

“What Is Your Life?”

September 15, 2019

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; (14) whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for little time and then vanishes away. (15) Indeed you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’” (James 4:13-15).

The epistle of James was written “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (Jas. 1:1). The expression “the twelve tribes” implies that the recipients were of Jewish nationality. That they were “scattered abroad” probably indicates that they were among that number alluded to in Acts 8:1, wherein we learn of the “great persecution...against the church,” which occurred following the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:59), and which resulted in these new converts being “scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). The writer of the book of James humbly described himself as “a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Jas. 1:1). However, it is generally conceded that his real identity was “James the Lord’s brother,” who was a pillar in the church at Jerusalem and a person of great influence for good (cf. Gal. 1:19; 2:9; Acts 15:13; cf. Mark 6:3).

The epistle of James has been called “the gospel of common sense,” or “the Christian’s book of Proverbs,” so described because of its practicality in dealing with the every day, ordinary events of life. For example, the epistle of James addresses what ought to be the Christian’s response to the “various trials” of life, the endurance of “temptation,” the importance of being “doers of the word, and not hearers only,” what constitutes “pure and undefiled religion,” the folly of “faith without works,” the proper use of the tongue, the sinfulness of one having “bitter envy and self-seeking” in his heart, etc., etc. (Jas. 1:2; 12, 22, 27; 2:26; 3:1-12, 16).

And surely the practicality of the book of James is equally as evident in our opening text, a text which refers to a person going on a business venture involving buying and selling, and seeking to make “a profit.” Jewish people of that time period, like so many capitalists today, traveled to various cities in business ventures, which involved buying, selling, trading, and seeking to make “a profit.” For example, Lydia, one of the first converts in Philippi, was “a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira” (Acts 16:14).

There is nothing inherently wrong with a person going into business, or traveling to different places while buying and selling, nor is there anything inherently wrong with such a person seeking to “make a profit.” If he doesn’t make “a profit” he won’t be in business very long, nor will he be able to provide for his family.

But a lot is wrong when a person seeks to live as if God does not exist! And a lot is wrong when a person plans his future and plans his vocation without taking the will of God into consideration! Such is the problem addressed in our opening text — a text

describing a person deciding what he will do, where he is going, and how long he will stay in “*such and such a city*,” without taking into consideration the uncertainty and brevity of life, or even the will of God. With this in mind we now ponder our text more closely.

It begins with the words “*come now*,” an attention- getting expression designed to cause a person to stop and consider before going further .

The text then alludes to those who say “*today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there buy and sell, and make a profit.*” Observe that such persons are saying “*we will go*,” and “*spend a year there*,” and we **will** “*buy and sell, and make a profit.*” On the surface, this seems innocent enough, but note the attention-getting statement “*You do not know what will happen tomorrow.*” They were stating what they would do even “*a year*” in the future, but they did not really know what “*will happen tomorrow!*” How true that is! Solomon elsewhere cautioned, saying, “*do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth,*” Prov. 27:1). Countless souls have made great plans for where they want to be in life for generations to come, but died the same day they made those ambitious plans!

Mindful of this sobering fact, James posed the sobering question, “**what is your life**” (Jas. 4:14). This question will serve as the focus of the balance of this article.

“What Is Your Life?”

1. From the standpoint duration? James likened life to “*a vapor that appears for little time and then vanishes away*” (Jas. 4:14). Hence, “*life*” is like a “*vapor*” that mantles the mountain early in the morning, but “*vanishes away*” with the rising sun. In Job 14:1-2 life is likened to a flower that is cut down and soon withers, and to a fleeing shadow. Regarding the brevity of life, the Psalmist said “*it is soon cut off, and we fly away*” (Ps. 90:10). Job said “*my days are swifter than a runner; they flee away, they see no good. They pass by like swift ships, like an eagle swooping on its prey*” (Job 9:25-26). Mindful of the brevity of life, it therefore behooves us to “*number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom*” (Ps. 90:12).

2. From the standpoint of Purpose? The real value of life is determined by its quality, not its length. The biography of the oldest man on record (Methuselah) is summed up in three relatively short verses, verses which the average person could memorize in a short time (Genesis 5:25-27)! In contrast, Jesus lived on the earth around 33 years, but there are **four books** of biography about His life (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), and about Whom countless volumes have been written. It seems that the main purpose of many people can be summed up in our opening text (“*buy*,” “*sell*,” and “*get gain*”); yet Solomon said that “*man’s all*” is to “*Fear God and keep His commandments*” (Eccl. 12:13). The apostle Paul cautioned the saints at Corinth, saying, “*whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*” (I Cor. 10:31). A good question each one of us should ask is this: “am I living for self, or am I living for God?”

3. From the standpoint of destiny? One’s purpose in life, for good or bad,

influences his eternal destiny. Sadly, the destiny of most people (Matt. 7:13-14) is described as “*everlasting punishment*” (Matt. 25:46) in that “*lake of fire*” (Rev. 20:15), which was “*prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matt. 25:34, and which will eternally be inhabited by those who chose to serve Satan instead of God.

In delightful contrast, the destiny of those who choose to serve Christ is “*eternal life*” (Rom. 6:23) “*in heaven*” (I Peter 1:4), that celestial city where “*God will wipe away ever tear from their eyes,*” where “*there will be no more sorrow, nor crying,*” where “*there shall be no more pain*” (Rev.21:4), where they can drink of “*the water of life*” and eat of “*the tree of life*” (Rev. 22:2), and bask eternally in the abounding love of God!

Conclusion: “*What is your life*” is a question which deserves and demands a solemn, studied, soul-searching examination. Don’t be like the rich farmer who lived his life as if God did not exist, who boasted of his imagined success, saying to himself, “*you have many goods laid up for many years: take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry*” Luke 12:19, but who died that very night, leaving all his hard-earned goods to someone else! “**What is your life**” is a very important question; let us ask ourselves this question, especially examining our lives from the standpoint of duration, purpose, and destiny.

***** —B. Witherington