

What Is ETERNAL LIFE?

Tony H. Espinosa • Martin H. Fuller • Mitchell J. Kennard • John-Paul Petrash

Toward the close of John's first Epistle we encounter a striking passage directly addressing the question posed in the title of this article:

He who believes into the Son of God has the testimony in himself...And this is the testimony, that God gave to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. I have written these things to you that you may know that you have eternal life, to you who believe into the name of the Son of God. (1 John 5:10-13)

Several of John's statements here address the meaning and importance of eternal life. First, he notes that those who believe have an inner witness assuring them that they truly have eternal life: "He who believes...has the testimony in himself." Second, eternal life is not only for the believers' future experience, for John says, "God gave to us eternal life"—therefore, they already possess it. As John says further: "You have eternal life." Furthermore, eternal life is more than a gift—it is a person. John declares that this life is "in His Son" and that "he who has the Son has the life." To have the life, then, is equivalent to having the Son Himself. Finally, John expresses his desire that the believers not simply hope but know with certainty that they possess eternal life: "I have written these things to you that you may know that you have eternal life." Such directness should command our attention. Indeed, John's word here recalls a passage from his Gospel, where he similarly states his purpose in writing: "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" (John 20:31). Taken together, these verses—both in his Epistle and in his Gospel—convey John's burden that the believers not only possess eternal life but also know with conviction that they possess it. And just as those first-century believers needed this assurance, today's believers need to know with assurance

that they have eternal life. Further, they should know what this life is. In the following pages we will explore the nature and significance of the life that the believers now possess.

Despite the importance that the apostle John ascribes to eternal life in his writings, this crucial subject often receives only scant attention in the realm of theological and biblical scholarship. There we find many monographs on subjects such as justification, sacraments, and ethics but relatively few on eternal life. This paucity of books on so great a subject as eternal life is surprising. Further, we find that this subject has been overlooked in many works of theology and biblical scholarship that are more comprehensive in scope. *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia* has no entry on eternal life, despite its inclusion of over 1,400 entries covering topics from cremation to Alfred Hitchcock. Neither does *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, a reference work with over 550 entries but little discussion of eternal life. We discover similar instances of neglect in many works of systematic or dogmatic theology, where eternal life often receives only cursory consideration, if that. And even when these works mention eternal life, its import is frequently diminished amid a host of other theological concerns. The works of two prominent theologians exemplify this negligence. The Anglican theologian J. I. Packer's *Concise Theology* mentions eternal life several times but fails to address it directly or even define it. This is especially puzzling given that the book includes whole chapters on subjects such as enterprise and the state. One might reasonably expect, at the very least, a subsection on eternal life. A similar inattention to eternal life is evident in the Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul's *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, where we find only some passing references to eternal life. This oversight is surprising given the book's title. It is even more surprising considering that Sproul devotes entire chapters to topics such as miracles,