

# WHAT IS ETERNAL LIFE?

A Christian Guidebook 7



T. M. Moore

A *ReVision* Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *What Is Eternal Life?*

All Christians—all who have come to believe in Jesus and have entered His Kingdom by grace through faith—all Christians have eternal life.

That sounds really good!

But what is it? Is eternal life just going to heaven when I die? Is there anything else?

There is, and as we shall see in this, Part 7 of our series *A Christian Guidebook*, eternal life is a much more wonderful and amazing gift than we may have believed.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 Gift of God

*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 6.23

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.* Ephesians 2.8, 9

### *Eternal life and salvation*

I suppose nearly everyone knows that Christianity has something to do with eternal life. But in that respect, the Christian faith is not that much different from other faiths. Other major religions and many minor ones hold views about eternal life. Even many secularists tend to believe in some version of life after death (though, to be honest, the secular version sounds more like wishful thinking than real hope).

So Christians can't be content merely to say to someone that believing in Jesus will enable them to have eternal life. They can get that in plenty of places. Or so they believe.

It is essential, therefore, that Christians be clear about what we mean when we say that we have eternal life, or when we hold out the offer of eternal life to others. Or when we seek to enjoy eternal life for ourselves.

This much is clear from the two passages provided above: Eternal life and salvation are “the gift of God”. Not *gifts* of God, and not even *a* gift of God. *The* gift of God. Eternal life and salvation are thus different ways of thinking about the same thing, but not entirely. The phrase “eternal life” and the term “salvation” overlap and entail one another. They are part and parcel of one another. But the two ideas—which together constitute the one gift of God—express differing but complementary aspects of God's gift, and it is important that we understand not only where the differences lie but what we mean by each term.

In this and the following series on “salvation” we will unpack what the Scriptures mean by “the gift of God.” We begin our consideration of that subject by examining the eternal life facet of what God has freely given.

### *Gift-giving*

But we need to clear up what we mean by saying that God gives this as a gift.

We are familiar with the tradition of giving gifts. Typically, we give gifts to people we love. But not just people we love, people who love us as well. Or, at least, should love us—children, grandchildren, friends, and so forth. The people we give gifts to on their birthdays, at Christmas, or on other occasions are most often those who give gifts to us as well. Giving gifts thus includes a parallel tradition, that of receiving gifts from those to whom we give them.

This is not what we mean by saying that God gives the gift of eternal life. Those who receive the gift of eternal life have never done anything to express love for Him. In fact, He has given them many different gifts, but they seldom express any gratitude for these. And they don't talk about or use those gifts in ways that might make someone believe they were from God. They act like these gifts are either only what you would expect any normal person to have—air to breathe, good health, food on the table, a safe home, friends, and such—or what they are by right entitled to—a raise at work, regular vacations, luxuries of various kinds, a robust retirement.

God gives such gifts every day to every human being. And yet multitudes of them—including you and me before we came to know the Lord—fail to acknowledge Him as the Giver of every good and perfect gift (Jms. 1.16, 17), and they do not offer Him anything in return. It's no wonder Paul referred to such people as “enemies” of God (Rom. 5.10).

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But this situation helps us to understand the uniqueness of *the* gift of eternal life.

### *God's gift*

God gives *the* gift of eternal life and salvation as a gesture of pure grace to undeserving human beings. They do nothing to earn this gift. Nothing inherent in them qualifies them for it. They would be content—of a sort—to continue as “enemies” of God, taking what He gives them without regard for any need to give anything back to Him at all.

But God intends to change that. People were not made for mere self-indulgence. They were made for joy. Not happiness, which depends on circumstances and conditions, but joy, which can be found in its truest and most lasting form only in a relationship with God. God gives the gift of eternal life to bring human beings into an environment, a *spiritual* environment, in which they know, love, and serve Him, the outcome of which is indescribable joy, increasingly. God gives the gift of eternal life and salvation to undeserving people so that they might *know* Him, *love* Him, and *serve* Him in the fullness of joy.

No other religion offers such a promise. No other deity, no philosophy, no worldview, and no amount of wishful thinking ends up in an eternal state of joy in the Presence of God, the consequence of His giving the gift of eternal life.

God's gift is all of grace, given to those He has chosen (Eph. 1.3-6), for the purpose of granting His joy to certain people forever. Those who receive this gift will give back to God in various ways—through praise and thanksgiving and worship, by dedicating their lives to Him and living according to His Word, and by publishing far and wide the wonder of His marvelous and saving grace—but God does not give the gift to gain these offerings, as though He needed them. He does not (Acts 17.24, 25). He is already full of all joy. Indeed, He is the very fullness of joy Himself.

He gives the gift of eternal life because He is a God of grace. And, by His grace, we who receive that gift are forgiven of our animosity and ingratitude (and more), transferred into a new state of existence, given the first true tastes of real joy, and set on a joyous course of knowing, loving, and serving God.

The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, and eternal life is the life of joy.

### *Search the Scriptures*

1. What is grace? Why is eternal life all of grace? Where would you turn in Scripture to support your answer?
2. Why is the gift of God not like the gifts we give to one another?
3. How does Scripture teach us to think about the benefits of having eternal life? Cite some Scripture in your answer.

*Next steps—Transformation: How did you come to receive the gift of eternal life? What difference has it made in your life? What differences are you hoping it will make?*

## 2 To Know 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

*What do you know?*

A more concise definition of eternal life could hardly be found: Eternal life—the gift of God—is to know God and Jesus Christ, Whom God has sent.

To *know* God and Jesus Christ. What does this mean? After all, we use the word “know” in a wide variety of ways. For example, we talk about “knowing” another person as an acquaintance or friend. We *recognize* their face and voice, are acquainted with some of their background and present circumstances, and spend time with them, mostly in work or diversions. We know them, and, in varying degrees, they are part of our lives.

We also use the word “know” to *indicate familiarity* with certain facts or situations. We know which season of the year it is and therefore how to dress appropriately. We know when we’re hungry and what to do about it. We might even know how long it’s been since our last oil change and so arrange to get one. We know where the remote is (usually) and how to work it.

To “know” is also to *understand* certain matters, even to prefer them—the requirements of our job, for example; which authors or podcasters resonate with our views; what the Bible teaches about this or that subject; and so forth.

All these uses of “know” can be found in the Scriptures, and they are all valid. To some extent at least, each of them is bound up in Jesus’ teaching about eternal life. We must know God for Who He is, prefer Him and His Word, understand what He requires, and count Him as our Savior and friend.

But these uses of “know” are subordinate to the larger, more intimate sense in which Jesus describes the true nature of eternal life.

*To know the Lord*

To know God and Jesus Christ. This is eternal life. But we cannot know God unless He first knows us (Gal. 4.9). And here is a key to understanding the true meaning of eternal life as knowing God and Christ. How does God know us? Are we merely bits of factual data or familiar faces in His infinite mind? Is there more to His “knowing” us than this.

Indeed, there is. Jesus said that God “so loved” the world that He sent His beloved Son to die for the sins of the world and the salvation of all who believe in Him. God’s knowing us is another way of describing His *love* for us. He knows that we are sinners in need of salvation, and He loves us in the midst of our lostness. He knows that we have made false gods of this, that, or some other foolish idol, and yet He draws near to us in the Gospel and offers Himself as our rightful inheritance. He knows that we will often fail Him, sometimes stray from His path, frequently neglect His company and His Word, and offer a pitiable rather than plenteous harvest of glad spiritual fruit. He knows all this, and yet He loves us with an everlasting and unfailing love. He has called us by our names, and we are His. He will never fail us nor forsake us because He knows our frailties and loves us nonetheless.

God loved—knew—us so that we might know—love—Him. To have eternal life is to love God as the only proper and defining response to His loving us, and likewise to love Jesus Who by His life, death, resurrection, and outpoured Spirit makes the knowledge of God a reality in our lives.

The proof that we have eternal life is found not in church attendance, good works, reading the Bible, or being nice to our fellow Christians. We have to look deeper than these. The proof of eternal life is that we *know*—

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we love with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—the God Who made and saved us, the Savior Who redeemed and bought us, and the Spirit Who indwells and transforms us. We love this Three-in-One God supremely, increasingly, unreservedly, intimately, and despite the indifference or hostility of the world.

Loving this God we delight in His Presence and seek intimacy with Him increasingly. Loving this God, we delight in His Word and feed on it with joy and rejoicing. Loving this God, we discover all that we can about what pleases Him, what He has determined is best for us in this life, and we follow His counsel and instruction with glad hearts. Loving this God, we cannot help but talk about Him at every opportunity, sharing freely what He has done for us, extoling His many virtues and gifts, remarking His works, and encouraging others to taste and see that He is good.

#### *Growing in the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ*

They who know God and Jesus Christ with this kind of loving intimacy and attention rejoice to know Him more and more. Peter commands us to grow in the grace and knowledge of—in love for—Jesus Christ. The more we grow in the knowledge of Jesus the more He will bring us into the knowledge of God, for He is the exact representation of the Father (Heb. 1.3).

“Delight yourself also in the LORD,” the psalmist tells us, “and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37.4). If our delight—our love—is wholly in the Lord, He will be what we most earnestly desire. And when that it is the case, we will seek Him more and more, pray more earnestly for His Presence, and delight to be found pleasing to Him in all our ways. And as our love for Him thus unfolds, God Who first loved us will show us more of Himself, grant us more of His love, and in every facet and aspect of our lives fill us out with the gift of eternal life.

As we know and love God, He brings more of His “then and there” to fill and transform all the “here and now” of our lives. For this is life eternal.

#### *Search the Scriptures*

1. Why is eternal life best described as knowing God and Jesus Christ? How should you expect to see this knowledge manifested in your life (cite some Scripture to support your answer)?
2. Read John 21.15-19. Why did Jesus ask Peter three times if he loved Him? Did Peter “know” Jesus when he denied him? Would he “know” Jesus better in the days to come? Why?
3. What are the greatest hindrances to your loving God and Jesus Christ more than you do?

*Next steps—Preparation: Review the various meanings of “know” mentioned in this article. How many of them apply to you? In which of these might you need to improve? What will you do to get started?*

### 3 Half-Way Home

*Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.* 2 Peter 3.13

*Not quite yet?*

A classic Gary Larson “Far Side” cartoon is a split panel. At the top, people are queued up on the clouds of heaven, outfitted with their angel wings, awaiting entrance. The gatekeeper/saint greets them, saying, “Welcome to heaven, here’s your harp.” In the bottom segment, people are lined up to enter hell. A devil greets them saying, “Welcome to hell. Here’s your accordion.”

At least one implication is clear: Both places are a little boring, only one is more so than the other.

I have sometimes, when teaching a larger group, asked for a show of hands for those who want to go to heaven when they die. Every hand goes up without hesitation. Then I ask, “How many of you want to go to heaven *today*?” Fewer hands by far. Perhaps because they want to continue caring for loved ones. But I suspect some of that hesitation is because, while heaven is clearly the best choice, it seems a little monotonous?

Unlike their fun and busy lives in the here and now.

Regardless, Christians know that going to heaven is our thing. We want it to be others’ thing, too, and so we urge them to consider whether, when they die, they know they’re going to heaven, that is, to have eternal life. And most of them, in this secular and wrong-believing age, haven’t really thought about it or, if they have, consider it to be a laughable proposition. Go to heaven? There’s no such place. And if there is, it seems a bit boring.

We know better. But, if we’re honest, we don’t quite understand why heaven is the better choice, except that the Bible says it is. Doesn’t it?

Heaven is, indeed, the better choice. But heaven is not the endgame of eternal life. Rather, heaven is a kind of half-way home for pilgrims on the Jesus Path of eternal life. It is a glorious, joyous, wondrous, and unspeakably beautiful place. Boring? Hardly. But for all its grandeur and glory, heaven is not the end of the line in our journey with the Lord. Eternal life includes heaven, but it doesn’t stop there.

At least, not forever.

*The glory of heaven*

Yet there is abundant glory, wonder, and joy in heaven. And all this revolves around Jesus, exalted in glory. Think of all the great saints you’ve ever known in your life. Teachers, mentors, parents, friends, pastors—folks you looked up to, learned from, and greatly admired for their piety, devotion, and love for Jesus. Add to them all the great saints of Christian history you’ve ever heard of or read about. Justin Martyr. Athanasius. Augustine. Patrick. Francis of Assisi. Calvin. Edwards. Newman. Crosby. John Paul II. And on and on. These are people we honor and look to for examples and instruction in righteousness.

All these great saints are in heaven now, surrounding us on every side, separated only by a veil of mortality that prevents our stepping into their proceedings at any moment (Heb. 12.1). And as these great saints, and multitudes more, cast an eye on us or carry our prayers to the Lord in bowls as incense, they are praising and rejoicing and singing and high-fiving and backslapping one another and rollicking with angels before the throne of Jesus in heaven (Rev. 4, 5).



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And these saints weren't dummies. It's not like in heaven there's something better to do with their time, something they would much prefer to this incessant celebration of the beauty, wonder, majesty, power, wisdom, goodness, steadfast love, and faithfulness of Jesus, seated beside His Father, framed by the rainbow of the Holy Spirit.

A more beautiful sight we will never see. Nor have these saints, which is why they never tire of devoting themselves—in their spirits, that is—to this heavenly rave. Heaven is more indescribably beautiful, wonderful, glorious, and joyful than we can know in this life. Departed saints, glorying in their spiritual existence, would prefer to be nowhere else doing nothing other than seeing and knowing and loving and worshiping Jesus together.

And I'm pretty sure there's nothing boring about this.

But heaven is just the warm-up for the final staging ground of eternal life.

#### *The new heavens and new earth*

The world is coming back to the garden of Eden for a new beginning. Peter reminds us that a new heaven and a new earth are coming—two realms of existence fused into one, replete with all the creatures and features God intended from the beginning, flourishing in culture, teeming with saints now made finally whole (saved) in their glorified bodies, all of them worshiping Jesus as they do whatever it is the wonders of the new creation provide.

This will be where we finally realize the meaning of eternal life: To know, love, and serve God and Jesus Christ and to fulfill our unique and wholly satisfying calling in His new world. We will never grow old, never fall ill, never be subject to sin or harm, never want of any good thing, never be bored, and never fail to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We have eternal life now, in the here and now—at least, as much as we can expect to realize while we are in this mortal flesh. And there is always exceedingly and abundantly more to know of eternal life in the here and now. Go to heaven when we die? Yes, certainly, gratefully, expectantly, and assuredly. But always keep in mind that even heaven is not the final stop on our journey.

The then and there is coming, and we cannot begin to imagine the joy, wonder, grandeur, loveliness, and daily delight of what that will be like. And all that will be so because of Jesus, in Whom all the promises of God are “Yes!” and “Amen!” (2 Cor. 1.20).

But we can think about it. Meditate on it. Talk and sing about it. And we should, for that, too, is part of what it means to have eternal life.

#### *Search the Scriptures*

1. Where would you look in Scripture for a glimpse of heaven as it is now?
2. Where would you look in Scripture to learn about the new heavens and new earth?
3. John says that one day we will see Jesus face to face, and then we will be like Him (1 Jn. 3.1-3). Do you think the Christians you know find this a compelling prospect? Explain.

*Next steps—Preparation: How much of the “then and there” presently factors into your “here and now”? What might you do to improve this?*

## 4 There and Then: Heaven and the New Heavens and New Earth

*But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? 2 Peter 3.10-12*

### *Heaven*

Heaven is part of the glorious inheritance which comes to all who have eternal life through Jesus Christ. We probably need to say a bit more about heaven, since it is the place where we will first see Jesus face to face and begin to be made like Him.

Heaven is a spiritual domain. It represents the third sense in which the word “heavens” is used in Scripture. The first heaven, or heavens, is the atmosphere around us—the air we breathe. The second is the place where the “great lights” have been placed—the sun, moon, and stars. And the third, into which Paul was wondrously and briefly translated (2 Cor. 12.1-4), is that spiritual domain where God rules, from which angels do His bidding, and throughout which the saints worship and rejoice in the Lord.

This heaven is a spiritual domain; therefore, all the inhabitants of that domain are spiritual *merely*. All but one, that is: Jesus rules in heaven in His new and glorified body. Don’t ask me how that can be. It just is. And part of the reason the saints are so excited and completely satisfied to worship Him is that they see in Him what they themselves will become. For all who have eternal life will be made like Jesus, in a new and glorified body, true and good and full of beauty and glory; for Jesus will bring all of creation, which He has redeemed and reconciled to God, to its full and original state, wholly good and sinless. I thrill at the way C. S. Lewis framed this in *God in the Dock*: “[T]he Christian story is precisely the story of one grand miracle, the Christian assertion being that what is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, into human nature, descended into His own universe, and rose again, bringing nature up with Him. It is precisely one great miracle.”

Before that final recreation of all things happens, all the saints of God from every age and place will be transformed (1 Cor. 15.50-55) and united with Jesus in the second heaven as He descends from the third heaven into the first to complete His great and glorious work of redemption (cf. Rev. 19.11-16; 2 Thess. 4.13-17). At that time, Peter tells us, the “heavens”—presumably all three—will be destroyed, together with all those who rejected the gift of eternal life. But we will be safe *in* Jesus, Who is already glorious and is thus the precursor and first fruit of the new heavens and new earth. And we will be translated *through* Jesus *into* the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells.

### *The new heavens and new earth*

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Adam and Eve had not fallen into sin? Let’s assume they passed the test, Eve tweaked the serpent’s nose, and Adam booted him permanently out of the garden. As Satan’s banishment was completed, God Himself would have served up the fruit of the Tree of Life to His creations. They would have eaten, and eternal life—for all creation—would have begun at that instant.

Adam and Eve would have turned the garden of Eden into a paradise of beauty, bounty, and fecundity. They would have befriended all God’s creatures and, together with them, would have expanded the garden and enriched and enhanced its bounty. Beauty and wonder would have abounded in infinite variety. New tools would have been developed to improve labor and extend the variety of work. Nothing would be wasted; everything would be continuously renewed. The resources of the earth would have been discovered and used to add beauty and utility to the project. Children—sinless children (can you imagine that?)—would have been

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born and would have taken their place in the garden with joy and without jealousy or competition. The boundaries of the garden would have been continuously expanded. More children would have been born. Holy and joyful communities would crop up here and there. More discoveries would be made. More culture created. More of the Lord's Presence known and delighted in.

And this would have expanded to encompass the entire earth. Forever.

Of course, this did not happen, nor could it have. Because we are creatures. We are not God. Only God can fulfill God's eternal plan for eternal life, and He has chosen to do that through Jesus, His Son, Who descended from the Father to save a people for Himself, to redeem and reconcile the world, and bring all of creation to its full and enduring beauty in the new heavens and new earth.

This is where we're headed, friends. This is what Jesus is preparing for us. This is where the mansions of God will be, where the lion will lie down with the lamb, the child will play with the viper, the Tree of Life will bear endless fruit, the River of Life will flow continually, and all the very good intentions of God for all His beloved creatures—human and otherwise—will be fully and beautifully and joyously realized in great bounty, variety, and unity. The Son of God will light this new creation with His constant Presence, so that ne'er a shadow will be in view.

#### *Preparing for the Lord's promise*

And as for us, we who have received the gift of eternal life and look forward to heaven and the new heavens and new earth: How should such an unfathomable and wonderful gift affect the way we live here and now? We must pursue "holy conduct and godliness", Peter says, and "be diligent to be found in Him in peace, without spot and blameless" (2 Pet. 3:12, 14). As we shall see, Paul will insist that this is the only proof to the watching world that such a thing as eternal life exists and can be known.

Eternal life—in all its stages and components—is the gift of God to those who believe in Jesus. And, while the full realization of eternal life is very much a matter of "then and there", we may expect—and indeed, labor—to realize foretastes, manifestations, glimpses, and insights of the full scope of eternal life in all our "here and now."

Are we making ready for that?

#### *Search the Scriptures*

1. Meditate on Revelation 21:1-5 and 22:1-5. How does this teach us to think about the new heavens and new earth?
2. Why is it important that Christians have as clear as possible an understanding of the gift of eternal life?
3. In what way or ways is your understanding of eternal life changing or being reinforced?

*Next steps—Demonstration: Jot down some ideas, images, or other notes that suggest to you what it will be like as eternal life comes to its fullness in the new heavens and new earth.*

## 5 Here and Now: On Earth as in Heaven

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4.16-18*

*If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Colossians 3.1-3*

### *Eternal life now*

Eternal life becomes ours the moment God, by grace, grants us the gift of faith and salvation. Eternal life and salvation are inseparably entwined; they are part and parcel of one another. We expect to know certain immediate and increasing effects and benefits of becoming saved: among these, forgiveness of our sins, openness to spiritual things, desire to learn Jesus, and participation in His Body. These are the *evidence* of true and lively faith, and we expect to grow in this great salvation throughout the course of our lives.

In the same way that we have salvation now, we also have eternal life, that is, the gift of knowing God and Jesus Christ. And we have this gift now. Jesus Christ, we know, is with us always, just as He promised (Matt. 28.18-20). He is with us wherever we are. But, and in a very real sense, we can also say that we are with Him where He is. Paul says our life has been hidden in God with Jesus, and that we are seated with Jesus at the right hand of the Father (Eph. 2.6).

This, I concede, can be very difficult to realize. How do we experience being seated with Jesus in heavenly places? What should we expect to “see” in that context and from that vantage point? How much of this aspect of eternal life—the then and there of our salvation—should we expect to realize in our here and now?

At least some, according to Scripture. And enough to strengthen and encourage us to “look” and “set our mind” on our then and there for very real help throughout our spiritual journey here and now.

### *Eyes of the heart*

In Ephesians 1.15-23 Paul provides insight to how we may engage heavenly realities throughout our earthly and temporal sojourn. As he prayed for the Ephesians, so, we can believe, he would have prayed for us as well. But what did he pray?

First, that God would give us His Spirit for “wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him” (v. 17). The Spirit, we know, works with the revelation of God in Scripture to make us more like our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). He uses the entire Bible to help us increase in our experience of eternal life. This is true for knowing more of our great salvation as well as for glimpsing more of our eternal life. Scripture presents many descriptions and reports to help us flesh out the details of our then and there, that these might encourage and sustain us in our here and now.

Second, Paul prayed that the “eyes” of our “heart” may be enlightened, that is, brought into the more brilliant light of divine revelation, so that we may know more of the hope of our calling—to God’s Kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2.12)—and “the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints” (v. 18). And more, that we might know “what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places* [where we are seated with Him, and where we are to set our minds], far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come” (vv. 19-21). Surely there is much here to see and consider and ponder,

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realities that can refresh and renew our souls and strengthen us for our daily service in the Lord!

This idea of “seeing” with the “eyes of the heart” is mentioned both in 2 Corinthians 4.16-18 and Colossians 3.1-3. The writer of Hebrews uses similar language in instructing us to “consider” Jesus in His exaltation (Heb. 3.1; 12.3). We cannot see Jesus or look into the unseen heavenly realm with our physical eyes. Thus, Paul and the writer of Hebrews must mean for us to look with eyes of faith, based on what the Spirit reveals to us from Scripture, for an enlightening and enlarging of our sanctified spiritual imagination, so that we might glimpse the unseen realm and Jesus, exalted in glory, and thus participate in a special, spiritual way in the gift of eternal life. Then and there, here and now.

But what is the purpose of this? Why should we make this a vital part of our life in the Lord Jesus? This sounds like meditation or contemplation or long silent periods of waiting on the Lord. None of these are disciplines in which we excel, and few of us are moved to do much of anything to improve in them. Are there practical benefits we’re missing by failing to know more of eternal life in this way?

There are, indeed.

### *Filling and overflowing*

In Ephesians 1.23, Paul describes the Church—the body of those who possess eternal life—as “the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” The Church is the fullness of Jesus. Jesus is exalted in glory, ruling in heaven, upholding the vast cosmos by His powerful Word. And the Church is Jesus *in His fullness* here and now.

As we in the Church look to Jesus, consider Jesus, and set our minds on Him, Jesus begins to fill us with Himself, enlivening gifts for ministry, bringing abundant spiritual fruit to ripeness, empowering us to bear witness to Him, uniting us as members of one Body so that in our unity the world might see and believe that the Father has sent Jesus for their salvation (Jn. 20.21). Paul says that Jesus is filling all things in all things, making Himself and the gift of eternal life more widely and effectually known, and He is doing this through us, His people, His sheep, His ambassadors and witnesses.

The grace of God that fills us with eternal life and opens before us heavenly vistas and power will overflow and spread from us to more and more people, with the result that thanks and praise arise to God from more parts of this world (2 Cor. 4.15). But until we learn to live every moment of our here and now in the refreshing vision and renewing power of the then and there, such a great awakening to God is not likely to occur. We know, as Paul did, the strength that sustains us from on high, from beyond this temporal sphere. And the more we know this heavenly and unseen aspect of our eternal life, the more our world will know it as well.

### *Search the Scriptures*

1. Meditate on 2 Corinthians 4.15. What makes grace spread from you to others? How is that happening at this time?
2. Review 2 Corinthians 4.16-18. When trials, difficulties, setbacks, and temptations arise, what should we do?
3. What will you do to see, look, and consider Jesus and the heavenly realm? How might you expect knowing more of this aspect of your eternal life to help you day by day?

*Next steps—Transformation: Establish some time each day for contemplating eternal life in heaven as it currently exists. Consider Jesus. Search the Scriptures for more understanding. Let this be a more fruitful aspect of your spiritual life.*

## 6 Proof of Eternal Life

... God, who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality... Romans 2.5-7

### *A most useful gift*

We might be inclined to think that eternal life is like a comfy chair, one of those that can put your feet up, massage your back, apply a little heat to your body, and be just what you want for an extended period of “Ahhhh.”

Well, in fact, eternal life is a bit like that, because as our vision of then and there improves and becomes more constant, and as we embrace the reality of eternal life in all our here and now, a certain measure of *rest* comes to characterize our lives. We’re not as easily troubled or agitated. We enjoy considering Jesus and delight in the surprise of finding ourselves becoming a little more like Him. We go to bed at night without the trials and difficulties and challenges of the day fighting to have a place under the covers with us. We just turn our soul to Jesus, close our eyes, give Him thanks and praise, and say in our spirit, “Ahhhh.”

And that’s a really good place to be.

But that’s not the whole of what it means to have eternal life. It’s not all a comfy chair. We can rest in the promise and possession of this unspeakable gift, even to the point of filling up with peace and joy. This is, indeed, no small part of what God intends in granting us the gift of eternal life.

But he has given us this gift so that we might share the fruit of it with others. And this we do through a life devoted to doing good and seeking God’s glory and honor and the full measure of immortality He will give.

What does that entail?

### *A new orientation*

Those who possess the gift of eternal life discover, increasingly, that their lives are being reoriented in various ways—from self to others, from getting to giving, from complacency to action, from the things of earth to the things of the unseen realm of heaven, from present indulgences to future promises and blessings.

And all this re-orienting inclines us to use our time in works appropriate for one who has eternal life, good works that bring glory and honor to God and demonstrate to the world that we are immortal mortals, and they can be, too.

I realize I’ve lifted our text out of a context of prior and succeeding verses that help our passage make sense. But I do not believe my use of the text will compromise or contradict the point of the larger section. For the point of the whole is that God will bring His righteous judgment to bear against every human being. And He will give the full gift of eternal life (“immortality”) to those who seek it by good works of glory and honor. Good works that strive for the glory and honor of God are the *proof* that we have received and *will* receive the gift of eternal life. Good works are not how we *earn* eternal life because, as we have seen, eternal life is the gift of God. Rather, good works are just how people live who have *received* that great gift and are orienting their lives accordingly.

And, if we’re careful to abide by our new orientation, such good works will issue from us gladly, selflessly, and to the edification and blessing of others. Proof positive that eternal life is at work in us.

## *What Is Eternal Life?*

### *But which works?*

Which works are *good* works? We can safely say that good works are works like Jesus did, works of compassion, courage, self-denial, instruction, witness, standing for truth, being patient, loving others, and so forth. Since considering Jesus, looking to Him, and especially seeing Him in His Word have the effect of transforming us into His likeness, we expect to do the kinds of works Jesus did. Not as consistently or completely, but truly and really and increasingly (cf. 1 Jn. 2.1-6).

The works Jesus did brought glory and honor to God. Following Jesus—being a disciple of Jesus—entails doing the works He did, which proves that we have eternal life and are on the path to enjoying eternal life forever with Him.

But still: Which works?

Well, Jesus did *holy* works, works that refracted the glory and honor to the holy God. He did *righteous* works, works that displayed the hand of God like a straight flush, spread out on the table—works of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. And Jesus did *good* works, works that helped, encouraged, and edified others, opening the eyes of many to the reality of eternal life through Him.

We want to do good works that are just that—holy and righteous and good. And the apostle Paul tells us that those works are to be found in the holy and righteous and good Law of God (Rom. 7.12). These, Paul insisted, are the works the Holy Spirit brings to light from within those in whom He dwells (Rom. 8.5-8). These are the good works of love that help us increase in the gift of eternal life and the Kingdom of God (Matt. 22.34-30; 5.17-19).

A life of good works is what you would expect—what *God* expects—from one who has received His gift of eternal life. And the more we increase in the experience and enjoyment of that gift, the more such good works will be present with us as the evidence of the kind of true and lively faith that accompanies eternal life and leads to glory and honor for God.

### *Search the Scriptures*

1. We don't do good works to gain eternal life but because we have received it. Where would you turn in Scripture to demonstrate each of those truths?
2. How does the Holy Spirit bring forth the fruit of good works in us? According to Romans 8.5-8, what can short-circuit that process?
3. How do works that glorify and honor God show proof of our having eternal life? What does the absence of such works suggest?

*Next steps—Transformation: Read Psalm 1. What place do reading and meditating in God's Law have in your practice of eternal life? How could you improve in this?*

## 7 Growing into Eternal Life

*You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.* 2 Peter 3.17, 18

*The gift that keeps on giving*

We have seen that eternal life is essentially a relationship with God (Jn. 17.3). It comes to us as a gift from God, Who intends to bring us into fellowship with Himself through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We have eternal life from the moment we first believe in Jesus, when the Spirit empowers us to recognize and cry out to God as our Father (Gal. 4.4-6).

At the same time, we know that a day is coming when we will have eternal life in all its fullness, without sin or death, in the presence of the Triune God, in a new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells—forever.

The wonder, beauty, assurance, hope, power, delight, and joy that come with the gift of eternal life derive from knowing God and Jesus Christ. God has brought us into fellowship with Himself, and He intends for us to know Him—to love, enjoy, and serve Him—all our days. We may sometimes have occasion to pause and think briefly about being so loved by our heavenly Father, indwelt by His Spirit, seated with His Son, and conveyed into His Kingdom. At which times—whether in our daily times with the Lord, during a service of worship, as we’re driving to work, or just when we push back from the desk for a moment of contemplation—at such times we may experience a frisson of joy, a moment of rapture or sheer delight, and a more proximate sense of the Presence of God. Then we know, assuredly and almost unbelievably, that we have eternal life, and we are filled with gratitude to God.

But we *have* eternal life *all* the time. We can know this joy, hope, and assurance at any time, and increasingly. And it’s this Peter urged us on in by instructing us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The gift of eternal life is always bigger, grander, nearer, and more wondrous than we have ever experienced. The grace of God is always more exceedingly abundant than we’ve ever known. And the Lord Jesus is more beautiful, more amazing, more powerful, and more loving than we can describe.

Where eternal life is concerned, God wants us to have more of it. Every day. And the way to do so is to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

*Growing in the grace of Jesus*

Grace is a divine disposition of favor toward us which He communicates by His Word and Spirit to empower us for loving Him and our neighbor. Grace is not some squishy feeling we may realize—or hope to realize—through some spiritual activity. Grace is the reality in which all who have eternal life live, walk, and work.

While the grace of God comes to us continuously—indeed, we could not even exist without it—in some mysterious way it is possible for us to *grow* in grace, even to have *more* grace; indeed, an *abundance* of grace—*grace upon grace*—is ready to be given us as we seek the Lord and walk with Him.

How does this work? Sorry, it’s a mystery.

But we can know a little about how to enter more deeply and consistently into this mystery.

First, acknowledge the grace you have received in thanksgiving. God is always gracious, always favorably disposed toward us, and always seeking to empower us for love. He never rests. Give Him thanks! First thing each day and throughout the day, thank God for His abundant grace upon grace.



## *What Is Eternal Life?*

Then do what God intends His grace to do in and through you: Deny yourself, take up your cross—your daily calling—and follow Jesus in loving God and others. As you empty yourself to worship and serve, God gives you more grace to do so. Think of the parable of the talents (Matt. 25.14-30). The guy who worked the hardest and made the best investments was given more to work with. That’s how we grow in grace. Thanksgiving, worship, and loving service are what God gives us grace for; do what God intends, and you will grow in more of His grace.

It’s a mystery, yeah; but it’s really pretty simple.

And growing in grace will lead to growing in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

### *Growing in the knowledge of Jesus*

You will *experience* the Presence of Jesus in, by, and through you as you walk in and work by His grace. It is God Who is at work within you, both to will and do of His good pleasure (Phil. 2.13). As you empty yourself in daily worship and loving service you will understand that you cannot do this and are not doing this on your own. Jesus is at work in you! His Spirit is stretching out in you and overflowing, like a refreshing stream of water (Jn. 7.37-39), to spread God’s grace to others (2 Cor. 4.15).

And knowing that, contemplating and meditating on that will lead you to say, “My God, how great Thou art!” And there is no end, no bottom, no limit to what you will learn about Jesus as you follow this pattern of making yourself an agent of grace day by day. Eternal life will be more real to you, more precious to you, and more a source of purpose and joy in all your quotidian tasks as you learn Jesus (Eph. 4.20), see Him more clearly and continuously (Col. 3.1-3), and delight in His matchless beauty and unbounded love.

Having eternal life means that you inhabit another world. You were bought with a price. You are not your own. You have been translated into the Kingdom of God’s dear Son, a Kingdom of power, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. You live in the world both *from within* and *unto* this new reality, and every day becomes an adventure of seeing Christ at work in you and unwrapping more of the gift of eternal life you have in Him.

So grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Grow in the gift of eternal life.

### *Search the Scriptures*

1. According to 2 Corinthians 4.15, what happens as we are good stewards of the grace God shows toward us each day?
2. When should we give thanks to God? How does Philippians 4.6, 7 guide us in this? What do these verses promise?
3. How would you explain to a non-Christian friend that you “inhabit another world”? Where would you turn in Scripture to explain this?

*Next steps—Transformation: What can you do to grow more in the gift of eternal life? Where do you need to improve? Take steps today to accelerate your growth in grace and in the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*What Is Eternal Life?*

*For reflection or discussion*

1. How would you explain to a nonChristian friend what it means to have eternal life?
2. What could you do to help a new believer get started on the right path of eternal life?
3. What do we mean by referring to eternal life as “there and then”?
4. In what sense is eternal life a “here and now” experience?
5. What can you do to help your fellow believers continue growing in eternal life?

*For prayer:*

*What Is Eternal Life?*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.