

When Does the Christian Possess Eternal Life?

Bible Answers About Denominations

It is evident that eternal life is the gift of God through Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:23). Jesus is the only provision God has made for mankind to enjoy eternal life, for Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me" (Jno. 14:6). Our focus in this article is not primarily on the reality of eternal life, nor the fundamental truth that eternal life is exclusively by and through Jesus Christ, but when does the Christian possess eternal life? Is it when one becomes a Christian? Is it a life that one gradually gains as he/she lives on earth? Is it a blessing that one receives in the life beyond this one? Is it present or future?

It is not uncommon to hear religious leaders assure their people that they have eternal life here and now. For example, Herschel H. Hobbs, a prominent Baptist preacher and author of several books, believes that the questions "Can a child of God be lost eternally?" and "When does the Christian possess eternal life?" are closely associated. In a book describing the fundamentals of their faith he writes, "Can a Christian once saved, ever be lost again? The thundering answer of scripture is no. The words eternal and everlasting life negate this idea (Jno. 3:16-18). The life is not a future prospect but a present reality (cf. Jno. 5:24)." (Herschel H. Hobbs, *Fundamentals Of Our Faith*, p. 106).

Is eternal life a present reality or is it future? There are Scriptures, that if taken alone present the answer to that question both ways. There are passages that clearly state that the Christian has eternal life as a present reality (cf. Jno. 5:24 and I Jno. 5:11, 13). Having called attention to such passages, the advocate of the doctrine of "eternal security of the believer" hastens to point out that the word "hath" and "have" are present tense; the believer has eternal life as a present possession. The fallacy involved in such a conclusion is a common one; and that is interpreting a passage or passages without considering all passages on any given subject. An excellent example of this failure is when one does not consider and compare all passages relating to prayer. For example, the statement in Matthew declares, "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing ye shall receive" (Matt. 21:22). But this passage is qualified by another statement, "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:" (I Jn 5:14). If we do not ask according to God's will He will not answer our prayers.

This question must be handled in the same way. There are other passages of Scripture that qualify those which seem to convey the idea of eternal life as a present possession. For example, consider the following: "And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30). When do we receive eternal life? Jesus said, "In the world to come." When Jesus was

describing the final judgment He said, "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt 25:46 NAS). When Paul was writing to the church in Rome he said, "Who will render to every man according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life: But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile" (Rom 2:6-9).

Eternal life will not be granted until the judgment day. Then what do we have now? We have the promise of eternal life. Notice the following statement: "In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began" (Titus 1:2). Hope always looks to the future. This is clearly affirmed by Paul when he wrote, "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it" (Rom 8:24-25).

If eternal life is possessed now and cannot be lost regardless of what is done because it is called eternal, why then does the Bible include the many warnings against doing that very thing? I believe that is a fair and proper question for Calvinists to answer. The truth of that matter however is that there is no proper response. To warn of something impossible to occur would be the height of nonsense. Yet, there are many such warnings. Did God repeatedly warn His people in both Old and New Testaments lest they fall; knowing all the while that such was not possible anyway? Consider that the Holy Spirit through the apostle Peter urged Christians "And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 1:5-11). The context of Peter's words has to do with entrance into the everlasting kingdom that "shall be" administered to brethren in the future. They were already in the kingdom, the church, saved from their past sins, and "in Christ," but not yet in the eternal realm of heaven.

One of the major themes of the book of Hebrews was to prevent apostasy, and correct the apostasy that had already occurred. The same is true of Romans, Galatians, and the letters to the churches in Asia in Revelation. Consider the following passages: Heb. 6:4-6; I Cor. 9:27; 2 Cor. 5:1-9; Jno. 15:1-6; Lk. 8:11-15; Heb. 2:1-3; 2 Pet. 2:20-22; I Cor. 10:12; Gal. 6:1). Someone reported that there are over twenty-five hundred warnings against the danger of a child of God being lost. How much evidence does an honest person need to prove to him the possibility of apostasy and that eternal life must then be a future reality? If a child of God is faithful to the Lord then one will receive the reward of heaven and live eternally with God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and the redeemed of all ages of time. It is this hope of eternal life that motivates us to serve God and be faithful to Him.

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