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## A Long Time

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## A Long Time

People say of those who are in their 80's, and of all who live beyond those years, that they have lived a long time, which is true. We can count the years. Children think that anyone over 20 has lived a long time, and from their perspective of so few years, they are correct; "a long time" is relative to a shorter extent of years. But what can we say of eternity? Is it a very, very long time?

We, who are in time, are constantly reminded of its progression: time not only does not stop, but it moves only in one direction, like traffic on a one-way street. We know the date of our birth, but we do not usually know beforehand the date when for us, time will end and eternity continue. We can answer many questions about the length of time, even counting in such terms as "light-years" for the ages of stars and galaxies that exist in time for far, far longer than human life on earth. But the stars' "lives" are neither long nor short when compared to any one of us when we die to time and live on in eternity. How long is eternity? It does not end. Our minds cannot do much with the concept other than to accept it as a reality that is different than time, or reject the idea, or, as many do, pretty much ignore it.

Many people suffer greatly in this life, but very few really want to move on into eternity. Life in time is very precious to us, though we prefer for ourselves and for others that we not suffer grievously. Even if we do not usually look forward to the huge change from living in time, with which we are so familiar, to eternity, which is beyond our comprehension, yet the promise of more and better life is attractive. To think of a way of still being ourselves yet incapable of ageing or diminishment is so far beyond our experience that we can barely imagine the possibility.

When we were first year in high school, or in college, we could observe the seniors, and have some images and ideas of how we, in our turn, would become seniors. Day by day, and year by year, we grew and changed, yet remained the same person we were as first-year students. But, we also had many experiences of life and love, wonder and suffering, so that we also were different by far than during the four years previous. We do not have corresponding models for what we might be like in eternity. We may have heard reports of "out-of-body" experiences by people who were medically dead for a short period of time, or we might be familiar with Gospel stories of the Risen Jesus. Whether or not we find those reports and stories helpful, consideration of eternity - existence outside of time - is of considerable value to us who now live in time.

All life ends with death, but if we are honestly reflective about the mystery of love - of love for others and their welfare that is shown in deeds - we can recognize the timelessness of loving, and acknowledge the inbuilt desire that this capacity for love must have a non-ending quality, a quality which is beyond our control, just as was our entry into life in the first place. We can find within our experience that we are not made for temporary life, but for finding our unique way of loving, in time, that - amazing grace - requires that we continue into eternity.

Eternity is of such a radically different context for life, that "a long time," which is a measure, has no relevance where time does not exist. We, for all our frailty, are meant literally to live forever.