

The Apostles' Creed: ...the life everlasting (17)

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord

Who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell

The third day He rose again from the dead

He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty

He will come again to judge the living and the dead

I believe in the Holy Spirit

The holy catholic Church; the communion of saints

The forgiveness of sins

The resurrection of the body

And the life everlasting

- We come in this study to the end of our look at the **Apostles' Creed**, and there is no more fitting an end to a summary of Christian belief than to consider the very essence and aim of our faith. By “essence” I mean, the very plan and purpose of creation and redemption, cross and covenant, Word and Sacrament... That is, when we talk of **the life everlasting**, we are not speaking simply about endless existence (for even demons and unbelievers will exist forever), but an actual sharing in and enjoyment of the very life of God in the most intimate and personal sense. It can be described no better than how Jesus Himself described it in John 17:3, *And this is eternal life, that they know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*
- The everlasting existence of all personal beings—both angelic and human—as noted above, is something that both the elect and the reprobate angels, and, believing and unbelieving humans, will all experience. But the everlasting existence of reprobate men and angels cannot be, and is not, described as eternal life, or a **life everlasting**, but is referred to in the Bible variously as “eternal death”, “everlasting destruction” or “judgment” (cf. Matt. 18:8, 25:41, 46; Jude 6-7; Rev. 14:11, 19:3; 20:10; etc.). Thus eternal life or **the life everlasting** is much more a qualitative matter than a quantitative matter. That is to say, it is the quality or kind of life one experiences forever and ever that is the subject of this final article of the *Creed*.
- The **life everlasting** is nothing short of the forever and full enjoyment of our eternally inseparable union with Jesus Christ and His divine life. And this then means, first of all, that Adam did not possess this eternal life in the Garden before he fell—he was promised something greater in the Covenant of Works.
- Very often, last things bring up first things. Adam was created and given a holy, righteous, and good life, but it was a losable and contingent life. Indeed, from the fact that he could die (cf. Gen. 2:17), we know he did not yet have eternal life (which means at least that one cannot ever die). The Covenant of Works, which bound Adam to obey the revealed law of God and live, or disobey that law and die, was the way by which Adam was to attain to eternal life (cf. Lk. 10:25; 18:18). And thus God put the sacramental *tree of life* in the Garden, which symbolized the reward he would receive and enter into, if he obeyed God perfectly. Indeed, it was a call to enter into that Sabbath rest that God Himself entered into, upon completion of His work.
- The **life everlasting** being the forever and full enjoyment of our eternally inseparable union with Jesus Christ and His divine life also means, that it can be found nowhere else but in Him, and it is laid hold of by faith in Him: *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.* (John 5:24; cf. 3:16, etc.), *Blessed are those who wash their robes* [some manuscripts actually read *do His commandments* echoing the terms of the Covenant of Works] *so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.* (Rev. 22:14). *Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”* (John 6:68).
- And finally, the **life everlasting** being the forever and full enjoyment of our eternally inseparable

union with Jesus Christ and His divine life also means that it begins right now. As John 5:24 (cited above) states, *whoever hears My word and believes...has passed from death to life*, or John 6:47 says, *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life*, or, John 6:54 says, *Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*.

- You see, the great and mysterious union that takes place between a believer and Jesus, is not a mere theological construct, but a critical and real union that ties us into the very life and vitality of Jesus Christ. Paul writes of this in these terms (Col. 3:2-4), *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory*. Or as he states it in Galatians 2:20, *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me*.
- As we speak of our union with Jesus Christ and participating in His life, we are actually speaking of heaven. To quote J.I. Packer, “Being with Jesus is the essence of heaven; it is what the life everlasting is all about.”¹ The *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 22 asks, “What comfort do you derive from the article of *the life everlasting*?” A: “That, since I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, after this life I shall possess perfect bliss, such as eye has not seen nor ear heard, neither has entered into the heart of man—therein to praise God forever.” This answer is a partial quote of Isaiah 64:4 (which Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 2:9), *From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for Him*, or as Paul puts it, “*What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him*”.
- This is not a disdaining of life in the here and now. Rather, those who have had a taste of the joy of salvation, communion with Jesus Christ, and a participation in the Spirit’s activity in this life, begin to long to enjoy those delights forever and ever, in full measure, with none of the limitations that sin has introduced. You see, our enjoyment of God and one another is never fully satisfied here in this life. We struggle with never being close enough to Him and each other. We long to have a communion with Him that is vibrant and satisfying to the degree that we will never want anything else nor look to another. Indeed, we want the fulfillment of the great promise God made to Abraham when establishing the Covenant (Gen. 15:1), “I will be your...exceedingly great reward.”
- But alas, hindered by our distance and the corruption of our flesh, we never fully experience here what we know could be. We have a little taste and beginning now—now we know in part...but then, face to face (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12). Then it will be that full enjoyment that we long for, and know is possible, forever and ever. And therefore, this hope of heaven that we have now in Christ—this taste of *the life everlasting*—should profoundly affect the way we live in the here and now.
- First of all, it should keep us from seeking full fulfillment from any relationship or pleasure in this life. Nothing in this life—save our Maker and Redeemer Himself—can ever satisfy us, and we will not be fully satisfied in Him until after the resurrection...until we have come into the full enjoyment and participation of *the life everlasting*.
- Secondly, it should produce in us courage and patience in this life. As Paul says in Romans 8:31-39,

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- So, *the life everlasting* is the final installment and aim of our glorious salvation in Christ!

¹ *Growing in Christ*, p. 88