

## Life's **Eternal**, **Not** Temporary

*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is **temporary**, but what is unseen is **eternal***

2 Corinthians 4:18

Lent, in some Christian denominations, is that forty-day-long liturgical season of fasting and prayer before Easter. The context of the forty days in that instance represents the time Jesus spent in the desert; where, according to the Bible, He endured temptation by Satan. Roman Catholics have traditionally used the period to give up some practice they typically enjoy, such as smoking, eating or drinking certain foods and beverages, or participating in other particularly enjoyable practices. They thus spend 40 days enduring the temptation to break their commitment in regard to that particular abstention; hence identifying in a small degree with the temptation of Christ. Dissimilar churches calculate the forty days differently. Some begin the Lenten season on Ash Wednesday and end it at midnight on Holy Saturday. While we in the Baptist denomination do not recognize the 40 days preceding the Easter celebration as a specific period for abstention, it should be a time of reflection and opportunity for witness regarding the greatest benefit true Christians in all denominations have accrued because of the incarnation, perfect life, substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; that reward being eternal life in heaven because of Christ's victory over death, a privilege He imparts to all who have trusted Him as Lord and Savior.

The apostle Paul reassures all believers of this fact in his first letter to the church at Corinth when he consoles believers concerning the validity of the reports concerning Christ's resurrection from the dead. *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.* (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

During this pre-Easter season it would be well for us to focus on and share the truth of the acrostic that relates to the unquestionable reality concerning human life; it lasts forever when it concerns the soul: **L**ife is **e**ternal, **n**ot **t**emporary. Once a person is conceived in the womb of his or her mother and the soul is given by God, life, subjective awareness, thinking and contemplating never ends. David reveals this fact in his Psalm of lament: *Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* (Psalm 51:5) If we did not have a soul at the moment of our conception in mother's womb, there would be no place for sin to exist. As pointed out in Paul's second letter to Corinthian believers and noted above, that which is

unseen is eternal. While our material, visible bodies are doomed to death by the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the obedience of Christ has redeemed (that is He bought back) the immaterial, invisible souls of all who have trusted Christ by the gift of faith given by the grace of God. *For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.* (Romans 5:17)

## Opportunities to Witness

There are many misconceptions regarding the reality of a life after death. Some believe that all will go to heaven (I.e. Unitarian Universalists) while others believe that only those who earn the right, through good works, will deserve heaven; the latter being mostly cults; such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. Some believe that there is no after life and that we simply end in oblivion; when it's over it's over. Our job is to relay the truth as opposed to those false impressions.

In the Shakespearian play entitled *Hamlet*, having discovered that his uncle and mother (who were lovers) had perpetrated the murder of his father, the young prince (Hamlet) contemplated suicide. In doing so he uttered those now famous words "To be or nor to be; that is the question." Since Hamlet's question was patently wrong there was no possible way that he could have received the right answer. It is axiomatic that an erroneous premise always leads to a mistaken conclusion. When one becomes (is conceived in the womb), one will always be. Ergo the valid question is not whether to be, but where to be. That is the query we can each use when witnessing to our friends and relatives during the Lenten period. Simply posit, "Where will you be 30 nanoseconds after you die?" Having delineated the genuine question we can now progress to an authentic answer.

Before giving our valid answer, however, we must first consider some of the possible answers given by our friends or relatives so that we can be ready for a rebuttal. Some will say, "It is impossible to know the answer to that question?" Where upon we answer that invalid statement with God's Word; in John's 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle, where we read; *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.* (1 John 5:13) That says that we do not have to wonder about, hope or pray for eternal life; we can know for certain. You then say that by believing in the truth of Jesus Christ and receiving Him as Lord and Savior through a prayer of faith one can know for certain where they will be at the moment one dies. The believer is bound for heaven. In speaking of that inevitable

event following physical death Paul wrote this: *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.* (2 Corinthians 5:8) The soul leaving the body enters heaven.

Another may say, "I have been a good person and I am going to heaven because of the good work I have done during my life on earth. It more than balances out the errors I have made" Your answer should be a question. "How many good works will it take to balance the wrong you and I have done? If we err in that calculation we will miss the joys of heaven." You may want to use this example in order to explain. Suppose that God grades sins and good works on a scale of 1 to 10 but we don't know what value He assigns to which sin and which good works. Suppose that I lie and that is graded with a 10. I then do a good work; bake a pie for a sick neighbor and He assigns a score of 1 to that act of mercy. I would have to perform 10 acts of goodness to cancel out the one act of lying. The same can be said for cheating, stealing, dishonoring a parent or thinking an adulterous thought. When we have added up the value of our collective good works and then subtract the sum totaled value of all of our sins will we be in the black or in the red? The point is this, we would never know until we either ended up either in Hell or Heaven. We could not rest assured that God considered us worthy of spending eternity with Him.

At that point you turn to another passage of Scripture for your answer. There we read the words of Paul who wrote; *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.* (Ephesians 2:8-9) Grace is defined as the unmeritable favor of God. Some say "unmerited." But that implies a not yet merited favor. The use of the adjective unmeritable means that there is no possible way that sinners such as we are could ever merit, that is earn through good works, the love, mercy and eternal company of a holy, righteous and just God.

At that juncture you point out the fact that no one who has ever lived can earn their way into heaven because we are all sinners at heart. God's Word teaches us that, *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* (Romans 3:23) and furthermore *the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 6:23) No matter how "good" we have been we will always fall short of God's requirements. Consider our earthly life to be analogous to the sport of pole vaulting. He has set the bar so high that we can never hope to rise above it; no matter how long the pole (the sum total of our righteous acts) has been. In fact God likens our good works to a pile of foul smelling, putrid, filthy rags. His prophet Isaiah teaches us that lesson; *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.* (Isaiah 64:6) At that point in the

discussion you should ask them if they would like to pray to receive that free gift of grace and mercy and gain eternal life. If they are not yet ready for that step of faith, move on to the next phase in your attempt to convince and convert.

Given the fact that the soul is eternal, what are our options regarding our eternal destiny? There are only two; heaven with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, the faithful angels and all believers of all time or a literal place called Hell followed by a Godless eternity. This is what the Bible teaches about heaven; *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.* (Hebrews 12:22-24)

### Biblical proof of Eternity

If, on the other hand, one rejects the truth about life going on after one dies, you can share these verses and the explanations offered from God's Word. *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.* (Ecclesiastes 3:11) Even if a person is ignorant regarding the work of God in creation, intervention, providence and salvation, the awareness of eternity, the subconscious notion that life will go on after we die, was implanted in each one of our souls at the time of our conception. Some have chosen to suppress that truth and the truth about the existence of God Himself. The apostle Paul has taught us that in his letter to the church in Rome. *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* (Romans 1:18-19)

The Bible clearly teaches that life after physical death goes on eternally. Solomon wrote these poignant words as he was about to close his great literary work in Ecclesiastes. He believed that when a man dies *the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.* (Ecclesiastes 12:7) The spirit spoken of there is the soul that God gave at the very moment we were conceived in the womb; one stem cell small. As we will note later, even the soul of a departed unbeliever will eventually return to God in order to stand in final judgment prior to being cast into a lonely, Godless, perpetually miserable eternal existence. Daniel too has taught the same truth. *There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your*

*people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.* (Daniel 12: 1-2) The “book” is the Lamb’s, about which we will have more to say. That “time of distress” is the great tribulation, a seven year period of abject devastation that comes upon planet earth prior to the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ. The church (body of believers) that remains alive on earth will be raptured (taken to heaven) immediately prior to that seven year period and the introduction of the Antichrist (a world leader) to the nations. The point of that passage in the book of Daniel is that every person ever born on this earth will one day face either “everlasting life” in heaven or “everlasting contempt,” first in Hell and later in an eternal place, called the Lake of Fire; a place to be explained later. Jesus offered more warnings about Hell than the words He spoke regarding heaven.

## Turning Up the Heat

Some unbelievers in response to our witness will jokingly say, “I am not worried about going to hell; most of my friends will be there to keep me company.” Hell is no picnic and people need to know the truth about that. The reality of, and warnings regarding, eternal punishment are depicted through out the Word of God in both the New and Old Testaments. Paul wrote this caveat to one church, *He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.* (2 Thessalonians 1:9) When the prophet Isaiah told unbelieving Israelites about Hell they reacted quite differently; it was no joke in their minds. *The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?* (Isaiah 33: 14) Jude also provides a rather graphic picture of the eternal destiny of those who choose to reject the truth of Christ. *And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire...They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.* (Jude 6-7; 13)

When a believer dies today the real he or she (the soul) departs the body and goes directly to heaven after which, at the time of the resurrection of bodies at the rapture and prior to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming, they will receive a glorified body. *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,*

*we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. (2 Corinthians 5: 1-5)* The "tent" analogy is our temporary dwelling while here on earth; the physical, mortal, destructible, corruptible body. We are ashamed of our nakedness in the same manner that Adam and Eve were when they sinned and caused the fall of all mankind. They futilely and immediately attempted to cover their private parts with fig leaves. It is that perpetual shame which encourages us to wear clothes. The "heavenly dwelling" is our permanent dwelling place, a glorified body that is immortal, indestructible and incorruptible. Heaven is the final purpose for which God made us as believers, but until then we are to be about the business of utilizing the spiritual gifts He has given us to serve others and glorify His name. *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4: 10)*

When unbelievers die their soul goes immediately to Hell where they await the final judgment before being cast into a Godless, blazing eternity apart from everyone else who disbelieved. The prophet Isaiah, having been instructed by the Holy Spirit, described the first stop, Hell, in this manner: *The grave below is all astir to meet you at your coming; it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you— all those who were leaders in the world; it makes them rise from their thrones— all those who were kings over the nations. They will all respond, they will say to you, "You also have become weak, as we are; you have become like us." All your pomp has been brought down to the grave, along with the noise of your harps; maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you. (Isaiah 14:9-11)* That is certainly not a very pretty picture whether your friends are with you or not. However, as bad as that seems, it is going to get exceedingly worse. The adage that "misery loves company" is somewhat satisfied in Hell. When the final judgment comes however, those now residing in Hell will go into a limitless place where there is no company, just a profound, never ending misery.

After a period of time in the dungeons of Hell those dead will have to stand before the throne of God for a period of final judgment. That comes after a millennial (1000 year) reign of Christ on earth following His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. The apostle John, having received a vision of the event while in exile on the Island of Patmos, recorded it thusly: *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before*

*the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.* (Revelation 20: 11-15) Recall Daniel's words regarding that.

The Lake of Fire at that time has three occupants: Antichrist (aka "the beast"), the false Prophet and Satan himself; the so-called un-holy trinity. John also teaches us that fact in the book of Revelation. When Jesus conquers evil and wins the battle of Armageddon at his 2<sup>nd</sup> coming this happens: *But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur.* (Revelation 19:20) *And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.* (Revelation 20: 10) The lake of burning sulfur is the Lake of Fire.

The books being opened and read aloud to the accused deserve further mention and a word of explanation here. In Romans 2: 16, we are informed that there will be a *day when God will judge men's secrets*. One of the books will have a list of those secrets and they will be read for all to hear. Imagine the shame those standing there will feel, hearing their deepest, darkest, clandestine thoughts and acts revealed before others. Another book has a running record of the good and bad deeds we have done through life. Ecclesiastes 12: 14 reminds us of that fact; *For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.* At that time God will also explain that those good works performed to balance out the sin in their lives, fell far short of pleasing Him. A third book reveals the actual motives behind the things we've done. Even a seemingly good work can have a wrong motive. For example the person may have done a good work to cancel out a sinful act. In reference to that the apostle Paul warned the church at Corinth that the Lord *"will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts."* (I Corinthians 4: 5)

Having disclosed the information recorded in those books, the most important book of all will be opened; the Lamb's book of life. Therein one finds the names of all people that will be spending eternity with God; the names He has known from the time prior to His creating the universe. That is the only book then being opened before those people that will say nothing

regarding them. It is then that God will declare to them: "You have been trying to rid yourself of me since the day you were born. But because I fill both heaven and earth that effort was utterly impossible until now. Where you are now going forever I will not be found. Furthermore even though billions of other unbelieving souls are there also, you will each be separated so far from one another that you will not be aware of any company. That is what my servant Jude meant when he wrote in verse 13 of the nature and destiny of people of your ilk; *they are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.*" At that point if a man's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

When these sinners are cast into the Lake of Fire the thoughts, if not the words recorded in Psalm 90: 7-8 will be with them for ever. *For we have been consumed by your anger, and by your wrath we are terrified. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. For all our days have passed away in Your wrath.* Their fear, shame and regrets will never end.

In warning of the two opposite and final destinies for people of faith versus unbelievers, Jesus spoke these words: *I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" (Matthew 8: 11-12) The weeping king Satan's people will be due to regrets, loneliness, depression and pain. The gnashing of the teeth will be a response to the searing pain of the burning sulfur, a pain that will never end.

These truths regarding Hell and the Lake of Fire are seldom spoken of from most of the pulpits in our land because they are either not believed or considered too hard to teach. They are however very crucial realities needing to be taught if a person is to make the proper choice as to whether or not to avail himself or herself of the truth of God and become involved in a Bible honoring, God fearing and sound preaching and teaching Christian fellowship such as we have at Old North Church. We should not be ashamed to share these truths. Paul has written this encouragement; *So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.* (2 Timothy 1:8-9)

This Lenten season, instead of planning to give something up, join with others in suffering for the gospel by giving something out; the good news of Jesus Christ and what the Easter celebration is really all about. Invite someone to Old North Church to worship on Easter, some person who is either a skeptic, unchurched or dissatisfied where they are now worshipping. *Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.* (James 5:20) Lest you think that God does not appreciate our witness, this is what He said through one of His prophets: *How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news...* (Isaiah 52:7)

*Soli Deo Gloria*