

– IV –

FROM ETERNAL LIFE TO SALVATION

Imagine you are an alien, a member of an extraterrestrial race visiting Earth to study human culture.

I'm sure if this really happened, several observations would bewilder you — men who would rather eat a live frog than admit they are not an expert on every subject, women who ask questions they already know the answers to (or questions they don't want the answers to), and Christians who judge non-Christians when both Jesus and Paul explicitly forbid it. However, pretend your first field study of humanity is a soccer match.

So, picture yourself watching a soccer match for the first time, *but your alien eyes cannot see the ball.*

Imagine how weird the game would look. To your eyes the match seems an unruly, high-intensity dance. Everyone appears to know where to go; groups of players regularly converge, but with no rhyme or reason as to *why*. Occasionally, the goalie dives to the ground, and the crowd screams in unison. It's like watching a complex card game without grasping the rules. You know there is structure behind the apparent chaos, but you cannot determine what it is.

You hit upon an idea. *What if there is a ball that only they can see?* In some sense this is a clever answer to the mystery... but it's not totally satisfactory. It *explains* what you see, but there is no evidence it's true. You have no reason to believe balls exist that humans can see but you cannot, much less that humans would be so discourteous as to use them.

This contrived situation portrays the feelings I had regarding the problem described in the first two chapters and the conjecture I proposed in chapter three.¹ I had hit upon an answer but couldn't find explicit support anywhere in the Bible. At that point I did not know the linguistic and Jewish cultural support for the

¹Richard Feynman described how physicists often worked using this analogy.

idea (which I will get to later in this chapter). I looked and looked for some passage that told me the invisible ball was there, but I just could not find it.

Ironically, the most Calvinistic pastor I've ever met found it for me.

Norm Koop, son of Reagan's Surgeon General, is the pastor of First Congregational, a Calvinist church with an impressive fellowship. His sermon one cold April Sunday treated the "The Real Lord's Prayer" as he called it: *John 17:1–26*. He focused on verse 13. **This is eternal life — that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent.**

It was like a Volvo slapped me "up side d'head."

Pastor Koop explained how the term **eternal** did not refer to the chronological length of life but its *quality*. For weeks I had searched for this exact idea — that John uses **eternal life** to refer to *present-day* salvation, the *regeneration* I mentioned on page 39.

The Greek construction John uses here is one he employs elsewhere to give exact descriptions of things, like a dictionary might. One example is *1st John 3:23*. **This is His commandment: that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He gave us the commandment.** He uses the same Greek grammar in *John 17:3* to define **eternal life**. (Literally, the Greek is **the eternal life**, like in *1st John 1:2*.)

To illustrate how John uses this language in a "definitional" way, see also *John 1:19; 3:19; and 15:12*. They all use the same Greek grammar. As does *1st John 1:5* and *3:11*.

Jewish "Eternal Life": O'lam Ha-Ba

You might be thinking, "Okay, so I see how it is a problem that every description Jesus gives of the Judgment would lead His audience to a conclusion that the modern Church rejects. But isn't it also a problem to believe that **eternal life** doesn't simply mean 'eternal life,' regardless of what *John 17:3* says?"

That's a good question... and I'm glad you asked it. (Or, rather, I'm glad you're willing to let me pretend you did.) We read **eternal life** where Jesus and other Jews are discussing *O'lam Ha-Ba*, a Jewish idea literally meaning "World to Come."

What is *O'lam Ha-Ba*? Well, that itself is a hard question. You won't find it discussed as such in the Bible, but that shouldn't surprise you now that you know the Jews (who built their culture upon the Old Testament) have little focus or clarity on the afterlife. *O'lam Ha-Ba* has multiple meanings. It can refer

to the spiritual afterlife immediately after death. It also refers to the age God promises in the Old Testament when the Messiah will unite Israel and Judah in power (like David did) while punishing those nations that have oppressed it. It also refers to the age *after that*.

Various Jewish factions hold different ideas of how the future will unfold. Some think the Messiah will simply come and bless the offspring of Israel, and that is the extent of the *O’lam Ha-Ba*. Rather than focus on heaven and hell, the Hebrews see blessings and curses manifested in the size and position of their progeny and the condition of their death. The blessed are buried in their homelands and have many prosperous children and grandchildren. The cursed die terrible deaths in disgrace and have their children bear part of their punishment.² Thus, it is understandable that many simply look forward to a time where their children or their children’s children will be vindicated. That is, after all, what Zechariah prophesies after being **filled with the Holy Spirit** in *Luke 1:67–75*.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, because he has come to help and has redeemed his people. For he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from long ago, that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us. He has done this to show mercy to our ancestors, and to remember his holy covenant – the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham. This oath grants that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, may serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him as long as we live.

This passage is breathtakingly powerful in portraying salvation as a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham while delineating specifically what that promise was. The **as long as we live** part places the blessing squarely in the present. We see the end goal is not our immortality but rather God’s glory — not deliverance from God’s wrath but protection from anything that hinders our serving God.

Another belief common to Judaism is that a grand resurrection begins the Messianic age. Those resurrected (not all of humanity, just the righteous ones from Israel’s past) will help bring about the kingdom described in the prophets. Others think the Messiah will first set things aright and then much later there will be a resurrection of the righteous to live in that blessed kingdom. Those

²*Genesis 26:24; Numbers 25:13; 1st Samuel 24:21; 2nd Kings 5:27; and Proverbs 11:21*

Jews used *O'lam Ha-Ba* to refer to both the coming age of the Messiah and again *separately* to the time after *that* when the righteous are raised.

When Jews ask Jesus about “eternal life” in the Synoptic Gospels, they likely have the afterlife in mind rather than life in the Messianic age. The wording of *Matthew 19:16* suggests they, like most, are more interested in their own future than God’s plan. They think Jesus is a rabbi (or perhaps a prophet), so they ask Him questions that are under debate.

But even these Jews do not have immortality in mind so much as “life in the next world” — whether that is the spirit world they will go to after death or a stake in the glorious future kingdom when God finally pays back all the nations that have oppressed Judah. To the Jews, it isn’t about immortality; it’s about *inclusion*. Salvation isn’t about evading wrath; it’s about *vindication*.

Some may have believed in the immortality of the soul, and that the righteous who are resurrected may not die again, but there is no consensus. In fact, Maimonides³ sees the future resurrection as a mere sidelight, after which the resurrected would, quite naturally, die again! The focus was exactly on what the words mean: the “World to Come” — when God vindicates Israel who can then serve God in peace, free from persecution. It’s really hard to get our modern, Western, individual-based, immortality-seeking minds around the Jewish understanding of the afterlife.

The linguistic confusion here isn’t because the Jews were sloppy with their speech or that Jesus used misleading language. The word translated **eternal** in the gospels does not, in fact, mean “eternal”!

There *is* a Greek word that means eternal, **aidios**. It is just not the one used throughout the gospels. It appears only in *Jude 6* and *Romans 1:20*.

A Quick Greek Lesson

[Nothing here is meant to suggest endless life-after-death does not exist. I’m just describing what the words used by the New Testament writers (and the Jews they were quoting) meant. I do this because many of the passages Christians use to describe the gospel refer to “eternal life,” so it is important to understand what was really being discussed.]

The Greek word translated **eternal** in the gospels is always **aiōnios**, an odd term rarely used in Greek literature. The closest thing to a good English translation is “measureless” or “indefinite.” It doesn’t mean “without end” but rather

³Also known as “the Rambam,” (for Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon). He lived in the 12th century and was easily the most important rabbi of the middle ages and one of the most influential rabbis in the history of all Jewish thought.

“so vast the edge is unseen.” The Hebrew equivalent even comes from the word for “unseen.” It thus makes a good choice to denote a vastly fulfilling life we can have in Christ (especially to John’s Greek audience who might not have had any understanding of the Jewish context). It describes well the opportunity given by a Christ who says in *John 10:10*, **I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly**. Keep in mind that John is transcribing Hebrew or Aramaic dialogue into Greek words. His use of a rare, vague Greek word to describe the life one has with the Holy Spirit is a natural one.

However, it makes a poor choice if you wish to describe “life without end.” **Aidios** is the word that conveys that concept clearly.

Aiōnios doesn’t mean “eternal” as we use the term, for Paul uses it in *Romans 16:25* to refer to the age before Christ, which had ended.⁴ When the Greeks translated the Old Testament, they use **aiōnios** to refer to items that are not eternal, like landmarks (*Proverbs 22:28*) and walls that had already been torn down (*Isaiah 58:12*). The Jews did not even *have* a clear notion of “eternal” in the sense that we use it. Many older cultures simply lacked the idea.⁵

What Did Jesus Mean?

The notion of the **O’lam Ha-Ba**, and in particular a resurrection of the righteous, had incubated during the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament, a four-hundred-year gap when the Jews did not have a prophet from God. We thus expect Jesus to have a clearer and different understanding of the **O’lam Ha-Ba** than the Jews He speaks with.

When Jesus uses the term, especially in John, He means the union with God accomplished through the Spirit. Is that not the most natural meaning of *John 17:22*, where Jesus prays that His disciples **would be one as We are one**. He has declared the Messianic age is imminent, and refers to a special relationship with God available in that age. This conception of **eternal life** shows several times in John, not just in *John 17:3*.

John 1:4

The very first time **life** shows up in John is *John 1:4*: **In Him was life, and the life was the light of mankind**. This describes the Spirit who, according to *John 14:26*, . . . **will teach you all things**.

⁴Plato (who appears to have coined the word) *contrasts aiōnios* with **aidios**, writing that gods are **aidios** while our souls are merely **aiōnios**.

⁵A good friend of mine spent years in the Philippines as a missionary. They do not have a term for “eternal” even now. The closest he could come to saying “eternal life” was *Buhay na walang hangang* which means “life with no until.”

John 5:24–29

I discussed *John 6:40* earlier. Another passage that appears to link faith, **eternal life**, and the Judgment is *John 5:24–29*. A close examination shows this passage speaks against the modern gospel rather than for it.

John 5:24–29 has two chunks. The first explains Jesus’ role as Spirit-giver. The second describes Jesus’ role as judge and resurrector. His opinion of the Jews He spoke to is shown in 5:38 and 5:42.

Jesus describes the present and the immediate future in the first section, saying **the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live**. That makes sense if **eternal life** means having the Holy Spirit, which transforms the spiritually dead to spiritually alive. Contrast that with the latter part which speaks of a future time where *all* will come out, **the ones who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life, and the ones who have done what is evil to the resurrection resulting in condemnation**.

| <i>John 5:24–25</i> | <i>John 5:28–29</i> |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Time is here now | Time is coming |
| Only some hear and come out | All hear and come out |
| Based on “hearing” | Based on doing good versus evil |
| Based on present faith | Based on past action |

At first Jesus appears to be repeating Himself, but when you look at the details, every one of them is different. The first half refers to life obtained by hearing/believing/obeying the message in the present, and the second describes a Judgment based on what those in the tombs *have done* (past tense).

John 17:2

Note the logic in *John 17:2*. **Just as you have given Him authority over all humanity, so that He may give eternal life to everyone you have given Him**. How does Jesus’ *authority* over humanity pertain to the “normal” idea of eternal life? To evangelicals, Jesus’ *sacrifice* is what allows our eternal life.

However, if you see **eternal life** as the Jewish *O’lam Ha-Ba*, where God has put a son of David in authority to give light to the nations and instruct God’s people in righteousness, it makes more sense.⁶ *John 16:15* shows this connection between Jesus’ authority and the sending of the Spirit directly: **Everything that the Father has is mine; that is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what is mine and will tell it to you**.

⁶See *Isaiah 16:5; Jeremiah 30:9; Ezekiel 34:23; and Zechariah 12:10*

Bridging from John to Paul

We've discussed **eternal life** in John at length, but one thing I've left out is "how do you get it?" John is quite clear on that score. Several times belief is given as the direct cause of eternal life, and *John 20:30–31* gives this truth as the purpose of his gospel: . . . **so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

But isn't belief the basis for **salvation** and **justification** according to Paul? *Ephesians 2:8* is the most famous example of this: **For by grace you have been saved through faith. . .**

If John uses **eternal life** to refer to what Jesus gives believers, and Paul emphatically claims that salvation is by faith alone, then it is at least plausible that they refer to the same thing. We should immediately ask two questions:

1. Does Paul link faith and salvation to receiving the Spirit?
2. Are there places where Paul clearly describes the Judgment?

Paul and the Spirit

Paul does link the Spirit to both faith and salvation in a way more direct than we might expect.

Galatians 3:2 . . . **did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?**

Galatians 3:14 . . . **by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.**

Titus 3:5 **He saved us . . . by the washing of the new birth and renewing by the Holy Spirit.**

Paul's Teachings on the Judgment

When I began rereading Christ's teachings on the Judgment, they seemed to contradict Paul's. Further study revealed the discrepancy is between *passages that clearly refer to the Judgment* and *passages we assume are related to the Judgment*. When Paul directly treats the Judgment, he says things very much in line with the teachings of Christ described in chapters one and two.⁷

⁷When considering Paul's writings on the Judgment, you have to separate those passages that speak of God's wrath in the present age (in particular the wrath on the entire world that ends this age), and the Judgment of all individuals living and dead that happens after the events of the second coming have run their course.

Romans 2:9–10 **There will be affliction and distress on everyone who does evil, on the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good. . .**

1st Cor. 6:9–10 **Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers. . . and swindlers will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

1st Cor. 9:27 **I subdue my body and make it my slave, so that after preaching to others I myself will not be disqualified.**

2nd Cor. 5:10 **For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil.**

I'll stop there, noting *Colossians 3:5–6, 24–25* and *Ephesians 5:5*, both written to *believers*, carry a similar message. In particular, Paul's discussion of his own fate in *1st Corinthians 9:24–27* should disabuse anyone of the thought that deliverance from hell is a "free gift" or that the Judgment is one of faith.

Hence Paul, like Christ, paints a Judgment where believers and non-believers are treated the same. There is no mention of God transferring righteousness, no mention of perfection required, no mention of forgiveness being a prevailing factor, and no indication that our good works are judged separately for purposes of "rewards." There are those in both classes (believers and non-believers) who do God's will and examples in both groups who fail to do so. All, believers and unbelievers, who rebel against God's law are in danger of His wrath; why else would Paul repeatedly exhort believers not to fall into sin?

In particular, there is no indication the Judgment is like a court where justice is meted out only for our crimes. Evangelicals push that basic paradigm upon their listeners, but you will have a hard time finding it anywhere in the Bible.

Finally, ponder the following pair of statements (New American Standard Bible translation):

Romans 2:13 **For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous before God, but those who do the law will be justified.**

Romans 3:20 **Because by the works of the Law no flesh is justified.**

At first blush, these appear to conflict. However, this illusion dissolves when we allow that Paul separates salvation (receiving the Spirit) from the Judgment.

These verses demonstrate Paul using the terms "justified" and "law" in two separate ways. The first statement refers to *individual* accountability with re-

spect to the final Judgment, and the **law** refers to God's over-arching law of right and wrong. The second statement refers to God's sending of Christ, personal transformation, receiving the Spirit, and joining the new covenant through faith. The **works of the law** referenced are those holdovers from the Mosaic law (principally circumcision) that some Jewish Christians and those whom they influenced were trying to force upon Gentiles in the early church.⁸

So, Paul and Christ do not disagree about the Judgment when one looks at verses where they clearly describe it, rather than passages we merely assume refer to the Judgment.⁹

Unfortunately passages that clearly refer to the Judgment are hardly ever mentioned in church. Instead we are fed a steady diet of a few other passages that we *are told* refer to heaven and hell, like an automated radio station playing the same five jazz songs repeatedly while claiming it broadcasts classic rock.

Chapter ten is devoted to understanding Paul and his writing. If you want something to ponder in the meantime, consider the two verses:

1st Timothy 4:10 **...we have set our hope on the Living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of believers.**

Colossians 1:20 **...and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself by making peace through the blood of His cross – through Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven.**

The first of these is odd for obvious reasons. For the second, consider *why* angels in heaven (whom we assume have not transgressed) would need to be reconciled to God? Similarly for other creatures. *Colossians 1:16* indicates a wide scope when interpreting this passage; what would **all things, whether visible or invisible** mean otherwise?

⁸To see this, cross-reference the next few verses of this passage with *Romans 4:15* and *5:13*, where Paul explicitly indicates he is referring to the Mosaic law. This is similar to, but not the same as, a perspective on Paul now shared by many scholars, including N.T. Wright and James G.D. Dunn.

⁹Some of these latter refer to the physical wrath God visits upon the earth prior to the Judgment. See chapters eight and ten.

Summary and Final Notes

I've tried to show that verses typically used to support evangelicals' version of the Judgment are actually references to membership in the new covenant because John often refers to the Holy Spirit by using the Greek words translated *eternal life* and Paul appears to use the term *saved* in a similar way. In both cases *regeneration* rather than *deliverance* is in view. Indeed, every practically every NT writer (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, Luke, and the writer of Hebrews) gives a description of the Judgment where no special treatment is afforded to believers.

After hearing Pastor Koop's sermon on *John 17:3*, I spent several years studying the Bible and other sources, trying to get at the heart of the matter. The rest of this book is dedicated to the question of what salvation is and, perhaps as importantly, what it *isn't*.

To Christians concerned for their eternal security, I wish to say up front that there is plenty of encouragement and hope for those who genuinely desire God; why else would Jesus tell . . . **everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise Him up on the last day and If you obey My commandments, you will remain in My love; just as I have obeyed My Father's commandments and remain in His love. I have told you these things so that My joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.** I ask you to bravely venture into some choppy seas that will challenge what you have likely been taught and perhaps taught others, clinging to the assurance that God is a loving (and living!) God.

I'm not suggesting a unitarian theology; I very much agree with Jesus when He says **I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.** And yet, I also agree with His very general statement **Whoever does the will of the Father are my mother, my brother, and my sister**, a claim transcending time, covenant, and enlightenment. To see why these viewpoints are not at odds, read on.

My goals so far have been to raise questions, point out some real problems with the perspectives we have been asked to accept, and present a viewpoint that allows Jesus and Paul to each mean what he says. I haven't given in these first four chapters a full picture of what *salvation* is or how the Judgment works. I've merely indicated how the Church's understanding of both conflicts with the Bible.

INTERMISSION

So far, we¹ have been discussing Jesus' and His apostle's teachings about eternal life, salvation, and the Judgment. In the first four chapters I developed a conjecture that *salvation* in general does not refer to escaping hell, but instead describes present spiritual liberation and strengthening. Salvation is thus effected by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit — the new covenant relationship in which God counsels us in righteousness and empowers us to be faithful. This indwelling is what Jesus often means by **eternal life**.

In other words, our salvation addresses the problem God faced throughout the entire Old Testament: *How can I have a faithful people with a heart for Me?* rather than the nowhere-mentioned problem *How can I get people into heaven?*

The immediate (for purposes of reading this book) benefit of entertaining this notion of salvation is that it allows us to discuss Judgment as a separate topic from salvation. We can take a sober, penetrating look at what scripture says about this event without constantly worrying *What does this say about Christ?* or *What does this imply about salvation?*

Much of what we're told about the Judgment comes from our assumptions that tie salvation to it. Once we remove those assumptions, we can bravely affirm truths that earlier might have left us feeling conflicted.

So, as we look into the Bible's teaching on God's Judgment, please try to keep at bay the "what would this mean about..." concerns. The last portion of this book is devoted to addressing those ramifications. I may tear down your mansions, but you will not be left an orphan.

¹And by *we*, I mean *I*.

Preview

The specific content of the next three chapters:

Chapter 5 How does the standard understanding of the Judgment compare to scripture?

Chapter 6 What is a more biblically consistent understanding of the Judgment?

Chapter 7 Jesus promises that those with genuine faith are assured a positive outcome at the Judgment; what does “faith” mean in this context?

If you have not done so already, you may wish to read through the nineteen problems listed in the topical index found on page 173.