

# Romans 1:18-32

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[ 0 : 00 ] I mentioned a few moments ago, we're going to be contemplating something this evening that's very difficult to contemplate because our minds are very limited in a lot of ways, in particular in this area.

A lot of you here will probably already be amazed by God, by who God is, by what he can do, by what he has done in Christ.

And so I hope that what follows, some of the thoughts and ideas, will be an encouragement to you, to even stimulate your amazement even further.

Others of you probably are too big in your own eyes, and God is too small in your eyes. And so I hope that the thoughts that follow will challenge you to open your eyes a bit wider, so you can get a more clear glimpse of just how great our God is.

Be amazed by him. And all of us, at some point, perhaps a lot of points in our life, all of us forget how other God is from us.

[ 1 : 20 ] He's not like us in a lot of ways. He's not just a bigger and better version of humans. He is bigger than us, and he is a lot better than us, but that's not all he is.

We often understand God as being in our image, as being like us, but a bit better. And we get into trouble because of that.

We ask questions like, does God really understand me? Does God really hear my prayers? Why is God taking so long?

Has God forgotten? Or will God ever answer? And even though the godliest people and the most faithful people can still ask those questions and be burdened with those questions, they often arise in our hearts because the humans that we know let us down so easily.

Don't help us when we need help, or can't help us when we need help. They fall short. And it's so easy to then understand God as being something like them. Okay, yeah, he's better, of course.

[ 2 : 35 ] But it still makes us wonder. We're just looking at God wrong. And although we are like God in some very important ways, because God created us to be like him in some ways, we are not and will never be like him in a variety of ways.

Because he is so other. He is different. He's unique. Over the next month or so, I'm going to be able to be up here four times.

And each of those four times, we're going to focus on some quality of God that is simply different than us. His otherness. So tonight, the focus is on his eternity.

God is eternal. We are not. So what does that mean, that God is eternal? What does that mean? And how might God's eternity be an encouragement and a challenge to us?

Those are the two questions that I want us to seek an answer to, or some sort of answer to. What does it mean that God is eternal? Probably most of us think of eternity as an everlasting future.

[ 3 : 54 ] Everlasting future time. And that's not wrong. And we're going to look at a number of things about God that that's exactly right. It is an everlasting future time.

But that's not all it means, that God is eternal. And that's what we're going to look at after we look at these few things. So first, there are things about God, things that he does that are eternal in that they last forever.

Such as God's word. God's word is everlasting. God's word is everlasting. Psalm 119 says, The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.

Peter writes in 1 Peter 1, actually quoting Isaiah 40. Peter writes, All humans are like grass, and their glory is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers. The flowers fall. But the word of God endures forever. And this is the word that was preached to you. Or listen to this one.

[ 5 : 03 ] This might catch some of you off guard. In Matthew 24, Jesus says, Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will stand forever.

Jesus' words also. So the idea about eternity as everlasting future time is important. God's words will last for all future.

Also God's promises. Close to his word. God's promises in particular. For example, one example. In 1 Chronicles 16, we read, God remembers his covenant promises forever.

The word he commanded for a thousand generations. What God promises not only will be fulfilled, certainly, but they will never ever be forgotten or changed or challenged.

For endless time. So again, it's important for us that God's eternity, or his eternality, does have something to do with lasting forever.

[ 6 : 09 ] We're certain about what he says and what he does, because that will last forever. His love, also. God's love is everlasting into the future.

Now, often, often psalm-only churches, or even old hymn-only churches, are very critical of new songs, because, as people say, they repeat the same thing over and over and over.

I'm sure some of you have said it. I've said it myself. And there's some validity to that. But what?

Some of those songs repeat something eight, ten times, something like that.

That's just tedious. Well, Psalm 136 that we sang, it repeats something, one phrase, 26 times.

There's something about repeating things often that is actually quite good.

And the thing that it repeats 26 times is, your love endures forever. So, in Psalm 136, we read, to the one who remembered us in our lowest state, his love endures forever.

[ 7 : 17 ] And freed us from our enemies, his love endures forever. And who gives food to every creature, his love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of heaven, his love endures forever.

That was only five. 26 times his love endures forever. It's incredibly important that God's love will never end. Again, everlasting future time.

Also, God's kingdom, his dominion. We read in Daniel. These are just glimpses all throughout Scripture. This is repeated over and over and over again. In Daniel 4, we read, Then I praised the Most High God.

I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion. His kingdom endures from generation to generation.

God will always be in control. And that's a promise for the future, forever. And of course, one of the most common uses of the word eternal throughout Scripture is eternal life.

[ 8 : 25 ] That thing that is promised to those of us who trust Christ. The thing that is not just promised, but actually given to us. Well, that's the idea of life that lasts forever into the future.

And I don't, I'm not even going to mention an example of this because there are so many all throughout Scripture. Eternal life is what is God's gracious gift to those who trust his Son.

So these are just a few examples of things about God, about what he does, that last forever and will never stop. And that's usually how we think about the word eternal.

God's eternal. So it's definitely true that he lasts forever. It's truly important that he does, but that's not enough.

It's not enough for us to simply understand God's eternality in that way. A very confusing topic, but a very important one, is timelessness.

[ 9 : 30 ] That God is outside of time. Not only does he last forever and have no beginning, but he's not even bound by time. And that's a concept, like I mentioned earlier, that our human minds have a very hard time even contemplating, let alone grasping, because we don't have any frame of reference.

We're always in time, and we always will be. But God, that's not so. Let me read to you a quote from C.S. Lewis that he wrote in an article or a chapter called Time and Beyond in Mere Christianity.

C.S. Lewis says, of course you and I tend to take it for granted that the time series, this arrangement of past, present, and future, is not simply the way life comes to us, but the way things really exist.

We tend to assume that the whole universe and God himself are always moving from past to future, just as we do. But many learned men do not agree with that.

It was the theologians who first started the idea that some things are not in time at all. The philosophers then took it over, and now some of the scientists are doing the same thing.

[10:46] So as we shift away from the idea of everlasting future into God's timelessness, the one who is always outside of time, we're going to look at a few different facets of that to try to get our minds starting to comprehend something about this great truth of our God and the importance of it for our life.

Now, C.S. Lewis' quote there that theologians started saying it, philosophers got a hold of it, and then scientists are finally starting to come around with the idea. It's a very interesting observation. For instance, it wasn't until really the late 1800s and early 1900s, very recently, that scientists started grasping the idea that time was not always existing, that it's so bound to stuff, to matter, to creation, that time actually began when creation began.

Before that, it was this concept that time has always been a constant. Albert Einstein really put this forward forcefully, and now most scientists would agree with this.

For example, Stephen Hawking, a notable Cambridge physicist, now, he talks about Einstein really championing this idea that time had a beginning.

[12:17] It didn't always exist. And he says, Stephen Hawking admits that way before the scientists ever got this idea, back in the early 1900s, Augustine, a Christian theologian in the 400s, was already talking about this, that time began when creation began.

And before that, well, there's no before. There's just no time. But Stephen Hawking was even unaware of something before Augustine. There was a Jewish commentator named Philo of Alexandria, Egypt, who, at the time of Jesus, actually probably a few years before Jesus, in his commentary on Genesis 1, he made the argument that time started when God created heaven and earth.

And that before that, there's no time. It didn't exist. So, this has been around for a very, very long time. And finally, scientists in this area, scientists are finally starting to catch up.

God created time. God existed before time, if you can say that. Without time, completely outside of it, in the beginning of stuff, and in the beginning of time, God already existed.

He was there in the beginning, before it. He's not controlled by it. He controls it. He is its creator. He's not subject to it.

[13:51] Now, when the Bible speaks about eternity, it typically does mean that God has always existed, that God always will exist, and that God produces things like promises, eternal life, that will last forever, that will never be shaken.

That's mostly how the Bible talks about eternity, the idea of time lasting forever. But, Scripture gives a few very important glimpses at the fact that God's relationship to time is not like ours at all. normal. It's not normal, we could say. For example, and I would love for you to turn to these two passages, and we're going to focus on these for a few moments. One of them, there are two great I am statements.

There are a number of them in the Bible, but two particularly important ones. The first is in Exodus 3, so if you could turn to Exodus 3. Now, remember, this is God's relationship to time is not like ours.

We're going to start to see the importance of this as we continue. Exodus 3, starting in verse 11. It's on page 60 in the Pew Bibles.

[15:13] Exodus 3, 11 to 14. But Moses said to God, Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

And God said, I will be with you, or I am with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.

Moses said to God, Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you. And they ask me, What's his name? Then what shall I tell them?

God said to Moses, I am who I am. Pause right there before you read the rest of that verse. I am who I am.

What does that mean? How should we understand that statement? Is God simply saying, like any of us would say, I am who I am and that's all you need to know.

[16:22] I know who I am. Just know that. I am who I am. It's sort of like a toss-away statement that he's self-sufficient, self-confident even. Well, the next verse will challenge that.

But before that, it could be that God actually is saying, I will be who I will be. That's another way to translate this. They're indistinguishable in the Hebrew. In which case, God is promising that I will

always be with you.

That's what he's just said. I will be with you. Who do I say sent me? I will be who I will be. So that could be. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, which most of the New Testament authors used as their Bible, like we use the English, that one, it had a funny, a very packed way of translating this.

God said to Moses, I am the being one. So they really got on to this full idea, I am who I am, which we're about to come to. I am the being one.

So look at the next statement in verse 14. Because this helps us understand something about the depth that God is saying. God says to Moses, I am who I am.

[17:43] This is what you are to say to the Israelites. I am has sent me to you. Now most of you are probably fairly aware of that statement.

You've heard it so much, you just gloss over it. But that's strange grammar. I am has sent me to you. The subject of the verb is a verb.

That doesn't make much sense in grammar. Instead of I sent you, or instead of Moses saying he sent me to you, God sent me to you, he says, I am sent me to you.

Now that's such a common phrase in Christian circles, we forget how stark that would have been. What does that mean? I am sent me to you. Well, at least what it means is that God simply always is.

It'll become more clear in the next passage that we're going to look at some of the implications of this. But this is starting to glimpse something about God. His very name that he gives to the Israelites, I am, is something different about his relationship to time than we experience.

[18:56] Let's look at this other passage, and I think some things will start clicking into place a bit. The other passage is John chapter 8. So turn to the New Testament, John chapter 8.

This might be stretching some of your minds, maybe even your comfort zone a little bit. It's certainly not a typical thing to talk about, unfortunately. John chapter 8.

This is another bit of quirky grammar. Or is it? Let's read what Jesus says. John 8, starting in verse 47, going to 59.

Jesus said to the Jews, He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you don't belong to God. The Jews answered him, Aren't we right in saying that you're a Samaritan and demon-possessed?

I'm not demon-possessed, said Jesus, but I do honor my Father and you dishonor me. I'm not seeking glory for myself, but there is one who seeks my glory, and he is the judge.

[20:10] I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death. At this, the Jews exclaimed, Now we know that you're demon-possessed.

Abraham died, and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets.

Who do you think you are? Jesus replied, If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me.

Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him, and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day.

He saw it and was glad. You are not yet fifty years old, the Jews said to him, and you have seen Abraham? I tell you the truth, Jesus answered.

[21:14] Before Abraham was born, I am. At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

Before Abraham was born, I am? That's strange grammar. That doesn't make any sense. Now, even if Jesus was claiming from this that he simply existed before Abraham, for example, like many Jehovah's Witnesses claim, that Jesus was the first created being, and so obviously he existed before Abraham, if that's all that Jesus is claiming, that I was already there before Abraham came about, well, his grammar would be different.

He would say something like, before Abraham was born, I was. I was present. Before Abraham was born, I existed in the past, past tense.

So, for him to say, before Abraham existed, I am, that just doesn't make any sense. If Jesus is related to time, like the rest of creation is, then he simply has bad grammar.

Or, since he doesn't have, well, if he does have bad grammar, it's only here, not in any other statement. And this is the kind of grammar that kids know, that kids get right.

[ 22 : 46 ] It's not a kind of grammatical mistake that, that a grown person is gonna, is gonna make. Jesus is claiming that before something in the past happened, he presently is.

Before the past. He's present, he has present existence in the past. This is mind-boggling. He has a different experience of time than we can ever claim to.

Now, of course, the Jews picked up stones to stone him at this. He's clearly a man standing in front of them, but they're not gonna stone him because he has bad grammar, because they think he does.

And they're not even gonna stone him because he was claiming existence in time before Abraham. They would just think he was loony. They're gonna stone him because they know what he's saying. They get it. By saying, before Abraham was born, I am. Jesus is claiming to be the one true God, the creator of all things, that great I am in Exodus 3.

[ 23 : 57 ] Jehovah, Yahweh, that's who Jesus is claiming to be. That's amazing. But for us right now, all I really want to draw our attention to in this amazing statement is that God does not experience time like we experience time.

God being eternal is something different, something more than just existing forever. But what does that even mean?

How do we even understand that or what it means for us? I want to have you use your imaginations for a few moments to try a feeble attempt at understanding something of the implications of God's experience of time.

So I want you to imagine something. Imagine that a person experience time differently than you do. All right, you appear to be living side by side, walking together, experiencing time similarly. You think you are. But, what you don't realize is that in one of your hours, an hour ticks by for you, this person has just experienced 42 years.

[ 25 : 25 ] Legitimately, 42 years. This is already strange, so you're going to really have to use your imagination. But what are some implications of that? If this person has a different experience of time, 42 years compared to your one hour, think about what you can accomplish in one hour.

Some, but not really a whole lot. Think about what you can learn about a topic in one hour. Again, you can learn some things, but not a whole lot in an hour.

This person next to you has 42 years to accomplish things and to learn about a topic. 42 years in the time span of your hour.

So when you get to the end of your hour and you produce what you've made and you show what you've learned and then this person says, well this is what I've done in your hour and this is what I've learned, well they've had 42 years to do something.

They're going to produce a lot more than you are. Higher quality. They're going to know so much more than you are and you're going to be baffled. But we've just had an hour. It's because they're experiencing time differently than you.

[ 26 : 39 ] Think about the detail of that person's understanding of something if they really did experience time like that. The detail. Suppose you taste a delicious bite of food.

I thought about this example when I was eating a banana. I bit into the banana and it was a good banana. Imagine that. Not necessarily a banana. Something that you really love.

A really nice bite of food. And you dwell on that. You savor it. You contemplate the flavor. You might need to be French to do this appropriately. You contemplate it.

You think about the flavor. Ten seconds of glory. It's just incredible. In your ten seconds that you've just experienced that bite that guy who appears to be with you in that ten seconds he's had forty-two days this is the equivalent math here of forty-two years for one hour in ten seconds he's had forty-two days to experience and think about and contemplate that bite.

So if you were to say to that person after those ten seconds are up wow now that was a good bite of food. Well it's true but in comparison with what that person could say about that bite we don't know anything.

[ 27 : 56 ] We don't have a clue how great the detail of understanding that he would have because he's a different experience of time. All right imagine this I'm going to shift a bit make you imagine something else and then I'm going to bring the two scenarios together to really blow your mind.

Imagine again a person is experiencing time differently than you but it seems like they're the same but let's reverse it this time.

Suppose in forty-two of your years you live for forty-two years that person has only experienced one hour. All right so we're flipping the metaphor here.

Think about it in terms of your memory. How well can you remember details about a year ago? Like daily details.

Not very well. You know it's fuzzy. Barely anything really just a few really important things you can think about you can remember from a year ago. Well think about forty-two years ago.

[ 29 : 00 ] What could you actually remember about forty-two years ago? Barely anything and not with good detail. but this person has experienced it in one hour.

How well can you remember an hour ago? Really good. You can probably remember with a lot of clarity what you did an hour ago and details. So this person can remember what you did a year ago so clearly because for him your year was only a minute ago.

and think of how clearly you could remember a minute ago. That's how he can memorize your past year as well as he can memorize a minute. He has this understanding a grasp on your year.

So if he thinks about your forty-two years in the past how well can he remember your forty-two years? Well that's only been an hour for him.

He can remember that so well details of what has happened to you for forty-two years he can remember as sharply as an hour ago. That's amazing if somebody had this experience of time.

[ 30 : 13 ] Now some of you might be completely lost at this point. Hopefully not. Hopefully your mind is hurting but you're still with me. Because now what if we combine these two scenarios?

What if this person who's experiencing time differently at the same time experiences the forty-two years in one hour?

And experiences your forty-two years in one hour? So I'm not going to try and explain that but imagine if we put these together. How well could that person understand your life?

Understand your past? He can remember it so much better than you can because his experience is so quick. He can remember what you've done. but he also has this depth of understanding because he's had forty-two years to dwell on what you've done in the past hour.

So he has this depth of understanding this detailed knowledge his experience of you and what you've done is so rich just because he's had this different experience of time.

[ 31 : 18 ] that person in eighty of your years think about a whole life span now.

You live for eighty years. Think of all that you could accomplish and all that you would know. Well in your eighty years of time that person has been able to produce and learn twenty-nine million years worth of stuff and yet remember it so sharply that it's been just a few hours as of a few hours.

That's an amazing person right there. If you're grasping this concept can remember with such clarity and can know in such great details.

Now I'm going to step away from your imagination and start wrapping some things up. Because if that person in your scenario that experiences time in such a mind blowing way by the way that time scale that I used the math that I was throwing out that's if if the person experiences one day like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day that's the math that I was going from which the Bible claims God experiences if that was just a human but because he was related to time so much differently than you he has such a richer understanding and memory and knowledge of things than you ever could if that was just a human think about God who's not even bound by time at all he's not bound by even that time scale think about how well God would know you how well he would understand your experiences how well he remembers everything that has happened to you because he's eternal he's outside of time he's not bound like we are by these strictures of time to bring some of this to a close

I'm simply going to read you a passage from C.S. Lewis another passage and then a paragraph from another thinker because they they apply this to practical situations remember we're thinking about God's otherness God is so different than us God is eternal in a very important way what does that mean for us well C.S.

[ 33 : 55 ] Lewis wrote again in Mere Christianity a man put it to me by saying I can believe in God all right but I can't swallow what I can't swallow is the idea of him attending to several hundred million human beings who are all addressing him at the same moment and I've found that quite a lot of people feel this now the first thing to notice is that the whole sting comes in the words at the same moment most of us can imagine God attending to any number of applicants if only they came to him one at a time and he had endless time to do it in so what really is at the back of this difficulty is the idea of God having to fit too many things into one moment of time well that's of course what

happens to us but almost certainly God is not in time his life does not consist of moments following one another if a million people are praying to him at 1030 tonight he need not listen to them all in that one little snippet which we call 1030 1030 and every other moment from the beginning of the world is always present for him if you like to put it that way he has all eternity in which to listen to the split second of prayer put up by a pilot as his plane crashes in flames that is difficult

I know suppose I'm writing a novel I write Mary laid down her work next moment came a knock at the door for Mary who has to live in this imaginary time of my novel there is no interval between putting the work down and hearing that knock on the door but I who am Mary's maker do not live in that imaginary time at all between writing the first half of that sentence and the second half I might sit down for three hours and think steadily about Mary I could think about Mary as if she were the only character in a book and for as long as I pleased and the hours that I spend so doing would not appear in Mary's time the time inside the story at all or think about it as a man named Steve Edwards writes since God is outside of time past present and future are always present before him consider the case of a sudden airplane disaster where all the passengers and crew have but moments to cry out to God in a hundred or more sudden separate desperate prayers God has all of eternity to hear even the shortest of these prayers to review all of the lives and facts and his own timetable for history he knows every heart every motive all the facts and he has all the time in the world to take the myriad of data into consideration before answering or denying each one of those prayers he can take his time all the time he needs and yet not fail to answer every one of those simultaneous prayers each with justice compassion and certitude he does not need to make split second decisions as we do he is never caught off guard and when he does act he can accomplish the impossible in a flash does does

God hear your prayers does God understand you why does God take so long will he ever answer God has a very definite timetable and he has capabilities that we cannot fathom therefore let us do as Isaiah 26 says and with this I close and will praise this God Isaiah 26 4 says trust in the Lord forever for the Lord the Lord is the rock eternal let me pray and then we'll sing a final praise to this eternal God