

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Hope and Promise of Life

by Dan Trygg

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ that everyone believing in Him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that He gave His unique Son, that everyone believing in Him might not perish (or be lost), but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ The one believing in Him is not judged; but the one not believing has been judged already, because he has not believed into the name of the unique Son of God.” John 3:14-18

“He must increase, but I must decrease. ³¹ He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² What He has seen and heard, of that He bears witness; and no one receives His testimony. ³³ He who has received His testimony has affirmed that God is true. ³⁴ For He whom God has sent speaks the personal-directives of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶ The one believing (‘trusting’) in the Son has eternal life; but the one not obeying (‘stubbornly-resisting’) the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on that person.” John 3:30-36

As surprising as it may seem, the idea of “eternal life” is *not* a major teaching of *most* New Testament preaching. It is an idea that is sparsely sprinkled, here and there, except for the writings of one author, the apostle John. The first three gospels only record a couple of incidents where someone asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The rich young ruler asked Jesus this question (Matt. 19:16; Mk. 10:17; Lk. 18:18), and so did a scribe (Lk. 10:25). Then, on another occasion, Jesus told the disciples that those who had left houses, brothers or sisters, father or mother, children or field because of Him, would receive 100 times more in this life, and *will inherit eternal life in the coming age* (Matt. 19:29; Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30). Finally, in a description of the judgment of the sheep and the goats, Jesus said that the goats would be sent off to eternal punishment, while the sheep would go away *unto eternal life* (Matt. 25:46).

In the entire book of Acts, the phrase occurs in only one context. While preaching to the people in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia on a second sabbath day, the Jewish leaders became jealous of the interest of the people, especially the “God-fearers”, the non-Jewish people who had been learning about the God of the Bible. They began to oppose Paul and Barnabas, and tried to disrupt their teaching. Paul confronted them, and said that they had “*judged themselves unworthy of eternal life*”, and that he and Barnabas were going to turn to focus on preaching to the non-Jews. At this word, the non-Jewish seekers rejoiced, and many believed, “*who were having been appointed unto eternal life*” (Acts 13:46,48).

That’s it! Jesus’ teaching in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the preaching of the early church in Acts! **What were they preaching? They were proclaiming the need for people to repent, and prepare their hearts**, because the kingdom of God was at hand. **Then they proclaimed the need to accept the promised King, Messiah Jesus**, and the forgiveness of sins He purchased with His blood. They proclaimed that Jesus rose from the dead as proof of His victory over sin and death. They called people to identify with Jesus as their King and Savior. **They were to accept the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit. They preached the kingdom of God and Jesus as their King.**

Did you know that Paul only mentioned eternal life in three chapters in Romans? To those who perseveringly through good work seek glory, honor and immortality, *God will render to them eternal life* (2:7). Then, as sin had reigned in death, in a similar way *the grace of God will reign through righteousness unto eternal life* by means of Jesus Christ (5:21). Finally, having become slaves of God, *the fruit and end of our sanctification will be eternal life. It is the free gift of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (6:22,23).

In Galatians 6:8, Paul declares that the one who sows to the Spirit, *the one who invests in his spiritual walk, will reap or harvest eternal life as a result*. In 1 Timothy 1:16, Paul says that he, as “the worst of sinners, is a demonstration of God’s patience as an example of those who would *believe unto eternal life*. In 6:12 of that same book, Paul exhorts Timothy to “*take hold of the eternal life unto which you were called*”. In Titus 3:5-7, Paul described how God had saved us through a washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, which He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by His grace, *we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life*.

Finally, Jude, the brother of Jesus, exhorted us to “**keep yourselves in the love of God, anticipating (now) the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life**” (1:21).

As you can see, this *is* just a scattering, a smattering, of references that only touch on this theme in passing. This phrase is not found in the letters to Corinth. It is not mentioned in Ephesians, Philippians or Colossians. It is not referred to in the letters to the church in Thessalonica, or the letter to Philemon. The phrase is not used in Hebrews, or

James, or Revelation. It certainly was *not* the predominant focus of the preaching recorded in most of the NT. **What we have in these passages is significant and important, but “eternal life” was not the focus of these letters or messages.**

So, where does the emphasis on “eternal life” come from? It comes from the writings of the apostle John.

This is an opportune time to remember what “history” is, or more specifically, what the gospel writings are.

There are many, many events that happened, words that were spoken, things that took place that have not been recorded or written down. **What we have are selected and edited accounts that are based upon actual events, teachings and conversations, but have been chosen to present a picture or make a point.** John tells us what was his motive and his basis for selecting the events, conversations and teachings that are in his account. He was led by the Holy Spirit to do this. This was not simply his idea. **In John 20:30-31, the author tells us that these events were chosen so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, we might have life in His name. “We might have LIFE in His name.”** As this apostle and eyewitness was writing his account, long after the other accounts had been written and shared with others, **John chose to weave together other aspects of Jesus’ life and teachings to emphasize the LIFE that was to be found in Him.** Looking back, John recalled the things that Jesus did and taught with a perspective that the earlier accounts may not have had. **He remembered that Jesus did not teach about eternal life as only something that would come to believers in the future. It was something that they could experience now. In fact, it was the future life of the kingdom of God reaching back into our present to be received and enjoyed in the here and now.** The word “eternal” is actually an adjective form of the word for “age, eon”. So, “eternal life” is “life of the age or eon of the kingdom of God”. It is “kingdom life” here and now.

John hammers on this theme! There are more references to “age-life” in John’s gospel and first epistle than in all the rest of the NT combined. 23 times!

Notice how Jesus introduces this theme in John 3, in His talk with Nicodemus. Jesus told him that **a person is not able to see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above** (vs. 3). Nicodemus misunderstands what Jesus is saying, thinking that He is saying you must be born a second time. **Jesus clarifies, “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.** Do not marvel that I said that I said to you, *‘It is necessary to be born from above.’*” He then references an account from the Torah, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, *in this same manner it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up in order that everyone believing in Him might have ‘age-life’* (life of the age-to-come-in-the-here-and-now). For *in this same manner* God loved the world with the result that He gave His unique Son, in order that everyone believing into Him might not perish (be lost, ruined, destroyed), rather he or she might have life of the age.” In Numbers 21:7-9, the people of Israel were being bitten by poisonous serpents as a consequence for their sin. God instructed Moses to make an image of a serpent and put it on a pole, so that if anyone was bitten, he or she could come to look at the bronze serpent on the pole and be healed. This was an act of faith in God’s word of promise and provision. Those who believed were healed and lived. Those who did not perished. Note, however, that **the life promised here is not simply natural life. It is life of the age-to-come-in-the-here-and-now. This is Jesus’ explanation for being born of the Spirit. This is supernatural life. It comes to those who will look in faith to Jesus, when He is lifted up like the serpent on the pole.**

Later on in this same chapter, we have the final testimony of John the Baptist recorded in this gospel. When his disciples approached him about how Jesus’ ministry was beginning to eclipse John’s, he reminded them that this was up to God. A person will receive only what God intends for them. **In John’s case, he had been sent ahead of Jesus to point Him out** to those who would listen to his testimony. He was now like the best man at a friend’s wedding. It was his place to rejoice in the bridegroom’s voice. **It was now time for him to decrease, to fade into the background, while Jesus would increase.** He was to take center stage, not John.

John went on to say that “He who comes from above is above all. **A person being out from the earth can only speak out from the earth, but the One coming out from heaven is above all.** He testifies as to what He has seen and heard, and no one receives his testimony. But the one taking His testimony affirms that God is true. **Whom God has sent speaks the personal-directives of God, since He gives the Spirit without measure.** The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. **The one believing (trusting in) into the Son has the “age-life”;** but the one stubbornly-resisting (disobeying, disbelieving) the Son will not see life, rather the wrath of God remains upon him.”

John clearly knew his place, and He was willing to yield everything to Jesus. He recognized that he could only speak from his limited earthly experience. This is true of anyone from here. **Jesus, however, had come from above. He could speak of things He knows that are beyond human experience or comprehension.** One who accepts Jesus’ witness affirms that God is true. **The person who trusts in the Son possesses the life-of-the-age now.** This is a further progression. In 3:15,16, the purpose was so that we may have this “age-life”. Now, we are told that those who trust *come into possession of that life* in the here and now. **Those who disbelieve can neither perceive, nor experience that life, nor the kingdom. They are still under the wrath of God, because they have not yet looked in faith on Jesus.**