

THE STORY – ETERNAL LIFE

We are great at anticipation, but our celebrations and moments aren't sustained.
We as a culture are conditioned to move quickly from one item or moment to the next.

On the liturgical calendar - we still sit squarely in the Eastertide season.
Traditionally Eastertide is celebrated for 40 days, the measure of the days the resurrected Jesus spent on Earth before the Ascension.

And while we don't formally celebrate Eastertide, this series has been an invitation to dwell on for months remind ourselves of the chief implication of the resurrection: the Good News - the redemptive story of scripture and the part we have to play... into eternity.

Tonight in our series The Story we point to Eternal Life. Specifically in Romans 6:23:
For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And Easter and salvation for many has become about Jesus punching our ticket into this Heaven.
We celebrate the resurrection, as we too will step out of our graves and ascend.

And praise God for that!

But this is a severely limited perspective about salvation and eternal life.
Eternal life isn't just about living forever in Heaven.

But if Jesus isn't there within the pearly gates... is it still Heaven?
To live eternally on those streets of gold, but without Jesus... is that still eternal life?

Tonight I want to look at Romans 6:23, alongside moments and parallel statements in the ministry of Jesus about eternal life... and expose some misconceptions about eternal life we cling too... often without realizing it... and often to our detriment.

The first perspective of eternal life tonight, is **Transactional vs. Relational**

“the wages of sin is death, but the [free] gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
Wages speak to earnings. A transaction of sorts, goods for hard labor.

The wages of sin is death. But the wages of righteous living is eternal life.

Only it doesn't say that.

Paul upholds a juxtaposition, and points to the opposite of earned wages: a gift.
As many translations put it and others put in a footnote for emphasis: it's a free gift.

This is why the Good News of the Gospel is Good News.
The Creator and giver of life came and died so that we could have eternal life freely.

And yet having been told this... we still try to earn it.
We are still prone to the perspective that we are more acceptable or less acceptable to God based on what we do or don't do. How much work we put in. How good we live.

Paul points to this inclination with the Israelites and their worship in Romans 9, where he says: *How could they miss [what God was doing]? Because instead of trusting God, they took over. They were absorbed in what they themselves were doing. They were so absorbed in their “God projects” that they didn’t notice God right in front of them, like a huge rock in the middle of the road.*

You see it in the Gospels – the religious leaders themselves and the people they taught pursued holiness and relationship with God through their collection of 613 laws they’d constructed. They were so busy striving in this way that they missed the holy and living God in the flesh, right in front of them in Jesus.

And when they did engage with Jesus in religious discussions, it was often “*how do I punch my ticket to eternal life?*”

It’s summarized in the question the Rich Young Ruler poses to Jesus in Matthew 19: *“Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”*

But Jesus doesn’t define eternal life as a transaction in the future. Jesus defines it as a relationship in the present.

Jesus says elsewhere in **John 17:3** - *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

We don’t have to wait to get to a destination. Jesus came here. He opened the door to relationship with God through the cross.

But to Israel at the time of Jesus, that would have seemed like a lofty aspiration. The temple they knew had a **veil** that separated the commoners from entering into God’s presence. This was by God’s own discretion and design. Yet at the moment of Christ’s death, what does the Gospels tell us? That same veil was torn top to bottom, as if from Heaven down to Earth, as if torn by God’s own hands from the heavens.

But the enemy likes to put up new veils,
He like to put up the veil that tells us we have to earn it.
That eternal life is transactional, and we have to pay up for it.
He like to put up the veil that says even if Jesus paid for it.. it was paid 2000 years ago, and I’ll cash in on it when I die... but it makes no impact on the present and my relationship with God and others.

But eternal life isn’t transactional. It’s relational:

This is eternal life: that we know the one true God, and Jesus Christ, whom He sent.

As the writer and theologian Dallas Willard would put it:
“Eternal life is now in session.”

Eternal life isn’t just quantitative in length.
It’s qualitative. There’s a depth of life God wants us to experience here and now.

Hymn writer **Isaac Watts** once wrote:

*“The hill of Zion yields a thousand sacred sweets
before we reach the heavenly fields or walk the golden streets.”*

2 Corinthians 5:5 - *“The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead.”*

Psalm 27:13 - *“I will see the Lord's goodness while I am here in the land of the living.”*

God is not waiting for eternity to begin. He lives in eternity now.
And He invites us to step through the veil that was torn and join him in it.
Eternal life – knowing him, the true God, and Jesus who he sent.

But for many, we still live behind the veil and barrier that salvation and saving faith and eternal life is transactional - eternal life hinges on some minimal admission fee into Heaven when you die.

Look - that may fly when bartering a transaction, but it certainly doesn't in relationships.

Try this with your spouse...

What is the minimum amount of dating we can do to keep the flame alive?

What is the lowest level of commitment I can walk in?

What's the minimum exclusivity in terms of interacting with other women?

Where the line I cross and then I'm good? And where are the lines I can't cross?

We grasp this with our relationships: a goal of **minimal devotion** will hurt, if not end them.
And yet how often do we ask questions about where the line is with God? How often do we toe the line rather than pressing into deeper relationship and transformation?

Centered set vs bounded set

Bounded sets and centered sets were first introduced in the field of psychology as a way to understand social structure.

A bounded set is described as a fence – think boundaries

A centered set is described as a well.

Where a bounded set is defined by the boundaries, a centered set is defined by what is at the center.

The Rich Young Ruler's question is operating from a bounded set:

HAVE I CROSSED THE BOUNDARY?

Jesus' chief concern: **AM I AT THE CENTER?**

Eternal life and a relationship with Jesus is a center we work toward, not a boundary we cross.
The heart of God and his holiness are at the center, and we're called to forever press in.

In the same way, salvation isn't a one time moment or exchange, for many also at an altar, that we then walk away from. It's a posture of repentance and faith that you begin in that moment and continue in for the rest of your life.

A perspective of grace that is limited to a one time transaction of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life can result in not just a bounded set, but being bound in sin.

And we operate in this perspective- salvation as punching our ticket to Heaven –

Once we've punched our ticket into Heaven, we clock out on Earth.

We aren't called to just punch our ticket to Heaven. We're called to pray "*thy kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven*" and then work toward bringing Heaven to earth

God's concern isn't a distant crossing into Heaven, but getting Heaven into us now.

Not some relocation. But transformation.

Not just transforming us, but transforming and renewing the world through us.

The cost of living with a bounded set instead of a centered one is so often growth.

Both in personal transformation and kingdom construction.

A centered set isn't static, it's dynamic, as we are ever moving closer toward the center.

When Christ is at the center and you're pressing in, there's always a new next step.

Praxis – 12 pathways... spiritual disciplines we will walk in as we follow Jesus

24 virtues... the Christ like qualities that will grow in us.

Before we hit on the third... I want to tie together the first two:

Why do we often find ourselves pulled into viewing eternal life as a future transaction, or operating from a bounded set with a line we cross over? **We want assurance of salvation.**

Why does the Rich Young Ruler ask Jesus how to punch his ticket and cross the line into eternal life? He wants assurance of salvation.

And this is key: Jesus doesn't mock him, he looks on him in love. God wants us to have assurance. Why? God is a good father.

My assurance isn't based on a future arrangement Jesus has made for me, but a present relationship.

The hymn blessed assurance nails it when it says: "**blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.**"

Not Heaven is mine. Not life after death is mine. *Jesus* is mine.

Jesus is *mine*. To call someone "mine." To be able to call someone yours.

That's the kind of relationship that runs **deep**.

Eternal life isn't just measured in length.

It's measured depth. Depth of relationship.

"to know God and Jesus whom he sent."

God sends himself. God gives himself. He doesn't give tickets to Heaven based on a receipt we received at some prayer at an altar. He gives Jesus Christ. Jesus is our proof of our Father's love.

**We want a transactional faith. But God is relational.
We want to cross a boundary. But God wants to be placed in the center.**

Jesus in us vs. us in Jesus

Romans 6:23 – doesn't say "eternal life in Heaven"
It says eternal life in Christ Jesus.

Unlike the other two we've talked about, this perspective of our relationship with God and eternal life isn't one or the other.

The Bible certainly speaks of Christ in us. Paul does five times in his letters.
But how many times does he speak of us being in Christ? **165 times.**

When we talk about inviting Christ in our hearts. This is easier to stomach.
He gets a part of us. He comes into my life. He takes up a room in my house.
He gets my heart, 1 of my 78 organs.

Unlike the tagline of this series, the tagline of our life reads:
My life tells a story and Jesus gets a part to play.
Not egregiously wrong. But it'll lead to a life lived small.

But Romans 6:23 talks about eternal life **IN** Christ Jesus,
and Paul adds so we don't get it twisted: "Christ Jesus...**our LORD.**"
The part Jesus plays in our story is meant to be LORD. Master. Author.
And as the old school saying goes that he's LORD of all or he's not LORD at all.

In John 15, Jesus makes the statement "**I am the vine, you are the branches**"
And nearly a dozen times over 17 verses he gives the command over and over:
remain in me.

Vs 4 & 5

***Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.
Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.***

We see in Jesus' words that fruit is essential. The fruit of character. The fruit of obedience.
But to become overly focused on the fruit and not the roots is the trap the Pharisees fell into.

The trap?

Self inflation – the Pharisees looking down on "sinners," wondering why Jesus dined with them,
and seeing a tax collector praying and thinking "at least I'm not like that guy."

Self hatred – a sober look at our own lives reveals we can never live up to the standard.

The medicine? This reminder in John 15. Remain in me. Focus on your roots. Don't be like the Pharisees, so focused on the fruit needed to punch their ticket to Heaven that they missed the God of Heaven walking in front of them.

If eternal life is relationship with God, my life's focus should be remaining and abiding in him. My job isn't to bear fruit. I can't do that apart from God. My focus should be abiding in him, staying rooted in the vine. The fruit is a byproduct.

So often in life we think we have to bear fruit **FOR** a God that's out there somewhere. But we can't on our own strength. We burn out and eventually tap out. I can't will myself into producing fruit if I'm a branch detached from the vine.

A life where fruit is the product of being **IN Christ** is a gamechanger. No longer is the goal doing something **FOR Christ**, pausing to operate spiritually from time to time as we navigate the secular or mundane.

If we're honest, often our day to day responsibilities feel like they very obstacles keeping us from a spiritual life. But they are the very place Jesus meets us.

Liturgy of the Ordinary -

Eternal life marked by a relationship with Jesus isn't about entering the gates of Heaven one day, or something we experience after we die. It's about allowing Jesus' eternal life to saturate our lives bit by bit, day by day. Remaining in Christ. Abiding in the vine.

Not moving impulsively onto the next thing on our day planner or calendar. But knowing Jesus meets us there in it. And we can abide in him.

You see as humans, our minds are a ceaseless flow of awareness. Therefore our mindfulness, or what we are aware of, is so key.

May we awaken this week like Jacob did to the presence of God:
"surely he is in this place, and I wasn't aware of it."

May we live mindful of the fact that Easter didn't just mark Jesus' defeat of death that we will experience when we meet him after death. It opened the door to eternal life – relationship with him – right here in our today.

May we realize that living "in Christ" those 165 times meant for Paul what it should mean for us today: "that God is telling a story and we have a part to play."