

The Apostle's Creed

I Believe in the Life Everlasting

John 3:1-16

By [J. Ligon Duncan](#)

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to John, chapter three. We've come to our final lesson in our study of the Apostles' Creed, and we will look at the final clause, "I believe in the life everlasting." We want to look at what the Bible calls eternal life and ask ourselves, what do we mean when we confess with the Creed, "I believe in the everlasting life, or in life everlasting? What does the Bible teach about eternal life?"

We will consider a number of passages, many of them in John's writings, and some in Paul's writings. But first, turn with me to [John 3](#) and the story of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus. You have to read between the lines, but you can tell that Nicodemus respects Jesus, longs to understand what He is teaching more clearly, and seems to be confused about what Jesus is teaching about the new birth, what it means to have new life in Him, to be confused about what Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom of God and about eternal life. So Nicodemus comes at night for fear of the rest of the Sanhedrin and what they would have thought had they known that this great teacher of Israel was consorting with this out of the way, peripheral, unordained rabbi, who was causing such a stir in Israel. So, let's give attention to God's word here in chapter three:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who

descended from heaven: the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy inspired and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, as we study Your word, open our eyes to behold wonderful truth in it, especially this day. Show us, by Your Spirit, what it is to confess to believe in the life everlasting. Show us what Jesus means when He speaks of eternal life and how He brings that about, this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Nicodemus was confused about the new life that Jesus was offering. He was confused about Jesus' teaching regarding new life, new birth, and eternal life. He came to Jesus wanting some clarification because of his confusion. And many today are confused about the Christian teaching of eternal life. Some view the Christian teaching of eternal life to be a case of "pie in the sky bye and bye." These poor Christians, they can't quite cope with life, and so they've come up with this belief that helps them cope with the hard things of this life. They run into hard things in life and they say, "Well, that's okay, the Lord will give us a life of glory to come." It's a coping mechanism, it's "pie in the sky bye and bye."

I quoted last week from that very significant twentieth century systematic theologian, Billy Joel, and I'm going to do so today. I mentioned the lullaby that he wrote for his daughter when she asked him, "Daddy, what happens when we die?" That lullaby is called, *River of Dreams*. Here's his answer to the issue of the afterlife.

In the middle of the night
I go walking in my sleep
From the mountains of faith
To a river so deep
I must be looking for something
Something sacred I lost
But the river is wide
And it's too hard to cross

And even though I know the river is wide
I walk down every evening and I stand on the shore
And try to cross to the opposite side
So I can finally find out what I've been looking for

In the middle of the night
I go walking in my sleep
Through the valley of fear
To a river so deep

And I've been searching for something
Taken out of my soul
Something I would never lose
Something somebody stole

I don't know why I go walking at night
But now I'm tired and I don't want to walk anymore
I hope it doesn't take the rest of my life
Until I find what it is that I've been looking for

In the middle of the night
I go walking in my sleep
Through the jungle of doubt
To a river so deep
I know I'm searching for something
Something so undefined
That it can only be seen
By the eyes of the blind
In the middle of the night

I'm not sure about a life after this
God knows I've never been a spiritual man
Baptized by the fire, I wade into the river
That runs to the promised land

In the middle of the night
I go walking in my sleep
Through the desert of truth
To the river so deep
We all end in the ocean
We all start in the streams
We're all carried along
By the river of dreams
In the middle of the night

Don't ask me to explain all of that. I have no idea. It would take a long conversation with Mr. Joel to sort that out, but what is clear is, he views the afterlife as a dream. That metaphor is pictured throughout the poem. It's a wish, it's a dream, but it's not reality. The reason he can't get across that river is because it's not reality. He wishes it were true. He wishes he could believe it, he says. It's just not true. It's a dream. A lot of people view the Christian teaching of eternal life like that. It's just a dream, it's a dream that people make up. Part of their wish fulfillment. Now, we will see that John's view of eternal life 2000 years ago, is already built and designed to refute that kind of view.

Secondly, there are some that view this hope of eternal life as ephemeral, it's hopeless, and again, we're going to see as we look at John and Paul that eternal life is far from

escapism. The doctrine of eternal life, in contrast, is built upon an utter realism, not only about this life, but about our experience of Jesus in this life. So we should see several things as we study this doctrine of eternal life. First of all, eternal life is now. Second, that eternal life is saving relationship with Jesus. Thirdly, that eternal life is forever, and finally, how it is that one gets eternal life.

I. Believers have eternal life now in Christ.

Please turn to [1 John 5:12](#). In John, eternal life is not 'pie in the sky bye and bye.' It's not even something that will only be experienced in the future, though it will be experienced in the future. It is not something consigned to after the coming of Christ, though it will be experienced after the coming of Christ. For John, eternal life is something that begins in the now. Eternal life is now in Christ, and John asserts that believers have eternal life now in Christ. "he who has the Son, has the life." The tense of the verbs, "He who has the Son, has the life." Not, "He who has the Son will have the life," or "He who believes in the Son now will have eternal life later," but "He who believes the Son has eternal life now." John loves the picture, the word picture of eternal life, and he uses it 50 or so times in his writings. John begins, in [1 John 1:2](#), just as he began the gospel, speaking of life and eternal life. So he begins this little letter, "What was from the beginning, what we heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the word of life, and the life was manifested and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us." Back in [1 John 5:11](#) and [13](#), the testimony is this, "That God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life, and he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." John is very interested in speaking about this eternal life, and we see this also in the gospel, [John 1:4](#). What does John say? "And the Word (Jesus) was made flesh and dwelt among us. In Him was life and the life was the light of men." In [John 3:16](#), which we read earlier, he speaks of believing in Christ and having eternal life. The theme verse of John is in [20:31](#), where John says that he has chosen to write the things that he has chosen to write in the gospel. Why? "That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." So, eternal life is a standing concern for the gospel of John, and the background to John's teaching about eternal life is very important and it's found in the Old Testament, naturally.

Now you may say, "Yes, but the Old Testament doesn't have much about the afterlife in it." Well, you need to go back and read your Old Testament again. Especially as you get to the end of the Old Testament, chronologically, and especially as you read the prophets, the latter prophets speaking frequently about life in the age to come. A gathering and deepening conviction occurs over the pages of the Old Testament, that they who fellowship with God in this life will experience that fellowship forever. And the Old Testament speaks of it. God will come in judgment. He will bring in the age to come. And we will fellowship with God, we will know God, we will relate to God, we will have life again in that age to come.

In the background of that teaching you find verses such as [Daniel 12:2](#), where Daniel speaks of the future resurrection of the dead, "Some will be raised to everlasting life." The Greek phrase that he uses to speak of everlasting life is probably the verse from which John and the other New Testament writers draw their phrase, eternal life.

So John's teaching on the eternal life is squarely based in the Old Testament, but note several very distinct differences. In the Judaism of Jesus' and John's day, there are two very significant things said about eternal life. One says that eternal life does not begin until the final day of the Lord. It is only when the future judgment comes that eternal life begins. The second is that eternal life is found in keeping the Torah, in keeping the Law. That's where you find eternal life. There are rabbis saying, "The Torah is great because it gives to those who practice it life in the age to come."

And what did John say? First of all, John said that eternal life does not start later, but it starts now in Jesus Christ. When you believe on Jesus Christ, the age to come breaks in to your experience, and you begin to experience now the eternal life to come. Secondly, John says, "No, you don't find eternal life by practicing the Torah. You find eternal life in Jesus Christ, alone." So, against that backdrop of Jewish teaching John sets forth Jesus' person and work in terms of Jesus' fulfilling these Old Testament hopes and predictions regarding eternal life. Eternal life is in Jesus. When you trust in Christ, the life of the age to come breaks in on you now. We've actually sung about this. Open your hymnal to hymn number 700, the third stanza. "The men of grace have found glory begun below, celestial fruits on earthly ground from faith and hope may grow. The hill of Zion yields a thousand sacred sweets, before we reach the heavenly fields or walk the golden streets." What's the point? The life of the age to come has already broken in on those who believe in Jesus Christ. We are already experiencing some of the glory, not all of the glory to be sure, but some of the glories of the age to come. Eternal life is now, not just pie in the sky bye and bye. The believer is saying, "There is a tangible difference in my life now. It's not subjective, but it's objective. Not just something that I feel or perceive, but it's a reality that's been brought into being in my experience through Jesus Christ." Eternal life is now.

II. Believers value relationship with Jesus above all else.

Relationship with Jesus is the source of eternal life, in fact, it's the essence of eternal life. At some point in your life, someone in a religion class will tell you that James, Paul and John view the Christian religion differently. They will attempt to set them at odds with each other. John doesn't talk about justification; he talks about eternal life. Well, see what Paul says in [Philippians 1:21](#), "For to me to live is Christ." Do you hear the echo of [I John 5:12](#), "He who has the Son has the life." To live is Christ. And because of that, to die is gain. John and Paul are saying the same thing. Believers value relationship with Jesus above everything else. Eternal life is more than endless existence. There will be endless existence in hell, and then none of us will have the temerity to call that eternal life. The book of Revelation calls it everlasting death.

Eternal life is more than endless existence. It is entering into the joy of Jesus, being with Jesus is the essence of heaven. It is what the life everlasting is all about. That's what Samuel Rutherford is speaking of in the hymn we sing so often, *The Sands of Time are Sinking*. He's saying, "I'm not going to be looking at the robes I'm going to be clothed in in glory. I'm going to be looking at Jesus. I'm not going to be looking at the crown that He's giving me. I'm going to be looking at Jesus. He's the One who is the glory of Emmanuel's land. He's the One that I want to be with. There's even a verse of that hymn that's not in our hymnal—in fact, there are about 15 verses of that hymn that are not in our hymnal, you'll be glad to know—and I'll share one of them with you. "I shall sleep sound in Jesus," Rutherford says, "filled with His likeness rise, to love and to adore Him, to see Him with these eyes, between me and the resurrection, but paradise doth stand. Then, then for glory, dwelling in Emmanuel's land. The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom's face. I will not gaze at glory but on my King of Grace. Not at the crown He giveth, but on His pierced hand. The Lamb is all the glory, of Emmanuel's land."

First and foremost, the believer looks to see and love Jesus, our Savior, Master and friend. That's the essence of what it is to be a believer. To desire Christ above all else, to desire to be with Him. There may be a hundred people that we desire to be with in glory, and that is perfectly appropriate. But there is no one that the believer more wants to be with than Jesus Christ. Guthrie says, "Less would not satisfy, more is not desired." To be with Jesus, to be in saving relationship with Him, is of the essence of eternal life. For the true believer, you see, Jesus is not just a means to an end, He's not your transport mechanism out of this world, He's not just the way that you get to live everlastingly, but He's the reason you want to live everlastingly, He's the One you want to fellowship with everlastingly. He is everlasting life.

III. Eternal life is forever.

It is also true, and we want to boldly assert, that eternal life is indeed forever. Eternal life is now, eternal life is in Jesus Christ, but also, eternal life is forever. Believers look for the experience of life in Christ to go on and on and increase forever. In [1 Thessalonians 4:18](#), Paul says that he's saying this so that you can comfort one another. He knew that there were believers in the church who had lost loved ones, and he wants to give them a word of comfort, and so he's explaining to them how both believers who have passed on and believers who are alive, when Jesus comes back, will both be raised into the air to meet Christ and dwell with Him forever. And he says in verse 17, "Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we shall always be with the Lord."

So if you didn't get the fact that eternal life is forever from just the phrase "eternal life," you get it from Paul—"we will always be with the Lord." This is not a temporary thing. This is not a long time. This is always with the Lord. But John also teaches that in [John 12:25](#): "He who loves his life (this life we're in now), loses it; and he who hates his life, will keep it to life eternal."

Now, he's not saying that those of you who are most miserable will have eternal life, so work hard to be the most miserable person in the room. That's not what he's saying. This is the one who values eternal fellowship with Christ above everything else in the world; he who hates his life, will keep it to life eternal. There's John making an assertion of the ongoingness of eternal life, as opposed to the not ongoingness of our temporal life here. But John is even more explicit in [John 11:25](#) in the middle of the story of Lazarus, and Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in Me will live even if he dies. And everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die." Eternal life is forever. It's ongoing. And believers look forward to it, not because we experience no joy here; we do, not because we have no taste of God's final glory here, but precisely because we do. Believers find joy here from knowing God. That's why you meet believers whose lives are falling apart, and yet they *know* God and you see the joy of Christ in their hearts and eyes. We find joy here from knowing people—sometimes. We find joy here from knowing God's people—sometimes.

We know exactly what that dear old lady from the island of Louis meant when she said to Donald MacLeod going out of church one day, "Oh, Professor MacLeod, the older I grow the more I love the Lord's people and the less I trust them." We know exactly what she meant. You know, we do taste the future glory of things to come through God's people sometimes. There's sometimes when God is so real to us through His people that we could reach out and touch Him. And we find joy here from enjoying the good gifts of life, and from doing God-glorifying things. This will go on and be increased forever in eternal life.

You see, the Christian's longing for eternal life is not escapism. In fact, the Christian can't escape the longing for eternal life because God says in [Ecclesiastes 3:11](#) that He implanted eternity in all of our hearts. None of us can *not* think about eternal life; we are built to think about eternal life. And so the Christian is not escaping *from* reality; he is escaping *to* reality. And the Christian in every good thing and every hard thing in this life is moved to long for eternal life. You see, it's not escapism; it's realism. We live in a fallen world. We live in a world where we know things aren't right. They're not the way they are supposed to be, and it makes us long to be with God. You know, you've had those experiences where there may be something and it goes so well that you say, "Lord, I just don't want this to stop." But it always does. What does that experience do? It leads you to long for the place where it will never stop. Or, it may be the experience of, "Lord, I didn't want this to start." It leads you to say, "Lord, take me from this place, the place where this will never happen." In Christ, believers live happily ever after. Herman Witsius, the Dutch theologian of the 17th century says, "The life everlasting is a most blessed state of the whole man in which he rejoices in the immediate presence, contemplation, and glorious enjoyment of God in heaven, and is thus conformed to Him as far as possible in soul and body without the least interruption or diminution of his happiness through all eternity." Eternal life is forever and in it we shall worship and work and think and communicate and enjoy activity and beauty and people and God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

IV. Only those who put their trust in Christ have and will have eternal life.

But how do you get it? Eternal life is now; eternal life is relationship with Jesus Christ; eternal life is forever; but how do you get it? Well, turn back to John 3. I know you've memorized it and you know it by heart, but look at verses 15 and 16. Eternal life is by faith, it's only by faith, it is by faith alone. Only those who trust in Christ have and will have eternal life. There's no salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Paul didn't make that teaching up. Peter didn't make that teaching up. No other author of the New Testament made that teaching up. Jesus asserted that; that is a Jesus claim. Remember what Jesus says? "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me." Jesus said that. Paul didn't say that; Peter didn't say that. Jesus said that. "No one comes to the Father but by Me."

Have you seen any of the Phil Donahue interviews and Shmuley Boteach and Al Mohler sitting there arguing about this? And the Jewish rabbi is very offended by Al Mohler's assertion that Jesus is the only way—it angers him. And he says, "You're going to ruin Jesus' reputation talking that way." That's an interesting discussion. Jesus said it! We're just repeating what Jesus said. There's nothing mean about that.

Understand that people who view that as "hate" speech don't understand the intent of the speech. I'm not saying that Jesus is the only way because I want to hurt people. I'm saying that Jesus is the only way because I don't want people to hurt! If the building is burning down and you say, "Get out of here; it's burning down," there's no hate speech in that. Now somebody may want to argue with you about whether it's burning down or not—that's a good discussion. But it is not hate speech to tell somebody that there is a future end for every human being; it is either one of everlasting bliss or condemnation, and only in Jesus can you find everlasting bliss. And brother and sister, I want you to experience that. What's hateful about that? It's not arrogant either, because we didn't think it up. We're just saying what Jesus said. Who are we to think up something better than Jesus? We're just saying what Jesus said. And so, what does He say? "Whoever believes ([John 3:15](#)) will, in Him, have eternal life. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

Believing on Jesus is the *only* way to everlasting life and peace. And because we believe in the life everlasting, and because we believe in Jesus, we expect, with all the saints, to see the King of Glory passing by. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, by Your mercy and grace, enable us to believe unto everlasting life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

A Guide to the Morning Service

The Worship of God What is worship? Well, the Psalmist tells us succinctly. It is giving unto the Lord the glory due His name ([Psalm 29:1-2](#)). Where do we find the substance of and our direction for our worship? The Bible. Thus, at First Presbyterian Church, our

motto for worship is: “Sing the Bible, Pray the Bible, Read the Bible, Preach the Bible.” So we strive to be sure that all that we sing is scriptural, that our prayers are saturated with scripture, that much of the word of God is read in each public service, and that the preaching here is based on the Bible.

The Sermon Today, we come to the close of our 18-week study of the Apostles’ Creed. For hundreds of years this Creed has served as an instrument for instructing Christians in the basics of biblical faith. Our study of this ancient confession of Christian belief has been designed to: (1) *Anchor the specific assertions of the Creed in text of the Scriptures*—to show clearly that the Bible teaches these truths. (2) *Address contemporary deterrents to belief*—to respond to the cultural forces currently arrayed against historic Christian teaching. (3) *Affirm Christian confidence in biblical truth*—to encourage Christians to whole-heartedly embrace the teachings of Scripture despite modern skepticism. (4) *Arrest Christian defection from the biblical truth*—to respond to false teaching that often goes under the name “Christian.” (5) *Apply the truth to specific issues in the Christian life*—to show how good theology serves to lead to the good life. You can, by the way, listen to today’s sermon and many others right on your computer! You may even want to send one to a friend. You can do this in a number of different ways, for instance, by visiting the First Presbyterian media site at <http://resources.christianity.com/fpcjackson/> or by clicking on the Life Audio link on the library page of the church’s web site at www.fpcjackson.org. If you have any difficulty, please email Jonathan Stuckert at jstuckert@fpcjackson.org.

The Psalm and Hymns Come, We That Love the Lord

We open our worship this morning by exhorting one another in song to worship. Every line of this hymn is precious, but the following grips us every time we sing it: “The men of grace have found, Glory begun below. Celestial fruits on earthly ground, From faith and hope may grow. The hill of Zion yields A thousand sacred sweets Before we reach the heav’nly fields, Or walk the golden streets. Then let our songs abound, And every tear be dry; We’re marching through Immanuel’s ground, To fairer worlds on high.” Today, we’ll be contemplating those “fairer worlds on high.”

My Hope Is in the Lord

A modern hymn set to a simple and singable tune. The lyrics consecutively lay out the practical implications of justification by grace through faith alone in Christ alone. The final line of the chorus reminds us that “everlasting life and light he freely gives.” That truth ties in well with our study of the final line of the Apostles’ Creed.

The Lord’s My Shepherd, I’ll Not Want (Psalm 23)

“And in God’s house, forevermore, my dwelling place shall be.” No thought could be more comforting to a believer in the midst of the vicissitudes of life. In this great scriptural song of praise, we acknowledge God’s everlasting tender shepherding and watch care over us. This great psalm is one of the two best known and loved of the old Scottish metrical psalms. We sing it today to the familiar “Crimond.”

For All the Saints

We just *had* to end our series on the Apostles' Creed with this hymn of ultimate hope and longing. I can't make my way through it without choking up—too many precious memories. But it sets our heads and hearts in the right direction, looking for “The saints triumphant [to] rise in bright array;” and “The King of glory [to pass along] His way” and for that great day when “From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, Through gates of pearl [will stream] in the countless host, singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost: Alleluia, Alleluia!”

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the service.

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