



Everlasting Life

John 3:16

TRINITY PULPIT

One of my cherished memories as a child is that of my grandfather on my mom’s side of the family. He and my grandmother lived in a very small farmhouse on 40 acres down in a hollow of Tennessee. In fact they lived on Racetrack Hollow Road. You really can’t make that kind of stuff up. I can remember those dimly lit scenes, late in the evening, as the supper was finished, and everyone would settle into the night. There were family members in each room laughing and catching up with one another. There was a serious scrabble game going on in the kitchen on the table. In the middle room — you really could not call it the family room, as every room but the kitchen had a bed in it — were a bed and three chairs. One of those chairs was an easy chair, vinyl, for sure, and worn. There, my grandfather would settle in after a long day of work on the farm. Before he would sit down and lean back, he would put an album on his little compact stereo. The only kind of music that was ever played on that stereo was gospel music. His favorite bands were The Chuck Wagon Gang and The Kinsmen Quartet. He would turn on the stereo and lay back and throughout the house you could hear those gospel tunes. Somewhere in the process you could hear them sing out:

*Jesus is coming soon,
 morning or night or noon.
 Many will meet their doom,
 trumpets will sound.
 All of the dead shall rise,
 righteous meet in the skies.
 Going where no one dies,
 heavenward bound.*

Heavenward bound. How we love to sing songs about heaven. Whether it is old hymns or gospel music or even new arrangements like *I Can Only Imagine*. We are comforted by the thought of heaven and life eternal.

Solomon, in writing Ecclesiastes 3, talks about the cycles and seasons of life. He reminds us that there is a time for everything under heaven, and he comments how all of these seasons and cycles seem to repeat and can seem meaningless; but then Solomon

says, “Yet God has put eternity in the hearts of men and women.”

God has put eternity in our hearts. I think that reminds us that in each human heart is the longing to know if this life is all that there is to experience. Is there something more beyond the veil of death? Even those who would say no and say, in a fatalistic way that this life is all there is and there is no afterlife, have at least had to come to that conclusion. In other words, God has placed eternity in our hearts and because of this we have to ask the question. Some come to the wrong conclusion, but the question still has to be answered.

I think of the words of Paul when I think of those who do not believe in life everlasting. When Paul writes, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (I Corinthians 15:19)

God has placed eternity in our hearts and thus we long to know if this life is all that there is to experience or if there is life eternal.

We are concluding our sermon series on basic doctrine today. We have been asking why we meet as a church and what is our mission. Using the thought of Starting with Why, we have looked at the doctrines of God, Humanity, Sin, Jesus, Salvation, and today, we conclude with Everlasting Life.

Our central verse for our consideration has been John 3:16. We began with that verse as an overview and we close with it today.

For God So loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

God Loved
 The World Everyone
 God Gave Jesus
 Jesus—The one and only Unique one God himself
 Believe--Salvation God has done God’s part and we must respond.
 Everlasting Life The very life of God

Jesus concludes this verse by saying that God sent Jesus and that by believing in Jesus we might not perish but have everlasting life. Jesus reminds us that there is an eternity, and we will spend eternity either with God or separated from God. We will either perish or have everlasting life.

Let's briefly look at this choice that we must make. Where will we spend eternity? We will either perish or have everlasting life.

Let's look at the negative for a moment: we shall not perish. The word perish is an interesting word. It means to be lost, but it also means to destroy. That is why some people have a theology not of the eternal nature of the soul, for eternity apart from God, but that of annihilation. There are some who do not believe in eternal punishment for those who do not choose Christ but instead annihilation. They just cease to exist. If this world here was all we have, then one might make that case. However, there are other passages that inform our thinking.

In fact, in this passage, when we think on the words of Jesus, we discover that Jesus is making a comparison. If there is life everlasting with Jesus, then there must be life everlasting without Jesus or apart from Jesus.

What does the Bible teach about life after death, especially for those who refuse the love of God in Christ?

The Biblical testimony is an understanding that develops. In the Old Testament there is Sheol. This was a shadowy place for all who were dead. The concept of life eternal with God is not fully accepted. Those in Sheol were not lost, but they were not with God, as we think about those with God. However, by the time we get to the New Testament there is a more developed idea of life everlasting.

In the New Testament we find the words Hades and Hell. Hades has more of a meaning like Sheol, but there is also a concept of punishment that goes with Hades. The same is true about Hell.

The term hell comes from the term Gehenna. Gehenna was the Valley of Hinnon, which was located just southwest of Jerusalem. It was a place outside the city of walls. In other words, it was a place on the outside of God's city. It was a place where, before the New Testament, there had been child sacrifices to the god Molech, where there had been terrible and horrific stories. In addition, there – in this god sacrifice – had been a fire that never went out. By Jesus' day the Valley of Hinnon was the garbage dump of Jerusalem. It was the place where things were cast off, thrown away, and lost. There was also always a smoldering fire in the Valley that never went out as the city tried to burn their refuse.

So, when Jesus speaks of eternal punishment in Matthew 25, he speaks of those who will go to Gehenna or Hell. In Revelation, John refers to the second death as the lake of fire or eternal punishment.

The picture of perish is that of eternal death, cast off from the presence of God, on the outside looking in, a place of fire, and a place of punishment.

Hell is not some funny *Far Side* cartoon with a funny looking devil. It is a place of total lostness from God. Why would a loving God send anyone to such a place eternally? That is a good question and here is the answer. God sends no one; we choose to go. We have learned

that we already stand condemned outside of Christ. God is not sending anyone to hell; God sent Jesus to rescue us from it.

The Bible tells us plainly that Hell was prepared for Satan and his angels. It is not a place where we were ever meant to be. It is not a place that was prepared for us, but in our rejection of God's love, we make the choice to perish.

However, Jesus says I have come that you might not perish but that you might have everlasting life. God has sent Jesus so that we might spend eternity not separated from God but with God.

Let's look at the term everlasting life. Now we could study this topic for weeks but for our purposes let's remember that we just want to have some basic doctrinal information. So, with this in mind let me say that everlasting life has three ramifications. The word means the very life of God. It is more than just life without end — it is real life.

So, first Jesus has come that we might have life. Jesus said I have come to give you life and life abundant.

Daniel Ritchie in his article, "Disabled by Design," begins by stating:

Take a step back for a moment and imagine that you were born without arms.

You have to do everyday tasks with your feet. You write with your feet. You eat with your feet. You put gas in your car by lying down on the ground to lift the nozzle with your feet. You pay for a gallon of milk at the grocery store by carrying it to the checkout line with your teeth and then taking your debit card out of your shoe and swiping it through the credit card machine with your toes.

That's my life. Every day is an exercise in the unusual, and the world recognizes that. I get stared at and hear rude comments on an almost daily basis.

God has placed eternity in our hearts and thus we long to know if this life is all that there is to experience or if there is life eternal.

As a child and teen, being different than everyone else I knew was a terrible burden. I did not think my own life was precious, remarkable, or holy. I felt worthless and broken.

He goes on to write how God rescued him from this way of thinking and gave to him a new way of living. At the age of 15, God showed him that first of all he was valued by God. Secondly, that he had purpose because of Christ. He would go on to say that despite his disability he knew life was precious.

My friends, I think that is a glimpse of abundant life. Abundant life is not the lie of the prosperity gospel that you are to have an abundance of things in this world. In fact, if that is the gospel, then there are millions of Christians who must not be Christian. Abundant life is not “feeling blessed” because I have a new house, car, got to go on an exotic vacation, or some other purchase or experience. Abundant life is living no matter your place in life and no matter how you find yourself with this knowledge: You are valuable to God and God has a purpose for you. That is abundant life. You have been included in the incredible grace of God. To have everlasting life is to have abundant life. You know you have been included and no matter what life throws at you, you know, you KNOW, God values you.

To have everlasting life is also to know the hope of resurrection. The Bible teaches very plainly that there will be resurrection of our bodies. Just as Jesus was resurrected so we will be resurrected. Now Paul tells us that this resurrection body will be different than this old body of decay. When Paul tries to describe it he struggles, but he simply says it will not be like this one; it will be eternal and it will be like Jesus.

Why is resurrection important? It is important because it is a remembrance that God loves everything about you and me. Even this body that we sometimes use for sin. God is redeeming the whole person. So, the Biblical concept of eternal life is not that we are disembodied spirits that float around on clouds. The Biblical concept of eternity is that we have a new body and that the physical and spiritual is redeemed. Paul speaks very plainly that the dead in Christ will rise; we will not all be raised, but we will all be changed into a full person, as Jesus is. Jesus in heaven is not a disembodied spirit. Jesus has a resurrected body. We too have resurrection.

Finally, to speak of everlasting life is to speak of heaven. Jesus said, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:3) The great promise of heaven is not streets of gold, pearly gates, or mansions, but the presence of Jesus. What the disciples wanted to know was would they be with Jesus.

Here is what we can say about the presence of Jesus. When we die in Christ we are in the presence of Jesus. Paul says to be absent from this body is to be present with Christ. In the Revelation we get a glimpse of heaven, and there in heaven is a picture of the church that has come through the tribulation that is this life. In addition, Jesus says that God is not the God of the dead but of the living speaking with Abraham, Moses, and Elijah. The point is that everlasting life, that is, life without ending, begins in the twinkling of an eye. You go to sleep in death here and we awake in the presence of Jesus. Heaven is a present reality where we will be when we pass in this moment.

However, there is something else that we are promised. The promise of Revelation is not only that heaven, where Jesus is, exists now but also, when all things are made new, this same heaven will come down to earth. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. I love how the late Eugene Peterson translated it in *The Message*:

I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, and gone the sea. I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband. I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They’re his people, he’s their God. He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” The Enthroned continued, “Look! I’m making everything new. (Revelation 21:1-5)

God has moved into the neighborhood and made his home with us. We are God’s people and God is our God. Everything is new.

That is everlasting life.

I have spent many a moment with church members as they passed from this life. Each one has been different in some form or fashion. It was said in a recent interview with Eugene Peterson’s family that in the final days of his life he could be overheard talking to others and then in the final moments he uttered: “Let’s Go.”

Let’s go. Yes, let’s go. Jesus said I have come that you will not perish but have everlasting life. You will have life abundant; know that God values you. You will have everlasting life. You will know resurrection. You will have everlasting life — you will be in heaven with Jesus, and then heaven and earth will be one and you will always be with God.

[Resurrection] is important because it is a remembrance that God loves everything about you and me.

The gospel song begs the question as it speaks of heaven:

Doesn't that make you want to go, brother?

Doesn't that make you want to go, sister?

Eugene Peterson uttered, "Let's go!" Yes, my friend, let's go. ▲



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