

1 John 5:13-21

“What is Eternal Life?”

Today we wrap up a portion of our series on the letters of John. Today we wrap up the letter of 1 John, which is the longest of the three letters by far. We've heard John's response to the early Christian community on their concerns of dealing with false teachers, their outside pressures to the community, and the need to keep the faith in the midst of adversity. All of these and more are themes that we experience today as Christians in the 21st century. Our spiritual ancestors have been through hardship and they survived giving us the faith that we have today. We are not alone in our experience today. We live on the shoulders of those who have gone before us.

One of the concerns of the early Christian community was the matter of eternal life. The early church leaders and of course Christ himself proclaimed the message of eternal life, that all who would believe in Christ would never taste death.

Today we are still concerned with eternal life. Our faith is built on the resurrection and the promise of life everlasting. But what are the challenges that we face in reaching eternal life? What would eternal life look like when we get there? What do we do with the gift of eternal life?

The very first Christians were fortunate enough that they still had Christ with them so that he could answer their questions on the life everlasting. Looking at Christ's words from the Gospel of John, we see that Christ passed this earth so that he could prepare the way for us and prepare a place for us in heaven with our heavenly Father. Christ tells us that there are many rooms, which I read that there are many places for us. Christ has prepared a place for all that choose to believe in him.

Yet in this, there were many challenges that faced the early Christians in reaching their place in heaven, which today are some of the same challenges we face in our life. The two challenges that stand out the most are one, the act of accepting Christ and the second, the persistent nature of sin. Both of these challenges can be overcome and we have the Holy Spirit on our side in overcoming the darkness that the challenges represent. We are not alone. We are victorious in Christ.

Today, just as in back in the time of our writer of 1 John, the first step towards eternal life was accepting Christ. We do this, because Christ proclaimed that he alone was the way and the truth and the life. Only the act of believing in Christ can save us from the death that comes from a worldly life.

We accept Christ not because we forced into it, but rather because we choose the faith for ourselves. Some of us have been in the faith our whole lives, where we received the gift of faith through our parents or other family members who rose in the faith, and then we chose the faith on our own. Some of us come to the faith later in life, when we accept Christ because we believe in the message of Christ. Both of these ways to Christ are equally valid and real. It's the step over the first challenge to eternal life.

The second step that we must overcome when is the constant threat of sin. The writer John discusses sin at some length and the challenge that we face in the threat of it. We can still fall into a trap, where we might lose the faith and rebel against God's love. We might begin to lose the message that we once held on to, and instead turn to a path that is not one of God's.

But we do not have to despair. If there has been one constant theme of the letter of 1 John is that we do not have to despair into sin and darkness. We are blessed with the Holy Spirit to guide us. As long as we continue to be in prayer and seek the ways of the Holy Spirit then we'll

overcome the darkness that can come. We have assurances throughout much of scripture that when we are trouble, all we have to do is call out, and we have the comfort of the Holy Spirit. This stands not only with sin, but with any other trouble we face, for Christ is on our side and the Spirit intercedes on our behalf whenever we feel that are in trouble beyond what we can handle.

Once we overcome these troubles, then we begin to look into the promise of eternal life. We come back to an earlier question, what does this look like? Scripture gives us an indication of what this looks like and we can move forward knowing that we have a guiding post for understanding what stands before us. Yet sometimes we get caught up in sources outside of scripture and seek out a vision of eternal life that might not be one that lines up with scripture.

In looking at a new life, the eternal life, I look towards the book of Revelation for an image that stands out. I turn to (Insert exact scripture quotation) Revelation 21. Revelation provides the image of a new heaven and a new earth, which I will read from.

In our reading, we see the image what will come. It is a standard passage of scripture when thinking about the eternal life. Scripture provides many other ideas of what eternal life would look like, but as Methodists it is the one that we turn to. We turn to this quite often in our services of death and resurrection, also known as funeral and memorial services. We use this image as the direction that we are working towards on this earth that in no matter what, there is a new creation there available for all people who choose to have a new life in Jesus Christ. It reminds us that our loved ones who have passed are living into a new creation that is far more glorious than anything that we can imagine.

Sometimes though, we hear of other sources outside of scripture that give us an idea of what eternal life might be like. We have images given to us in media or through experience that cause us to wonder to think about what lies ahead of us. I think it is perfectly fine to muse and

wonder what the next life will be like. But the source of where we think of what the next life will be like should always push us back towards scripture and towards Christ.

One of the more popular sources on what heaven and eternal life might be like is in the very popular book “Heaven Is For Real” by Todd Burpo. It’s a book about Todd’s son who has a near death experience and the vision that his son had while he was in heaven, as the book says. The book provides many heartwarming images, such as the child sitting on Jesus’s lap and seeing family members that had passed on before he was even born. This book does provide comfort that someday we will see our friends and family that have passed and that indeed heaven is for real.

I think this book for the most part is a perfectly acceptable example of what musing about the next life can be. I have read most of the book, and it has my mark of approval. I don’t have any problems with the book. But I could not be me a pastor of the gospel without this disclaimer, that there is a danger in turning too much to books such as this however. The danger is when we begin to be more focused on the book, rather than on scripture. We don’t need a book written just a few years ago to tell us that eternal life is for real. We have the Bible to tell us these things. We have the life of Christ to tell us these things.

It is always important to turn to scripture when thinking of matters of life. There is one other area that we have to be careful of when pondering the next life, and that is this. We can’t become preoccupied with it. While it is the goal of every Christian and a part of the promise that Christ has given us, we cannot focus only on the afterlife. We have been given this life for a very real reason, and that is so that we can have life abundantly!

The last point we come to today is, what do we do with the gift of eternal life? The Gospels are full of the images that we have been given much in this life. We have been given the

opportunity to love deeper, grow deeper in faith, and be a blessing to other people because of our relationship with Jesus Christ. The world is full of opportunities for us to live out our faith in this life. Again, the gospels have told us that Christ came into the world not to condemn the world, but so that those who believe in Christ may have it more abundantly. The world that the early Christians, such as the first audience to 1 John lived in, was a world that was only for the elite, but Christ challenged that. Christ came so that we don't have to live in despair and death, but in the Resurrection, the ultimate act of life, we can live a life more abundantly.

By serving God and others in this world, we become a testimony to the life that is to come. We can live a life knowing that no matter what gets thrown at us we can make it and we have a life ahead of us that will be amazing beyond words. We must live our lives now so that we can truly be a testament to faith that will stand, so that others will notice how we live, and we can therefore have the opportunity to share our faith, and our Savior Jesus Christ, to all that we come into contact with.

I charge us today as believers into the Gospel to live in such a way that we can be that testament to Christ. Take the image of a new heaven and a new earth, and make it your goal to live in a way so that others may know that image. Prayerfully live so that the obstacles to eternal life pass, so that you can be the testament. We have been given much in this life. Go forth and live it! Amen.