

RETURN TO

ETERNITY

An Ascension-tide Address

given by

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"Truly, truly, I say to you," declared Jesus, "before Abraham was, I AM." (John 8:58)

"But sir," protested a young man at Adelaide Boys' High School last week, "that's bad English. It should be 'Before Abraham was, I was' not 'I am.' "

"Yes, "I agreed, "it certainly does look like bad grammar. But Jesus used that phrase 'I am' for a very special reason." And so we proceeded to study the nature of God and how He is eternal, infinite and so on.

Now you probably think I must be a super-optimist if I think I can get High School lads of just medium interest to grasp the eternity and infinity of God, when even such wise, mature, intelligent, sanctified citizens as you have some difficulties in understanding these profound matters.

Well, maybe I am. But still, it's amazing what the Holy Spirit can communicate to people. So let us put our confidence in His enlightening us as we consider together this fascinating statement Jesus made: "Before Abraham was, I AM."

We believe there is but one living, true and eternal God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Maker and Preserver of all things. (Article 1). All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. (John 1).

TIME AND ETERNITY

One of God's creations was TIME. He made it, He controls it and uses it, but He is not subject to it.

God transcends time. He does not have to wait for tomorrow - for Him, it is now. He does not have to think back to yesterday. For Him it is now.

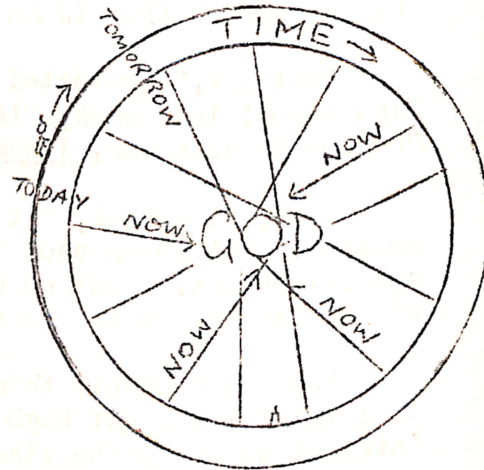
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Perhaps this illustration will help you to grasp this point.

Here is a bicycle wheel. The rim stands for Time, and we can think of ourselves as this ant who is running round the rim... 'TICK, TICK, TICK' he mutters to himself as he passes the other insects on the way. Now he is 'here', a moment ago he was 'back there', soon he will be 'further along'.



The hub stands for GOD. He is linked by all these spokes to the rim, and these spokes represent 'Now'.

All Time is Now to God. He does not have to wait till tomorrow. He is there already. And yesterday is just as present to Him as today is.

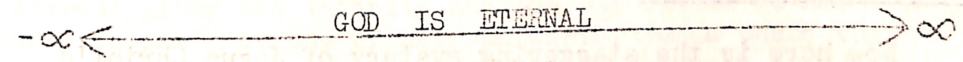
So you can see that for Jesus, the eternal Son of God, Abraham's day was just as much 'NOW' as that moment there in about 30 A.D. when He spoke those words. Jesus in His eternal divinity is Master of time, and He relates to it all just as closely as we relate to this present moment of ours.

Does that seem impossible? It does not look nearly so difficult when we recall that Jesus is God, not just man.

He is the one who the New Testament says has the divine Name Yahweh, Jehovah, which means "I AM WHAT I AM". This Name is rendered by "the Lord" in English and Greek, but in French this Name is given as "L'Eternel" - the Eternal. Both are quite appropriate - Jesus is eternal, and Lord of all.

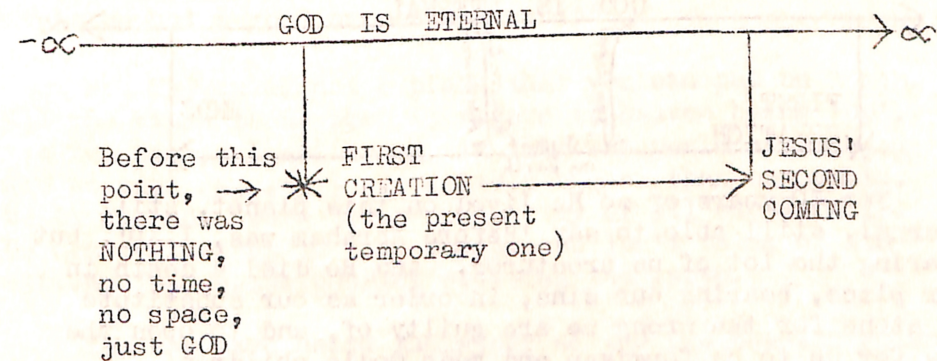
Now let me change the illustration as we move on. Let us unwrap our bicycle wheel and think of TIME as a straight line. This is much better than thinking of it as a circle, because the Bible always says that time is going somewhere, it has a goal to reach, in contrast to the old Greek idea that time is cyclical, with a perpetual sequel of five 'ages' such as the Golden age.

This straight line then can represent the eternal existence of God:



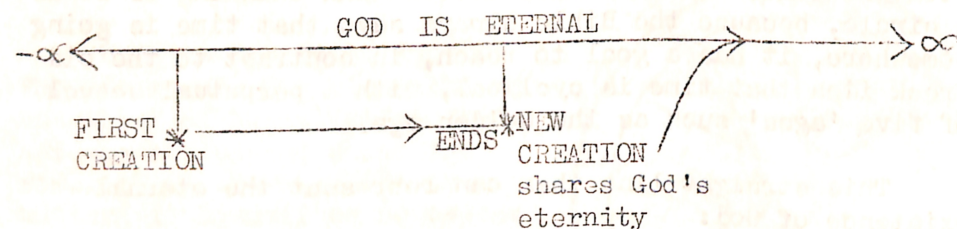
He begins at minus infinity (that is, He is from eternity, without beginning). He ends at infinity (that is, He never ends, He is eternal, everlasting).

In the beginning God created the first universe, this present temporary one, which, says Paul in Romans 8:20 is subjected to futility. God is still creating and sustaining the universe - all things hold together in Him (Col. 1:17).



This first creation will conclude at the return of Jesus Christ. It will be destroyed, and God will create the new heavens and new earth which will share in the

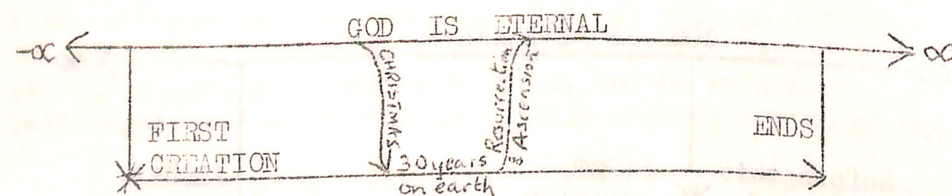
freedom from decay that God gives His people. (Romans 8)



JESUS' VISIT TO EARTH

Now here is the staggering mystery of Jesus Christ's Incarnation. Remember He is eternal, the Son of God, Creator and sustainer of everything.

For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven, down from His eternal glory, to become part of the Creation He Himself had made. At Christmas the Son of God came down to take on Himself the nature of the people He had created.



For 30 years or so He lived on this planet, still eternal, still able to say 'Before Abraham was, I AM', but sharing the lot of us creatures. And He died a death in our place, bearing our sins, in order as our substitute to atone for the wrong we are guilty of, and to open the way for us to be forgiven and made God's children.

Then He rose from the dead, and for 40 days appeared to His disciples, stayed with them, proved Himself conclusively alive and risen.

RETURN TO ETERNITY

And so came that first Ascension Day, when Jesus ascended into heaven. He returned to the glory and majesty He had always had with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and left behind the limitations and humiliation of this created world. In a way this is Jesus' Return to Eternity.

Please don't take that phrase to imply that when Jesus was on earth He was not eternal. It is just a useful way of describing the contract between Jesus' eternal glory and infinity and the experience He had here on earth as one of us. On earth, Jesus could be in only one place at one time; having returned to Heaven, He is everywhere at once. On earth Jesus accepted being subject to the progress of time; having returned to eternity, all time is 'Now' to Him.

Jesus 'ascended into Heaven;' He was lifted up, says the Bible (Acts 1); He was raised far above all rule and authority, power and dominion (Eph. 1:21).

Does that mean to say that Heaven is 'up there'? Is it at a certain altitude above the earth, and we could find it if we had a good enough spaceship?

No, Heaven is not a place that you can put on a map. All the Bible means when it refers to heaven being 'up', 'in the highest' and so on, is that the realm of God and His eternal majesty is infinitely higher than our world. He is greater, more powerful, worthy of all our worship. We are to look up to Him, but please don't think of Him sitting in a space chariot orbiting the earth.

You may have heard the story of the two Russian scientists who were working on the early sputniks, trying to get them to orbit the earth properly. Well, one day they were snooping round the Pearly Gates, and St. Peter saw them.

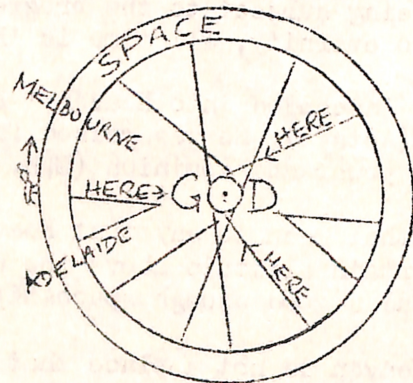
"Hey, you two! Off you go now, you know you're not allowed in heaven, because you're atheists. Go on, get back to earth."

"B-b-but sir," stammered one of the scientists, "w-we don't want to come in - we just want to get our ball back."

No, that's not what heaven is like. Heaven is with God, in a life that does not have a physical location like the earth we are used to. Heaven, like God who created it, is infinite and spiritual, not finite and physical.

Let us come back to that old bicycle wheel. This time the rim stands for SPACE, and as we run round the tyre, we are moving from 'here' to 'there'. If we want to get from Adelaide to Melbourne, we have to TRAVEL.

Not so with God. Here at the hub, God is linked to all space by these spokes which stand for 'HERE'.



Adelaide is 'here' to God. He is in this church with us now. But the folk in Melbourne don't have to wait until He gets there before they can begin their service. Melbourne also is 'Here' to God.

You may remember Naaman the Syrian general who came to Elisha the prophet of God to be healed of his leprosy. (2 Kings 5) Naaman was so grateful that he wanted to worship the Lord, the God of Israel. And he asked permission to take back with him to Syria two mules' burden of Israelite soil.

You see, Naaman believed that a nation's deity was inseparably linked to that nation's territory: if you left that land, you got out of range of the deity, unless you took some of the land with you.

But the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the King of the whole universe. He can be worshipped literally anywhere. He is not limited by space.

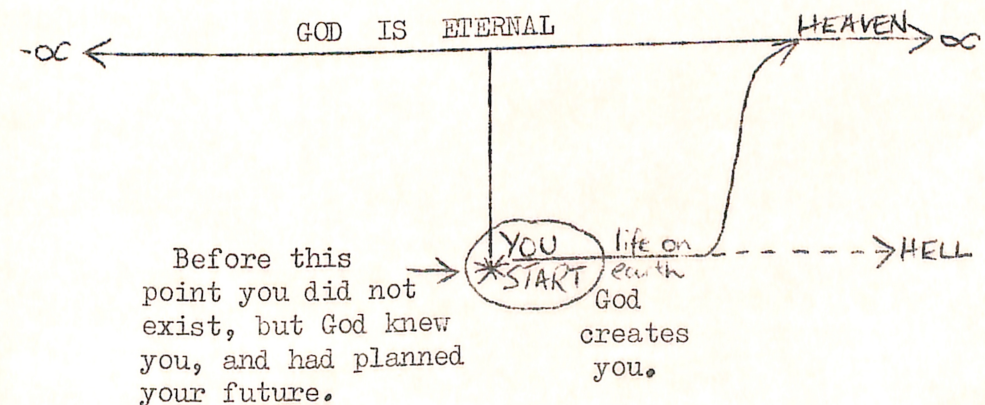
And when you take your spaceship sometime, and travel to Mars - please don't think that you're out of range of God. He is Spirit, and Mars, Saturn, and the furthest point of the universe are all pervaded by His presence - "even there shall your hand lead me, and your right hand shall cover me." (Psalm 139).

For all TIME is NOW to God. And all SPACE is HERE to God.

DOWN HERE ON PLANET EARTH

What about us human beings here on Planet Earth? Can we share in this eternity? Yes indeed, and that old heresy about the immortality of the soul is not all that far from the truth if we see it in this way.

Let us get out our straight line again.



Before this point you did not exist, but God knew you, and had planned your future.

The Bible plainly states that all we have is derived from God our Creator. And the Bible says that no one will ever fade out. There is no such thing as extinction for the human soul, and so in effect the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is straight Biblical theology.

But that soul of yours will spend eternity in one of two situations - in Heaven or in Hell. There is either eternal life, joy, rest, peace, love and fellowship with God, or else eternal decay, misery, frustration, strife, hate and exclusion from God's fellowship. Either way, all of us will go on for ever.

Now that's a long long time, and a very big contrast between the two. God declares that if you refuse His gracious offer of salvation, you will suffer eternally for your sin. But if you turn to Jesus in repentance and faith, and ask Him for the forgiveness that He won for you on the Cross of Golgotha, then you will be freed from that guilt, and freed, saved, rescued from the horror of hell.

Return to Eternity! Your eternal God and Creator calls you to come back to Him. He offers you amnesty, forgiveness, and eternal life and joy. Return to the Lord your God in repentance and faith, and He will give you His eternal life, making you one of His children.

RETURN TO ETERNITY...

explores the profound issues of Time and Eternity. The Creation, the Incarnation of Jesus, and the life of each of us on earth, are put in the perspective of the Eternal Creator God who said, "Before Abraham was, I AM."

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