

# Eternal Life

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As Possessed by the Believer  
In All Dispensations



*An Answer to Correspondents*



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# ETERNAL LIFE

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THE question of a correspondent as to the consistency of the assertion that Old Testament saints had eternal life with our Lord's words in John 17: 3, is one being raised by many at the present moment, and deserves a fuller reply, therefore, than otherwise would be at all necessary. It is one capable of a clear and scriptural answer; and it is only a matter of astonishment that so many, well taught in the Word, should be so little clear.

But first, what exactly is meant by "eternal life"?

The answer awakens the deepest gratitude and adoration in the heart of a believer : it is *divine* life ; it is life in the fullest sense *eternal*, existing *from* eternity *to* eternity in God Himself. It is the communication of this life which makes all who receive it, not children of God by *adoption* merely, but children of God by *birth*—by life and nature.

Of so wondrous and blessed a fact many Christians have so little apprehension, that it will be necessary to produce Scripture to vindicate such a statement from the appearance of presumption : God's thoughts are not as our thoughts, and the riches of His grace toward us are far beyond any possible prior conceptions of our own.

The truth is plainly declared by the apostle that " God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son." But how in Him ? Scripture answers : in Him, as

what belonged to Himself always — His own life. Thus, “in Him” (the Word) “was life; and the life was the light of men” (John 1: 4); “For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested unto us” (1 John 1: 2). And thus as possessors of the life which is in His Son, we are “*in Him* that is true, even in His Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 5: 20).

Thus it is plain how low and gross and incomplete is the thought that eternal life is mere eternal existence, or immortal life — as so many are saying; or even eternal, happy, and holy existence, as is the common thought. It is *divine life*, eternal in a sense that no other is. Christ is our life; and now, raised from the dead, His work accomplished, He is the “last Adam,” the life-giving Head to a “new creation,” to

which he who is in Christ already belongs (1 Cor. 15: 45, 47; 2 Cor. 5: 17).

As really as we get our natural life from the first Adam, so really do we get a new, supernatural life from Christ, the last Adam. The divine-human Personality of the new-creation Head explains how the life that links us with the new creation links us at the same time to God in a higher and more blessed way than any creaturehood, as such, could give. "For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one : for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren " (Heb. 2: 11).

Eternal life and life in the Son are thus but different terms for that divine life, and, being partakers of it, we are children of God. And life in the Son expresses the double fact that only through the Son, the Mediator, could the life ever be ours; and also that, having it, we possess it not inde-

pendently or in separation from its source. As another has said, "It is not an emanation from [God], a something given out from Him, as life was breathed into Adam at the first ; but on the contrary, the believer is taken into communion (joint-participation) of the life, as it continues to dwell in the Fountain-head itself."

This, then, is eternal life, which we have as born of God—from the first moment, therefore, that we are born of Him. If new birth was from the beginning of God's dealings in grace with men on earth, then the Old Testament saints were necessarily partakers of eternal life, of life in the Son, as we are.

But to this some oppose the Lord's definition of eternal life in John 17: 3: "And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee"—the Father—"the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent."

“How could this,” they ask, “be true of saints before Christ’s coming? Had they this knowledge of the Father and the Son, which is the New Testament revelation?”

The answer may be given without any difficulty or hesitation: They had not. Does this, then, settle the point in question? Surely it would be hasty to imagine this in view of consequences so serious as must follow.

For if the Old Testament saints had not eternal life, new birth must have been with them a very different and an infinitely lower thing than it is with us? Nay, they could not have been, in the sense in which we are called so, children of God at all! *What* life had they then? And when did true eternal life begin to be in men? When Christ came and faith received Him first? Or when He rose from the dead, having accomplished His work?

*Not* the latter, certainly, for it would exclude the people of whom the Lord affirms it to be true, in the very prayer in which these words are found. "I have manifested Thy name," He says, "unto the men which Thou gavest Me out of the world : Thine they were, and Thou gavest them Me, and they have kept Thy word. *Now they have known that* all things whatsoever Thou hast given Me are of Thee. For I have given unto them the words which Thou gavest Me ; and *they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from Thee ; and they have believed that Thou didst send Me*" (vers. 6-8). Here, the knowledge which the Lord declares to be eternal life He declares that His disciples already had—had therefore eternal life before redemption was yet accomplished.

They were, as far as the life essentially



was concerned, still what Old Testament saints were, nor do the Lord's words imply any thing else, although Old Testament saints could not have had the knowledge He speaks of. It is a mode of speech with which we are perfectly familiar, to speak of a thing in its full and proper *development* as if it were alone the thing. A babe, if you distinguish it from other creatures, is a *man* ; but we rightly reserve the name, in ordinary parlance, for the being come to maturity and manifesting the powers of a man. In the babe, you do not yet see what the man is. I say, man is the highest creature of God on earth, both for mental and physical endowments. Is not that true ? Surely. Is the babe, then, a *man* ? We must, really, answer both ways—Yes and no !

Apply this to the passage before us, and it is simplicity itself. If we think of eternal

—*i. e.* divine—life, what does this imply but divine acquaintanceship—the knowledge of God? If we think of life in the Son, what but acquaintance with the Father? But the life gives not the knowledge: it gives the capacity for it. Manhood, the possession of human nature, gives not the knowledge of a man, but the capacity for acquirement. The knowledge must be ministered from without; and so must the knowledge of God. The knowledge ministered of the Father and Son alone gives the life its true character—displays it—*shows what it is.* “This is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.”

Christ has “brought life and incorruption to light by the gospel.” We may surely say, not only objectively revealed it to us, but subjectively also revealed it in us. And

the two things are connected. The hindrances to growth and development, which the darkness of the dispensation imposed, are removed ; the true character of the life within us is manifested. And yet, even to us, Scripture speaks of it as, *in a sense*, a future thing : “ In the world *to come*, everlasting life ” (Luke 18: 30); so, “ He that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal ” (John 12: 25); so, “ Ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life ” (Rom. 6: 22). Thus, while it is a possession, it is still a hope ; and exactly as the character of it as now possessed is being taken to deny its possession of old, so is the hope of it taken by some to deny a present possession—with just as much and as little truth in one case as in the other. We possess it now, yet in a sense have it not but wait to enter upon it as a future thing. And so, pre-

cisely, the Old Testament saints had it essentially, yet in its true character waited for it as a thing yet to be entered upon. Now, as revealed, it is revealed in its true character in connection with Him in whom alone, so far, it has its perfect display, and in us brings it out also in its reality. Yet we still hope for it *as if* we had it not, although we have it and know we have it. In the full reality of what it is, eternity alone can declare it to us.

I would add, while not intending to enter into it at large, that the word "life" is used in various senses both in Scripture and elsewhere. There are even two words in the Greek to express on the one hand the life in us (which is  $\psi\upsilon\chi\acute{\eta}$ ), and, on the other, the practical, displayed life (which is  $\omega\acute{\eta}$ ). This applies only to natural life, but the same distinction exists really as to

the spiritual. The displayed life is that of which the Lord speaks in the verse in question.

I would add also, with regard to the views of another that have been appealed to in this connection, that they are entirely misjudged. Certain passages, whose meaning has not been really weighed, have been quoted from the "Examination of the 'Thoughts on the Apocalypse'" (Coll. Writ., Proph., vol. iii, pp. 39-42, n.), as where he speaks of it as a "fundamentally false principle" that "if life be there, inasmuch as it is always of God, or divine life, it is always essentially the same, whatever official distinctions there may be as to dispensation." He replies, "The difference is very great indeed as to man. It is every thing as to his present *affections*, as to his *life*. Because God puts forth power—power, too, which works in man through

faith, according to the display He makes of Himself. And therefore the whole life, in its *working*, in its *recognition of God*, is formed on this dispensational display . . . Because all this is what faith ought to act upon, and the life which we live in the flesh we live by faith—for ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Hence,” he adds, “the Lord does not hesitate to say, ‘This is life eternal, to know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.’ *That could not have been the life of those before.* Had they, then, not life? Nay, but it could not be stated in that way—their life was not that; and to undo these differences is to make a life without affections, character, responsibility—in a word, without faith. You cannot do it, for to us to believe is to live.”

It is plain, surely, that it is the practical life which is in question here. He owns

fully that it is divine life in all; in its practical character, as a life of faith, different according to the revelation of God; which faith receives. This is clear enough; but, at p. 554 of the same volume, he is still more explicit. "And if it be said, But were they not quickened with the *life that was in Christ? No doubt they were.*" "He (Mr. N.) holds now that there was the same life essentially in all of them (heavenly and earthly saints). *With this I fully agree.*"

And this is all that has ever been contended for.

F. W. G.