

ETERNAL LIFE --WHEN?

By William H. Bell, Jr.

What does the Bible have to say about eternal life? Do we have it now? If we have it, can we lose it? Many say that faithful sons of God do not now have eternal life as an actual possession, but have the *promise* or *hope* of eternal life. What are the implications for the reception of eternal life if Christ returned as He said he would, in the first century generation? (Matthew 24:30, 34) If He came the second time in connection with the event known as the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, would not an implication of that coming be that we now have eternal life?

In this writing, we will define eternal life. Secondly we will demonstrate the soundness of that definition by the scriptures. We will then compare our conclusions with some different opinions on the subject. Third, we will emphasize that eternal life is a blessing of the coming of Christ which has already been realized since A.D. 70. Fourth, we will show that the present possession of eternal life is (during our earthly sojourn conditional, i.e. subject to our free will) and based upon our faith and obedience. The above being true, the present possession of eternal life does not imply the impossibility of apostasy (forsaking God) or the impossibility of saving the lost.

According to scripture, eternal life is knowing God and Jesus Christ. "And this is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent," (John 17:3) "Knowing" here is not mental acknowledgement alone, it is knowing God through an obedient relationship with Him. "Now by this we know that we know him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, I know him, and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in Him." (1 John 2:3, 4).

Next, the scriptures teach that eternal life is in Christ. “And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; and He who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (1 John 5:11, 12)

Scripturally, we can know that we have eternal life, not by what we feel or see with our eyes but by reading what is written. “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God,” (1 John 5:13).

As a result, John said they had been given an understanding whereby they could know. “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life,” (1 John 5:20).

The above text says that Jesus Christ is the true God and eternal life. We may sum up what has been said by the following. Eternal life is knowing the true God through obedience to His Son Jesus Christ. It involves all that is included in this relationship.

Now, we propose to demonstrate the soundness of our definition of eternal life by comparing it with words of men. We are told that eternal life is to be “temporally” understood, i.e. “unending existence.” We agree that one must at least be capable of existing forever to receive and enjoy blessings which last forever. However, we do not equate the two. If man did not have the capability of existing forever, he not only could not receive everlasting blessings forever, (We use the term forever here to denote unending duration), he also would be incapable of enduring eternal punishment.

Man has a soul that survives him in physical death. “Jesus taught that God is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. God is not the God of the www.allthingsfulfilled.com

dead, but of the living.” (Matthew 22:32) Yet, unending existence in physical death cannot be equated with eternal life. If, however, eternal life is the quality of existing forever in death, and, if all men (the righteous and the wicked) have the quality of existing forever, then all men have eternal life. This is incredulous.

Further, if eternal life is the capacity of man to exist forever, would not then man have eternal life from the beginning of his existence? Further, man would never be able to lose it. That is not only the impossibility of apostasy, but it is also universal salvation. It would mean that men had eternal life before both the first and second comings of Christ. It would mean man would have eternal life with or without a relationship with God. Such view does violence to both the meaning and conditions of eternal life. It makes mockery of Christ, His death, the gospel and its promises. Many, through not all Amillennialists (those who believe that the return of Christ is yet future, yet who also reject a future pre-parousia millennial (1000 years) reign of Christ), affirm eternal life to be unending existence, yet fail to see the impasse to which such reasoning leads.

Others have said that eternal life is received at death only for the righteous, yet before the second coming of Christ. Eternal life is equated with the resurrection. If it is received at death, then the resurrection is not equal in time to the parousia. That would contradict 1 Cor. 15:23, “But each one in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at his coming.” A companion text is 2 Timothy 4:1. “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom.”

Further, this would create serious problems for those who believe that eternal life is a promise to be received at the return of Christ. “When Christ who is our life appears, then you will appear with him in glory.” (Col. 3:4) Therefore the futurists cannot have at

death what would not be given until the coming of the Lord! If so, there is no need for a future coming and resurrection, all man would need to do for eternal is to physically die.

Some argue that having eternal life is freedom from the threat of apostasy and temptation. Hence, if we have it today, then why is there yet the presence of temptation and the possibility of apostasy? Let's look back at the definition of eternal life. Jesus is the true God and eternal life. (1 John 5:20) Eternal is certainly an attribute used to describe God, (Romans 16:26). Question, when did God become eternal? Read Psalms 90:2. If eternal is an attribute of God then God became eternal when He became God! The truth of the matter is, God never became God, He simply, yet profoundly and unfathomably AM!

If having that which is eternal today means that we must be free from the presence of temptation and the possibility of being lost during our earthly existence, then what man can claim that he has the eternal God? If man has an eternal soul, which we have established already per the above, then does he not already have the capacity to possess blessings which are eternal? Is the kingdom eternal? (Luke 1:32, 33, 1 Peter 1:11; Heb. 12:28) Is the word of God eternal? (Matt. 24:35, 1 Peter 1:23-25) Is Christ eternal? (1 Tim. 6:16) Is the Holy Spirit eternal? "Who ever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son." (2 John 9)

The possibility of forsaking God is therefore not the lack of having, but the lack or failure to keep or maintain that which one received. "Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word he shall never taste death," (John 8:51) Is the presence of temptation and the possibility of apostasy with respect to having the eternal God an objection against having God or Christ today?

Some will argue, yes, but eternal life is a promise. “And this is the promise that He has promised us-eternal life.” (1 John 2:25). We agree that this *was* a promise as far as consummation was concerned prior to the coming of Christ in A.D. 70, but not subsequent to that time. Again, let us notice our definition. “Jesus Christ is the true God and eternal life. (1 John 5:20). This being true, then what God promised was Jesus Christ. Consider, this is the promise that he has promised us, Jesus Christ, who is the true God and eternal life.

While it is true that disciples in the first century were in Christ, they were yet hoping to be in Christ or rather, to have Christ “in” them! “To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Col. 1:26, 27). Here we learn that “Christ **in you**” was **the hope** of glory. Paul wrote this letter to people who had already been baptized into Christ, Col. 2:12). As he wrote to the Romans, stating their relationship with God after their baptism (Rom. 6:3,4), that likewise, Christ was “in them.” “And if Christ is **in you...**” (Rom. 8:10).

So, why did Paul write to the Colossians about “the” hope of Christ in you? First there is only one hope, Eph. 4:4. Did not Paul tell the Romans, “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen [realized already] is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.” (Romans 8:24, 25). Therefore, the Colossians yet awaited the realization of “Christ **in you**, the hope of glory.

This is the already but not yet. This is why they saw Christ in them in baptism, not fully, because the “hope of glory” had not yet arrived at his second coming. Yet it is only one hope, the same blessing, however in a consummated or perfected state. In

addition, Paul said, Christ is our life. (Col. 3:4) Therefore, inasmuch as Christ was in the Colossians, life was in them, yet, there was a future perspective to that life.

Paul describes their present possession of that life as life that was “hidden” meaning not yet revealed or manifested. “For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” What life did the Colossian Christians have? How had they died? They had died with Christ in being baptized into Him. “Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead,” (Col. 2:12, 20) See also Romans 6:3, 4, where they are raised from death into *newness of life*.

However, the life they received in baptism was hidden. It was not a physical death they experienced, nor a physical life they received in baptism. It was spiritual life, the life of the gospel, the life that is and is in Christ, eternal life! This life would be manifested when Christ returned. “When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.” (Col. 3:4)

Therefore, the text is not speaking of physical life being hidden for such obviously would be false. It speaks of life in Christ. This life had both a present or already perspective and a future, i.e. a not yet perspective. That life was hidden in Christ, but would later be revealed at His coming.

It is not a different life. It is the same and only life which they had in Christ. Is not Christ, the life received in baptism? Is not this the life the Colossians received when they died with Christ? Was not that life hidden? So, it was that life, --life in Christ, not physical life, that was the life that would appear, or be revealed with Him in glory.

This explains the *already present* and the *not yet future* of Covenant Eschatology. Hebrews 2:8 clearly expresses this already but not yet concept. That www.allthingsfulfilled.com

which God put under the feet of Christ was not yet realized in consummation, hence it is spoken of as past. The time perspective is the initiating cross-event. The yet future dimension is the consummating parousia-event. This same concept is true of eternal life. It was present in its initiation through the death of Christ, yet not revealed and hence promissory in view of the at hand, very soon coming of Christ in A.D. 70, (James 5:7, 8; Heb. 10:37; Rev. 1:1-3, 22:6) Since Christ's return in the first century generation, (Matthew 24:34) we have eternal life, not in promise, but in reality, realized and consummated as a present blessing in the kingdom of God.