

Behold Your God - Eternality

Within Tolkien's book *The Hobbit*, there is an encounter between the evil Gollum and Bilbo Baggins. Gollum wants to eat Bilbo, but Bilbo challenges Gollum to a game of riddles. If either of them asks the other one a riddle which he cannot answer, he loses. At one point, Gollum asks Bilbo this riddle:

*This thing all things devours:
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays king, ruins town,
And beats high mountain down.*

Bilbo thinks and then comes to the right answer: Time. Time devours all things, birds, beasts, mountains, towns, iron and stone. Whatever or whoever you may be, time will affect you and change you. Time may afford you the chance to grow and get better, but at some point, time will wear you down, and overtake you with decay and weakness.

None of us can escape time. We are sometimes amazed by it, amazed that it keeps marching on, and that just yesterday we were such and such an age. We're amazed to find the increasing amount of people younger than us. We're amazed to hear that a certain year that we lived through was twenty years ago, or longer. The number of years grows larger, and yet we don't always feel it has been that. We feel like time is a river pushing us downstream, and we are always amazed at how far along it has pushed us.

But there is one person for whom this is not true. The true and living God is not only infinite regarding space, as we learned last week, He is infinite regarding time. The living God is eternal and unchanging.

It's very difficult to illustrate God's eternity and immutability with the narratives of Scripture, because history, is by definition the story of the past, the account of the succession of events in time. But perhaps the closest we can come is something like the account of Daniel's vision here in chapter 7. Here in Daniel 7, we will behold our eternal and immutable God.

Daniel 7:1 *In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head while on his bed. Then he wrote down the dream, telling the main facts.*

Daniel is not the young man he was when he was deported to Babylon from Judah in around 605 B.C. At that time, he and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were in their late teens. When they refused the king's meat and God rewarded and blessed them, they were just entering adulthood. When Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he was barely in his twenties.

But those years have ticked by, and this is fifty years later. Nebuchadnezzar has died, and a string of assassinations and court intrigues have seen one king after another come and go: his son Evil-Merodach (2 years), murdered and replaced by his brother-in-law, Neriglassar (4 years), succeeded by his son Labashi-Marduk (only a boy) and killed 9 months into his reign as part of a conspiracy, succeeded by Nabonidus. Nabonidus was really the last king of Babylon, and ruled for 16 years, but he was away in Arabia so much, that he had chosen to make his son Belshazzar his co-regent.

Daniel gets this vision the first year that Belshazzar takes the throne. In some ways, Daniel has lived through change, change and more change. He watched his homeland be ravaged by Babylonian soldiers. He had to live and work in a foreign culture. Indeed, 10 years after this vision, a finger will write on the wall that Belshazzar has been weighed and found wanting and that very

night the Babylonian kingdom will change hands into the Persian. Fifteen years after this moment, Daniel will find himself in a lion's den.

In some ways, Daniel of all people knows about time and change. He knows the truth that Isaac Watts penned when he wrote

*Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.*

So what Daniel receives in this vision is a vision of the eternal, immutable God. Daniel is going to see this eternal God work with time, time accelerated so that hundreds of years pass in seconds, and then time stands still, as God's royal court determines events. Daniel is going to see what Scripture calls the times of the Gentiles, which is the period of time from the Babylonian Captivity, all the way until a Jewish Messiah sits again on David's throne. Remember, Daniel is an Israelite, and deeply concerned with the fate of his people. This vision describes how different kingdoms will dominate Israel, until Israel's king comes. It's actually Daniel's personal version of the dream Nebuchadnezzar had in chapter 2. And through this, Daniel will have more than ever confirmed to him that the true and the living God is eternal and immutable.

² Daniel spoke, saying, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the Great Sea. ³ "And four great beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other. ⁴ "The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings. I watched till its wings were plucked off; and it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand on two feet like a man, and a man's heart was given to it. ⁵ "And suddenly another beast, a second, like a bear. It was raised up on one side, and had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. And they said thus to it: 'Arise, devour much flesh!' ⁶ "After this I looked, and there was another, like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird. The beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it. ⁷ "After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, exceedingly strong. It had huge iron teeth; it was devouring, breaking in pieces, and trampling the residue with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. ⁸ "I was considering the horns, and there was another horn, a little one, coming up among them, before whom three of the first horns were plucked out by the roots. And there, in this horn, were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking pompous words.

In his vision, Daniel sees the sea, and the wind whips up the sea. And from this disturbed sea emerge four animals, one after the other. First, a lion, with eagle's wings, whose wings are plucked, and it ends up standing on two feet. Second a bear, a lopsided bear, with its last meal still in its mouth. It's told to devour. Third, a leopard, also with wings, but this time with four wings, and also four heads. What frightened Daniel was the fourth animal, unlike all the other animals– it's not a lion, a bear or a leopard. It's just a beast, and it's terrifying. Iron teeth, bronze claws, devouring with its mouth, it smashing with its limbs, stomping with its feet. In Daniel's words, exceedingly strong – seemingly unstoppable. Its head has ten horns, and then an eleventh horn comes up and pushes out three of the ten. And this eleventh horn has eyes and a mouth which speaks.

Well, what does all this mean? Daniel is told in verse 17 that these four animals represent four kings, and therefore kingdoms.

The first animal is like a lion with eagle's wings. Which is the king of all beasts, and the king of birds? The lion and the eagle. Who was the human king greater than all others? Nebuchadnezzar. He was an absolute monarch. The head of gold in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Because of his pride, Nebuchadnezzar was humbled, like a bird plucked of its feathers and wings. However, after seven periods of time, he was given again the mind of a man, like a lion stood on its two feet. The first

beast is Babylon, symbolised by Nebuchadnezzar. If you remember pictures of the gates of Ishtar from Babylon, one of the things which lined the walls were lions.

The second kingdom is the one which replaces Babylon, represented by a lopsided bear. The bear is large and ferocious and not as dignified as the lion. In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the second kingdom was the kingdom of the Medes and Persians. Just like the bear was lopsided, so one part of the kingdom, the Persians ended up stronger than the Medes. The bear was the Medo-Persian empire which took over from Babylon in 539 B.C. and continued until 331 B.C. Who took over from the Persians? The Greeks.

The third kingdom is the leopard, with four wings and four heads. A leopard is characterised by being sleek, agile, and very fast. With the addition of four wings, this will be blindingly quick.

Alexander the Great conquered the known world in just eleven years, conquering from Egypt to India. When he died at age 33, his kingdom was divided amongst his generals. How many generals were there that each took a piece of the empire? Well, how many heads did this leopard have? Four. Daniel, writing 200 years in advance, predicted that this kingdom would be divided four ways. And that's exactly what happened. Alexander's four generals: Ptolemy, Seleucus, Lysimachus and Cassander.

Well, which empire replaced that of the Greeks? Rome, the kingdom of iron, stronger and fiercer than all the ones before. This beast has great iron teeth, and takes over the whole earth. By the year 146 B.C., Rome had defeated all the Greek states, and by 117, empire stretched from Spain to Babylon, from Britain to Egypt.

The angel then goes on to say that from this Roman empire will come ten kings. An eleventh Roman king will come, supplant three of the kings. And once on the throne, he will speak blasphemous words, try to change times and law, persecute God's people.

Now Daniel has just seen a vision of four kingdoms, spread over at least 500 years, and I think well over 2500 years. But it is what happens next is what really shows us our eternal God.

⁹ *"I watched till thrones were put in place, And the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, And the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, Its wheels a burning fire;*

¹⁰ *A fiery stream issued And came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, And the books were opened. ¹¹ "I watched then because of the sound of the pompous words which the horn was speaking; I watched till the beast was slain, and its body destroyed and given to the burning flame.*

Like the in the book of Revelation, the scene cuts from Earth to Heaven. Here we see the Divine Council taking its seats. This Council is made up of glorious beings. We meet this council in many other places – we see it in Revelation several times, Job, in Psalm 82, Psalm 89, it is probably there in Genesis 1, Micaiah the prophet describes it to Ahab and Jehoshaphat, we clearly see the princes from this council in Daniel 10. This council rules and judges concerning events in the world. And we'll see the results of this court's decision.

But the supreme and transcendentally superior head of this council is named here: the Ancient of Days.

Who is this Ancient of Days? Well, we see a second person receive the kingdom from the Ancient of Days. Just as Daniel had seen king Nabonidus make his son Belshazzar his co-regent, so in this vision, the Ancient of Days is going to give and share the kingdom with the Son of Man. That means the Ancient of Days here is a manifestation of God, particularly of God the Father.

Here is the first truth about God we learn here:

First God is eternal. He is named three times in this chapter, Ancient of Days. What does that

mean? It is the idea of days without end. It is easier for us to imagine something existing going on forever, but how do we grasp the idea of someone who had always been? No beginning to God. Everyone in the Bible has a genealogy: so-and-so was begot by so-and-so, and he begat so-and-so. But God has no one before Him in the genealogy. God simply, always was. Daniel is seeing a parade of nations, the rise and fall of kings, but there is one King here who had no beginning, who never ascended to His throne, who never grew up and developed, but simply always was.

As Moses put it, *2 Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.*

Look at the descriptions of the Ancient of Days: *His garment was white as snow, And the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, Its wheels a burning fire; ¹⁰ A fiery stream issued And came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him.*

Millions of beings are serving the Ancient of Days – not the other glorious beings seated at the divine court. Indeed, each of these beings is not eternal. They might last forever, but they have not existed forever. Only the Ancient of Days is eternal. No, He is the centre, and He sits on a throne of flame, with fire coming from it, picture of pure and powerful judgement and righteous ruling. His garment is brilliant white, absolute purity, and then His hair is also white as wool. This white hair is an image of eternal wisdom.

We see something like this again when the Risen Lord Jesus appears to John and the description of Him is ¹⁴ *His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; (Rev. 1:14)*

Now in a culture where white and gray hair is something to be coloured away, we might not fully understand this image of hair as white as wool. But in Scripture, this picture God's eternity without fading. When we see someone ageing and growing in wisdom, that white hair begins to become a mark of how the years have added grace and wisdom. As Proverbs put it, ³¹ *The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, If it is found in the way of righteousness. (Prov. 16:31)*

But for us, what we gain in wisdom and experience, we lose in physical strength and endurance and mental freshness. But for God, it is not so. To look upon an eternal face is to see timeless strength and wisdom. J.R.R Tolkien helps us get a glimpse of this idea of the marriage of age and youth, when he describes the death of King Aragorn. Aragorn is a King blessed with enormous long life, who has the power to surrender his life up before it wastes away. And his wife Queen Arwen weeps as he says goodbye, Tolkien writes, "Then a great beauty was revealed in him, so that all who after came there looked on him in wonder; for they saw that the grace of his youth, and the valour of his manhood, and the wisdom and majesty of his age were blended together. And long there he lay, an image of the splendour of the Kings of Men in glory undimmed before the breaking of the world." I believe that is what you see when you look into the face of the Risen Jesus Christ: the grace of youth, the valour of manhood, the wisdom and majesty of age combined into one eternal face: the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

But Daniel sees something else about God. In verse 11, we read that he sees this final beast with the blasphemous horn slain, and the final kingdom is then given to someone else.

¹³ *"I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. ¹⁴ Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His*

dominion is an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed. (Dan. 7:1-14)

Here we read of a second person, a divine-human person. He is standing in the Heavenly Court, meaning He has access to this special place, but He is like the Son of Man. This can only be the Messiah. He is both God and Man. He is brought to the Ancient of Days, and the Ancient of Days gives the Son of Man a kingdom. It is a kingdom that rules over every tongue and tribe and nation. And notice what kind of dominion it is: everlasting, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom shall not be destroyed. So since Messiah Jesus is God, we learn something else about God:

Second, God is everlasting.

For the kingdom co-ruled by the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man to be everlasting, what must be true about them? God the Father, and the God the Son, and God the Spirit are everlasting. Israel lost its glory after Solomon. Daniel sees that Babylon will fall, and Persia will fall, and Greece will fall, and even this seemingly unstoppable Rome will fall. Every world empire, from the Babylonian to the British has had its day. But there is coming a kingdom upon which the sun will never set. That's because its king is everlasting.

But in God's case, being everlasting means He is immutable. He is unchanging, perfectly constant. Only one Person will never age, weaken, or die. Because God is perfect, He cannot change for the better, because He does not need to improve. He cannot change for the worse, for then He would cease to be the perfect God. And since change is experienced in time, we see that time will not change God in the least. He is everlasting, but everlasting in all His perfections.

The psalmist thought about the stars and compared them to how everlasting God is:

²⁵ Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. ²⁶ They will perish, but You will endure; Yes, they will all grow old like a garment; Like a cloak You will change them, And they will be changed. ²⁷ But You are the same, And Your years will have no end. (Ps. 102:25-27)

As the everlasting God, He does not change in His character. He does not mature. He does not grow cynical, or become more mellow. God never experiences moods. He does not shift in His stance towards you, or slowly grow cold towards you.

Heb 13:8 *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*

Jam 1:17 *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*

Not only His character, but His promises will not change, because they are rooted in His unchanging nature. ⁶ *"For I am the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob. (Mal. 3:6)*

He cannot be persuaded to change His mind, for what He knows is everything, and how He knows it is with perfect wisdom. Daniel, now in his seventies knew that God was going to keep His promises to Israel even after Daniel's body would sleep in the dust, and when the ages would roll into Persia, Greece, Rome, and beyond.

³⁵ Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for a light by day, The ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, Who disturbs the sea, And its waves roar (The LORD of hosts is His name): ³⁶ "If those ordinances depart From before Me, says the LORD, Then the seed of Israel shall also cease From being a nation before Me forever." (Jer. 31:35-36)

This God will not weaken. He will keep His promises to you, when you weaken.

Now it is manifestly true in Scripture that God changes His arrangements with His people. The book of Hebrews is the ultimate example of the new and better way, the new covenant, the better promises. God has changed what covenant is overseeing His people, what the penalties and arrangements are. But this is not a change in God's intrinsic being. It is a change in the outward arrangements with people. Indeed, when someone is saved, he changes from God's enemy to God's child – but this is not God changing, but the man's nature. As we meet God's conditions, as we change with respect to God's commands, we experience a changed situation from God.

This is very different from what is known as Process Theology, which teaches that God Himself is growing, developing, changing with our world, becoming and in process. But an everlastingly perfect being has no reason to change, does not change, cannot change,

But Daniel receives a third comfort about God through this vision.

Third, God can see and experience all time equally vividly.

When we read of this court scene, we have the sense that it is almost independent of these kingdoms. The court sits enthroned above and beyond the flow of time, surveying it and controlling it. What God has just done is show Daniel four kingdoms stretching over hundreds of years. And indeed, I believe this eleventh horn, the final Roman king, is only slain at the second coming of Messiah, because Jesus quotes this very verse, when He is tried before the Sanhedrin, telling them that they will see the Son of Man coming in great glory in the clouds. This means that this Roman beast is finally slain long after Daniel might have understood it. This prophecy stretches well over 2500 years. But God does not strain to see 200 years ahead. Five hundred years are not further off for Him.

As Peter told us, ⁸ *But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.* (2 Pet. 3:8)

We can keep track of events in our day using a clock, and we can see our 12 hours represented on its face. But God can do that with millennia, with thousands of years, or millions, or billions for that matter. He can survey all that has been, and is, and ever will be without so much as moving His eyes.

This is why He declared to Israel: ⁹ *Remember the former things of old, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me,* ¹⁰ *Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,'* (Isa. 46:9-10)

Daniel is beholding the God who never has to rush, who is never behind, never late, never trying to catch up or keep up. Daniel is seeing that this God is in control of Israel's future, this God is in control of the Gentiles. God is not at the mercy of time, but has it all in His view: your whole past, your present, and your entire, everlasting future.

But lest we think that this eternal God is not involved in our time, this court scene teaches us a fourth truth about our God.

Fourth, God knows where we are in time and can act in time.

Now even though this divine court is somehow independent of the timeline of Babylon, or the era of

Persia, or the time of Greece or Rome, when God chooses to act in time, He can do so.

²¹ "I was watching; and the same horn was making war against the saints, and prevailing against them, ²² "until the Ancient of Days came, and a judgment was made in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom. ²³ "Thus he said: 'The fourth beast shall be A fourth kingdom on earth, Which shall be different from all other kingdoms, And shall devour the whole earth, Trample it and break it in pieces. ²⁴ The ten horns are ten kings Who shall arise from this kingdom. And another shall rise after them; He shall be different from the first ones, And shall subdue three kings. ²⁵ He shall speak pompous words against the Most High, Shall persecute the saints of the Most High, And shall intend to change times and law. Then the saints shall be given into his hand For a time and times and half a time. ²⁶ 'But the court shall be seated, And they shall take away his dominion, To consume and destroy it forever. ²⁷ Then the kingdom and dominion, And the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, Shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And all dominions shall serve and obey Him.' (Dan. 7:24-27)

This is quite amazing, because Daniel is experiencing a vision of something in the future, but in this court, God is able to act, and that act becomes future history. Notice the time words. Verse 22 – *until* the Ancient of Days came, and the *time* came for the saints to possess the kingdom. Verse 25 - **Then** the saints shall be given into his hand **For a time and times and half a time.** ²⁶ 'But the court **shall** be seated, And they **shall** take away his dominion, To consume and destroy it forever.

Though God is dealing here with multiple eras, He is able to work with each and insert the Messianic kingdom precisely when He wants to.

God knows our time and responds to us and works with us in time. We read Scriptures such as ⁴ *But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,* (Gal. 4:4)

³¹ *"because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.* (Acts 17:31)

Now there is a debate among Christian theologians as to whether God experiences time in Himself, whether He is atemporal or timeless, or whether, at least since the creation of the universe, He experiences succession. Classic theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas said God experiences no duration, no sequence of events, no sense of successive events. Theologians such as John Feinberg and William Lane Craig suggest that God does experience time. The debate is too technical and philosophical for our purposes here. But it is enough to say, while we do not know what God's inner experience of time is, we know that externally He relates to us and responds to us in time. That doesn't mean He changes. He is immutable, but not immobile. He does not change, but He is not static, uninvolved. He always responds.

The true and the living God is eternal, everlasting without change, sees all time equally vividly, and can respond to us in time.

To know the God of the universe is to know the I AM. Encapsulated in His name is I was, I am, and I will be. We all have birthdays and He saw all of us on our first day, but He had no first day. He has watched us as we age, but He has never aged. He will not weaken or age, but will remain perfect, even as we weaken and age. As we grow to resemble Him, He will remain as brilliantly, beautifully perfect as He always was. He sees the entire scope of our existence, into eternity future in one moment, and yet He will walk with us, one moment at a time, stooping to our level, living with us in time and space. Yes, time *all things devours: Birds, beasts, trees, flowers; Gnaws iron, bites steel; Grinds hard stones to meal; Slays king, ruins town, And beats high mountain down.*

¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17)