

# Eternal life, physically alive forever

## Is it not true that possessing eternal life means being physically alive forever?

When we see “life” (Heb. *chayim*, חַיִּים; Grk. *zōē*, ζωή) or “death” (Heb. *mavet*, מָוֶת; Grk. *thanatos*, θάνατος) referred to in the Holy Scriptures, are we to assume that the Bible *only* regards life and death in terms of a medical definition? *A heart is beating and a brain is thinking?* Only if the Biblical definition of life and death *and* the medical definition of life and death are the same, can we conclude that possessing eternal life only means being physically alive forever. When a number of important Scriptural passages are reviewed about life and death, we quickly find that a one-dimensional vantage point of life and death only being physical concepts is completely inadequate. There are multiple dimensions of life and death presented to us in the Bible, especially as they concern one’s relationship to the Creator through His Son Yeshua the Messiah.

The quintessential word about death, originally given to the first man and woman, appears when they are prohibited from eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The penalty as issued from God for doing so is, “for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17, NASU). The implication of *b’yom akol’kha* (בַּיּוֹם אֲכַלְךָ), “on the day you eat,” is that as soon as Adam and Eve did eat the fruit they would drop dead (Genesis 3:7). This did not happen, and in an interesting turn of events what instead occurs is that Adam and Eve are turned out of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve will physically die, but it will not be on the day of them eating the forbidden fruit:

“Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, “You shall not eat from it”; cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return”’ (Genesis 3:17-19, NASU).

Instead of being able to frolic in the intimate presence of God in the Garden of Eden, where tending to the various plants and animals was no doubt something that brought a great deal of pleasure and enjoyment—Adam and Eve are instead cast out into the wider world where things will not be so leisurely. They will have to work hard for their food, and tend with various weeds and thorns. At a distant time in the future, they will be reminded of their mortality and their bodies will return to the base elements at their time of death. Thankfully, the hope of resurrection seen later in the Biblical narrative nullifies the claim that Genesis 3:19 is a permanent condition.

When we can recognize the immediate result of Adam and Eve’s sin, we can appropriately realize how their “death” is not at all something which is primarily physical. The death that Adam and Eve principally experienced, and which all human beings since have experienced, has been a condition of exile from the Creator. N.T. Wright explains, “In Genesis, and indeed much of the Old Testament, the controlling image for death is exile. Adam and Eve were told that they would die on the day they ate the fruit; what actually happened was that they were expelled from the garden.”<sup>1</sup>

For those who most especially know that the Messiah has come and has been executed in atonement of human sin, what has been fully realized in His work for us? **The death condition of separation from the Father can be completely reversed!** When one reviews the Gospels and other Apostolic works, it is easily detected that eternal life is to be viewed as far more than just a future reanimation of deceased human remains; eternal life very

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 95.

much concerns the condition lost in Eden being restored to men and women who desire reconciliation with the Father via His Son. D.H. Johnson offers us the summary:

"[E]ternal life involves a personal relationship with God and all its attendant blessings. In Genesis 2-3 the tree of life was in the midst of the garden which was in Eden (Gk. *paradeisos* [παράδεισος]). It was in the garden that God had fellowship with man and woman (Gen 3:8). And if man had eaten from the tree of life he would have lived forever (Gen 3:22). But because of their sin, God banished them from the garden and made it impossible to return to the tree of life (Gen 3:24). The life God intended for humanity was one of ideal service in an ideal location (Gen 2:15). It was a life of knowing and walking with God. It was an everlasting Sabbath...This notion of life as a relationship with God carried over into the teachings of Jesus and into the Gospels."<sup>2</sup>

One of the main thrusts of Yeshua's ministry was to nullify the work of the Devil, as He emphasizes, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10, NASU). Here, the life that Yeshua came to give people is one of bountiful communion and fellowship with God, something that the Adversary surely wants to rob from people, frequently by putting various sinful barriers in their path (Matthew 8:8-9). While most who have read the Bible are familiar with John 3:16, "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" (NASU), Yeshua further states how those who believe the message already possess eternal life:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, **has eternal life** [*echei zōēn aiōnion*, ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον], and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24).

Those who have acknowledged Yeshua as Lord and have received forgiveness for their sins, already have eternal life. They have been redeemed from damnation, and can experience the fellowship that God desires with His human creations. Membership in the Messiah's flock is granted because His followers have eternal life:

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27-28, NASU).

In His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Lord exclaims what eternal life truly is, knowing the Father and Son:

"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Yeshua the Messiah whom You have sent" (John 17:3, NASU).

While it is absolutely imperative for born again Believers to recognize that they already possess eternal life, membership among the redeemed, and a restored fellowship with God—no one can deny the futuristic aspects of what possessing eternal life involves. Johnson informs us of how "Eternal life can be experienced in the present, but it also has a future dimension...It seems best to describe eternal life as a relationship with God...One can begin to know God now, but will only know him fully in the eschaton."<sup>3</sup> The consummation of our salvation, as detailed by the Apostle Paul, is the "the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:23, NASU). It is only at the Second Coming of the Lord, when the resurrection will occur, that the righteous will receive bodies that will never die, being able to experience the joys of the world to come *including* being revealed the many mysteries about His Creation and history (cf. Ephesians 2:7).

Frequently, those who tend to look at eternal life only from the perspective of being physically alive make their case from the basis that God "alone possesses immortality" (1 Timothy 6:10; 1:17). What this means, at least for them, is that it is impossible for humans to possess any component of themselves that can survive after death and before resurrection in a disembodied condition, because God is the only One who can never die. Yet the premise "God alone is immortal" should not be held so rigidly. The very nature of God means that He totally transcends the power of death, and His immortality also involves His eternity as a Being without beginning or end—as the One who made the universe. The post-mortem survival of the human consciousness, held in another dimension until the resurrection, is at best what one might call a *reflection* of immortality. The kind of immortality that God has by virtue of Him being God, is one that no angel or human will or can ever have—even in the Eternal State.

While eternal life can be experienced now in the vibrant relationship we are to have with the Lord, accessible via the power of the gospel—the fullness of eternal life *and* immortality impressed upon a resurrected body, will only be experienced at the *parousia* or coming of the Messiah. Death is to be regarded as an already-

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<sup>2</sup> D.H. Johnson, "Life," in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 470.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 471.

defeated foe, but more is surely to come (2 Timothy 1:10). The Apostle Paul so excellently puts it in 1 Corinthians 15:53-54:

“For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP [Isaiah 25:8] in victory’” (NASU).