



WHAT'S SO BIG ABOUT
ETERNAL LIFE?

Presented by

DR. JOEL NEDERHOOD
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My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. Philippians 1:23

The other day I received a letter from a listener who writes often to express his disagreement with this broadcast. Even though he is not a believer, he might be offended if I called him an atheist. But at least he is an agnostic. At any rate, he finds most everything he hears on this broadcast useless if not obnoxious. I always benefit from his insights.

What he said the other day, though, was especially valuable, for it opened my eyes to some thing I had just never thought about before. He revealed his disinterest in eternal life. Apparently, he assumes that Christian people are always thinking about eternal life and are trying to convince others to believe in their religion so that these "others" may enjoy eternal life rather than eternal something else. My correspondent told me, somewhat to my surprise I must admit, that he did not find the idea of eternal life very appealing.

I say I was surprised, but I shouldn't have been. For it doesn't take much imagination to see how uninteresting eternal life must look to those who stand outside the Christian faith and look in. My friend reminded me of several characteristics of eternal life which turned him off, and all I needed was this reminder to see that, why of course, eternal life must look pretty dismal from his vantage point.

There are several things that mean a lot to us in this life that will apparently be absent in the life to come, and their absence does not make eternal life very attractive for some people. Let's start with sex. That is very big in many people's lives these days. Sexual pleasure and satisfaction have become practically another unalienable right. Well, so far as we know, this won't exist in heaven. Ac-

cording to the Bible, there will still be males and females in heaven most likely, but they will relate to one another as the angels relate to one another. The sexual component of life as we know it now will just not be there. Many people will miss this.

Food—that's another thing that will apparently be unnecessary in the eternal state. People who enjoy all kinds of culinary delights and good drinks will find that there will be nothing in heaven that will be comparable. The Bible reports that Jesus looked forward to celebrating Holy Communion with His people in eternity, but that does not really compare to an evening at a good restaurant with a good meal and vintage wine. Many people will miss this, too.

We could go on, couldn't we? Think of the enjoyment you get from your work. Lawyers, truck drivers, surgeons, carpenters, engineers—all of these get a certain kick out of their job. There is a zest that accompanies learning a skill and using it well. And sports—that is another area of experience that, so far as we know, will just not be a part of eternal life. Christians from Chicago will have no teams to moan and groan about and exult over when there is an occasional victory. Think of it—no soccer, no Irons-sexual tennis matches, and no Olympics. Many people will miss all this, as well.

But the worst thing about eternal life, and my friend emphasized this in his letter to me, is that it is eternal. Think of it—never ending. Anything, if it never ends, no matter how pleasant, becomes boring, isn't that right? He reminded me of the legendary sea captain who was condemned to sail on endlessly never coming to port. If that is what eternal life is like, he said, I want no part of it. However good it might be, it is just too long. Eternal life is, in short, too much of a good thing.

All this reminds me of a cartoon I saw the other day of some very elderly people, living in a very

run-down nursing home. One turned to the other and said, "Just think, if I hadn't quit smoking, I would have missed all this!" I guess that's the way my friend feels about eternal life. If believing means that that's what you get, he wants no part of it. Eternal life he can do without.

In contrast to the rather bleak reaction to eternal life that we have just been talking about, there is a very interesting sentence in the book of Philippians in the New Testament which many Christians themselves have been puzzled by. The book of Philippians is actually an ancient letter which a very important church leader of the early church, the apostle Paul, wrote to Christians living in the city of Philippi. He wrote it from prison, and it looked as if he wasn't going to be able to help the church by coming to visit them again. Yet, he spoke about his desire to come to them once more. This is what he writes:

"I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this [imprisonment of mine] will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again" (vv. 19-26).

This reveals the conscientious heart of a man who felt a great responsibility for the people whom

he had brought to the Christian faith. He wanted to come to them again so that he could help them further, but he had to recognize realistically that

there was a good possibility that he would not be able to do so. He was in prison, and the government being what it was in those days, there was a good chance that he would be executed. So he found himself facing two possibilities. He might be able to come and help the Christians in Philippi. He might be killed. Which possibility did he consider the better? Dying was better, so far as he was concerned. He said, "For me to live is, Christ, and to die is gain." He said, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, which is far better." He must have known something about life after death, eternal life, that we don't know.

Well, he certainly did. In fact, before we make all kinds of statements, possibly rash, about eternal life, we should listen carefully to what he says about it. Just as we consult experts regarding other obscure subjects, we should rely on the apostle Paul's expertise about this subject. What did he know, that we don't?

Paul had had a series of remarkable experiences at the beginning of his Christian life that qualified him to speak with authority about life everlasting. As you may know, Paul was not born a Christian. As a matter of fact, he was the greatest persecutor of the Christian community immediately after Jesus Christ's death. But Paul, the greatest persecutor, became the greatest missionary the church has ever known because Christ Himself apprehended him and made him His representative.

Paul was not actually converted in the usual sense. He was captured by Christ who came to Paul in a visible manifestation as Paul was traveling toward Damascus with authorization to persecute Christians. I'll not go into this remarkable event in Paul's life, except to say that it is recorded in

great detail three times in the book of Acts. Paul also referred to his meeting with Christ several times in the letters he wrote to the churches. The point is just this: Paul saw Christ. He says in I Corinthians 15:8: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

Because of this unique introduction into the Christian faith, the apostle Paul always expressed a thoroughly Christ centered form of Christianity. This is significant in connection with our thinking about life eternal, for example. Whereas we tend to think about eternal life as simply an extension of this life, or we think of it as being somewhat uninteresting, perhaps, because some of the things we enjoy here will be missing there, the apostle talked about eternal life in glowing terms because it would provide an opportunity to be with Christ. Christ was the center of everything for him. After all, Paul had actually seen the glorified Jesus on the road to Damascus and from that day onward he lived for the day that he would be with that Jesus again.

There are indications in the Scriptures, too, that the apostle Paul not only met Jesus on the Damascus road, but he also received supernatural instruction concerning the religion of Jesus Christ and concerning heaven. In the book of Galatians, he refers to a time he spent in Arabia rather soon after he became a Christian. This is what we read: "I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my

fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus" (Galatians 1:11-17).

With this, the apostle indicates that there was a period after his conversion in which he received special instruction from God. How this occurred we do not know. But that he needed such instruction is clear, for this man had zealously persecuted the church because he believed that no people were more mistaken and perverse than Jesus' followers. Such error had to be removed from his mind, and truth had to take its place.

So you see, Paul did know something about eternal life that we do not know. And that is why he said that it's better to depart this life and to be with Christ than to stay here. Even though we cannot understand how this can be true, for this life is very sweet and enjoyable for many of us, we have to take Paul's evaluation of the two possibilities very seriously.

That he knew something about eternal life that we do not know, is also clear from another very intriguing part of his writings, found in II Corinthians 12. We read there: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (2-4).

These words are mysterious, and I would hesitate to say anything too definite about them. Though Paul seems to be talking about someone he knew,

he is most likely talking about himself. And even if the words do not refer to Paul himself, then at least they do refer to someone Paul knew just knowing such a person-one who had been caught up into Paradise and who had heard words unlawful to utter-was important in itself. Whatever the situation, the fact is that Paul had a special contact with Christ and with the place where Christ is in His glorified body.

Now then, if a person does not believe the Bible, the material about the apostle Paul's special experiences with Christ and with the realm of heaven will not impress him very much. The fact is, though, that the Bible is true, and the facts it presents about the apostle Paul are the truth. And this is the person who says to us that, as far as he was concerned, in the light of the knowledge he possessed about Christ and about the place where Christ was, death, leaving this world, should be considered a gain, something that was better than being here.

But you know even some Christian people don't really believe that this is true. I remember hearing a minister-a theologian at that-who thought that a man, let's say 40 years old in the prime of life with his family about grown, at his best so far as his profession was concerned, could never feel as the apostle Paul. Only the elderly, he said, could say that it was better to die than to remain here.

I think he forgot that whether or not we agree that being with Christ is better than being here is a matter of faith. After all, Paul saw Christ. Paul at least knew someone who had been in Paradise and had heard things that could not be told, possibly he had been there himself, and Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, declares: "It's better to be with Christ than to be here."

We have discovered that an expert on eternal

life assures us that eternal life is better than what we have here. Why do we find this hard to believe?

Well, first of all, apparently one of the main reasons we tend to be so uninterested in eternal life is that we have found nothing in this world so enjoyable that we would like to do it forever. At least this is the conclusion I draw from the letter I referred to earlier. You remember that the man who wrote me thought that the very idea of eternity and eternal anything was frightening.

It is true, isn't it? There is nothing we do in this world that we would like to do forever. The things we enjoy doing we often enjoy because we haven't done them for a while. Take vacations, for example. Many people enjoy them immensely but after a couple of weeks they are eager to get back to work. Eating-the same way. It's great to eat when one is hungry, but one cannot do it continuously. Having children is a great joy, but most parents expect that finally their children will leave home and have their own families. They love their children, but they don't want them in their home for fifty years.

The fact is, many of us are bored with life. Many people are not interested in eternal life, because they are not really interested in this life. Did you know that the Bible offers a remedy for this boredom? When it comes to eternal life, it is possible for eternal life to begin right now. Jesus said once, "And this is eternal life, that they know ... the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent" (John 17:3). Eternal life can begin for believers right in this world. They can know God and His Christ right in this world, and when they know Christ, their ordinary lives become meaningful.

I never really thought about this before, but I should have. Of course many people are not interested in eternal life, because they haven't found life here very enjoyable. And some of the things

they think they enjoy, they know they won't have over there. Many people really don't want to live forever because when it comes right down to it, they don't have anything to live for. They are looking forward to death, and when it comes they don't want to be bothered with an endless life.

Well, they won't be. But I won't talk about what they will be bothered with right now.

We must believe what the Bible tells us. The statement is simple. It's better to depart and to be with Christ than to be here. It is, in fact, far better. That is true for everyone who, already in this world, turns to the Lord Jesus Christ and believes that He is his Savior.

Jesus Christ, you see, makes all the difference. Eternal life without Jesus Christ is admittedly entirely uninteresting. An eternal vacation-who needs it? But living with Christ, that we need. Those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ have their sins taken away because of His perfect sacrifice made on Calvary's cross. When they confess their sins and entrust their lives to Jesus, they know that everything changes for them. And they live with Him already in this world. They love Him, even though they have never seen Him. And they long to be with Jesus forever.

Eternal life is being with Jesus Christ. We cannot imagine what that will finally be when the end of history as we know it will occur and we will be with Him forever. Sometimes the impression is given that eternal life is singing hymns from mimeographed sheets endlessly. There will be singing when we are with Him, but there will be much, much more. We can be sure that the Savior who has made this complex and marvelous universe will give His people ample occasion for joy and fulfillment. In His presence, we will experience true life and it will be everlasting.

Don't make the mistake of imagining eternal life

in terms of your present experience. Eternal life is being with Christ forever.

I know you have never seen Him. I haven't, either. But I know a man who did see Him in His glory. And he said that being with Him in death is even better than living in faith with Him now. I know a man who said, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. . . [To] depart and be with Christ is far better. "

I believe he knew what he was talking about. Surrender your life to Jesus the redeemer and look forward to the life that is eternal.

Prepared for broadcast by Joel Nederhood,
Radio Minister, Christian Reformed Church,
The Back to God Hour
6555 W. College Dr., Palos Heights, IL 60463

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P.O. Box '108,

SUTHERLAND, N.S.W. 2232.

P.O. Box 15392

New Lynn
AUCKLAND N.Z.