

Biblical understandings of life

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In the Bible, “life” is understood in several ways. For example, life is attributed to the animal kingdom, to animate existence as distinguished from inert matter. “And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’” (Gen 1.20). Animate life is created by God. It is not unlike that of humans, although Adam and Eve have the privilege of being made in the image and likeness of the creator (Gen 1.26). Out of the dust from the ground, to be sure, but God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” (Gen 2.7).

Human life can be defined as “conscious existence with the powers derived from it”. “Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul?” (Job 3.20). The “light”, I imagine, is human consciousness. The juxtaposition of “light” and “life” in the same verse brings to mind John 1.4, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

The misery and bitterness of which the sick Job complains, as much to God as to his friends, spring from the consciousness that human life is limited in duration. Trees may live long, but not humans! “A mortal, born of woman, few of days and [as in Job’s case] full of trouble.” (Job 14.1). Job asks rhetorically, “If mortals die, will they live again?” (14.14), but he knows that the answer is “no”. In fact, for humans, as for animate existence generally, life is viewed as a “possession of which one is deprived by death”. According to the psalmist, that deprivation comes after “seventy years” – the span of human life – “or perhaps eighty, if we are strong”. It depends on the “favour of the Lord” (Ps 90.17).

The quality of human life – righteousness, humility, capacity for mercy, love, peace and the like – depends on obedience to God. God expects these virtues of God’s covenant people.

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6.8). Or again, “Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.” (Amos 5.14). Choose life! And again, “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5.24).

Even within the constraints of temporality, there is an abiding quality in the life of the community lived rightly in a covenant relationship with God. Communal solidarity must not be pushed too far, however. The notion that “the parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” no longer holds for Jeremiah; “all shall die for their own sins.” (Jer 31.29f).

But life in Old Testament perspective is still time-bound. Later, Jesus would argue in defence of a life beyond time (Mk 12.26). In the episode of the burning bush, God announces, “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”, and God is a God of the living (and not of the dead). This was recorded in scripture accepted by the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection.

In the New Testament, life is still temporal. It is a blessing to serve God without fear “in holiness and righteousness... all our days” (Lk 1.75). Human beings are still mortal, and their lives can be threatened or terminated. The life of the infant Jesus is threatened by Herod (Mt 2.13ff). The life of Paul is threatened (Acts 22.22ff). John the Baptist (Mk 6.27), Stephen (Acts 7.54ff) and James the brother of John (Acts 12.2) are all killed. Jesus often speaks of his own demise (eg Mk 8.31ff).

But other important notions about life are articulated. Life is not measured by the abundance of a person’s possessions (Lk 12.15). Life is more than meat and apparel (Lk 12.23).

Having life is equated with entering the kingdom of God (Mk 9.45, 47). It is better to enter that kingdom with one eye than to enter the place of the dead with two eyes. The antidote to an anxiety-ridden “life” is a proper focus on God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness (Mt 6.33). So high a value is placed on life related to the kingdom of God that finding it is like stumbling upon hidden treasure or discovering a pearl of great value (Mt 13.44ff).

A man described variously in the synoptic gospels as rich, young and a ruler asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replies, “Keep the commandments... sell what you own, and give the money to the poor... come, follow me.” (Mk 10.17, 21).

Fullness of life may demand divesting (emptying) oneself of the things that define one’s life as good (vv.19ff). In the following verses, eternal life is identified with salvation (v.26), and the kingdom of God (v.23). Verses 26f contain in germ Paul’s doctrine concerning the law in relation to eternal life.

Eternal life is the free gift of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6.23); it is not something merited by humans through obedience to the law, which is, in any case, an impossibility. Paul cites Habakkuk, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Rom 1.17; Hab 2.4).

Eternal life is “life hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3.3); to be spiritually minded is life itself (Rom 8.6). Paul writes to the Corinthians that we are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.” (2 Cor 4.10f). And to the Galatians he says, “...it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2.20).

So eternal life is life lived in a faith-relationship with Jesus Christ. It is the life of the eternal God in me, and death cannot destroy it. "Death," exults Paul, "has been swallowed up in victory. 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' ... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor 15.54-57). The ultimate manifestation of that victory is resurrection from the dead, foreshadowed and guaranteed in Christ's resurrection (1 Cor 15). There is life – a fuller life unencumbered by mortal flesh, but clothed in a new body – in a dimension beyond death.

But eternal life does not have to await the end time (*eschaton*). In John's gospel, Jesus declares that "anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." (Jn 5.24). To be sure, there is a future dimension to this eschatological event of resurrection, "for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice (ie the voice of the son of man) and will come out." (Jn 5.28f). But the hour "is now here" (v.25) in Jesus Christ. The eschatological event is realized in the presence of Christ.

John's gospel is related to at least three worlds of thought – the primitive Christian tradition about Jesus, both historical and theological; Judaism; and Hellenistic thought. The triple background is reflected in the prologue to his gospel. It was the Word that called life into being in the beginning (Gen 1.1ff). "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." (Jn 1.1, 4). John was responding to two problems that beset the church when he wrote. The first was the eschatological problem – the expected time had gone by, but Jesus had not yet manifested himself "to the world" (Jn 14.22). The second was the gnostic problem. John's answer to both problems is that the historic person of Jesus in his life, death and resurrection, already constitutes an eschatological event, perpetuated in the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the way to the true and saving knowledge (*gnosis*) of God, which is "life eternal" (Jn 17.3).

John's gospel treats eternal life comprehensively, in a series of pericopes that narrate human encounters (eg with Nicodemus) and "signs" or miracles, followed by argument and discussion.

When Lazarus dies, Jesus says to Mary and Martha (and indeed to his disciples who feared a threat to his and their own lives were they to return to Judea): "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (Jn 11.25-26). Mary understands him in terms of Pharisaic orthodoxy, "resurrection on the last day" (v.24). But the force of the "I am" saying is that in Jesus Christ the "last day" is already here. The *eschaton* has invaded the present!

Eternal life, the life of those born "from above" of water and the Spirit, is a real and present possibility for those who believe in Jesus (Jn 3.7, 16). Faith is a relational, covenantal category with connotations of commitment, trust,

confidence, fellowship, and childlike acceptance of Jesus Christ as God's Son – the creative Word (*logos*) and the manifestation of the true life that the creator gave to God's human creatures in the first place and now opens to its eternal dimension and destiny. The raising of Lazarus after four days in the tomb (Jn 11.39) foreshadows the power of the resurrection, which Jesus' own resurrection triumphantly endorses.

As for the quality of eternal life, the texts abound. The life Jesus gives is like the good wine at the wedding feast, gladdening the heart and galvanizing the limbs to dance (Jn 2.1-11). He is "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (Jn 4.14), qualitatively different from Jacob's well. He is the bread from heaven. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (Jn 6.35). Those who feed on him have eternal life (Jn 6.51, 54). Clearly, to eat this bread and to drink from this spring is to nourish one's own life and action from the life and work of Jesus.

There are eucharistic, communal and covenantal overtones here, just as there are baptismal connotations in the foot-washing episode. What cleanses the disciples (Jn 13.10), however, is not the water or the foot-washing in itself, but their involvement and participation in Jesus' redemptive ministry. The servant nature of this ministry is seen most clearly in the "self-emptying" on the cross to which the foot-washing points.

"You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you," Jesus says to his disciples in the parable of the true vine (Jn 15.3). This is no particular word, but the whole recreating, redemptive life and work of the divine Word.

It remains for them to abide in him (Jn 15.4), in a mutual intimacy analogous to that between the Father and the Son. To abide in him, in a closeness like that of branches to a vine, is to keep his commandments. In this way, they abide in his love, "just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (Jn 15.10). Abiding in him is necessary to bear the fruits of peace, love and joy.

The parable of the good shepherd also strikes the note of hearing his word and responding to it. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." (Jn 10.27f). Eternal life is a way of life – Jesus' way – in which we follow, responding to his voice.

What is eternal life – this life that Jesus comes to give to humans, and to give in fullness? John supplies the answer in the high-priestly prayer: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (Jn 17.3).

Questions

1. What is your understanding of life? What is your understanding of fullness of life?

2. In John's gospel, eternal life is likened to several things. What do we learn from these images?
3. What do you understand by the statement that "eternal life is the free gift of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6.23)?
4. Is it not a contradiction to say that life in fullness may demand emptying oneself of the things that define one's life as good?
5. What does it mean to say that in Jesus Christ the "last day" is already present?
6. Reflecting on your personal experience, why is life lived in a faith-relationship with Jesus Christ characterized as "eternal life"?

Women's pre-conference

All women attending the general council are invited to gather before the meeting with women from Ghana. The pre-conference brings together Reformed women from all over the world to celebrate life, worship and share their stories with one another. The pre-conference will take place at the University of Ghana from July 27 to 30 2004.

Participants will study the theme "That All may have Life in Fullness" through the eyes of women, contributing a unique perspective to the general council discussion on the theme's implications for our covenant as a family of churches, our mission among God's people and the spiritual life of our congregations. Participants will also reflect on the work of the department of partnership of women and men between 1997 and 2004, beginning to envision its future. The pre-conference will provide orientation and training to maximize the participation of women in the general council.

For further information, write to Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth, secretary for partnership of women and men, or email her at dpwm@warc.ch