

ETERNAL LIFE

Background: what is eternal life?

In ancient Greek thought the concept of 'immortality of the soul' for humans was significant. But the biblical expression 'eternal life' signifies far more than immortality. It is certainly clear from the Bible that we all survive death, and a vital question for everyone is: will this state be *eternal life* or conscious separation from God for ever?

Scholars debate the word 'eternal'. Some emphasise that it is a word of *duration*, and others *quality*. When you think of duration it is translated 'everlasting'—meaning life that goes on forever. But others point out that eternal life means life of a good quality, signifying life worth living, everlasting and abundant; life *in* Jesus who is himself the life.

When do we begin to experience eternal life?

On being born-again (see Study No. 10) we begin knowing the new quality of life 'in Christ' which is called 'eternal life'. God is eternal. He is the I AM, the eternal one. Eternal life was experienced by humans at the beginning, but because of Adam's rebellion (Genesis chapter 3, recounting the Fall) and the consequent separation of man from God, eternal life became possible only on God's post-Fall terms. (See Exodus 3:14; Matthew 25:46; John 1:1-4; 3:3-20, 36; 5:24-27, 39-40; 6:27; 6:68; 8:12; 10:10; 11:25; 12:25; 20:31; 1 Timothy 6:12; Titus 1:2; 1 John 1:1-2; Revelation 1:8, 18; 22:13.)

Can we lose eternal life?¹

We have noted that we begin to enjoy eternal life when we are *in Christ*. In John chapter 3 it is clear from the Greek continuous present tense used that we must *go on believing* in order to *go on having* eternal life. So it is clearly possible to 'walk away from' eternal life – in other words to come under condemnation again (see again Study No. 10 and the 'Final thoughts' section of that study). You may encounter a range of views on this matter. The debate has centred on the claim by some preachers that believers are 'once saved, always saved' (an expression which is absent from the Bible). Jesus told disciples about the vital importance of *abiding* in him. Disciples are to persevere in a walk of obedience, and not fall away.

Faithful discipleship

Our experience of eternal life begins as we become a *new creation*. We *repent* and *believe* in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour and are *baptised in water and Spirit*. The new nature we are given will result in a radical new life and vitality as we go on being filled with the Spirit – but there will be struggles to overcome with his help. The names of believers (i.e. Jesus' *faithful* disciples – and that is all who go on faithfully believing in him, putting their trust and allegiance in him, walking in obedience) are written in the Book of Life. (See Romans 6:4, 22-23; 8:2, 6, 10; 2 Corinthians 4:10; 5:17; Galatians 2:20; 6:8; Ephesians 4:17-28; Philippians 2:16; James 1:12; 1 John 3:14-15; 5:12-13; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:11-15. See also Genesis 3:22-24 and Revelation 2:7.)

¹Note: To clarify, see the following extract from *Is John 3:16 the Gospel?* by David Pawson, pp. 85-86 (© Used by permission, Terra Nova Publications; book & ebook available). Note the author's translation from the Greek original (2nd paragraph):

... Perhaps one of the most common misconceptions is that eternal life is a package that has been transferred to us when we believed in Jesus so that *we now have this package*, we now have eternal life ... and we have got it for ever. The notion that you can *lose* eternal life is very new to many, many Christians, because the majority ... have been told that you cannot, and that once you have got eternal life you have got it eternally, and that is settled for ever ... So often we are reading John 3:16 with a prejudiced mind, a mind that says 'once believe, always believe', or 'once saved, always saved'. So we read the tenses differently. Instead of realising it says '*God once loved ...*', and, '*If we go on believing, we go on having life*', we switch the tenses back to front, and say, 'God goes on loving, and we only need to believe once.' So we have reversed the message because we have been reading it through certain spectacles. The message of John 3:16 (read as carefully as possible) is that eternal life can be lost, and you can cease to be having eternal life by ceasing to believe in him who died for us ...

... *God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who is having the Son is having life and he who is not having the Son is not having life* (1 John 5:12). 'Having' is in the present continuous tense. The key there is that God has given us eternal life but this life is not in us. This life is in his Son; we are only given that life in his Son. We are not given it in ourselves. Therefore, as John goes on to say, *he who is having the Son*, or literally, *he who goes on having the Son*, goes on having life. But he who *does not go on having the Son* does not go on having life. Eternal life is not in the Christian, it is in Christ.