

I WANT TO LIVE FOREVER

The ancient sufferer Job asked: “If a man dies, will he live again?” And the modern musician, Bon Jovi, sings his answer:

This ain't a song for the broken-hearted
No silent prayer for the faith-departed
I ain't gonna be just a face in the crowd
You're gonna hear my voice
When I shout it out loud.

It's my life
It's now or never
I ain't gonna live forever
I just want to live while I'm alive
(It's my life)
My heart is like an open highway
Like Frankie said
I did it my way
I just wanna live while I'm alive
It's my life.

Bon Jovi may sing a different song when the doctor tells him he is going to die. He may then ask Job's question: “If a man dies, will he live again?”

If you have watched someone die, if you have been threatened with death, if you have lost someone you dearly love, if you have thought about how much longer you have to live—you probably have wanted to live forever.

Immortality is a universal quest. Every country. Every language. Every religion. Every generation. We all want to live forever. While there may be a few rare exceptions among poets, philosophers, musicians and cynics who have said they don't want to live forever, they are just that—rare exceptions. We are all born with an instinctive need to breathe, to eat, to drink and to

sleep. It would make no sense for there to be such instincts if there were no possibility for those needs to be satisfied.

Similarly there is an instinctive need to live forever. We all want life to go beyond death. We want to reconnect to those we love who have died. We want our lives to be more than a half dozen or even a dozen decades. Four hundred years from now we want someone to remember us. We don't want this life to be all there is.

Living is so deeply ingrained in us that we will go to extraordinary lengths in order to extend it. We will do just about anything to keep life going. Even when we come to the end and we know it's our last breath we don't give up hope; we hold on.

The pyramids in Egypt are one of the wonders of the ancient world. Some say that it took 100,000 workers as many as 40 years to build one pyramid. Pharaohs were buried with boats, clothes, money, food and servants to take them over the divide of death and into the next life. Why would they do go to so much time and expense? Because they calculated that this life was short and the next life was forever. They knew where they were going to spend the most time and invested accordingly.

When baseball hero Ted Williams died his family publicly and legally fought over what to do with his body. Allegedly, Williams wrote a longhand note saying his body should be frozen for future thawing and resuscitation. It was a hope in the "world religion" of scientific optimism that somehow sometime scientists will give us immortality by overcoming the effects of death.

If you visit Beijing, Moscow and Hanoi you can see on display the preserved bodies of Mao, Lenin and Ho Chi Minh. This is the communist version of immortality. Even if the soul is permanently gone at least the body can be perpetuated with preservatives, air-conditioning and lots of wax so that we can see what they looked like.

Every religion focuses on immortality: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity and a myriad of lesser faiths. Some teach reincarnation. Others talk about heaven and hell. Some say there is an evolving into some kind of eternal deity. The doctrines are contradictory but the desire for eternal life is everywhere.

God has put eternity into our heads and hearts. We are all designed for life, not for death. We yearn for life. We expect life. We want to live forever. Even those who do not believe they can live forever probably wish they could believe they could live forever.

According to the Bible there is only one path to eternal life, and that is Jesus Christ. John 17:3 records a prayer that Jesus prayed to God the Father: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

The Bible teaches the central message of Christianity. All of humanity is infected with the terminal disease of sin. Jesus Christ came from heaven to deliver the only cure. When Jesus died on the cross he cured sin and death. He made eternal life possible. The prescription to get this eternal life is faith in Jesus alone—to believe in him and what he has done.

Occasionally we read news stories of sick people who refuse treatment for a life-threatening malady. Because of religious or other reasons they will not receive a blood transfusion or authorize an operation. If they are rational adults our legal system allows them to refuse the treatment that will save their lives. The attending physician may speak with anger or may speak with tears, but either way says, “Accept the treatment or you will die.”

It is a similar but more important message from the Bible to all of us with the terminal illness of sin: Accept Jesus or die forever.

For those who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin and giver of eternal life there is not an exemption from physical death. At least not for most of us! There are some who will be alive when Jesus Christ returns to earth and will have an opportunity to transition from this life to eternal life without going through the gate of death. For the rest of us, physical death is the way we get from here to there.

In some ways the Bible tells us a lot of things about what to expect after we die. In some ways, however, the Bible has left a lot of questions unanswered. Because the teachings are spread throughout the Bible and our time is limited I am going to summarize them rather than spend a lot of time on each one. If you want to study some for yourself a good place to begin is in I Corinthians 15 in the New Testament.

When a Christian dies, his or her body is buried and his or her soul goes to heaven to be with God. We don't know how our souls function without our bodies. Do we get a “loaner” from somewhere in heaven that we can borrow at least for awhile? If so, what will it be like?

These questions are not answered in the Bible. What we are told is that it is temporary. Now “temporary” may seem all too long, but in the scope of eternity it is relatively brief. What we do know is that God has scheduled a future resurrection when he will bring our dead bodies back to physical life again. But that will take amazing miracles because most bodies will have been mostly destroyed. So how will God do it? Again, the answers are not given. What we do know is that we are talking about the God who created the world and us in the first place. He is more than capable of fulfilling what he has promised he will do.

The resurrection bodies we will receive will be like our present bodies only significantly upgraded (sort of like the original Microsoft Windows software and the newest Microsoft Windows software). Our bodies and souls will be reunited and live together forever as us.

Life will be indescribably good. We will have happiness and joy that will be wonderfully fulfilling. There will be no sin or pain or disease or death. We will love and glorify God as we were originally designed to do. Our eternal homes may be in heaven or back on earth or maybe both—a primary residence in heaven and a second home on earth. It’s described in the New Testament in II Peter 3:13, “But in keeping with (God’s) promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

St. John got a preview of what all this would look like, and he wrote that preview in Revelation 21:1-4:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

We do not know the details of our eternal life in the new heaven and new earth but it will be as good as it gets. **We may fully expect that the God who created this world and all the joys and desires of this life will incorporate the same design elements into our next life.** Some of us may worry about the details but we will discover that God thought of all the details and made the

future better than anything we ever could have imagined. In other words, this deep human desire to live forever will be fully and forever satisfied in the eternal life that Christians will experience in the future.

This brings us back to today. Forever changes time; tomorrow impacts right now. This is not our usual way of thinking of things. We usually talk about how today determines tomorrow, and of course, this is true. If we take care of our bodies today we will increase health in the future; if we go to school today it will impact our life's work; if we accept Jesus as Savior in this life we will have eternal life rather than eternal death. Yes, today determines tomorrow. However, what we have guaranteed for us in the future also transforms life now.

If you know that you will have life after death then physical death is far less frightening. If you know that eternity will be problem-free and pain-free then this world's troubles are far more tolerable. If you know that you are destined to eternal happiness, today's sadness is handled differently because it is temporary. If you know that your life has eternal meaning and destiny then this life has meaning and purpose.

What a contrast to those who don't have eternal life and all the promises that God has given to Christians. Their expectations for life after death are worse, not better (no wonder they hold on to living for so long!). They think that all of life has to be lived out in 30 or 40 or 80 or 90 years. They assume that they have to accumulate wealth and success now or there will be no opportunity beyond death. When life is terribly hard they are devastated because there is no hope for anything better.

Christians are those who have a guaranteed good future, and that transforms the way we live in the present.

On the last page of the last book of C. S. Lewis's classic *Chronicles of Narnia* there is a conversation between the children of the story and Aslan (Aslan is a lion who represents Jesus). Aslan says to the children:

“You do not look so happy as I mean you to be.”

Lucy said, “We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often.”

“No fear of that”, said Aslan. “Have you not guessed?”

Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.

“There was a real railway accident”, said Aslan softly. “Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream has ended; this is morning.”

And as he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth had read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Someday our bodies will die. Every one of us will have “the date after the dash” (on the left of the dash is the date of birth; on the right of the dash is the date of death). For those who are Christians the date after the dash is merely the end of the title page of our eternal biography! As C. S. Lewis wrote:

... for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth had read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

In the words of Jesus in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

God of Eternity, what a gift you have given to us—eternal life through Jesus Christ. Not only do we thank you for it but we live differently now because of what we have been promised then.

For any who have not yet accepted the gift of eternal life, I pray that today may be the day they say “Yes” to following Jesus and getting the guarantee of forever. May the date after the dash

*be just the beginning and “every chapter better than the one before”
... because of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

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