

From Everlasting to Everlasting

Text: John 11:1–53

Hymn: “What Wondrous Love Is This” (LSB 543)

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

John 11:25-26

Introduction:

Our text uses the word “life” in two senses. It speaks of one kind of life we’re going to lose but get back again – “whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” And then it speaks of another kind of life we don’t have to lose at all – “everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” The first, of course, is bodily life, the one characterized by such things as breathing and muscular movement; that is the one we lose for a while, but, because of Christ, we can get it back again better than before. The second is spiritual life, the one characterized by such things as loving God more than anything else and loving our neighbor as ourselves; that is the one which, if we have it, even death cannot take it away from us. It goes on even when the body decays and disintegrates.

Today we want to see that Christ’s death and resurrection make us sure of having both kinds of life. They guarantee us eternal bodily life, and they guarantee us eternal spiritual life.

I. Christ’s Saving Work Guarantees Us Eternal Spiritual Life

For a reason that will become evident later, let’s discuss the second truth first, namely, that Christ’s saving work guarantees us eternal spiritual life.

I said of this life a moment ago that if we have it even death cannot take it away from us. Notice there’s an “if” there, a big “if”—if we have it. The thing we want to

realize today is that we don't necessarily have it. In fact, not one person was ever born with it. And a lot of people go through life without ever getting this life. We can breathe, eat, walk around, and make a living, we can get up in the morning feeling ever so good and saying, "It's a great day to be alive," and we can still lack the life I'm talking about. We can be in the prime of life, we can be enjoying the best years of our lives, and still be without this life. For the life I'm talking about is the very life God Himself has, the life characterized by such things as perfect holiness and perfect love. And that life? Well, without Christ we just don't have it.

The curious thing is that once upon a time we did have it. The first members of the human race, Adam and Eve, possessed this life. But they rejected it. Through sin they committed spiritual suicide, and by doing that they spiritually murdered the whole human race. They could pass on bodily life, for that they still had, but they could not pass on to their children the life of God. (After all, you can't give what you haven't got in the first place.) That is why you and I, here in church today, came into the world alive in the body, yes, but not alive in the soul; born, true, but desperately in need of being born again. We simply lacked God's kind of life of holiness and love. And that is why the Bible is not exaggerating when it comes right out and calls us "dead"—"dead in trespasses and sins."

Now this spiritual life isn't one of those things that's nice if we've got it, but we haven't got it, so we might as well forget about it and make the best of it. No! It's a profound tragedy either way we look at it—from God's point of view or from our point of view. God planned that we live His kind of life—and He isn't the type of person who likes to see His plans go wrong. Seventy-five years lived on this earth by a person

without the life of God are seventy-five years of indebtedness to God—and eventually God forecloses. We go into debtors' prison, so to speak. In fact, the Bible even calls it a "prison" in a couple of places, but more often calls it by its plainer name "hell."

And that is where it begins to be a tragedy from our point of view. No, on second thought, it doesn't begin there. It begins here, in this life. There is often unhappiness on earth already, and that, we might say, is the wages of sin paid in advance.

What can we do about the mess we're in? Well, frankly, nothing. When a person has committed suicide, there's really nothing that he or anyone else can do to get back life. That's true of spiritual life too. We can't get it back, and so we can't pay our debt to God. Nor can anyone else pay it for us. "None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him," the psalmist reminds us (Ps. 49:7).

When someone's in debt to us, about all we're interested in is getting our money back. But God's considerably different from us—He's love. That means He wasn't simply concerned about the debt, but He was even more concerned about the people in debt—about you and me.

What God did about it is something we've been hearing about and singing about during this Lenten season. God sent His Son, Jesus, to our world, and He took care of our debt. For one thing, He lived the life that we owed to God. And, another thing, He died the death that we owed to God for not living for Him, the death called hell. It happened on a cross. That cleared every obstacle from God's path and made it possible for Him to reach us with His life. He reaches us through the Gospel story and the Sacraments, and—we come to life! Already down here we get a good start at being

holy and loving. And in heaven we'll be completely so. And with it will come happiness; it's always "godliness with contentment," as the Bible promises (1 Timothy 6:6).

In Jesus' subsequent resurrection from the grave, God signaled that this blessed and eternal spiritual life won for us by Jesus' crucifixion and damnation was now indeed a reality, an accomplished fact. By the resurrection of His Son on Easter Sunday, God is telling us that He can give us spiritual life once again, in fact, that He's glad to do that and that He will do that. Christ's saving work, therefore, brings about a spiritual resurrection in us. St. Paul says this a lot better than I can: "Just as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4, KJV). "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11).

This spiritual life of holiness and love is eternal. Bodily death does not interrupt it; in fact, bodily death only makes it more complete. "Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die," Jesus said to Martha in our text.

That a person does not really die at death but lives on, a teaching commonly called the immortality of the soul, is not a uniquely Christian teaching. By that I mean that some pagans teach it as well as Christians. By and large, the human race thinks it incredible that the strange human spirit that can write books and compose symphonies and concoct inventions should end in a chemical process. And so the human race has concluded: "The soul is immortal."

Will you please understand that that is not what is meant when Jesus says, "Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die"? The immortality of the soul is, of course, taken for granted here, but Jesus is speaking of a life in addition to that. Our

sin did not take away from us the immortality of our soul, but it did take away from us spiritual life. And Christ did not come to our world to guarantee the immortality of our soul. We were immortal anyhow, whether we liked it or not. Most of us think we would like it. But remember—a soul can be immortal in two ways: it can be immortal in heaven, or it can be immortal in hell. It can live in life, or it can live in death. And that's where Christ made the difference. By His death and resurrection He has made the teaching of the immortality of our soul a comforting instead of a terrifying teaching. He has not assured us that our soul shall live—we were sure of that anyhow—but He has assured us that our soul shall live in life rather than in death, in heaven rather than in hell.

II. Christ's Saving Work Guarantees Eternal Bodily Life

So we're finished with that point: Christ's saving work guarantees us eternal spiritual life. I dare say that most people will go along with this claim. They'll have no objections—it's just vague enough and abstract enough to suit them. I dare say that some people could even sleep through it, for it's not a particularly jarring or challenging truth. I said a moment ago that most people believe in a hereafter of some kind. You go to a non-Christian funeral and you'll always hear some poetic, flowery sentiment about achieving immortality, reaching the other shore, and being absorbed into the Absolute or the Infinite. Our world is filled with philosophies about the hereafter—rather anemic philosophies and not too comforting—but they sound nice and pretty. And so when I come along today and claim that Christ's saving work guarantees us eternal spiritual life, people may say, "O.K. That's fine. A slightly different interpretation of immortality perhaps. A Christian's way of looking at it maybe. But it'll do."

But Christianity makes an additional claim about the after-life, one that is not vague, not the least bit. It's a solid, definite thing. For sheer boldness it has no parallel. For Christianity promises an eternal bodily life. Did you hear that? Christianity claims that these bodies that die and are buried and rot—why, they're going to rise again better than ever, and they're going to participate in the eternal spiritual life that our souls have already been enjoying.

It seems that God likes bodies. He made them in the first place. And now He wants us to have them for eternity. We're sure of this because of Christ's own bodily resurrection. That's a case in point. That shows it can happen. Christ is "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" is the way St. Paul says it (1 Cor. 15:20). Even Job, way back in Old Testament days, expressed this conviction in some pretty daring language: "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God; Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another" (Job 19:25, KJV). Jesus says it this way in our text: "Whoever believes in me, though he die" [get that: "though he die"] "yet shall he live." And that Jesus meant exactly what He said, that it was a definite and concrete promise, became clear just a few minutes later when Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave, dead already for four days and, according to sister Martha, not in too presentable a condition.

Conclusion:

This is a jarring truth. It constitutes a severe challenge to our faith. That, perhaps, is why the world, by and large, won't go along with us on this claim. Yet, if

believed, it is a tremendously comforting truth. There's nothing like it. It robs death of its sting and the grave of its victory.

The important thing is that we do believe it. "Do you believe this?" Jesus asked Martha in our text. That is my question to each of you today: "Do you believe this?" With God's help you can. "With him nothing is impossible."

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