

"What is Eternal Life?"

John 3:1-21

If there's one verse in the Bible that we all know it's John 3:16.

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.

At least we think we know it. The problem with overly familiar verses that we can recite at the spur of the moment is that we deceive ourselves into thinking that head knowledge means we have mastered it. For example, what does Ps. 23:1 say,

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

If we all know this verse that means none of us have any wants, correct? That we are always completely satisfied in God no matter our circumstances, right? How about v.4?

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Got that one; checked that off my list. Really. So, we no longer fear anything because we constantly remind ourselves God is with us and have nothing to fear. And what about Ps. 119:11? Favourite verse, right?

¹¹ Your Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against you.

So just because we know that verse means we no longer sin, correct? But that verse does make the correct point. We memorize or study Scripture so that in applying it we might sin less.

What about John 3:16? We've all used it to share the gospel with people, telling them that God loves them, that He sent Jesus to die for their sins and that if they would believe in Him, they won't go to hell but to heaven when they die. Isn't that essentially how we've used John 3:16? Sure. Why? Because, according to this verse and many other verses the reward for faith in Jesus is eternal life.

What then is eternal life? If eternal life is the most important thing that God wants to give us for believing in Jesus shouldn't we want to know what it means; what it's all about? The problem with knowing John 3:16 is we've separated it from its context and *limited* it to being something you get when you die. Who did Jesus say this to? Why did He say this to him? He mentioned eternal life in 3:15 as well quoting an unusual Old Testament story during Israel's wilderness wanderings. The whole conversation began when He told a religious teacher to be born again if he wants to see the kingdom of God. How is that connected to eternal life? And what does perish mean?

If we want to really understand eternal life – especially since it's the most valuable thing God gives us – we need to study places like this that tell us about it. And even if we explore every passage where it is mentioned we will have only scratched the surface on what we have. But as we study this in 2019 my prayer is that we grow closer to God as the giver of eternal life and we will have a greater passion to tell those who don't know Christ yet how they can have eternal life too.

[Pray – Father, You told Jeremiah to call to You and ask You to show us great and unsearchable things we do not know. Would You help us to see some of the great and unsearchable things regarding eternal life this morning, in Jesus' Name]

John introduced Jesus' ministry in Ch. 2 with the miracle of turning water to wine at the wedding in Cana. After that Jesus went to Jerusalem where He overturned the tables in the temple of the money changers and v.23 says that "*people saw the miraculous signs that He was doing and believed in Him*". But then it says Jesus didn't entrust Himself to people because He knows their hearts.

And so along comes one of those people, a man named Nicodemus who was aware of some of these signs and says to Jesus,

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

But since Jesus knows what is in the hearts of men, He ignores Nicodemus' comment (he didn't ask him anything) and challenges him with this statement,

³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Jesus will use 'being born' language 3 more times as entrance into the kingdom but then in v.15-16, 18 He switches language and talks about believing in Him to have eternal life. We have to understand Jesus equates the two. And then to add another comparative phrase in v.21 He says 'whoever lives by the truth comes into the light.' So then kingdom, eternal life, truth and light are all synonymous with one another. Let's use 3:16 as our springboard from which we'll study the unit 3:1-21 to find what eternal life is.

Eternal Life Is God's Gift for Whoever Believes in Jesus **(3:16a)**

God gave His One and Only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. Jesus began telling Nicodemus about the kingdom and the need to be born again. Nicodemus lived at a time when all Jews believed they were all destined for the Kingdom because of their Jewishness. They were the "people of God". Unless you were a clear reprobate or apostasized from your Jewishness you were taught that when the rule of God comes to the earth through the reign of the Messiah/Son of David you would be included.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus with this assumption. He approaches Jesus with respect as if Jesus were a fellow Rabbi. Again, notice Nicodemus doesn't ask Jesus any question. However, Nicodemus approaches Jesus as if he and the other members of the Sanhedrin (the 70 rulers of Israel) had authority over Him.

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher [we the Pharisees have made our assessment and come to acknowledge You as a fellow teacher] who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." [there is no other explanation that they could come up with other than that Jesus was representing God well].

But Jesus' response "*Unless one is born again you cannot see the Kingdom of God*" challenges Nicodemus' and the Jews' long held belief that their Jewishness based on Law

keeping qualifies you to rule under Messiah. Since eternal life or kingdom life is a gift from God, you can't earn it and therefore,

It cannot be obtained by our merits (vv.1-2)

Nicodemus' "we know" is presumptuous and arrogant. He presumes he is righteous because He's a Law-abiding Jew and a teacher of the Law at that. Of course, he's a shoe-in for the Kingdom. No, Jesus say. Eternal life is a gift from God not based on works but on belief in Jesus specifically. Nicodemus shows his ignorance of this when he questions Jesus,

⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus elaborates. "Unless one is born of water and spirit (not The Spirit as many of our translations say) he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Jesus distinguishes physical birth (which the Jews presumed theirs earned them kingdom life) from a spiritual birth in v.6 and likens it to wind. You can't see it but you know it was here by the effects it produced. Again, Nicodemus doesn't get it and Jesus tells Nicodemus 'I thought you were 'The Teacher' of Israel and you don't know these things! Meaning, its in the Old Testament – have you missed it? Where in the Old Testament does it talk about a spiritual birth associated with water? Some think this water refers to our physical birth and spirit to spiritual birth. But everyone is born physically so obviously only people can be born again.

Some think He means baptism but that would make baptism a requirement for salvation when in fact it is a post-salvation affirmation of your faith. Come to Ezek. 36:25-27 where we read of a future day for Israel in the kingdom when God says,

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Nicodemus should have known this passage which speaks about a new birth (new heart) associated with water, cleansing. This gift of God that gives us eternal life through Jesus

Must be received by faith and a renewed heart (3:3-10)

Nicodemus was like so many other Jews of His day, full of himself and his self-righteousness trusting in his external Law keeping to earn him God's favour. Jesus says you need a new heart; everyone does. You need to be cleansed of your impurities and believe that God can do this. The context of Ezekiel is that Israel, who was in exile in Babylon would return and the promises of God would still come true for the future. They looked like they were dead but God was going to breathe new life into Israel (Ch. 37, the vision of dry bones coming back to life). Israel was in exile because of sin but God would change their hearts and cleanse them of their sins and breathe new life (rebirth) into them. When we place our faith in Jesus, repenting of our sins and desiring this new eternal life, God's Spirit breathes new life into our spirit and we are born anew. We receive God's gift of new Spirit life where our old spirits were dead to God because of sin.

Jesus has been leading up to this belief in Himself as God's Son and says to Nicodemus in v.11-13,

¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not

believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

When Jesus says “we know” He is intentionally challenging Nicodemus’ “we know” back in v.2. Jesus’ “we” is the prophets and Moses and the testimony of Scripture. And Jesus knows because He is the Son of God who was already in heaven and has now come down. Eternal life is God’s gift for those who believe in Jesus

Because Jesus was sent by God (vv.11-13)

“For God so loved the world that He gave His One and Only Son”. He sent Jesus. Jesus came from God. Jesus knows all these things because He is divine - and He wrote the book that Nicodemus assumed he knew but obviously didn’t.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish ...

Nicodemus was blind to his own perishing and somewhat ignorant that the Old Testament pointed these things out. So, Jesus goes directly to Moses in v.14-15 and uses it to tell Nicodemus that ...

Eternal life is the Only Remedy for Avoiding Condemnation **(3:16b)**

John 3:16 assumes all are in a state of perishing and need to believe in Jesus for eternal life. Nicodemus wrongly assumed he was okay. How does the snake story relate? Let’s read Num. 21:4-9

⁴ They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” ⁶ Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

This comes after the rejection of the land led by the 10 spies. This is after other miraculous provisions of water. This is well-after the giving of daily manna. The people complained again. They failed to believe God could provide water and they detested the miraculous evidence of God’s provision for what they needed each day. They preferred slavery in Egypt. So God sent venomous snakes whose bite resulted in death. They realized their sin and confessed ‘we have sinned’. Then God provided a way to be saved from their sins that required faith alone by looking up at a dead snake (statue) so as to be saved from the penalty of their sins.

This is the point Jesus was making here to Nicodemus and to everyone,

All of us are perishing because of sin (3:14, 19-21; Num. 21:4-7)

Look at 3:19-21, still in the same context:

¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into

the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Jesus is the truth and the light. He exposes our sinfulness and need of saving. When we read the Word, we understand we are all sinners and have fallen short of God's glory. Our choice at that time is come to the light and ask forgiveness or slink back into darkness and continue to 'do it our way'. The serpent clearly illustrates that...

Each one must trust Jesus to be spared from wrath (3:36; 5:28-29; Num. 21 :8-9)

Who of those who were bitten were saved from perishing? Whoever looked up and believed for him/herself. Parents couldn't look up for their children. Children couldn't look up for their parents. If you were bitten and you wanted healing you had to look up and believe that that act of faith in God's Word would save you. And so it is with eternal life.

Look at 3:17-18,

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Three 'whoever's' in two verses. Each person must make that choice for themselves to confess they have sinned and believe Jesus alone saves us from the penalty of our sins (perishing) and can receive eternal life.

We are all initially perishing because of our sins. If we don't believe that look at 3:36,

³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

Jesus' death on the cross paid the penalty for our sins. God's wrath is His righteous judgment of our sins that results in eternal separation from God. If we don't believe Jesus paid for our sins or and we can some how do it ourselves, we are perishing now as we speak and we do not have life; eternal life.

So far we know eternal life is God's gift for those who receive Jesus Christ as their Saviour, which is the only remedy for avoiding eternal condemnation from God. But, in both v.15 and 16 and 36 we read that ...

Eternal Life is More than Just Assurance of Heaven
(3:16c)

All three of those verses talk about having eternal life or life now. Too often we sell Jesus short by telling people only that faith in Him assures of a spot in heaven. But that's not how the New Testament tells the gospel. John 3:16 says we have eternal life. It's more than that assurance of heaven

But an ongoing present reality (5:24)

Sometimes this reward for faith is just called life. Which means physical existence doesn't mean we have real God-centered life. The word 'eternal' means beyond time as we know it but it also has the sense of unalterable and since its life in God, like God it cannot end. It speaks of a quality of life as well as an aspect of duration.

5:24 "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life."

Life without Christ is a dying life. It is already perishing. At salvation we crossed over into God's life or Jesus' life. Eternal life is

Jesus' life in us (15:5)

Jesus said in 15:5

5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Somehow Jesus comes to dwell in us. His life is in us and as we remain, dwell with Him He does something through us which couldn't have happened prior to faith. We are incapable of producing spiritually, godly work without Jesus living in us. Eternal life is more than just the assurance of heaven but an ongoing present reality of Jesus' life in us

That always satisfies (4:13-14)

In the next chapter Jesus tells the woman at the well that He can give her the gift of living water that

4 ... whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

A spring is that which keeps flowing, keeps providing, keeps replenishing itself. We have this now. We can be satisfied internally when we are struggling externally. Paul put it like this in Col. 1:27,

27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

And of course, once we have this life through faith in Christ . . .

It will never be interrupted (11:25)

When Lazarus died Jesus told Mary and Martha to have hope because,

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do we believe this?

For Mary and Martha, it meant hope even though a loved one died. It meant strength to live until we pass from Jesus in us to us in Jesus' presence. Knowing we have eternal life should change how we live. We should live more confidentially because God is keeping our life in Him. We should live more faithfully believing that God will provide for our needs and direct our paths and lead us to green pastures and quiet waters. We should live more evangelistically because we have a clearer idea of what it means to live a perishing, no purpose life that ends in pain outside of the presence of God.

Do you believe John 3:16? Are you enjoying eternal life now? This morning was just the trailer for the 4-part movie we're going to watch Scripture unfold in the next 4 weeks. Pray that God would continue to show us more great and unsearchable things.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net