

## What is Eternal Life

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*Texts: 1 Corinthians 15: 12-20*

The question from the congregation I am responding to today is at once deeply personal and profoundly theological. Here's how the person asked the question, or rather questions:

How do I incorporate death into my life? All of a sudden, at age 80-something, I'm facing the deaths of four people whom I knew well, whom I liked and enjoyed being with. They are gone now. The pace of death is only going to pick up. What do I do with my loss? Also how can we be with people as they are facing death? And what is eternal life? Does it exist?

I know I am not going to be able to address these questions sufficiently to ease the grief that this person is clearly living with right now. But I do hope to honor the depth of the questions and the struggle with the best of my pastoral and theological reflection. And indeed, these questions really blur any distinctions between pastoral compassion and theology and philosophy. Somehow, when we face the death of a loved one, we both long to be comforted emotionally, and we naturally yearn for some understanding of the nature of death itself. What is death? What is this intrusion into life? Why does it seem so natural physically, and yet so foreign spiritually? Does life somehow endure?

I am going to address a bit of the philosophical aspect of this first, then the theological and pastoral.

I believe that something we reasonably can call "eternal life" does exist. To some of you, who expect an educated person on the modern world to hold to a certain, fundamentally material, view of the world, that may seem surprising, or at least naive. To others of you, your response may be, "Jeez, I should hope so! You're a Christian pastor, of course you believe in eternal life!" The truth though, is that many pastors in our progressive family, like many church members in our progressive congregations, would not be willing to make an affirmation of "eternal life."

Indeed, many among us today ultimately hold to the view that everything, including life itself, can be broken down to a fundamentally material basis. The idea is that life is ultimately a matter of biology. Biology is ultimately a matter of chemistry. Chemistry is ultimately a matter of physics. And physics is ultimately a matter of math. And math is simply what it is, grounded in nothing but pure logic and reason – with no room for anything else – including the divine. (Note: upon further reflection, this progression from biology to math/logic is obviously too simplistic, but I will leave it as is, the way I preached it. Furthermore, not all science is grounded in materialism, and some scientists conclude that material causes cannot explain all scientific observations.)

The influence of materialism is largely what leads us to doubt that there can be anything such as "eternal life," for their ultimately can't be anything that exists that doesn't have a material foundation. And I get it. I love science just as much as the next person, and Carl Sagan, and Bill Nye the Science Guy, and Stephen Hawking have long been heroes of mine.

But I have realized that, while fantastic with science, with theology, maybe not so fantastic. All of them, and so many others, ultimately have a simplistic vision of God that turns God into a being within creation, rather than the eternal source of creation itself, the ground of all being, not an actor within the cosmos, but that in which, the one in whom, we live and move and have our being.

This is perhaps a subject for another time and another format, but let me just put it this way: you could use materialism to describe this room right now, accounting for every single atom, from our brains to the paint on the wall, and you would still say nothing about what is actually happening here – the reason we are here: to express our love of God together.

Materialism wants you to think it can ultimately explain purpose and meaning, or really in many cases claim that purpose and meaning don't exist, in spite of our stubborn experience that they do, but materialism makes a category error. It's like trying to explain what a touch down is in baseball. There are things that exist that materialism can't address.

So, the field is open for "eternal life," and now I'll try to fill in that field a bit.

What is eternal life? What of those four people mentioned by our church member in the question today, and of all the others, beloved by us, or beloved by anyone, or beloved by no one, who have died? What of all of these people now? Their bodies, we know, are burned or in the ground, but what of them, if anything, remains? If eternal life is what happens to them when they die, what is eternal life?

This is the issue that ultimately arises from today's passage from 1 Corinthians. In Biblical language, are the dead raised?

To talk about eternal life, though, I think you will understand that we are going to have to dig pretty deep today. We are touching here on matters of life and death, body and soul, meaning and eternity. Whatever it is, basic to the idea of eternal life is that it is a solution, or perhaps better a resolution, of whatever it is that ails us in life. I mean that writ large, of course. Eternal life has something to do with healing something about our human predicament. That's the basis of what eternal life is, I suppose. The ultimate, divine healing of humanity. In other words, our answer to the question "What is eternal life," depends on how we understand the central problem of human existence. Or, to state it with perhaps too little nuance: what problem does eternal life address?

I want to explore two answers with you today, and think through what each of those answers means for our understanding of eternal life. The first, I think, is the answer that lies at the base of our modern society, the dominate view of the world that has been around for hundreds of years now. The second understanding of the central problem of human existence comes more directly from our faith, which sadly, is all too little in view in the world today.

First, the dominate view today: A preacher I deeply admire says "Our culture's operational assumption has long been that the central problem of human existence is mortality" (Sam Wells). Mortality. We all die. Our culture sees that as the grand problem of life. It ends. We may look with bemusement at stories of Ponce DeLeon and his search for the fountain of youth, we may enjoy science fiction movies that involve visions of eternal youth, but the attempt to skirt mortality is not just found in stories old or new. You don't have to look far to see the same search today in elective cosmetic surgery, packed health clubs, baby boomers buying corvettes, and 60-year old's doing Ironman Triathlons (raise your

hand). It all seems like a great protest against mortality. As I did a couple Ironman's in my 50's, I am among those protesters, I suppose. I don't mean to imply that these things are always a desperate way to look young and deny death its due, but they certainly are often just that. Surely this is behind the effort of some tech enthusiasts who want to upload their consciousness into some kind of super advanced computer, allowing them to live forever. That's a stated goal of some of our billionaire tech bros. Our battle with mortality comes from a distinct discomfort with, even rejection of, limits in general. A central feature of our society is our desire to overcome limitations, limitations of age, transportation, communication, power, knowledge, and everything else. The very word "limitations" has strangely negative connotations in our society, almost quaint, as if we have advanced so far that there are no limitations that just are, that must be accepted, that are, in fact, good and can be accepted gladly. In the proper context overcoming limitations is great, when done to achieve a greater moral purpose, but our society seems intent on overcoming limitations for no greater reason than simply because they are there.

Mortality then, is the mother of all limitations, the biggest problem of all. I thought it was interesting when I was invited to visit a local hospital at my previous church. The sole focus of the event was the latest technology available at the hospital – the robotic surgery machine, the latest digital imaging equipment, the state-of-the-art IR department. I thought how much more interesting it would be, and how much more relevant to the vast majority of their patients, and me as a pastor, if they told me how skilled and compassionate their nurses could be when someone was suffering, and how their doctors didn't just work to extend life, but to aid in human healing, and perhaps even dying well (which, until 100 years ago, was the goal of most of work by physicians). Again, these are not matters of "this OR that," as if you can't extend life AND aid in human healing: but look at what we celebrate, what we value, what we spend our treasure on. If mortality is the central problem of human existence, then what we celebrate, and what we pay for, is delaying death.

So, what does this view lead us to believe about eternal life? If mortality is the central problem of human existence, what is eternal life? It is a place where we live on. It is a place, that, in some way, is not vulnerable to the limit of mortality. And the only way that can be true, is if there is some part of us that lives on. We know our bodies return to the dust, but our souls live on, our eternal souls continue to exist in eternal life, on into eternity.

If mortality is the problem, then eternal life is the place our eternal souls continue on for all time. I think that is pretty much the view of eternal life that prevails in our society. Actually, I hear it expressed all the time by church members - from kids in Confirmation to men who have been in the church for eight decades. I had one member at a previous church with whom I had coffee a few times over the years to talk about his theological take on the world. Actually the purpose of the talks was for him to convince me I was wrong about almost everything that has to do with theology, but I still enjoyed talking with him. He said one day that he sure hoped there was no such thing as eternal life, because it sounded awful. Nothing but your soul living on, endlessly singing praises to God, day after day, year after year, eon after eon. "How dreadful," he said. And, of course, he was right. Such a view of eternal life is dreadful. If mortality is the main problem, and if eternal life is simply and only about overcoming mortality, then eternal life is not worth having. It is not worth having because it leaves one alone forever. And being alone forever is not a description of eternal life. It is a description of hell.

But let's look at a different interpretation of the main problem of life. What if the central problem of human existence is not mortality, but isolation? I think this is closer to the view of the Bible. Just think

of the very first story of the Bible, Adam and Eve. God tells Adam, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' Of course, Adam and Eve do eat from that tree, and what happens? They hide from God, they fear God, they are set outside the garden where God had previously walked with them through the verdant beauty. They are isolated from God. Exactly what God said would happen, happened. They "died," not because their hearts stopped, but because they became isolated from God, from each other, isolated even from the ground on which they walked.

I once had a friend, an old retired pastor, who was in the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease, early enough that he was aware of what was happening. We had lunch one day and he said that he really wished assisted suicide was legal in Illinois, because he was just heartbroken that this disease was going to isolate him from his family and friends. He didn't care about death. He cared about isolation. And, of course, the concern about isolation is close to home, as well. There is a whole lot of dress up and cover up going on, but isolation is real in Cambridge, all the communities in which we live, and everywhere. A few years ago the Surgeon General even declared loneliness to be a national epidemic. Sometimes our society is like an isolation machine. All the negative stuff, the affairs, the alcoholism, the conspicuous consumption, it's all an attempt to numb oneself from the isolation. And all the positive stuff, the churches, the bridge clubs, the mom's nights out, the conversations on the sidelines of a soccer field, it's all a way to hold the isolation at bay.

If isolation is the fundamental human problem, then what is eternal life? It is, of course, the ending of isolation. It is, in the language of our faith, communion, or even more theologically, "perichoresis." The real message of scripture, the main melody of our faith, from the time of Abraham through Jesus to today, is that eternal life is not a place for the repose of our eternal souls. In fact, it is not a place at all. It is a state of being. The state of fully knowing God and being fully known by God. Fully knowing the wonder of God, and fully knowing that you are a wonder in God's sight.

This view of eternal life has little room for the idea of an eternal soul separated from your body at death. This view of eternal life is about all of you. All of you that is here now, and all of you that will always be. And you will always be, not because of an eternal soul, but because of an eternal God, a God who knows you fully, a God who ends all isolation, a God who lives in communion with all our loved ones, living and those who have died, and with you, in eternal life, now and forever.

The real message of the resurrection of Jesus is not simply that he has beaten mortality, but that he has overcome isolation. After all, his resurrection was not a resuscitation of a corpse, but a resurrection, being raised to new life. The grace filled passage from the eighth chapter of Romans says what? "Neither life, nor death...nor anything else in all creation" can do what? "Separate us from the love of God..." Isolation is overcome. What are the final words of the Gospel of Matthew? Jesus says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Isolation is overcome.

Eternal life is fully knowing the wonder of God, and fully knowing that you are a wonder in God's sight. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, of those who live in communion with God, now and forever. Isolation is overcome. Alleluia. Amen.