); and then a particular complaint of the condition of the church (v. 8-10). 2. A prayer (v. 12). But before he speaks of the shortness of human life, he fortifies them by the consideration of the refuge they had, and should find in God (v. 1): "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations." We have had no settled abode in the earth, since the time of Abraham's being called out from Ur of the Chaldees. We have had Canaan in a promise, we have it not yet in possession; we have been exposed to the cruelties of an oppressing enemy, and the incommodities of a desert wilderness; we have wanted the fruits of the earth, but not the dews of heaven. "Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations." Abraham was under thy conduct; Isaac and Jacob under thy care; their posterity was multiplied by thee, and that under their oppressions. Thou hast been our shield against dangers, our security in the times of trouble; when we were pursued to the Red Sea, it was not a creature delivered us; and when we feared the pinching of our bowels in the desert, it was no creature rained manna upon us. Thou hast been our dwelling-place; thou hast kept open house

for us, sheltered us against storms, and preserved us from mischief, as a house doth an inhabitant from wind and weather; and that not in one or two, but in all generations. Some think an allusion is here made to the ark, to which they were to have recourse in all emergencies. Our refuge and defence hath not been from created things; not from the ark, but from the God of the ark. Observe,

1. God is a perpetual refuge and security to his people. His providence is not confined to one generation; it is not one age only that tastes of his bounty and compassion. His eye never yet slept, nor hath he suffered the little ship of his church to be swallowed up, though it hath been tossed upon the waves; he hath always been a haven to preserve us, a house to secure us; he hath always had compassions to pity us, and power to protect us; he hath had a face to shine, when the world hath had an angry countenance to frown. He brought Enoch home by an extraordinary translation from a brutish world; and when he was resolved to reckon with men for their brutish lives, he lodged Noah, the phoenix of the world, in an ark, and kept him alive as a spark in the midst of many waters, whereby to rekindle a church in the world; in all generations he is a dwelling-place to secure his people here, or entertain them above. His providence is not wearied, nor his care fainting; he never wanted will to relieve us, "for he hath been our refuge," nor ever can want power to support us, "for he is a God from everlasting to everlasting." The church never wanted a pilot to steer her, and a rock to shelter her, and dash in pieces the waves which threaten her.

2. How worthy is it to remember former benefits, when we come to beg for new. Never were the records of God's mercies so exactly revised, as when his people have stood in need of new editions of his power. How necessary are our wants to stir us up to pay the rent of thankfulness in arrear! He renders himself doubly unworthy of the mercies he wants, that doth not gratefully acknowledge the mercies he hath received. God scarce promised any deliverance to the Israelites, and they, in their distress, scarce prayed for any deliverance; but that from Egypt was mentioned on both sides, by God to encourage them, and by them to acknowledge their confidence in him. The greater our dangers, the more we should call to mind God's former kindness. We are not only thankfully to acknowledge the mercies bestowed upon our persons, or in our age, but those of former times. "Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations." Moses was not living in the former generations, yet he appropriates the former mercies to the present age. Mercies, as well as generations, proceed out of the loins of those that have gone before. All mankind are but one Adam; the whole church but one body. In the second verse he backs his former consideration. 1. By the greatness of his power in forming the world. 2. By the boundlessness of his duration: "From everlasting to everlasting." As thou hast been our dwelling-place, and expended upon us the strength of thy power and riches of thy love, so we have no reason to doubt the continuance on thy part, if we be not wanting

on our parts; for the vast mountains and fruitful earth are the works of thy hands, and there is less power requisite for our relief, than there was for their creation; and though so much strength hath been upon various occasions manifested, yet thy arm is not weakened, for "from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." Thou hast always been God, and no time can be assigned as the beginning of thy being. The mountains are not of so long a standing as thyself; they are the effects of thy power, and therefore cannot be equal to thy duration; since they are the effects, they suppose the precedency of their cause. If we would look back, we can reach no further than the beginning of the creation, and account the years from the first foundation of the world; but after that we must lose ourselves in the abyss of eternity; we have no cue to guide our thoughts; we can see no bounds in thy eternity. But as for man, he traverseth the world a few days, and by thy order pronounced concerning all men, returns to the dust, and moulders into the grave. By mountains, some understand angels, as being creatures of a more elevated nature; by earth, they understand human nature, the earth being the habitation of men. There is no need to divert in this place from the letter to such a sense. The description seems to be poetical, and amounts to this: he neither began with the beginning of time, nor will expire with the end of it; he did not begin when he made himself known to our fathers, but his being did precede the creation of the world, before any created being was formed, and any time settled. "Before the mountains were brought forth," or before they were begotten or born; the word being used in those senses in Scripture; before they stood up higher than the rest of the earthly mass God had created. It seems that mountains were not casually cast up by the force of the deluge softening the ground, and driving several parcels of it together, to grow up into a massy body, as the sea doth the sand in several places; but they were at first formed by God. The eternity of God is here described,

1. In his priority: "Before the world."

2. In the extension of his duration: "From everlasting to everlasting thou art God." He was before the world, yet he neither began nor ends; he is not a temporary, but an eternal God; it takes in both parts of eternity, what was before the creation of the world, and what is after; though the eternity of God be one permanent state, without succession, yet the spirit of God, suiting himself to the weakness of our conception, divides it into two parts; one past before the foundation of the world, another to come after the destruction of the world; as he did exist before all ages, and as he will exist after all ages. Many truths lie couched in the verse.

1. The world hath a beginning of being: it was not from eternity, it was once nothing; had it been of a very long duration, some records would have remained of some memorable actions done of a longer date than any extant. 2. The world owes its being to the creating power of God: "Thou hast formed it" out of

nothing into being; Thou, that is, God; it could not spring into being of itself; it was nothing; it must have a former. 3. God was in being before the world: the cause must be before the effect; that word which gives being, must be before that which receives being. 4. This Being was from eternity: "From everlasting." 5. This Being shall endure to eternity: "To everlasting." There is but one God, one eternal: "From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." None else but one hath the property of eternity; the gods of the heathen cannot lay claim to it.

Doct. God is of an eternal duration. The eternity of God is the foundation of the stability of the covenant, the great comfort of a Christian. The design of God in Scripture is, to set forth his dealing with men in the way of a covenant. The priority of God before all things begins the Bible: "In the beginning God created" (Gen. 1:1). His covenant can have no foundation, but in his duration before and after the world: and Moses here mentions his eternity, not only with respect to the essence of God, but to his federal providence; as he is the dwelling-place of his people in all generations. The duration of God forever is more spoken of in Scripture than his eternity, *á parte ante*, though that is the foundation of all the comfort we can take from his immortality: if he had a beginning, he might have an end, and so all our happiness, hope and being would expire with him; but the Scripture sometimes takes notice of his being without beginning, as well as without end: "Thou art from everlasting" (Ps. 93:2); "Blessed be God from everlasting to everlasting" (Ps. 41:13); "I was set up from everlasting" (Prov. 8:23): if his wisdom were from everlasting, himself was from everlasting: whether we understand it of Christ the Son of God, or of the essential wisdom of God, it is all one to the present purpose. The wisdom of God supposeth the essence of God, as habits in creatures suppose the being of some power or faculty as their subject. The wisdom of God supposeth mind and understanding, essence and substance. The notion of eternity is difficult; as Austin said of time, if no man will ask me the question, what time is, I know well enough what it is; but if any ask me what it is, I know not how to explain it; so may I say of eternity; it is easy in the word pronounced, but hardly understood, and more hardly expressed; it is better expressed by negative than positive words. Though we cannot comprehend eternity, yet we may comprehend that there is an eternity; as, though we cannot comprehend the essence of God what he is, yet we may comprehend that he is; we may understand the notion of his existence, though we cannot understand the infiniteness of his nature; yet we may better understand eternity than infiniteness; we can better conceive a time with the addition of numberless days and years, than imagine a Being without bounds; whence the apostle joins his eternity with his power; "His eternal power and Godhead" (Rom. 1:20); because, next to the power of God, apprehended in the creature, we come necessarily by reasoning, to acknowledge the eternity of God. He that hath an incomprehensible power must needs have an eternity of nature; his power is most sensible in the creatures to the eye of man, and his eternity easily from thence deducible by the reason of man. Eternity is a perpetual

duration, which hath neither beginning nor end; time hath both. Those things we say are in time that have beginning, grow up by degrees, have succession of parts; eternity is contrary to time, and is therefore a permanent and immutable state; a perfect possession of life without any variation; it comprehends in itself all years, all ages, all periods of ages; it never begins; it endures after every duration of time, and never ceaseth; it doth as much outrun time, as it went before the beginning of it: time supposeth something before it; but there can be nothing before eternity; it were not then eternity. Time hath a continual succession; the former time passeth away and another succeeds: the last year is not this year, nor this year the next. We must conceive of eternity contrary to the notion of time; as the nature of time consists in the succession of parts, so the nature of eternity in an infinite immutable duration. Eternity and time differ as the sea and rivers; the sea never changes place, and is always one water; but the rivers glide along, and are swallowed up in the sea; so is time by eternity. A thing is said to be eternal, or everlasting rather, in Scripture,

1. When it is of a long duration, though it will have an end; when it hath no measures of time determined to it; so circumcision is said to be in the flesh for an "everlasting covenant" (Gen. 17:13); not purely everlasting, but so long as that administration of the covenant should endure. And so when a servant would not leave his master, but would have his ear bored, it is said, he should be a servant "forever" (Deut. 15:17); *i.e.*, till the jubilee, which was every fiftieth year: so the meat-offering they were to offer is said to be "perpetual" (Lev. 6:20); Canaan is said to be given to Abraham for an "everlasting" possession (Gen. 17:8); when as the Jews are expelled from Canaan, which is given a prey to the barbarous nations. Indeed circumcision was not everlasting; yet the substance of the covenant whereof this was a sign, viz, that God would be the God of believers, endures forever; and that circumcision of the heart, which was signified by circumcision of the flesh, shall remain forever in the kingdom of glory: it was not so much the lasting of the sign, as of the thing signified by it, and the covenant sealed by it: the sign had its abolition; so that the apostle is so peremptory in it, that he asserts, that if any went about to establish it, he excluded himself from a participation of Christ (Gal. 5:2). The sacrifices were to be perpetual, in regard to the thing signified by them; viz, the death of Christ, which was to endure in the efficacy of it: and the passover was to be "forever" (Exod. 12:24), in regard of the redemption signified by it, which was to be of everlasting remembrance. Canaan was to be an everlasting possession, in regard of the glory of heaven typified, to be forever conferred upon the spiritual seed of Abraham.

2. When a thing hath no end, though it hath a beginning. So angels and souls are everlasting; though their being shall never cease, yet there was a time when their being began; they were nothing before they were something, though they shall never be nothing again, but shall live in endless happiness or misery. But

that properly is eternal that hath neither beginning nor end; and thus eternity is a property of God.

In this doctrine I shall show, I. How God is eternal, or in what respects eternity is his property. II. That he is eternal, and must needs be so. III. That eternity is only proper to God, and not common to him with any creature. . . .

The Manner of God's Eternity

I. How God is eternal, or in what respects he is so. Eternity is a negative attribute, and is a denying of God any measures of time, as immensity is a denying of him any bounds of place. As immensity is the diffusion of his essence, so eternity is the duration of his essence; and when we say God is eternal, we exclude from him all possibility of beginning and ending, all flux and change. As the essence of God cannot be bounded by any place, so it is not to be limited by any time: as it is his immensity to be everywhere, so it is his eternity to be always. As created things are said to be somewhere in regard of place, and to be present, past, or future, in regard of time; so the Creator in regard of place is everywhere, in regard of time is *semper*. His duration is as endless as his essence is boundless: he always was and always will be, and will no more have an end than he had a beginning; and this is an excellency belonging to the Supreme Being. As his essence comprehends all beings, and exceeds them, and his immensity surmounts all places; so his eternity comprehends all times, all durations, and infinitely excels them.

1. God is without beginning. "In the beginning" God created the world (Gen. 1:1). God was then before the beginning of it; and what point can be set wherein God began, if he were before the beginning of created things? God was without beginning, though all other things had time and beginning from him. As unity is before all numbers, so is God before all his creatures. Abraham called upon the name of the everlasting God (Gen. 21:33) the eternal God." It is opposed to the heathen gods, which were but of yesterday, new coined, and so new; but the eternal God was before the world was made. In that sense it is to be understood; `The mystery which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the command of the everlasting God, make known to all nations for the obedience of faith" (Rom. 16:26). The gospel is not preached by the command of a new and temporary god, but of that God that was before all ages: though the manifestation of it be in time, yet the purpose and resolve of it was from eternity. If there were decrees before the foundation of the world, there was a Decree before the foundation of the world. Before the foundation of the world he loved Christ as a Mediator; a fore-ordination of him was before the foundation of the world (John 17:24); a choice of men, and therefore a Chooser before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4); a grace given in Christ before the world

began (II Tim. 1:9), and therefore a Donor of that grace. From those places, saith Crellius, it appears that God was before the foundation of the world, but they do not assert an absolute eternity; but to be before all creatures is equivalent to his being from eternity. Time began with the foundation of the world; but God being before time, could have no beginning in time. Before the beginning of the creation, and the beginning of time, there could be nothing but eternity; nothing but what was uncreated, that is, nothing but what was without beginning. To be in time is to have a beginning; to be before all time is never to have a beginning, but always to be; for as between Creator and creatures there is no medium, so between time and eternity there is no medium. It is as easily deduced that he that was before all creatures is eternal, as he that made all creatures is God. If he had a beginning, he must have it from another, or from himself; if from another, that from whom he received his being would be better than he, so more a God than he. He cannot be God that is not supreme; he cannot be supreme that owes his being to the power of another. He would not be said only to have immortality as he is (I Tim. 6:16), if he had it dependent upon another; nor could he have a beginning from himself; if he had given beginning to himself, then he was once nothing; there was a time when he was not; if he was not, how could he be the Cause of himself? It is impossible for any to give a beginning and being to itself: if it acts it must exist, and so exist before it existed. A thing would exist as a cause before it existed as an effect. He that is not, cannot be the cause that he is; if, therefore, God doth exist, and hath not his being from another, he must exist from eternity. Therefore, when we say God is of and from himself, we mean not that God gave being to himself; but it is negatively to be understood that he hath no cause of existence without himself. Whatsoever number of millions of millions of years we can imagine before the creation of the world, yet God was infinitely before those; he is therefore called the "Ancient of Days" (Dan. 7:9), as being before all days and time, and eminently containing in himself all times and ages. Though, indeed, God cannot properly be called ancient, that will testify that he is decaying, and shortly will not be; no more than he can be called young, which would signify that he was not long before. All created things are new and fresh; but no creature can find out any beginning of God: it is impossible there should be any beginning of him.

2. God is without end. He always was, always is, and always will be what he is. He remains always the same in being; so far from any change, that no shadow of it can touch him (James 1:17). He will continue in being as long as he hath already enjoyed it; and if we could add never so many millions of years together, we are still as far from an end as from a beginning; for "the Lord shall endure forever" (Ps. 9:7). As it is impossible he should not be, being from all eternity, so it is impossible that he should not be to all eternity. The Scripture is most plentiful in testimonies of this eternity of God, *á parte post*, or after the creation of the world: he is said to "live forever" (Rev. 4:9, 10). The earth shall perish, but God shall "endure forever," and his "years shall have no end" (Ps. 102:27).

Plants and animals grow up from small beginnings, arrive to their full growth, and decline again, and have always remarkable alterations in their nature; but there is no declination in God by all the revolutions of time. Hence some think the incorruptibility of the Deity was signified by the shittim, or cedar wood, whereof the ark was made, it being of an incorruptible nature (Exod. 25:10). That which had no beginning of duration can never have an end, or any interruptions in it. Since God never depended upon any, what should make him cease to be what eternally he hath been, or put a stop to the continuance of his perfections? He cannot will his own destruction; that is against universal nature in all things to cease from being, if they can preserve themselves. He cannot desert his own being, because he cannot but love himself as the best and chiefest good. The reason that anything decays is either its own native weakness, or a superior power of something contrary to it. There is no weakness in the nature of God that can introduce any corruption, because he is infinitely simple without any mixture; nor can he be overpowered by anything else; a weaker cannot hurt him, and a stronger than he there cannot be; nor can he be outwitted or circumvented, because of his infinite wisdom. As he received his being from none, so he cannot be deprived of it by any: as he doth necessarily exist, so he doth necessarily always exist. This, indeed, is the property of God; nothing so proper to him as always to be. Whatsoever perfections any being hath, if it be not eternal, it is not divine. God only is immortal; he only is so by a necessity of nature. Angels, souls, and bodies too, after the resurrection, shall be immortal, not by nature, but grant; they are subject to return to nothing, if that word that raised them from nothing should speak them into nothing again. It is as easy with God to strip them of it, as to invest them with it; nay, it is impossible but that they should perish, if God should withdraw his power from preserving them, which he exerted in creating them; but God is immovably fixed in his own being; that as none gave him his life, so none can deprive him of his life, or the least particle of it. Not a jot of the happiness and life which God infinitely possesses can be lost; it will be as durable to everlasting, as it hath been possessed from everlasting.

3. There is no succession in God. God is without succession or change. It is a part 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" (Ps. 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.

(3.) God is his own eternity. He is not eternal by grant, and the disposal of any other, but by nature and essence. The eternity of God is nothing else but the duration of God; and the duration of God is nothing else but his existence enduring. If eternity were anything distinct from God, and not of the essence of God, then there would be something which was not God, necessary to perfect

God. As immortality is the great perfection of a rational creature, so eternity is the choice perfection of God, yea, the gloss and lustre of all others. Every perfection would be imperfect, if it were not always a perfection. God is essentially whatsoever he is, and there is nothing in God but his essence. Duration or continuance in being in creatures, differs from their being; for they might exist but for one instant, in which case they may be said to have being, but not duration, because all duration includes *prius et posterius*. All creatures may cease from being if it be the pleasure of God; they are not, therefore, durable by their essence, and therefore are not their own duration, no more than they are their own existence. And though some creatures, as angels, and souls, may be called everlasting, as a perpetual life is communicated to them by God; yet they can never be called their own eternity, because such a duration is not simply necessary, nor essential to them, but accidental, depending upon the pleasure of another; there is nothing in their nature that can hinder them from losing it, if God, from whom they received it, should design to take it away; but as God is his own necessity of existing, so he is his own duration in existing; as he doth necessarily exist by himself, so he will always necessarily exist by himself.

(4.) Hence all the perfections of God are eternal. In regard of the Divine eternity, all things in God are eternal; his power, mercy, wisdom, justice, knowledge. God himself were not eternal if any of his perfections, which are essential to him, were not eternal also; he had not else been a perfect God from all eternity, and so his whole self had not been eternal. If anything belonging to the nature of a thing be wanting, it cannot be said to be that thing which it ought to be. If anything requisite to the nature of God had been wanting one moment, he could not have been said to be an eternal God.

The Essence of God's Eternity

II. God is eternal. The Spirit of God in Scripture condescends to our capacities in signifying the eternity of God by days and years, which are terms belonging to time, whereby we measure it (Ps. 102:27). But we must no more conceive that God is bounded or measured by time, and hath succession of days, because of those expressions, than we can conclude him to have a body, because members are ascribed to him in Scripture, to help our conceptions of his glorious nature and operations. Though years are ascribed to him, yet they are such as cannot be numbered, cannot be finished, since there is no proportion between the duration of God, and the years of men. "The number of his years cannot be searched out, for he makes small the drops of water; they pour down rain according to the vapor thereof (Job 36:26, 27). The numbers of the drops of rain which have fallen in all parts of the earth since the creation of the world, if subtracted from the number of the years of God, would be found a small quantity, a mere nothing, to the years of God. As all the nations in the world

compared with God, are but as the "drop of a bucket, worse than nothing, than vanity" (Isa. 40:15); so all the ages of the world, if compared with God, amount not to so much as the one hundred thousandth part of a minute; the minutes from the creation may be numbered, but the years of the duration of God being infinite, are without measure. As one day is to the life of man, so are a thousand years to the life of God. The Holy Ghost expresseth himself to the capacity of man, to give us some notion of an infinite duration, by a resemblance suited to the capacity of man. If a thousand years be but as a day to the life of God, then as a year is to the life of man, so are three hundred and sixty-five thousand years to the life of God; and as seventy years are to the life of man, so are twenty-five millions four hundred and fifty thousand years to the life of God. Yet still, since there is no proportion between time and eternity, we must dart our thoughts beyond all those; for years and days measure only the duration of created things, and of those only that are material and corporeal, subject to the motion of the heavens, which makes days and years. Sometimes this eternity is expressed by parts, as looking backward and forward; by the differences of time, "past, present, and to come" (Rev. 1:8), "which was, and is, and is to come" (Rev. 4:8). Though this might be spoken of anything in being, though but for an hour, it was the last minute, it is now, and it will be the next minute; yet the Holy Ghost would declare something proper to God, as including all parts of time; he always was, is now, and always shall be. It might always be said of him, he was, and it may always be said of him, he will be; there is no time when he began, no time when he shall cease. It cannot be said of a creature he always was, he always is what he was, and he always will be what he is; but God always is what he was, and always will be what he is; so that it is a very significant expression of the eternity of God, as can be suited to our capacities.

1. His eternity is evident, by the name God gives himself (Exod. 3:14): "And God said unto Moses, I am that I am; thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel, `I Am hath sent me unto you.'" This is the name whereby he is distinguished from all creatures; I Am, is his proper name. This description being in the present tense, shows that his essence knows no past, nor future; if it were *he was*, it would intimate he were not now what he once was; if it were *he will be*, it would intimate he were not yet what he will be; but *I Am*; I am the only being, the root of all beings; he is therefore, at the greatest distance from not being, and that is eternal. So that *is* signifies his eternity, as well as his perfection and immutability. As *I Am* speaks the want of no blessedness, so it speaks the want of no duration; and therefore the French, wherever they find this word Jehovah, in the Scripture, which we translate Lord, and Lord eternal, render it the Eternal,—I am always and immutably the same. The eternity of God is opposed to the volubility of time, which is extended into past, present and to come. Our time is but a small drop, as a sand to all the atoms and small particles of which the world is made; but God is an unbounded sea of being. "I Am that I Am"; *i.e.* an infinite life; I have not that now, which I had not formerly; I shall not

afterwards have that which I have not now; I am that in every moment which I was, and will be in all moments of time; nothing can be added to me, nothing can be detracted from me; there is nothing superior to him, which can detract from him; nothing desirable that can be added to him. Now if there were any beginning and end of God, any succession in him, he could not be "I Am"; for in regard of what was past, he would not be; in regard of what was to come, he is not yet; and upon this account a heathen argues well; of all creatures it may be said they were, or they will be; but of God it cannot be said anything else but *est*, God is, because he fills an eternal duration. A creature cannot be said to be, if it be not yet, nor if it be not now, but hath been. God only can be called "I Am"; all creatures have more of not being, than being; for every creature was nothing from eternity, before it was made something in time; and if it be incorruptible in its whole nature, it will be nothing to eternity after it hath been something in time; and if it be not corruptible in its nature, as the angels, or in every part of its nature, as man in regard of his soul; yet it hath not properly a being, because it is dependent upon the pleasure of God to continue it, or deprive it of it; and while it is, it is mutable, and all mutability is a mixture of not being. If God therefore be properly "I Am," *i.e.* being, it follows that he always was; for if he were not always, he must, as was argued before, be produced by some other, or by himself; by another he could not; then he had not been God, but a creature; nor by himself, for then as producing, he must be before himself, as produced; he had been before he was. And he always will be; for being "I Am," having all being in himself, and the fountain of all being to everything else, how can he ever have his name changed to I am not.

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, radically, 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 (I Tim. 6:16) not only that he is immortal, but he hath immortality in a full possession; free simple, 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" (Ps. 41:13). 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 wanted 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 filling 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.

The Uniqueness of God's Eternity

III. Eternity is only proper to God, and not communicable. It is as great a madness to ascribe eternity to the creature, as to deprive the Lord of the creature of eternity. It is so proper to God, that when the apostle would prove the deity of Christ, he proves it by his immutability and eternity, as well as his creating power: "Thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail" (Heb. 1:10-12). The argument had not strength, if eternity belonged essentially to any but God; and therefore he is said only to have "immortality" (I Tim. 6:16): all other things

receive their being from him, and can be deprived of their being by him: all things depend on him; he of none: all other things are like clothes, which would consume if God preserved them not. Immortality is appropriated to God, *i.e.* an independent immortality. Angels and souls have an immortality, but by donation from God, not by their own essence; dependent upon their Creator, not necessary in their own nature: God might have annihilated them after he had created them; so that their duration cannot properly be called an eternity, it being extrinsical to them, and dependent upon the will of their Creator, by whom they may be extinguished; it is not an absolute and necessary, but a precarious immortality. Whatsoever is not God, is temporary; whatsoever is eternal, is God. It is a contradiction to say a creature can be eternal; as nothing eternal is created, so nothing created is eternal. What is distinct from the nature of God cannot be eternal, eternity being the essence of God. Every creature, in the notion of a creature, speaks a dependence on some cause, and therefore cannot be eternal. As it is repugnant to the nature of God not to be eternal, so it is repugnant to the nature of a creature to be eternal; for then a creature would be equal to the Creator, and the Creator, or the Cause, would not be before the creature, or effect. It would be all one to admit many gods, as many eternals; and all one to say, God can be created, as to say a creature can be uncreated, which is to be eternal.

1. Creation is a producing something from nothing. What was once nothing, cannot therefore be eternal; not being was eternal; therefore its being could not be eternal, for it should be then before it was, and would be something when it was nothing. It is the nature of a creature to be nothing before it was created; what was nothing before it was, cannot be equal with God in an eternity of duration.
2. There is no creature but is mutable, therefore not eternal. As it had a change from nothing to something, so it may be changed from being to not being. If the creature were not mutable, it would be most perfect, and so would not be a creature, but God; for God only is most perfect. It is as much the essence of a creature to be mutable, as it is the essence of God to be immutable. Mutability and eternity are utterly inconsistent.
3. No creature is infinite, therefore not eternal: to be infinite in duration is all one as to be infinite in essence. It is as reasonable to conceive a creature immense, filling all places at once, as eternal, extended to all ages; because neither can be without infiniteness, which is the property of the Deity. A creature may as well be without bounds of places, as limitations of time.
4. No effect of an intellectual free agent can be equal in duration to its cause. The productions of natural agents are as ancient often as themselves; the sun produceth a beam as old in time as itself; but who ever heard of a piece of wise

workmanship as old as the wise artificer? God produced a creature, not necessarily and naturally, as the sun doth a beam, but freely, as an intelligent agent. The sun was not necessary; it might be or not be, according to the pleasure of God. A free act of the will is necessary to precede in order of time, as the cause of such effects as are purely voluntary. Those causes that act as soon as they exist act naturally, necessarily, not freely, and cannot cease from acting. But suppose a creature might have existed by the will of God from eternity; yet, as some think, it could not be said absolutely, and in its own nature to be eternal, because eternity was not of the essence of it. The creature could not be its own duration; for though it were from eternity, it might not have been from eternity, because its existence depended upon the free will of God, who might have chose whether he would have created it or no. God only is eternal; "the first and the last, the beginning and the end"; who, as he subsisted before any creature had a being, so he will eternally subsist if all creatures were reduced to nothing.

Author

Stephen Charnock, who was born in London, in 1642 entered Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and there was converted. His public ministry began in Southwark, London, after receiving his B.D. from the university. In 1650 he earned a fellowship at New College, Oxford, where he associated with Thomas Goodwin and John Howe. He became chaplain in 1655 to Henry Cromwell, governor of Ireland. He earned his reputation in Dublin, where his preaching without notes greatly impressed his listeners. With the coming of the Restoration, he lost his position and lived in London in semi-retirement until his death. For a short time he was joint pastor with Thomas Watson of the church at Crosby Hall.

Charnock published only one sermon in his lifetime, his greatest works being published after his death. *A Discourse of Divine Providence* was published in 1680 and followed in 1682 by *On the Existence and Attributes of God*. His complete works were published in nine volumes in 1815 with a biography prefixed by Edward Parsons. Charnock's style was lofty and sublime. He wrote of God's attributes in a declarative, nonspeculative manner. He set forth the divine attributes as qualities (not impersonal abstractions) observable in God's dealings with men. He was grave without being dull and thorough without being wearisome.