



ETERNAL LIFE IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

by John Pester

In the writings of the apostle John there is a crucial emphasis on the eternal life of the Triune God being received in his Gospel, being partaken of through fellowship in his Epistles, and being consummated in an expression of the divine life in redeemed and regenerated humanity in Revelation. The Gospel of John reveals particularly that the eternal life came through the incarnation of the eternal Word in order to be released and imparted into humanity through the Lord's death and resurrection for the purpose of expressing the Triune God through the mutual indwelling of God in redeemed and regenerated humanity. The Epistles of John reveal the fellowship of the eternal life that is available to all those who have believed into Jesus Christ in order for the believers to abide in the Triune God. Revelation reveals that the consummation of the fellowship of the eternal life that the believers have received is the enlarged, corporate, mutual indwelling of God and the believers, as signified by the consummate sign in John's writings—the New Jerusalem. In all of John's writings eternal life is a central component. This eternal life, which is God Himself, has been made available to all those who believe; this eternal life is now operating in those who have believed, and this eternal life is being enlarged through fellowship into a mutual dwelling place of God and the believers. The eternal life is the focus of John's writings. Regrettably, John's understanding of eternal life is not the general understanding of most Christians today.

To most Christians, eternal life means an everlasting human life, a human life that never ends. This understanding is reinforced by a great lack of clarity among Christian teachers and theologians related to the meaning of the term *eternal life* (*zōē aiōnios*). Popular teachers stress the matters of unending time in the future and of peace and prosperity now. Theologians stress the component of time in the future and the qualities of a spiritual life in the present. Few teachers and theologians have a clear understanding of eternal life according to the context of John's writings, especially the Gospel of John: eternal life is the divine life of the Triune God. God's divine life with its divine nature should not be considered as if it was just one of His many divine attributes. Eternal life in the Gospel of John refers to the Triune God Himself, who has been made available to the believers through the process of incarnation, death, and resurrection. Eternal life is God the Father in Christ Jesus as the life-giving Spirit flowing into redeemed and regenerated humanity.

John wrote so extensively about eternal life in order to mend the tears in the net of the divine revelation—tears that were widening at the end of the first century,¹ a consequence of the churches turning away from Paul's emphasis on life in his Epistles. Just in Romans, an Epistle that most regard as a judicial response to the influence of the works of law as a means of justification, Paul spoke of the righteous having life (1:17), of receiving life eternal (2:7), of being saved in God's life (5:10), of reigning in life

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(v. 17), of the justification of life (v. 18), of grace reigning unto eternal life (v. 21), of walking in newness of life (6:4), of sanctification in life (v. 22), of eternal life being the gift of God in Christ Jesus (v. 23), of life being the purpose of the commandments (7:10), of the law of the Spirit of life (8:2), of the mind being life (v. 6), of the human spirit being life (v. 10), and of life being given to mortal bodies (v. 11). When the clarity of Paul's emphasis on life in his gospel was lost in the degradation of the churches and in their turning away from his ministry (1:1; 2:16; 15:20; 16:25; 2 Tim. 1:15), John wrote to mend the tears in the divine revelation by reemphasizing the centrality of eternal life as the content and focus of the gospel. Paul wrote of eternal life, but many disregarded it. John also wrote of eternal life, but few have seen it.

Many Christians unwittingly have been turned away from the revelation and ministry of life and, consequently, have little or no experience of the greatest gift of God in Christ—God, as life, living, dwelling, and growing in their tripartite being in this age to be fully expressed in the next age and in eternity future. We live in an age of turning away, an age of not entering into God in Christ. The gospel that Christianity preaches and teaches is not a gospel that fosters the growth of the divine life in an ongoing experience of salvation (v. 10), and it is not a gospel that effectively furthers God's aim for our believing into Christ (John 20:31). Christianity, effectively, remains in a degraded state in relation to Paul's completing ministry, and it remains largely ignorant of the availability of the divine life as presented in John's mending ministry.

Misunderstanding *Eternal Life* in the Gospel of John

Mending the tears in our understanding of the meaning of *eternal life* requires that we first see some of the common misunderstandings that are prevalent in Christianity. These understandings vary considerably, but all bear little resemblance to the understanding that motivated John to write his Gospel. At the low end of the spectrum, eternal life is presented and understood as a prosperous human existence that has the extra benefit of being everlasting in time. There is a primary emphasis on a qualitatively better human life that is a blessing given by God but that ultimately has no relation to the divine life and nature of God Himself. Such teachings draw primarily from misguided interpretations of John 10:10, which says, "The thief does not come except to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and may have it abundantly." In complete ignorance of the context of chapter 10, involving the Lord as the Shepherd who gathers the believers together as one flock through the impartation and abundant experience of the divine life, which counters the efforts of God's enemy to steal and kill His sheep and to destroy the gathering together of one flock, superficial teachers of prosperity focus on the words *abundantly* and *life* in total isolation to promulgate their private interpretation of opportunity for human self-aggrandizement (2 Pet. 1:20).

This tendency to mask a love of self and money under the guise of a form of godliness (2 Tim. 3:2, 5) is exemplified in Joel Osteen's teachings, which evidence a blatant misreading of the Lord's word in John 10:10. In *Your Best Life Now* he writes, "I'm so glad that Daddy later learned that, as God's children, we are able to live an abundant life, that it is okay to prosper; that we should even expect to be blessed" (86), and in *The Power of I Am* he writes, "Poverty, lack, and barely getting by are a yoke. Do not accept that as your destiny. Jesus came that you might live an abundant life" (211). Osteen's teaching that life in the Gospel of John is related to prosperity is clearly stated and promoted. In other publications notions of enrichment and prosperity are also present, only less explicitly stated. Nevertheless, references to prosperity encourage readers to entertain vain imaginations of wealth and human blessings. For example, in a note on John 10:10, the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible states, "God's ultimate purpose is never to impoverish his own, but to enrich them and extend to them

infinite and everlasting blessedness” (1721). To find such a note in a study Bible that purports to embody the spirit of the Reformation is astonishing. It is preposterous to think that prosperity was a focus of the Reformation, when more eternal matters, such as justification by faith, were the prominent focus of the Reformation writers. In *John*, Mark Edwards associates a material understanding of life with the Lord’s words concerning eternal life in John 3:15, saying, “This is the first occurrence in the Gospel of the phrase ‘eternal life’. Theophylact contrasts the promise of long life and prosperity under the covenant with Israel” (48). This comment initially associates life with mere human prosperity, but it also implies that all subsequent references to *eternal life* embody the same interpretive focus of this “first occurrence.”

Further along the spectrum of understandings is the notion that eternal life refers primarily to an everlasting human life. The Amplified Bible exemplifies this thought in its amplification of John 3:15: “In order that every one who believes in Him—who cleaves to Him, trusts Him and relies on Him—may *not perish, but have eternal life and [actually] live forever!*” (135). Through the addition of *[actually] live forever* as an amplification of *eternal life*, there is a shift in focus from receiving God’s eternal life to being granted, presumably by divine fiat and power, a human life that will never end. In *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* Craig S. Keener also gives a limited definition of *eternal life*, one that leaves its meaning open to baser interpretations: “Most early Christian literature also employs it as the ‘life of the coming age,’ though ‘eternal life’ is more frequent in the Gospel” (329). What is left open to interpretation is the meaning of *life of the coming age*. There is no clear statement that this life is something more than just an extended human life, and so readers are left to their preconceptions that eternal life is a life that is merely everlasting in time, a life that begins in the coming age. In *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* F. F. Bruce makes the same observation about the literal meaning of *eternal life*, but he qualifies it so that there is a clear separation from what some would improperly perceive as just a reference to human life. He states, “Primarily this [reference to eternal life in John 3:15] means the life of the age (*aiōn*) to come, resurrection life, which believers in Christ enjoy in advance because of their union with one who is already risen from the dead” (89). By correctly associating *eternal life* with resurrection life, which is now available to the believers through their union with the One who has been resurrected (14:6), Bruce provides a necessary corrective to the thought that eternal life is just an extension of a believer’s human life, and by such, he points to a scriptural understanding of eternal life that others miss.

At the highest end of the spectrum of understandings, commentators stress that eternal life involves a qualitatively higher spiritual life in addition to everlasting human life. Often, however, there is a limited discussion of the distinction between these two lives. In *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John* Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida associate eternal life with more than unending physical existence:

In many languages *eternal* is expressed as a negative, “that which never ends,” but it may be expressed positively as “that which goes on and on.” However, since the meaning of *eternal life* certainly involves a qualitative distinction, and thus is not a matter of mere continued existence, some translations employ such qualifiers as “real” or “new”; for example, “will have real life that never ends.” Such a phrase tends to focus upon the distinctive features of this new life in Christ, and so helps to avoid the idea that those who believe in Jesus will simply never die. (88)

The thought that eternal life also involves a spiritual component is expressed in a note on John 1:4-5 in *The MacArthur Study Bible*, which states that *life* in verse 4 refers “not only in a broad sense to physical and temporal life that the Son imparted to the created world through His involvement as the agent of creation (v. 3), but especially to spiritual and eternal life imparted as a gift through belief in Him” (1573). Newman

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and Nida's and MacArthur's comments are helpful in disabusing readers of the thought that the Lord came simply so that believers would have a continued human existence untouched by death in the future, but there is no discussion of what makes this life "real," "new," or "spiritual." When others attempt to give substance to these qualifiers related to a higher spiritual life, they often resort to empty words tailored for those with itching ears (2 Tim. 4:3). For example, the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible's note on John 3:16 states,

eternal life. More than endless existence, it is ultimately an existence in which we are forever in the beatific presence of the triune God (17:3; Rev 21:3-4). Believers already possess unending spiritual life because their spirits cannot die and already possess fuller life because they enjoy fellowship with God. In the new heavens and the new earth, they will also enjoy unending physical life and more intimate fellowship with God in his manifest presence. (1705)

The spiritual life that is described in this note certainly seems higher than an earthly life of prosperity or just an everlasting human life, but the repeated use of the word *presence* suggests a degree of separation between God and redeemed and regenerated humanity that is not present in the Lord's revelation of the ontological relationship between God and humanity, a relationship that will occur as a result of receiving the eternal life through the coming of Christ as the Spirit, as another Comforter (John 14:16-20). The Lord clearly indicated that the disciples would know that He was in the Father, the Father was in Him, and He was in them as a result of their receiving the Holy Spirit of life who would impart the divine life of the Triune God into them on the day of the Lord's resurrection (20:22). Phrases such as *beatific presence of the triune God* and *more intimate fellowship with God in his manifest presence* appeal to spiritual sensibilities, but they fall short of the truth, indicating a shortage in understanding the meaning of eternal life. In a later note on John 3:15, John MacArthur opens a door to a fuller understanding of the meaning of eternal life in the Gospel of John, writing, "This 'eternal life' is in essence nothing less than participation in the eternal life of the Living Word, Jesus Christ. It is the life of God in every believer, yet not fully manifest until the resurrection" (1581).

Understanding *Eternal Life* in the Gospel of John

Few commentaries have clear statements about eternal life because they fail to see the importance of life in John's writings. The term *eternal life* occurs seventeen times in the Gospel of John.² There are twenty-two other instances of the term *life* that refer contextually to the eternal life of the Triune God.³ Based on John's prominent emphasis on life, Witness Lee identifies the subject of the Gospel of John as being "The Gospel of Life—Proving That Jesus Christ Is God the Savior Coming as Life to Propagate Himself" (Recovery Version, outline).⁴ In an aptly titled book, *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, G. R. Beasley-Murray also draws attention to the repeated use of *eternal life* and *life* and identifies them as key terms in the Gospel of John:

It is of no small significance that the term "life," or "eternal life," occurs many more times in the Fourth Gospel than in any of the first three Gospels. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the key term of Jesus for salvation appropriated is the key term of the Gospel of John. The evangelist himself stated that the reason for his writing his Gospel was, "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). (2)

In the Gospel of John *eternal life* and almost all instances of *life* refer to the divine, uncreated life of God and, thus, to God Himself. The Word, who was with God and who was God and in whom there was life (1:4), came to make the divine life

available to humanity (v. 14). In order to accomplish this eternal intention, the Word became a genuine man through incarnation and then passed through death and resurrection to redeem fallen humanity. In resurrection this genuine God-man became a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), the Spirit with all the mediating elements of Christ's person and work, making a divine and mystical union with humanity possible. By believing into Christ through the hearing of faith, those who believe are regenerated with the divine life in their God-created human spirit (John 3:6). Through the process of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection and through a believing response to this process, the divine life of the Triune God is imparted into and mingled with the human spirit of those who believe, resulting in an increase and enlargement of God through the receiving of His divine life. At the beginning of the Gospel of John, eternal life initially is in God alone (1:4), but by the end of the Gospel of John, this eternal life, this processed God, is in redeemed and regenerated humanity (20:31).

In order to see the meaning of *eternal life* as intended by John, it is helpful to distinguish between the Greek words that are translated as "life" in the New Testament. In *The Gospel of John: Believe and Live* Elmer Towns says,

The Greeks had three words for life, each with a different shade of meaning and emphasis. First, the term *psuchē* referred to the self who was alive...John uses *psuchē* as the life laid down by the good shepherd (10:11). Second, the word *zōē* in classical Greek normally referred to the essence or principle of life itself—the existence of life as opposed to death. The third word, *bios*, was used by Greek writers to describe one's manner of life and was almost exclusively used with reference to human life (such as *biography*). In this gospel, John uses the word *zōē* as spiritual life, and it often is accompanied by the adjective *aiōnios* ("eternal"). As *aiōnios* is also an attribute of God, it has been suggested that eternal life is nothing short of the life of God. (xiii)

All humanity has a God-created biological life (*bios*) and a psychological life (*psuche*), but only believers have the eternal life of God (*zoe*). God desires to give the divine life in abundance. F. F. Bruce succinctly confirms this, saying, "Eternal life here [John 3:15] is the very life of God which resides in the eternal Word ('in him was life') and is communicated by him to all believers" (89). The Gospel of John reveals that receiving eternal life is the issue of believing in the name of Jesus Christ and even the purpose and goal of believing. In *I Am the Way: A Spiritual Journey through the Gospel of John*, Philip Wesley Comfort associates the issue of believing with receiving the *zoe* life of God, an issue that is far beyond the common understanding that believing is just for the forgiveness of sins:

The essential nature of the Word is life (Greek, *zōē*), and this life gives light to men who live in darkness. The divine life resided in Christ, and he made it available to all who believe in him. Human beings are born with the natural life—called *psuchē* in Greek (translated "soul," "personality," or "life"); they do not possess the eternal life. The divine life can be received only by believing in the one who possesses it—Jesus Christ. (35)

While the effectiveness of the Lord's redemption is applied to sins by faith, faith also results in an impartation of the divine life into those who believe. Elmer Towns speaks to this aspect of faith:

The result of faith in Christ is eternal life. John associates the adjective *aiōnios* with the noun *zōē* in 17 verses in this gospel. The phrase means a life that is endless, beginning at the moment of faith (5:24) and never ending. But John makes the phrase refer to more than endless existence. It also involves a sharing of the divine life (5:26; 17:3). (32)

In the hearing of faith related to the gospel of our salvation, we heard the speaking of

Through Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection and through a believing response to this process, the divine life of the Triune God is imparted into and mingled with the human spirit of those who believe, resulting in an increase and enlargement of God.

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the Spirit and subsequently received the speaking Spirit: “Did you receive the Spirit out of the works of law or out of the hearing of faith?” (Gal. 3:2). We received the Spirit in the regeneration of our human spirit, as indicated by the Lord’s word to Nicodemus in John 3:16: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” In a note on this verse, Witness Lee writes concerning the meaning of regeneration as presented in John’s Gospel of life:

The first Spirit mentioned here is the divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, and the second spirit is the human spirit, the regenerated spirit of man. Regeneration is accomplished in the human spirit by the Holy Spirit of God with God’s life, the uncreated eternal life. Thus, to be regenerated is to have the divine, eternal life (in addition to the human, natural life) as the new source and new element of a new person. (Recovery Version, note 2)

Having the divine, eternal life in addition to our human, natural life is a matter of receiving the enlivening life of the Spirit into our deadened human spirit (Eph. 2:1). When the Lord spoke of being born anew (John 3:3, 7), He was not speaking metaphorically; He was speaking of a divine reality that is made available through faith—being born of God’s life by the Spirit, a life that has the authority to make us children of God through our receiving of His life and nature. Cullen I. K. Story confirms this proper understanding of the meaning of being born of the Spirit in *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose, Pattern, and Power*, saying, “Both John 3:15 and 3:16 emphasize that the new birth means new life, eternal life, which, to John means participation in the very life of God” (77).

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After resurrection and through resurrection, the Lord Jesus, who had become flesh ([John]1:14), became the Spirit who gives life, as is clearly mentioned in 1 Cor. 15:45. It is as the life-giving Spirit that He can be life and the life supply to us. When we receive Him as the crucified and resurrected Savior, the Spirit who gives life comes into us to impart eternal life into us. We receive the Lord Jesus, but we get the Spirit who gives life. (Lee, Recovery Version, John 6:63, note 1)

With his familiarity with the ministry of Witness Lee, Philip Wesley Comfort similarly speaks of Jesus becoming “life-giving spirit”:

Through resurrection, Jesus had acquired a different form (see Mark 16:12). As to his person, he was still the same Jesus who had walked in Galilee and was crucified at Calvary. His person had not changed. It never will, for it is immutable. But his form changed; he is now “life-giving spirit.” This was the ultimate outcome of his spiritual journey—the consummation of his life on earth. (168-169)

Although Comfort gives no explanation as to why he uses a lowercase *s* in *life-giving spirit*, it is hard to imagine that he would mean anything less than the divine Spirit, because he speaks of this “life-giving spirit” as being the changed form of the immutable person of Christ. And since Jesus Christ was the embodiment of the eternal Word, in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily, for Him to be something less than divine in His form as “life-giving spirit” would be economically incomprehensible. Rather than introducing uncertainty with the use of a lowercase *s*, it would be better to acknowledge that the life-giving Spirit is the Spirit who gives life (John 6:63). Such an acknowledgement would reinforce the central focus in the Gospel of John that the believers receive the divine life that was manifested in the

incarnate Word by being joined by faith to the life-giving Spirit, who is the economical manifestation of the crucified and resurrected Christ.⁶

The Central Focus on Eternal Life in the Gospel of John

The central focus in the Gospel of John is on the believers' receiving and participating in the eternal life of the Triune God. This is supported by four crucial verses that are interspersed throughout the Gospel: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (1:4); "the thief does not come except to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and may have it abundantly" (10:10); "this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Him whom You have sent, Jesus Christ" (17:3); and "these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name" (20:31). These verses, while selective,⁷ nevertheless present succinctly the focus of the Gospel of John. They also mutually reinforce the content of the other verses in this selective grouping. Of the four verses, 10:10 and 17:3 were spoken by the Lord, indicating a divine awareness of the need to communicate His purpose in coming; 1:4 and 20:31 were written by John, indicating a human awareness of the need to communicate the Lord's stated purpose in coming. Verses 1:4 and 20:31, containing the first and last use of *life* in John, speak of the source of life, the person of Christ ("in Him"), which is equal to His name ("in His name"). In 1:4 the eternal life is in Christ as the eternal Word, and in 20:31 the eternal life is now in both Christ and the believers. In 17:3 the Lord prayed that the believers would know the eternal life, and in 10:10 the Lord indicated that our knowing should be in abundance. In 10:10 the Lord declared that His purpose in coming is that we would have life, and in 20:31 John declares that his purpose in writing of the Lord's coming is that we would have life in His name. All these verses, when soberly considered, should help believers to see and enter into John's understanding of life.

Life Being in Him

John 1:4 says, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." It is significant that the first mention of life in the Gospel of John is in relation to a person, not to a condition such as prosperity, to human longevity, or even to spiritual blessings. John first speaks of the Word who was with God and who was God and then speaks of the essence and nature of the Word—life. He also speaks of this life being the light of men, foreshadowing God's effectual economic operation to impart this divine life into redeemed and regenerated humanity. Witness Lee, focusing on the context of the first verses in this Gospel, also indicates that John's reference to *life* should be viewed as a restatement of the divine intention and desire of God for humanity to partake of His life, as symbolized by His loving charge for Adam to eat of the tree of life in Genesis 2: "Since [John 1:3] refers to the creation in Gen. 1, *life* here should refer to the life signified by the tree of life in Gen. 2. This is confirmed by the fact that in Rev. 22 John mentions the tree of life. Since life is in Him, He is life ([John]11:25; 14:6), and He came that man might have life (10:10b)" (Recovery Version, 1:4, note 1). This may seem like an interpretive stretch, but John's emphasis on life in his Gospel and Epistles (see notes 2 and 3 below; 1 John 1:1-2; 2:25; 3:14-15; 4:9; 5:11-13) and his explicit references to the tree of life in Revelation provide substantive support for Lee's assertion (2:7; 22:2). At the beginning of the Scriptures, the tree of life is prominently featured (Gen. 2:8-9), as it is in the concluding chapter (Rev. 22:2). Surely, these scriptural references to the tree of life speak of God's eternal intention and desire for humanity to receive and partake of His divine life, as symbolized by a tree in Genesis 2 and by a flourishing vine that grows on this side and on that side of the river of water of life in Revelation 22 (cf. John 15:1). When John speaks of life being in the Son (5:26), he is speaking of the life that has the power to overcome the darkening effects that occurred in humanity when Adam partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (1:5).

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and nature.*

Thus, the Lord charged His disciples to eat Him in order to have life by eating His words, which are spirit and life (6:53, 63), just as God charged Adam to eat of the tree of life.

In 1:4 life is revealed to be both an intrinsic (“in Him”) and communicable attribute of the Word: “and the life was the light of men.” Verse 4 shows that God’s intention is for His life to be imparted into humanity. After the fall the Word, in whom there was life, came in the flesh in order to carry out this intention by redeeming fallen humanity as the last Adam and by regenerating believing humanity with His eternal life as the life-giving Spirit. Thus, the eternal life in the Word became eternal life in humanity. John’s early transition to life in verse 4 is significant. He begins by establishing the Word’s credentials as being both with God and being God. In verse 3 he speaks of the creating God, a God who created human vessels with the capacity to receive Him as life, and then in verse 4 he reveals that the content of these God-created human vessels is the communicable life of God. Despite a God-given capacity to receive the divine life, the life in the Word still had to be given to humanity by the coming of the Word in the flesh (v. 14).

Coming to Give Life

John 10:10 says, “The thief does not come except to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and may have it abundantly.” This verse speaks of God’s eternal intention, an intention that motivated the incarnation of the Word and enabled His life to be given to humanity. This is a matter that goes far beyond many of the trivial treatments of the word *abundantly* in commentaries,⁸ and its significance is indicated not only by the Lord’s plain words but also by the context of His speaking concerning the intention of His enemy, Satan, to steal, kill, and destroy. In essence, this verse is a précis of the struggle that was foreshadowed by God’s placement of humanity before the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2, a struggle that commenced with Satan’s effort to steal away and corrupt God’s chosen vessel for life in Genesis 3, a struggle that concludes with the utter destruction of Satan, death, and Hades in the lake of fire in Revelation 20 and with the eternal flowing of the divine life in chapter 22. John 10:10 is more than a casual statement about the promise of a “blessed” life that is available to believers. It is about the universal struggle between God and His enemy to obtain vessels for the expression of their life and nature. For the enemy such an expression involves corruption and death; for God it involves glory and life.

In order to carry out his intention, Satan comes first to steal, that is, to steal humanity away from God, who is the rightful Owner of humanity as the Creator. Thus, he came into the garden of Eden to steal humanity from God. Satan’s greatest efforts are focused on stealing people away from God because the expression of his fallen life in God-created vessels serves as an ongoing affront to God’s righteousness, holiness, and glory. Satan lives to challenge God, roving over the earth to find those who, in spite of their inclinations to honor God, can be goaded to curse God (Job 1:7-8; 2:9) and thus hinder them from participating in God’s purpose. If he is unsuccessful in this regard, he will kill those who are on God’s line of life, as he did with Abel, who offered sacrifices according to God’s ordained way of redemption (Gen. 4:4-8). Satan’s killing actions reveal that he was a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44); his efforts to steal and kill ultimately relate to his desire to destroy any semblance of a testimony of God among redeemed and regenerated humanity. This testimony relates to the Lord’s desire to be the one Shepherd of one flock (10:11-16). The church, as the one flock, is just such a testimony, and nothing angers and threatens the enemy more than a testimony of oneness that is the result of the mutual sharing of the eternal life of the Triune God. Satan steals, kills, and destroys in order to frustrate God’s desire for a testimony that displays His multifarious wisdom to the rulers

and the authorities in the heavenlies, an eternal and glorious testimony in the church and in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:10, 21).

In order to counteract Satan's intention and efforts, the divine life is needed and needed in abundance. In fact, only the divine life can overcome the satanic life. The law of our natural human life cannot overcome the law of sin and of death in our members (Rom. 7:22-23). Only the life of God, operating through the law of the Spirit of life (8:2), can deliver us from the wretched situation of corruption and death that is operating in vessels who have been stolen from God, who are under the killing ravages of death due to sin, and who have fallen short of the glorious expression of God. The Lord's reference to abundant life speaks not of a flourishing human life but of the intensity of the struggle between God and His enemy, especially over those who have received the divine life through believing.

Every genuine believer has received the divine life, but it is not enough to just have life; the Lord recognized the believer's need to experience His life in abundance. It is clear from Paul's Epistles that it is possible for us, as genuine believers, to live and walk like the Gentiles (Eph. 4:17-20), who conduct themselves in the lusts of the flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the thoughts because we, like the Gentiles, are still by nature children of wrath (2:3). It is also possible for us to have an outward form of godliness (2 Tim. 3:5) and all the while still be "lovers of self, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, implacable, slanderers, without self-control, savage, not lovers of good, traitors, reckless, blinded with pride, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (vv. 2-4). All genuine, seeking Christians will honestly recognize and acknowledge the presence of at least one, if not many, of these fallen traits in their daily living, which are the manifestations of their participation, even if unwittingly, in Satan's efforts to undermine God's intention. No one is immune to his efforts. Only the life of God, which is present in the indwelling Spirit who is mingled with our spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), can deliver us from the body of this death, and we need this life in abundance. In order to make His life abundantly available, the Word of life came in the flesh, in the God-created humanity of Jesus. Even though He possessed a humanity that was pure and without sin, He did not live by His natural, psuche, life, but by the divine, zoe, life. In order to gain His intention of imparting His divine life and nature into humanity, as revealed in John 10:10, the Lord laid down His soul-life, not only on the day of His crucifixion, going willingly to the cross to die, but also throughout His entire life, establishing an organic model that we can appropriate in our living in union with Him as His one flock.

As a man, the Lord has the psuche life, the human life, and as God, He has the zoe life, the divine life. He laid down His soul, His psuche life, His human life, to accomplish redemption for His sheep (vv. 15, 17-18) that they may share His zoe life, His divine life (v. 10b) the eternal life (v. 28), by which they can be formed into one flock under Himself as the one Shepherd. (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 11, note 1)

The believers' abundant experience of the divine life accomplishes God's eternal intention and shames the enemy by overcoming his efforts to steal, kill, and destroy. In the believers' experience of the divine life, there is also a knowing of the very God of life, which is inexhaustibly richer and deeper than just having a blissful and extended human life.

Knowing God as Life

John 17:2-3 says, "Even as You have given Him authority over all flesh to give eternal life to all whom You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Him whom You have sent, Jesus Christ." In these verses the

Only the divine life can overcome the satanic life. The Lord's reference to abundant life speaks not of a flourishing human life but of the intensity of the struggle between God and His enemy, especially over those who have received the divine life through believing.

Every life has a function, and according to its function, there is a knowledge of that life that goes beyond mere intellectual apprehension. The function of the eternal life is to cause us to experientially know the true God.

Lord first spoke of being given authority to give eternal life, and then He defined the eternal life that He gives, equating it with knowing the true God and Him who has been sent. Thus, to know eternal life is to know the true God, and to know the true God is to know the eternal life. These two—eternal life and God—cannot be separated; to know one is to know the other. F. F. Bruce describes this correspondence:

Eternal life, then, consists in the knowledge of God. Since the knowledge of God is mediated through the revealer whom God has sent, and is indeed embodied in that revealer, the knowledge of the revealer is one with the knowledge of the God who is revealed. Nor is this knowledge a matter simply of intellectual apprehension: it involves a personal relationship. The Father and the Son know each other in a mutuality of love, and by the knowledge of God men and woman [sic] are admitted to the mystery of this divine love, being loved by God and loving him—and one another—in return. (329)

Every life has a function, and according to its function, there is a knowledge of that life that goes beyond mere intellectual apprehension. The function of the eternal life is to cause us to experientially know the true God, a personal knowledge that is conveyed through the eternal life with its function of knowing God. “Eternal life is the divine life with a special function, that is, to know God and Christ (cf. Matt. 11:27). God and Christ are divine. To know the divine person, we need the divine life. Since the believers are born of the divine life, they know God and Christ (Heb. 8:11; Phil. 3:10)” (Lee, Recovery Version, John 17:3, note 1). The believers can know God and Christ because God and Christ are not only the source of eternal life but also eternal life itself. In a personal relationship of mutual indwelling, both the true God and redeemed and regenerated humanity corporately know one another. In order to know God, there is a need for faith, for believing that Jesus is the Christ, the One who is anointed to carry out God’s intention.

Believing to Have Life

John 20:31 says, “These have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name.” *These* refers to the signs that John reported in his Gospel, beginning with the wedding at Cana and extending to the resurrection of Lazarus (2:11; 12:18). John’s writing of these things is the speaking of the Spirit, both then and now, and when people respond to the Spirit’s speaking concerning the Son of God through a hearing of faith, the Spirit gives them the life that is the Son, which is also the life of God. Believing is the means for receiving eternal life, because humanity is joined to the Word of life through faith. Faith is the means,⁹ but having life in His name, that is, in the person of the One in whom we believe, is the goal. John wrote these words, this report on the Word of life, because he knew that the issue of believing would be life in His name. The Gospel of John can be considered as a lengthy, selective report on what John had seen and heard concerning the Word of life (1 John 1:1), not the Word of redemption. John’s report in his first Epistle was written so that the believers would know the fellowship that is inherent in the life of the Triune God, a fellowship that joins all believers to one another and to the Triune God (v. 3). John’s report in his Gospel was written so that the believers could be called into this fellowship of life (1 Cor. 1:9).¹⁰

John 1:4; 10:10; 17:3; and 20:31 are reports based on the Lord’s utterances related to eternal life. What John heard over the course of his time with the Lord, he reported in his Gospel generally—and in these verses specifically—either through implicit references or through explicit repetitions. John 1:4, which says, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men,” implicitly refers to the Lord’s word in 5:26: “Just as the Father has life in Himself, so He gave to the Son to also have life in Himself.” It also implicitly refers to the Lord’s word in 8:12: “I am the light of the world; he who

follows Me shall by no means walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (cf. 9:5). The Lord’s word to the Pharisees in 5:40, in which He said, “You are not willing to come to Me that you may have life,” also must have solidified John’s understanding that eternal life is in Christ.

In 10:10 John explicitly repeats the Lord’s words, writing that He said, “I have come that they may have life and may have it abundantly.” John prefaces his repetition of the Lord’s words in verse 10 with an acknowledgement that they were, in fact, utterances that the Lord Himself was repeating: “Jesus therefore said to them again” (v. 7). The focus of the Lord’s speaking in 10:10—on the believers having life through His coming and His giving of life—reflects the words that John heard earlier and reported in 5:21: “Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He wills” and in 6:33: “The bread of God is He who comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world.”


In 17:3 John again explicitly repeats the Lord’s words, writing that He said, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Him whom You have sent, Jesus Christ.” In John’s equating eternal life with knowing the true God, there are implicit references to the Lord’s many statements concerning believing into God in order to receive eternal life, including the Lord’s speaking to Nicodemus in 3:15, in which He said that “everyone who believes into Him may have eternal life”; His speaking in verse 36: “He who believes into the Son has eternal life”; His speaking in 6:40: “Everyone who beholds the Son and believes into Him should have eternal life”; and His speaking in verse 47: “Truly, truly, I say to you, He who believes has eternal life.” In 1 John 5:20 John effectively repeats his report of the Lord’s words in John 17:3, saying, “We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding that we might know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” In both verses the words *eternal life*, *know*, *true God*, and *Jesus Christ* are mentioned, and in both verses, knowing the true God is defined as the eternal life. Receiving the divine life is the purpose of John’s report, and 20:31 confirms that the focus of 1:4; 10:10; and 17:3 is the divine life being made available to humanity through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. When the Spirit opens our eyes to see and our ears to hear of the capacities that are inherent in the divine life of God and that were displayed in the life of Christ, we appreciate Him, call upon Him, receive Him, accept Him, and are organically joined to Him, reaching John’s goal in writing his Gospel—receiving the life of God through faith.

The Wonder of Eternal Life

The eternal life of God is wonderful. It is wonderfully available, and it can be wonderfully operative in our regenerated human spirit because of the redemption of Christ. There is no wonder in a human life that is filled with material abundance; this is the status of many unbelievers. There is no wonder in a life that lasts forever; this is a condition without a deeper purpose. And there is no wonder in a life of spiritual blessing apart from the indwelling and mutual abiding of God in redeemed and regenerated humanity. There is wonder, however, in a human vessel receiving and partaking of the eternal life, of God Himself, the One in whom there is life and who continually gives life to all those who believe into His name. **LFC**

Notes

¹“Going on from there, He saw another two brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them” (Matt. 4:21). In commenting on the word *mending* in this verse, Witness Lee writes, “When James and John were called by the Lord, they were in a boat, mending their nets. Eventually,



When the Spirit opens our eyes to see and our ears to hear of the capacities that are inherent in the divine life of God and that were displayed in the life of Christ, we appreciate Him, call upon Him, receive Him, accept Him, and are organically joined to Him.

Paul's stress in 1 Corinthians 15 is on the work of the Spirit to give life more than on the person of the Spirit. While he speaks of the Spirit so that we would understand how God could communicate His life, his emphasis is on the Spirit's actual giving of life to the believers.

John became a real mender, mending the rents in the church by his ministry of life. (See his three Epistles and chs. 2 and 3 of Revelation.)” (Recovery Version, note 1).

²See John 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; and 17:2-3.

³See John 1:4 (twice); 3:36; 5:21 (twice), 24, 26 (twice), 29, 40; 6:33, 35, 48, 51, 53, 63 (twice); 8:12; 10:10; 11:25; 14:6; and 20:31.

⁴The first-level subheadings in Witness Lee's outline of the Gospel of John feature prominently the importance of the divine life: Introduction to life and building, 1:1-51; Life's principle and life's purpose, 2:1-22; Life meeting the need of man's every case, 2:23—11:57; Life's issue and multiplication, 12:1-50; Life's washing in love to maintain fellowship, 13:1-38; Life's indwelling—for the building of God's habitation, 14:1—16:33; Life's prayer, 17:1-26; Life's process through death and resurrection for multiplication, 18:1—20:13, 17; Life in resurrection, 20:14—21:25.

⁵According to 1 Corinthians 15:45, the last Adam, the crucified Christ, became a life-giving Spirit in His resurrection from the dead (vv. 4, 12-16, 20-22). If we primarily regard *life-giving Spirit* as a formal name, much like we regard *the Spirit of God* as a name (Matt. 3:16), Paul's use of the indefinite article *a* rather than the definite article *the* can be a source of consternation, because it seemingly lessens the identification of the life-giving Spirit with the third person of the Divine Trinity; that is, “a spirit” here is not “the Spirit.” But in this chapter on the economical process of resurrection, Paul's stress is on the work of the Spirit to give life more than on the person of the Spirit. While it was necessary for him to speak of the Spirit because we would not otherwise understand how God could communicate His life to us, Paul's emphasis is on the Spirit's actual giving of life to the believers. Hence, he speaks of a life-giving Spirit rather than the life-giving Spirit to keep the Corinthians' attention focused on the Spirit's economical giving of life and the Corinthians' economical receiving of the divine life, which alone could overcome the problems inherent and manifested in their bios life and psuche life.

⁶For the purpose of this article, I have limited my discussion to the matter of eternal life, but the Gospel of John ultimately reveals that eternal life is for building, that is, the building of a mutual abode for God in redeemed and regenerated humanity and redeemed and regenerated humanity in God. The linked matters of life and building can be seen throughout the Gospel, beginning in chapter 1, where life is spoken of in verse 4 and where the building produced by this life is implied in the Lord's reference to Bethel, the house of God in Jacob's dream, in verse 51. It can be seen in chapter 14, where the Lord explicitly speaks of His death and resurrection being the preparation for the building of God and redeemed and regenerated humanity into a mutual abode, and it can be seen experientially in chapters 20 and 21, where this mutual abode is effectuated by the Lord breathing the Holy Spirit into His disciples as life and by His training of the disciples to live in the reality of this mutual abode. Witness Lee comments on the matter of building in the *Life-study of John*:

The Gospel of John unfolds the building. In 1:14 we see that Christ in the flesh was the tabernacle for God's habitation among men on earth. “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” Also, Christ's body was the temple before His death and after His resurrection (2:19-22). Before His death His body in the flesh was the temple, and after His resurrection His resurrected body remained the temple of God. This is the building. Furthermore, this gospel reveals that the believers are to be built as the abode of the Triune God (14:2, 23). This is adequately and fully disclosed in John 14. According to that chapter, all the believers will be built together as God's eternal habitation with so many abodes. Thus, as the Lord's last prayer found in John 17 indicates, all His believers must be built up into one (vv. 11, 21-23). (13)

⁷Other verses containing the terms *eternal life* and *life* could have been selected, most notably John 3:15 and 16: “That everyone who believes into Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that everyone who believes into Him would not perish, but would have eternal life.” I chose not to focus on these verses because of their familiarity to most believers, a familiarity that serves as a veil from seeing the Lord's plain

word that it is God's desire for us to share in the eternal life in the only begotten Son whom He gave to us out of His love for the world.

⁸Most homiletical discussions of *life* in John 10:10 fail to identify this life as the eternal life of God, much less the communicable life of God. There are a few exceptions but even these are limited because they lack clarity and specificity. For example, in commenting on the word *abundantly*, the New Geneva Study Bible states, "The life that Jesus gives is unique because it is eternal, and He gives this life in evergrowing abundance to His redeemed" (1682). Here there is recognition of an "eternal" component of life, but it is by no means clearly stated that this life is the eternal life of God Himself. This note, like many other comments, seems to frame abundance largely in terms of what could easily be interpreted as material manifestations. In *John*, R. C. Sproul says, "Jesus came not to steal but to give, and His gift is abundant life" (189). When Sproul later comments on 20:31, he says, "John is echoing Jesus' own words: 'I have come that they may have life' (John 10:10b). People who don't have Christ don't have life, and they don't even know it. To have the life that God created us to have, we must find it in the Son of God" (395). In both instances *life* is nebulously defined. In its first occurrence *life* is defined so generally that a reader can attach any significance to it; in its second occurrence *life* is framed largely in terms of a human life that at most is equivalent to the God-created human life prior to its being touched by the effects of sin. There is no thought that *life* refers to the divine life that God's created human vessels needed to receive even in their original state of innocence. Sproul's tendency for generalities is mirrored in Charles H. Talbert's brief comment on John 10:10 in *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*: "What he provides is 'abundant life,' i.e., life to the full" (171). It can also be seen in Cullen I. K. Story's comment: "The life described in John 10 is one of free movement, of adequate provision, in essence, an abundant life" (227). When generalities serve as a principle component in any discussion, it is easy to follow a tendency to imaginatively embellish an argument with natural human concepts. In *Insights on John*, Charles R. Swindoll displays this tendency: "Abundant life includes peace, purpose, destiny, a genuine purpose for living, the joy of facing any adversity—including the grave—without fear, and the ability to endure hardships with confident assurance" (190-191).

⁹Despite the apostle's plain words that he wrote selectively of the many signs Jesus did so that we would "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name" (John 20:31), the importance of receiving life as the result of believing is still missed by many. In *The Gospel of John: Worship for Divine Life Eternal* John Paul Heil focuses much more on the matter of believing than he does on having divine life in the name, the person, of Christ:

With a direct appeal to the audience, [John] offered his true testimony, "so that you also may believe" (19:34-35). Reinforcing and advancing this previous appeal, the narrator states that all of the signs have been written "so that you may believe" (20:31). With this declaration of the purpose of the book the narrator climaxes all of the previous appeals for the audience to believe in and worship Jesus as the Christ. (152-153)

Although Hiel subsequently states that those who believe "may thereby know and experience divine life eternal," he limits this experience to one that is "in and through loving one another in the self-sacrificial way that Jesus loves" (153), which comes far short of John's understanding of what it means to "have life."

¹⁰The fellowship of life in the Gospel of John is a corporate matter, involving all the believers and the Triune God; the word *fellowship* implies the church in its life relationship in God and with God and the believers. In his article in this issue of *Affirmation & Critique*—"The Church in the Gospel of John"—Ed Marks points to seven designations of the church that are related to and actualized by the fellowship of life: as many grains of wheat, as the many brothers, as the Father's house, as the Son's vine, as the Spirit's new child, as the bride, and as the flock of God.

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Despite John's plain words that he wrote selectively of Jesus' many signs so that we would "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name," the importance of receiving life as the result of believing is still missed by many.

The fellowship of life in the Gospel of John is a corporate matter, involving all the believers and the Triune God; the word fellowship implies the church in its life relationship in God and with God and the believers.

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Begotten of God, not of the Will of the Flesh nor the Will of Man

The created soul-life that was present before the fall was affected by the fall; thus, there was the soul-life before the fall and the soul-life after the fall. *The will of the flesh* refers to the soul-life after the fall, whereas *the will of man* refers to the soul-life before the fall. According to John, those who believe in and receive the Lord Jesus are not begotten of blood, which speaks of the human life associated with flesh and blood, nor are they begotten of the soul-life, which was affected by the fall and which speaks of the intentions related to the fallen soul-life, nor are they begotten of the intentions that were present in our soul-life prior to the fall. The life that we have received from the Lord is not related to flesh and blood, and it is not related to the soul-life, either after or prior to the fall. It is related only to the life of God.

From *Life and Building in the Gospel of John* by Witness Lee, p. 66