

Eternal life a free gift

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
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“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6.23

Introduction

This verse summarises the wonderful nature of the Gospel, the Good News of Christianity: eternal life is a free gift that God gives to those who believe. It is not earned or deserved in any way. For any who are not as yet Christians today, here is tremendous good news for you: you can be saved from hell, and freely receive from God the right to go to heaven. You do not have to have achieved a certain level of moral goodness first. You do not need to have attended meetings of the church for a period of time. You can receive eternal life today.

For those of us who are already believers, this is a reminder that our salvation is entirely by God's grace, by his kindness, and is not in any way deserved. So we cannot look down on others, or feel superior to them.

This free gift of eternal life that God gives is in sharp contrast with what sin does in our lives. Sin pays “wages”. But the “wages” of sin are miserable: death. This death is physical death, spiritual death, and eternal death in hell.

As we think about this verse, I want to do so under three headings:

1. The wages of sin is death.
2. The gift of God is eternal life.
3. This eternal life is in Christ Jesus.

1. The wages of sin is death

The apostle says in the first half of the verse: “For the wages of sin is death”.

In our natural state we are serving the slave master of sin. Sin is spoken of here by the apostle as a power or force, almost like it is a person. Sin has us all, prior to God’s work in our lives, in his grip.

This goes back to our ancestor Adam. When God made Adam, the first man, he was perfect, and completely without any corruption. God placed him in a beautiful garden, and said that he was free to eat from all the trees in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But Adam disobeyed God, and ate of that tree. By doing so, Adam declared rebellion against God. He effectively said that he, Adam, would be his own judge of right and wrong. Adam therefore started to taste the bitter effect of sin in his life.

When Adam ate of that tree, immediately his nature was changed. He became a slave of sin. This change in nature was passed down to his descendants, and all his children have inherited his tendency to sin. All are born under the power of sin, and as soon as we are able to express ourselves, sin comes out in our lives.

This sin comes out in different forms. For some, it comes out in very extreme forms of mass murder, like we have witnessed this week on the streets of Nice, or robbery, rape, child abuse, drunkenness, and other very obvious and gross sins. For others, sin comes out in a much more subtle form, in terms of pride, envy, bitterness, rudeness of speech, selfish ambition, lust and greed. Some might wear a cloak of religious respectability, and attend churches, mosques or temples, and live lives that others regard as “good”, while, secretly, under the surface, they have hearts that are full of greed, bitterness, pride and lust. But all of us, in our natural state, are in the grip of sin, in one form or another. We cannot escape from its clutches. We might, with a great exercise of will power, give up particular sins, but, when we do so, is that we generally put other, more subtle, sins in their place.

Sin pays “wages” to its slaves. What are the “rewards” of sin? Death. What sort of death is the apostle talking about here? The answer is physical death, spiritual death, and eternal death. Let us think about these.

1) Physical death

It is a fact that all die. Why do we die? Because of sin. Physical death is the “reward” that sin pays us for serving it. If Adam had not sinned, he and his descendants would have lived for ever. But physical death came into the world as a result of sin. That is also why we experience ageing and ill health. Physical death is at work in us all, because of sin.

2) Spiritual death

Sin also pays its “wages” to us in the form of spiritual death. In our natural state we have no relationship with God. We are cut off God and alienated from him. Instead, we follow the devil, and this world. We are slaves of sin. We cannot change ourselves.

3) Eternal death

The third form of death that sin pays as its “reward” is eternal death. What is eternal death? It is the experience of everlasting destruction in hell.

After they die, the souls of those who have not been saved by God will go to a place called Hades, which is a sort of spiritual prison. It is a horrible place of awful suffering and torment.

But that is not the end, because when Jesus comes again, all who have previously died will be raised up from the dead. Their souls will be reunited with their bodies. They will then face Jesus as their judge. Everything that they have done, everything that they have said, and even the thoughts that they have indulged, will be exposed before the Lord Jesus, and they will receive the punishment that is due to them. The Bible says that the just punishment for sin is everlasting punishment and torment in hell. Jesus described hell as a place of “the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched”. He talked about it in terms of the “outer darkness”, and a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In the book of Revelation, hell is spoken of as the “lake of fire”. It says that, for those who are in hell, the “smoke of their torment rises for ever. There is no rest day or night for them.”

We see from this how deceptive sin is. Sin says to you, “Serve me, and you will be happy and fulfilled. Do not bother with God’s laws. They will only mess your life up. Break loose. Enjoy yourself. Find fulfilment in

satisfying your desires.” But this is a big lie. The pleasures of sin last a few seconds. The torments to which sin leads to will last for eternity.

But thanks be to God, there is hope. God is offering us deliverance from this physical, spiritual and eternal death. He is offering us eternal life, and this life is free. To this we now turn.

2. The gift of God is eternal life

Let me remind you of our text. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In the second half of the verse the apostle now speaks, not of wages, but of a gift, and not of death, but of life, eternal life.

What is this eternal life that the apostle is speaking of? It is the opposite of death that was spoken of in the first half of the verse. It is recorded in John chapter 17 verse 3 that Jesus said, when praying to his Father, “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Whereas sin pays the wages of spiritual death, where we have no relationship with God, the gift of God is that we may have spiritual life, eternal life, which means having a personal knowledge of God. We can know God as our friend, as our helper, as our strength and support. We may know his love, and have the joy of being able to meditate on his excellent qualities.

This is made possible because, for those to whom God gives eternal life, God provides a righteousness that is not their own, which qualifies them to have a relationship with God. God is utterly holy, and he cannot have anything to do with those who are sinful. But he has provided for us a righteousness that is not our own, HIS righteousness. There is a word that the apostle uses frequently in this book of Romans, the word “justified”. He says that God has justified the believer through faith. What does that mean? It means that God has acquitted the believer. God has declared the believer to be not guilty in his sight, to be righteous. When God gives someone eternal life, he says of that person that he is not guilty, for ever. That person’s sins have been completely taken away.

Not only is the person who receives eternal life declared by God to be righteous, he is also delivered from the power of sin. This is something about which the apostle has spoken a great deal in this sixth chapter of Romans. The true believer has been joined to Christ in his death and in his resurrection. His old man, that wanted sin, has been killed with Christ. A new man, that wants to please God, has come to life inside

him, through his union with Christ's resurrection. He used to be a slave of sin. He could not do anything other than sin. But now he has become a slave of righteousness, and is able to serve God.

And, on top of all this, physical death has been overcome for the person who has eternal life. The person who has eternal life will have to experience physical death, yes, unless the Lord returns before he dies, but for the true believer physical death is not a fearful thing. For the person who has received eternal life, physical death is the gateway to heaven. He knows that the moment he dies he will be taken into the presence of God. The true Christian who knows his Bible is looking forward to death. This is not because he is morbid, or because he is depressed and does not want to live any more. Far from it! He loves life! But he knows that when he departs from this world, he will go to be with the Lord, and experience unspeakable happiness.

And that is not all either. When Jesus comes again, the body of the person who has received eternal life will be raised from the dead and be reunited with his soul, just as the body of the person who was not saved will be raised from the dead. But, whereas, for the person who was not saved, the resurrection will be terrifying, because he will then be condemned and sent to hell, for the person who has received eternal life the resurrection will be glorious and wonderful. For him the final judgement will not be terrifying but a wonderful celebration, as he understands as never the full extent of his sin, and how Jesus paid for his sins. Also, the good deeds that he did after his conversion will be revealed and he will be rewarded for his service of Christ. He will then go on to enjoy the wonders of the new world that God is going to make. He will enjoy perfect fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ. Best of all, he will see God, face to face, and be utterly delighted and satisfied with God.

The tremendous thing is that this eternal life starts now, for the person who truly believes. Many people think that eternal life is something that you receive when you die, if you have lived a good enough life. But the truth is that now, even while we are in this world, we can receive eternal life. Once you have eternal life, it is never taken from you. It is recorded in John chapter 5 and verse 24 that Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, he who hears my words, and believes him who sent me, has eternal life. He will not be condemned, but has already passed from death to life."

The apostle says that his eternal life is the gift of God. The Greek word that he uses means “a gift of grace”. What is grace? It is undeserved love. So the apostle here is talking about eternal life as a gift of God’s grace. He gives it to us without our deserving it in the slightest.

Eternal life, then, is a completely free gift. It is not in any way earned or deserved.

This is where so many people go astray. They think that if you try hard to live a good life, if you do the best you can, if you are religious and go to a church or a mosque or a temple, and if you follow the rules of your religion as much as you are able, then God will reward you by giving you the right to go to heaven.

But this is most emphatically what the Scripture does NOT say. The Scripture says that eternal life is the gift of God’s grace. It is totally undeserved.

When you properly understand the extent of sin in your life, and also the holiness of God, you realise that eternal life has to be a free gift. Our problem is that we are always sinning. Every moment of every day, we sin in some way or other, whether in the way we think, or in what we say, or in what we do. We can never make ourselves good enough to go to heaven, because we are always sinning. Moreover, God is absolutely pure and holy. He cannot stand the tiniest sin. The Scripture says that God is a “consuming fire”. Anyone who dares to come into his presence without his sin having been paid for will be immediately consumed. So the only way for us to have eternal life is through it being given to us as a gift, without our deserving it at all.

Many find it very hard to accept the idea that eternal life is a free gift. They say, “Surely I should contribute something to my salvation? I know that salvation is through Jesus dying on the cross, but surely I must do something as well?” So they try to contribute to their salvation in some way. Some think place store on being baptised, and think that through their baptism they are saved. Some rely on the Communion service, which they sometimes call the “mass”, and think that receiving the bread and the wine makes them good in God’s sight. Some think that by doing good deeds they can clock up credit with God. Some, who have come into contact with churches that place an emphasis on reading the Bible and telling the good news about Jesus, hope that if they read the Bible, attend meetings of the church and tell others about Jesus, they will make themselves acceptable to God. Still others look to the fact that they are engaged in social and political action to make them right with God. Others say that they believe that we are saved by

faith in Christ, but think that they also need to continue in obedience to God in order to keep their salvation.

All these are different forms of the false way of salvation which can be called “salvation by works” or is sometimes called “legalism”. But what the apostle says here, and what the Bible says again and again in many places, is that salvation is not by works, in any way, shape or form. It is entirely by God’s grace.

This leads us to the third point,

3. God’s gift is “in” Jesus Christ

Hear the text again: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This eternal life is “in” Christ Jesus.

Eternal life is only possible because of what Jesus did upon the Cross, and his subsequent resurrection. By dying on the Cross, Jesus purchased for us the right to have eternal life. He paid the debt that we owe to God for our sins. This is why eternal life is a free gift, because it has been completely paid for by what Jesus did on the Cross.

Notice about whom we are speaking here: the apostle describes Jesus as the “Christ” and also as “Lord”. What do these terms mean? The term “Christ” is the term given in the Bible for the special King that God promised in the Old Testament that he would be sending into the world. This King would establish a kingdom the like of which had never been seen before, a kingdom of perfect peace and justice. The King is described in the Old Testament as the Son of God, and also as God, who is rightly worshipped and honoured. This is also what the word “Lord” means. The Greek word for “Lord” is the word that was used to describe God when the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew to Greek. So, by saying that Jesus is Lord, the apostle was saying that he is God. So it is through this Jesus, the Jesus who is the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, that God offers the free gift of eternal life.

We should also note the word “in”. It is not merely through Jesus that we receive this eternal life: it is “in” him. It is through being united to him that we receive his life.

There is no other way. Various religious teachers and prophets might tell you various things about how to live, some of which might be better than others. But they cannot give you eternal life. If you follow these

leaders and do not trust in the Christ of the Bible to be saved, you will remain a slave of sin, and you will land up in hell. Some people say that they believe in Jesus, but the Jesus they believe in is not the Jesus of the Bible. Some say that he was a prophet, but no more than a prophet. Some say that he was just a great teacher and a good example to us. Some say that he was a sort of superior angel, created by God. These and other versions of “Jesus” will not give you eternal life. It is only the Jesus of the Bible through whom you can gain eternal life.

Conclusion

We have seen that sin is a horrible master that rules over the human race and pays grim “wages” in the form of physical, spiritual and eternal death. We have also seen that God has made eternal life available. This eternal life consists of knowing God. Those who have eternal life are counted as being righteous in God’s sight. They are set free from the power of sin. They know that when they die they will go to paradise to be with Jesus. And they have the sure and certain hope of the resurrection and glory when Jesus comes again.

What should be your response to these things?

First of all, let me address those who do not yet have eternal life, or are not sure that they have. What should you do in response to what we have seen today?

Let me tell you what not to do. Do not say to yourself, “I must try harder to be a good Christian”. This is a response that so many make when they hear about heaven and hell. They think “I really must try to be good, so that I do not go to hell.” The point of what we have seen today is that, no matter how hard you try, you cannot make yourself good enough for heaven. Eternal life is a free gift.

So then, what should you do?

Firstly, you must realise that you are a hell-deserving sinner. Many will say, “I am not perfect. But I am not so bad that I deserve to go to hell.” You need to see that you have offended grievously against God, that you are constantly continuing to offend, and that you are indeed a hell-deserving sinner.

Secondly, you must realise that God has provided an answer for your sin. You need to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Lord, God in the flesh, and that he died in the place of sinners on the Cross, to give them eternal life.

Thirdly, you need to stop relying on your own works, and put all your trust in Jesus to save you. Come to him. Ask him to give you eternal life.

Fourthly, having done these things, you need to exercise faith. You need to believe that Jesus has saved you. You might say, "I am not sure I can believe that I am saved, because my life has not changed". But eternal life is a gift. It does not depend upon your life. It depends upon the promise of God. God has promised that all those who believe in Christ will be saved. If you doubt that you are calling God a liar. Believe, on the basis of the promise of God, that you *have* received eternal life, and your life will then indeed change.

What about those of us who have already believed? What should be the lesson for us from this verse? We need to continue to believe that our salvation is a free gift. Sometimes we can think that we have understood and believed that eternal life is a gift from God, yet we unconsciously can slip back into a sort of "salvation by works" mentality. This will sometimes show itself in a judgmental and condemning spirit, which focuses on the sins of others. It may exhibit itself also in the form of self-pity, and thinking that one deserves a better deal from God. The person who has forgotten that his salvation is entirely undeserved will also often be joyless, and lacking in zeal to serve God. Everything in the Christian life becomes a chore for him. He will also be miserable when God saves someone who has been a notorious sinner, and resent this person being blessed.

Are you a Christian who has forgotten that his salvation is entirely a free gift? Remember afresh what God has done for you, and how you did not deserve it at all. Rejoice in your salvation. Remember that there is absolutely nothing in you that in any way merits God's love. Remember that it is entirely free and undeserved.

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