

A GLORIOUS RESULT

JOHN 3:16

Michael Emmanuel, Jr. had a birthday party on June 3, 2006. It was his sixth birthday. Friends and family celebrated at the local Chuck E. Cheese in Boca Raton, Florida. The party itself went just fine. The problem came when it was over. All the children and adults climbed into three different vehicles and headed home. Everyone, that is, except Michael. Apparently, the 6-year-old returned to the play area and got left behind. Employees found Michael wandering around the restaurant at 10 p.m. and called the police. Michael's mother had assumed that her son was staying with his grandmother, and didn't even realize he was missing until the next morning. Unfortunately, it's possible to have a joyful celebration and still forget the guest of honor. I hope that didn't happen to you this Christmas. Did you have a joyful celebration but you forgot Jesus, the guest of honor? Many people do just that.

During this Christmas season we've been taking a careful look at the most well-known verse in the whole Bible: John 3:16. I call it the Christmas verse because its message is the message of Christmas. Let's recite that great verse one more time together this morning. "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." (John 3:16 NIV) It clearly, simply and compellingly explains the full meaning of why Jesus came and why we should celebrate Christmas.

The final phrase – the one that's underlined on the screen – "shall not perish but have eternal life" – is the one we want to think about today. This is the goal. This is why God did, is doing and will do all that He does. This is why Jesus was born at Christmas. This is why He died and rose again. You could say that it's summed up in one word: life. Life is the goal of it all. Jesus Himself said, "A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of." (John 10:10 MSG) So, what is "eternal life"? How is it different than your ordinary, every day, walk around life? Or, is it different? First of all eternal life is ...

THE FULL QUANTITY OF LIFE.

That adjective "eternal" just before the noun "life" is what makes the kind of life referenced here in John 3:16 unique. This is different than physical or biological life. It points to the full quantity of life or everlasting life. This is a kind of life that has no end. It's impossible to understand never ending, everlasting life even though we're taught to believe it. Endless life that just goes on and on and on forever into infinity – it's hard to get your brain around that reality.

In the Bible, the phrase "eternal life" becomes almost synonymous with heaven – the place where Jesus' followers will live forever with God. Do you ever think much about heaven and wonder what kind of place it will be? Or, what will it be like to live forever? Sometimes, our culture's depiction of heaven can make it

seem like an unappealing place. I recall reading a “Doonesbury” comic strip where one of the characters had just turned 40 and is struggling with a new awareness of his own mortality. He’s sitting on his young son’s bed saying good night and the boy says to him, “Daddy, if you die from being 40, would you go to heaven?” Dad answers, “I hope so, son.” The little boy observes, “Ashley O’Hara told me that heaven is where all the My Little Ponies live and that you get to stay there forever.” Dad replies, “Heaven is spending forever with thousands of little pink ponies? Maybe I’ll stick around for awhile longer...” His son says, “Guess what else, Dad? The president of heaven is Megatron!”

People have weird ideas about heaven. Even some Christians have bought into odd concepts about heaven – like the idea that we’re going to flit from cloud to cloud as cherubic, winged little creatures plucking golden harps during an endless day off. True enough, the Bible doesn’t give lots of information about heaven or eternal life, but there are some things we can know. Like what? First, the Bible clearly teaches that eternal life will mean having a real body in heaven. Every follower of Jesus will spend eternity in a real physical body. What does the Bible reveal about your new body? It will not age or deteriorate. It won’t be subject to disease or death. It will have abilities far greater than your present body. And yet it will be the real you in this new body.

Nature provides an interesting analogy when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. You see the beauty of a butterfly and find it hard to believe it was once a grubby looking caterpillar. Or, you see a homely little caterpillar and marvel that it could ever be transformed into a gorgeous butterfly. It’s the same creature, but it’s very hard to recognize any relationship between them at all. In much the same way, this side of heaven it’s hard to imagine what this new body will look and feel like. I’m quite sure the change will be far more dramatic than what happens when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. And yet – once again – it will be the real you in that new, resurrected body made to live in heaven for all eternity.

What else can you know about eternal life? Eternal life or heaven will be in a real place. We’re not going to be floating around in outer space for eternity. The Bible teaches that God is going to create a new heaven and a new earth. Look at these Bible verses. God says, “Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth, and no one will even think about the old ones anymore.” (Isaiah 65:17 NLT) “But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God’s righteousness.” (2 Peter 3:13 NLT)

What else can you know about eternal life? It will be a life free from Satan and sin. The Bible promises that Satan will not be present in eternity. He will have been destroyed and removed forever. Heaven will be a place free from temptation of any kind. Sin will not exist. Evil of any kind will not exist. Everything that is the result of sin in this world – guilt, failure, disease, broken relationships, war or poverty – will not exist in heaven. Above all, death will not be present in heaven. No more grief and no more separation from people you

love. I love how the Bible describes it, “He [God] will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.” (Revelation 21:4 NLT) Imagine a place free from any kind of loss, disappointment, loneliness, tears, heartache or sadness of any kind.

What else can you know about eternal life? It will be an active life in heaven. Somewhere along the way, some Christians have gotten the idea that heaven is going to be a kind of eternal vacation where you just sit around a lot. Who wants to do that forever? Certainly there will be rest from all the things that drained your energy or exhausted you in this life, but I don’t believe the Bible teaches that heavenly rest will mean being inactive. It’s interesting to me that the Bible often refers to heaven as a city. For instance, it says, “Abraham was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God.” (Hebrews 11:10 NLT) Or, “Then I saw New Jerusalem, that holy city, coming down from God in heaven....” (Revelation 21:2 CEV) A city is full of many kinds of activities. A whole lot goes on in a city! Isn’t it better to assume that you’ll be busy, active and involved in interesting, stimulating and satisfying projects, tasks and events in heaven that you will find very enjoyable?

What else can you know about eternal life? It will be a life lived in the actual presence of God. Isn’t God here with us right now? Yes, but God has the ability to be present in different ways. We know that God is omnipresent – everywhere all at the same time, but there is a kind of being present that I can only describe as His actual presence. That’s probably a good thing, by the way. I don’t think you or I could tolerate or endure the actual presence of God for very long if at all right now. But in heaven with those new bodies you will be equipped to experience His actual presence. That’s going to be wonderful! Remember that God is perfection. Everything you’ve experienced in this life that’s good, beautiful or worthy of admiration will find its ultimate fulfillment in God. God is beauty perfected. God is love perfected. God is tenderness perfected. God is strength perfected. God is joy perfected. God is peace perfected. And you will live in the actual presence of a God like that for all eternity.

Lord Thomson of Fleet Street in London was one of the great newspapermen of the past century. At one time, he owned some 285 publications in England, Scotland, Canada and the United States. One day, he invited Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, a well-known pastor and author, to a wonderful luncheon in the gorgeous dining room at *The Times* offices in London. At the table were distinguished editors, writers and businessmen.

The conversation ranged over many subjects: world affairs, politics and economic trends. Suddenly, Thomas said, “Dr. Peale, I am an old man and one of these days I’m going to die. I want to know: is there an afterlife?” The room became silent and Dr. Peale had everyone’s attention. He said, “Lord Thomson, I believe in the promises of the Bible. But beyond the biblical is the evidence of intelligence and common sense.”

Dr. Peale continued, "Suppose someone came to a baby about to be born and said, 'You can't stay inside your mother for long. In a few months you'll be born into a new world even though it might feel like you die out of your present state.' The baby might say, 'But I don't want to leave here. I'm warm, happy and loved. I don't want to be what you call 'born' out of this place.'" But he is born. And what does he find. He feels beneath him strong, loving arms. He looks up into a beautiful face, tender with love, the face of his mother. He is welcomed and cared for. He says, 'How foolish I was. This is a wonderful place to which I've come.' The baby goes on to enjoy all the delights of being a kid. He grows into youth with its excitements and romance. He marries and knows the love of wife and children. The years pass and then he becomes an old man. Someone says, 'You going to die or be born out of this place into another.'"

"That old man might say, 'But I don't want to die. I have people I love here. I love this world – the dawn, the sunset, the moon, the starlight. I don't want to leave this world.' But of course, he does die. What happens then? Does God, the Creator, suddenly change His nature? Can't we assume that the man will once again feel loving arms beneath him and once again look up into a strong, beautiful and loving face? Won't he be saying soon, 'Why, this is a wonderful place! This is where I want to stay forever!'" Then, Dr. Peale asked, "Doesn't this make sense?" A deep silence hung over the table. Lord Thomson finally sighed and said, "It does indeed make sense. I will never forget that parable. It has helped me answer a question that has haunted me for years."

It need not haunt you or me. "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." This is what God wants for you. This is the glorious result of Christmas that He has envisioned for every person who receives His indescribable gift. Life! Life! Life! Eternal life – the full quantity of life. Secondly, eternal life is ...

THE FULL QUALITY OF LIFE.

As amazing as the endless quantity of the life that comes through Jesus happens to be, that's not the most wonderful thing about it. The greatest fact about eternal life is that it's the full quality of life that God intends for you and me. That adjective "eternal" before the word "life" is a very important one. It's a word used to describe God Himself. What Jesus offers you is God's own life. In other words, this is the life which God Himself lives by and which Jesus possessed while He walked on the earth. The great devotional writer, Oswald Chambers, put it in a memorable way: "Eternal life is not a gift from God; eternal life is the gift of God." Jesus made that exact claim. On one occasion, He was praying to His Father and he said, "Eternal life is to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, the one you sent." (John 17:3 CEV) When you receive Jesus into your heart by faith, you receive God and you receive His life.

Logic forces you to acknowledge a corollary truth. People who don't love and follow Jesus do not have life. Yes, of course, they have biological life – they breathe, their hearts beat, their brains function – but they don't have the life of God in them. It would be better to say that they exist, but they don't live. To be alive – in the biblical sense of that word - you must have God. To have God you must believe in Jesus. His life enters into you and you become alive for the very first time ever. Yes, you get quantity of life – endless, everlasting duration of life. But you also receive a quality of life that's truly indescribable because it's God's own life force, so to speak, living in and through you right now and today. So, in one sense, you wait to receive eternal life after you die. But, in another sense, you have already received eternal life the moment you put your full trust in Jesus.

What does having this eternal life – this life by which God Himself lives – mean for you? What difference does it make? Maybe a simple analogy will help. Let's say you've reserved a little, subcompact car like a Ford Escort to rent for you vacation. Now there are positives about a Ford Escort. Great gas mileage. Runs fine. Gets you to where you want to go. But let's suppose when you go to the car rental place to pick up your Ford Escort, they tell you that all of them have been rented. They ask, "Would you mind getting an upgrade?" Sure, you tell them, you'd gladly accept an upgrade. The car rental guy says, "Well, it looks like the only car we have available is a Lincoln Town Car. Would that be all right?" Well, sure, it's just fine with you! So you hop into your Lincoln Town Car and off you go. Does the Lincoln get you to your destination any faster? Well, probably not. But you sure do enjoy the trip a whole lot more. There's greater comfort, greater luxury, greater space. You probably even feel better about yourself driving around in that plush vehicle!

God does more than give us endless, everlasting life after death. God wants to significantly upgrade your life right now. How so? Well, first, He wants to give you a new beginning. The fact is that sin has marred your past. It will ruin your present and your future unless you receive the life God offers in Jesus. When you surrender to Jesus, God forgives your sins past, present and future. Yes, sin can still have great power in your life, but you no longer have to be its slave. Secondly, God wants to give you new spiritual energy and vitality. The Holy Spirit now lives in your spirit. As His grace flows into your life, your behavior changes, your attitudes change and your relationships with others change. God actually gives you the ability to live a different and qualitatively better kind of life that brings glory to God and joy to you.

Third, God gives you a new purpose. Accumulating money and the things money can buy will never fulfill you. Accomplishing goals however lofty will never satisfy you. Achieving success will never meet your needs. God made you for Himself. You will find fulfillment, satisfaction and the meeting of your own deepest needs when you are growing in your personal knowledge of Him, when you are helping others come to know Him and when you are helping to build His Kingdom in some way. Fourth, God gives you a new significance. You are not

worthless or hopeless. Jesus came into this world, died on a cross and rose again because you are of great value to His Father. You've become His child and an heir to all that He possesses which is everything.

Fifth, God gives you new joy and peace. Yes, each and every one of us will face some very hard, painful days in this life. Some of them happened in 2009 and some will happen in 2010. Disappointment, failure, heartache, crisis – they're just painful facts in this life. But when God lives within you, He gives you the strength to endure. More than that, He gives you the ability to overcome. More than that, He gives you the power to conquer. Through it all, you will discover His joy – a joy no one can ever take away because no one can ever take God away from you. Through it all, you will discover His peace knowing God always has the last word in the lives of His children.

It's easy to forget what God has given you in this life and to settle for less somehow. You can give in to anxiety, to discouragement, to defeat or to bondage to some kind of sin. You can settle for less in this life when God wants you to experience more. Your life can be marginal when God wants it to be marvelous. On this Sunday just two days after Christmas Day, on this last Sunday of an old year and as we stand on the threshold of a new year, may each of us not only hear but believe and experience fully what Jesus said, "... I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10 NIV)

From his hospital bed on the eve of open heart surgery, Pastor Bruce McIver asked his cardiologist, Dr. Dudley Johnson, "Can you fix my heart?" The physician, known for being short and to the point, said, "Sure." Then he quickly turned and walked away. Following the 12-hour surgery, McIver asked Dr. Johnson, "In light of the blocked arteries that I had when I checked into the hospital, how much blood supply do I have now?" Dr. Johnson's reply was characteristically terse, "All you'll ever need." Then, he walked away. When Pastor McIver was being discharged from the hospital, his wife asked the doctor, "What about my husband's future quality of life?" Dr. Johnson paused and then said, "I fixed his heart; the quality of his life is up to him."

Suppose you asked God, "Can you give me eternal life?" His response might be just as short and to the point, "Sure." You might then ask, "How much eternal life can You give me?" God might well respond, "All you'll ever need." And if you asked God, "What will the quality of that life be like?" He might well say to you, "The quality of that life is up to you." "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." In Jesus, God has given you the full quantity of life and the full quality of life. But entering into that life and experiencing it the way God intended is up to you.