

Musings on the Eternal State

Most of the essays that I've written discuss what the Bible has to say about different topics. In my previous essays I've spent a lot of time studying passages and then drawing conclusions. The process is pretty straightforward and the results have been encouraging.

This time, however, I'd like to do something a little different. I want to spend some time speculating about what life will be like in the Eternal State – the endless period that begins after the devil has been defeated once and for all and after the Great White Throne Judgment has put an end to all evil. (You can read about this period in Revelation 21 and 22.) In this astonishing era all sin, death, and pain have been done away with, and we will live with God in the New Heaven and Earth. It will a glorious time of joy and peace – an *endless* time, in fact.

Now, to be sure, other people have spent a lot of time discussing what the Bible has to say about this, but I want to go a bit further. I would like to explore the implications of living in the world that the Bible describes. What will it be like to live through the endless ages of eternity? Based on the information that we've been given, are there any conclusions that we can draw?

One might ask, why bother speculating? After all, the Eternal State doesn't begin until after the Millennium is over, so it's at least a thousand years away. Why not just wait until we get there and then see what happens? Does it really matter?

I think it does matter, and I think it's worth pondering. Look at it this way: when people have a vacation planned they tend to spend a lot of time thinking about it, even if it's still months (or even years) away. They think about it, long for it, hope for it, and dream of the day when it will finally begin. The Eternal State is much more than a mere vacation; it is our eternal destiny. As exciting as the Millennium will be, it only lasts 1000 years and it takes place in a world that still has pain, sin, and death. The Eternal State is much better and it lasts *forever*. Given the truly unimaginable amount of time that we will spend there, I think it's certainly worth pondering.

Science

Science is not an evil thing. There is no reason to believe that scientific advancement will be confined to this Age or that it will stop when Jesus returns and establishes His Millennial Kingdom. Likewise, there's no reason to believe that science will cease to progress when the Eternal State begins. Despite what some people think, we will *not* automatically know everything there is to know the moment we are resurrected; our knowledge will always be finite and we will always have questions. (Only an infinite being can have infinite knowledge, and we are not and will *never* be infinite beings. God is the only God; there will never be any others.) Since this is the case, it's quite likely that people in the Millennium and the Eternal State will ask questions about the universe and will design experiments to answer those questions.

That being said, I do *not* believe that scientific advancement can continue forever. The laws of the universe are finite, and that means that if scientific progress continues long enough people will eventually arrive at a perfect understanding of all physical laws. Of course, people will still have to learn the full implications of those laws (along with how the laws interact with each other), and that will take some additional time. Knowing the laws of physics will certainly help people understand how the Earth works, but the Earth contains a lot of very complicated systems and the laws interact in very complicated ways.

However, we should *also* keep in mind that the rate at which scientific knowledge is

accumulating is continuing to grow. In a perfect world with perfect immortals, it is not unreasonable to speculate that this trend will continue. If science is the study of a finite universe with finite laws, then an ever-accelerating learning process will eventually complete its study of that universe. In other words, scientific research cannot last forever; one day it will come to an end.

Here's another way to look at it: it is possible to express physical laws as mathematical formulas. The universe is essentially a giant math problem. It's a very complicated math problem, but it's not an infinite one, and eventually it will be solved. If people continue to care about science and continue to pursue it throughout eternity then that math problem *will* be solved. It is only a matter of time.

I believe there will come a time when scientific research will, for all practical purposes, be completed. All physical laws will be known and all of their implications will be understood. We will know what *can* be achieved and what *cannot* be achieved, and we will know the best way to achieve any physical goal that is actually possible. Now, it may take a long time to reach that point, but given that we have all of eternity to work with I think that it is inevitable. I also suspect that diminishing returns will play a factor. We may still be learning new scientific facts 10,000 years from now, but I suspect that if you compared our scientific knowledge in 1 million AD and 10 million AD the differences would be relatively small.

What I am suggesting is that scientific advancement and discovery is a characteristic of a young civilization. Mature civilizations will master science to the point where it is a known quantity. Any civilization (alien or human) that is capable of scientific advancement will eventually reach a point where science is “done”. Therefore, we will not spend all the ages of eternity pursuing science; I suspect that is something we will only do in our youth.

Now, there are some caveats to this. If God creates new life forms then those life forms will have to be studied, and that will provide something new to learn. However, since these life forms operate under known laws, the amount of time it will take to fully understand these new creatures will drop as we march through eternity. Likewise, if God creates an entirely new parallel universe that has entirely different laws, then that will present a new challenge. Neither of those situations alter the core premise, though: this universe has a finite set of unchanging laws, and it is likely that those laws will be known and mastered long before we get very far into eternity. Science has an end.

Economics

Will the Eternal State have an economic system? Before we can answer that we need to understand what economic systems are for and why they exist. Once we understand what economics actually is the answer will become clear.

The purpose of an economic system is to efficiently allocate scarce resources. Any time there is a system that has scarce (or limited) resources, the laws of economics will come into play. This brings up a question: will the Eternal State have resources that are not infinite and that have a cost?

Let us suppose that when science is mastered it will be possible to obtain a limitless supply of energy at a negligible cost. (If energy never becomes free then that means it has a cost, and that means it is a scarce resource – but for the purpose of this argument let's assume a best-case scenario.) Let us also suppose that Star Trek-style replicators become common and anyone can create anything that they want at any time, at no cost. If you want something – be it a meal, or a car, or a house, or a book to read – you can press a button and materialize it at no charge to you.

Even if that level of technology is reached, I believe there are still some resources that will always be scarce. For example, time is a scarce resource. Even though we will live forever we will

always live one moment at a time, and in each moment we must make a choice about what to do. We may spend a given hour writing a book, or eating a meal, or talking to a friend, or walking on the beach – but we must make a choice. Barring some limited multi-tasking, if we are doing one thing then we are not doing something else.

This means that our potential creative output is limited by time. Take Bach as an example. Bach is a composer of music. If he is building a bookshelf then he is not composing music. New music from Bach is a unique thing; it is a scarce resource that no one else can provide. If civilization wants more music from Bach then it will need to find some way to persuade Bach to spend his time writing music instead of walking in the park. Bach's time is a scarce resource.

Since there are scarce resources, and since there are competing uses of those resources, and since civilization will desire some things more than others, that leads to the conclusion that there will be some sort of economic system in the Eternal State. Now, it's unlikely that the medium of exchange will be currency or precious metals; after all, if you can materialize anything you want then precious metals will cease to be valuable. The medium of exchange must be something that is also scarce; otherwise it cannot be traded for a scarce resource. I do not know what that resource might be, but it seems highly likely that it will exist.

This brings up another point. Since different people have different talents, and since some talents are more in demand than others, that means that some people's time will be more in demand than other people's – which means that their time will cost more. Also, since some people will benefit civilization more than others, that implies that some people will become wealthier than others. How that will work out and what that wealth will look like is unknown, but it seems a likely outcome.

Now, I am not saying that the Eternal State will have people who are poor or destitute. The Eternal State is a world without pain, suffering, death, or disease; no one will go hungry and no one will suffer. Poverty is a relative term here. If one person has \$10 million and someone else has \$10 billion then the millionaire will seem poor by comparison – but he's certainly not poor in an absolute sense. What I *am* saying is that since people are different, some people will be wealthier than others. In Christ's parable of the talents, some servants ended up with more and some ended up with less. There are economic reasons for this and I do not think that will ever change.

At the same time, I would like to point out that everyone is going to have an infinite amount of time to enrich themselves. Right now, in this world, people have limited lives and limited opportunities. In eternity, however, people will have endless ages in which they can pursue opportunities. I am not sure what kind of goods people will be accumulating or how wealth will be measured, but in an infinite amount of time people can accumulate an infinite amount of things. (It's really staggering if you stop and think about it.)

Population

One of the known characteristics of God's kingdom is that it will continue to increase and grow forever, throughout all of the ages to come. This implies that there will be some type of growth in the Eternal State. Since Jesus said there is no marriage in Heaven and since Revelation states that we will reign throughout the Eternal State, that implies that God will create new creatures throughout the ages of Eternity. It is possible that He will create new beings or races that we will reign over – and that those creatures may reproduce in large numbers.

One thing we do know is that the universe contains a lot of unused space. Scientists estimate that there are roughly 350 billion large galaxies and 7 trillion dwarf galaxies – for a total of *30 billion trillion stars*. That is a great deal of space and could accommodate a staggering amount of growth! I

admit that a lot of that space is uninhabitable by Earth standards, but I'm not sure that matters. God is certainly capable of creating life forms that don't need Earth-type conditions to survive.

The size of the universe does present a challenge, however. Even if you discount the dwarf galaxies and just focus on the 350 billion large galaxies, we still have something of a problem. To see why, imagine that when the Eternal State begins there are 100 billion Christians. (I admit that number seems extremely high, but for the purpose of this example let's assume a best-case scenario.) Once the Universe is fully populated, that would mean that 100 billion Christians would be ruling over 350 billion galaxies. This means that each person would be responsible for 3.5 galaxies, each of which contains billions upon billions upon billions of stars. Governing that much real estate would be a truly staggering task! On top of that, the growth will continue for all of eternity, so at some point the Universe will be full and additional universes will be needed. The amount that each person will need to govern will seemingly grow to staggering proportions.

This brings up a question: will people be asked to govern an ever-growing portion of the universe, or at some point will God change the rules so that mankind can have children again? I admit this is highly unlikely, but it should be noted that God has changed the rules in the past when one dispensation ended and another began. For example, before the Flood no one was allowed to eat meat, but after the Flood it was permitted. Before the Flood people were allowed to marry their siblings, but after the time of Moses that was no longer permitted. Some things have changed throughout time. At this point in history the people in Heaven (and in the Resurrection) do not marry. It may be that it will stay that way forever, but it's also possible that it will not. It's at least a possibility to consider.

God

One of the complaints I've heard about living forever is that eventually you would run out of things to do and life would become incredibly boring. Sure, there's a lot to do out there, but after a million years or so everything would be old and life would become a terrible pain. People don't want to die, but at the same time they think that eternity basically means you get to eat the same thing for breakfast for billions and billions of years, until you are sick of life and wish you had never been born.

Interestingly, God does not have this problem. God is eternal; He has always existed and will always exist. God is also complete: He never changes. God is not growing because God is perfect, and He is not learning because He knows everything (past, present, and future). Yet God is not bored. He is not craving something new and He is not bemoaning the fact that He will live forever. In fact, Jesus often advertised eternal life as a *good* thing, not a bad thing. He seemed to think that it was an incredible prize that was worth giving up everything for.

I believe that *God* will make eternal life worth living. You see, God is infinite; there is no end to Him. We are in a relationship with God; in fact, Jesus called His Church "the Bride". We can spend a billion years growing in our relationship with God and still have an infinite amount of things left that we do not know – and an infinite amount of time in which to learn them. We will never exhaust God and we will never learn everything there is to know about Him. There will never come a day when we will possess all of His wisdom and knowledge. It is staggering to think that no matter how much time we spend learning about God, there will always be more things about God that we do *not* know than we *do* know. There will always be more.

God is the real prize in Eternity. He is the source of all wisdom, the creator of all beauty, and the One who is infinitely good and infinitely holy. Nothing else that we ever encounter will even come close to comparing with Him. He is the Source that we will never tire of exploring and that we will never exhaust. God has told us that He intends to spend the endless ages to come showing us the

exceeding riches of His grace, and that is a stirring thought.

The Westminster Catechism says that the chief end (or purpose) of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. It's a good thing that we have all of eternity to fulfill that goal, because we're going to need it! That is one task that will never end – and one that we will never get tired of pursuing.