

ETERNAL LIFE

An Exhaustive Doctrinal Bible Study

From the Bronze Serpent to the Face of God

What is eternal life? How is it defined? What is its substance?

Old Testament • New Testament • Reformed Theology • Protestant Positions

Prepared for Personal Bible Study

September 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Eternal life is the promise at the center of the gospel. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Yet many Christians who can recite that verse would struggle to say what eternal life actually is. The most common answer is “living forever” or “going to heaven when I die.” Both are true as far as they go, but neither is how Scripture defines it. Jesus gives the definition himself: “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

This study follows that definition through the whole Bible. The thread begins with the tree of life in Eden and the breath of life breathed into Adam (Genesis 2), runs through the revelation of the divine name at the burning bush (Exodus 3), the fiery serpents and the bronze serpent in the wilderness (Numbers 21), the Psalms’ “fountain of life” (Psalm 36:9), and the prophets’ promise that all God’s people would “know the LORD” (Jeremiah 31:34). It comes into focus when Jesus says that the Son of Man must be lifted up “as Moses lifted up the serpent” (John 3:14), when he claims the divine name, “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), and when he defines eternal life in his high priestly prayer (John 17:3). It is expounded by John, Paul, Hebrews, and Peter, and it is consummated when God’s servants “will see his face” (Revelation 22:4).

Three questions organize the study. **What is eternal life?** It is life given freely to the dying through faith in Christ lifted up. **How is it defined?** It is knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent, in covenant fellowship. **What is its substance?** It is the life of the triune God himself, the eternal I AM, communicated to believers through union with the Son by the Spirit. A fourth question follows naturally: **when is it ours?** It is possessed now by faith and perfected at the resurrection, when faith gives way to sight.

The exegesis proceeds within the framework of **Reformed systematic theology**: covenant theology, the analogy of faith, Christ-centered typology, the doctrine of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, and union with Christ as the heart of the application of redemption. Section 15 sets out the Reformed doctrine of eternal life in full. Section 16 presents other Protestant readings — **Lutheran, Arminian and Wesleyan, Anglican, and Baptist and Free Grace** — in their own terms, and Section 17 addresses the disputed practical questions.

How to Use This Study

- **Canonical order:** Sections 2–13 follow the biblical canon from Genesis to Revelation. Sections 14–18 move to church history, systematic theology, comparative positions, and synthesis.
- **The pattern at each passage:** Text → language → doctrinal significance → connection to the three questions. Where Protestants agree, the study says so; where they divide, the disagreement is stated fairly.
- **Scripture quotations:** Quotations follow the English Standard Version (ESV) and are occasionally abbreviated with ellipses. Consult your own Bible for the full context of each passage.

- **Original languages:** Hebrew and Greek terms are transliterated in the text; the script appears in the vocabulary tables of Section 1.
- **Confessional citations:** Quotations from the Westminster Standards, the Heidelberg Catechism, and other historic documents are taken from their standard English texts.
- **The golden thread:** Watch for three recurring words: **life**, **know**, and **I AM**. Each section shows how they are joined.

SECTION 1: GREEK AND HEBREW VOCABULARY

The Language of Life and Eternity

English has one word, “life,” where Greek has several. The New Testament chooses its words carefully, and the choice matters for the doctrine.

- **“Life” (zōē):** The New Testament’s word for life in its fullness, and above all the life that belongs to God. John uses zōē about thirty-six times. Jesus says the Father “has life in himself” and has granted the Son “to have life in himself” (John 5:26). When zōē is given to believers, it is a share in that divine life, not an upgrade of natural life.
- **“Life” (bios):** Biological life, the span and means of living (Luke 8:43, “all her living”; 1 John 2:16, “the pride of life”; 3:17, “the world’s goods”). It is never used for eternal life. The distinction is telling: eternal life is not bios stretched out endlessly but zōē given from above.
- **“Life, soul” (psychē):** The natural life of a person, the self (Mark 8:35, “whoever would save his life will lose it”). Jesus “lays down his life (psychē)” for the sheep (John 10:11) so that they may have “life (zōē)... abundantly” (10:10). He gives his natural life to give them his divine life.
- **“Eternal” (aiōnios):** From aiōn, “age.” Its primary sense is “belonging to the age to come,” the new age that God brings in. Duration is included, because the age to come never ends, but the word first names a kind of life, the life of the coming age, before it names a length. Mark 10:30 shows both: “in the age (aiōn) to come eternal (aiōnios) life.”
- **“Eternal life” (zōē aiōnios):** The full phrase appears about seventeen times in John’s Gospel and six times in 1 John. The Synoptic Gospels more often speak of “the kingdom of God.” The two expressions describe the same reality from different angles: the kingdom is the reign; eternal life is the life of those who live under it.

Key Greek Terms

Term	Meaning	Significance
ζωή zōē	“Life”	The life of God himself, shared with believers (John 1:4; 5:26; 1 John 5:11–12).

Term	Meaning	Significance
αἰώνιος aiōnios	“Eternal,” “of the age”	The life of the age to come, begun now (John 5:24). Also used of God (Romans 16:26) and of punishment (Matthew 25:46).
γινώσκω ginōskō	“To know”	Personal, relational knowing. In John 17:3 the present tense (ginōskōsin) describes an ongoing knowing, not a single act.
οἶδα oida	“To know”	Often knowledge of a fact. John uses both verbs; “no one knows the Father except the Son” (Matthew 11:27) uses epiginōskō, full knowledge.
ἐγώ εἰμι egō eimi	“I am”	Used absolutely by Jesus (John 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5–6). Echoes the Septuagint of Exodus 3:14 and Isaiah 43:10, 25.
ὑψόω hypsōō	“To lift up, exalt”	Used of the serpent and of Christ (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32). John means both the cross and the glorification together.
ἀπόλλυμι apollymi	“To perish, destroy”	The opposite of eternal life (John 3:16; 10:28). Ruin, not mere cessation.
πιστεύω εἰς pisteuō eis	“Believe into”	John’s distinctive phrase: faith that goes out of oneself and rests on the person of Christ (John 3:16, 18, 36).
κοινωνία koinōnia	“Fellowship”	The eternal life made manifest brings fellowship “with the Father and with his Son” (1 John 1:2–3).
ἀθανασία athanasia	“Immortality”	God “alone has immortality” (1 Timothy 6:16); believers “put on” immortality at the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:53).
ἀφθαρσία aphtharsia	“Incorruptibility”	Christ “brought life and immortality (aphtharsia) to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).
ὁπόμεθα opsometha	“We shall see”	“We shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2); “they will see his face” (Revelation 22:4). The goal of eternal life.

Key Hebrew Terms

Term	Meaning	Significance
חַיִּים chayyim	“Life”	Plural in form. Used of life as God’s gift and presence: “with you is the fountain of life” (Psalm 36:9).
נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה nephesh chayyah	“Living being”	Adam became a living being when God breathed into him (Genesis 2:7). Life is received, never self-generated.
עֵץ חַיִּים ‘ets hachayyim	“Tree of life”	The sacramental pledge of life in Eden (Genesis 2:9; 3:22–24), reappearing in Revelation 22:2.
עוֹלָם ‘olam	“Long duration, forever”	Time beyond human horizon. God is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Psalm 90:2).
חַיֵּי עוֹלָם chayyei ‘olam	“Everlasting life”	First explicit Old Testament occurrence: Daniel 12:2, tied to bodily resurrection.
יָדָע yada‘	“To know”	Covenant knowing: intimate, relational, obedient (Jeremiah 31:34; Hosea 6:6). Also used of choosing (Amos 3:2).

Term	Meaning	Significance
אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh	"I AM WHO I AM"	God's self-naming at the bush (Exodus 3:14). The Septuagint renders it egō eimi ho ōn, "I am the one who is."
יְהוָה YHWH	"The LORD"	The covenant name, related to the verb "to be." God is self-existent and faithful to his word.
נָחָשׁ / שָׂרָף nachash / saraph	"Serpent" / "fiery, burning one"	"Fiery serpents" (hannechashim hasseraaphim, Numbers 21:6), probably named for their burning bite.
נֶחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת nechash nechoshet	"Serpent of bronze"	A wordplay in Numbers 21:9. The remedy is made in the image of the curse.
נֵס nes	"Pole, standard, banner"	The serpent was set on a nes (Numbers 21:8), the word for a rallying banner. Compare Isaiah 11:10, the root of Jesse as a "signal" to the nations. The Septuagint reads "upon a sign" (epi sēmeiou).
בְּרִית berit	"Covenant"	The bond in which God gives himself: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33).
פָּנִים panim	"Face"	Presence and favor. "Seek my face" (Psalm 27:8); "the LORD make his face to shine upon you" (Numbers 6:25).

"Eternal" or "Everlasting"?

English Bibles use both words for the same Greek term. "Everlasting" emphasizes duration; "eternal" can also suggest quality. Neither word alone captures aiōnios. The life is everlasting because it is the life of the age to come, and it is of the age to come because it is the life of the everlasting God. The order matters: Scripture moves from **who** to **how long**, not the reverse.

SECTION 2: GENESIS — THE TREE OF LIFE AND THE LOSS OF LIFE

Genesis 2:7 — The Breath of Life

Genesis 2:7 (ESV) — *"then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."*

Human life begins as a gift. Adam is dust until God breathes. Life in Scripture is never self-originating or self-sustaining; it is always received from the one who has life in himself.

- **Life as communion:** Adam's life is lived in the presence of God, in the garden where God walks (3:8). The first human life was not merely biological existence but life with God.

- **The pattern of the Spirit:** The same breath appears when the risen Christ “breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22), and when Ezekiel prophesies to the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:9–10). New life comes by the same divine breath as the first.

Genesis 2:9, 15–17 — Two Trees and the Covenant of Life

God places two trees in the middle of the garden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9). One is freely given; one is forbidden under the sanction of death: “in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (2:17).

- **Covenant of works:** Reformed theology reads Genesis 2 as a covenant in which life was promised on condition of perfect obedience (Westminster Confession 7.2). The tree of life was the sacramental pledge of that life, confirmed and made unlosable had Adam passed the test.
- **Two kinds of knowing:** The forbidden tree offered a knowledge of good and evil taken autonomously, apart from God’s word. Eternal life, by contrast, is a knowledge given by God and received in submission to him (John 17:3). The fall was, at its root, a grasping after the wrong knowledge.
- **Death as separation:** Adam did not die physically that day, but he died spiritually: he hid from God (3:8) and was cut off from the tree (3:22–24). Death in Scripture is first separation from God, and bodily death follows as its fruit.

Genesis 3:22–24 — The Way Barred

God drives the man out “lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (3:22). Cherubim and a flaming sword guard “the way to the tree of life” (3:24).

- **Endless life in sin is not mercy:** God bars the way so that fallen humanity will not live forever in its fallen condition. Unending existence apart from God would be a curse, not a gift. This confirms that eternal life cannot be defined by duration alone.
- **The way reopened:** Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). The tabernacle curtain, embroidered with cherubim (Exodus 26:31), is torn at his death (Matthew 27:51). Revelation restores the tree: “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14).

Genesis 5 — “And He Died” and the Man Who Walked with God

The genealogy of Genesis 5 tolls like a bell: “and he died.” The one exception is Enoch: “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him” (5:24). In a chapter dominated by death, the man who walked with God is taken into life. The contrast anticipates the doctrine: life belongs to those who walk with God. Hebrews 11:5 attributes this to faith.

Genesis 3:15 — The Serpent and the Seed

The first gospel promise is spoken to the serpent: the seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head, and the serpent will bruise his heel (3:15). From the start, the serpent is linked to sin, death, and the curse, and the Redeemer is the one who defeats it by being wounded. Numbers 21 will pick up this imagery in startling form.

SECTION 3: EXODUS — I AM WHO I AM

Exodus 3:13–15 — The Name at the Burning Bush

Exodus 3:14 (ESV) — *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

Moses asks for God's name, and God answers with a name built from the verb "to be." The bush burns and is not consumed (3:2): God's life does not depend on fuel. He simply is.

- **Aseity:** Reformed theology calls this God's aseity (from Latin a se, "from himself"). God depends on nothing outside himself for his existence or life. Everything else receives life; God alone has it in himself (Acts 17:25; John 5:26).
- **Faithfulness:** The name is also a promise. "I will be with you" (3:12) uses the same verb. The God who simply is will be for his people what he has promised to be.
- **Septuagint:** The Greek translation renders the name egō eimi ho ōn, "I am the one who is." Jewish readers of the Greek Old Testament heard "I am" (egō eimi) as the language of God's self-revelation, especially in Isaiah 40–55. This is the background of Jesus' "I am" sayings (Section 9).

Exodus 6:2–8 — "You Shall Know That I Am the LORD"

God repeats his name and joins it to the covenant: "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (6:7). The exodus has a goal beyond escape from Egypt. God redeems his people so that they will know him. The pattern of redemption for the sake of knowledge runs straight to John 17:3.

Exodus 33:18–34:7 — "Show Me Your Glory"

After the golden calf, Moses asks to see God's glory. God answers that no one can see his face and live (33:20), but he passes by and proclaims his name: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (34:6).

- **Knowing God is knowing his character:** God reveals himself not by a vision of his essence but by proclaiming his name and his mercy. To know God is to know him as the merciful and just covenant Lord.
- **The face withheld and given:** Moses could not see God's face. John says, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18), and alludes to Exodus 34 when he says the Word was "full of grace and truth" (1:14). In Christ, the face is shown: "whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

SECTION 4: THE WILDERNESS — THE FIERY SERPENTS AND THE BRONZE SERPENT

Numbers 21:4-6 — Rebellion and Judgment

Numbers 21:5-6 (ESV) — *And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.*

The context is the last generation of the wilderness, turned back around Edom (21:4). The complaint is not merely hunger. They speak against God himself and call the manna, bread from heaven, "worthless food." It is a rejection of God's provision and therefore of God.

- **Judgment fits the sin:** The serpent, the ancient emblem of the tempter (Genesis 3), now bites. Sin brings death in a form that recalls its origin.
- **"Fiery" serpents:** Saraph means "burning." The name probably describes the burning pain or inflammation of the venom. The same root names the seraphim of Isaiah 6, the "burning ones" around God's throne.
- **No human remedy:** Nothing in the camp could stop the poison. Deuteronomy 8:15 recalls the wilderness as a place of "fiery serpents and scorpions." The people are already dying when the remedy is given.

Numbers 21:7 — Confession and Intercession

"We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." Moses prays. God does not take the serpents away. He provides a remedy in the middle of the judgment. This is the pattern of the gospel: God does not remove the consequences of sin by ignoring them; he meets them with a provision that deals with them.

Numbers 21:8-9 — Look and Live

Numbers 21:8-9 (ESV) — *And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

- **The remedy looks like the curse:** God commands an image of the very thing that is killing them. The wordplay *nechash nechoshet* (“serpent of bronze”) underlines it. Paul’s words fit exactly: God sent “his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin,” and so “condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3). “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- **Lifted up on a pole:** The serpent is exposed on a pole, a banner or standard, the object of a public, visible look. Galatians 3:13 applies Deuteronomy 21:23 to the cross: “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” The curse is displayed, and the curse is judged.
- **Look and live:** The only condition is to look. Not to kill the snakes, treat the wound, offer a sacrifice, or prove sincerity. The look is itself the admission that there is no other remedy. Reformed theology calls faith the “alone instrument of justification” (Westminster Confession 11.2): it receives, it does not contribute.
- **Individual and universal:** “Everyone who is bitten” may look. The offer is to all who are dying; the benefit comes to each one who looks. This anticipates the “whoever believes” of John 3:15-16.
- **“Shall live”:** The verb is *chayah*, “to live.” The remedy is not relief but life, given to the dying. This is the first answer to “what is eternal life?”: it is life given to those who deserve death.

Wisdom of Solomon 16:5-7 — An Ancient Jewish Reading

The Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish work written before Christ and not part of the Protestant canon, calls the bronze serpent a “symbol of salvation” and says that the one who turned toward it was saved “not by what he saw, but by you, the Savior of all” (16:6-7). The Reformed tradition does not treat the book as Scripture, but the reading is instructive: even before Christ, Jewish readers understood that the power was not in the bronze but in God, and that the object pointed beyond itself.

2 Kings 18:4 — Nehushtan: When the Sign Becomes an Idol

Some seven centuries later, King Hezekiah “broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan)” (2 Kings 18:4). The name probably means “a piece of bronze.”

- **Sign and thing signified:** The bronze serpent was a God-given sign. When Israel began to worship the sign itself, it became an idol. Hezekiah’s act is a canonical warning against confusing the means God uses with God himself.

- **Reformed application:** The Reformers used this text against the veneration of relics and images. The same principle governs the sacraments: they are signs and seals of Christ, never objects of worship in themselves (Westminster Confession 27.2).

1 Corinthians 10:9 — Paul’s Warning

Paul writes, “We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents” (1 Corinthians 10:9). The better-attested reading, adopted by the ESV, names Christ as the one Israel tested in the wilderness. Paul thus sees the preincarnate Son present with Israel in Numbers 21, both as the one provoked and, by implication, as the one pictured on the pole.

Deuteronomy 30:15–20 — “He Is Your Life”

At the end of the wilderness, Moses sets before Israel “life and good, death and evil” (30:15) and urges, “choose life... loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days” (30:19–20).

- **God is the life:** The Hebrew is striking: “he is your life” (hu chayyekha). Life is not a thing God hands out and then withdraws from. God himself is the life of his people.
- **Life and length of days:** Quality (“he is your life”) comes first; quantity (“length of days”) follows. The same order governs the New Testament doctrine.
- **The law cannot give it:** Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:12–14 in Romans 10:6–8 and shows that the life promised is received by the “word of faith,” not achieved by works. What Israel could not do, Christ has done (Romans 8:3–4).

SECTION 5: THE PSALMS AND WISDOM LITERATURE

Psalm 16:11 — Fullness of Joy in Your Presence

Psalm 16:11 (ESV) — *“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”*

Peter quotes Psalm 16 at Pentecost as a prophecy of Christ’s resurrection (Acts 2:25–28). The “path of life” leads into God’s presence, and the joy is “forevermore.” Life, presence, joy, and eternity are joined in one verse.

Psalm 36:7–9 — The Fountain of Life

Psalm 36:9 (ESV) — *“For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.”*

- **Life is in God:** God is not merely the one who gives life; life is “with” him as a fountain is the source of a stream. John begins his Gospel the same way: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4).
- **Life and light, knowing and living:** “In your light do we see light.” Knowledge of God and life from God come together. Jesus later calls himself both “the light of the world” and the giver of “the light of life” (John 8:12).

Psalm 63:1-3 — Steadfast Love Better Than Life

“Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you” (63:3). David, in the wilderness, measures God’s covenant love (chesed) against natural life itself and finds God better. Eternal life is not the extension of natural life; it is the possession of something better than natural life.

Psalm 73:23-26 — Whom Have I in Heaven but You?

Asaph, troubled by the prosperity of the wicked, comes into the sanctuary and sees their end (73:17). He concludes: “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (73:24-26). Heaven is defined by its person. God himself is the “portion forever.”

Psalm 90:2 — From Everlasting to Everlasting

“Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (90:2). The psalm contrasts God’s eternity with human frailty: “we are brought to an end by your anger” (90:7). Humanity’s only hope is that the eternal God would be “our dwelling place in all generations” (90:1).

Psalm 133:3 and Psalm 17:15

- **Psalm 133:3:** “For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.” The blessing of life is tied to the unity of God’s people gathered in his presence.
- **Psalm 17:15:** “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.” An early glimpse of the beatific vision: waking to see God’s face and be satisfied.

Proverbs 3:18 — Wisdom as a Tree of Life

Wisdom “is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her” (3:18; compare 11:30; 13:12; 15:4). Proverbs takes up the Eden image and attaches it to the fear of the LORD and his wisdom. The New Testament identifies Christ as “the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24), in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3).

Ecclesiastes 3:11 — Eternity in the Heart

God “has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11). Human beings are made for more than time can satisfy. Augustine’s famous confession expresses the same truth: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Confessions 1.1).

SECTION 6: THE PROPHETS — KNOWING THE LORD

Isaiah 25:6–8 — He Will Swallow Up Death Forever

On the mountain of the LORD a feast is prepared for all peoples, and God “will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces” (25:8). Paul quotes this verse of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:54), and Revelation 21:4 alludes to it. Eternal life is the defeat of death itself in the presence of God.

Isaiah 43:10–11, 25 — “That You May Know... That I Am He”

Isaiah 43:10 (ESV) — *“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.”*

This text is central to the whole study. God’s purpose is that his people “may know and believe... that I am he.” The Septuagint reads “that I am” (*hoti egō eimi*). In 43:25 it doubles the phrase: “I am, I am the one who blots out your transgressions.” Knowing, believing, “I am,” and forgiveness are all here. John weaves the same threads together: “unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (John 8:24), and “when you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he” (8:28).

Isaiah 57:15 — The One Who Inhabits Eternity

“For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly.’” The eternal God dwells with the humble to give them life. The phrase “high and lifted up” appears also of the Servant in 52:13, who is “high and lifted up” in the very passage that describes his suffering. John sees Christ’s glory in Isaiah’s vision (John 12:38–41).

Jeremiah 9:23–24 — Let Him Boast in This

“Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom... but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.” The highest good a human being can possess is to know God, and to know him as he has revealed himself. Paul applies this text to Christ (1 Corinthians 1:31).

Jeremiah 31:31-34 — They Shall All Know Me

Jeremiah 31:33-34 (ESV) — *“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”*

- **The covenant formula:** “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” This is the heart of every covenant administration (Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:7; Revelation 21:3). Eternal life is this covenant bond made unbreakable.
- **Knowing as the defining mark:** What distinguishes the new covenant is that all its members “know the LORD.” Knowledge here is not information but communion, the relationship Israel was always meant to have.
- **Forgiveness as the ground:** “For I will forgive.” The word “for” gives the reason. Sinners cannot know a holy God until their sin is dealt with. This is why the serpent must be lifted up before eternal life can be defined as knowing God.
- **Fulfilled in Christ:** Hebrews 8:8-12 and 10:16-17 quote this passage as fulfilled in Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice. Jesus speaks of “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20).

Ezekiel 36-37 — A New Heart and Dry Bones Raised

God promises a new heart and a new spirit (36:26-27) and then shows Ezekiel a valley of dry bones. When the prophet speaks, “the breath came into them, and they lived” (37:10). God explains: “you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves” (37:13). Regeneration and resurrection both end in knowing the LORD.

Hosea 6:3, 6 — Let Us Press On to Know the LORD

“Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD” (6:3). “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (6:6). Jesus quotes this verse twice (Matthew 9:13; 12:7). God wants a people who know him, not merely perform rituals before him.

Habakkuk 2:4, 14 — The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

“The righteous shall live by his faith” (2:4), and “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (2:14). Habakkuk joins life by faith with a world filled with the knowledge of God. Paul quotes 2:4 as the thesis of the gospel (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11).

Daniel 12:2 — Everlasting Life

Daniel 12:2 (ESV) — *“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”*

- **First explicit use:** Here the phrase chayyei 'olam, “everlasting life,” appears for the first time in the Old Testament.
 - **Bodily resurrection:** Those who “sleep in the dust” awake. Everlasting life is embodied life, not the escape of the soul from the body.
 - **Two destinies:** The same word “everlasting” describes both life and contempt. Jesus echoes this in John 5:28–29 and Matthew 25:46. The symmetry bears on the debate over conditional immortality (Section 17).
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SECTION 7: THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS — INHERITING ETERNAL LIFE

Mark 10:17–31 — “What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?”

A rich man kneels before Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life (10:17). Jesus points him to the commandments, then to the one thing he lacks: “go, sell all that you have and give to the poor... and come, follow me” (10:21). The man goes away sorrowful.

- **The question assumes doing:** The man thinks of eternal life as a reward for performance. Jesus exposes that he loves his wealth more than God and so has not kept the first commandment.
- **“Come, follow me”:** The answer is finally not a task but a person. Eternal life is found in following Jesus.
- **Impossible with man:** “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (10:27). Eternal life is God’s gift, not human achievement.
- **Now and in the age to come:** Jesus promises blessing “now in this time... and in the age to come eternal life” (10:30). Here the Synoptics use the phrase in its “age to come” sense, while John will stress that this life can be possessed now.

Luke 10:25–28 — Love God and Live

A lawyer asks the same question. Jesus has him answer from the law: love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. “Do this, and you will live” (10:28). Reformed interpreters read this as the law’s demand stated in full. The promise of life on condition of perfect love stands, but no sinner meets it. The parable of the Good Samaritan that follows exposes the lawyer’s attempt “to justify himself” (10:29).

Matthew 11:25–30 — No One Knows the Father Except the Son

Matthew 11:27 (ESV) — *“All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”*

This “Johannine thunderbolt” in Matthew states the same truth as John 17:3. Knowledge of the Father is exclusive to the Son and given only through the Son. The invitation follows at once: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (11:28).

Matthew 7:21–23 — “I Never Knew You”

At the judgment some will claim to have prophesied and done mighty works in Jesus’ name. He will say, “I never knew you; depart from me” (7:23). The decisive question is not whether we know about Jesus or have worked for him, but whether he knows us. Eternal life is mutual knowing: “I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:14; compare Galatians 4:9).

Luke 20:34–38 — The God of the Living

Answering the Sadducees, Jesus argues for the resurrection from Exodus 3:6: God calls himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him” (Luke 20:38). The argument rests entirely on the covenant relationship. Because God has bound himself to them, they cannot remain dead. Relationship with God is the ground of resurrection life.

Matthew 25:31–46 — Eternal Punishment and Eternal Life

The parable of the sheep and goats ends: “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (25:46). The same adjective, *aiōnios*, qualifies both destinies. The sheep “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (25:34). Eternal life is the kingdom inherited, prepared by grace before the world began.

SECTION 8: JOHN 3 — THE SON OF MAN LIFTED UP

John 3:1–13 — Born from Above

Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, comes by night. Jesus tells him, “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (3:3). The word *anōthen* means both “again” and “from above.” Nicodemus hears only the first; Jesus means both. Eternal life is not natural life improved but a new birth from God by the Spirit (3:5–8).

- **Regeneration comes first:** Reformed theology teaches that regeneration, the Spirit’s work of giving new life, precedes and produces faith (Westminster Confession 10.2). A dead man cannot see until he is given sight. The new birth is the beginning of eternal life in the soul.

- **“You must know these things”**: Jesus rebukes Nicodemus: “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (3:10). The promise of a new heart and spirit was in Ezekiel 36. The teacher of Israel should have known.

John 3:14–15 — As Moses Lifted Up the Serpent

John 3:14–15 (ESV) — *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

This is the first mention of eternal life in John’s Gospel, and Jesus introduces it by pointing back to Numbers 21. He does not tell Nicodemus what eternal life is before he tells him how it is given.

Numbers 21	John 3
Israel sins by speaking against God	All people are “condemned already” (3:18) and love darkness (3:19)
Fiery serpents bring death	Sin brings perishing (3:16)
A bronze serpent in the likeness of the curse	Christ “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” made sin for us (Romans 8:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21)
Lifted up on a pole	Lifted up on the cross (3:14; 12:32–33)
“Everyone who is bitten”	“Whoever believes”
Looks at the serpent	Believes in him
Shall live	Shall have eternal life

- **“Must”**: The Greek *dei* expresses divine necessity. The cross is not an accident of history but the appointed means of life (compare Luke 24:26; Acts 2:23).
- **“Lifted up”**: *Hypsoō* means both “raise up physically” and “exalt.” John uses it three times of Jesus (3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34). In 12:33 he explains: “He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.” For John, the cross is not a detour on the way to glory. It is the glory, the hour when the Son is lifted up and draws all people to himself.
- **“Whoever believes in him”**: The look of Numbers 21 becomes faith in the person of Christ. Faith is not a work that earns life. It is the turning of a dying person’s eyes to the only remedy.
- **“May have eternal life”**: Present possession. The believer has it, not merely will have it. The Israelite who looked lived at once.

John 3:16–18 — Perish or Have Eternal Life

John 3:16 (ESV) — *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

- **“So”**: The Greek *houtōs* means “in this way,” pointing back to 3:14. God loved the world in this way: by giving his Son to be lifted up like the serpent. The verse describes the manner of God’s love, not merely its degree.

- **“Gave”:** The Father gave the Son, first in the incarnation and supremely on the cross (Romans 8:32).
- **“The world”:** In John, “the world” is humanity in rebellion against God (1:10; 7:7). The wonder is not that the world is large but that it is hostile, and God loved it anyway. Reformed interpreters differ on how “world” relates to the extent of the atonement, but all agree that the offer of the gospel is to be made freely to all (Westminster Confession 7.3).
- **“Perish” versus “eternal life”:** The alternative to eternal life is not simple non-existence but ruin, the loss of everything for which a person was made. The two outcomes are set side by side, as in Numbers 21: death by the serpent’s bite, or life by the look.
- **Condemned already:** “Whoever does not believe is condemned already” (3:18). No one starts neutral. The Israelites were already bitten. The gospel does not bring condemnation; it offers rescue to those already under it (3:17).

John 3:36 — Has Eternal Life or the Wrath Remains

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (3:36). Two features stand out. Eternal life is a present possession (“has”), and unbelief is described as disobedience. The wrath of God is not newly imposed on unbelievers; it “remains,” because they reject the only remedy.

John 5:24–29 — Passed from Death to Life

“Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (5:24). The verb *metabebēken* is perfect tense: a completed transfer with lasting effect. Then Jesus looks ahead: “an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out” (5:28–29). Eternal life has a present stage (spiritual resurrection, 5:25) and a future stage (bodily resurrection, 5:28–29). Section 13 returns to this.

John 5:26 — Life in Himself

John 5:26 (ESV) — *“For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.”*

This verse explains how the Son can give eternal life: he has life “in himself,” as the Father does. No creature has life in itself. Reformed theology reads the Father’s “granting” in terms of the eternal generation of the Son and his appointment as Mediator. The Son shares the divine life fully, and as the incarnate Mediator he is appointed to give it to his people.

SECTION 9: THE I AM SAYINGS — THE SUBSTANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE

The Absolute “I Am” Sayings

John records Jesus using *egō eimi* absolutely, with no predicate, in a way that echoes the divine self-naming of Exodus 3:14 and Isaiah 40–55.

- **John 8:24:** “Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” Eternal life or death hangs on believing that Jesus is the “I am.”
- **John 8:28:** “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he.” The lifting up of John 3:14 reveals the divine identity. The cross is where the I AM is made known.
- **John 8:58:** “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”
- **John 13:19:** “I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he.”
- **John 18:5–6:** When Jesus says “I am he” in Gethsemane, the soldiers draw back and fall to the ground, a reaction to the revelation of God.

John 8:56–59 — Before Abraham Was, I Am

John 8:58 (ESV) — *Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”*

- **Two different verbs:** Abraham “came to be” (*genesthai*, aorist, a beginning); Jesus “is” (*eimi*, present, no beginning). The contrast is between created existence and eternal being.
- **Not “I was”:** Had Jesus said “before Abraham was, I was,” he would have claimed only to be older than Abraham. “I am” claims timeless existence, the being of God himself.
- **The response:** “So they picked up stones to throw at him” (8:59). Stoning was the penalty for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:16). His hearers understood that he was claiming the divine name.
- **“Abraham rejoiced”:** Jesus says Abraham “rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (8:56). The one who existed before Abraham is the one Abraham looked to by faith. The Old Testament saints were saved by the same Christ (Westminster Confession 7.5–6).

Why the I AM Is the Substance of Eternal Life

John 17:3 says eternal life is knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ. John 8:58 identifies Jesus with the I AM who spoke from the bush. The one we are given to know is not a creature who began but the eternal God who simply is. That is why the life is eternal.

- **The life is eternal because its source is eternal:** Life borrowed from a creature would end when the creature ended. Life received from the I AM shares in his unending life. “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19).

- **The life is personal because its source is personal:** Eternal life is not a substance or force passed from God to us but communion with the living God himself.
- **The Mediator must be God:** Only one who is God can give the life of God. Only one who is man can die in the place of men. So the one lifted up must be both (Heidelberg Catechism 15–18; Westminster Confession 8.2). The I AM took flesh (John 1:14) so that he could be lifted up.

The Seven “I Am” Sayings with Predicates

Saying	Text	How it defines eternal life
“I am the bread of life”	John 6:35, 48, 51	Eternal life is feeding on Christ by faith. Compare manna, the bread Israel despised in Numbers 21:5.
“I am the light of the world”	John 8:12	Eternal life is the “light of life,” knowing God in his own light (Psalm 36:9).
“I am the door of the sheep”	John 10:7, 9	Eternal life is entrance into God’s fold through Christ alone.
“I am the good shepherd”	John 10:11, 14	Eternal life is being known by Christ and knowing him; he lays down his life and none can snatch his sheep (10:28).
“I am the resurrection and the life”	John 11:25	Christ does not merely give life; he is the life. Death cannot hold those united to him.
“I am the way, and the truth, and the life”	John 14:6	Eternal life is coming to the Father, and there is no other way.
“I am the true vine”	John 15:1, 5	Eternal life is union with Christ, abiding in him and bearing fruit.

John 6:35–58 — The Bread of Life

After feeding the five thousand, Jesus contrasts the manna in the wilderness with himself: “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died” (6:49). “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (6:51).

- **The wilderness again:** In Numbers 21 Israel called the manna “worthless food” and was bitten. Jesus presents himself as the true bread from heaven. To despise him is to repeat the wilderness rebellion.
- **Eating is believing:** “Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (6:35). Verses 40 and 54 run parallel: whoever “believes” has eternal life (6:40), and whoever “feeds on my flesh” has eternal life (6:54). Reformed interpreters read eating as the act of faith by which believers receive Christ, which the Lord’s Supper signifies and seals.
- **Raised up on the last day:** Four times Jesus says, “I will raise him up on the last day” (6:39, 40, 44, 54). Present possession and future resurrection belong together.

- **Drawn by the Father:** “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (6:44). Reformed theology finds here the doctrine of effectual calling. Eternal life begins with God’s initiative.

John 11:25–26 — I Am the Resurrection and the Life

John 11:25–26 (ESV) — *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?”*

Martha believes in a future resurrection “on the last day” (11:24). Jesus brings that hope into the present and fixes it on himself: “I am the resurrection.” Believers will still die physically (“though he die”), yet they “shall never die” in the deepest sense, because death cannot sever them from Christ. Then he raises Lazarus as a sign. The raising of Lazarus leads directly to the plot to kill Jesus (11:53). The one who gives life does so by laying down his own.

John 14:6–9 — The Way to the Father

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also” (14:6–7). Philip asks to see the Father, and Jesus answers, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). This is the answer to Moses’ prayer in Exodus 33:18. To know the Son is to know the Father, because the Son is the exact image of the Father (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:15).

John 1:1–18 — In Him Was Life

The prologue gathers every theme. The Word was God (1:1). “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (1:4). The Word became flesh and dwelt (literally “tabernacled”) among us, and “we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth” (1:14), an echo of Exodus 34:6. “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (1:18). The one who has life in himself became flesh to make the Father known. That is the whole doctrine of eternal life in miniature.

SECTION 10: JOHN 17 — THIS IS ETERNAL LIFE

The Setting of the High Priestly Prayer

John 17 is the prayer Jesus offers on the night before his death, after the Upper Room Discourse and before he crosses the Kidron to Gethsemane (18:1). It is called the High Priestly Prayer because Jesus intercedes for his people as the priest who is about to offer himself (17:19). The prayer moves from his own glorification (17:1–5), to the disciples (17:6–19), to all who will believe through their word (17:20–26).

John 17:1–3 — The Definition

John 17:1–3 (ESV) — *“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”*

- **“The hour has come”:** Throughout John, Jesus’ “hour” is the hour of his death and glorification (2:4; 12:23, 27; 13:1). The definition of eternal life is spoken on the threshold of the cross, just as the first mention of eternal life (3:14–15) was tied to the lifting up.
- **Authority to give:** The Son has “authority over all flesh” to give eternal life. It is his to give, not ours to seize (compare Genesis 3:22).
- **“All whom you have given him”:** The phrase recurs in 17:6, 9, 24 (compare 6:37, 39; 10:29). Reformed theology finds here the covenant of redemption: the Father gives a people to the Son, and the Son undertakes to give them life. Eternal life is rooted in the eternal counsel of God (Ephesians 1:4).
- **“This is eternal life”:** Jesus gives a definition, not a description of a benefit. Eternal life is not merely the result of knowing God. It is knowing God.
- **“That they know”:** The present subjunctive (*ginōskōsin*) describes ongoing knowledge, a continuing relationship. It is not a single moment of information but a life of knowing that grows forever.
- **“You, the only true God”:** Jesus affirms monotheism. There is one true God, over against all idols (1 Thessalonians 1:9). This is covenant language from Deuteronomy 6:4.
- **“And Jesus Christ whom you have sent”:** Jesus places knowledge of himself alongside knowledge of the Father. No mere creature could be named as the object of saving knowledge together with God. The verse is not a denial of the Son’s deity but an affirmation that the one true God is known only in and with the Son whom he sent. 1 John 5:20 says of the Son: “He is the true God and eternal life.”

What Kind of Knowing?

Biblical knowing is not merely intellectual. It includes at least four elements, all of which the Reformed tradition holds together.

- **Knowledge of truth (*notitia*):** Real content. God has revealed who he is and what he has done in his Word (John 17:8, 17). There is no knowing God without knowing truth about him.
- **Assent (*assensus*):** Receiving that truth as true, on the authority of God’s word (17:8, “they have received them and have come to know in truth”).
- **Trust (*fiducia*):** Resting personally on Christ. Calvin defines faith as “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us,” founded on the free promise in Christ and sealed on the heart by the Spirit (Institutes 3.2.7). Faith is knowledge that trusts.

- **Communion and love:** Knowing in the covenant sense is intimate fellowship (Genesis 4:1 uses *yada'* of marital union; Amos 3:2 of God's choosing love). Jesus prays "that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (17:26).

John 17:4-5 — The Glory Before the World Existed

"And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (17:5). The Son shared glory with the Father before creation. This is the same claim as John 8:58 and 1:1. Eternal life is knowing the one who shared eternal glory with the Father.

John 17:6-19 — Kept, Sanctified, and Sent

- **Revealed the name:** "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me" (17:6). Jesus makes the Father's name known, completing what began at the burning bush.
- **Kept in the name:** "Holy Father, keep them in your name" (17:11). Those given to the Son are kept. "I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction" (17:12). Reformed theology grounds the perseverance of the saints here (Westminster Confession 17.2).
- **Sanctified in truth:** "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (17:17). Eternal life grows through the Word.

John 17:20-26 — That They May Be One and See My Glory

- **Union with the Trinity:** "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us" (17:21). Believers are brought into the fellowship of Father and Son. This is not absorption into God's essence but real communion with him through union with Christ.
- **"That they may be with me... to see my glory":** "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory" (17:24). The future of eternal life is to be with Christ and behold his glory. The knowing begun now becomes sight.
- **Love as the end:** The prayer ends with love: "that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (17:26). Eternal life is sharing in the love of the Father for the Son.

John 10:27-30 — My Sheep Hear My Voice

John 10:27-28 (ESV) — *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."*

Knowing runs both ways: the sheep hear, and the shepherd knows. Eternal life is given, not earned. It "never" perishes (a strong double negative in Greek, *ou mē... eis ton aiōna*). Both the Son's hand and the Father's hand hold the sheep (10:29), "I and the Father are one" (10:30).

SECTION 11: THE LETTERS OF JOHN — THE LIFE MADE MANIFEST

1 John 1:1-4 — The Eternal Life Was Made Manifest

1 John 1:2-3 (ESV) — *“the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us — that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”*

- **Eternal life is a person:** John calls the Son “the eternal life, which was with the Father.” The same person who was “with God” in John 1:1 is here “the eternal life” itself.
- **Seen, heard, touched:** The apostles heard, saw, and touched the Word of life (1:1). Eternal life is not an abstraction but the incarnate Son.
- **Fellowship (koinōnia):** The purpose of proclaiming eternal life is fellowship with the Father and the Son, and with one another. This is John 17:3 and 17:21 turned into apostolic preaching.

1 John 2:3-6, 24-25 — Knowing Him and Keeping His Commandments

“By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments” (2:3). Knowing God is not proved by claims but by obedience. “And this is the promise that he made to us — eternal life” (2:25). The promise is received by abiding in the Son and the Father (2:24).

1 John 3:1-3, 14 — We Shall See Him as He Is

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (3:2-3). The present knowing of God ends in seeing him. The hope of sight produces holiness now. “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers” (3:14).

1 John 5:11-13 — Life in His Son

1 John 5:11-12 (ESV) — *“And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”*

- **The location of life:** Eternal life is “in his Son.” It is never detached from Christ. You cannot have the gift without the giver.

- **Having the Son:** To have life is to have the Son. This is union with Christ stated as simply as possible.
- **Assurance:** “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13). God wants believers to know that they have it. The Westminster Confession teaches that believers may attain “an infallible assurance of faith” (18.2).

1 John 5:20 — He Is the True God and Eternal Life

1 John 5:20 (ESV) — *“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”*

This verse is the closest echo of John 17:3 in the New Testament. The Son gives understanding so that we may “know him who is true.” We are “in him,” in union with the Son. And “he is the true God and eternal life.” The most natural antecedent of “he” is Jesus Christ, just named. John ends his letter where his Gospel’s prologue began: the Son is God, and the Son is life. The final verse follows: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (5:21). Every substitute for the true God is an idol, even a good gift like the bronze serpent.

SECTION 12: PAUL — LIFE IN CHRIST

Romans 5:12–21 — Death in Adam, Life in Christ

Paul sets two representatives side by side. Through Adam’s one trespass, death reigned; through Christ’s one act of righteousness comes “justification and life for all men” in him (5:18). “Grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:21). Reformed theology reads this as the two covenant heads: Adam in the covenant of works, Christ in the covenant of grace. What Adam forfeited, Christ secured by his obedience.

Romans 6:4, 22–23 — The Free Gift of God

Romans 6:23 (ESV) — *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

- **Wages and gift:** Death is earned. Eternal life is a gift (charisma). The contrast mirrors Numbers 21: the bite was deserved; the life was freely given.
- **“In Christ Jesus”:** Eternal life is located in Christ, as in 1 John 5:11. Paul’s phrase “in Christ” is his shorthand for union with Christ.

- **Newness of life:** Believers were buried with Christ by baptism and raised “that we too might walk in newness of life” (6:4). Eternal life begins in a new way of living now, and its end is eternal life (6:22).

Romans 8:1-11 — The Spirit of Life

“The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (8:2). God did what the law could not do: “sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (8:3). This is the doctrinal explanation of the bronze serpent. The Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead “will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (8:11). Eternal life has a Trinitarian shape: the Father sends, the Son condemns sin in the flesh, and the Spirit gives life.

Galatians 2:20 and 3:13 — Christ Lives in Me

“It is no longer I who live, but 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” (2:20). The life of the believer is Christ’s own life. That life comes because “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (3:13). The one lifted up on the tree bore the curse so that those who look to him might live.

Philippians 3:8-11 — The Surpassing Worth of Knowing Christ

“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:8). Paul’s goal is “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings... that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (3:10-11). Knowing Christ is the treasure, righteousness from God through faith is the ground (3:9), and resurrection is the goal. John 17:3 in Paul’s own words.

Colossians 3:1-4 — Your Life Is Hidden with Christ in God

Colossians 3:3-4 (ESV) — *“For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”*

“Christ who is your life.” Paul does not say Christ gives life, but that he is the believer’s life. The life is real now but hidden; it will be revealed at his appearing. This is the “now and not yet” of eternal life.

1 Timothy 6:12-16 and 2 Timothy 1:9-10 — Immortality Brought to Light

- **“Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called” (1 Timothy 6:12):** Eternal life is both given and laid hold of. The believer lives out what has been received.
- **“Who alone has immortality” (1 Timothy 6:16):** Only God has immortality in himself. Creatures have it only as a gift. This verse figures in the debate over the immortality of the soul (Section 17).

- **“Life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10):** Christ “abolished death.” The grace behind it “was given us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (1:9), another pointer to God’s eternal purpose.

Titus 1:2 and 3:7 — The Hope of Eternal Life

Paul serves “in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began” (1:2). Believers are “justified by his grace” so that they “might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (3:7). The promise was made in eternity, secured in time, and will be inherited in full.

1 Corinthians 13:12 and 15 — Face to Face and the Resurrection Body

- **“Then face to face” (13:12):** “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” The knowing begun now will be completed. Note the order: God’s knowledge of us comes first.
- **The resurrection body (15:42–57):** The body is sown perishable and raised imperishable. “Death is swallowed up in victory” (15:54, quoting Isaiah 25:8). Eternal life is embodied life in a renewed creation.

SECTION 13: HEBREWS, PETER, AND REVELATION — THE FACE OF GOD

Hebrews 7:16, 25 and 9:12 — An Indestructible Life

Christ became priest “by the power of an indestructible life” (7:16). “He always lives to make intercession” for those who draw near to God through him (7:25). “He entered once for all into the holy places... by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (9:12). Eternal life is secured by an eternal redemption and sustained by a living high priest.

1 Peter 1:3–5, 23 — A Living Hope

God “has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:3–5). The new birth is “through the living and abiding word of God” (1:23). Both the inheritance and the heirs are kept by God.

2 Peter 1:3-4 — Partakers of the Divine Nature

God's power has granted "all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us" (1:3). Through his promises believers "become partakers of the divine nature" (1:4). Again life comes "through the knowledge of him." Reformed theology reads "partakers of the divine nature" as sharing in God's moral likeness and communion through union with Christ, not as a change of creaturely essence into divinity. The creature-Creator distinction remains forever.

Revelation 2:7 and 22:1-2, 14 — The Tree of Life Restored

The tree barred in Genesis 3 is given back: "To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (2:7). In the new Jerusalem "the river of the water of life" flows from the throne, and the tree of life grows on either side, "and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (22:1-2). "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life" (22:14). The Bible ends where it began, with the curse removed.

Revelation 21:1-4 — God Dwells with Man

Revelation 21:3 (ESV) — *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."*

The final vision is the covenant formula of Jeremiah 31:33 fulfilled. The center of the new creation is not the streets of gold but God dwelling with his people. Death, mourning, crying, and pain are gone (21:4), because the one who is the life is present.

Revelation 22:3-5 — They Will See His Face

Revelation 22:3-4 (ESV) — *"No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."*

- **"No longer anything accursed":** The curse of Genesis 3, borne by Christ on the tree (Galatians 3:13), is gone. The serpent that bit is destroyed (20:10).
- **"The throne of God and of the Lamb":** One throne, shared by God and the Lamb who was slain. The one lifted up is enthroned.
- **"They will see his face":** What Moses could not see (Exodus 33:20), the servants of God will see. The knowing of John 17:3 becomes the sight of 1 John 3:2. This is the beatific vision (Section 15).
- **"His name on their foreheads":** The name revealed at the bush is written on his people. They belong to him forever.

SECTION 14: A HISTORICAL ORIENTATION — FROM IRENAEUS TO THE PURITANS

The church has always confessed “the life everlasting” (Apostles’ Creed). What has varied is the emphasis: whether eternal life is conceived chiefly as a place, a duration, a vision, or a relationship. The Reformation recovered the biblical link between eternal life, justification by faith, and union with Christ.

The Early Church

- **Irenaeus (c. 130–202):** Against the Gnostics, who despised the body, Irenaeus insisted on the resurrection of the flesh and on knowing God through the incarnate Son. His famous line joins life and vision: “the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God” (Against Heresies 4.20.7).
- **Athanasius (c. 296–373):** Against Arius, Athanasius argued that only one who is truly God could give us the life of God. If the Son were a creature, he could not unite us to God. His argument depends on texts like John 1:1–4, 5:26, and 14:6.
- **Augustine (354–430):** Augustine spoke of the heart made for God and restless without him (Confessions 1.1). He closed The City of God with a vision of the eternal Sabbath: “There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise” (22.30). In his Tractates on John he stressed that eternal life is knowing God, and that faith now leads to sight hereafter.

The Medieval Church

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) taught that humanity’s final happiness is the vision of the divine essence (Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 3, a. 8). Medieval theology developed a rich doctrine of the beatific vision, but increasingly tied the attainment of eternal life to merit, purgatory, and the sacramental system. Eternal life came to be seen as the reward at the end of a long process rather than a gift received by faith.

The Reformation

- **Martin Luther (1483–1546):** Luther recovered eternal life as the gift that accompanies forgiveness. His Small Catechism says of the Lord’s Supper: “where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” Eternal life is not earned at the end but received now with the promise.
- **John Calvin (1509–1564):** Calvin opened the Institutes with the claim that true wisdom consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves (1.1.1). In his commentary on John 17:3, he explains that eternal life is found only in knowing God as he has revealed himself in Christ, and that knowledge of God apart from Christ is empty. He treated union with Christ as the key to the whole application of redemption (Institutes 3.1.1) and the final resurrection as the completion of that union (3.25).
- **Calvin against soul sleep:** Calvin’s first theological work, Psychopannychia (written 1534, published 1542), argued against the idea that souls sleep unconsciously between death and

resurrection. He defended the conscious life of the believer's soul with Christ (Philippians 1:23; Luke 23:43).

The Puritans and After

- **Richard Baxter:** The Saints' Everlasting Rest (1650) set out heaven as the enjoyment of God, and urged believers to meditate on it daily.
- **John Owen:** Of Communion with God (1657) described the believer's present fellowship with each person of the Trinity. Meditations on the Glory of Christ (1684), written near his death, argued that the vision of God in heaven will be the vision of his glory in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).
- **Jonathan Edwards:** In his sermon "Heaven Is a World of Love" (1738), Edwards described heaven as the place where the love of the Father and the Son flows to the saints without hindrance, echoing John 17:26.
- **Later Reformed theology:** Herman Bavinck, Geerhardus Vos, and Anthony Hoekema stressed the "already and not yet" structure of New Testament eschatology. Eternal life is the life of the age to come, which has broken into this age through Christ's resurrection and will be completed at his return.

SECTION 15: THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL LIFE

The Doctrine in Brief

The Reformed tradition teaches that eternal life is the gift of God, promised in the covenant of grace, purchased by Christ, applied by the Holy Spirit, and received by faith alone. Its essence is knowing and enjoying the triune God through union with Christ. It begins in regeneration, is possessed now in justification, adoption, and sanctification, is preserved by God's power to the end, and is perfected at the resurrection in glorified body and soul, in the immediate vision and enjoyment of God forever.

Westminster Shorter Catechism 1 — *"What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever."*

The Covenant of Works and the Promise of Life

Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2 — *"The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience."*

- **Life was always the goal:** Even before the fall, God set before Adam a higher life than he had at creation, confirmed and made unlosable. The tree of life was its pledge.

- **Lost in Adam:** By the fall, Adam and all his descendants came under death (Romans 5:12). No sinner can now obtain life by the law (Galatians 3:21).

The Covenant of Grace and Christ the Mediator

Westminster Confession of Faith 7.3 — *“Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved.”*

- **Christ fulfills the covenant of works:** Christ, the last Adam, rendered the perfect obedience Adam failed to render and bore the curse Adam incurred (Romans 5:19; Galatians 3:13). Eternal life is the reward of his obedience, given to those united to him.
- **The Mediator is God and man:** “It was requisite that the Mediator should be God, that he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God... and man, that he might advance our nature, perform obedience to the law, suffer and make intercession for us in our nature” (Westminster Larger Catechism 38–39, abbreviated). This is the doctrinal meaning of the I AM lifted up.
- **One covenant, one life:** The Old Testament saints received the same eternal life by the same Christ through promises, types, and sacrifices (Westminster Confession 7.5–6). The Israelite who looked at the serpent in faith was looking, though dimly, to Christ (John 8:56; 1 Corinthians 10:4).

Union with Christ as the Substance

Calvin wrote that as long as Christ remains outside of us, all that he has suffered and done for our salvation remains useless to us (Institutes 3.1.1). Eternal life is not a commodity Christ purchases and hands to us at a distance. It is Christ himself, received by the Spirit through faith.

- **The Spirit as the bond:** The Holy Spirit unites believers to Christ (1 Corinthians 6:17; 12:13). He is “the Spirit of life” (Romans 8:2).
- **All benefits in him:** Justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification are all “in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3–14). Westminster Larger Catechism 69 teaches that the communion in grace which believers have with Christ is their partaking of these benefits.
- **Communion with the Trinity:** Through union with the Son, believers have fellowship with the Father and the Spirit (John 17:21; 1 John 1:3; 2 Corinthians 13:14). This is not a merging of essence but a real personal communion. The Creator-creature distinction is never erased.

Present Possession: What Eternal Life Is Now

Benefit	What it gives	Relation to eternal life
Regeneration	A new heart; spiritual life from the dead (John 3:3–8; Ephesians 2:1–5)	The beginning of eternal life in the soul

Benefit	What it gives	Relation to eternal life
Justification	Pardon of sin and acceptance as righteous in Christ (Romans 5:1; WSC 33)	The legal ground: “justification and life” (Romans 5:18)
Adoption	Received into God’s family with all its privileges (John 1:12; WSC 34)	Eternal life as family life with the Father
Sanctification	Renewed in the whole person after God’s image (2 Corinthians 3:18; WSC 35)	Eternal life growing in knowledge and holiness (John 17:17)
Assurance and perseverance	Peace, joy, increase of grace, and perseverance to the end (WSC 36)	Eternal life known and kept (1 John 5:13; John 10:28)

The Knowledge of God

- **Knowledge through revelation:** God is known only as he reveals himself. General revelation leaves sinners without excuse (Romans 1:20), but saving knowledge comes only through the Word and in Christ (Westminster Confession 1.1).
- **The twofold knowledge:** Calvin distinguished the knowledge of God as Creator from the knowledge of God as Redeemer in Christ (Institutes 1.2.1). Eternal life is the second, which restores the first.
- **True yet not exhaustive:** God is “incomprehensible” (Westminster Confession 2.1). We know him truly, but never exhaustively. This is why eternal life never grows stale: there is always more of God to know.

Perseverance of the Saints

Westminster Confession of Faith 17.1 — *“They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”*

- **Grounded in God, not in us:** Perseverance depends on “the immutability of the decree of election,” “the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ,” and “the abiding of the Spirit” (17.2). Compare John 6:39; 10:28–29; 17:11–12; Romans 8:30.
- **Eternal means eternal:** If life could be lost, it would not have been eternal life in John’s sense. “Whoever believes... has eternal life... and shall never perish” (John 10:28).
- **Warnings as means:** The Reformed read the warnings of Hebrews 6 and 10 as God’s appointed means of keeping his people, not as evidence that true believers finally fall away (Canons of Dort, Head 5, Article 14).

Death, the Intermediate State, and the Resurrection

Westminster Shorter Catechism 37 — *“The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.”*

- **“Still united to Christ”:** Death does not break union with Christ. The body in the grave remains his.
- **To depart and be with Christ:** The intermediate state is conscious and blessed (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Luke 23:43), but not yet complete.
- **The resurrection:** Eternal life is finally embodied life. “At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 38).

Glorification and the Vision of God

Westminster Larger Catechism 90 (abbreviated) — *“...made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels, but especially in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity.”*

- **Vision and fruition:** “Vision” is seeing God; “fruition” is enjoying him. The Westminster divines placed both at the heart of heaven, the fulfillment of John 17:3 and 17:24.
- **In the face of Christ:** Reformed theologians such as Owen stressed that the vision of God is mediated through the glorified Christ, in whom the fullness of deity dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9). The creature never comprehends God’s essence, but sees his glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).
- **The new creation:** The final home of eternal life is not a disembodied heaven but the new heavens and new earth, where God dwells with his people (Revelation 21:1–3; 2 Peter 3:13).

Confessional Statements Compared

Confession	Key article	Emphasis
Heidelberg Catechism (1563)	Q. 1; Q. 58	Comfort: belonging to Christ in life and death; the beginning of eternal joy felt now
Belgic Confession (1561)	Art. 37	The last judgment; believers crowned with glory and honor, their cause acknowledged before all
Canons of Dort (1619)	Head 5	Perseverance of the saints and the assurance it brings
Westminster Confession (1646)	Chs. 7, 17, 18, 32, 33	Covenant structure; perseverance; assurance; intermediate state; final judgment
Westminster Catechisms (1648)	WSC 1, 36–38; WLC 86, 90	Chief end; benefits in this life, at death, and at resurrection; vision and fruition of God

Confession	Key article	Emphasis
Second London Baptist (1689)	Chs. 17, 18, 31, 32	Substantially the same as Westminster on perseverance, assurance, and last things

Heidelberg Catechism 58 — *“What comfort does the article concerning life everlasting afford thee? That since I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, after this life I shall inherit perfect salvation, which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man to conceive, and that to praise God therein for ever.”*

SECTION 16: OTHER PROTESTANT READINGS

All Protestant traditions agree that eternal life is God’s gift received by faith in Christ. They differ chiefly on how it is applied, whether it can be lost, and how believers may be assured of it.

Overview Table

Tradition	Can it be lost?	Ground of assurance	Key voices / documents
Reformed	No. The elect persevere by God’s preserving grace	God’s promise, the fruit of grace, and the Spirit’s witness	Calvin; Dort; Westminster 17–18
Lutheran	Yes. Believers can fall from grace through unbelief, and may be restored	God’s objective promise in Word, baptism, and Supper	Luther; Augsburg Confession XII; Formula of Concord XI
Arminian / Wesleyan	Yes. Faith can be abandoned and life forfeited	The direct witness of the Spirit (Romans 8:16) and its fruit	Arminius; Remonstrance (1610) Art. 5; Wesley
Anglican	Varied. The Articles lean Reformed; later Anglicans range widely	Word, sacraments, and the Spirit	Articles 16–17; Book of Common Prayer
Baptist (most)	No. “Once saved, always saved”; most affirm perseverance	God’s promise and the evidence of a changed life	Second London Confession; Baptist Faith and Message (2000) Art. V
Free Grace	No. Eternal life is secure even if faith and fruit fail	The promise of John alone, apart from works	Zane Hodges; Grace Evangelical Society

(A) The Lutheran View — Life Through the Means of Grace

Lutherans teach that eternal life is given through the Word and sacraments, which really convey forgiveness, life, and salvation. They affirm with the Reformed that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone.

Key Arguments

- **Objective means:** The promise comes to us externally in preaching, baptism (Titus 3:5), and the Supper. Assurance looks outside the self to these means.
- **Falling from grace:** The Augsburg Confession (Art. XII) rejects those who deny that the justified can lose the Holy Spirit. Lutherans cite texts such as 1 Corinthians 10:12 and Galatians 5:4.
- **Election as comfort:** The Formula of Concord (Art. XI) teaches that the elect will certainly be saved, but insists that election be considered only in Christ and through the means of grace, not speculatively.

Points of Disagreement with the Reformed View

The Reformed hold that if a person truly has eternal life, he cannot lose it (John 10:28), and that apparent apostates never truly possessed it (1 John 2:19). Lutherans answer that this makes assurance depend on introspection about whether one's faith is genuine, and prefer to rest assurance on the objective promise. Lutherans also reject the Reformed view that grace is always effective in the elect.

(B) The Arminian and Wesleyan View — Life Received and Kept by Faith

Arminians hold that God's prevenient grace enables all who hear the gospel to believe, and that eternal life is received and retained by continuing faith.

Key Arguments

- **Warning passages:** Hebrews 6:4–6 and 10:26–29, John 15:6, and 2 Peter 2:20–22 are read as describing real believers who may finally fall away.
- **Conditional promises:** “If indeed you continue in the faith” (Colossians 1:23); “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:13).
- **The witness of the Spirit:** John Wesley taught that believers may know they are children of God through the direct witness of the Spirit with their spirit (Romans 8:16), confirmed by the fruit of the Spirit.

Key Theologians and Documents

Jacobus Arminius (who left perseverance undecided); the Remonstrance of 1610, Article 5 (likewise undecided); later Remonstrants and John Wesley (who affirmed that true believers may finally fall); modern writers such as I. Howard Marshall (Kept by the Power of God, 1969).

Points of Disagreement with the Reformed View

The Reformed answer that the warnings are real and necessary but serve as means of perseverance; that the same letters promise that God will finish what he began (Philippians 1:6; Hebrews 6:9–20; 10:39); and that eternal life that could end would not be eternal. Arminians reply that the Reformed reading empties the warnings of their force.

(C) The Anglican View

Article 17 of the Thirty-Nine Articles affirms “predestination to life” as “the everlasting purpose of God” and calls it “full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons.” Article 16 says that after baptism “we may depart from grace given,” and by God’s grace rise again. Anglican theology has therefore ranged from the Reformed convictions of the English Reformers to Arminian readings from the seventeenth century on. The Book of Common Prayer burial service speaks of “sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life.”

(D) Baptist Views and the Free Grace Debate

Most Baptists affirm the eternal security of the believer. Reformed Baptists hold the full Westminster doctrine through the Second London Confession. The Baptist Faith and Message (2000, Art. V) teaches that all true believers endure to the end.

The Free Grace View

Zane Hodges and others associated with the Grace Evangelical Society hold that eternal life is received by believing Jesus’ promise, that it can never be lost, and that ongoing faith and good works are not necessary evidence of having it. They stress John 3:16, 5:24, and 6:47.

The Lordship Response

John MacArthur’s *The Gospel According to Jesus* (1988) argued that saving faith necessarily includes submission to Christ as Lord and bears fruit. The Reformed tradition agrees that works do not justify, but insists that the faith which alone justifies is never alone. It is always accompanied by other saving graces (Westminster Confession 11.2). 1 John was written “that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13), and gives obedience and love as marks of it (2:3; 3:14).

SECTION 17: PRACTICAL AND DISPUTED QUESTIONS

Is Eternal Life a Quantity or a Quality?

Both, in a definite order. Scripture defines eternal life by its substance (knowing God, John 17:3) and by its source (the I AM, John 8:58), and from these its duration follows. To make duration the definition leads to a heaven centered on endless pleasures rather than on God. To deny duration leads to a mysticism that ignores the resurrection. The biblical order is: who, then what, then how long.

Can Eternal Life Be Lost?

Texts cited for perseverance	Texts cited for possible loss
John 6:37–40; 10:27–29	Hebrews 6:4–6

Texts cited for perseverance	Texts cited for possible loss
Romans 8:29–39	Hebrews 10:26–31
Philippians 1:6	John 15:1–6
1 Peter 1:3–5	2 Peter 2:20–22
1 John 2:19	1 Corinthians 9:27
Jude 24	Colossians 1:21–23

The Reformed tradition holds that God preserves all whom he has given eternal life, and that the warning passages are the very means by which he does it. The alternative traditions hold that the warnings describe a real possibility of forfeiting life. Both sides agree that no one should presume on grace while living in unrepentant sin (Romans 6:1–2).

Do All People Live Forever?

The traditional Protestant view holds that every human soul continues to exist forever, either in eternal life or in eternal punishment (Westminster Confession 32.1; 33.2). Conditional immortality (annihilationism) holds that only the redeemed receive immortality, and that the lost are finally destroyed.

- **Arguments for conditional immortality:** God “alone has immortality” (1 Timothy 6:16); immortality is given through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10); the lost “perish” and are “destroyed” (Matthew 10:28; 2 Thessalonians 1:9). Advocates include Edward Fudge (*The Fire That Consumes*, 1982) and, tentatively, John Stott (*Evangelical Essentials*, 1988).
- **Arguments for the traditional view:** Matthew 25:46 uses the same word for “eternal punishment” and “eternal life”; Revelation 14:11 and 20:10 describe torment “forever and ever”; Daniel 12:2 speaks of “everlasting contempt.” The Reformed confessions affirm eternal conscious punishment.
- **Common ground:** Both sides agree that the lost are cut off from the life of God. The debate concerns whether that separation is endless existence or final destruction. Note that on either view, eternal life in its biblical sense (knowing God) belongs only to the redeemed.

What Happens at Death?

The Reformed tradition teaches a conscious intermediate state in which believers are with Christ (Westminster Shorter Catechism 37). Some Protestants, including some Anabaptists and later Seventh-day Adventists, have taught “soul sleep,” that the dead are unconscious until the resurrection. Calvin wrote *Psychopannychia* against this view. Scripture calls the death of believers “sleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:13–14), but the Reformed read this as describing the body and the peace of death, while the soul is “away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

What Will We See?

The Reformed tradition affirms the vision of God (1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 22:4) while insisting that the creature can never comprehend the infinite God. Most Reformed theologians hold that this vision is mediated through Christ, the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). Recent writers have renewed attention to the doctrine, including Michael Allen (*Grounded in Heaven*, 2018) and Hans Boersma (*Seeing God*, 2018), who argue that Protestants have sometimes neglected it in favor of an earthly or purely relational hope.

Heaven or the New Earth?

The final state is not disembodied existence in the sky but resurrection life in a renewed creation (Romans 8:18–23; Revelation 21:1–5). The intermediate state with Christ (“heaven”) is real but temporary. Reformed writers such as Anthony Hoekema (*The Bible and the Future*, 1979) emphasized the new earth as the home of eternal life. The center of both, however, is the same: God with his people.

How Can I Know I Have Eternal Life?

Westminster Confession of Faith 18.2 — *“This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God.”*

- **The promises:** Look first where the Israelites looked: away from the bite to the remedy. “Whoever believes in him... has eternal life” (John 3:36).
- **The evidences:** 1 John gives marks: belief in Christ (5:1), love for the brothers (3:14), obedience (2:3), and rejection of the world (2:15).
- **The Spirit’s witness:** “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16).
- **When assurance is weak:** The Westminster Confession teaches that true believers may have their assurance shaken, but are never utterly without the seed of God and the life of faith (18.4). Weak faith still looks, and the look still saves.

SECTION 18: SYNTHESIS AND STUDY CONCLUSIONS

What Is Not Disputed

Across the Protestant traditions in this study, the following are widely affirmed:

- Eternal life is the gift of God, not the wage of human works (Romans 6:23).

- It is received by faith in Jesus Christ, who was lifted up on the cross (John 3:14–16).
- It consists in knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent (John 17:3).
- It is found only in the Son (1 John 5:11–12; John 14:6).
- Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, the I AM who became flesh (John 1:1, 14; 8:58).
- It begins in this life and is perfected at the resurrection (John 5:24–29).
- Its final state is embodied life in the new creation, where God dwells with his people and they see his face (Revelation 21–22).

The Central Exegetical Tensions

- **“Eternal” (aiōnios):** How much weight falls on quality (the life of the age to come) and how much on duration (Section 1)?
- **“Has eternal life” (John 5:24):** If it is possessed now, can it be lost? Or does its present possession guarantee its future (Sections 10, 16)?
- **The warning passages (Hebrews 6; 10):** Real possibility, or means of perseverance (Section 17)?
- **“Who alone has immortality” (1 Timothy 6:16):** Does every soul live forever, or only the redeemed (Section 17)?
- **The vision of God:** What does it mean to “see his face,” and is the vision of God direct or mediated through Christ (Sections 13, 15)?
- **Faith and fruit:** Is ongoing obedience a necessary mark of eternal life (1 John), or only a desirable one (Section 16)?

No single verse settles these questions. The most responsible reading holds several truths together: eternal life is given freely to the dying, defined as knowing God, rooted in the eternal I AM, possessed now, and perfected later. The Reformed tradition holds that the same God who gives this life also keeps it.

The Three Questions Answered

Question	Answer	Key texts
What is eternal life?	Life freely given to the dying, through looking in faith to Christ lifted up	Numbers 21:8–9; John 3:14–16
How is it defined?	Knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent, in covenant communion	John 17:3; Jeremiah 31:34; 1 John 5:20
What is its substance?	The life of the triune God, the eternal I AM, shared through union with the Son by the Spirit	Exodus 3:14; John 5:26; 8:58; 1 John 1:2; 5:11–12
When is it ours?	Begun now at faith; perfected at the resurrection in the vision of God	John 5:24–29; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 22:4

Master Cross-Reference Table

Theme	Old Testament	Gospels and Acts	Epistles and Revelation
Life from God	Genesis 2:7; Deuteronomy 30:20; Psalm 36:9	John 1:4; 5:26; Acts 17:25	1 Timothy 6:16; 1 John 1:2
Tree of life	Genesis 2:9; 3:22–24; Proverbs 3:18	John 14:6	Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14
The divine name, I AM	Exodus 3:14; Isaiah 43:10, 25	John 8:24, 28, 58; 18:5–6	Hebrews 13:8; Revelation 1:8
Serpent, curse, and remedy	Genesis 3:15; Numbers 21:4–9	John 3:14–15; 12:32–33	Romans 8:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13
Faith as looking	Numbers 21:8–9; Isaiah 45:22	John 3:15–16; 6:40	Hebrews 12:2
Knowing God	Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 9:24; 31:34; Hosea 6:6	Matthew 11:27; John 17:3	Philippians 3:8–10; 1 John 5:20
Covenant formula	Genesis 17:7; Jeremiah 31:33	Luke 22:20	Hebrews 8:10; Revelation 21:3
Present possession	Psalm 16:11; 63:3	John 3:36; 5:24; 6:47	Colossians 3:3–4; 1 John 5:12–13
Kept by God	Psalm 121:7–8	John 6:39; 10:28–29; 17:11–12	Philippians 1:6; 1 Peter 1:5; Jude 24
Resurrection	Isaiah 25:8; 26:19; Daniel 12:2	John 5:28–29; 11:25–26	1 Corinthians 15:42–57
The face of God	Exodus 33:20; Psalm 17:15; 27:8	John 1:18; 14:9	1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 22:4

Questions for Reflection

1. Before this study, how would you have defined eternal life? What changes when you define it as Jesus does in John 17:3?
2. Why do you think God commanded an image of the serpent rather than something else? What does this teach about how Christ saves?
3. Read Numbers 21:4–9 and John 3:14–18 side by side. What does each add to the other?
4. The Israelites only had to look. Where are you tempted to add something to the look of faith?
5. How does Jesus' claim "before Abraham was, I am" change the way you understand the life he gives?
6. What is the difference between knowing about God and knowing God? How would you describe that difference to someone else?

7. Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent when it became an idol. What good gifts of God are you tempted to love more than God himself?
8. If eternal life begins now, what should look different in your life this week?
9. How does the hope of seeing God's face (Revelation 22:4) shape how you pray, suffer, and hope?
10. Which of the disputed questions in Section 17 matters most to you, and why?

A Final Word

Eternal life is not an endless extension of the life we already have. It is a different life altogether, the life of God himself, given to people who were dying. In the wilderness, Israel had only to look at the serpent on the pole. On the cross, the Son of Man was lifted up so that whoever believes in him should not perish. The one lifted up is the I AM who was before Abraham, who has life in himself, and who came to make the Father known. To know him is life now, and to see him will be life forever. As the psalmist said, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Psalm 73:25).

KEY SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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