

Of the Life of God.

by John Gill

God is life essentially, eternally, and efficiently, and he gives life to all creatures through his power and will.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:20, Psalm 36:9, Jeremiah 10:10, John 5:26, John 10:28, Acts 17:25, Romans 8:2, Ephesians 4:18, James 2:26, 1 John 5:20

Topics: "Spiritual Life", "The Nature of God"

Description

John Gill expounds on the life of God, emphasizing that God's essence is life itself, distinct from all created beings. He explains that while creatures exhibit various forms of life, God's life is self-sustaining, eternal, and independent, making Him the ultimate source of life for all creation. Gill highlights that God's life is not only essential but also efficient, as He grants life to all beings, from plants to humans, and especially imparts spiritual life to the regenerated. He contrasts the living God with lifeless idols, affirming that true life is found only in God, who is eternal and immutable. Ultimately, Gill encourages believers to recognize their spiritual life as a reflection of God's divine nature, which is perfect and everlasting.

Transcript

A Body of Doctrinal Divinity

Book 1--Chapter 7

OF THE LIFE OF GOD.

Having considered the attributes of Simplicity, Immutability, Infinity, Omnipresence, and Eternity, which belong to God, as an uncreated, infinite, and eternal Spirit; and which distinguish him from all other spirits; I shall now proceed to consider such as belong to him as an active and operative Spirit, as all spirits are, more or less; but he is infinitely so, being "actus, purus, et simplicissimus"; he is all act; and activity supposes life and operations; power, such as God performs, almighty power, or omnipotence; which are the attributes next to be considered; and first his "life".

Some think this is not a single perfection of God, but expressive of all the divine perfections: and, indeed, it is his nature and essence, it is himself; and so is every other attribute his nature, under different considerations, and as variously displayed; wherefore this may be treated of as a distinct attribute; and a very eminent and fundamental one it is; by which God exerts his nature and essence, and displays all his perfections. And in order to apprehend somewhat of the life of God, for comprehend it we cannot, it may

be necessary to consider life in the creatures, what that is; and by rising from the lowest degree of life to an higher, and from that to an higher still, we may form some idea of the life of God, though an inadequate one.

Life is a principle in the creature by which it moves itself; what has motion has life, and what has not is without it; as long as a creature has any motion, it is supposed to have life; but when motionless, it is thought to be dead; the phrases, to move, and to have life, are synonymous, and express the same thing; (see Gen. 7:21, 22, 23) but it is not any kind of motion that can lay a claim to life; the sun, moon, and planets move, yet they are inanimate; so a dead carcass may be moved, though it cannot move; it is self-motion only that shows a creature to be alive, that is under a divine agency; for all creatures live and move and have their being in and of God; and hence it is that such who only seem to have self-motion, are, in an improper sense, said to live; as a fountain, flowing with water, is called living, (Gen. 26:19) to which the allusion is in Song of Solomon 4:15; Jeremiah 2:13; John 4:10, and water that is stagnated in pools and lakes, and remains unmoved, is dead.

The lowest degree of real life is in vegetables, in herbs, plants, and trees; which are truly said to live (Ezek. 47:7, 9), for though they have not a local motion, yet a motion of growth and increase; they become bigger and larger, and rise up to a greater height, and put forth leaves and fruit; which shows life. In animals there is an higher degree of life; in them there is the breath of life, which is common with the bodies of men, who live the same animal life with them; these are possessed of sensitive powers, of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling; and perform the common functions of life, eating, drinking, walking, &c.

But neither of these sorts of life can assist us in our ideas of the life of God; there being nothing in theirs similar to his. There is an higher degree of life still, which is in rational creatures, angels, and the souls of men; by which they are capable not only of operating on bodies, on matter, without them, but of performing acts within themselves, by a self-motion, suitable to their nature as spirits, and rational ones; such as to understand, to will, to choose, and refuse; love, and hate, &c. which may be called the motions of the mind; as the first thoughts of, and inclinations to sin, are called, "motions" (Rom. 7:5).

And now these internal acts of the mind, which are good in angels or men, and show a rational life in them, most resemble what is in God; who can, in, and of, and by himself, understand all things, will and decree whatever he pleases; and loves and hates what is agreeable or disagreeable to him, &c. But what comes nearest to the life of God, that we can conceive of, is that which is in regenerated persons, who have a principle of spiritual life, grace, and holiness, implanted in them, by the Spirit of God, and are made partakers of the divine nature, have Christ formed in them; "and they live, yet not they, but Christ lives in them"; and, by having such a principle of life wrought in them, they understand divine and spiritual things; they will that which is spiritually good, and do what is such; the Spirit of God working in them a disposition thereunto, and giving them power to perform; "being in Christ, and created in him unto good works", they perform vital spiritual acts, and live a life, a spiritual holy life, and which is called, "the life of God", unconverted men are strangers to (Eph. 4:18).

Now this most resembles the life of God, especially, as it will be perfect and eternal in a future state, though it comes abundantly short of what is in God; every imperfection in the life of angels and men, carried to its greatest height, must be removed from God; and everything that is great and excellent must be ascribed to him; and as infinitely transcending what is in finite creatures. God is life essentially, life eternally, and life efficiently. 1. God is life "essentially", it is his nature and essence, it is himself, it is in and

of himself.

The natural life of creatures is not in and of themselves; but is in God, and from him: the spiritual and eternal life of the saints is not in and of themselves; but is from God, "hid with Christ in God". But the life of God is in and of himself; "the Father has life in himself" (John 5:26), and so has the Son and Word of God (John 1:1, 4), and likewise the Spirit, called, therefore, "the spirit of life" (Rev. 11:11), and what is true of all the Persons in the Godhead, they partaking of the same undivided nature and essence, and living the same life, is true of God, essentially considered.

And as the life of God is "of himself", it is independent; there is no cause from whence it is, or on which it depends. The natural and spiritual life of men is of God, depends on him; they live not so much their own life as another's; they have their life from God in every sense, and are supported in it by him; "he is thy life, and the length of thy days" (Deut. 30:20). But God lives his own life; which, as it is without a cause, has no dependence on any other. It does not arise from any composition of parts, and the union of them, as the life, even the natural life, of man does, who consists of soul and body; and his life is the result of the union of these, which when dissolved, it ceases; for "the body without", or separate from, "the spirit", or soul, "is dead" (James 2:26).

And the spiritual life of saints arises from the union of Christ and his Spirit, as a principle of life unto them; which, could it be dissolved, as it cannot, death would ensue, even death spiritual and eternal: but God is a Spirit, a simple and uncompounded Being; consists not of parts, from the union of which his life arises; and so his life is "infinite", "eternal", and "immutable", as also "most perfect". In the life of creatures, even in the highest degree; being finite and dependant, there is always something wanting; but in God there is none; he is "El-Shaddai", God all-sufficient, blessed and happy in himself for evermore.

The scriptures frequently speak of God as the "living God" both in the Old and New Testament, (Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; Ps. 42:2, 84:2; Matthew 16:16; 2 Cor. 6:16) who has life in himself, and gives life to all that have it; and not the Father only, but the Son of God also, is called the living God, (Heb 3:12 and the Spirit is called the Spirit of the living God, (2 Cor. 3:3 each person is the living God, and God, essentially considered, is so; and this title and epithet he has in opposition to, and contradistinction from, them that are not by nature God: the living God is opposed to idols, lifeless and motionless, (Jer. 10:10, 15, 16; Acts 14:15; 1 Thess. 1:9) he is distinguished by this essential attribute of his from the first objects of idolatrous worship, the sun, moon, and stars, which are inanimate; from heroes, kings, and emperors, deified after their death; which idolatry was very early; and worshipping them is called eating the sacrifices of the dead (Ps. 106:28), and from all images of wood, stone, brass, silver, and gold, which are dumb idols, and lifeless ones (see Ps. 115:4-7).

And God is not only acknowledged to be the living God, and to live for ever and ever, by some of the greatest personages, and proudest monarchs that ever were upon earth, and who even had set up themselves for God, (Dan. 4:34 6:26 but he asserts it of himself, which must be true, and may be depended on; "And lift up my hand, and say, I live for ever", (Deut. 32:40. yea; it is an oath of his affirming the same, and it is the common form of swearing with him, "as I live, saith the Lord"; and which is very frequently used by him (see Num. 14:28) and this is no other than swearing by his life, which is himself; "for when he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself" (Heb 6:13), and so both men and angels swear by the living God; "by him that lives for ever and ever" (Jer. 5:2, 12:16; Dan. 12:7; Rev. 10:5, 6), which distinguishes him from, and prefers him to all other beings: and, indeed, he is "most properly" said to live; the life of creatures is no life in comparison of his; especially the life of man: what is it?

"it is but a vapour, that appears for a while, and then vanishes away" (James 4:14). But, 2. God is life eternally, without beginning, succession, or end; he is without beginning of life or end of days, and without any variableness; "the same today, yesterday and for ever"; he that is the "true God", is also "eternal life" (1 John 5:20). It is indeed said of Christ, the Word and Son of God, that he is the "eternal life", which was with "the Father" from eternity, before "manifested" unto men; and so lives from eternity to eternity; and, as before observed, what is true of God personally, is true of him essentially considered: he lived from eternity, and will live for ever and ever; as several of the above scripture testimonies assure us; and which may be concluded from the "simplicity" of his nature: what consists of parts may be resolved into those parts again, and so cease to be; but God is a simple and uncompounded Being, as has been established; not consisting of parts, and so not capable of being reduced to them, or being dissolved, and therefore must live for ever: and from his "independency"; he has no cause prior to him, from whom he has received his life, or on whom it depends; there is none above him, superior to him, that can take away his life from him, as he can from his creatures, who are below him, and dependent on him; but he is above all, and dependent on none.

Likewise from his "immutability"; there is no change, nor shadow of change, in him; and yet, if his life was not eternal, he must be subject to the greatest of changes, death; but he is the same, and of his years there is no end (Ps. 102:27). The same arguments which prove his "eternity", must prove also that he lives for ever; he "is the true God", "the living God, and an everlasting King" (Jer. 10:10), he is called "immortal eternal", (1 Tim. 1:17) the very heathens have such a notion of Deity as immortal; nothing is more common with them than to call their gods, "the immortal ones".

God, says Socrates {1}, is, I think, the very species or idea of life, and if anything else is immortal, and confessed by all that he cannot perish. Aristotle {2}, has this remarkable observation, "The energy, act, or operation of God, is immortality, this is everlasting life; wherefore there must needs be perpetual motion in God." And he reports {3}, that Alcmaeon supposed that the soul was immortal, because it was like to the immortals. But our God, the true God, is he "who only hath immortality" (1 Tim. 6:16), that is, who hath it in and of himself, and gives it to others.

Angels are immortal, they die not; but then this immortality is not of themselves, but of God, who supports and continues them in their being; for as he made them out of nothing, he could, if he would, annihilate them, and bring them to nothing again: the souls of men are immortal; they cannot be killed, nor do they die with their bodies; but then what has been said of angels may be said of them. The bodies of men, after the resurrection, are immortal; this mortal then puts on immortality, and always is clothed with it, and ever continues; but this is the gift of God, and the effect of his will and power; yea, even the bodies of the wicked are immortal, but not of themselves, it is even against their wills; they choose and seek for death, but cannot have it; their torments are endless, and the smoke of them ascends for ever and ever.

God only has immortality in and of himself. 3. God is life "efficiently", the source and spring, the author and giver of life to others; "With thee is the fountain of life", (Ps. 36:9 which he would not be, if he had not life in and of himself, essentially, originally, independently, most properly, and in the most perfect manner. God is the author and giver of life, from the lowest to the highest degree of it. The vegetative life that is in herbs, plants, and trees, is from him, and supported by him; and he takes it away, when his Spirit blows upon them (Gen. 1:11,12; Isa. 40:7).

The animal life is owing to him; the life of all animals, of the fishes in the sea, the fowl of the air, and the beasts of the field; and he gives them life and breath; and when he takes it away, they die, and return to

the dust (Gen. 1:20, 21, 24, 25; Acts 17:25; Ps. 104:29). The rational life in angels and men, is from him; angels are made rational living spirits by him, and in him they consist: to men he grants life and favour, and his visitation preserves their spirit, and he is the God of their life, that gives it, and, continues it, and takes it away at pleasure (Ps. 42:8).

No creature can give real life; men may paint to the life, as we say, but they cannot give life: no man can make a living fly; he may as soon make a world. The spiritual life that is in any of the sons of men, is from God. Men, in a state of unregeneracy, are dead, dead in a moral and spiritual sense: and while they are corporally alive, they are dead in trespasses and sins; and because of them dead as to their understanding of, will to, affection for what is morally and spiritually good; and their very living in sin is no other than death: nor can they quicken themselves; nothing can give what it has not; the resurrection of the dead, in a corporal sense, requires almighty power; and, in a spiritual sense, the exceeding greatness of God's power; so that it is not by might or power of man, but by the Spirit and Power of the living God.

It is God, that of his rich mercy, and because of his great love, and by his almighty power, quickens men dead in sin, dead in law, and exposed unto eternal death; he speaks life into them, when he calls them by his grace, breathes into the dry bones the breath of life, and they live spiritually; a life of justification, through the righteousness of Christ, which is the justification of life, or adjudges and entitles them to eternal life; and a life of faith on Christ, and of holiness from him; they live in newness of life, soberly, righteously, and godly; which life is preserved in them, it springs up to everlasting life; it is hid and secured with Christ in God, is a never dying one, and shall issue in eternal life; in which all the three Persons in the Godhead are concerned (John 5:21, 25, 11:25; Rom. 8:2).

Eternal life, so often spoken of in scripture, as what the saints shall enjoy for evermore, is of God; it is what he has provided and prepared for them in his council and covenant: what they are foreordained unto in his purposes and decrees, and do most certainly enjoy; what he who cannot lie has promised to them before the world began, and which is his free gift, and flows from his free favour and good will, through Christ, (Acts 13:48; Titus 1:2; Rom. 6:23) and in which the Son and Spirit have a concern; Christ came that his people might have it, and he gave his flesh for the life of them; it is put into his hands, and he has a power to dispose of it, and give it to his sheep; so that none of them shall perish, but have it (1 John 5:12; John 17:2, 10:28).

And the Spirit, whose grace springs up to it, and issues in it; and he dwells in his people, as the earnest of it, and works them up for it, and brings them into the full enjoyment of it. Now God must have life in the highest degree of it, as explained; even essentially, originally, infinitely, and perfectly; or he could never give life in every sense unto his creatures; and he must live for ever, to continue eternal life, particularly to his people, and preserve them in it. ENDNOTES:

[1] Apud Platon. in Phaedo, p. 79.

[2] De Coelo, l. 2. c. 3.

[3] De Anima, l. 1. c. 2.

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