

The Promise of Eternal Life • 1 John 2:24–25

My first recollection of death came from the upstairs bedroom of the house I lived in as a child. I was about four years old when my grandfather died. My parents chose to shield me from the harsh realities of what had happened. Whether they were right or wrong, they did not allow me to see his body, nor did I attend his funeral. My only specific memory is a visual one – of playing down the street and looking down toward our house and seeing, parked outside, the black funeral hearse that took his body away. It is a surprisingly vivid memory still, for it seemed very black and it seemed very large, even from a distance. But even though death had come my way, I don't think I really understood anything about it at all.

It was not until several years later in an experience that, as an adult, I must confess to you, almost sounds silly, but for me as an eight-year-old boy, it was most serious. One day when I came home from school I walked down the dead end street on which our house was situated, and through a path I had traveled 1,000 times before into the park that was nearby. I went to what was my favorite place where I had played many times before, under some very tall pine trees where there was a carpet of pine needles on the ground below, and there, to my surprise, I found a dead squirrel. Of course I had seen squirrels many other times before, but I had never until that day touched one. I touched it and found that it was soft and furry, and I liked that squirrel. I felt sorry for him, and I wanted to help. I wanted to fix him, so I ran to get some water. I still remember prying open his mouth and trying to pour some water in. I found some food and offered it to him to eat.

I sat there for what I suspect were a couple of hours and held him and petted him and loved him. And I discovered something that to me, at the time, was absolutely astounding. I had never thought about it before. I discovered that death meant that he could not be fixed. Everything else I had encountered before that was broken, I could fix or somebody else could. But death was different.

Death was final. That gray squirrel would climb no more trees, collect no more nuts, never again scamper across the street in front of a car . . . it was dead.

Easter deals with death. Not squirrel death, but human death. Human death is our universal experience. You can trace back in your family tree for as many generations as you are able and you will find that everyone died. And so shall all of us. The gate to death is a gate that is not a respecter of persons. All the distinctions we generally make in life of gender and education and wealth and position and power make no difference at all. In death it doesn't count if one is male or female, young or old, educated or ignorant, rich or poor, powerful or weak. It doesn't make any difference because death claims absolutely all of us. Some painfully, some painlessly, but it is an inevitable expectation of all of us.

Personally, I find death to be serious, to be sobering. In fact, I will tell you that I find it to be scary. And that is why I'm so interested in Easter,

because Easter is an account of a man who died and came back to life again.

Whenever I have an opportunity to travel to a country to which I have never before been, I look in advance for someone who has been

there, maybe even someone who has lived there. When I find such a person, I ask questions. I ask about the culture, I ask all kinds of questions, but most of all I ask, "What is it like?"

When I think of death, a journey that I inevitably must take, I look for someone who has been there, who has lived there, and who has returned. The only one I know to whom I can turn, who has had such an experience, is Jesus. He was dead and buried and rose again, and he says that he and we may now live eternally because of what happened. His message is that Easter results in eternal life.

I'm also quite interested in the words of a man who was an eyewitness to all of this. A man who was actually standing near the cross on Good Friday, and a man who touched and talked with Jesus

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after his resurrection. His name was John, and he wrote words when he himself was an old man coming near the gate of death. He wrote in 1 John 2 verses 24 and 25, “See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us - even eternal life.”

It seems to me that John’s advice here breaks down into two parts. In the first part he tells us to stay with the Easter message and if you do, you’ll stay with God. What he’s talking about is “Gospel-Keeping”, or keeping on hanging on to the gospel, as he writes, “See that what you heard from the beginning remains in you.”

In our country there are millions of people who can say that from the beginning they have heard the gospel message, the story of Jesus Christ. They heard it at home; they heard it at Sunday School; they were baptized; they went to Catechism and were confirmed; they learned the lesson, but somehow in their adult life it is as if it has been forgotten. Oh, it’s still there in some dusty old volume of the library shelf of the brain, but not in terms of any type of commitment or relationship or anything like that.

I have talked with many adults who have said to me that they were born Christians which, of course, is a technical impossibility, or they say that they became Christians when they were four or five or six years old, but somehow it never stuck. They discovered in adulthood that they learned the facts, but the faith was really that of their parents and not their own.

The word gospel means ‘good news.’ It is the good news that God’s Son, who is himself God, came to earth and took on human flesh. He became like us. He lived a perfect life for 33 years. He died voluntarily an awful death of suffering on the cross to pay the price for human sin. He was buried, and on Easter Sunday morning he rose back to real life again, proving that death can be defeated and offering eternal life to all who would believe in him. Belief in him is part of that essential gospel message.

Those are the facts. But with them also comes from God an offer of a contract, a contract between God and us. It’s a contract in which God offers to us salvation, and we must offer him our lives. It is “Gospel-Keeping.”

John writes that “what you heard from the be-

ginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.” That is not “Gospel-Keeping”, that is “God-keeping”, and he is saying that the two are inseparably linked – they cannot be divided from each other. If you have the gospel then you have God, and if you don’t have the gospel you don’t have God. The two always, invariably, go together.

My parents live on the East Coast of the United States. Because of the distance they are from where I live, my primary means of keeping in touch with them is by telephone. In order to telephone them, I must know their telephone number – their area code and then the seven digits that follow. So to call them I need to know that the number is 201-226-7330, and I have to get the number exactly right. If I change a single digit in the area code and dial 202 instead of 201, I will not reach the state of New Jersey where they live, but rather Washington D.C., which is only one digit different in its area code. If, instead of dialing 226, I should dial 326, while I might reach the state of New Jersey, it will be a different community, a community where they do not live. If I get those digits correct, but fail to get the 7330 and miss just one there, while I might get into their town, I’ll get someone, in all probability, that I don’t know. Certainly it won’t be my father or my mother. So, in order to call them, I have to have every number, and I have to have them exactly right.

Just having those numbers in my mind, though, accomplishes nothing at all. I must make a commitment. I need to pick up the telephone; I need to push the buttons; I must be willing to pay for the call; and I need to do it.

But that is still not all I need to do. I need to hang on. I need to wait until someone answers. And I need to speak and identify myself and say why I’m calling. I need to share my thoughts and heart with them, and I need to listen as they share their thoughts and their hearts with me. So to put it all together, I need to have the right number, commit to the call and have a relationship with my father and with my mother.

The same goes for the gospel and for God. First, we must know the facts: the fact that the Son of God came, that he became a man, that he died in our place on the cross, that he rose again from the dead, and that he offers salvation on the basis of what he did. We can’t foul up a single one of

those facts. Just as you can't miss a single digit in a telephone number to call it right to get to your destination, so you cannot say that he is God, but he is not man. You can't say that he died, but he didn't rise again from the dead. You can't say that he died, but he didn't die for our sins. And you can't put it all together and then fail to say that he offers to us eternal life and forgiveness of sins on the basis of what he did.

All the facts must be correct, exactly right, but having the facts in our brain is not enough. Like the telephone we must pick up, so we must also commit to do something with those facts. We must accept the gospel in faith. We must accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and as our Lord. We must make that commitment.

But even that does not complete what it is all about. For we need to hang on to the line. We need to talk to God, to tell him who we are. We need to share with him our lives and our hearts and our thoughts. And we need to listen to God as he shares his life and his heart and his thoughts back to us.

John writes in 1 John 2:24, "See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father." Which brings us to the second part of John's advice. It is that if you stay with the Easter message and if you stay with God, then you will experience eternal life.

In the next line he writes, "And this is what he promised us - even eternal life." Now I think there is a great misunderstanding about eternal life. For example, people often think that mostly what it means is time, a very long time. While time is an element in eternal life, it talks far more about the quality of life that comes from eternity. So the main thing about eternal life is its quality of life.

People who live in Minnesota understand that because we often talk about the quality of life we have in our state. Those who advertise on our behalf talk about it even more than we do. Minnesota has a marvelous quality of life. We have our lakes and we have the arts. We have major sports teams and we have opportunities in terms of education. We have the best in medical care. We have a grand quality of life.

We also speak of the quality of life when it's poor. We think of people who have been in tragic accidents and are left severely handicapped or perhaps even in a comma, and while we say that life is there, we say it's a very poor quality of life.

Let me tell you what eternal life is. It is the life of eternity, or another way of saying it, it is the life of heaven. The moment a person becomes a Christian, he or she gets heaven's life even though still temporarily here on earth. So let me tell you what eternal life is. It is the life of eternity, or another way of saying it, It is just a part; some day it will be whole.

Several years ago, along with a small team of others, I traveled across the Sahel of West Africa. It is that swath of land just south of the dunes of the Sahara Desert. In fact, as you travel the Sahel you can see the encroachment of the sand as miles are lost every year and as drought moves the Sahara farther south.

We went to some very remote places in the West African countries of Burkina Faso and Mali, remote places only accessible by four wheel drive vehicles. Places where the humidity must have been as close to zero as it could be in any desert, and where we were baked in a sunlight that soared the temperatures up to 130 degrees or more. There were times in the great discomfort of it all that I often thought about home. About the comforts and the

conveniences that I as an American have routinely enjoyed for all of my life and I was out there missing it greatly.

At the conclusion of our trip, before fly-

ing out of Africa, we went to the capital city of Burkina Faso, which is Ouagadougou. There we went to the United States Embassy for a visit. We walked up the path, again in scorching hot sun, and went through the double doors of the US Embassy. I was immediately impressed with the first delight and that was air conditioning. While I wouldn't say it was heaven, I'll say the contrast was clear between where I had been and what I was experiencing at that moment.

Immediately we were greeted by a United States Marine guard, for it's the Marines that guard the embassies of the United States in all foreign countries. What a joy to be greeted in English, a

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language I understood, for I had heard a lot of languages I didn't understand at all. To be able to talk back and forth with him!

And then the third delight of that visit to the U.S. Embassy was to go to the recreational area that was part of the embassy compound, primarily provided for embassy employees and their dependents. There was a swimming pool and next to that a snack shop, also air conditioned. My three American friends and I sat around a table and I had a hamburger and French fries and a Coke with ice! It may be an exaggeration to say that it was the best meal of my life, but it was one of the best meals of my entire life.

What I experienced there was a little bit of the United States in a foreign place. It is said that, legally, an embassy is really part of the territory of the country it represents. It was a piece of the United States that I there experienced and delighted in until I eventually came home to the United States of America to enjoy all of the comforts and conveniences that are ours.

And so it is with the quality of life that is called eternal life, for it is a taste of heaven in advance. It's the comforts, the delight, the pleasure and the joy of having just a piece, not the whole thing. For someday the whole thing shall be ours, and then the eternal life which has now begun for us will be full-blown in eternal life, which is the highest quality and the greatest gift God has to give.

But there is also a quantity to eternal life. For that which is eternal has no end; it goes on and on and on and on. It is forever. That is a notion with which most of us are not comfortable or familiar, for we routinely think of everything as having a termination point, of coming to an end. That will not be so with eternal life. There will be no death with a punctuation mark at the end of the life of eternity. For Jesus Christ in his resurrection took on and defeated death once and for all. Forever.

Put all of that together one more time – that those that get the Easter message get God and those who get God get his promise of eternal life with all of its qualities and with all of its quantity. Does this describe you? Would you say you are an Easter Christian? Not just what you learned as a kid and mostly lost, but present, personal faith in a living and risen Jesus. If you've got it, keep it. If you haven't got it, get it. Make that transaction. Tell God that you accept his Son, Jesus, as your Savior

and your Lord. Accept his gift of eternal life and give yourself to him. Become an eternal life Christian.

Diane Komp is a physician and a professor of Pediatrics at the Yale University School of Medicine. She tells a lot of fascinating stories about her experiences with children as they die. Some of those were recounted in the January 20, 1990, issue of the Los Angeles Times.

Among them was a story that Dr. Komp tells about one of her early experiences when she was a resident. A little girl was dying of leukemia. Before the girl died, according to Dr. Komp, she found the energy to sit up and to say, 'The angels - they are so beautiful! Mommy, can you see them? Do you hear their singing? I've never heard such beautiful singing.'

But Dr. Komp's favorite story is about a boy, also dying of leukemia, at the Yale New Haven Hospital. This boy's parents gave strict instructions that no one was to tell him he was going to die and that no one was to make any mention to him of God or anything religious. Great effort was made to follow these instructions. Even the volunteer hospice workers were instructed what not to say. Dr. Komp says that this child had a dream. A school bus pulled up to his house in his dream and Jesus was on the school bus. He invited the child onto the bus. Jesus told him of his coming death and in the telling gave to him great peace.

That is the Easter story all over again. In the face of death comes a living Jesus who invites us onto the heaven-bound bus of eternal life. Won't you climb aboard? Climb aboard with Jesus!

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