

When does eternal life begin, and what is it?

I have a friend in western Canada called Maggie. Maggie had been a regular woman with an expectation of a regular life. She had always expected to work and have a career, to marry and have a family, to grow older and have grandchildren when she retired. A very usual plan. But it never worked out like that. By her 40's she had realized that love was not coming her way, and so all the hopes of family began to turn to shadows.

But she had meaningful work and friends and carried on. In her mid 50's she met an older man who, like her had found himself alone. To her astonishment this friendship developed and over a couple of years it grew into love. They married and lived in quiet astonishment, which was lovely. And then he died. He died after only a few months of illness and decline.

Alone she grieved deeply and painfully. Every day she would visit his grave and talk. Not great things, but the small things of the day. The hopes for the weekend. How hard it was to be alone in the movie theatre again. How the roses were doing. And so on. Over months and seasons her love for him did not decline but changed. Or rather she did not decline but grew. She had loved and been loved, and she had much love left to give. Perhaps she will not be "in" love again, but that is not the point, I think she'd say. She is more filled with the knowing of love that enables her to love more widely.

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Abraham is told by God to go to a far land and become a great nation, to be a blessing to many and to have any curses that fall upon him turned back upon his enemies.

I am still in amazement at Maggie. In her 50's she dared to believe that love had come into her life. After her husband's death she grew to believe that love could still flourish and bless her, and those around her. Paul says of Abraham, in this story, God counted him as "righteous" simply because he had the ability, the will, the faith, the trust in God, to believe that this plan could be true. Well, he believed it after he stopped God long enough to get his hearing aids in. Prior to that he hadn't understood a thing that God was saying!

Really! 70! I cannot imagine starting a huge project at 70!

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What is the eternal life that Jesus is telling Nicodemus about? Eternal life is the gift God is trying to give to everyone, and the path he has taken is to give it away through his son, Jesus.

Maggie and Abraham are helpful places to begin.

"Those who live in Love, live in God, and God lives in them." it says in one of the epistles.

I think eternal life is about living life in the presence of the eternal one, the source of love.

When Maggie had her man enter her life, she began to live in love. She lived in a new sort of love, a love that began by knowing that she was loved by him, without condition or payback or earning. She was simply loved. And the lasting grace of that love was how she remained in that love even after she could no longer touch or see him.

When Abraham set off for a new land, with his walking stick and his hearing aid, he set off carrying in his heart a promise he continued to believe God would honour. He travelled in the belief of the presence of his Lord. He had trust.

You cannot learn this stuff. It's not like learning how to make your cell phone work.

Jesus says that what he is teaching cannot be learned. It has to be entered. This does not happen in your head. We have control over our heads, our thoughts. We meter and enlarge our learning at will. We chose the experiences we feel like having.

Jesus says this is like falling overboard in deep water. You feel confusion, disorientation and fear. You don't know which way is up. Your wits are confused and you are no longer either in control or safe. You are not on home turf. Who can relax, look towards light, slow the panic, calm the breath and rise? Only one who has done this before. Or... one who trusts the person who pushed you.

Jesus says this is about the unpredictable and capricious actions of God's Holy Spirit. She is the wind of love that, like a Chinook, sweeps down and melts the snow of exhaustion, of disappointment, and blows away the defeat and guilt that settle, sediment-like, in our hearts and minds. There is a power in God's Holy Spirit that cannot be fathomed, just experienced. She pushes you.

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Eternal life is like falling in love. It is like that moment that might come when you say, to yourself, "Ahhh!...This is what it is all about! Now I see!" The light comes on.

But it is not possessive, like sexual love.

It is expansive and goes beyond reasonable borders. It is the love which knows no end, and has no limit to its resources, and that even grief or death cannot destroy.

To live in God is to live in love and have God's Holy Spirit living in you.

This is eternal life.

I cannot say clearly enough that if you think that eternal life is a sort of "part two" of life that kicks in after death, then you have a surprise ahead of you.

The point of the resurrection is the demonstration that the Eternal One who was the life of Jesus, the Christ, continues to live and rise again, because God encompasses death, and is not overcome by it.

So too those who allow, who welcome, who seek to have the Eternal One, who is the love of Christ, within their being, then, when the body dies, they will continue, and rise in something beyond our comprehension called eternity.

This is a teaching not about rules, regulations, approval or condemnation.

It is, says Jesus about God's outrageous determination to "hoover-up" everyone and everything into peace, love and life beyond life.

Is that it, though, when we die?

I am not sure God's deal with Abraham ever ended. Love continued to work in Maggie after the one she loved died.

Does the God who loves us, seeks us out, forgives, teaches, lifts and blesses us, who heals us in this life....does God suddenly cease to do these hall-mark activities of love?

Someone said, "If there is a heaven and a hell, hell will be empty because it is in the nature of God to save us, and when we see clearly, it is in our nature to say Yes"

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I have said above what I think eternal life is.

When does it begin? It begins when you say to the Father, to Jesus or to the Spirit (we all come to God a little differently)..when you say, "I love you. I trust you. I want to live in you. Will you live in me?"