

December 26, 2021

“What Is Your Life?”

As we conclude the year 2021, and anticipate the beginning of a new year, 2022, it is appropriate that we “*examine*” ourselves (2 Cor. 13:5) by seriously pondering that soul-searching question, “**what is your life,**” a question posed in the epistle of James:

(13) “*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 a little time and then vanishes away.* (15) *Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’*”

The book of James is a four-chapter, 106 verse “general epistle” which was written to “*the twelve tribes...scattered abroad*” (Jas. 1:1). The particular “*James*” who penned this epistle is generally thought to be “*James, the Lord’s brother*” (cf. Gal. 1:19; Mark 6:3). However, in the letter bearing his name, James simply and humbly described himself as “*James...a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Jas. 1:1). In all likelihood, “*the twelve tribes...scattered abroad*” (to whom this epistle was addressed) constituted Jewish Christians who were “*scattered*” by reason of persecution. Cf. Acts 8:1-4. As is implied by the subject matter, the primary purpose of this letter was to warn Jewish Christians against various besetting sins, and to encourage them to steadfastness under persecution.

In some respects, Jewish Christians “*scattered abroad*” faced many of the same dangers faced by their national ancestors who were taken captive by the Assyrians and Babylonians — not the least of which was the danger of blending in with their surrounding culture, and taking a “business as usual” approach to life. And similar dangers face Christians today. In our quest for survival in the world that now is, it is so easy to lose sight of the world to come. In so doing, we lose our focus and we become more consumed in making a living than in **making a life**. Hence, the admonitions contained in this book are as applicable to Christians today as they were to the original recipients of this inspired letter.

With regards to the verses with which this article began, you will please note that James addressed some who were making business plans — determining to go to some city, “*spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit*” (Jas. 4:13). Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong in buying and selling and making a profit. Honorable work, and honest trading for a profit stabilizes the economy and enables people to feed their families. This is good. However, it is not good for a person to make plans irrespective of the brevity of life, and without regard to what “*the Lord wills*.” Planning ahead is wise, but presumptuous planning which makes no provision for an uncertain tomorrow and a certain eternity is foolish. With this in mind, James asked, “*what is your life?*” And he answered his own question, saying, “*it is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away*” (Jas. 4:14). The obvious point is that “*life,*” at best, is short — so brief that it is likened to a “*vapor*” that soon “*vanishes away!*” There is one thing upon which all “old folks” agree; it doesn’t take long to live a life! Hence, instead of “*boasting*” (v. 16) about what they plan to do in the future, sober-minded people will say “***If the Lord wills we shall live and do this or that***” (v. 15), and then act accordingly.

Having made these observations, we now focus more directly upon the question, “***What Is Your Life?***” Contextually, the question was intended to emphasize the brevity of life. And we must never lose sight of this fact. Indeed, these verses are but as few among many which force

upon us an awareness that a person's journey from the cradle to the grave is incredibly short — especially when compared to eternity. That being the case, the question “*what is your life*” should receive due consideration by every responsible person. The balance of this article is written with this in mind. We have already addressed this question with regards to the brevity of life, so we now ask:

What Is Your Life With Regards to Purpose?

The real value of life is not measured by quantity, but by **quality**. The biography of the oldest man on record is given in four short verses, Gen. 5:21,25-27). These verses tell us all we know about Methuselah. We learn that Enoch was his father; he bore “*sons and daughters*,” including Lamech; he lived 969 years “*and he died*.” That is all that is actually stated about Methuselah. Using a little math, we can conclude that he died in the year of the flood; he may have died **in** the flood. But regarding Methuselah, who lived 969 years, everything we know about him can be summed up in one short paragraph which can be memorized in five minutes!

Conversely, Jesus lived on earth for about 33 1/2 years, but four New Testament books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are books of biography dealing with His life. The Old Testament looked forward to His coming; the New Testament begins with an announcement of His arrival, and concludes with an announcement of His return. The Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44) all spoke of the coming Messiah. The life of Jesus was so significant that that apostle John, after having already written about Jesus, concluded saying, “*And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*” (John 21:25)!

Methuselah's life had length. Jesus' life had **purpose**. Jesus summed it up saying, “*I have come down from heaven, not do to My Own will, but the will of Him who sent me*” (John 6:38). Jesus knew His earthly stay would be short; hence, he said, “*I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work*” (John 9:4).

Yes, we know about Methuselah, and we know about Jesus. But friend, what about *you*? “*What is your life*” with regards to purpose? The purpose of many is to accumulate as many material goods as possible, even though each one must die (Heb. 9:27), and not one of us can take any earthly possessions with us (I Tim. 6:7). The purpose of others may be summed up in these words “*eat, drink, and be merry*” (cf. Luke 12:15-21), but this approach to life produces misery instead — both here and hereafter!

What should be our real purpose in life. Solomon answered this question in these words, “*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. **Fear God and keep His commandments.** For this is the whole duty of man*” (Eccl. 12:13).

What Is Your Life From the Standpoint of Destiny?

This question is inseparably connected with the previous question. Purpose and destiny go hand in hand!

Speaking of destiny, there is a hell to shun (Matt. 10:28), and there is a heaven to gain (I Pet. 1:4). Hell is inconceivably terrible. Heaven is inconceivably wonderful! But the duration of each is the same; it is “*everlasting*” or “*eternal*” (Matt. 25:46)!

One doesn't have to be morally wicked in order to be lost. In fact, all one has to do to go to hell is **nothing**! When Jesus returns He will take "*vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who **do not obey** the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Thess. 1:8). The inspired writer expressed it this way: "*Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it; to him it is sin*" (Jas. 4:7).

Mindful of the agonies of hell, mindful of the boundless joys of heaven, mindful of the length of eternity, and mindful of the value of the soul, Jesus asked: "*For what profit is it to man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*" (Matt. 16:26).

"*The way*" that "*leads to destruction*" is "*broad*" and heavily traveled, whereas "*the way which leads to life*" is described as "*difficult*," and there are but "*few*" who "*find it*" (Matt. 7:13,14). But the "*way*" in which we travel determines direction, and direction determines destiny.

Conclusion:

We could view the question "*what is your life*" **retrospectively** (looking backward, inward, and forward). But we have chosen, in this article, to ponder this question with regards to duration, purpose, and destiny. Indeed, "*what is your life?*" Do you need to make some changes in order to make it what it ought to be? If the answer to that question is "yes," then **right now** is the time to start making those changes. Tomorrow may be eternally too late! —B. Witherington
