



*from the Market Harborough Methodist Circuit*

## **Session 1.6: ETERNAL LIFE**

### **INTRODUCTION: THINKING ABOUT ETERNAL LIFE**

This is a big subject! Some would say that 'Eternal Life' is the whole point of faith, and the purpose of the Bible is to get us there! We grow up with ideas of heaven from a young age, and as we learn the Christian faith we are told that this is the very reason Jesus came and died for us (John 3: verse 16). The Bible as a whole can seem confusing on the issue, but the New Testament has much to say about it. In particular, John's Gospel uses the phrase 'eternal life' a lot, while the other Gospels prefer to talk about 'the Kingdom of God', and St. Paul prefers to write about 'the resurrection of the dead' and the return of Christ. Finally, the book of Revelation ends with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. There is certainly connection and overlap with all of these ideas, and all of them are rooted in Old Testament teaching and tradition. God's people have always looked for and hoped for a future with God beyond this life.

In this session, we will be looking at some passages from John's Gospel. 'Eternal life' is a key theme for John. It is helpful to reflect on the ways John portrays the good news of Jesus as being a reversal of Eden, a new opportunity for humanity, and a new creation.

It is important to note that nowhere in the Bible does it say that eternal life is an automatic right. The Bible does not say that we have a naturally 'immortal soul'. Rather, eternal life is a *gift*, based on God's love and grace. Paul says in Ephesians chapter 2:

*But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the **gift** of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*

*(Ephesians 2: 4-9, NRSV)*

So we read that eternal life is a gift which invites us to trust in God's love and grace, for ourselves, for those we love, and for the world.

## **PREPARING FOR THE SESSION (before you arrive)**

*What issues do you think this session will bring up for you?*

*For some people, this subject will bring up memories of people who have died, or feelings of grief.*

*Ask God to help you think about the issue with his comfort and healing, knowing God's loving arms around you.*

**Group leaders:** later in the session we suggest lighting candles. You might like to get some candles and matches in preparation, and a safe space to light them!

## **STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS**

Share with your group or just think by yourself:

*What are your ideas of heaven? Where do you get them from?*

*What do you think eternal life is? How do we get it?*

*What questions do you have about the subject? Be honest about your questions, knowing you can raise them in this safe space.*

## A PRAYER

Everlasting God,  
You invite us to find eternal life, through your Son, Jesus,  
and in him to find hope for the whole world.  
Help us to grow in our relationship with him,  
and to know the life of heaven that begins in us now.  
As we trust in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit,  
we pray for the day when your Kingdom is complete,  
you are worshipped and glorified, and all is at peace,  
on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

## READING THE SCRIPTURES

In the Genesis creation story, Adam and Eve found themselves in Paradise-on-earth, the Garden of Eden. But after disobeying God, tempted as they were to snatch for themselves the knowledge of good and evil, they were sent away from the garden before they could taste the fruit of the Tree of Life (Genesis chapters 2-3). There is a sense of a broken relationship, where all that God wants to give us is hampered by our own tendencies to go our own way (sin), and we are destined only for death. In the New Testament (and especially in John's Gospel), Jesus gives us a way back to 'Life', 'Life in all its fullness', and 'Eternal Life' – the life of God's age, the life of the age to come, both now and forever.

**We begin with the prayer of Jesus to God the Father:**

### **John 17: verses 1-3 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said:*

*'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all people, to give **eternal life** to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is **eternal life**, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent...'*

## DIGGING DEEPER (1)

Jesus actually defines 'eternal life' in this passage, and it is not so much about a place, but rather a relationship.

*"To know God and know Jesus Christ". What kind of knowledge is this? Do we need to worry if we are not 'knowledgeable' in our faith?*

*How can we begin to know God and know Jesus Christ?*

*How does this affect your view of eternal life?*

**Our second reading comes after a controversy of Jesus healing on the Sabbath:**

### **John 5: verses 19-29 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*<sup>19</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing... <sup>21</sup> Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes. <sup>22</sup> The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son, <sup>23</sup> so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. <sup>24</sup> Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has **eternal life**, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life.*

*<sup>25</sup> 'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. <sup>26</sup> For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; <sup>27</sup> and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup> Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice <sup>29</sup> and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.*

## DIGGING DEEPER (2)

*Are you familiar with these words? Does anything surprise you, or that you have not noticed before?*

*What is your understanding of judgement after life? What are the injustices or evils that need judging and bringing out in the open so that they can be brought to an end?*

Verse 24 suggests that eternal life is based on believing in the message of Jesus and trusting in God. We pass from death to life and are kept away from judgement, passing into God's life. Jesus' words suggest that we already have eternal life – it begins in the present.

Verses 28-29 suggest that there will be a further judgement of all other people, based on whether they have done good or evil. *Where else in the Bible do we hear this sort of thing? How does that make you feel? Does this offer hope of justice for the world?*

**Our next reading follows on from further controversy after Jesus feeds the five thousand with bread and fish...**

### **John 6: verses 35-51 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*<sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. <sup>36</sup> But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. <sup>37</sup> Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; <sup>38</sup> for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have **eternal life**; and I will raise them up on the last day.'* ...

*<sup>47</sup> 'Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has **eternal life**. <sup>48</sup> I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup> Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup> This is the bread that comes down*

*from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'*

### **DIGGING DEEPER (3)**

Jesus' words about the bread of life point us to a trusting reliance on him for our provision. These words are connected to the people of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus, when they had to rely on God for 'daily bread', or manna.

Jesus offers himself as our bread – which if we receive ('eat') we will live forever. *How does this connect with (or reverse) the story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3)?*

In our faith, the risen Jesus invites us to trust or believe in him, and know that the life of God in him has broken the power of death: He is above and beyond the curses and death of this world. He invites us to connect with him, to commit ourselves to him, so that we will know eternal life beginning here and now.

*How do we continue to grow in this relationship of trust? How can we be reminded of the Bread of Life, and take it regularly?*

*How important is this regular reminder to help us persevere in faith?*

*What questions or doubts do you still have about eternal life?*

*What do you think it means to be 'raised up on the last day'? How might this connect to Jesus' own resurrection?*

*What do you think of these words from the Methodist funeral service?*

In the presence of death,  
Christ offers us sure ground  
for hope and confidence and even for joy,  
because he shared our human life and death,  
was raised again triumphant  
and lives for evermore.  
In him, his people find eternal life.

## SONGS ABOUT HEAVEN

We have great hope of heaven, because Jesus gave himself for us and offers himself to us. Here are some modern songs which can help us to worship, or you might have some old favourites you want to use instead:

Available on YouTube using the links below:



**Home – song by Chris Tomlin**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIb4NC5ikYo>

**Hymn of Heaven – song by Phil Wickham**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjB0mkj0XaM>

## ACTIVITY: REMEMBERING LOVED ONES IN GOD'S LOVE

When someone we have loved dies, their light in us does not go out. When we believe in a God whose love is greater than we can ever imagine, expressed in the utmost sacrifice of Christ, we can also believe that those we love who have died are never lost to God's love. God holds them with as much love as we do, and even more.

Let us light candles to remember those we love who have died, and think of their eternal place in God's heart.

*(Group leaders: you might like to have some candles or tealights ready, and some gentle music, inviting people to light lights in silence. It may be appropriate to offer this or another prayer at the end:)*

Loving God,  
In your love, we remember these people,  
and in your love, we ask you to hold them,  
until that day when all things are brought together by your grace,  
through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## PRAYING TOGETHER

- Ask God to be with you in this time together;
- Bring to God any prayers for members of the group, or for others you know who are in need, or in grief;
- Pray for those who are close to death and need God's comfort and reassurance.
- Pray for those who are uncertain about their eternal life
- Pray for those who are suffering in our world or community;
- You might like to **say the Lord's Prayer**.

## MORE TO EXPLORE – FURTHER BIBLE PASSAGES

This session is just a starter on eternal life. The subject is explored in many other passages we did not have space to look at. You might like to read and reflect on some of these at home:

**John 3: verses 1 - 18**

**John 11: verses 1 - 44**

**John 14: verses 1 - 6**

**1 Corinthians 15 (whole chapter)**

**1 Peter 1: verses 3 - 9**

**1 Thessalonians 4: verses 13 - 18**

**Revelation chapters 21 & 22**

## GOOD SOIL WILL CONTINUE...

Coming soon, we will have a new series of *Good Soil*, so that we can continue to be resourced and nourished as we grow and learn in God's love together. When not meeting together, please remember to pray for the other members of your group or your church.