

Eternal Life

Those who believe in God generally also believe in life after death. Indeed, the prospect for believers obtaining eternal life was a major part of the message the Lord Jesus Christ preached during his ministry.

However, if we consider Christianity in general, we find that there are different understandings of what ‘eternal life’ means. One reason for this is because very few people these days read their Bibles properly (if at all), even if they are believers. It can seem easier to rely on church leaders or the local Vicar, Pastor or Priest to decide and teach what people should believe. The teaching of eternal life is no exception to this. The only way to understand what God says about eternal life is to read the Bible carefully and in context. To read it any other way results in errors and misunderstanding.

This article seeks to explain what the Bible really teaches about eternal life and how it can be gained. We cannot deal with this subject comprehensively, because there is not the space to do so. However, we hope that this introduction will encourage readers to examine their Bible further on this fascinating topic.

Needing to be Saved

When Peter was being tried before the Jewish rulers, he told them regarding the Lord Jesus Christ:

Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Being saved – from what? From the curse of sin and death under which all men and women live. Death is the end of life for everyone. Sin is the disobedience of God’s commandments.



Throughout history and perhaps especially these days, a great many people have chosen to ignore Him and to do whatever is “right in their own eyes”.

Back at the beginning of the Bible, God decreed to Adam and Eve that the consequence of their act of disobedience would be their deaths after years of toil and strife living their lives. To Adam, God said:

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken: for dust you are, and to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:19).

The Promise to Abraham

In Genesis we read about the faithful man Abraham. God makes him a number of promises across the later years of his life, and in chapter 17 He tells Abraham:

I give to you, and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God (Genesis 17:8).

We see here that God promised Abraham he would possess the land of Canaan for ever. Despite this, he didn't possess it in his lifetime, not even by the time of his death. This caused the writer in Hebrews to make this comment about him:

By faith he [Abraham] dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:9)

The promise made to Abraham means that he must be raised from the dead and given eternal life, for that promise to be fulfilled. This must still be future, as it has not happened yet. Abraham had faith in God's promises and looked far into the future to the time when he would live for ever in the kingdom of God.

Another Genesis account of Abraham concerns him and his son Isaac. Genesis 22 tells how God instructed him:

Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you (Genesis 22:2).

God's command to Abraham was a test of his faith and obedience. Although God did not let him go



through with a human sacrifice, Abraham proved that he was prepared to do anything God asked of him. This was also an enacted parable of resurrection from the dead. We find again in Hebrews that a commentary is provided:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense (Hebrews 11: 17–19).

Job

Another Old Testament man of faith, Job, believed in the resurrection of the dead. He knew he would live again after his death:

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed,

this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another (Job 19:25–27).

Clearly, Job looked forward to the time when he would live again, even though his body had been destroyed (decayed in the grave). He believed that he would be raised from death, to stand again upon earth and that he would see God with his own eyes.

Jesus' Message of Eternal Life

As we have seen, the Old Testament teaches us that eternal life is promised to the faithful, but quite often it is implied, rather than plainly stated. In the New Testament, however, it is explicitly stated, and especially as taught by Jesus.

He came to speak the truth to all who would hear him, saying to his disciple Thomas:

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

Jesus is the only way to life – eternal life – there is no other way for anyone to come to God. In fact that is the message of Peter which we considered in our introduction. Jesus also said:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved (John 3:16–17).

To be saved ultimately means being saved from the curse of sin and death;

being found worthy at the judgement to be granted eternal life and permitted to enter the kingdom of God.

In Luke's Gospel, we have the account of a lawyer who asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life:

And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested him, saying. "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" So he answered and said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him "You have answered rightly: do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:25–28).

Conditions and Judgement

Eternal life is not automatically given; it requires a commitment to a life faithful to God. Indeed, Jesus said he was the only way to life – meaning eternal life – and that by keeping his commands we demonstrate our commitment to him:

If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love... You are my friends, if you do whatsoever I command you (John 15:10, 14).

Keeping the commandments of the Lord Jesus is totally necessary if we desire eternal life. True believers can look in hope for the day when they will be raised from the dead and granted immortality – eternal life in the kingdom of God.

After the resurrection, there will be a 'Day of Judgement', which Jesus

taught clearly in his parables. For good examples of these, read ‘the parable of the talents’ (Matthew 25:14–30) and ‘the parable of the sheep and the goats’ (Matthew 25:31–46). These give word-pictures of people found worthy at the judgement who will be permitted and indeed welcomed to go into the kingdom of God.

We see in these parables that, again, eternal life is not given automatically, it requires a response from the believer. Jesus summarised this responsibility and the right outlook:

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Matthew 6:33).

This means putting God, and everything He promises and asks of us, first and foremost in our lives.

The Kingdom of God on Earth, Not in Heaven

There is a common misconception amongst some believers that the faithful go to heaven at death, to receive a reward there. However, a careful reading of the Bible tells us otherwise. Eternal life will be enjoyed by the faithful on earth, not in heaven.



We can see this from the example of the Apostle Peter at Pentecost, preaching to the Jews:

Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne... (Acts 2:29–30).

That descendant was the Lord Jesus Christ (see v31) who is now in heaven awaiting the day when he will return. Peter was quite clear: David did not ascend into the heavens (v34). David was described as ‘a man after God’s own heart’ (Acts 13:22). If he did not ascend to heaven, we can be sure that neither will we!

Peter’s message was that Jesus, the firstfruits of the resurrection to eternal life, is in heaven, awaiting the appointed day of his return:

The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool” (Acts 2:34–35).

That day will be wonderful, when faithful men and women from all time will be welcomed into the Kingdom of God, to enjoy that promised eternal life.

Let’s take the time now to read our Bibles, find out about God’s promises and what He wants from us, and get our lives right with Him, so that we too can inherit eternal life.

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