

Minister's Message

Dear Friends,

The story is told of a sportsman whose great love was cricket. One Sunday after the morning service he asked his vicar, "Tell me, do they play cricket in heaven?" "I don't really know," responded the clergyman, "But I'll make inquiries. I'll ask the Lord." First thing Monday morning the man phoned the Vicarage, "Well, Vicar, did you get an answer to my question?" "Yes I did. I have got some good news for you, and also some bad news. The good news is that they do indeed have a heavenly cricket team." "And what is the bad news?" asked the man. "The bad news is that you have been selected to play next Saturday."



Underlying that silly story is a serious question. A question many of us wonder about but never ask - what will heaven be like? What is there for us when this earthly life draws to a close? What will it mean to have life eternal? Perhaps we don't ask the question because we feel there are no answers. Or are we afraid to ask too much in case we discover that the whole concept of heaven and eternal life is no more than a delusion; the Christian hope is a false hope with no real foundation at all?

Well, in this month's Message, I am going to raise some of those questions; difficult and searching questions which we rarely talk about. Let's begin with something fairly basic. What are the grounds and foundations of the Christian hope? Is there any sound logic to a belief in eternal life? For the Christian, the hope of life eternal is born of our experience of fellowship with God. In Jesus, God has revealed himself to us to be One who loves us with a love greater and more mysterious than we can ever imagine. God loves us better than we love ourselves, and our well-being and ultimate good are safer in his hands than they would be in our own. Now is it possible that the Eternal Father would allow the children he loves to come to nothing, to cease to exist after their brief span on earth? Anyone who denies the doctrine of eternal life is either doubting the reality of God, or they are saying that it is God's will that those he loves should no longer exist. If there is a God behind the universe, and if he is a God of love, then his precious children will experience life eternal.

Having now looked briefly at the grounds for our Christian hope, we move on to further questions.

Granted that eternal life does await us, what will it be like? To some extent we must answer, "we don't know." In this domain, with St. Paul, we walk not by sight but by trust.

The Scottish theologian John Baillie tells of a devoted doctor visiting a man who was very poorly and drawing near to the end of his life. The man asked the good doctor if he had any idea of what was awaiting him in the life beyond. The doctor fumbled for an answer. But before he could speak, there was a scratching sound at the door, and the answer came to him. "Do you hear that noise?" he asked his patient. "That is my dog. I left him downstairs, but he has grown impatient and has come up looking for me and can hear my voice. He has no idea what is inside that door for he has never seen this room. But he knows I am here. Now is it not the same with you. You know not what lies beyond the door to eternity, but you do know that your Master is there."

There is much we do not know about the nature and conditions of eternal life, but that does not mean we are completely ignorant. Within the New Testament writings there are some colourful pictures and images of things to come, and although we cannot take them literally, they do give us important clues. The first thing to be noted is that eternal life stands not so much for a greater length of life but for a new quality of life. The Christian hope is not for more of the same, but for something altogether higher and better. The main thrust of the word eternal is not life that goes on and on, but a life that is not subject to time conditions at all. It is not gaining an endless quantity of life, but a new and exceptional quality of life. "I have come that they may have life," says Jesus. "and that they might have it more abundantly." According to St. John that life can begin here and now. "He who hears my word and puts his faith in him who sent me has eternal life." It cannot be a full enjoyment of eternal life because of the limited conditions of the present, but it is possible to have a foretaste of things to come, and because it is life with God it is life that can never die.

continued on page 8.....