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1st Timothy 1:12–16, New Living Translation.

¹² I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

Life Eternal.

1st Timothy, along with 2nd Timothy and Titus, are called the Pastoral letters. They are traditionally attributed to Paul, but there is good reason to believe he did not write them personally. They are called Pastoral letters because he wrote them to two young pastors, two young proteges, Timothy and Titus. Unlike most of his letters, these letters were not written to entire churches. Timothy and Titus were of the next generation. These were the people who would teach the fundamentals of Christianity to a generation who had not known Jesus, who had not known the Apostles or Paul. These letters wrestle with a critical concept: how can a Christian, especially a Christian leader, maintain a level of ethical and spiritual integrity

significantly above that of the surrounding culture, when, at the same time, we must be an active part of that culture. If we are not part of that culture, we cannot minister to others. We must find a way to balance the uniqueness of being a believer against the worldliness of being a member of everyday society. But these letters, although some say they were written in the early sixties, were probably written forty or so years later by followers of Paul. They contain language that did not exist during Paul's time, including terms that have to do with the organization of the churches that emerged in the second century; this includes words that refer to elders, deacons, and bishops, concepts that did not arise until it is thought that Paul would have passed away. Our quote today comes from early in 1st Timothy.

The letter begins, as letters of that time and place did, with a greeting: *1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, 2 To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.* Timothy is the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother. He met Paul during what we call Paul's second missionary journey, and we read about this in Acts, Chapter 16. It was Paul who ordained him into the ministry. Paul goes on to talk about a trip Paul made to Macedonia, something that is not recorded in Scripture. Some believe that this trip must have happened after the end of Acts, after he was released from prison. This lends some credence to

the belief that Paul did write 1st Timothy, but that he wrote it as a very elderly man. In this statement, Paul tells Timothy to not fall into the practice of teaching pagan myths, or to focus on genealogies of the Israelites, but rather to focus specifically on how to serve God through deep faith. He is to teach others to have pure hearts, clean consciences, and faith that is sincere. He is to be very wary of those who are ignorant of the faith yet want to teach: ³*As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,* ⁴*nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.* ⁵*The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.* ⁶*Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion,* ⁷*desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.* Then, starting at verse 8, Paul makes it clear that the law taught by God and by Christ is there to stop us from doing wrong: ⁸*Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully,* ⁹*understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners.* Keep in mind that Paul is talking about moral law here, not ceremonial law, as practiced by the Israelites and then the Jews.

Next comes our quote. Here is a cutdown version: ¹²*I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service,* ¹³*though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.* ¹⁵*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* ¹⁶*But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.* Notice that Paul says that Jesus gave him strength, put him to work as an evangelist – and this was after Paul had been a great sinner, someone who had hunted down and persecuted Christians. He says that Christ came to Earth to save sinners like him. Importantly, Paul does not say that he sinned out of ignorance. He does not excuse himself. He ends by saying that Jesus Christ grants believers eternal life. This last part is what I want to look at closely.

Let's consider this "eternal life" that all of us obtain as a result of being believers. That's what we claim, right, that we are saved by our faith, not our actions. Our actions, of course, are a very good reflection of our true faith. If we abuse others, if we are greedy, vindictive, if we take and refuse to give, then maybe our faith is an illusion. Maybe we are lying to those around us and to ourselves. But back to this "eternal life". In the original Greek of the New Testament, this is

the two words: aiōnion zōēn, written in reverse: life eternal, or zōēn aiōnion. But this word, aiōnion, what precisely does it mean? A common problem in interpreting the Greek New Testament is interpreting these ancient Greek words properly. It does not precisely mean eternal. In fact, a better translation is “of the age” or “age-long”. More subtly, it was used to refer to God’s age, or the age of God’s kingdom. This was understood to mean the age that starts now and goes on for all of eternity. It does NOT refer to only eternity. Here is something important: this word is used numerous times in the New Testament, for instance in Matthew 25, when Jesus says: ⁴¹ *“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”* Yes, that word eternal there, at the end, is the same word: aiōnion. We have always been told that if we believe, when we die, we will have eternal life, that we will be with God

forever, that we will be in Jesus' Kingdom for all of eternity. But what the Bible really says is that if we have faith, we will be in the Kingdom of God from now through eternity. In other words, it starts right now.

In my work as a hospital chaplain, I have sat with many people who are terminally ill, facing the last stage of their disease, or actively dying. The good news is that many people, when confronted with death, reach back to their faith. Sometimes they haven't been to church since they were living with their parents. Sometimes they are conflicted, half-believing what society tells them about the evils of people who believe in God and half-believing what they were taught in Sunday School so many decades before. Since Boulder Community is indeed a true community hospital, where people who work there are proud to work for perhaps the largest of the last true, independent, non-profit hospitals left in Colorado, I need to be very careful to serve all people. I never mention religion unless a patient brings it up. Only when someone asks to pray or identifies themselves as a believer, do I talk to them about faith. And indeed, many people do. It's so incredibly important that faith gets implanted in a person when they are young. Only then does it have a chance to resurface when they are in need, facing a divorce, financial ruin, a chronic disease, loneliness, the loss of a spouse, or some other life-changing situation. There are, of course, people who still attend a church, who have been

active in their faith all their adult life. But either way, I like being able to tell people about the Kingdom of God, and how they are already there.

In fact, you don't have to be deathly ill to feel a rescuing joy out of knowing this. The Bible makes it clear that we are there now. I talk to people all the time about their faith, about their journey in God's realm, and how they are right there right now, walking alongside their Lord, with the Holy Spirit bringing them security. They might be facing a major operation. They might be recovering from an infection. It could be something routine, like a joint replacement, but whatever it is, they were reminded that they are mortal, that someday, they will leave this planet. The good news, though, is that their journey will not be interrupted. They will continue, walking along the paths, past the streams and ponds, under the clear blue sky, listening to the birds and the wind in the trees, and breathing in the pure, clean air of the Kingdom of God. No matter what happens to us in life, we are in a beautiful place, a sacred place, and we will never leave that place.

During Jesus' ministry, he performs a miracle where he feeds Five Thousand people who had come to listen to him. He does this with five barley loaves and two fish brought by a boy. That evening, Jesus went out on a boat and got caught up in a strong storm with the Apostles. Jesus walks on water to prove to them that they do not need to be afraid. Then, in the Gospel of John, we are told that on the next

day, Jesus gives his famous Bread of Life sermon. He says this: ⁴⁷ *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.* ⁴⁸ *I am the bread of life.* ⁴⁹ *Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.* ⁵⁰ *This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.* ⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”* Notice these words: Whoever believes has eternal life. You have it now. That’s what Jesus says.

This doesn’t mean that there is nothing special waiting for us in the next life. In Luke, Chapter 18, Jesus talks to a rich man. He talks about how hard it is for someone with money to enter the Kingdom of God, that money corrupts. He tells us that even if we have to give up a lot in this life to truly follow his path, we can look forward to a greater reward: *“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God,* ³⁰ *who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”* So, of course, we do believe that when we die, there will be an even greater reward. But that eternal life, the life that we live in the presence of God, it has already begun. We can find joy in it right now.

I spoke recently with a woman who was healing from a post operative infection, something that started weeks after her surgery, long after she had gone

home. This did not happen to be someone at the hospital. She was recovering and things looked good, but she was very weak, very tired. She told me that having her gut surgery come back to make her even sicker than she had been before the surgery made her think about how important it is to enjoy life today, to find joy each morning, to walk with her faith each day, all day, letting God's grace lift her up. She's right. We should find this easy to do. After all, we are already living in the Kingdom of God, already living an eternal life.

We took our first step in the Kingdom of God the day we first believed. Our faith may have been weak in the beginning, and it may well need further strengthening. But each day we are living in eternity. Amen. Please pray with me.

God, thank you for this beautiful world in which we live. We look forward to an even greater beauty one day. But in the meantime, we are quite content, in fact, we are joyous, at living in your kingdom – in your eternal kingdom. Thank you for all that you have given us. Amen.