

“ETERNAL LIFE.”*

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JOHN BUNYAN, in that beautiful allegory, “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” represents his pilgrim, on one occasion, as thrusting his fingers into his ears and running, and as he runs he cries, “Life! life! eternal life!” This represents the spirit of the true Christian in all ages and in all lands, and gives us a picture of the earnestness of the man who turns a deaf ear to the allurements of this world’s pleasure. It puts before our minds the distant goal after which we aspire, and towards which we run, girding up the loins of our minds; the immortal crown which is in reserve for the good. We ask, “What is eternal life?” What is implied; what is buried up or hidden away in the deep significance of the phrase which you have in the language of the text, which you are enjoined “to lay hold of” in at least two places in this chapter?

I do not know that I can tell you what it is, and I may as well warn you in the opening of my remarks that you are not to expect from me a full exposition of all that is meant by that phrase, “eternal life.” This is not making any humiliating acknowledgment. It is saying of the form of life called eternal life, what we have to say of every other form of life. We talk about vegetable and animal life, but notwithstanding all the language which men of science may use, they cannot tell us what life really is. There is vegetable life, with which you are all familiar. It has a wide range, running from the tiny moss, springing out of the wall, to the huge cedars of Lebanon, or the mighty oak of our Canadian forest, which sends its roots deeper into the soil, and its branches into the sky, year by year, and for a thousand years or more braves the tempest or the storm. You cannot tell what that life is. You cannot tell how it is that the acorn is inspired with the spirit of life and grows up into the great tree. That form of life is as inexplicable as the form of life called eternal.

Then again, there is animal life of every grade, from the motes that people the sunbeam, all along to the higher forms of animal life up to the leviathan, the greatest of all that swim the ocean stream. We cannot tell what animal life is; we think that something has been added to vegetable life. In vegetable life we have various forms of beauty, in animal life we have added to these the powers of feeling and instinct. This instinct is shown in animal life by the fondness of the parent for its young, and gives us a marvellous display of the infinite resources of the great Author of life. Look at the form of life displayed in the beautiful little canary in its cage. What grace of form, and what sweet music are combined in its little frame, and yet you can tell nothing about this manifestation of life. It is all a mystery. How it is that the beautiful bird can sing so sweetly no one can tell.

* A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nelles, in the Methodist Church, Orillia, on Sunday, December 12th, 1881, from 1 Timothy vi. 12: “Lay hold of eternal life.” This report is kindly furnished by the Rev. S. P. Rose. The report was made by a gentleman in the audience, and though substantially correct, suffers from the fact that it was never revised by the lamented preacher.