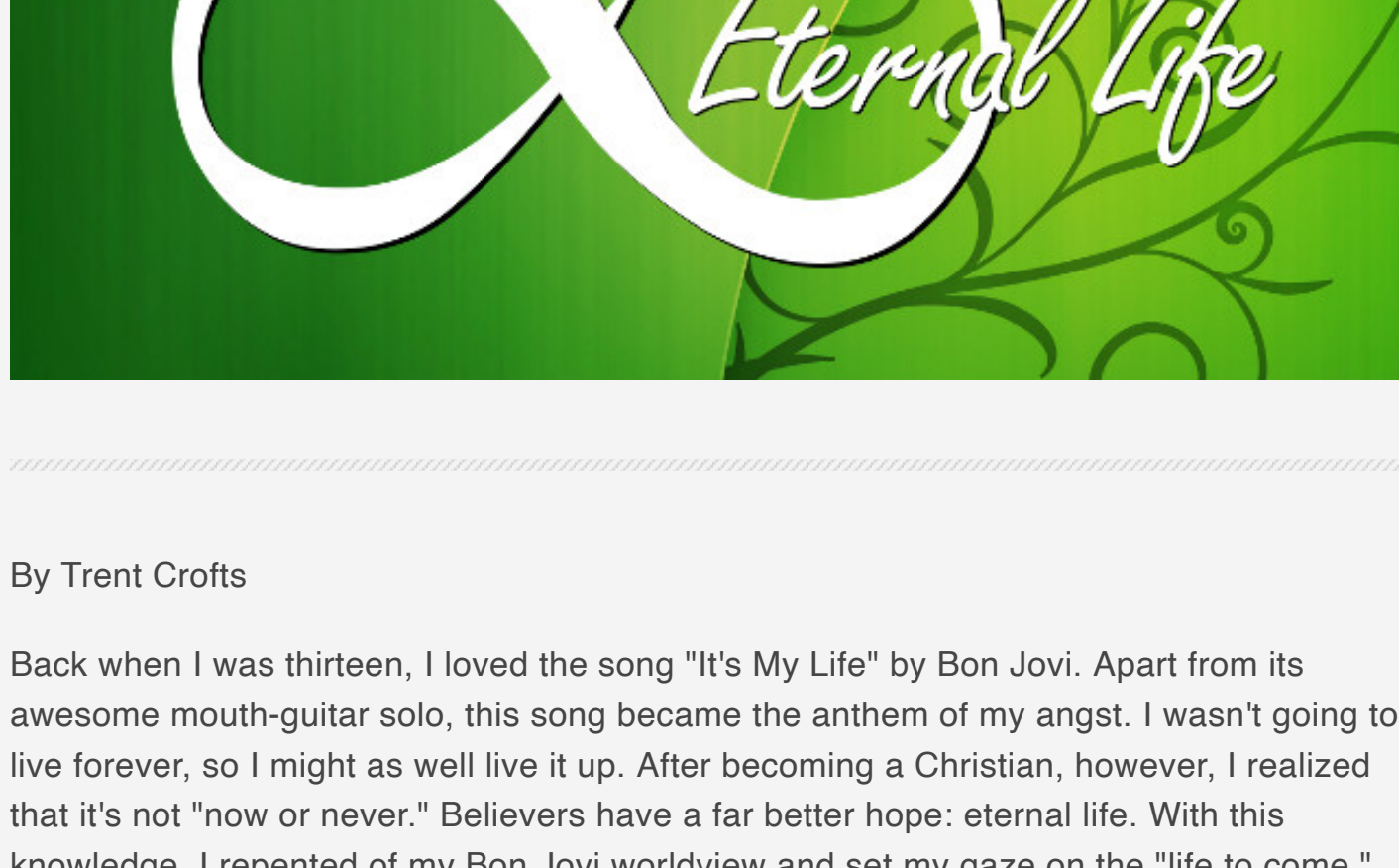


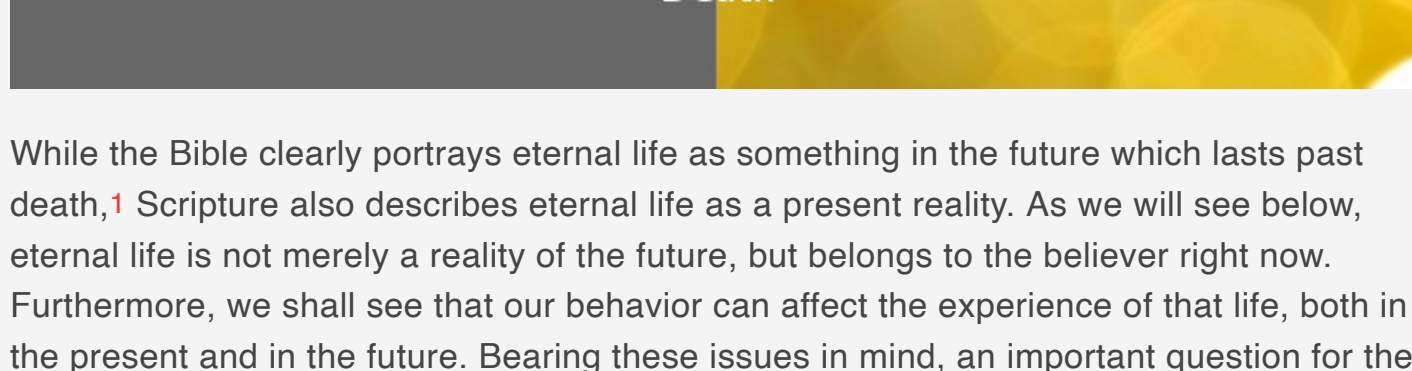
ETERNAL LIFE: IT'S MY LIFE



By Trent Crofts

Back when I was thirteen, I loved the song "It's My Life" by Bon Jovi. Apart from its awesome mouth-guitar solo, this song became the anthem of my angst. I wasn't going to live forever, so I might as well live it up. After becoming a Christian, however, I realized that it's not "now or never." Believers have a far better hope: eternal life. With this knowledge, I repented of my Bon Jovi worldview and set my gaze on the "life to come."

The more I've studied the concept of eternal life, the more I think I've missed an important nuance. When we think about "eternal life," we often think of it in two dimensions. First, we regard eternal life as a *future* reality - something we are waiting to enjoy. Second, we regard eternal life as a *temporal* reality - it means we keep living after death. The chart below visualizes this outlook:



While the Bible clearly portrays eternal life as something in the future which lasts past death,¹ Scripture also describes eternal life as a present reality. As we will see below, eternal life is not merely a reality of the future, but belongs to the believer right now. Furthermore, we shall see that our behavior can affect the experience of that life, both in the present and in the future. Bearing these issues in mind, an important question for the believer emerges: how does eternal life intersect with the present?

First, the Bible tells us that eternal life belongs to the believer *right now*. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Gospel of John. The theme of eternal life runs throughout John's Gospel, appearing *17 times*. Indeed, the author's purpose for the book is to provide assurance of "life" in Jesus' name (20:31-32). The first reference to eternal life in John's Gospel shows up in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. As Jesus unpacks the salvific work of being "lifted up," he states the purpose behind his death: "so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:15, NET).² From Jesus' perspective, his exaltation was a future event. For the readers of John's Gospel, however, this was an open invitation to have eternal life. The only qualification of time is linked to his exaltation. John 3:16 further explains Jesus' saving work, noting the love of God in giving up his only Son for a similar purpose as the previous verse: "so that everyone who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (NET). Again, we see no orientation to the future. Although Jesus contrasts perishing with eternal life, the context does not specify this as some future judgment. Instead, Jesus focuses on what people have when they believe. Toward the end of the chapter, we encounter the testimony of John the Baptist concerning Jesus' origin and teaching "from above." At the conclusion of his teaching, the Baptist makes one of the clearest statements on the present realities of eternal life: "The one who believes in the Son *has* eternal life. However, the one who disbelieves the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (3:36, author's own translation).³ The pronouncement of God's wrath in the present parallels the possession of eternal life: it is a present possession for those who believe.

The same idea emerges in Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan women at the well. In explaining his offer for "water" that truly satisfies, Jesus states "but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him, cannot thirst forever, but the water which I will give to him will become in him a well of water welling up into eternal life" (4:14, author's own translation). In this explanation, we should understand "drinking" as believing and the water as Jesus Himself. Note that when someone drinks, they are immediately satisfied; they have no possibility of being thirsty again. The complement to "not thirsting" emerges from the possession of eternal life. Thus, when someone believes, they are immediately satisfied with eternal life.

Explaining his "work" on the Sabbath to the Jews, Jesus states "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes the one who sent me *has* eternal life and will not enter into judgment, but *has moved* from death to life" (5:24, author's translation).⁴ The possession of eternal life provides a change of residency. Later, in the bread of life discourse, Jesus declares the will of his Father: "that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (6:40). While one may be tempted to connect possession of eternal life with resurrection, Jesus does not make that kind of connection. The present consequence of belief relates to possession of eternal life and the future consequence of belief relates to resurrection. Jesus' statement later makes this abundantly clear: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the one who believes *has* eternal life" (6:47, author's translation). Concerning his role as the Good Shepherd providing for his sheep, Jesus states "I give them eternal life and they cannot perish forever and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (author's translation). For other passages, see Romans 6:23; 1 Timothy 1:16; 1 John 5:11, 13.

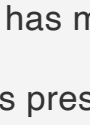
Second, the Bible tells us that our present experience of eternal life can be enhanced or diminished. Many passages present eternal life as a possession and/or characteristic of Jesus, suggesting that our fellowship with the Lord effects our present enjoyment of eternal life. In John 6:68, Peter shoots down the idea of abandoning Jesus because he has "words of eternal life" (NASB). In Jesus' prayer, he equates eternal life to "knowing" God and himself (Jn 17:3). In the opening of 1 John, the author testifies about "the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us..." (1 Jn 1:2).

"Eternal life" here functions as an "epitaph" or special name for Jesus. Later in the epistle, John states "And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1 Jn 5:11). Closing out his letter, John teaches that God sent his Son for us to know "him who is true" or literally "the truth," and that we are in fact in "him who is true" or "the truth," Jesus Christ. John then states that "This one is the true God and eternal life," referring to Jesus. Thus, our present experience of eternal life depends upon our ongoing relationship with Jesus, who is eternal life.

Paul also suggests our present life holds opportunity for an enhanced or diminished experience of eternal life. Contrasting the condemnation brought through Adam's sin with the justification brought through Jesus' obedience, Paul argues that just as death "reigned" through Adam, how much more will righteousness "reign in life" through Jesus (Rom 5:17). Paul develops this argument throughout 5:18-21, concluding that where sin increased, grace abounded "so that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace will reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:21, NET). In other words, since we have experienced justification and have received the free gift of righteousness, grace can rule over our lives and produce *eternal life* (a richer quality of life). These verses clearly anticipate Paul's exhortation to walk in a new way of life (cf. Rom 6:4, 8, 11, 13). In the closing section of Galatians, Paul exhorts his readers towards love and works and backs up his exhortation with a proverb: "for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (5:7). He goes on to explain this principle: "For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap *eternal life*" (5:8). While many understand this as a reference to final judgment, it more likely reflects the present consequences of our lives. Reaping "corruption" could either refer to damaging ourselves or could refer to the perishable return on our investment from the flesh. In the same vein, reaping eternal life could refer to our experience of eternal life or to the lasting return on our investment from the Spirit. Either of these ideas fit better than some idea of final judgment, especially when one considers the very next verse: "Now let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (6:8). Far from suggesting that we must continue to work if we hope to escape future condemnation, Paul urges his readers to keep doing good with an eye towards reaping rewards, either a richer experience of eternal life or the enduring nature of our investments.⁵ Furthermore, in his closing section in 1 Timothy, Paul urges Timothy to "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1 Tim 6:12). Based on the context, to "take hold of the eternal life" looks like fleeing greed (cf. 6:9-11) and pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love steadfastness, gentleness (6:11) and to "fight" (6:12). Paul urges Timothy to appropriate or make good on eternal life by living it out (cf. also 6:17-19).

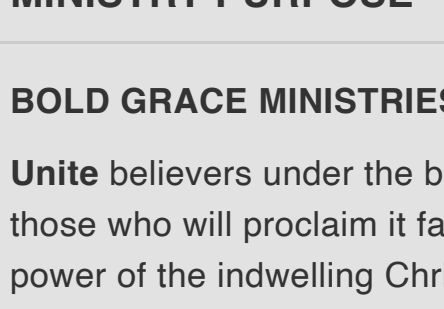
Third, the Bible tells us that our future experience of eternal life can be enhanced or diminished. Responding to Peter's question about reward for leaving everything and following Jesus, the Lord replies that in the messianic age or "rebirth," everyone who has left behind their lives for his sake "will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life" (Matt 19:29). Eternal life here is a special blessing for following Jesus at great cost (cf. Mark 10:30; Lk 18:30). Paul also describes eternal life as a reward for our present lives. In Romans 2, the apostle suggests that God will pay everyone according to their works (2:6), and states "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (2:7). Again, while some make this a matter of "final justification," it seems better to understand this as the reward for doing good works.⁶ Paul also highlights how our present sanctification anticipates our future experience of eternal life. Because we have been set free from sin and now serve God, the "fruit" of our obedience results in "sanctification and its end, eternal life" (Rom 6:22). Every victory over sin in this life anticipates the consummation of eternal life overflowing into complete freedom from even the presence of sin.

In summary, the blessing of eternal life lies before us right now. It belongs to Jesus, and we possess it through belief in Him. Through ongoing fellowship with our Lord, our connection to and experience of this "life" enhances. By making investments according to the Spirit's leading, we reap a fuller appreciation of eternal life. We may take hold of this "life" in our battle for godliness. Finally, we anticipate the fulfillment of eternal life as God's grace works in us to overcome sin. Now please excuse me as I crank up some Bon Jovi.



¹ Cf. Matt 25:46; Jn 12:25; Titus 1:2; 3:7; etc.
² Unless noted, all references are from the ESV.
³ Some versions translate this verse as "whoever does not obey the Son..." (ESV; NASB), while others opt for "rejects the Son" (NET; NIV). However, the Greek word may also translate as "disbelieve," which fits the parallel better with "the one who believes."
⁴ The emphasis behind "has moved" reflects a status update: it happened in the past and bears consequences for the present.
⁵ Some understand this passage as a reference to the "judgment" of believers referenced in 1 Corinthians 3 and 2 Corinthians 5 and suggest eternal life is some kind of future reward. While this interpretation has merit, the emphasis on the present appears stronger to me.
⁶ One could also understand this verse as present consequences for obedience or disobedience. The context of Rom 1:18-2:5 highlights the present revelation of God's wrath against ungodliness and unrighteousness, describing how people have corrupted themselves and how God has handed them over to their passions. Therefore, one may understand 2:5 in the same line of thought: those who judge others and live without repentance are storing up wrath "in a day of wrath and revelation of God's righteous judgment" (author's translation). Thus, 2:6-10 potentially describes positive and negative consequences for our behavior which God "pays out" in the present. This parallels the idea of sowing and reaping in Galatians 6:8.

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