

## What Is Eternal Life?

### Introduction

Our topic today is eternal life. Our Sunday school class has been going through a study of several words that are commonly used in Christian circles and looking at the Biblical basis for their meaning. It can be easy to get lost in jargon or common terms, but not really grasp the truths behind them. So, today we are going to take a look at what it means to have eternal life.

Some of you may remember the name, Chuck Colson. Colson was one of President Nixon's advisers and was implicated in the Watergate scandal. Eventually, he was convicted and sent to prison for his actions. In the midst of this turmoil, Chuck Colson gave his life to Christ and began a ministry called Prison Fellowship. Colson continued to be active in social and religious circles, seeking to bring a Christian influence. The story is told of a conversation that was had between Mr. Colson and a senior television executive over dinner one evening.

Mr. Colson felt that he had a great opportunity to influence the man and his companies programming for good. Colson reminded the executive that wholesome programming could be profitable because of the "fifty million born again Christians out there." He encouraged the executive to run more programs like *Chariots of Fire* which was "a great movie with a marvelous Christian message." The television executive responded with several statistics about television viewing habits. In fact, of the 65 shows rated the week that *Chariots of Fire* was shown, the top rated show was the soap opera *Dallas*, while *Chariots of Fire* came in at number 57. The television man then asked Colson, "So, where are your fifty million born again Christians, Mr. Colson?"

The truth of the matter is that this same question could be asked of us today. Where are all the Christians? There is a lot of talk today about being spiritual, about having faith, believing, about being passionate and relevant. Lost in much of this discussion, and in some cases the discussion is merely posturing and self-promotion, is the truth of what it means to be a Christian. Significantly, the truth is being lost not just in the world. It is being lost within the church itself. Christians do not know what it is to be a Christian. The Apostle Paul could well say to us, just like he did to the Galatians, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you in the grace of Christ unto another gospel (Galatians 1:6)."

The further danger is that in many cases there are those who claim to be, and genuinely think they are, Christians. They participate in activities of the church and live moral lives, but they are, in fact, not Christians at all. They are merely self-deluded. To be self-deluded with regard to your relationship with God and your eternal destiny is the most dangerous place one can be. The possibility that you think that you have eternal life when in fact you are destined for eternal death, should cause us all to pause and, as the Apostle Paul wrote, *examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith* (II Corinthians 13:5).

David wrote, "*Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to Thy Word* (Psalm 119:9). So today we are going to take a look at what God says in his Word about eternal life, because the cure to the ignorance that leads to shallow Christian living or deluded damnation is the truth found in God's Word.

## Every Human is an Eternal Being Already

The first thing we must understand about eternal life is that all of us are eternal beings. We are not eternal in the same way God is, but we are eternal. God exists outside of time. He created time. He has no beginning or end. As humans, we are created by God. We have a beginning. Our physical bodies will someday die, but our physical bodies are not truly who we are. Our spirits will live on.

Someone may say that they believe that once you die that's all there is. You just cease to exist. Others would argue that you recycle into the universe and come back, reincarnated, as something else. However, Hebrews 9:27 says, "*And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.*"

Physical death is only the end of our physical bodies. After death there is judgment. For the unredeemed, this judgment will lead to eternal punishment. For the Christian, there will be judgment to determine what rewards will be received. I want to give you three scriptures that speak directly to this matter.

Daniel 12:2 *And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.*

Matthew 25:46 *And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.*

II Corinthians 5:10 *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.*

I don't want to dwell on this point too much. However, it is worthwhile to discuss and important to frame our study of the other aspects of eternal life because it is very easy for us to become shortsighted. We naturally think of what we see and touch as what is reality. The reality is that this physical reality is not permanent. Permanency is the true test of whether something is real or not. Who we are, our spirit, lives forever. A.W. Tozer wrote: *The importance of all this cannot be overestimated as we think and study and pray. It reveals the essential spirituality of mankind. It denies that man is a creature having spirit and declares that he is a spirit having a body. That which makes him a human being is not his body but his spirit, in which the image of God originally lay.*

Much of society and many of us have created a social construct for ourselves that in many ways limits our perceived need for God morally, relationally, and physically. Difficulty and suffering serve to pull down these walls and allow us to see clearly. The present juncture of history can be a great opportunity for the people of God. The entire world has been forced to take a step back. To be still, at least in some measure. We are faced with our own mortality in a starkly personal and immediate manner. Do not waste this opportunity. As David wrote, let us take the time to step back and examine our ways, our thoughts, our desires, and our ambitions in the light of God's Word and in the light of his calling to each of us to live worthy of Him (Ephesians 4:1).

## Eternal Life is Now

It could be easy at this point to become legalistic or think that our relationship with our Heavenly Father is transactional; as if, we are to live pleasing to God so that we get to go to the good place instead of getting fried for eternity. You might be asking if that is all there is to eternal life? Is it just the better option? Just to be clear, it is emphatically the better option; but if all you think of as eternal life is the

place you spend the hereafter, you are missing out on a lot. In John chapter 17, Jesus gives a different definition of eternal life.

*John 17:1-3 These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: <sup>2</sup>As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. <sup>3</sup>And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.*

Jesus says here that true eternal life is knowing God and Jesus. It is the relationship between the redeemed creation and the perfect, eternal Creator. This relationship is not one to which we merely look forward. It is relationship of the present. It is entered into the instant we believe in Christ and repent of our sins. II Corinthians 5:17 says that if we are in Christ we are new creatures. The old has gone away. Everything is new. We don't physically die when Jesus redeems us. It is a spiritual death and rebirth; which one day will result in a new body to go along with our new spirits (Philippians 3:21).

Back when I was a little younger, I did a lot of things that were pretty rough on my body. I think about it a lot on those days when my back, shoulder, neck, you name the spot, hurts all day. I think about how when I was doing all those fun things that make me hurt now, I used to think the experience would outweigh the future pain. So far I still think I was right, but the glory is fading, let me tell you. Now we get excited about a new body. The older I get the more I think about it too. However, what should really excite and motivate us is the new life, the new spirit, that we have been given now, but when you look at how we live on a daily basis, what we watch on TV, how we conduct our business, the activities we are involved in, what we do with our money, etc., etc., etc. the world is hard pressed to see where there is any real difference between their lives and ours.

Jesus did not come here so that we could feel better about ourselves or to help us live happier, more fulfilled lives. Jesus came and died for us to make us new. He came to set us on an entirely new course with a new way of looking at things. He didn't promise us prosperity, good health, or political power. He didn't come to give us the American Dream or create an earthly utopia. He came for so much more.

Let's consider a relationship between a man and a woman. They go through all the butterflies of meeting, falling in love, and getting engaged. Then they get married and pretty soon they get busy with life. Their interaction is reduced to mumbling something for a few seconds at each other every day. How good is their relationship going to be? It's going to be pretty bad, isn't it?

Now suppose another couple had gone through the same thing, except after they are married they continue to spend time together. They go through hardship together. They spend time together. They do things for each other. What is their relationship going to be like? Well it's going to be pretty good. Why? It's because they have gotten to know each other deeply. They have sacrificed together. They have helped each other.

Our relation to Christ is similar to this. When Jesus tells us that knowing the Father is eternal life. He means much more than just our salvation. He means a daily walking together, of our depending on him, of a maturing of our knowledge and experience of Him through His constant companionship with us. He is not like a shadow that follows us around but does not really affect our lives in any way. We are to abide in Him, not simply by commandment, but out of our daily need for Him and growing desire to be with Him.

The desire to know God more intimately leads to changed lives as we begin to bring our lives into obedience to Him not out of legalistic desire that leads to self-righteousness, but because we earnestly desire him and willing part with those things that hinder our knowing him more fully. It can lead to doing things that the world around us will not understand. I warn you. If you do this, at some point you will not be understood by those around you. There will come a time when you have to purposely step away from someone or something, even good things, to follow Christ. It's worth it.

In Matthew chapter 13, Jesus tells about a rich merchant who found a pearl of great value. When he found it, he immediately sold everything he had and bought the pearl. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like that pearl. It can be hard to give up success, security, and self-direction, but we must if we wish to obtain the full value of what Christ has set before us in himself and the Father above. It's scary at times, but it's worth it.

## Walking Points

I have come to be fascinated by the story of John and Betty Stam. The Stams were a young couple who were martyred in China in 1934. They had both graduated from the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and separately went to China as missionaries with the China Inland Mission. They renewed their acquaintance while in country, were married, and had a little girl. In the meantime, the situation in China had gone from bad to worse. The Communists were rapidly taking over the country and the Stams were in great danger.

Two weeks after reaching their first post as a family, the Stams were captured by the Communists. They made John write a letter to the mission agency to demand a ransom. In the closing of the letter, John wrote, "May Christ be glorified whether by life or by death." The little family was moved from place to place for several days. One day as they were being moved, someone asked John where they were going. John replied, "I don't know where they are going, but we are going to Heaven."

On the last day of their lives, they were marched stripped of their outer clothes to be executed as criminals. John was barefoot because he had given his socks to Betty to help her keep warm. There was no screaming or crying. No fighting or angry words. They spoke together for a few moments; then John knelt, praying, as they cut his head off. When that was done, Betty calmly knelt beside him and went to meet him in Heaven.

I am struck at their faith. They endured hardship, torture, and eventual death calmly and with concern for others. They marched to their own grave in peace, knowing what was about to happen to them, leaving their little girl hid in the abandoned house where they had been imprisoned, not knowing what would happen to her. They faced all of this with peace and calm. In the middle of it all, they ministered to others around them.

What is it that makes someone behave like this? It's Jesus. It's knowing Him so intimately that the reality of this world fades into oblivion compared to being with Him, wherever He leads.

Before she left for China, Betty Stam wrote these words: *When we consecrate ourselves to God, we think we are making a great sacrifice and doing lots for Him, when really we are only letting go some little bitsy trinkets we have been grabbing; and when our hands are empty, He fills them with His treasures.*

This is life, true eternal life, allowing Christ to empty our hands of all those things we want to hold onto so badly and fill them with Himself. Jesus has really only promised the Christian two things about our time in this world: (1) you will have trouble (John 16:33) and (2) I will be with you always (Matthew 28:20).

The Stams were not just convinced of this. It wasn't just an intellectual assent. It was a deep relationship between John and Betty and their Lord and Savior. They sacrificed everything that we hold dear and sacred for it. Everything. They believed God in a way that is hard for me to imagine. When the writer of Hebrews says that faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1), I think of the Stams. Their lives showed substance and evidence of the power of a relationship with Christ.

It is a level of relationship that can only be reached by complete and total abandonment of all that we are in ourselves. It's a paradigm change. Our lives are so ingrained with the love of this world, the seeking of comfort, wealth, and influence that it is hard for us, even as Christians, to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. I find it interesting that when God met with Elijah (I Kings 19) there was a great wind, then an earthquake, then a fire, but God was not in any of them. After they all passed, Elijah heard a still small voice, that was God. Most of us do not experience the present eternal life that God desires to share with us because we have allowed God to be drowned out in our lives. We are like Samuel who though he had served in the tabernacle for years did not know God's voice when God spoke to him (I Samuel 3). We know the voices of our culture, of politics, sports, even religion, but we do not know God's voice. His voice is still and small. You have to stop and listen for it. You have to intentionally spend time with Him and seek Him out. You have to invest in the relationship.

In closing, I would ask of you two questions. The first is, what is your eternal destination? I know most the people watching or reading this are church people. We are nice people, moral people, even good citizens, but do we bear the mark of Christ in our lives? The question is not about being too radical for Christ. The question is can anyone tell that we are Christians at all? I will go so far as to ask, if there is no real fruit of your relationship with Christ in your life, if your life is has not markedly been changed by Christ, if you are not being convicted of sin, if you are not growing in understanding of the Word, if you are not witnessing to others, then are you certain you are a Christian? Jesus said that only those that abide in him would bear fruit (John 15:1-8). If there is no fruit, are you really in Him? This is the most important question in life. Meaning, value, and purpose are only truly found in relationship with Christ. Are you in that relationship? If you are unsure how to answer that question, or if you are sure and you want to enter into a relationship with Christ, please contact the church. Someone will help you.

The second question is to those who know they are Christians. Are you truly experiencing the eternal abundant life that Christ came to give you? Are you seeking and satisfied in Him or are you allowing yourself to be choked out by the care of the world (Matthew 13)? Are you cultivating your heart to remove the weeds and prepare it for the seed of the Word?

I don't normally attach much significance to my dreams, but a few weeks ago I had one that has stuck with me. I was in a house, packing. A hurricane was on the way and everyone was ordered to evacuate. I only had a few minutes left to pack and get on the last helicopter out. There was only enough room for me to bring one small box of possessions with me.

I remember feeling a sense of urgency, of time slipping away; but I wanted to get my stuff. I heard a call that the chopper was ready to leave, but I stayed to get more stuff. Then I heard it leave and everything

was quiet. I realized I had waited too long. There was no longer a way out. It was too late. Then I looked down into my box. It was full of worthless junk.

I have been thinking about that dream a lot. When I stand before Christ, what will be in my box? What will I have to show Him? What will I give to Him and say, "These are the most important things in my life". Will it be nothing but broken junk? Will I have waited too long to be obedient? Will I have put off one day, one moment, too long answering His call to me?

He is the only one that can fill the box of my life with anything other than junk. He is the one who as Betty Stam put it, fills it with his treasures. So I ask this question of you, and I ask it of me, what are you allowing your box to be filled with?

I want to close with two passages from the book of Revelation.

Revelation 1:12-18 <sup>12</sup>And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; <sup>13</sup>And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. <sup>14</sup>His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; <sup>15</sup>And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. <sup>16</sup>And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. <sup>17</sup>And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: <sup>18</sup>I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

Revelation 3:14-22 <sup>14</sup>And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; <sup>15</sup>I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. <sup>16</sup>So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: <sup>18</sup>I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. <sup>19</sup>As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. <sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. <sup>21</sup>To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. <sup>22</sup>He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

## References

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