

The Life Everlasting

SCOTT HOEZEE

The life everlasting. Those are the final three words of the Apostles' Creed, and seeing as they come at the very end and right before we say, Amen," it is easy to just glide right over the top of those words. Yet, what we confess each time we say this is quite probably more than we can wrap our minds around most of the time. Also, the very prospect of an unending life in God's new creation comes pretty close to being what God's whole project of salvation has been about all along. If never-ending life with God really is our future, then we should never mention it in passing; not even as we bring the Creed in for a landing. Today on Groundwork, we think about the life everlasting, and dig into scripture to see what this means. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and as we conclude this series, we welcome back Dr. Sue Rozeboom, assistant professor of Liturgical Theology at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan. So, welcome back, Sue.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Thank you so much. It is good to be with you.

DAVE BAST

We are on the fifth and final program in a series on the closing section of the Apostles' Creed, as Scott mentioned at the top: I believe in the Holy Spirit – and not only the Person of the Holy Spirit, and His basic work of uniting us with Christ, of pointing and testifying to Christ, but what He does in and through the Church. He gathers the one holy catholic Church. It is the communion of the saints, as well as the communion of the Spirit, and He assures us of the forgiveness of sins through Christ, and He promises that someday God will use the Spirit to raise our flesh, our bodies as well; and finally, we believe, as we say, in the life everlasting; and that is a pretty big subject, but here we go; let's take a whack at it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are two words in the Bible; there are two words that often get used interchangeably, maybe just at the beginning here, maybe it does not matter in the long run, but it is fun just to think about; the two words that often get used in this connection are: Eternal and everlasting. The Creed talks about the life everlasting, but you can often read about eternal life in the Bible; in fact, we will hear that in a couple of passages in the next segment. Technically, there is a distinction, though, and I teach at Calvin Seminary where Dr. John Cooper teaches Moral Philosophy and Apologetics. I asked him what really is the difference between eternal and everlasting and he said that technically only God is eternal; God, by nature, is ever-existing before there was a creation, etcetera, and what we get in salvation is everlasting life. We do not become part of God; we do not become God; we do not become eternal the way God is eternal, but what we have is an everlasting life that is granted to us that lets our life extend beyond our death and then on into the future of God's creation. So, there is a little distinction there. In fact, Dr. Cooper taught me a new term; I do not think it is going to catch

on, but technically what we get is something called *semp eternity*, which refers to a creature who ordinarily would have a limited existence, but who was granted the gift of everlasting life that goes on and on.

DAVE BAST

Okay, I think I get it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

All that said, we can use eternal and everlasting interchangeably and they can mean the same thing, but that is a little technical distinction.

DAVE BAST

Am I the only person here who has this problem? I will just throw it out to both of you, but I have moments when I think about living forever or eternity or everlasting life and it kind of spooks me; it kind of daunts me; it feels like, “Wow, do I even want that?” That is almost scary, the idea that there is no end; there is literally no end; there is no escape; it just goes on and on. Does that strike you as weird?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes and no. In the one sense, most people, even who are old and full of years, if they have been reasonably healthy and not in great, great pain, most people want to keep going on: I will take another 10; I will take another 15. So, there is one sense in which you feel like we should keep going, and there is another sense where when you think of no limits, it goes beyond our normal sensibilities and ability to wrap our minds around it.

SUE ROZEBOOM

I cannot say that I have ever allowed myself to dwell on the thought that I would not want to exist forever, because what we will be enjoying will not be something we will want to escape.

DAVE BAST

Those of us who are saved anyway.

SUE ROZEBOOM

I guess I have a lot of hope and confidence. Yeah, well, I guess I hadn't thought about it.

DAVE BAST

This is getting too speculative, I know, but – and I know St. Augustine thought a lot about the nature of time; what time was – do you think that what we believe in when we say everlasting life is unending time, going on and on and on and we are conscious of it? Or is it that it is an eternal moment; it is like forever now; we do not really think about the future.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, you are right; that is pretty speculative, but yes...

DAVE BAST

It is a philosophical question.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; will time pass, will clocks tick the same way in God's new creation as they do now? Will we notice it? We just do not know. What we do know is that, as Sue just said, it will be a place of such joy and energy and fascination in everything we do, that I think we will just be forever lost in thought and in joy and in praise and in wonder and in exploring the universe and the new creation of God; so, I do not know, but I just think we will be too busy and too full of awe to worry about it anymore.

SUE ROZEBOOM

What comes to my imagination, too, now that you have put this question to the fore is something that Chrysostom said...

DAVE BAST

John Chrysostom, one of the great early Church fathers and preachers.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Yes. Yes, a Syrian Christian from the early Church. He said, "Weep, then, at the death of a dear one as if you were bidding farewell to one setting out on a journey." So, perhaps life everlasting is a grand journey.

DAVE BAST

Always more to discover, always more, and God at the center of it.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Right, exactly.

DAVE BAST

My reason for even bringing that question up is to point out the problem that we have. Because all we can do is project from our present experience and put it on the canvas of eternity. Things are so muddled here for us and so broken, that to imagine what it will be like when life is perfect, when we no longer have regrets and we are no longer conflicted in any way, and we are actually seeing God and experiencing His presence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds me of little something that my friend, Laura Smit, who teaches theology at Calvin College said; she said, "We have this tendency when it comes to God that we think, 'Well, we have a little bit of an idea of what it means to be good,' and so, when we think about God being good we just spell *good* in all capital letters. Big good. We know about faithfulness, but God is big faithfulness," and she said, "Actually, when you are comparing yourself to God, there is such a different quality to God, that it is not quite the same. It not just *good* spelled in all capital letters; it is a different quality of good." So, life and time and existence with God will not be just like this life magnified or this life a little bigger. It will be a whole different quality of existence. That is what we Christians believe is inside of us. The seed of that eternal or everlasting life, we believe, is inside of us already now, even before we die.

DAVE BAST

Right, and I think that is one of the things we want to stress...

SUE ROZEBOOM

Amen.

DAVE BAST

And actually, we want to look at this from John. It is not just eternal or unending life of the kind that people live in the world now.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Eternal life begins here and now. Jesus says, "I am the life. To know Me is to have eternal life." So, there is a lot of that, especially in the Gospel of John, and that is where we are going to turn in the next segment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast.

SUE ROZEBOOM

And I am Sue Rozeboom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are talking today, Sue and Dave, about the last line of the Apostles' Creed: We believe – I believe – in the life everlasting. The one Gospel that talks the most about eternal life, everlasting life, is John. So, let's hear three passages, John 3:16, a few verses from John 11, and John 17. We will just read them back to back to back and then talk about them.

SUE ROZEBOOM

John 3:16: For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life.

DAVE BAST

And John 11, which is the story of the death of Jesus' friend, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, and then Jesus' interaction afterwards.

²¹"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will give You whatever You ask for." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha answered, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in Me will live even though they die, ²⁶And whoever lives by believing in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷"Yes, Lord," she told Him. I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, near the very end of the night before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, He is in the upper room with the disciples in John 17, and Jesus is praying and He says this: ¹"Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son that Your Son may glorify You. ²For You granted Him authority over all people that He might give eternal life to all those You have given Him. ³Now this is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. ⁴I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave Me to do. ⁵And now, Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began."

DAVE BAST

So, according to Jesus, it is all about life, isn't it? Life, life, life; eternal life, everlasting life, life in Him, life through believing in Him, life for those whom God has given Him; life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It starts in John's Gospel, in John 1: Jesus is the Word of God. And then John says in verse 4: And in Him was life. And that life is the light of all people. ⁵And that light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out.

So, Jesus brought a new quality of life into this world that is going to go beyond biological life; and therefore, beyond death.

SUE ROZEBOOM

This is a life that we already participate in. It is manifest in us already by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, which is why we talk about life everlasting here in the last article of the Creed that has to do with the

work of the Holy Spirit. It is interesting that in the early Christian Church there were profound ways that early Christians practiced their faith, such that the very way that they employ their bodies in prayer spoke to them of the way that they enjoyed this new life already. So, for instance, most times throughout the Christian year they would kneel for prayer, in the season of Lent, always kneeling for prayer; but in the season of Easter, always standing. So, the invitation was to remember that we are fallen in Adam and Eve and the first humanity. We are fallen when we pray, but when we rise from prayer, we remember our primary identity is as one who is raised to new life in Christ.

DAVE BAST

You are saying that in the worship of the early Church they would actually employ specific postures in specific seasons to reinforce the lesson that, “Yes, we have died; yes, we are fallen creatures, but we have been raised...”

SUE ROZEBOOM

Yes. But ultimately, we have been raised, and that is what we remember every time we rise from the kneeling posture in prayer to standing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is interesting, too, because when we recite the Apostles’ Creed and we get to these last articles, it is easy to think that the last couple parts of the Apostles’ Creed are only about the future; way, way off in the sweet by and by... Well, the resurrection of the body, that is a future hope, that is true. The fullness of a life everlasting, the fullness of that is in the future, but what we need to remember and what we really see in John 11 in Jesus’ interaction with Martha is that actually, as the Creed concludes when we confess: I believe in the life everlasting... that is also already today, in a sense, because...

DAVE BAST

It has already started, right.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Amen.

DAVE BAST

I like that because this is this wonderful, poignant, and yet profound encounter Jesus has with these grieving sisters. Their brother has just died and Martha, who has always been the outspoken one, says to Him, ^{21b} “Lord, if You had only been there.” And that is a natural reaction. We think when someone died, “Where was God? He could have saved him.” Jesus says, ²³ “Your brother will rise again.” The promise.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which she thought was like a Hallmark card.

DAVE BAST

She says: Yeah, I have been to Sunday School. I know the Catechism. I know he will rise... I know the correct answer; that he will rise at the last day.

SCOTT HOEZEE

At the last day...

DAVE BAST

No, no, you do not get it, Martha. I am the resurrection; not I will be, I am now, and the life begins now. We are trying to say this over and over; maybe we are hitting it a little too hard, but please get this; please understand this: Everlasting life does not start when you die; it does not start when Jesus returns; it starts here and now.

SUE ROZEBOOM

It starts with your baptism, which is the mark that we receive of our identity with Christ, who is our life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; we die with Christ; we rise with Christ. Interestingly, in John 11, Jesus' encounter with Martha is actually before Jesus' resurrection, and of course, we know that the raising of Lazarus also is not the final resurrection; it was more of a resuscitation that day. Lazarus did die again; but the point is, Jesus was saying that this is a present tense hope if you believe. So, He does not say to Martha, "Will you believe this some day? Are you willing in the future?" No, He says, "Do you believe this?" Right now. And then she, remarkably, says, "Yes, I actually do. You are the Son of God who is coming into the world." In other words, she started to recognize what we talked about earlier in terms of what Jesus' resurrection means, and that is that it is our future that occurred in the past. Jesus is the sneak preview, as we said in the previous program; the sneak preview of what we will all experience, but when we are baptized, as Sue just said, it already starts now. It is already in us.

DAVE BAST

Let's talk a little bit, though, about that word, *believe*. Sue, maybe you could reflect on this because it is in John 3:16, as you read: Whoever *believes* in Him will have eternal life. Martha, do you believe this? Why is it that faith is so important? Why is it that Jesus so emphasizes the need to believe? It seems a little bit, almost, I don't know, insensitive? I mean, here He is in the funeral home talking with the grieving family and He is grilling them: Do you believe? Do you believe? What is it about faith that is so instrumental in this whole business of receiving eternal life?

SUE ROZEBOOM

Well, faith itself is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

DAVE BAST

It is another function of the Ministry of the Spirit.

SUE ROZEBOOM

It is another function of the Ministry of the Spirit, and that is what Paul makes so clear to us in Ephesians 2, that faith itself is a gift; otherwise it would not be grace that saves us, but our work. But even faith is not our work, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit that inclines us to assent to the good news and the promise of this life everlasting; of the work that God is accomplishing in Christ by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I like the images that I have heard, and I have heard this in different theology classes, that faith is like the pipeline through which all of the living water of God flows into us, or faith is like the electrical wire that conducts the power of God into our hearts. In this context of the life everlasting, faith is what begins to channel that everlasting life that Jesus bought for us on the cross and through His resurrection. It starts to get hardwired into us already now, by faith.

DAVE BAST

I think one of the famous questions and answers in our Catechism, as we, the three of us at least, learned growing up; when it asks: How are you right with God? And it goes through the answer of all that God has done and what He does through the Spirit, and then it concludes: All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart. That is the wire; that is the pipe; that is what faith does. It does not really do this for us, but it allows us... we are opening our hands and saying, "Yes."

SUE ROZEBOOM

Yes. It is the instrument by which we receive that good gift.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And all of this, of course, has rich pastoral and personal implications for all of us in the often difficult world. We will think about some of that in just a moment.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and today once more, Sue Rozeboom, and you are listening to Groundwork, where we are talking about the everlasting life that we believe in; the eternal life that begins here and now and extends forever for those who are in Jesus Christ. Let's talk a little bit with the time that we have left about the nature of that life; what it will be like as nearly as we can say, based on what the scripture says about it. Probably one of the best places to look for that is at the very end of the book of the Revelation.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Revelation 21 gives us an extraordinary glimpse of the new heaven and the new earth. John writes: ¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them. They will be His people. And God Himself will be with them. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that is, as you read it, Sue, an incredibly important passage in the Bible for lots and lots of different reasons, actually; but for a couple of key reasons as we bring this series on the last part of the Apostles' Creed in for a conclusion here. We take the last two articles of the Creed – in the previous program, we looked at: We believe in the resurrection of the body – and now the life everlasting – you put those two together and you say: Well, if we are, indeed, going to get a physical body back, that body has to be somewhere. We are not a concept or a memory in God's mind; we are not wispy spirits. We are going to have a real body, which means we have to have a location. Real bodies have to be somewhere, and the Bible says that somewhere is not a wispy, cloudy, misty, vapory heaven, but a new creation, which we do not go up to heaven, actually, according to John from the passage that you just read, the new creation comes down to us, and that means we stay in this creation, albeit, renewed.

DAVE BAST

I have a friend who is a theologian, Steve Bouma-Prediger, who says, "I want to be left behind." You want to be here. You want to be here on earth...

SUE ROZEBOOM

Amen.

DAVE BAST

when Jesus comes, because He is bringing the new creation with Him.

You know, so many jokes, Sue, that people tell about heaven: Will there be golfing in heaven? Will I do this and that? And they are kind of cornball, maybe, or sort of hokey folk wisdom, but there is a kernel here that the things that we love here on earth are going to be there, only better, in the new creation, and that is what, maybe, Revelation is pointing to.

Sue Rozeboom:

Perhaps. I once heard Ron Rienstra preach a sermon, and he was reflecting on this and he said that one of the worst things he could hear in heaven is that it would have been okay to golf on Sunday. So, the activities that give us life – ultimately, obviously, it is Christ who gives us life – but, we were made to play; we were made to enjoy this good earth – gardening, sports, leisure – we were made to enjoy these things. So, that which gives us good joy is that which we will enjoy, then, in the new heaven and the new earth.

DAVE BAST

The question of pets in heaven sometimes comes up; and all that sort of thing. Whatever it is that we find pleasurable will be there in its pure form; in its real form.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The theologian named Anthony Hoekema, who taught at Calvin Seminary many years ago...

DAVE BAST

Yes, I had a course with him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he has been gone from us for quite a while now, but he wrote a book about God, the Bible, and the future, and he said at one point, if we imagine heaven, as we ought to refer to it, the kingdom of God, the new creation, he said if we imagine it as anything less than a place with tadpoles and tiger lilies and mountains and Chardonnay wine, that would be conceding defeat to the Devil, because the Devil has been out to besmirch and destroy God's creation from the beginning. The fact that the creation is not going anywhere – the physical creation – dirt and earthworms and parrotfish will all be renewed. That will be one of the signs that the Devil lost. He could not destroy creation. God renewed it and it will be our eternal home.

SUE ROZEBOOM

I wonder if Jesus' miracles are actually that which give us a glimpse of that? Because Jesus' miracles were done to demonstrate, to manifest, to show us the kingdom of shalom; and that, presumably, is the kingdom that we will enjoy in life everlasting.

DAVE BAST

What do you make of these negatives in Revelation? The things that are not there; like the sea, it says, will be no more; and tears and crying will be wiped away. We get that, I think, but isn't John getting at what you were just saying, Sue, with the miracles of Jesus?

SUE ROZEBOOM

Perhaps. *Sea* there is a metaphor for chaos; for all that disturbs us, that undoes our well-being.

DAVE BAST

So, you think of sickness, blindness, deafness, lameness – the things that Jesus...

SUE ROZEBOOM

Destitution, oppression...

DAVE BAST

All of the things Jesus reversed.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Poverty, yes. So, even the widow whose son was raised from the dead, not to have a husband, not to have a son, her wellbeing is completely jeopardized, and Jesus upends that.

DAVE BAST

And that is ultimately going to be done completely, finally, and forever for all of us in the life of the world to come; the life everlasting, as we believe.

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and again this week, our guest, Sue Rozeboom. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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