

Eternal Life Is Kingdom Life

Isaiah 65: 17-25 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

One of the characteristics of popular Christianity is the belief that when you die, you go to heaven. In life-after-death, it's imagined that you'll be able to enjoy some sort of eternal vacation, doing all of the things that you enjoyed doing in your mortal life.

Presumably, it is always better. The Giants win more games than they lose in heaven. You sink the uphill putt that you never could quite manage in mortal life. The beach always has a gentle, cooling breeze and you never burn, and that guy with the drink with a stupid umbrella is ready at your beck and call with a new one. The fish are eager to bite and you always catch a half-dozen beauties. Whatever the scenario, the afterlife is "a better life." It's like what retirement should be, only you don't get old or sick – there are no more doctors. Or diets; you're always fit and trim. And it never ends.

This makes perfect sense in a bizarre, wealthy westerner kind of dream state. It is the continuation of the self-designed paradise that wealthy westerners are *already* familiar with, and indeed may *already* be living in many ways. The assurance of eternal life is that the best of his life will continue and be even better. The afterlife in heaven is like a gated community of personal pleasure, or as we typically call it, a gated community.

As delightful as it may seem, the fantasy runs into one big problem when you identify or imagine yourself to be a Christian. That big problem is Jesus and what we know from scripture. This popular idea is not what Jesus was all about.

You complain, "But Pastor Bruce, Jesus talks about eternal life. 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***. There it is, Pastor Bruce: eternal life. What about that?"

Indeed, that is what John 3:16 says. You simply don't understand what is meant when the scriptures refer to 'eternal life.' That will be my task for the next 15 minutes.

We begin with the breathtaking passage from Isaiah 65 on which I preached just three months ago. The companion passage from the New Testament on that July Sunday was from Revelation. Both passages, their respective composition separated by over 500 years, portray God's actions to create a new heaven and new earth. As I said then, both passages reflect the fulfillment of God's plan for God's creation, the reuniting of heaven and earth.

This **is** the over-arching story of scripture that begins in the Garden of Eden as the human creation seeks to "become like God." The separation of humanity from divinity is an estrangement that God always seeks to reconcile. Humanity has never made itself righteous before God, submitting itself to God's will and way, despite every effort made by God to bring people into proper paths and away from sinfulness.

Sinfulness goes to the fundamentals of human society where in-people and out-people gets manifested in a myriad number of ways. Eventually these manifestations of sinfulness reach down to some of those moralistic peccadillos that some folks like to make into ultimate terms while neglecting all of the big things that go begging for attention. That's another sermon.

But that's why we hear Isaiah talk about the end of weeping and crying from sadness and distress about loss and need and suffering. That's why he talks about the long lives that will be enjoyed as opposed to the shortened lives of those who endure without basic needs being met, exposed to disease, poverty, and warfare, and regarded with indifference as expendable and unworthy. That's why the prophet talks about 'building houses and dwelling in them,' and about 'planting vineyards and eating their fruit.' God's people have labored and not received any real benefit as the wealth is gathered by the rich and powerful. That's why the prophet closes with the imagery of the peaceable kingdom, pictured on the bulletin cover in a contemporary format, when 'wolf and lamb feed together,' not one feeding at the expense of the death of the other. Predatory behavior has no place in the Kingdom. In Isaiah's next chapter, even animal sacrifices in the Temple are strongly condemned in the new creation of Isaiah's vision.

The bold statement of a new heavens and a new earth describe the fulfillment of God's plan to bring together what had been set apart in the beginning, heaven and earth united once again.

I've returned to this passage because we need to recognize that this fulfillment of God's plan happens **in real time**. It does not occur in any after-life. It does not occur in a separate plane of transcendence, some spiritual realm to which souls migrate upon their death. That is a Hellenistic Greek concept that will affect some later Christian theologians, but only some disposed to Hellenistic Greek culture and concepts. For *every* writer in the Bible, the unification of heaven and earth is believed to occur **in real time**. Any idea of life-after-death is expected to occur when heaven and earth are reunited.

Turning to the passage from 1st Thessalonians 4, we are reading from what is believed to be Paul's earliest preserved letter to the churches. Still, it has been about 20 years since the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Yet Paul is imminently expecting Jesus to return to complete what Paul believed was signaled by the resurrection, that his times are the final stages of the fallen world. The end, the *eschaton*, is coming soon, Paul believed. Much of what Paul is teaching is about how to live one's life in the believed-to-be-brief interim period before Jesus returns.

His counsel turns in our passage to a likely concern of this Christian community; people are dying while waiting for the Lord. They ask, what are we to believe? Are those who die before Jesus returns lost? Let's hear Paul's words again:

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep ~~in death~~, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. (1 Thess. 4:13-15)

Paul refers to 'those who sleep' in noting those who have died, 'sleep' being a common term for death. Actually, the metaphor of 'sleep' works remarkably well. You'll recall Jesus saying in John's gospel, 'In my Father's house there are many rooms.' Yes, it's like a Days Inn where God's people go to sleep until awakened at the end of the age. Paul will explain to them what this is all about.

He starts by stating: *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again.* The death and resurrection of Jesus is seen by Paul and the other Jesus-people as the sign of the imminent end of the age.

Why? Go back to the Garden of Eden. One of the sanctions placed upon humanity when the first couple was cast out was the imposition of death. Death did not exist in Paradise, in Eden. Death did not occur until the first couple sinned in trying to 'become like God,' were sanctioned, and cast out from Paradise. One sanction was death. Now death remains a fact of life in the world. But when heaven and earth are reunited at the end of the age, when the Kingdom triumphs over the worldly Powers-That-Be and Jesus returns, then death itself comes to an end. This existence returns to the terms on which humanity engaged God in Paradise, fully reconciled and enjoying *eternal life*, even those who have died. That is Paul's assurance to them when he writes: *According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.* All will be gathered together in the reunited heaven and earth, the living and the dead, in eternal life together.

How is Paul so convinced that the time of Jesus' return is imminent? Jesus' crucifixion – his death on the cross – is *overturned* by his resurrection to new life. The resurrection is the clear-as-crystal sign that death has been overcome in Jesus, that the time of fulfillment of God's desire of uniting heaven and earth is about to be completed. The victory over death in Jesus means that the end time is imminent in Paul's mind.

Let's put a couple of things together that we've covered in my horribly multi-topical sermon. We understand the critical importance of the Garden of Eden story that drives the *entirety* of scripture. We understand the nature of human sinfulness in its inescapable breadth and depth as we have sought to become like God, originating in the Garden of Eden. We understand that the term 'eternal life' refers to the life that comes at the fulfillment of all things, at the end of the age when Jesus returns and heaven and earth are reunited. We understand that Paul and others saw this event as imminent because Jesus' resurrection overcame death. This was the understanding among Christians for centuries.

The question that has not been asked and begs to be asked is: does eternal life only come after death and the end of the age? For that answer, we can look at last week's story of the rich man for one good example of how this was understood; there are many

others. Remember the question asked by the rich man: 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He wanted eternal life, to be grafted onto that promise in Jesus, and he wanted it *now*. Jesus does not tell him: sell all that you have and give to the poor *before you die* and you will share in the promise of eternal life. No, he tells him to go and sell everything *now* and give it to the poor *now*, and then follow Jesus as a servant of the Kingdom which is unfolding *now*.

This story and numerous other examples tell us that living on the Kingdom path now *is* living eternal life now. I've really reached the end of my sermon and find that I've only managed to introduce the context of the title subject. Since I have already packed four or five sermons into today's time, let's call this part one, and I'll proceed apace next week to finally explore how the Kingdom life is eternal life.

In short, Kingdom life is eternal life and it is happening now. How it is understood as happening now and what it consists of has to wait until next week. I'm sorry if I've burst your bubble about a beachfront, mountainside resort of an afterlife in sheer self-indulgence. Jesus did not get crucified for that, and he also did not get resurrected for that. He did come to bring us an invitation to the Kingdom life which eternal life now. That's a pretty sweet deal actually, but there are no drinks with stupid umbrellas in this deal. Instead, Jesus Kingdom gospel is designed to transform the world and life as we have expected it to be. It is how we can live the heaven life today.