Everlasting Life—Two of Its Dimensions

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**Preface**

The phrase *everlasting* (eternal) *life* occurs forty-two times in the New Testament. It is composed of the following two Greek words: (1) *zoen*—from the noun *zoe* and (2) *aionion*—from the adjective *aionios*. *Aionios* is an adjective of duration not affected by the limitations of time. *Zoe* refers to one’s spiritual (spirit and soul) life as distinguished from physical life.

The meaning of *everlasting life* as the free grace-gift of God of regeneration (entrance into heaven on the basis of *faith alone*) is well documented in Scripture. However, many who recognize this meaning are not as aware of the eleven of the forty-two usages of this phrase (26 percent) that presents everlasting life as something to be earned or achieved through merit (works).

**Examples of Everlasting Life Conditioned on Faith Alone**

*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life* [*zoen aionion*]. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life* [*zoen aionion*]. ([John 3:14-16](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+3.14-16&t=NKJV))

*He who believes in the Son has everlasting life* [*zoen aionion*]; *and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.* ([John 3:36](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+3.36&t=NKJV))

*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life* [*zoen aionion*], *and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.* ([John 5:24](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+5.24&t=NKJV))

*And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life* [*zoen aionion*]; *and I will raise him up at the last day*. ([John 6:40](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+6.40&t=NKJV))

*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life* [*zoen aionion*]. ([John 6:47](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+6.47&t=NKJV))

**Examples of Everlasting Life Conditioned on Merit (Works)**

*And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life* [*zoen aionion*]. ([Matthew 19:29](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+19.29&t=NKJV), see also [Mark 10:30](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Mark+10.30&t=NKJV); [Luke 18:29-30](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Luke+18.29-30&t=NKJV))

*He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life* [*zoen aionion*]. ([John 12:25](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+12.25&t=NKJV))

(God) who "*will render to each one according to his deeds*": *eternal life* [*zoen aionion*] *to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality*. ([Romans 2:6-7](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+2.6-7&t=NKJV))

*But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life* [*zoen aionion*]. ([Romans 6:22](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+6.22&t=NKJV))

*For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life* [*zoen aionion*]. ([Galatians 6:8](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Galatians+6.8&t=NKJV))

**The Error of “Illegitimate Totality Transfer”**

The Bible student, if not careful, can be subject to the error of “illegitimate totality transfer.” This is an exegetical error of importing the “sense of meaning” of a word or phrase as determined in one context or linguistic setting into all uses of the word or phrase regardless of their contexts or linguistic settings. This is the error when one sees “everlasting life” as the same specific issue when it is used in both the contexts of achievement by “faith alone” and “merit.”

**The Other (Soul/Life) Dimension of Everlasting Life**

Just as several other biblical doctrines are multidimensional (*e.g*., God is a trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; salvation is composed of three segments—past, present, future; Christian inheritance is twofold as in being an “heir of God” and a “joint-heir with Christ” during the kingdom age—[Romans 8:16-17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+8.16-17&t=NKJV)), there are two dimensions of everlasting life. The first dimension is the instantaneous and one-time-never-to-be-repeated bestowal of it to a person when at his decision of *faith alone in Christ alone* it results in the regeneration of his spirit, his judicial justification before God, and the permanent forgiveness of his sins by God for all eternity. But there is more.

Everlasting life in the Bible is not a static entity, a mere gift of regeneration that does not continue to grow and blossom. Rather, it is a dynamic relationship with Christ Himself. Jesus expressed it as a growth-in-knowledge experience in the following:

*And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent*. ([John 17:3](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+17.3&t=NKJV))

He further described it as a spiritual life that is intended to grow and become more abundant:

*I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.* ([John 10:10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+10.10&t=NKJV))

The spiritual growth or sanctification aspect of everlasting life, also known as “present tense” salvation, is seen in Scripture as *soul* (life) *salvation*, and is distinguished from *spirit salvation* (“past tense” salvation). Spirit salvation is regeneration/justification before God and is conditioned only upon faith in Jesus Christ. Soul (life) salvation is a process through this life, conditioned upon “good works,” which will be revealed at the Judgment Seat of Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Corinthians+5.10&t=NKJV)) that results in rewards or lack thereof ([1 Corinthians 3:12-15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Corinthians+3.12-15&t=NKJV)) into the kingdom age. Then there is also “future tense” salvation of the body. The reader is directed to the study entitled “[Rule of Three](http://bibleone.net/print_tbs97.html)” in the topical section of [Bible One](http://www.bibleone.net/) for a more detailed treatment of the doctrine of (tripartite) salvation.

But spiritual growth (soul salvation) is not instantaneous and automatic; it is conditioned and directly proportional upon effort expended by the believer in achieving it. Such effort involves the absorption of, faith in, and obedience to God’s Word (Bible doctrine). This maturation process also involves the believer’s proper response to the various trials given him by God in order that he may achieve a greater intimacy with Jesus Christ. Only by continuing in “doing good” (*i.e.*, “divine good works”) does that spiritual life imparted at regeneration grow to maturity and earn rewards. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he challenged Timothy in the following:

*Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. . . . that you keep this commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing* ([1 Timothy 6:12](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Timothy+6.12&t=NKJV), [14](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Timothy+6.14&t=NKJV))

Possessing eternal life is one thing, but “laying hold” of it is another. The former is *static*; the latter is *dynamic*. The former depends upon God; the latter depends upon the believer. The former comes through faith alone; the latter requires faith plus obedience ([1 Timothy 6:14](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Timothy+6.14&t=NKJV)). In fact, Paul further down in the chapter indicates that the acquisition of this dimension (“laying hold”) of eternal life is finalized (finds its culmination) in the future ([1 Timothy 6:19](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Timothy+6.19&t=NKJV)); therefore, eternal life is not only the gift of regeneration (spirit salvation), which is by faith alone; but is also a life (soul salvation) that is cultivated by faith plus proper spiritual growth, which comes by knowledge of, faith in, and obedience to the Word of God—and which culminates in the kingdom age upon earth.

**The Typology of the Israelites**

In the Old Testament the Israelites were delivered from the wrath of Egypt by their faith as expressed by placing the blood of the Passover lamb on the lintel and doorposts of their homes. This is a type of the *static* dimension of (spirit) salvation when a person *by faith alone in Christ alone* is regenerated and justified by God. But then there is the type of the *dynamic* dimension of (soul) salvation in their journey through the wilderness under specific directions by God in order to take possession of the land He had promised them.

*Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you*. ([Deuteronomy 4:1](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+4.1&t=NKJV))

The promised land of Canaan for the Israelites was the culmination of their salvation, just as the kingdom age will be the culmination of the present or *soul salvation* of the Christian. And only until the Bible student understands the typology of the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and their life in the wilderness as two different parts of their “salvation” experience can he fully appreciate the message and theology expressed in the book of Hebrews.

**The Difference Amplified**

It is critical to note that in every place where everlasting (eternal) life is presented as something that can be obtained by works, it is contextually *always* described as a future acquisition. Conversely, whenever it is described as something in the present, it is obtained by faith alone.

*In* [*Galatians 6:8*](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Galatians+6.8&t=NKJV)*, for example, eternal life is something earned by the sower. If this passage is speaking of final salvation from hell, then salvation is based on works. A man reaps what he sows. If we sow to please the Spirit, we will reap (future tense) eternal life. Paul calls it a harvest “if we do not give up.” Eternal life is earned by sowing to the Spirit and persevering to the end. It is what we get if we do good works. There is nothing here about the inevitability of this reaping. It depends upon us. We will reap, Paul says, “if we do not give up.” Eternal life is no static entity but a relationship with God. It is dynamic and growing and has degrees. Some Christians have a more intimate relationship with their Lord than others. They have a richer experience of eternal life. Jesus Himself said, “I came to give life more abundantly”* ([John 10:10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+10.10&t=NKJV)).

*In this sense it is parallel to physical life. Physical life is received as a gift but then it must be developed. Children often develop to their full physical and mental ability under the auspices of their parents. In order for eternal life to flourish, we must also be obedient to our parents. Whenever eternal life is viewed as a reward in the New Testament, it is presented as something to be acquired in the future. But when it is presented as a gift, it is something acquired in the present. No one can receive it as a reward, i.e., experience it to a more abundant degree, until he has received eternal life freely as a gift to begin with*. (The Reign of the Servant Kings by Joseph C. Dillow, Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992)

And as in [Galatians 6:8](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Galatians+6.8&t=NKJV), understanding these two differing aspects of salvation also brings enlightenment to [Romans 2:5-13](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+2.5-13&t=NKJV). The main problem in the passage is that [Galatians 6:7](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Galatians+6.7&t=NKJV), [10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Galatians+6.10&t=NKJV) promise eternal life on the basis of works, which is in complete contradiction to Paul’s statements in [Romans 3:19-22](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+3.19-22&t=NKJV); that is, it is a contradiction *if* eternal life means “go to heaven.” The reference in [Romans 3](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+3&t=NKJV) is speaking of spirit salvation or the static salvation of regeneration (acquiring justification and the righteousness of God—[2 Corinthians 5:21](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Corinthians+5.21&t=NKJV)); whereas, the reference in [Romans 2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+2&t=NKJV) pertains to soul salvation or that dynamic salvation that brings spiritual growth/maturity and results in future rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

The day of judgment of works will come to both the believer ([2 Corinthians 2:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Corinthians+2.5&t=NKJV)) and to the unbeliever ([Revelation 20:11-15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Revelation+20.11-15&t=NKJV)). The difference between the two is that the believer’s one-time faith-acceptance of God’s grace-gift of salvation in Christ will insulate him from the eternal Lake of Fire. His works, if indeed they are divine good works (*i.e.*, works under the control of God’s Spirit and done *through* the believer), will accrue for him “eternal life” rewards that will benefit him during the millennial kingdom. But the unbeliever will have no insulation from an eternity in the Lake of Fire. Rather, he will be shown most emphatically that no amount of good works will insure for him a place in heaven; and that without his name being written in the Book of Life (a product of *faith alone in Christ alone*) he has only an eternity in that inferno apart from God ([Revelation 20:15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Revelation+20.15&t=NKJV)) to which to look forward.

**Conclusion**

The conclusion is that in order to understand a number of “salvation” and/or “everlasting (eternal) life” passages in the New Testament an understanding of the differing aspects of salvation must be applied contextually. To do otherwise and give in to the device of illegitimate totality transfer will only drive the Bible student toward confusion, erroneous *exegesis* [*eisegesis*], and faulty doctrine.

*Words are constantly being used in different ways in different contexts. To be bemused at “distinctions” betrays a wooden concept of language typical of many Experimental Predestinarians with their penchant for the illegitimate totality transfer. If the word means one thing here, it must, they say, mean the same thing in the passage they use to support their system. . . .*

*Making all soteriological references to these words refer to our entrance into heaven requires, if we let the text speak plainly, that the entrance into heaven be based upon works. But if these words often refer to something else, something conditional in the believer’s experience—his victorious perseverance and subsequent reward—no “theological exegesis” is necessary to make them consistent with the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone*. (The Reign of the Servant Kings by Joseph C. Dillow, Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992)