

Back to the beginning

Scientists believe that thinking about our own mortality has significant effects on the mind. Studies show that when people are reminded that they are going to die, those who are religious become more religious, those who are patriotic, become more patriotic – whatever makes up the core of their worldview, they defend it more aggressively. They are also more likely to believe any kind of story that tells them they may live forever.

In a worldview it seems that we need to tell ourselves stories that deny the reality of death so that we can manage the paralyzing fear of death. In social psychology this is called TMT (terror management theory)– where humans embrace stories, cultural values, and symbolic systems to alleviate the fear of death. American, Stephen Cave, a renown lecturer in Philosophy, points out that civilization as a whole can be viewed as a collection of life-extension technologies, the motivation for it's very existence being again – immortality.

In our current age of unprecedented advances in technology, stories about how new scientific discoveries will extend our lives abound in our cultural narrative. Cave sees four basic narratives - one of them, interestingly, being the Resurrection Story

And even if we are not able to extend our lives indefinitely, there is the hope that even when we die, we could rise and live again. We see a symbolic resurrection in nature every year with the changing of the seasons, as well as the literal one found in Christianity. But even if someone doesn't believe that an omnipotent God that could resurrect them, they may well believe that omnipotent scientists and doctors could do so in the future.

In America *The Alcor Life Extension Foundation*, has 151 “patients” in ‘cryopreservation’ (that is the use of very low temperatures to preserve structurally intact living cells and tissues). – imagine - whole bodies or brains preserved in liquid nitrogen, awaiting a moment in the future when they could be brought back to life.

One could almost see Mary Shelley checking her copyright!!

As you would imagine, there are vast numbers of quips, quotes and questions about life and death...

Here we have just one philosophical view from Charles Schultz's Peanuts cartoon....

Eternal life is the dominant theme of the New Testament. In general it is a term that describes the salvation that God bestows on those who trust and serve him.

Throughout his teaching as recorded in the New Testament, Jesus talked about **eternal life** rather than **life after death**. In his teaching it is clear that eternal life is **something that begins in the here and now** and continues after death. On a number of occasions people approached Jesus and asked what they had to do to gain this eternal life. { **READ Luke 18 :18-29** }

So Peter feels that Jesus should know that they have abandoned their families, work and everyday lives to follow Him. Jesus reassures Peter that in following him even if the cost is high in terms of losing wealth or people abandoning them because of their faith, that greater rewards are to be gained. The rewards being a closer relationship with God and with other believers and that the spiritual treasure that they build up following Jesus in this life will last into the life to come.

As Christians we believe in eternal life because Jesus talked about it a lot and, even more, his resurrection is seen as solid evidence that death is not the end. We also believe that Jesus came to restore humanity to its original relationship with God the Father, who himself is eternal.

At Christian funerals, John 3:16 is often read out as a promise and a reminder that death is not the end but through Jesus' death and resurrection there is a promise of eternal life:

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

Now from our earlier reading, we can easily summarise that Nicodemus was an intelligent and respected Pharisee, indeed, a member of the Jewish ruling council. But Jesus seems to be somewhat playfully attempting to bring him to an authentic understanding of the 'kingdom of God'. That he must be 'born again', go back to the very beginning - like a baby - in order to unlearn everything he is so sure about - so that he can be retaught.

The wonder, innocence and curiosity of a little child is what God desires from us...

In Matthew 18:3 Jesus says, *"Assuredly, I say to you, unless you **change and become as little children**, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."*

So what are we to make of this Kingdom of heaven? Well, John in his gospel, rarely use the term Kingdom of God, which is at the heart of Jesus' message in the other three Gospel writings. When he does use this term he translates it as something that is notoriously hard to put into English and so is commonly rendered as 'eternal life'.

As we know from the story at the start, eternal life or life everlasting means many different things to different people including amongst Christians but it more than often gets associated with 'the life in heaven after you die'...

However, the Christ-centred nature of eternal life is underscored by Jesus' own words in prayer on the night he was betrayed. First, he reminds His heavenly Father that he gave the Son *"**authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him**"* (John 17:2). He then offers us a succinct description of what eternal life actually is: (John 17:3). *"**Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent**"*

Here, Jesus equates “eternal life” with a knowledge of God and of Himself as Son. There is no knowledge of God without the Son, for it is through the Son that the Father reveals Himself to man. So we could say that **Eternal life is knowing God.**’

But what is this Knowing ?

Well this ‘knowing’ is much more than just intellectual knowledge. It can be seen through various scriptures, for example....(Gen. 4:1). *“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, "I have acquired a man from the Lord.”* Adam didn’t just know Eve intellectually. Let’s face it there is no way *that* is going to produce children!! No, he had a deeply intimate, personal experience with her. This was speaking of a knowing between a man and a woman in the most intimate way possible. Likewise, when Jesus said eternal life was ‘knowing God’, He was speaking of us having an intimate, close up and personal relationship with God.

And this ‘knowing’ isn’t just something for the select few. This ‘knowing’ should become normal Christian living. In fact, if this isn’t our experience, one could say that we aren’t really living. This is what drove the Apostle Paul and many of the early Christians. (Phillipians. 3:10 *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings becoming like him in his death and so, somehow, to attain the resurrection from the dead”*). It’s still what drives Christians today. It’s about a genuinely authentic close relationship with a person, not just some doctrine.

The history of Christianity is littered with believers prepared to risk their very lives to preserve this relationship. Those early Christ-ones, despite intense persecution, had such a depth of relationship with the Living God that it was literally contagious. In Rome, some Christians knew their God so intimately that they sang His praises as they were burned at stakes. There are historical accounts of the Emperor Nero sticking his fingers in his ears and saying, “Why must these Christians sing?” *A phrase that can still be heard being made to churches to this very day...No, I jest!*

Once we understand that true eternal life begins with a personal relationship with God, it leads us to question and reassess all aspects of our lives so that we are living out eternal life now...today...this very minute...

You see, Eternal life has both an "already" and a "not yet" dimension. Biblical Interpreters have sometimes wrongly stressed one to the exclusion of the other. Biblical statements taken in their entirety teach us to have a careful regard for both aspects of this two-sided truth: eternal life is a present possession in terms of its reality, effectiveness, and its permanence (John 10:28) *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.*

Yet its full realization awaits our life with the Lord in the age to come.

John puts it so simply in ([1 John 5:11–12](#)): “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” .

So **have we got to work** towards this eternal life? Do we have to get so many brownie points before we can have it. Do we have to be following commandments in order to be eligible.... NO! Because Eternal life began the moment we exercised our faith in Christ.

.... it's what we do in our lifetimes with this understanding and knowing of our gracious God that carries the real weight.

{THE ROPE EXAMPLE}

When we come to God with a child-like faith we are on an open road to God's own heart.

Little children come innocent, trusting unconditionally, believing without complications, humble, content in the little things, in wonder and in awe at what they discover, believing in the seemingly impossible, feeling secure... When we endeavour to live our lives with these qualities we have been 'born again'... from death to life

John 5:24: "He who hears my word, and believes him that sent me, has eternal life, and comes not into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."

For our time on this earth if all we have done is believe in Jesus so that we won't go to hell, then we are missing out on the everlasting life..... the eternal life the Lord wants to have with us right now.

Do we KNOW Him as He knows us?

The gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen