

JESUS WILL RETURN TO GIVE US ETERNAL LIFE

In Advent we view various aspects of our faith. We place ourselves with believers of the Old Testament who looked forward to the coming of their Messiah, when the Dawn from on high would visit them. We remember that Christ comes to the hearts of those who repent of their sins and believe in Him through God's Word and Sacraments. We look forward to His second coming. Tonight we shall consider aspects of the eternal life that our Lord Jesus will give us when He returns.

The sinfulness of human nature causes longing for immortality and vague ideas of the possibility of a happy existence after this life. They divert proper faith into a search for making the best of this present life, or into foolish ideas about reincarnation. Who would even want to come back to this present earth again in some other form of life? However, we are in this life only once, and after that there is either heaven or hell. We must study what the Holy Scriptures have to say about eternal life, and not be tempted into vague speculation. No one can come to the Father except through Jesus Christ.

Eternal life is inseparable from our Lord Jesus when He returns. He is the resurrection and the life. We shall be with Him, see Him, have glorified bodies like His, and be like Him. In the resurrection of all the dead our bodies will be instantly changed. They will be adapted to life in the new heaven and new earth. As Jesus Christ, as God and Man, is the image of the invisible God, and as Adam and Eve were created to bear God's image and likeness, the likeness to God in human beings will be fully restored to us through Jesus Christ. We shall know God, and be holy and righteous, as even now we know that God credits us with Jesus' righteousness through faith. We shall be happy and joyful to be in communion with God. God's will for His people will be realised when He is their God, and they are His people for ever.

Our expectation of eternal life includes our firm belief that our very same bodies will be raised. They will no longer be weak and subject to decay and death, but immortal, strong, and incorruptible. Job professed his confidence that, when his Redeemer at last stood on the dust, his skin would surround his body, and from within his flesh he would see God. He himself would see Him for himself. His own eyes would see Him, and not as a stranger. Here we live by faith. There we shall live by sight. We shall know God as now He knows us. Our bodies will be glorified, as Jesus' body was glorified after His resurrection. However, eternal life will be far beyond our present ability to understand or imagine. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has comprehended, what God has prepared for those who love Him." Although we know that our bodies will be spiritual, we have no idea what spiritual bodies will be like. Perhaps they will not have the kinds of limitations of space and movement that they have now. When Jesus rose, His body passed through the linen wrappings around His body, through the closed door at the tomb, and, that evening, through another locked door.

Jesus said that the righteous would shine like the sun in the kingdom of His Father. In this life we have no adequate conception of what life will be like when it is beyond space and time. The new heaven and new earth will be more wonderful than God's first creation. God Himself will rejoice over His redeemed, as He now rejoices when a sinner repents. God said, through Isaiah: "For look! I am creating a new heaven and a new earth. The past things will not be remembered or come to mind. However, be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating. For look! I am creating Jerusalem to be joyful, and its people to be glad. I shall rejoice over Jerusalem and be glad about My people. The sounds of weeping and lamentation will no longer be heard in the city. No longer will there be a baby in it who lives for only a few days or an old man who does not live out his days... They will build houses and live in them. They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They will not build and have someone else live there. They will not plant and have another eat from it. However, the days of My people will be like the days of a tree, and My chosen people will enjoy what their hands produce. They will not toil for nothing."

Before the fall into sin, Adam had the ability to name all God's creatures. Although he had not seen Eve before, he immediately recognised his rib in Eve. In the life to come our knowledge will be far better. As the rich man in Hades recognised Abraham and Lazarus at the heavenly banquet, we shall recognise those whom we have known here. Peter, James, and John immediately recognised Moses and Elijah with Jesus in glory, and so shall we know closely all the other redeemed people from all the generations since Adam. Mary Magdalene recognised the risen and glorified Jesus by the sound of His voice, in spite of eyes filled with tears, and we shall know not only God, but also the angels in their hundreds of thousands.

Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us, and it will be completely free of the sin, the anxiety, the bereavement, the sickness, the hunger, the thirst, the sorrow, and the death that spoil our present lives so much. There will be no more unsolved problems, unfulfilled longings, or perplexities. We shall probably even then not

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understand all mysteries. The glory of the life to come will be so wonderful that the sufferings of this present time do not deserve even to be mentioned. The devil will no longer tempt us, and our consciences will be free from all thoughts of being accused and condemned for what we have done. Like the good angels, we shall never fall away from God, and our love for God and our fellow redeemed will not grow cool.

All believers in Jesus will equally have salvation and eternal bliss. However, there will be degrees of glory. As now the sun, moon, and stars have different degrees of brightness, there will be different degrees of glory in heaven in proportion to the faithfulness and the sufferings of Christian believers in this life. Such differences will not arouse envy, but only thanks and praise to God for His grace in Christ.

Various questions arise, among them the thought that we would be desperately unhappy if close friends or relatives of ours were absent from eternal life. Here in this life we need to confess the truth clearly that only believers in Christ will have eternal life. Now, under the influence of sin, our wills complain and rebel. In heaven we shall want completely only what God wants. Our love will also extend fully to all those to whom God has shown His love and grace in Christ from before the creation of the world. All whose names have been written in the Lamb's Book of Life will enjoy eternal life.

The thought of never-ending life torments human beings here and now, even though they have an idea of it. On this earth enjoyment often does not last long, and, no matter how great it is, we can get tired of it. That inheritance will be eternal, ever new, and will never fade. It will not be boring! No moths, rust, or thieves will spoil it. Eternal life is also described as a time of refreshing, a blissful rest, peace, and quiet, after labour. Beside Abraham at the heavenly feast Lazarus was comforted. This rest will not be mere idleness, but ceasing from the hard work and disappointments of this present age. The ground will no longer be cursed with thorns and thistles. Life will be enjoyment, rejoicing, praising God, and serving Him and the Lamb. It will not be a burden.

Another question is whether we may expect to find animal and plant life in heaven. At present all creation is subjected to futility because of the sin of human beings, who had been created to rule over the rest of God's creation. By the words "we ourselves also" in Romans chapter eight Paul distinguished human beings from the rest of creation. However, he wrote, "For the creation is waiting with eager expectation to see the revealing of God's children. For this created world has been subjected to futility, not by its own choice, but because of the One who subjected it; in hope, because the created world itself will also be freed from its slavery to decay, in order to have the glorious freedom of the children of God. For we know that all the creation has been groaning together with them, and labouring with birth-pangs together with them until now." Then there are the prophecies in the Old Testament of the wolf living together with the young ram, the leopard lying down with the young goat, the calf, the young lion, and the fattened steer being together, and a little boy leading them. "The cow and the bear will graze together. Their young ones will lie down together. The lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play near the hole of the cobra. The weaned child will put out his hand on the viper's nest-hole." We usually interpret these as pictures of the peace of the time of the New Testament, but there should be no objection to expecting literal fulfilment of these in eternal life.

The Scriptures picture the joy and delight of the eternal life that Christ will give us when He comes by using various symbols. It will be like a marriage feast, a feast of joy with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob together with many from the east and the west. It will be a sitting on thrones. It will be life in the New Jerusalem. Sometimes eternal life is described as a crown, a crown of righteousness, or the crown of life.

John described the holy city, the new Jerusalem, "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband." It was glorious and brilliant. The city was a perfect cube, twelve thousand furlongs long, wide, and high! That distance each way comes to about 2,200 kilometres! The number twelve for its gates and multiples of twelve by ten cubed for its dimensions remind us of the twelve tribes of the Old Israel and the twelve apostles of the New Testament. The foundations of the walls were twelve precious stones, and the twelve gates were single pearls. The city and its streets were pure gold, like clear glass. God and the Lamb were its temple and gave it light.

Eternal life will be like the joy of harvest after hard toil. It will be laughter after present weeping. This joy will express itself in singing. People who do not sing much now will sing then! The Book of Revelation describes those who have won the victory over the beast and his image and the number of his name as standing on the glassy sea. God's purposes, which are now baffling, will be transparent. They hold God's harps and sing the song of Moses, God's servant. It will be like the one used after the crossing of the Red Sea. They will also sing a new song, the song of the Lamb. They will have the joy of the Lord, not simply joy in heaven, but such joy as only the Lord can give.

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Heaven will be paradise restored, but far greater than the Garden of Eden. The first man, Adam was a natural living being. The last Adam (Jesus Christ) has become a life-giving spirit. "The spiritual is not first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the earth, made of dust. The second Man is from heaven. Those who are made of dust are also like the man of dust; and those who are heavenly are also like the Man from heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the Man from heaven." As the Garden of Eden had rivers and the tree of life, John saw there "the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, coming out from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street and on each side of the river there was the tree of life. It produces twelve crops of fruit, each tree yielding its fruit every month."

Isaiah spoke about the joy over Jesus' first coming: "They will rejoice before You as people rejoice at the harvest, or like those who rejoice when they divide plunder." The Old Testament prophets foretold that, when the Jewish captives in Babylon returned to their own land in Canaan there would be great joy. We can expect similar and greater joy when our returning Lord Jesus takes us to our eternal home. Isaiah's words go beyond the occasion of the return from Babylon, and beyond the joy caused by Jesus' first coming, to the joy that Jesus will cause at His second coming: "A highway will be there, a roadway. It will be named the 'The Holy Way.' No unclean person will travel on it. It will be for those who walk on that way. Stubborn fools will not wander about there. No lion will be there, and no predatory animals will come up on it. They will not be found there, but the redeemed will walk there. Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return. They will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will be on their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."

Because Jesus will certainly return to take us to eternal life, our hope enables us to cope with the hatred of unbelievers and the troubles of this life. We need to keep closely to God's holy means of applying to us the benefits of Jesus' redemptive work, His Word, our Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the words of absolution spoken by men, and the mutual encouragement and admonition of fellow believers. May God maintain and increase our readiness for Christ our Saviour's return, and our expectation of the rooms in His Father's house that He has gone to prepare for us!

This is the sure hope we have through God's grace in Jesus Christ our Saviour. He alone has done everything to prepare eternal life for us. Nothing can snatch us from His hand, or separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ our Lord. The most precious words we can ever hear are the words of Jesus: "Come, you whom My Father has blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the time the world was created." Amen.