

## “Eternal Life” (John 3:14-21)

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who loved you so much that He gave His life to save you, so now you *are* saved; now you *are* forgiven no matter what. Amen. My relationship with my father was inextricable. People talk about how easy and common it is for children to idolize their dads (esp. sons towards their dads). Kids do that. He was easy for me to idolize. Though he had only a high school diploma, he made his way through the world in becoming a world-class journeyman mechanic. If it had an engine and wheels, he could fix it. Tractor, big rig, truck, car, motorcycle...it didn't matter...God really gifted him. He could stand back and examine two things: the sound of an idling engine and the tint of the exhaust...just from these two things, he could diagnose in a way that to this day I find astounding. He had been a U.S. Marine. He was strong; a man's man. But then we grow up and the idealizing starts to fade right? We all understand, but I have to say that even to this day as I am almost 50 years old, I continue to marvel in the gift that God gave me in my father. The physical strength and endurance; the skill in mechanics are not so much the focal point, however, but now I think more about other things...he worked like crazy to support his family (he quite simply taught me to work hard and not pay a second thought to it), but he was always giving...and he was so fantastically generous; he was gracious. Why? Was it because I was such a great kid? Well actually, no, I wasn't. Whatever motivated my dad, I am quite sure it was not because I was so well behaved and a poster-child for warming your parent's heart. I have the unsavory reputation in my immediate family, that I – the youngest child – was for the most part responsible for my parent's grey hairs. My grandmother called me (in Spanish) “diablo” (I know, way too much information about your pastor), but imagine how funny for some of my family members who know that diablo became a pastor! But my father was always pouring out his love which was way beyond anything I could possibly have earned. *That* is what amazes me about my father. I still want to be like him.

And while I know that he did not actually grasp the Gospel of Christ – in his *understanding* -- until his later years, I think about how unbeknownst to me I was receiving a living picture of the Gospel itself from my father even from a very young age. He wasn't afraid to discipline me and that he did, but he never, ever led me to question whether or not he loved me. I'll never forget when I was so sick that I was delirious as a little boy, and yet I can remember his carrying me into the doctor's office in the middle of the night as I was burning up with scarlet fever; I'll never forget our hiking in the mountains when I was still a boy and my tripping and falling and tumbling down...he leaped down and dug his heels into the steep slope and caught me. I'll never forget being in college and my car breaking down before descending the grape vine and I couldn't believe how fast he got there...and he was so adept at mechanics, I was able to drive the car home after his make-shift repairs and he really didn't even get on my case. He “just” loved me. Even when he called me a “knuckle-head,” he was still loving me!

I have realized that the Lord gave me a glimpse, just a little tiny glimpse of the Gospel from my other Father, my ultimate Father...and your ultimate Father. Why does He love us so...why? You sin, He still loves you; you rebel, He still loves you; you forget about him; He still loves you; you wander away, He still loves you; you try to ignore Him, He still loves you. Why does He love us so? Why? We can't give an adequate answer...He just does. He *is* love (1<sup>st</sup> John 4:8 & 16). No matter how many times you've screwed up, He still loves you. But we need to understand that this isn't cheap talk. This isn't "paint God the way you want to paint Him so that you can tell yourself that He loves you (whether or not it's actually true)," no way. This is *absolutely* the case. This is a real state of affairs: your Heavenly Father – THE Heavenly Father, Maker of heaven and earth – actually and truly loves you this way. This is an objective fact.

How do we know? The "how do we know" is the answer; it is the Gospel, the Good News, the wonderful, wonderful Good News. I've been handling, teaching, preaching on John 3:16 for a long time, but I've got to tell you that this text from God's Holy Word NEVER ceases to amaze me. As I prepared for today's sermon I thought and still think: "No wonder we call this "The Good News," the saving Gospel. It is beyond sweet to the soul; it is the anchor to our peace; it is our confidence that we will live beyond the portal of physical death; it is our assurance that no matter what, we are loved by the Lord of Life and that therefore we have life that by definition can never cease. You Christian – soak it in – right now as you trust in Jesus Christ, you have in your possession *eternal life*.

The Word of God says at John 3:14 that the Lord Jesus had to be lifted up on the cross. It uses the word "must" and this little word shows the compulsion within the heart of God towards you. He saw that you were in big trouble. He knew it and in spite of your sin that causes you to want to do your own thing, He made Himself send His Son because He loved and loves you.

But is this Gospel really for you? Yes and here again, no need for speculation or guessing. Verse 15 says "That whoever believes in him may have eternal life." This wording "whoever" is an expression of a universal situation. "Whoever" is another way of saying "everyone" or "anyone"...salvation is extended to all. Are you part of the "all" amongst humanity? Are you human? If you could answer "yes" to either of those questions (hopefully to both those questions, ☺), then yes, you are included. And as you believe through the power of this Good News that opens hearts and minds and literally brings light into your soul and truth into what you know; then the Scriptures are here teaching: you HAVE eternal life. It's already yours. This is not a future prospect or potential gift. You've got it right now as you believe in Jesus Christ! And when combined with the whole sentence in the original language it means, "that [you] may keep on having eternal life." And it's not about how strong or weak your faith is. What matters is in WHOM your faith is in; *that* is what counts and when the answer is Jesus, then that's it...through that ONE thing (Jesus!) you HAVE eternal life. That's a fact. This is your confidence. This is your security. This is your salvation! "Whoever believes in [the Son of God,

be it with a strong or with a weak faith,] may have eternal life. [John 3:15] Worthiness does not depend on the greatness or smallness, the weakness or strength of faith. Instead, it depends on Christ's merit." [FC SD VII 70-71]

God loved you so much that He desired to give you life that never ends and He accomplished that – and proved His love for you – by giving you Jesus. And when you trust in Him, you HAVE – here and now – eternal life. And man is this life something to get excited about! The apostle John makes a huge deal about this wording. In His Gospel he describes this gift to you called “eternal life” about 17 times. This is special life, not just any life...not mere animation, not mere biology, but ageless life; endless life, beginning now and lasting forever life. And this life – this phenomenal gift that is yours – teaches us about the big picture. This life cannot be scathed by physical death, because this life has conquered ALREADY the greater death. You see physical death is just the symptom of a greater death. You know about symptoms. If you're sneezing, coughing, have a fever...you have the flu. The real problem is not the sneezing, but the real problem is the flu. Physical death is a symptom, the real problem is sin that leads to death that is permanent separation from God...THAT is what the everlasting life of Jesus has already fixed. So someone might say, “Then why do we who believe still have to experience physical death?” Answer: our physical death is a left over from our former condition. Here's an analogy: the caterpillar has a new life coming, but it must still experience its cocoon before it becomes a butterfly (the cocoon becomes a left-over of the caterpillar life)...don't be afraid of your “cocoon,” it's just a “cocoon,”...you haven't seen anything yet! Your Savior couldn't be held in that tomb...His cocoon couldn't hold Him! You've only just begun to live. Therefore, Christians despise death. We look down on it, because the evil one tries to distract us by it...he tries to raise fear through it...but this is the truth Christian: when you physically die, you will keep on living...fully you; fully saved; fully secure; full of life because you have received the special life, the ageless life, the eternal life through Jesus Christ!

Lenski: “He bestows it, he alone, but does this by kindling faith in us. Thus faith has life, and life is found where faith is. The faith that clasps the Christ uplifted on the cross makes us alive in and through him. A thousand evidences show the change from death to life, namely every motion of that life Godward, Christward, against sin, flesh, world. And this life is ‘eternal,’ it goes on endlessly unaffected by temporal death, except that then this life is transferred into the heavenly world.” (pg 257 in his corresponding commentary on John)

But again, how can you know; how can you be sure...because your Father loves you. And nothing compares to this love. We can't find anything in this world – even in the midst of the most impressive human relationships – that even comes close to this love that the Father has for you.

John 3:16 is the only place in John's entire Gospel where God the Father is said to love the world. (128 Kostenberger) And John 3:16 is where God's love for you is truly astounding and

beyond words. There is this word in the Greek...where in English it reads that God gave His “one and only” Son, that “one and only” is *monogenas*. This word stresses the greatness of the Father’s gift to you. In addition, whereas verse 17 uses the word “sent”...that God “sent” His Son for you, here in verse 16, the word is that God “gave” His Son for you...put these together. The Father, your Father, our Father...gave as in “gave up” and sacrificed the love of His life; His Son from His very heart...His *monogenas* Son, His one-of-a-kind Son; His most cherished possession; His most beloved...He gave up THIS Son so that you would be saved from sin and death. It must have broken His heart...and YET, THAT is how much God loves you. It is astounding love; it is overflowing love; it is logic-defying love.

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:19: “that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

Romans 5:8: “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

The Father sent His “one-of-a-kind” Son to show His miraculous, overflowing love...and Jesus Himself loved you the same way, but the Father also sent His Son out of His great concern for you. He saw your condition in sin. Luther is bold – as always – and completely accurate: “All men are already condemned and imprisoned to be damned eternally, but the Son of God was given to us to redeem us from that judgment.” (AE 22:380) Our Father saw that we were in critical condition. So He acted in the greatest love. I’ve testified about my dad’s love. I was a child. I was burning up with a fever...he acted; it was a critical situation. The Father saw you...you were burning up with a fever designed to keep you in condemnation; to consign you to eternal separation from God; to put you in hell... but on account of His overflowing love, He acted. He sent His Son to “save”...the original word is whole and complete salvation...for your soul and for your body; for all of you. On account of Jesus’ saving you from sin and death, now even your physical body will be completely restored!

But inherent in this Good News is an implanted warning: some people reject the life and light of Christ. “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (John 3:18) When my dad came to rescue me in my broken down car stuck in the mountains in Gorman, what if he had showed up and I said, “No thanks dad...sorry you made this long trip, but I don’t want your help!” What would you say to such a response to my dad’s loving help? As crazy as this might sound, this is what many people choose to do towards God. And we need to understand, this doesn’t put God in a position to conduct Himself in a vindictive or retaliatory way (so many folks don’t get this)...God still loves the one who even rejects Him...but God doesn’t force His love. Love is something by nature that is freely given and freely received. You can’t force love. If you did, it wouldn’t be love. But people choose to keep themselves apart from God’s overflowing love. They put up a barricade and say, “No thanks!” Lewis wrote,

“There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it.” (The Great Divorce, MacMillan: 1946: 72) God is just, and in this case, He permits what is just, esp. when that is what a person wants.

But faith – which God gives through His Word – prevents condemnation. It thrusts a person from death to life. It releases the soul from prison. It removes a person from the pathway to hell. And here, just to use the word “hell” conjures up so many weird images, but fundamentally, it means to go on existing in a such a way that a person’s “replacement god” is what they get for eternity. Here, think of a little snap-shot: the Israelites once received bread from heaven – “manna” as it is called – and they started to treat the manna as more desirable than the Giver of the manna...so they got what they wanted: manna. Manna, manna, manna, endless manna...until they were getting sick over manna...this is a clue about hell. I’m not trying to make light of it. Trust me. It is the endless reception of selfish desire. It is insanity; it is depravity; it is getting sick of the craved thing...it is choosing the things of creation over the Creator. Have you ever realized that when you were a kid you loved to eat certain things, but now you can hardly stand that thing? Well think of that, but infinitely worse.

Lewis again gives us an interesting picture of what I’m trying to describe. Napoleon who was transfixed on military might, strategy, and victory had made his god known: his own power. He is pictured in Lewis’ theoretical hell this way: “Walking up and down – up and down all the time – left-right, left-right – never stopping for a moment.” (The Great Divorce p. 20) He is for eternity muttering to himself why he finally lost, blaming others, unable to stop his lust for absolute power, never resting, never content, forever frustrated. The Word of the Lord describes what we call hell this way in the very last verse of the book of Isaiah:

***“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”*** (Isaiah 66:24)

What puts a person in this position? One thing: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” (verse 19) And verse 20: “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.”

Let me take you through a quick lesson: You may have noticed that the two verses use the word “evil” and “wicked.” We all have sin and when sin breaks out into action, it is sinful or to put it another way, it is “evil” (esp. when it occurs when we know better, thus we pray to the Lord, “deliver us from evil”), but what if evil itself is pursued? What if evil is acted out intentionally, deliberately, as a way of living? Then that is wicked or it is the verification of the investing in a “worthless” life. It is the unrepentant pursuit of evil. It is “active evil.” It is

unobstructed. This is an important detail. That is, the wicked person intentionally lives in evil. This person is saying, “Jesus, no thank you, I reject your light and life; and I want to choose instead *my* way.” And such a life runs from the light of God, not wanting their way exposed for what it is.

Have you sinned? Yes, you have. Have you committed evil? Most likely, yes, your sin has surfaced. But are you continuing in that evil with deliberate repetition, unrepentant and pushing away God’s call? Then there is a warning inherent in this powerful section on God’s Gospel. Upon further reflection, St. Augustine put all of this in perspective from the view of the Christian:

***“He that does truth accuses his evil works in himself, spares not himself, forgives not himself, that God may forgive him: for that which he desires God to forgive, he himself acknowledges, and he comes to the light; to which he is thankful for showing him what he should hate in himself.”*** (NPNF1 7:86)

Dear Christians this is to be of great comfort to you: those who have eternal life are confident of eternal life not on account of themselves – no, how could that be the case when there are too many things within ourselves that we should very much not love, but hate? – but you are confident, rather, in Jesus! The Father’s great love has broken through...you recognize it, confess it, you take true comfort in it: it is a love that gave His very best; His one-of-a-kind Son...it is astounding love; it is overwhelming love and as you believe it, trust it, and hold it...something continues to happen: you receive eternal life, endless life, ageless life, overflowing life...life that will not be impeded by your upcoming little cocoon. You will not only continue to live, but live in the light of God. This light too, however, is also already yours...and it is known through the truth of God’s Word...in light you know what to confess, in light you know who to hold on to; in light you know you’re forgiven, you know what the blood of Christ has done for you...all condemnation is GONE! So John concludes, ***“But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out by God.”*** (21) Your “work” is to confess your Savior...this you are even now doing; your “work” is to receive His life...as you continue to do esp. as you receive once again this day His body and blood...your “work” is Christ’s work in you, your faith...no matter how weak, no matter how strong...it is faith in Christ...and this is why you know the greatest love...and this is why – dear Christian – you have eternal life!