

So That You May Know

Hespeler, 16 May, 2021 © Scott McAndless

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, Psalm 1, 1 John 5:9-13, John 17:6-19

Today is the last Sunday of the season of Easter for this year. And, as I've said before, I believe that it is our task during this season of the year to come to a deeper understanding of what it means and what it changes that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Week after week I have been trying to explain all of the ways in which the event of Easter is able to transform the way that we see and understand the world and our place in it.

But there is one impact of the event of the resurrection that I have left out up until now. This is not because it is not important, but more because it is the one that people seem to think of first. In fact, people think of it so quickly that they just stop their thinking there and don't go on to think of the other ways in which Easter changes everything for us. And it is that tendency that I am trying to counteract.

But, of course, I shouldn't leave it out. There is one more thing that it means to us that Jesus rose from the dead. It means that, since death was not the end of Jesus' story, death will not be the end of our story either. The resurrection of Jesus is the event that is the foundation of our hope and expectation that there is life beyond this present reality.

Our Fear of Death

Humans are sentient and self-aware beings. That is to say, we are beings who not only exist but are also conscious of our existence and have a sense of self that remains constant throughout the various phases and changes of our lives. As far as we can tell, this is something that sets us apart from all of the other animals upon this planet. This is a great blessing, but it also brings with it a tinge of curse.

This awareness of our existence also brings with it an awareness that we shall cease to exist as we are at some point. And we are not quite sure what to do with that. It inspires fear – fear of the unknown, fear of the annihilation of self and fear of being cut off from our relationships with the people that we love. Now, I am not suggesting that every person struggles with these particular fears, but it is common enough that many of the philosophies and religions of this world have put considerable effort into reassuring people that, yes, there is a way to conceive of something that extends beyond this present existence.

1 John Wants Us to Know

And I really appreciate that our reading this morning from First John addresses this anxiety about the afterlife head-on. In fact, he explains that this is the entire purpose of everything that he has written in this letter. **“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have**



eternal life.” But this letter was written a long time ago and I’ve got to say that I have known an awful lot of Christians over the years who did not feel as if they knew that they had eternal life.

I’ve known many Christians who continue to be very uncertain about such things for various reasons. So how is it that, in this letter, the apostle assures us that this is something that we can and should know that we have, and yet so many seem to lack this knowledge. So, I would like to explore that question a little bit this morning.

What is Eternal Life

First of all, we need to try and understand what this thing is that we are supposed to know that we have. What is eternal life? I mean, it obviously means life that goes on forever and ever, but what sort of life and existence are we talking about? This, in itself, is actually a big stumbling block for many people. You see, there are various descriptions of the afterlife found in the scriptures and in popular Christian literature, but the problem with a lot of these descriptions is that they do not stand up to close examination.

On a basic level, we all know that the language that we often use, where we speak of going up into heaven, doesn’t really work on a practical level. In ancient times, people used to conceive of the heavens, the place of God’s abode, as a real physical space just beyond the dome of the sky.

Descriptions of that Life are Impractical

But we all know today that that cannot be so. We know that the dome of the sky is actually an illusion created by the refraction of the sun through the atmosphere. We know that beyond it is a vast empty space that our astronauts, spaceships and satellites travel through. We know that God is not just up there hanging around with the souls of the dead. So, for many people, the mere fact that the traditional description cannot be a practical description means that there can be no afterlife.

Of course, this also applies to many other descriptions of the afterlife, the idea of living perpetually in perfect bliss might sound nice, but it also sounds, on closer examination, like a terrible bore. Would I really be pleased if I had nothing to do for all eternity but play a harp? And let’s not even get into the descriptions of gates made of pearl, walls of jasper and streets paved with gold – I mean, can you imagine a worse driving surface than gold? So, what do we do with that problem?

If all of the descriptions of the afterlife that we have heard don’t seem to work out practically, does that mean that it cannot exist? Of course not. There is no practical description of that life in the Bible or anywhere else. That is because, whatever that afterlife is, it is outside of our human experience, beyond our understanding and cannot be described with our words. We cannot know what it is like until we experience it for ourselves.

Just Because You Can’t Imagine It, Doesn’t Mean It Isn’t Real

My personal idea is that the afterlife might be found in some kind of quantum cosmic consciousness that we enter into together, but even that is only my own speculation. We just don’t know what it’s like. So anything you have ever heard about the afterlife is not meant to be a

practical description. It is a metaphor and, like any metaphor, you cannot take it as a literal description. It's only a way of saying that it is something like a city paved with streets of gold.

So, as a very important first point, do not think that it is impossible for you to attain eternal life because you cannot imagine what that would be like, nobody can, but that does not mean that it isn't real.

I'm Not Good Enough

The second reason why many people do not think that they can know that they have eternal life is because they do not think that they are good enough. They assume that there is some kind of judgment, some kind of standard that people need to live up to, and they just cannot be sure that they have made the grade. Some, in fact, are very sure that they haven't.

Now, I do understand why it is that people often feel this way. Many of us go through life with this constant feeling that we have to perform and that we have to be certain ways in order to please others and be acceptable. Most of us receive this message from other people constantly throughout our lives, so it is not all that surprising that we should come to think that God is judging us in much the same way.

But the message of the gospel is absolutely clear on this point, even if you struggle to believe it sometimes. God does not judge us by our works or righteousness but rather treats us with grace. **"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast."** (Ephesians 2:8-9) No one can, by their works or righteousness, earn their way into that life, and so God has provided another way by means of God's love and grace. So nobody can say that they are not good enough to get in.

The Faith Question

I hope that we all, as Protestant Christians for whom this has long been the theme of our faith, have absorbed at least that part of the gospel message. But there are still many who carry around that niggling feeling that they cannot know that they have eternal life because of one little word in that verse that I quoted above. **"For by grace you have been saved through faith,"** the apostle writes, and there are many who worry that they do not have the requisite faith. In the same way, in our reading from 1st John, the apostle writes, **"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life,"** but there are many who will say, "That is wonderful, but what if I am not sure if I believe?"

So it seems that there is one more hurdle that gets in the way of our knowing that we have eternal life and that is our fear that we might not have the necessary faith or belief. Some people express that anxiety in terms of not being able to accept certain teachings or tenets of the faith.

What If I Can't Believe Impossible Things?

I have heard some people say, for example, that they are not sure that they can buy that whole story of the virgin birth. It's not that they don't like the story or don't find it meaningful, it's just that they can't wrap their modern, logical minds around the idea that such a thing could have happened. And, of course, there are many other teachings that people have the same struggle with from the seven-day creation story to the global flood and even the bodily resurrection of Jesus. And

so, many will hear about how faith is needed to attain life eternal and conclude that that is not for them because they are too logical or too well educated and cannot bring themselves to believe that certain unbelievable things happened, just like the Bible says that they did.

But none of that is what the Bible means when it speaks of obtaining the life through faith. It is not a matter of believing the right things and it is certainly not a matter of screwing yourself up to believe impossible or improbable things. That is not what is referred to by faith in the Bible.

The Faith the Bible is Talking About

First John explains it like this, **“And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.”** This makes it quite clear that the possession of eternal life is not dependent upon us at all. It is something that God gives, and it is given in Jesus. He goes on, **“Whoever has the Son has life.”**

There is not a word about faith in that statement, but I would suggest that faith is implicit in everything that is said there. The faith that is being spoken of is basic trust. It does not mean that you have to believe anything in particular about Jesus. I mean, yes, that might be helpful, but it is not necessary. What he is looking for is just a sense of trust.

It is like, for example, the trust that a child requires in order to receive a cookie from the hand of a loving parent. If that relationship of trust is there, the child doesn't even have to ask the question whether or not the delicious cookie being offered is good or dangerous. She just receives it gratefully. But even if the child might have been disappointed in the past and so have questions or doubts about her parent, if she can find enough trust to just receive it, the end result is the same, the child has a cookie. It depends upon the parent, not the child.

It Depends on God

What John is saying is that eternal life works the same way. It doesn't depend on us; it depends on God and is in Christ. It doesn't matter if you have doubts and questions about it. It doesn't matter if you believe all of the things that good believers are supposed to believe, or you can accept none of it. That is completely another matter. Jesus offers it; you only have to receive it. That is what the faith is in that concept.

Yes, the resurrection of Jesus does many things for us. It really makes us understand and see almost everything differently. One of the things that it should change is that it should make us look at the inevitability of death not with fear or dread, but with hope and confidence. I honestly cannot tell you what that existence will be, though I could offer you a few metaphors. All I can know is that you will find yourself under that care of a God who, the story of Jesus teaches us, you can trust to give you only good things, including life eternal.