25 *Eternal Life: Based On Good Works Or Faith Alone?*

**Jesus’ Normal Salvation Passages Versus “Eternal Life” Passages**

In most of the salvation passages to this point, Jesus has not used the words *eternal life*. Jesus said those who “kept” (tereo, obeyed) His word “should never ever die.” (John 8:51). Jesus has said those who “endure to the end shall be saved.” (Matt. 10:22.) Jesus has said you can go “to heaven maimed” or “hell whole.” (Mark 9:42-47.) Jesus has said if you are unforgiving after being forgiven a mountain of debt (initial salvation), your forgiveness is revoked. You are sent back to the jailers to be “tortured” at the prison that the master originally spared you from. You must pay every last penny of your previously forgiven debt. (Matthew 18:23-35.)

In other words, Jesus often does not use the expression of *eternal life* when Jesus talks of salvation.

Outside the book of John, you find the term *eternal life* mentioned only rarely. Jesus says those who have given up homes, family, etc., for the “kingdom of heaven shall inherit eternal life.” (Matthew 19:16, 30.)

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**Problem For Cheap Grace: ‘Eternal Life’ Is Frequently Tied To Works & Obedience**

Dillow is a chief proponent of the gospel of cheap grace. He realizes, however, that the translated term ‘eternal life’ is in verses which frequently directly tie it to good
works, such as in Matthew 19:16, 30, just quoted. This very serious difficulty for faith alone doctrine is infrequently mentioned. However, Dillow confesses this truth:

> The phrase eternal life (Gk. zoein aionion) occurs forty-two times in the New Testament. Its common meaning... entrance into heaven... is well documented. However, many are not aware that **in eleven of those forty-two usages (26 percent) eternal life is presented to the believer as something to be earned or worked for.** Mt. 19:16, 19:29; Mk. 10:17, 30; Lk. 10:25, 18:18, 30; Rom. 2:7; Gal. 6:8; Jn. 12:25-26; Rom. 6:22. (Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*, supra, at 135-36.)

Thus, 26% of the time “eternal life” is clearly linked to works or obedience. What a dilemma for cheap grace that says instead belief alone is what one needs to be saved!

As a solution, Dillow argues that in forty-two passages except these eleven passages, the Greek zoe ainon means ‘entrance into heaven.’ However, in these eleven problem verses, Dillow says we must switch zoe ainon to mean instead a *happy and abundant life* starting in the here and now, but never implying ‘entrance into heaven.’ Why?

Because otherwise, Jesus is laying down conditions of good works, obedience, etc., for *entrance into heaven.* Because this would violate *cheap grace,* and its belief alone position, Dillow says we must change the meaning from *eternal life* into *happy abundant life* in just those eleven verses.

However, that means Dillow is varying the meaning based on preconceived notions of which doctrine is correct. Dillow is putting doctrine ahead of the text. **Dillow is not letting the text shape doctrine.** Instead, he is blatantly biasing the text to fit preconceived doctrine.

However, if *eternal life* means *entrance in heaven* in thirty-one passages, it should mean *entrance into heaven* the eleven other times that Dillow disputes the meaning merely because it is conditioned on good works, obedience, etc.
Most important of all, Dillow never reveals that there is nothing in *zoe ainon*’s meaning that includes the idea of a *happy and abundant life*. That is not a dictionary meaning. It is an invented *ad hoc* (a just-so made up meaning) idea to fix the problem posed by *zoe ainon*.

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**The Dilemma Posed If Zoe Ainon Does Mean Eternal Life**

The correct conclusion, however, as demonstrated below, is that *zoe ainon* is about salvation every time it appears. The fact this means there are eleven verses that tell us obedience and works are simultaneously conditions of *zoe ainon* does not change this. Our doctrine is formed by the verses’ actual meaning. We don’t make verses fit our preferred doctrine. If we make our doctrine force a foreign meaning upon an expression like *zoe ainon*, we are putting our doctrine beyond testing by the original Greek language. We are imagining a realm of doctrine that is above the inspired words of Jesus.

For example, we cannot use the commonly heard idea that *salvation is by faith alone* to squash out of existence contrary verses from Jesus. Rather, Jesus’ contrary verses to faith alone doctrine dictate, as we will prove in the next chapter,¹ that we need to re-evaluate how we translate the word *pistis* as *faith*. That word has permissible alternative meanings such as *faithfulness, pledge, trust*, etc. It should force us also to re-evaluate how we translate the verb *pisteuo as believe* instead of the permissible alternative meaning of *obey*.

In fact, we shall see this dilemma reaches its climax with John 3:16. In the next chapter, we will prove that we should have translated the key verb in John 3:16 — *pisteuo*

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— with these eleven verses in mind. This verb pisteuo can mean believe certainly, but with equal validity it can mean obey, comply, trust, etc.² In other words, these eleven works-obedience-eternal-life passages are simply more proof that pisteuo in John 3:16 means obey, not believe, as we will thoroughly prove in the next chapter.

Thus, Dillow is wrong to use these eleven works-obedience-eternal life verses, which are quoted below, to rationalize a meaning of zoe ainon which is unknown in any dictionary — a happy and abundant life. This concocted meaning is solely invented to satisfy the doctrine of faith alone. Rather, these eleven verses are a leading clue that we must overhaul our understanding of the Greek word pistis (noun) and pisteuo (verb). While pistis and pisteuo are almost everywhere translated in the KJV as faith and believe, they equally signify in a Greek dictionary the respective meanings of faithfulness (obedient living) and obey.

Let’s now examine why eleven passages cause such turmoil for the belief-alone adherents. In each, zoe ainon is contingent on good works or obedience.

The Eleven Works-For-Eternal Life Passages

Dillow — one of the staunchest belief alone advocates today whose books are evangelical seminary classics — admits that if zoe ainon (translated typically as eternal life) really means entrance into heaven, then there are numerous passages that tie it to good works and obedience. Dillow’s list of the eleven obedient-works-for-eternal-life passages are:

2. See “John 3:16: Obeying Unto Christ Should Save?” on page 417 et seq.
The Eleven Works-For-Eternal Life Passages

- Matthew 19:16, 19:29: “(16) Someone came to Jesus with this question: ‘Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?...(29) [Jesus responded:] And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for My sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life.” (NLT)

- Mark 10:17, 30: “As Jesus was starting out on His way to Jerusalem, a man came running up to Him, knelt down, and asked, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’....(29)’Yes,’ Jesus replied, ‘and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for My sake and for the Good News, (30) will receive now in return a hundred times as many houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—along with persecution. And in the world to come that person will have eternal life.”

- Luke 10:25-28: “One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking Him this question: ‘Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?’ (26) Jesus replied, ‘What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?’ (27) The man answered, ‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (28) ‘Right!’ Jesus told him. ‘Do this and you will live!’” (NLT)

- Luke 18:18, 29-30: “(18) Once a religious leader asked Jesus this question: ‘Good Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?’.... (29) ‘Yes,’ Jesus replied, ‘and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, (30) will be repaid many times over in this life, and will have eternal life in the world to come.” (NLT)

- Rom. 2:7: “He will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good work [ergon agathon], seeking after the glory and honor and immortality that God offers.” (NLT)

3. Oddly, translations like the KJV, ASV and NLT translate ergon agathon so as to omit it says good work while everywhere else ergon is translated as work. See, e.g., Ephesians 2:9 (“not of erga,” plural).
- Gal. 6:8: “Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.” (NLT)
- John 12:25-26: “He that loveth his life loseth it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. (26) If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will the Father honor.” (ASV)
- Rom. 6:22: “But now being made free from sin and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto sanctification, and the end eternal life.” (ASV) “... you have your fruit [result] in sanctification, and the outcome [is] eternal life!” (literal).

Without even examining Dillow’s case that zoe ainon means happy and abundant life, these eleven verses in their very own context prove Jesus is talking of salvation-life in heaven. These passages speak of sacrificing life here and now to receive a life in heaven. See John 12:25-26; Mark 10:30. This contrast proves eternal life is the gain.

Thus, Dillow’s argument fails in context that zoe ainon means a happy life in the here and now in all eleven passages. Yet, what is Dillow’s case built upon? Is it based on anything more than circular logic? Let’s see his proof.

**Zoe Ainon As Something Different Than Eternal Life**

Dillow argues his case as follows for the meaning of an abundant life (not eternal life) in these eleven passages:

Life (Gk. zoe) is often used of an abundant quality of life beyond regeneration which is the possession of those who ‘persevere in doing good.’ Rom. 2:7...Therefore, not just a counter-balance to death is meant, i.e., regeneration, but an abundant life, a vibrant experience with Christ.
However, Dillow offers no proof except the doctrine of faith alone for such a meaning. He realizes that unless his substitute-translation is used — an abundant quality of life — the faith-alone doctrine is falsified. Yet, Dillow never offers any proof that the words zoe ainon have the meaning he suggests from a Greek dictionary! Instead of admitting faith alone is falsified, Dillow accepts a false translation!

However, let’s see if Dillow could have made his case better than this. In a sense, Dillow is correct there are other possible meanings. In particular, the adjective eternal is not always a correct translation choice. The expression can mean literally “life for the ages” or “life lasting for an age.”

Blatant Denial Of Dictionary Meanings To Zoe Ainon

Vincent’s famous work of 1905 entitled Word Studies in the New Testament has self-contradictory claims about ainon’s true meaning. Vincent taught in the second volume (on John’s Gospel) that zoe ainon meant to “live forever.” (Vincent, Word Studies (1905) Vol. II at 99.) He said it was “a characteristic phrase of John for lives forever.” However, Vincent by the time he wrote volume four must have seen a problem. He obviously became aware of the dilemma posed to faith alone doctrine by the eleven troublesome passages referenced above. If ainon truly means eternal or forever, salvation is not by faith alone. To save belief-alone doctrine, Vincent in volume four of his Word Studies of 1905 made the following extraordinary reversal about the meaning of the Greek noun ainon:

“The word always carries the notion of time, and not of eternity. It always means a period of time. Otherwise it would be impossible to account for the plural, or for such qualifying expressions as this age, or the age to come. It does not mean something endless or everlasting... The adjective ainos in like manner carries the idea of time. Neither the noun nor the adjective, in themselves, carry the sense of
endless or everlasting...Zoe aion...is not endless life, but life pertaining to a certain age or aeon, or continuing during that aeon...[It] carries...a sense of quality. (Vincent’s Word Studies of the New Testament (1905) Vol. IV, at 58-61.)

However, this volume-four-Vincent is wrong. The volume-two-Vincent is right. First, the most authoritative Greek dictionary — the Liddell Scott — says aion by itself means sometimes eternal or perpetual. (No dictionary ever says it implies a present quality of life.) Also, the highly authoritative work by James H. Milligan and George Moulton entitled Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (London: 1930)(reprint Hendrickson Publishers 1997) at 16 says of aion:

[W]e must note that outside the NT, in the vernacular as in the classical Greek... it never loses the sense of perpetuus [i.e., perpetual]....

All other authoritative Greek dictionaries concur on aion having this meaning of the perpetual: “without end” (Bauer, BAGD); “without end, never to cease, everlasting” (Thayer); and “eternal” (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament). Confirming this usage is that the Hebrew word for eternal was olam, and it was translated in the Septuagint in 247 B.C. by aion. (E.g., Dan. 12:2.)

In fact, what volume four of Vincent Word Studies was claiming was preposterous. Yet, the volume-four-Vincent surely must have realized by then if one does not chip away at ainos, there is no escaping that faith alone doctrine is falsified by Jesus! (Vincent must have not been able to go back and alter volume two at page 99 to avoid a self-contradiction.)

Nevertheless, unless numerous dictionaries all conspire to promote a false point despite it undermining their favored doctrine of faith-alone, then the volume-four-Vincent appears to have been willing to deny a word its true meaning to save faith-alone doctrine! Yet the volume-four-Vincent must have known Jesus makes a clear use of ainon to mean eternal in Matthew 25:46, saying: “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The meaning of ainon’s usage there as eternal is undoubtable. For Jesus describes clearly “eternal punishment” in verse 41 as punishment by “eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels.” Thus, when this is contrasted in verse 46 with zoe ainon, the latter clearly must mean eternal life.

Therefore, certainly the volume-four-Vincent could not seriously believe what was being written for the masses. Vincent may have temporarily suffered from a temporary apoplexy to save faith-alone doctrine. Whatever the reason, somehow this volume-four-Vincent’s bias in favor of belief-alone is what obviously usurped the truth he confessed in volume two. The only reason we can still read his frank opinion in volume two is that it was already in print when Vincent must have noticed the destruction of faith alone doctrine if zoe ainon means “eternal life.”

5. The volume-four Vincent dismisses eternal in this verse, only weakly saying it “is the punishment peculiar to an aeon other than in which Christ is speaking.” Id. at 60. In other words, the punishment is supposed only for a period of time other than the epoch in which Jesus spoke. The suggestion is it could be a decade later; the tribulation, etc. Vincent had to know this could not wash. For it would mean the righteous receive only a temporary epoch of life, and the evil receive only a temporary epoch of punishment. That certainly is not Jesus’ meaning.
Conclusion

Thus, we have eleven undisputed verses that condition zoē aïnon (eternal life) upon works and/or obedience. Dillow — one of the leading voices in evangelical seminaries today — confessed this. Yet, Dillow’s effort to claim zoē aïnon means something other than eternal life is unavailing. The eleven verses clearly reference salvation, promising that losing one’s life here will cause one to “inherit eternal life” in the next. See John 12:25-26. Salvation is the clear import of zoē aïnon even in the eleven problem passages.

Moreover, Dillow tries to supplant this meaning of eternal life with the meaning abundant life. Yet, not a single dictionary ever suggests such a meaning. Aïnon means either eternal or age-enduring. Zoe means life. Dillow is making up a meaning out of thin air when zoē aïnon is plain as day.

We saw other reputable men (the volume four Vincent) are so desperate to withdraw these eleven verses from the salvation-debate that they are willing to downplay that aïnon itself can ever mean eternal. Yet, all the other most reputable dictionaries say to the contrary that it does often mean eternal. Even the volume-two Vincent said likewise! Thereby, the volume-four Vincent is an example of what lengths to which cheap grace advocates are willing to go to save their precious doctrine of faith alone. The faith alone advocates are brought to utter desperation by these eleven problem passages. Yet, the truth is staring back at us: there are eleven passages, including mostly from Jesus, that tie eternal life to actions, works, obedience, and things cheap grace rejects as ever a condition of eternal life. Who do you heed? Jesus or cheap grace? The eternal consequence of your decision is all in your hands.