

Eternity

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Preacher: Canon Dr. J.I. Packer

[0 : 00] I am glad to be speaking to you, though I have to begin, I'm afraid, with an apology. The title of my talk was given out as Eternity.

Now that's an unruly theme. But I expect that for most of us, most of you, this has, forgive me, misled you.

What do you mean? Well, I mean that I should, I think, have called the talk Eternality.

Why, you ask? Well, that's the name, actually, which a number of theologians give to the matter about which I'm going to speak to you.

Namely, the Eternality of God, which is often referred to by theologians as his eternity.

[1 : 15] Two words are treated as synonyms. And the Eternality of God is not the same subject, of course, as what I expect you were expecting, which is some reflections on the fact that we have a glorious hope in front of us, which is promised to us, guaranteed to us by our Lord, which is therefore ours in the most categorical and definitive sense, and which certainly we are moving towards by faith in Christ, in fellowship here at St. John's.

Those were going to be the notes struck in what I expect you were expecting. Am I not right?

But, well, first of all, I realized I'm going to talk about the Eternality of God, and that will surprise people.

And then, I wasn't expecting this, I find that I have not brought my notes, which is another thing that I didn't expect to discover.

Hmm. What am I going to do? Wing it. Thank you for the advice. Best, oh no, here they are.

[3 : 09] I'll do the best I can. Do the best I can. And, as I say, I apologize if you have been misled, and I suppose I should say, if anyone wants to walk out, this is a moment to go.

Now, to business. The Eternality of God is a phrase which theologians do use, just as some of them talk about the Eternity of God with the same meaning.

The meaning that they attach to the phrase is the consistency of God in pursuing his goals, in handling the situations which that involves, the logical, theological progress that he makes, that God makes, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together, make towards the goal that the Bible, in fact, does tell us that God is after.

Now, let me put it, let me put the essence of the matter this way. This is a study, therefore, of God's consistency.

His, let's say it, his coherence is the wrong word, but I don't know a better one just at the moment.

[5 : 23] And perhaps you'll allow me a footnote here, in case you're puzzled. When you get into your nineties, which is where I am, you will find that a funny thing happens, it seems to happen to all of us.

Words, concepts, which are clear to you, words on the tip of your tongue, in fact, which you're just about to use in saying something important, they vanish.

And suddenly you're stuck. If you're giving a talk, this can be embarrassing, unless you can get your friends to laugh it off, as you've just done.

All right. What do I think, then, that I'm going to do? As I said, I found the notes, after all.

I'd better tell you now, they're not very good notes. And as I speak, you will increasingly wonder, I expect, whether they are real notes, or whether this is just some kind of joke, joke that the fellow is playing.

[6 : 44] Well, as I say, the consistency of God pursuing his goals, according to the, well, the, how can I say it, the intermediate, the intermediate pointers, yes, according to the intermediate pointers, pursuing those goals over a long period of time, that is presented to us as a matter of fact, some of it past fact, some of it present fact, some of it future fact.

It's presented to us in the Bible where all these things are laid out. And what I'm going to do this morning is simply survey the elements of the picture that the Bible draws here for us and that means I'm going to say just a little.

It can only be a little, partly because of pressure of time and partly because, frankly, I, for one or two reasons, I won't go into them, I am a bit jumbled this morning and it's partly because I'm a bit jumbled that how can I say it, I shall be speaking a bit gingerly in what I say.

But what I want to say is something which in a sense will be very familiar to you, you will not regard it as strange, you will not regard it as especially illuminating, it's something that you knew before. It is that the God, God the creator and redeemer, God the triune Lord, God is the God who is here, we're never out of his presence, never out of his sight, never out of his mind, and each of us can count on his permanent pastoral care, and when I say he, I'm thinking, let me say explicitly of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit acting in union with each other as they do.

[9 : 45] And I am not thinking in the tritheistic terms in which I'm afraid a lot of people in the churches do think simply because they've never been instructed as to how the Bible shows the Trinity working.

So that's going to be our starting point. The God who is here and is everywhere that we are so that we are always in his presence.

Then I want to say something about the God who was spoken of in this book title by the late Francis Schaeffer as the God who is there.

And this phrase, the God who is there, was offered by Schaeffer as a control for thinking about the world as we live in it, as we know it, as we think about it and talk about it.

God is always there as, shall I say, the fundamental ingredient in the reality that we are trying to focus.

[11 : 20] and that is important in a materialistic age like ours, in which those who are not believers and not in the churches are constantly trying to shift the ultimate focus of our knowledge of the cosmos such as it is away from anything theistic into a materialistic frame in which ultimately it is possible and even necessary to say well so you see it doesn't make sense in the end after all and I pause for a moment to give you a chance to shout disagreement at that way of characterizing

Vancouver in this day and age and I don't hear a word of dissent and I don't think that however long I sat here waiting I should hear a word of dissent I think that we as realists we know very well that that's what we are surrounded by and up against and that's the alternative to the Christian understanding of the God who is there at the root and in all the dimensions of everything and perhaps even as I say it that way you will feel as I must confess I do even as I say it feel that this is something which we

Christians ought to have been saying insisting on affirming making a song and dance about much more than we have been doing for the last what shall I say 50 years the 50 years 100 years the rational lifetime of any and everyone who is sitting in this room we as the Lord's people have been relatively passive and the materialists atheists the pluggers of alternative views of reality have been extremely active and called a great deal of attention to themselves so that people generally have lacked the incentive to focus as the folk further back in our history did focus on

God's revelation scripture and the way that it all the wonderful way in which it all fits together well from that standpoint Schaeffer's book was a godsend it started doing something which hadn't been done for a long time and there are still glad to say you're glad to glad I'm sure to think also it's a reality that has called for articulate expression and will call for articulate expression until the Lord comes back you see how I'm talking about the

Christian witness in the world I know that it's wonderfully performed at shall I say youth and social levels in which people who know the Lord and you know what I mean by that phrase seek to share that precious knowledge but in the academic world though we're very polite to each other the tenor of thought books lectures institutions generally is anti-Christian and inclined to the skeptical view that it all adds up to nothing of importance that by the way is why some of us think it's a marvelous thing that the university in this city should have appointed a

[17 : 15] Christian of maturity as the president of the university it's never happened before will it ever happen again we don't know but in face of all of this the God who is there is the second string or theme that I want to pursue as we think of the consistency of God in working out his purposes and that isn't of course the end of the story thirdly I want us to think a little about about the prospects for the country for the cosmos for the community that we can foresee and remember that

God permeates all of that even though most of it occurs with backs turned to him so that the people doing it they don't think about him they don't think about the things that they've been told that God is concerned about they write off God and they write off the God centered understanding of what's going on around them so we are how can I say we're dealing with the God who's here the God who is there the God who's everywhere and the

God who is always the God whom you can never dismiss as an unreality in this sphere of life study or that aspect of work and planning and so forth he is the God who is always there and will always be there so that this is not something that will change as the years go by well I've already said enough I think for you to realize yes this is something different from what I expected and all right I'll meet you halfway on that and invite you again to get up and go home before you have to listen to any more of me no of what shall

I call it togetherness I'm going to call it where things in which things come together ultimately for the glory of God and you say what's that well it is in actual fact the state of affairs in which God is being praised for things that are praiseworthy that he has been doing and is doing and will continue to do I think that that is worth saying with some emphasis and giving you a chance to react to because we all of us here at St.

John's I'm quite sure we speak of the glory of God as the goal of everything that we do or compass or whatever but we don't cash that phrase by thinking out what it means and I'm telling you that what it means is that folk and we don't count them numberless folk perhaps I dare say numberless folk are praising God for this and this and this which his servants have done are doing are planning to do and it doesn't mean anything less than that so I make that point as I go along I think it's a point which some of us may need to have made because as I say the phrase has become a sort of what do call it now here we are man in his nineties word he knows well has somehow dropped out of his mind well all right give up give up that phraseology and say it in a different way yes there's always a way out hacker if you if you think think yes and get everybody else to think as well if you could do that

[24 : 20] I'm trying this is the overall picture of God at work in this world that he made and sustains and in which specific plans and purposes get worked out according to his will I think I am going to stop there in monologue and invite you to carry on from where I've got to by dialogue I would like to know whether I convinced you so far and I would like to know whether you see what comes next that is what we as the body of

Christ here on earth should be doing in order through the grace of God with the help of God to articulate spell out things states of affairs lines of action whatever that will lead to people praising God for what's being done in his name yes five minutes ago I was speaking to that point and I'm speaking to it again now passing it over to you and inviting you to pick up and run with it starting in the situation that

I've sketched out where we Christians are in the habit of thinking will we glorify God most and best by not making a nuisance of ourselves not challenging what's going on around us acting as I shall I say it acting in the secular sense of the word meekly letting folk with anti-Christian anti-theistic ideas get away with it as we say what better can we do than we actually are doing to make Christ known to establish the whole

Christian way of looking at life looking at the world looking at the future and thinking about the hope that God who is in charge of it all God who is here God who is there God who is ever present is himself doing and going to do and now at last I do shut up and so please carry on the thinking from the point I reached what can we best do and get others to do for the glory of God in these days well first of all do you agree that we haven't done enough

I am currently reading the life of C.S.

[28 : 46] Lewis the late C.S. Lewis that was written by the visitor who's coming to Vancouver next week perhaps he's already here Alistair Alistair McGrath it's an amazingly elaborate and full scale piece of work and from what I know about Alistair McGrath who is professionally a scientist a philosopher of science and a philosopher along the Christian lines that I was hinting at in the things that I said before he's written 20 or 30 major scholarly books and is

I think one of the really outstanding apologists and indeed evangelists on paper of our time yes I'm reading this book and I'm amazed at how thoroughly McGrath has done his work it's the life of Lewis to end all lives of Lewis exhaustiveness is its mark in just about every page and it does I think open some doors which well again I ask you what would you propose to open these doors and call

people's attention in this day and age to the things that

God is planning has been planning to do from the start the things that make sense against the secular background of our culture things that really deserve protest in the highest circles as well as the lowest circles I wish there were some more Alastair McGrath around frankly no I'll ask you this has any one of you read stuff by Alastair McGrath whatever it is Life of Lewis or any of the challenges to paratheism or any of the constructive accounts proposals at any rate with regard to understanding the world around us that

McGrath has been pumping out and he does write very fast pumping out is an improvement for his news has been pumping out for this last well actually 40 years yes it is 40 years and it's 20 or 30 serious scholarly books well I ask anybody read any McGrath and enthused about it I have seen some of his YouTube talk presentation of YouTube not his books but he has given two talks in region college I think Tuesday night and Wednesday night one is on science and religion the other one is commenting by C.S.

Lewis and Dr. Dr. if you're not able to attend there are going to be live streaming so you can go online and they'll be on YouTube as well for a little while so you can see them online if you're not able to be there September 18th is science and faith completing or enriching and September 19th is God's Science and the Meaning of Life C.S.

[33 : 40] Lewis and Richard Dawkins both at 730 at region those free lectures at region at night are good well thank you for telling us that how will that be stream how it went yeah just go on to the region college website and maybe events and it's posted there and there should be a link or something you can log on out there yeah there's a if you I'm on the website now and it actually has a little thing at the bottom that says live stream starts in two days nine hours and 43 minutes so 28 seconds so I think there will be a link so I'm delighted to find that that

McGrath has his shall I say his supporters I think we have a couple of questions here well I was wanting to just make a point is for each person to know their strengths and their weaknesses because God can use both and if you ask God to do that know what you are good at there may be some things that really bug you as a Christian and you need to speak out or do something or pray about it but really get that into your mind to do something about something that God reveals to you to do because actually it might not seem very big but it will be a chunk in what God's doing in the world and I think that's what God does uses little people as well as people who might think as big and just be guided by God know what you want to read your Bible and really move forward yeah and another thank you thank you yes um uh

Dr. Packer uh I actually had a question actually about eternity uh uh you had uh said before that God was everyone and I I mean I think I think everyone accepts that um temporally God is always has been always was always is and always will be um the um say the the vertical plane but I'll say the horizontal plane of say spatial omnipresence is that something you also hold well I think that when we start thinking along this line we've got to remember that what we're talking about is not God omnipresent in a system which is greater than he is yeah a system in other words which is a repository for God it's the other way around

God is the repository for the whole of this cosmos as we knew it did I say the whole of it this expanding universe which no one can keep track of universe which gets larger even as one tries to say how large it appears at the moment well I think so but God how can I say God now I'm going to use a word which I'm perhaps misusing I'm going to say embodies it isn't anything like any form of embodiment known to us that I'm talking about it's simply God in and I'm saying that God embodies the whole cosmos and there are no limits to him so as the cosmos goes on expanding the universe grows larger well the relation between everything that is and God will remain the same see that and I do I that's something I do mean to say and I do hope is true

I think there's every reason to suppose that it is true from the Bible and I when I try to talk about reality reality I try to highlight that because otherwise people don't know what I'm talking about I mean that as long as people go on thinking that I'm talking about a cosmos of something or other in which God is contained they are off my wavelength just as they're away from the truth and I want to blow the whistle at that point