

Eternal Life

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[0 : 00] Well, this morning I'd like us to turn back to the chapter that we read in John chapter 5. We're going to focus especially on verse 13 where John says, I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

As I'm sure you know, in many parts of life we have goals at school, at work, in our community. We all have things that we're aiming for, outcomes, targets, dreams.

Sometimes these are the things that we want as individuals. Sometimes they're things that other people want for us. So your teachers at school will want you to do really well. Your employers want you to perform.

And maybe as individuals we have high expectations of ourselves where we want a particular job or house or achievement. And as we all know very well right now in Britain we are in the midst of a great battle between our politicians all fighting for the goal that they want.

Maybe even in this past week you've had goals you've had to reach. Maybe some have slipped by. And it can be thrilling for us when we achieve these things and it can also be hugely disappointing when we fail.

[1 : 18] Either way, whether you're a Christian or not, whether you believe in God or not, goals are a big part of life for us all.

Today I want to forget about all the targets and goals of work or school or politics and chuck them to one side. And instead I want us to ask what is God's goal for you?

In other words, in terms of the Christian message, what is the outcome that God wants for us all? And the answer to that is actually very clear.

In the message of Christianity God's goal is that you would have eternal life. That's summed up brilliantly and possibly the most famous verse of the Bible, John 3.16, where it says, for God, soul of the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

And in many ways for John, who wrote this letter and who wrote the Gospel of John, eternal life is a huge theme that he keeps coming back to. At the end of the great Gospel he wrote, the story of the life of Jesus, he says that these things are written so that you may believe in Jesus Christ and that by believing you may have life in his name.

[2 : 41] And the same is emphasized in 1 John 5.13, eternal life is a key theme. And I think that's part of the reason why, if you noticed in the chapter we read, John keeps on using the language of being born in reference to being a Christian.

And that's something he does again and again. We're born of God into new life, into eternal life. These two words, eternal life, that's the goal.

It's at the heart of the Gospel message. Today I want us just to simply ask, what does that actually mean? What is this eternal life?

To answer that question, there are two key words that we need to think about. The first word is quantity. One of the things that we are constantly aware of is the fact that life is limited.

Again and again we are confronted by the fact that life is short. I'm sure you are the same that I can't believe that it's nearly December. I can't even believe it's 2020.

[3 : 54] I still tend to think it's kind of in the 90s, that was when I grew up. And anything like 2020 just seemed like, it seemed like so unbelievably far in the distance.

And yet here we are, life goes by so fast. And even if life is long, it's still so short, sometimes heartbreakingly short.

Life is limited. There's only so much of life that we can all have in terms of quantity. It can seem so small. Eternal life is not like that.

Eternal life is life that is unlimited in its quantity. In other words, it is life that lasts forever. The old translations of John 3.16, the verse that's on the screen there, used to use the phrase everlasting life, which I think is such a beautiful phrase.

God wants us to have life that will last forever, that will never end. And so when we think about eternal life, we want to think in terms of that never-endingness.

[5 : 02] There's a perpetuity about it. It's endless. It's life that keeps on going. Now that maybe immediately raises the question, how is that possible?

Well, I think the reason that we can have this life that is without end, is because it is a life that comes from the God who is without beginning.

We say that God is eternal. And when we say that, we don't just mean that He always will be there, we mean that He always has been there. And the whole reality of time, of days, of months, of years, that whole system that we are completely confined to and limited by, God is above it all.

And the reason He is above the system is because He made the system. He is the creator of time. You go back to the first chapter of Genesis, at the beginning of the Bible, you'll see there's a big emphasis on time, evening, morning, evening, morning.

It's reminding us that God is the creator of time. And as the creator of time, as the creator of everything else, He can give life that is limitless in its quantity.

[6 : 15] We can't do that. We, as fallen, broken humans, can only give limited life to the next generation. So children born of us have life of a very limited quantity.

The children born of God, those who trust in Him, have life of unlimited quantity. And all of this raises the question, I suppose, that maybe we sometimes think about, you think, how will time work in heaven?

We think, you know what, how will that work? Heaven is in eternity, we're in time. How will time work in heaven? We can't fully answer that question.

There's a sense of which we don't know, but I thought we might as well have a wee bash at answering it. And here's a suggestion to think about. It's not definitive. But in thinking about this, I was thinking about the fact that we must remember that in the new creation, in the future that God has for us, we will be there as humans.

We're not going to be there as kind of floaty spirits or clouds. We're going to be there as humans, body and soul humans. And as humans, we are space, time, creatures.

[7 : 28] That's the realm we exist in. We can't function outside that system. We can't comprehend being outside that system. We need time. That's the realm we exist in.

So in terms of thinking about how time might work in heaven, I think that when God says, I will give you eternal life, part of what he's saying is that he will keep on providing time for us forever.

An unending quantity of time. And he can do that because he is the one who creates it. He's the one who makes it. But what's even more important is that the reason he does that is so that you can always be with him.

And that means that right now, time is the great limiter that restricts us. It restricts us in so many ways. In our future, in the new creation, time will become an unending resource that frees us to be with God and to be with each other forever.

That's why you can't use up time in the new creation. And I think that's captured beautifully in the hymn, Amazing Grace, that we'll sing at the end. One of the verses says, when we've been there 10,000 years, we'll have no less days to sing God's praise.

[8 : 41] A great image of how you've used up 10,000 days, but you've not used any up. What's left over is still unending. There's this never-ending quantity.

And that's a brilliant reminder that in the new creation, in the future, you will always have time. Right now, so often, we don't have time.

In God's new creation, we will have time. Time to rest, time to think, time to talk, time to laugh, time to walk, time to learn, time to sing, time to sit still, time to run, time to savor, time to be together.

God is saying, I will give you life that never runs out of time. Eternal life is a life of unending quantity.

And one of the crucial things about that is for us today, is that it should shape our perspective. We said a moment ago that for us, life is so short.

[9 : 48] And if we were to try and draw a picture of eternity, which I know is impossible, but we're just going to try it anyway, imagine that's eternity.

Just, I know it's not, but just use your imagination. As big as why does the screen can be. Massive. And then we think, well, how do our lives compare to it?

And you have to look very closely and see if you can see anything. Do you see that? Can you see it? A tiny dot. Now, that picture is the biggest exaggeration I have ever made in my life.

Because the dot is a billion times too big. It should be tiny. It should be tiny. And even if our life is long just now, in relation to even the age of the universe, but beyond that to the endless ages of eternity, time is nothing.

But if that's the case, why are we so obsessed with the size of our dot? And we never think about what's going to happen to us for eternity.

[11 : 15] So people are outraged if their dot is cut short to 50, 40 or 20 years, which, and that's an awful thing, but we're actually quite happy if it reaches 80 years.

We think, oh, well, that's a decent run. And we pour our energy into preserving our dot for long enough until it's an acceptable length. And all the time, God is saying, look at what I'm offering you. Look at what I want you to have. I want you to have eternal life. We would all do anything to preserve our we dot. If we get a diagnosis, we go straight to the doctor.

When we hear that something is particularly unhealthy, we avoid it forever. When we're told to do something to keep well, we jump to it straight away. And all of that's a good thing, but in comparison to what God wants us to think about.

But we turn round and say to God, no, thanks. I'll just make the most of my dot. And maybe you're sitting here thinking, well, what if the dot is all that there is and eternity is not real?

[12 : 23] Well, apart from the fact that without eternity, you have to try and explain where your dot came from. All I think we can say to that is that surely, same to yourself that the dot is all that there is, that has got to be the biggest gamble that anyone could ever take.

So when we're thinking about eternal life, we're thinking about quantity. But there's another key word that I want us to think about.

And I'm sure you can probably guess what it is. This is the one that is actually, I think, the even more important one. Eternal life is not just about quantity. It is also, and primarily, about quality. And that's why the translation, if I just go back a couple of slides, the translation, everlasting life in John 3.16 is not actually adequate.

Because as brilliant as the word everlasting sounds, it's not a good enough description. Eternal life is not just about never ending quantity. It is even better than that.

[13 : 36] And that's brought out very clearly when we look across the New Testament and see the various emphases that are made in regard to eternal life. In other words, when the New Testament talks about eternal life, it doesn't primarily focus on the never-endingness of it.

What it focuses on instead is the incredible quality of life that God wants you and me to have. And there's a huge amount we could say about that and too much to take in.

I just want to highlight four things under four brief headings. I'll have to skip through my diagram picture again. First one is to say that eternal life is a life of extraordinary privilege.

The New Testament uses the word eternal to describe the standard of life that God wants to give us. And he's saying it's a life of the highest, highest level. One of the key words used to describe that or associated with that is that word glory that we have in the verse before us, where it says, this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. That phrase, eternal weight of glory, is speaking of the fact that everything God has prepared for you, if you put your trust in Jesus, is utterly brilliant. It is of the highest, most outstanding quality. The word glory conveys the idea of weightiness and brightness. It's the stuff of heavyweight quality and of dazzling beauty. It's a bit like a big gold bar, just solid, absolute quality. The eternal life that God wants to have is of the highest standard, which means there's nothing flimsy about it, nothing superficial, nothing substandard, nothing compromise. That's why if you go to the last two chapters of the Bible and you read about the new heavens and the new earth that God is preparing for us, it is breathtaking.

And perhaps the only way for us to understand that or to start to understand that is to think of the best that you've ever seen. So think about the stunning hills of Scotland.

[15 : 52] Think about the glistening sea in the sunshine. Think of the stunning colors of your gardens, flowers and full bloom. Think of the finest music, the most beautiful art. Think of all the stuff that makes you say, wow. And then remember that that is just a glimpse of the eternal weight of glory that God has for us. But what's perhaps even more amazing is the fact that these privileges

of eternal life are described with another very important word. It speaks in terms of this privileged quality, the best of the best. And then there's this key word that's used. These privileges are your inheritance. Jesus is the mediator of our new covenant so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance. That means that through trusting in Jesus, you are guaranteed all of this. You are the legal, rightful heir to all that God has prepared.

Eternal life is a life of extraordinary privilege. Second thing I want to say is that eternal life of abundant satisfaction. The New Testament uses the word eternal to describe the provision that God makes for us. Jesus speaks about this in John's Gospel. In chapter four, he speaks about quenched thirst. In chapter six, he speaks about satisfied hunger. You can see the verses on the screen there. In verse chapter four, he says, whoever drinks of the water in this well will be thirsty again. Whoever drinks of the water, I will give him, will never be thirsty again. The water I give him will be a spring of water welling up to eternal life. And then he uses the language of food in John 6. Don't work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life. And whoever comes to him will not hunger. Whoever believes in him will never thirst. Think of all the ways in which people suffer because of a lack. Think of all the ways in which you suffer because things are missing or limited. Eternal life is a life where there will be no lack.

Instead, there is abundant provision and total satisfaction. Often the Bible speaks of eternal life in terms of a meal. The New City Catechism we read this morning made a reference to that.

I think that that language of a meal in eternal life is both literal and figurative. It's literal, in a sense, I think we'll have amazing meals together in heaven. But we will also feel and experience complete satisfaction and fulfillment in every part of life. So in the New Creation, you'll be able to learn a musical instrument without it being incredibly frustrating. You'll be able to herd animals without them driving you around the bend. And you'll be able to watch other people have a brilliant time and never feel left out. All the best of life will be there without any of the brokenness that sin has brought. And our own weaknesses and frailty are cared for in every way. There's a brilliant phrase using the word eternal in 2 Thessalonians 2.16. Now, may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace. Eternal comfort, that doesn't mean getting to sit in a nice sofa forever.

It means eternal encouragement, the fact that God wants us to have a constant awareness that He was right with us, that He loves us, and that He'll always be there. So often in life we find ourselves saying, I wish it wasn't like this. In heaven we'll never ever feel like that. It's a life of abundant satisfaction. Third thing I want to say is that eternal life is life of unshakable security. New Testament again uses the word eternal to describe this, particularly in reference to what Jesus achieved on the cross. Here's three examples. Hebrews 5 speaks about eternal salvation.

[20 : 18] Hebrews 9 speaks about eternal redemption. Hebrews 6 speaks and makes reference to the reality of eternal judgment. Our salvation is an eternal salvation. That means that our rescue from sin, which is what God's great saving work is, is totally, fully, and completely achieved through Jesus. That was again what we were noting in the New City Catechism, that when we have the Lord's Supper we're not saying that there's something lacking from the cross. We're saying, no, the cross is complete, full. Everything has been achieved. There's nothing lacking, nothing still to be done, and nothing that can ever undo it. And that means that if you are trusting in Jesus, you are absolutely safe. Nothing that earthly life can throw at you can take away what eternal life has in store for you. Our redemption is an eternal redemption. The word redemption is the language of the marketplace, of economics. It's the language of buying someone out of slavery. So to be redeemed means to be bought out of slavery, to come under new ownership. Eternal life is eternal redemption, which means God owns us and keeps us forever. You are always His.

And then in Hebrews 6 we see the mention of the fact that our judgment is an eternal judgment.

Now there's two aspects to this. One is the judgment of those who reject Jesus. This is the judgment that will come to those who just say, no, I don't want you, I don't need you.

I'll stand on my own. And that's a sin that leads to death, as John referred to in this chapter.

A mindset that refuses the offer of salvation that's freely offered in Jesus. That will bring an eternal judgment. That means that it's a fair judgment. It also means it's a permanent judgment, and that has got to be a massive warning to us. John makes it really clear in verse 12, what he says, whoever has the Son has life. Whoever does not have the Son does not have life.

But the other aspect of eternal judgment is incredibly positive. It's the fact that for those who trust in Jesus, an eternal judgment is also made, but that's not a judgment of condemnation.

[23 : 03] It's a judgment of justification, of being pronounced not guilty. For those who trust in Jesus, those who are trusting in Him, or who start trusting in Him, we are eternally judged not guilty.

We are eternally judged as righteous. In other words, we are forgiven forever. And that's the astonishing truth about what Jesus does for us. He brings us from our sins, from our brokenness and our inadequacy, and he makes us fully acceptable in the eternal judgment of God. That means that your status as a forgiven, adopted child of God is stamped into God's eternal law. And all of that means that eternal life in Jesus is a life where we are utterly secure.

And Jesus has a brilliant way of describing this. He says, I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Eternal life means to be held in impenetrable safety in Jesus' protective hand.

So eternal life is this extraordinary privilege, its abundant satisfaction, its unbreakable security, but perhaps most of all, eternal life is a beautiful relationship. That's really what lies at the heart of eternal life. In John chapter 17, Jesus gives the definitive definition of eternal life. He says, when he says, when he spoke in these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, Father, the hour has come, glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you, since you've given him authority over all flesh to give eternal life to all you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Eternal life means knowing God, knowing God as their Father, knowing Jesus as their brother and king, knowing God the Holy Spirit as their comforter and their companion. The heart of eternal life is a relationship where we know God, and that is a relationship of the highest quality, because his care for you is at the highest level. His interest in you is to the minutest detail. His plans for you are utterly brilliant. His dedication to you is immeasurably strong. His gentleness to us is supremely tender. His love for us is never, ever one ounce less than eternal.

[25 : 42] And the quantity of eternal life, the never-endingness of it is simply there so that the relationship we have with God will be at the highest quality forever. And that means that it's not that we come to know Jesus so that we can live forever. It's actually that we live forever so that we will forever know Jesus. But alongside that is the wonderful truth that eternal life is not just knowing God, it's also the fact that we will know each other. Eternal life is a community life.

That's what union to Jesus does. It brings us into relationship not just with God, but with one another as well. Eternal life means not just the highest quality of relationship with God, it also means the highest quality of relationship with one another. That's why when the Bible speaks of the new heavens and the new earth, it speaks in terms of an eternal home.

Here we have it in 2 Corinthians 5, 1. We know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

And the key word I want to emphasize there is the word we. It's our home. We have a home together because at the heart of eternal life is a beautiful relationship with God and with one another.

So eternal life is not just about quantity, it's also about quality. A great reminder that even the very best of life just now is just a fraction of the life that God wants us to have. And again, I'm going to try and draw a picture to illustrate this, which you just have to bear with me.

[27 : 31] If we think of it in terms of a graph, eternal life gives us privilege, satisfaction, security, and relationship to the highest level. Earthly life, it's not even close in comparison.

And sometimes these things aren't even positive. I've not deliberately put relationship as the one that's in negative terms. It could be any of them, but we know that for so many people, for ourselves, some of these aspects in their lives aren't even positive at all, let alone anything close to being eternal. And that comparison between the tiny dot and the end of stages of eternity between the tiny bit of the graph and the infinite bar graph of eternal life is showing us the incredible difference of what God is offering us in Jesus.

And I suppose the key question is how do we get it? How do we get that eternal life? And the answer is utterly incredible. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Eternal life is a free gift, is free.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son that he ever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. I want to say one more thing before I close.

[29 : 21] When we do a sermon like this and look at a topic like this, you can think, all that sounds great, but is it really real?

It seems too good to be true and it seems like wishful thinking, and even if it is true, it seems a million miles from the reality of today, Sunday morning on the 24th of November 2019.

Well, if you're thinking like that, then I can understand that. But I want you to see something amazing that's being emphasized to us in the chapter we read from 1 John chapter 5, because one of the great emphasis of that chapter is that none of this is vague optimism. And this whole concept of eternal life is not wishful thinking. It is utterly real and true. And that's what John speaks about in verses 5 to 9, and particularly he uses two key words, water and blood.

It says, who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ. Now, what does that mean? What in earth is he talking about when he says water and blood? The readers obviously knew what it was. It was obviously something that was familiar between John and the congregation he was writing to. It was possibly a common expression in the church. Jesus has come by water and by blood. What does that mean? Well, it's different suggestions. Some people say maybe it refers to baptism in the Lord's Supper. Baptism, there's water in there, Lord's Supper, the wine supposed to symbolize Jesus' blood. Others say it refers to the reference in the Gospel where Jesus had a spear put in his side when he was on the cross and out came water and blood. Others have suggested that the water is referring to the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry and the crucifixion of Jesus at the end of his ministry. You can think of it that when you're at home as to which one you think it is. I'll plumb for the third one, I think. I think it's probably referring to his baptism and the Lord's Supper. But the key point is that all of these things are referring back to the real life space-time reality that Jesus has come. Water and blood are real things. And John is saying that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come into the real world of here and now. And the fact that he has come has meant that the reality of eternal life has burst into the here and now. The life of the age to come has come now in and through Jesus. And if you think about the whole history of humanity, there's been two great intrusions into that history. The first intrusion is sin that came in and broke the world. But the second great intrusion that comes into humanity is the resurrection of Jesus. And in his life, death and resurrection, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, eternal life, the life of the age to come has burst into the here and now. That's the amazing use of the gospel that Jesus has come and that by coming he is going to overcome all the brokenness in the world, as you can see in verse 5. The second intrusion is going to overcome the first one. That's the message of the gospel. It's not vague optimism. It's not floaty mystery. It's not a pipe dream in the distant future. It is real. And that's why John is writing all this. He's saying, I've seen it. I was there. I was an eyewitness. It's all real.

Eternal life has burst into the here and now. If we trust in Jesus, we have eternal life now. And that should utterly transform us. But so often as Christians, we forget that it's true.

[33 : 31] And that's why he says in verse 13, I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. That knowledge gives us hope in all the heartbreak and weirdness of life. So you need to hold on to it. That knowledge gives us a promise to rest on. You need to build your life on every part of that. That knowledge gives us a message to proclaim. We need to tell others about us. And that knowledge that we have eternal life needs to shape how we live this week. Because the Christian church, the Christian community is the place where the quality of the eternal life is to be seen by all. That's why John says we don't keep on sinning.

We don't just live according to all the brokenness in the world around us. We are going to live differently. We're going to live according to the brilliant standards that God has for us. And the result of that is that as you go into your week, your family, your colleagues, your friends, they can get a glimpse into the amazing beauty of the eternal life that God wants us to all have.

They can get a glimpse of that by looking at you. And that's why eternal life is not just for way, way, way in the future. Eternal life is for tomorrow morning. And for the way you and I live this week. May God grant that for any of us here who are not yet Christians that we would have this eternal life through faith in Jesus. But may God also grant that for every one of us who is a Christian that we would know that we have this eternal life, that we would never forget it, and that the reality of it would shape every moment of our lives. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your incredible gift of eternal life in Jesus.

[35 : 55] We pray that for any of us who are maybe not yet not yet sure where we stand before you, help us Lord to see and to think about what really matters. And for those of us who want to live

this week as your people, we just pray that the way we speak, the way we behave, the way we work, the way we are towards our families and friends, would always just be a glimpse of that amazing quality of life that you have in store for us all through Jesus. We pray that we would always be those who would know that we have eternal life. Amen.