

045: Eternal Is Not Forever (based on Ch. 3 in *The Savior of All Men*)

If you were to survey a large group of Christians and ask them, “Where will the saved spend eternity?” — the overwhelming majority would say, “in Heaven.”

- If you were to ask that same group, “Where will the unsaved spend eternity?” — the overwhelming majority would say, “in Hell.”
- I would have given those same answers for most of my life.
- However, from my studies of the Scriptures in recent years, I have to say that both answers are technically incorrect.
- I now have a new understanding of Heaven and Hell based on what God’s Word actually teaches.

If you have believed on Jesus for the gift of eternal life, then you possess eternal life.

- But have you ever deeply considered the question:
- What is eternal life?
- Is it an end in itself? Or is it the means to an end?
- The traditional understanding is that eternal life is an end in itself, somewhat like a ticket to heaven — you either have it or you don’t.
- Some consider it a “get-out-of-Hell-free-card.”
- But neither of these understandings is correct.
- From my intensive study of the Scriptures on this point, I believe the Scriptures teach that eternal life is the means to an end.
- I will explain what I mean as we go along in this episode.

Here’s where the rub comes in.

- Since the time of the Reformation, Christians have been led to believe that eternal life is endless life in Heaven and eternal condemnation is endless life in Hell.
- That is due to an unfortunate mistranslation in most English Bibles.
- The word eternal in the New Testament is translated from the Greek adjective *aionios*, which is derived from the noun *aion*.
- But here’s the problem: *aion* means “age” or “eon.”
- Its adjective *aionios* means “age-lasting,” “age-during,” or “for the age.”
- The same is true in the Old Testament of the Hebrew adjective *olam* which was translated *aionios* in the Septuagint.
- In contrast, the English adjectives eternal, everlasting, and forever mean “unending” or “perpetual.”
- Do you see the problem?
- English Bible versions have muddied the waters by translating the Greek adjective *aionios* and the Hebrew adjective *olam* as eternal, everlasting, or forever, which is incorrect.

How did our English Bible versions drift so far from the correct meaning?

- Several scholarly books have been written on the subject, but only a summary can be provided in this episode.
- The general consensus is that — despite the correct meanings of *aion* and *aionios* understood by Jesus and the writers of Scripture — something happened in the early centuries of the church that skewed the definitions for later generations of Christians.

- The early fifth century church leader known as Augustine (AD 354-430) admittedly could not read Greek.
- Latin was his native language.
- Thus, he was compelled to study Scripture, using Jerome's recently translated Latin Vulgate (published in 382).

The Vulgate is known to have many translation errors, not the least of which was the translation of the Greek word *aionios* as *aeternus*, which is Latin for eternal.

- Augustine popularized the use of *aionios* as meaning *eternal*, though that's incorrect.
- During the centuries known as the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic church popularized the meaning further, until it became the established lexical definition.
- By the time of the Reformers — who hailed Augustine as a theological hero — *aionios* was being unquestionably translated *eternal*.
- Of course, our modern English Bibles are products of the Reformation, including the revered King James Version (originally published in 1611).
- The unfortunate consequence is that generations of Bible readers have assumed *eternal life* to be unending life, despite the attempts of several Bible scholars to set the record straight.

Marvin R. Vincent (1834-1922) was a Presbyterian minister and an esteemed professor of New Testament exegesis at Union Theological Seminary.

- He is well known for his Word Studies in the New Testament, a multi-volume set which is often found in the libraries of pastors and professors.

- Vincent wrote an extensive note at 2 Thess. 1:9 in his Word Studies as to the correct meaning of the Greek adjective *aionios*.
- I will quote a few of the pertinent paragraphs, since they are pertinent to our study.

"*Aion*, transliterated *eon*, is a period of time of longer or shorter duration, having a beginning and an end, and complete in itself ...

- The word always carries the notion of time, and not of eternity.
- It always means a period of time ... It does not mean something endless or everlasting.
- The adjective *aionios* in like manner carries the idea of time. Neither the noun nor the adjective, in themselves, carry the sense of endless or everlasting ... *Aionios* means enduring through or pertaining to a period of time.
- Both the noun and the adjective are applied to limited periods.
- *Zoe aionios, eternal life*, which occurs 42 times in N.T. ... is not endless life, but life pertaining to a certain age or eon, or continuing during that eon ...
- Life may be endless. The life in union with Christ is endless, but the fact is not expressed by *aionios*.
- Thus, while *aionios* carries the idea of time, though not of endlessness, there belongs to it also, more or less, a sense of quality.
- Its character is ethical rather than mathematical.
- The deepest significance of the life beyond time lies, not in endlessness, but in the moral quality of the eon into which the life passes."

Vincent is not the only scholar who makes this point.

- Many others do as well, including several modern Greek experts.
- We should not allow Augustine, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Reformers to hijack the correct understanding of the adjective *aionios* and the term, *zoe aionios*, *eternal life*.
- Unfortunately, Reformation theology has pervaded much of our thinking in the last few hundred years, and especially so with the meaning of the words, *eternal* and *everlasting*.
- That is why it is so important to study the original meaning of those words at the time the Bible was written.
- Correct interpretation is critically important to rightly dividing the Word of God.

Thus, the best translation for the Greek noun *aion* is “age” and for the Greek adjective *aionios* is “age-lasting” or “age-during.”

- Young’s Literal Translation (1862) translates the term *zoe aionios* (*eternal life* in the KJV) as *life age-during*.
- Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible (1902) translates it *life age-abiding*.
- Weymouth New Testament (1903) translates it *life for the ages*.
- Concordant Literal New Testament (1926) translates it *life eonian*.
- N.T. Wright calls it “the life of God’s coming age.”

Thanks to the Reformation we are programmed to think that eternal life is a ticket to heaven where we will dwell forever and ever, endlessly, and there is nothing else we need to do now to prepare for that eternal, blissful state.

- That is erroneous!
- *Zoe aionios*, or age-lasting life, is not about *quantity* of life, living forever in Heaven.
- It is about *quality* of life, here and now, that leads to inheritance in the coming kingdom.
- In other words, eternal life is exclusively offered in our age, giving the guarantee of life in the next.
- If eternal life is appropriated in this life, it will result in quality of life now, with the hope of quality of life in the age to come, in the form of inheritance.

Granted, the term is used once in the Old Testament, in Dan. 12:2, but the context is referring to the close of the Tribulation, when deceased Israelites are resurrected to be judged.

- The faithful ones will be rewarded with age-lasting (millennial) life, while the unfaithful will be disinherited to experience age-lasting shame and contempt, a reference to the darkness outside.
- For Israelites, this negative reward could possibly result in exclusion from the promised land during the Millennium.
- Eternal life as a present possession, however, is unique to our age, having been offered only since the time of Christ.

What happens when a person believes on Jesus for eternal life?

- John 5:24 He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.
- Here we find two benefits of age-lasting life:
 1. The believer instantaneously passes from death to life.

- Our minds are geared to think that this means our future destiny changes from Hell to Heaven.
- But that's not actually what this means.
- It means you are no longer separated from God — for death is separation from God.
- As a believer you are now in vital communion with God.
- What happens when believers do not appropriate their age-lasting life?
- They fall back into spiritual deadness!
- That's why, in this verse, John actually uses a present active participle in Greek to convey the verbs *hears* and *believes*.

Literal translations bring out the essence of the participle in their translations. For instance:

- John 5:24 (Young's Literal) He who is hearing my word, and is believing Him who sent me, hath life age-during, and to judgment he doth not come, but hath passed out of the death to the life.
- The use of the participle doesn't mean you can lose your eternal life if you stop hearing and believing, for you have believed on Jesus for eternal life, and have received His unconditional gift.
- But it means if you do not continue depending on Him in your Christian life, then you will dry up and wither, like the branches in John 15 that do not continue abiding in the vine.
- In other words, you will not be in vital communion with Christ.

This is demonstrated from other Scripture passages, as well:

- James 1:15 When desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (the idea of spiritual deadness).

- Rom. 8:6 For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.
- Rom. 8:13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
- Those believers who do not appropriate their eternal life end up spiritually dead, having lost vitality. They will not be rewarded by Jesus.

Interestingly, *eternal life* has a dual meaning, depending on context, not merely singular.

- In that respect, it is much like the word *salvation*.
- Context dictates whether the word *salvation* is referring to initial salvation (regeneration) that occurred in the past, or ongoing salvation (sanctification) — sometimes called “soul salvation” or “saving of the soul” — that is occurring in the present for those believers who are cooperating with God, with a view to future reward.
- In like manner, eternal life is a gift that one receives from God upon belief in Jesus for His life.
- The *gift* is bestowed when one initially believes and is saved (regenerated).
- As the child of God continues to believe Jesus for daily grace to live the Christian life victoriously, their soul is progressively saved (sanctified) so that they are earning the *reward* of eternal life, which is based on Spirit-enabled works.
- This does not happen automatically, but only to the extent the believer cooperates with God in the sanctification process.

The terms *eternal life* and *everlasting life* are used a total of forty-five times in the New Testament.

- Surprisingly, twenty-five of the forty-five usages refer to the *gift* of eternal life, speaking of how it is received by faith.
- But the remaining twenty usages (about 45%) speak of eternal life as involving *works*.
- Here are some examples of verses in this latter category:
- Rom. 2:6-7 God ... will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality.
- Rom. 6:22 But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.
- John 6:27 Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.

Gal. 6:7-8 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

- 1 Tim. 6:12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.
- John 12:25 He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.
- Also consider the rich young ruler.
- He comes to Jesus and asks, “Sir, what must I do to inherit eternal life (life for the ages)?”
- Jesus tells him to obey the law, naming several of the Ten Commandments.

- The man assures Jesus that he has been obedient.
- But then Jesus tells the ruler he is missing one thing:
- He must sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor.
- Then he will inherit eternal life.
- This eternal life is according to works.

Because of verses like these — showing eternal life to be according to works — some religious groups (such as Roman Catholicism) have arrived at the conclusion that salvation is by faith plus works.

- They see many Bible verses indicating that eternal life is by faith, yet many others indicating that eternal life is according to works.
- In a desire to be consistent, they have made the assumption that both are required for salvation and have, consequently, arrived at a faith-plus-works salvation doctrine.
- I believe this is an interpretation error.
- Ironically, Calvinist “perseverance” doctrine — despite its Reformation mantra of “faith alone” — makes a similar error, teaching that those who are true believers will essentially live in a righteous manner, otherwise, they were never truly saved.
- Both religious belief systems (Roman Catholicism and Reformation-based Calvinism) essentially synthesize salvation and sanctification, making them inseparable.
- That results in a misinterpretation of Scripture.

The key to correct interpretation is distinguishing between the *gift* of eternal life and the *reward* of eternal life.

- The *gift* of eternal (age-lasting) life is free to those who believe.

- Rom. 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- If you have believed, then you have passed from death to life, which is commonly called *salvation* (in the sense of regeneration or initial salvation of one's spirit).
- The *reward* of eternal (age-lasting) life is earned by those who do good works after salvation.
- That is commonly called sanctification or discipleship or soul salvation, which leads to reward.
- If you are appropriating your age-lasting life now, then you are spiritually alive and one day will enjoy His kingdom to the fullest.
- If you are not appropriating your age-lasting life, then you are spiritually dead and will not enjoy the blessings of kingdom life (though you will be in the kingdom).
- Instead, you will have regrets, for you will not receive the inheritance of ruling with Christ in the New Jerusalem.

A second benefit of age-lasting life is seen in John 5:24:

- 2. Impunity from judgment at the Great White Throne.
- Does this mean Christians will not be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ?
- No! It simply means they will not be judged with unbelievers at the Great White Throne.
- John 5:28-29 Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.
- Jesus will raise everyone on Earth to face Him in judgment.
- The Bible speaks of two general resurrections:

1. The resurrection of life for believers to face Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

- This resurrection occurs before the Millennium.
- 2. The resurrection of condemnation for unbelievers to face Jesus at the Great White Throne.
- This resurrection occurs after the Millennium.
- Believers have impunity from the Great White Throne Judgment that unbelievers will experience, thus, believers will appear at the first judgment, the Judgment Seat of Christ.
- Nevertheless, the first judgment is also a judgment!
- At the Judgment Seat of Christ, the fire will try every man's work of what sort (quality) it is (1 Cor. 3:13).

Most Christians think the Judgment Seat is all positive — the dispensing of rewards.

- But what is often missed is that many will be recompensed for bad behavior.
- 2 Cor. 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.
- Col. 3:23-25 And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.
- Thankfully, believers have immunity from the Great White Throne Judgment, but we know conclusively that all believers will meet Jesus in judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Anyone who believes on Jesus for eternal (age-lasting) life, receives His marvelous gift of regeneration, the indwelling

presence of His Holy Spirit, and the guarantee of resurrection prior to the Millennium.

- There are other glorious benefits, but we will leave it at that for now.
- As I've said repeatedly, eternal (age-lasting) life is not a ticket to Heaven.
- What, then, is the purpose for this life?
- Eternal life is the provision of Jesus within believers as the means by which they can live righteously and thereby qualify for age-lasting (millennial) inheritance.
- By way of illustration, eternal (age-lasting) life is like a dimmer switch.
- The switch must first be turned on so there is power to the light fixture, resulting in some light.
- Even though the light is quite dim and minuscule, it demonstrates, nonetheless, that the light fixture is connected to power.
- But it is only as the dimmer switch is increased that light shines more brightly.

Eternal life (life for the ages) is like that.

- When you believe on Jesus for eternal life, you are connected to the power source and with that come a couple of tremendous benefits.
- First, you pass from death to life and, second, you are given impunity from the Great White Throne Judgment.
- Indeed, you will be resurrected before the Millennium to meet Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ.
- 1 Cor. 15 makes that quite clear.
- Before the light can grow brighter, you must draw upon your age-lasting life, then the dimmer switch can be increased so the light shines brighter.
- To the extent you continue to draw upon His life, your light will continue to grow brighter, and you will reflect

to others the glory of Christ through your life, in increasing measure.

- Perhaps that is why Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

Are you living out your age-lasting life?

- Is your light growing brighter?
- Or are you becoming dim and spiritually dead?
- Eternal (age-lasting) life is really not about getting a ticket to heaven and living endlessly.
- It is about getting the life of Jesus now, accessing that life, and thereby qualifying to live in the coming kingdom age as a co-ruler with Jesus Christ.
- Most Christians think that believers will live forever in Heaven.
- But that is not correct; in fact, we never go to Heaven (in the sense of the third Heaven, where God dwells).
- Faithful saints will dwell with Jesus in the New Jerusalem, which will be a glorious place that will hover over the earth during the Millennium.
- Unfaithful saints will be excluded from that place and will dwell on Earth, in the darkness outside the bright New Jerusalem.

Following the Millennium, and sometime after the age of Satan's rebellion, that Jesus puts down, God will create a new heaven (universe) and new earth (2 Pet. 3:10), where man will dwell perpetually.

- In fact, Rev. 21:2-3 speak of God descending to Earth to live together with man.
- So, technically, we will not spend eternity in Heaven — we will always dwell on Earth (or, if qualified, in the New Jerusalem).

- What about after we die?
- We will discuss that in a future podcast episode.
- But let's pursue the answer to another important question.
- How does this corrected translation of the word *eternal* (as age-lasting) change our concept of Hell?
- Notice the words that I emphasize in the following verses:
- John 3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not PERISH but have everlasting life.
- John 3:18 He who believes in Him is not CONDEMNED; but he who does not believe is CONDEMNED already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Most Christians assume that the word perish means "to go to Hell."

- They think the word condemned means "consigned to Hell," and everlasting means "forever" or "unending."
- Therefore, they conclude that, after this life, believers go to Heaven, where they live forever and unbelievers go to Hell, where they burn forever.
- But this is incorrect.
- The correct definition of *perish* is to be destroyed; to be put to death, to die; to be lost, to stray."
- The word does not convey the idea of going to Hell.
- To *condemn* is "to separate; to make a distinction between; to exercise judgment upon."
- Once again, the word does not convey the idea of going to Hell.
- Of course, we've already seen that the words *eternal* and *everlasting* are a mistranslation.
- They actually mean "age-lasting," or "age-during."

An overwhelming majority of evangelical Christians believe the doctrine of eternal conscious torment, which teaches that unbelievers will burn forever and ever in the lake of fire.

- But as you know from my podcasts, I don't see that doctrine as biblical.
- How does understanding the correct meaning of the word eternal shape one's understanding of Hell?
- Notice the following verses that refer either to eternal or everlasting punishment or fire:
- Matt. 18:8 If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting (age-lasting) fire.
- Matt. 25:41 Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting (age-lasting) fire prepared for the devil and his angels."
- Matt. 25:46 These will go away into everlasting (age-lasting) punishment, but the righteous into eternal (age-lasting) life.
- Mark 3:29 He who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal (age-lasting) condemnation"—
- 2 Thess. 1:9 Who shall be punished with everlasting (age-lasting) destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;
- Heb. 6:1-2 Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of

resurrection of the dead, and of eternal (age-lasting) judgment.

Mark 3:29 refers to what is commonly called “the unpardonable sin,” which is not a Bible term, but refers to the uniquely Jewish sin of attributing Christ’s mighty works to the devil or demons and not to God.

- That sin against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven for the millennial age.
- Rather, those who commit that sin will suffer some sort of age-lasting punishment.
- The Jewish leadership were primarily the ones guilty of this sin, and it led the nation into unbelief, as they rejected the Messiah.
- As a result, Jesus took the kingdom offer away from Israel and now offers it to the church (see Matt. 21:43).

What can we conclude about these verses that refer to some form of future judgment or punishment?

- The use of the adjective *aionios*, translated *eternal* or *everlasting*, specifies that the judgment or punishment is only for a period of time — it could be a very long time, but it is limited in duration, nonetheless.
- If Hell is eternal conscious torment, then ...
- 1. Why did God not mention this fact in the Old Testament?
- The word *Hell* is nowhere used in the Old Testament, except in English Bibles that have mistranslated the Hebrew word *Sheol* (which essentially means the grave).
- If Hell is eternal conscious torment, then ...
- 2. Why did the apostle Paul never mention Hell either in the book of Acts or in his epistles?
- Paul used the word Hades (meaning “the grave”) once, in 1 Cor. 15, the great resurrection chapter.

- Quoting Hosea 13:14, he said:
- 1 Cor. 15:55 (KJV) O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

Ironically, the passage in Hosea uses the Hebrew word *Sheol* and the King James Version translates it *grave*, which is correct.

- The KJV also correctly translates the Greek word *Hades* in 1 Cor. 15:55 as “grave.”
- Why, then, did the KJV translators choose to translate this same word Hades as “hell” in virtually all the other places where it is used?
- One can only wonder.
- The point to be made here is that Paul never spoke about Hell.
- If Hell is eternal conscious torment, then ...
- 3. Why did God create man with the ability to sin, knowing that man would sin, and knowing that, as God, He would consequently have to consign the vast majority of His creation to an endless Hell to be tormented forever and ever?

Wouldn’t the devil be the victor, by winning over far more multitudes to unbelief than God does to belief?

- How is God glorified in this scenario?
- Is God truly loving and merciful if He allows masses of His creation to burn forever in the lake of fire?
- At present count, approximately one-third of the world population are “Christian.”
- Of course, that does not mean one-third have believed on Jesus for eternal life.
- It simply means they have identified with so-called Christianity in its variety of forms.

- What this means according to the prevailing Christian view is that two-thirds (and probably much more) of the world's population will burn forever in Hell eternally — billions of people!
- Add to that the billions who have lived on Earth since the planet was created, and there will be countless multitudes suffering torment endlessly in the lake of fire.
- In fact, according to the traditional view, the billions of unbelievers who have already died are right now in Hell, suffering immensely.

Yet, a large percentage of those condemned have never even heard the name of Jesus, much less had the opportunity to believe on Him.

- Traditionalists have little pity on this group, for they often quote Rom. 1:20, "They are without excuse."
- But as we shall see in future studies, this verse is misused to support an unbiblical model of Hell as an unending place of torment for those who never believed on Jesus for eternal life.
- Another large percentage of human population lived before Christ came to Earth.
- How could they possibly have believed on Jesus before He existed in human form?
- Our theological systems have dogmatic answers to these questions but, unfortunately, the answers are based on assumptions and not biblical facts.

If God is truly a loving, merciful, and good heavenly Father, how could He punish His creation – His human children – forever and ever for temporal sins?

- Should even the most abominable humans who live only seventy or eighty years be tormented forever for their temporal earthly behavior? Is that fair?
- It is just, many claim.
- Yet the disparity between the crime and the punishment is so great that we must question if it is just.
- Should the punishment be forever and ever for crimes that are temporal?
- I challenge you to think on these things