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SERMON CLVII.

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TIME MEASURED BY ETERNITY.

JAMES iv. 14—*For what is your life?*

This question has met the eye of thousands without making the slightest impression upon their minds; and I fear it is commonly dismissed with as little thought, as if it related to the most trifling subject. But when we pause for a moment to consider its import—when we glance at its momentous bearings, and listen to its deep toned emphasis, it assumes an importance compared with which many of those great questions that agitate nations are of less weight than the dust of the balance. *For what is your life?* The first and most obvious answer is that which the apostle himself gives, “It is even a vapor which appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away.” It is a momentary scene of hope and disappointment, of joys and sorrows, of entrances and exits. But as we dwell upon the question, there is another thought of far deeper interest. It is, that our life is the threshold of eternity—the infancy of immortality; that here our characters are to be formed for the innumerable ages of future being—that our everlasting happiness or misery is suspended upon our improvement of this inch or two of time. What an amazing value do these considerations give to the breath that is in our nostrils!

I am aware, that the text does not directly contemplate all that is suggested in these remarks. It *primarily* challenges our serious
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SERMON CLVIII.

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SOLEMN VIEWS OF PROBATION.

JAMES iv. 14—“*What is your life?*”

This weighty question which the apostle asks with a particular allusion, I propose to ask and answer with a more general reference. The subject, always appropriate, is peculiarly so at this season. It is not necessary, I presume, to expatiate on the manifold importance of a correct estimate and a careful consideration of human life. The soul is influenced to its determinations and actions by motives presented to it. Man operates on man by these; and they are among the most important means of the moral government of God. Now, the consideration of human life in its various accidents, relations and bearings, supplies some of the most powerful and prevailing of motives. How frequently is this class of motives introduced and urged in the Bible. “And that knowing the time, that it is now high time to awake out of sleep. Be ye also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am. So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. Oh that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end. Go to, now, ye that say, To-day or to-morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” *What is your life?*

On this subject I purpose to submit a series of observations, which, I hope, will prove neither uninteresting nor uninstructional. If we implore the blessing of God to accompany them, I am sure they will not. I adopt this question, not for any object of curiosity, nor with a view to attempt a philosophical definition of life. Philosophy has in vain endeavored to trace out and detect the vital principle. It has eluded every research. It defies analysis. We know *that* it is, for we see

its movements around us, and we feel its workings within us. But *what* and *where* it is, we know not. We distinguish life into various kinds—vegetable, animal, intellectual, spiritual; but in doing so, we give no explanation of what life is. We throw no light on the darkness which envelops it. It is latent still. The life of the body, we know, is the effect of the inspiration of the Almighty; and not the result of any exquisite material organization. He “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.” To the soul itself life is essential. It cannot be conceived to exist without it.

But waving these speculations as rather curious than useful, we ask, What life is—the word being understood in its ordinary acceptation, as denoting that part of man’s conscious existence which precedes the dissolution of the body, the space antecedent to that strange separation, in consequence of which the dust returns to the earth, and the spirit to God who gave it? Life, as the antecedent of immortality, what is it? And

1. In point of *duration*. The ordinary term of human life was once nearly 1000 years. It is reduced to less than one-tenth of its former measure. It is usually reckoned at 70 years. Some go a little beyond that. The greater part come far short of it. Few of those whom I now address will ever reach it. How short life is! Verily it is a vapor, a span, a hand’s breadth. Even when it was a thousand years, it was in the divine estimation *ephemeral*; for a thousand years are with the Lord as one day—and that a day past—yesterday. Yes, as a watch, i. e. the space of three hours—and not in the day time, but in the night, when men sleep and time steals away swiftly and unperceived. So much for the *absolute term* of human life.

2. The *effective portion* or available amount of life, is much less than its actual duration. It takes some of its first years for the mind to expand itself, and the various powers to get ready for action. Infancy and childhood extend far into life and sometimes constitute the whole of it. And after this period, it requires nearly one half of a person’s time, each day, to refresh and repair the powers of body and soul for action during the other half. Sleep, that emblem and image of death, so like death, says one, that it ought not to be trusted without prayer, occupies about one-third of man’s earthly existence. Then, the mere mechanical operations of life, and those actions which are necessary to keep the vital machinery in repair, occupy other large portions of time: and sometimes, as in sickness, it lies idle, or works to no good purpose. When all the necessary deductions are made from the sum of human life, how little comparatively is left for the great moral purposes of our being! And then consider, how much of the remainder

is not devoted to these purposes! How much, that nature requires not for any of her uses, we waste, we squander! How prodigal of life we are! What spendthrifts of time! How poor, yea, how in debt we are, yet how lavish! With nothing beforehand of life, what free liverers we are! How many hours we spend, though we have not one to spare, in unsuitable amusements, in unrefreshing recreation, in idle fancies, in unprofitable speculation, in useless or injurious reading, in vain and perhaps uncharitable conversation, in impertinent, if not ungenerous interference in the concerns of others, in political discussions and strifes to no profit, and I know not in how many other ways! All time so employed is *lost*, and I wish that all was said when that is said. It is far worse than lost. How much of life is spent—how much of the life of every impenitent sinner has been spent, in doing what must be undone, in making work for repentance, in running in debt to God! Has not the whole of his life been so spent? This is truly the worst business in which one can be engaged. It makes the greatest waste of time. For every minute thus employed, two are consumed. One is spent in doing the thing, and another is necessary to undo it, and for one of them an uncertain future is drawn upon. Are any of you so employed?—employed in doing what you must undo—in habitual sinning—pursuing a course of life that will require to be wept over and repented of?—I beseech you, change your occupation this day. Let the time already spent in this injurious and infatuated manner, suffice you. Begin now to *do* the work of repentance. You have accumulated enough of it. You have sinned long enough. To-day, just at this point, stop and turn. Repent, and come to Christ, and commence a new life.

There is a word in our language, whose etymology is a reproach to our nature. It is *pastime*, i. e. an invention to get rid of time, because it hangs so heavily, or to speed its progress, because it moves so tardily. Oh, could you give a little of your superfluous time to certain inhabitants of eternity, what thanks would they not render you! What you waste and would wear away is what they want, and would at any price redeem, if it were redeemable. But its redemption is even more precious than that of the soul. It has ceased for ever. There is no salvation for lost time. Some speak of *killing time*, as if it were an exploit to boast of. And they have their various ways of doing this murder. And they consider and discuss, how soonest and most effectually they may dispatch it. They should take care that in making their passes at time they do not thrust through and kill the soul.

And now, if little is left us, how much less, it appears, we leave ourselves for the high and mighty purposes of our existence here ;

for repentance and reformation; for making progress in holiness, and in preparation for the coming judgment; for glorifying our God, for requiting our Savior, and doing good to men! How short this preface to eternity, and how we shorten it! What expedition the court of heaven makes in bringing on its trials, and how we, as if not satisfied, hasten them! How momentary is probation in comparison with retribution! A whole eternity is to be employed in reaping and consuming in pleasure or pain the growth of a few seeds hastily scattered here! But this brings us to another consideration—

3. The *relative proportion* of human life—its *ratio* to eternity. This is incalculable. It is not a drop to the aggregate drops of the waters, wide and deep, of ocean, with all its seas and rivers. It is less than that. It is not one grain of sand to the sum total of the dusty particles that make up this huge and solid earth. It is less. It is finite to infinite—a point that has but position, to a line that hath beginning, but no end, being produced eternally. How long, O, how long, is eternity! how long to suffer—to be in despair! Does not the aged person seem to himself to have lived a great while? or rather does he not seem to have lived a great while, to the youth who is looking forward? Yet the retrospect of the one and the prospect of the other extends scarcely beyond seventy years! How long it seems since our world began? Yet it is not 6000 years. Look forward 6000 years. How long it will be ere those years have completed their circuit! Pass from thousands to millions, and from millions on through all the terms of numeration. Yet those years are not eternity. They are no part of it. Oh, eternity! It has no end, for it has no progress. It is duration not in motion, but at rest. How long, even to enjoy; but to suffer with pain to protract it—pain that clogs the wheels of time, and makes hours seem days! What shall I say? There is an eternity of pain. My Bible tells me so, and tells me that we have all exposed ourselves to it; but Jesus died to save us from it. Hast thou fled to him for refuge from this great danger? If thou hast not, fly, quick and uncumbered as thought, to him, and be no longer exposed to an eternity of pain!

4. The *moral influence and bearing* of the present life, is the next topic. It is probationary, and the whole of probation. All that follows belongs to retribution. It is the *causal* period, and the only period of causation. Every thing beyond it is effect. It is the little pivot of existence, on which turns the immense and interminable whole. It is preparatory. Here we sow, and only here. Hereafter we reap, and we do nothing but reap. The foundation of judgment is laid altogether here. The present is the only part of duration that is to be

specifically accounted for. In the final day of decision, we are informed, we shall receive in retribution according to the deeds *done in the body*. Though we shall be accountable beings as long as we exist, yet it is this short prefatory portion of our accountable existence that is to determine the character of all the rest. The actions of this little limited life are empowered to decide for eternity. This is a consideration of unparalleled power and weight. Let it be contemplated and felt. *We are acting for eternity!* Ages of retribution answer to this hour of probation. How circumspectly, then, ought we to live! If such be the consequences of life, how frugal ought we to be of its moments! How much more necessary now, than ever they will be hereafter, are anxiety, watchfulness, industry, and self-denial! A little care and effort now, and all will be safe forever. A little providence and pains taking, and you will have made your fortune for immortality. Oh, will you not strive to enter in at the strait gate? Will you not labor now for the meat that endureth unto everlasting life? "and watch a moment to secure an everlasting rest?"

5. The *uncertainty* of human life is a part of the general subject; on which it is only necessary to say, that there is no revealed ground of confidence that any part of the future will become present to us, while we are in the body. Death often comes entirely unexpected, and is sometimes literally instantaneous. There are cases in which the victim of sudden death is in health even to his final moment. It is speaking within bounds to say, that "we know not what a *day* may bring forth." What is your life? It is even a vapor that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away.

6. The *dependency* of life is a topic that deserves attention. It is not independent—self-sustained. Proximately it is dependent on the union of body and soul. But on what does that union depend? Not on accident. That is a word which stands for no reality. Not on any independent and uncontrollable laws of nature. The laws of nature are the ordinances of Heaven, and do but perform the will of a Supreme Intelligence. Life is dependent on the determinations of an intelligent being. There is a Sovereign of life, and he is absolute. It is God, in whose hand our breath is. "Thou turnest man to destruction, and sayest, return ye children of men." The reasons of his determinations with respect to life are unsearchably hidden. His thoughts and ways in reference to this matter are not as ours, but high above them. What He does, we know not now. On what principles he protracts life in some cases, and cuts it short in others, we cannot say. Their wisdom transcends our comprehension. He decides with all eternity spread out before him. We see not half way to the grave.

It is no wonder we decide differently. He plucks life, full often in the bud. Yea, its tenderest shoots disappear before him. They seem to have withered; but we hope they are transplanted to a kinder soil—a more genial clime. In the death of infants, we seem to see Jesus reaching out his hands from heaven, and saying “Suffer the little children to come unto me”—or rather heaven itself, acting as a mighty magnet to bring those little unresisting spirits to the joy of their Lord. He cuts short the life of usefulness; he takes away the prop of the family; he prostrates pillars of the church; he removes ornaments of the state. What vacancies he creates, what bereavements he causes, what disappointments he occasions, what heart-bleedings and heart-breakings! How often he strikes just where we think he should not, and the universe affords no shield against the force of his blow. And yet, how strange, he often spares the wretch who bares his bosom to the stroke, and implores that he may die. He lets the life that had become a weight and a weariness run on; spins out old age, and protracts pain, decrepitude, poverty and misfortune beyond their wishes; while as often he disregards the most importunate petitions for life; and even his own children present their united prayers in the name of the great Advocate in vain!

7. The *inequality* of human life requires a word. In order that life may be uncertain, it is necessary that it should be of *unequal* length; and that it should be entirely uncertain, so as to *baffle all calculation* and defy conjecture, seems to be a first principle with God. Here is a reason for its inequality. But why this particular man should have so much more space allotted him for the pursuits and enjoyments of the world than that man,—above all, why the one should be allowed a period of probation so much more protracted than the other's,—why so much more time should be granted in the one case for hearing the gospel and deciding on the offer of salvation, is something we cannot explain—our knowledge extends only to the *fact*. But,

8. Life,—short, interrupted, uncertain, and unequal as it is,—is *long enough*. That life is long enough, which answers life's great end. Now this life does that, or if it do not, a longer life would not. If a man is determined to go on in sin, (and a man soon makes up his mind one way or the other,) life is long enough. The sooner it is over the better, if he has come to that determination. Why should he live only to treasure up wrath against the day of wrath? If on the other hand he inclines to stop sinning, life is long enough for repentance, and for making a successful application to the Savior. The penitent thief found the way to Jesus short, and the welcome ready

The gospel makes a simple and intelligible proposal to men, which it requires no long time to consider and decide upon. A longer life would only the more dispose men to procrastination, to which they are already but too much inclined. Mankind are better by reason of the shortness of the term they live, and probably more are saved than would be, if the average of life was longer. It was when men lived a thousand years, that "the earth was filled with violence," and became so corrupt that a deluge was necessary to cleanse it. Never was repentance so rare as in the world before the flood. Never were the righteous so small a minority. Never so few were saved from any generation. We ourselves are proofs that life is long enough. It has afforded us an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the gospel, the way to be saved, our duty. Now, if we have complied with the plain requisitions of the gospel, we have lived long enough. To die to-day would be gain to us. If any have not complied, will they say that it has been for want of time?—With every disposition to repent and believe the gospel, will they say that they have lacked the space and opportunity? Has it not rather been for the want of *heart* to repent, that they have not repented? But will the lapse of time supply that defect?

9. Finally, if life be such as it has been represented, especially in regard to its uncertainty, it follows clearly and conclusively, that *the most important business of life, if it can be ascertained, should be attended to first*. Our life is such a vanishing vapor, such a fleeting shadow, and we are so frail, that we are in danger of dying and leaving some things undone. Now all things are not of equal importance. We had better leave some things unaccomplished than others. What is that which we had better by all means not leave undone? Find out what it is, and *do that first*, whatever it be. Is it not reasonable that you should do so? If the more important thing be not repentance, the seeking of the influences of the Holy Spirit, the surrender of the heart to Christ, the making of the soul's peace with God on the terms of the gospel, then by all means do not begin with this work, but put it off until you have done that other thing, which is more important than repentance and reconciliation to God, and by and by repent and make your peace with Him. But if, in your search, you find nothing more important than repentance and the application of the heart to religion, nothing *so* important, nothing that dying you would more regret having left undone, nothing that you can leave undone with so much injury, then begin with this—repent *first*, mind religion *now*. Do you not see that you *ought*? and *will* you not? Come, resolve to-

day, to do *first* that which is most important. Begin with this resolution. *Dare* to make it. Then, having made it, lay your hand upon your heart, and lift up your eye to heaven, and tell me if the most important thing be not, that you come to God through Jesus Christ, and devote yourself entirely and forever to his service. And is not the interval, in point of importance, between this and every thing else immeasurable? What remains then but to act conformably to your own decision? May God, for Christ's sake, by his Holy Spirit, incline you so to decide and do.

Beloved youth, suffer the word of exhortation. It is morning with you, bright and cheerful morning—and may it be noon, clear and cloudless; and afternoon serene and unportending; and may your sun go down in glory; and the twilight of your evening melt into the twilight of the morning of an eternal day. I wish you this, but you know this wish may never be realized. The morning may be all the day for you. What then will you now do? Will you decide in favor of that which has been recommended? You are to stand, remember, before the judgment seat of him who said, "Seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Will you obey?

And you who are at the *noon* of life, the middle-aged, do you never wish, when wearied with the toils of business, and borne down by the weight of incumbent care, that you had attended to religion in the morning? Tell your children this. But as you did not attend to it then, will you now presume to put it off till evening? What infatuation! Because you have put it off so long, (already *too* long, as you confess,) will you put it off longer? Because you have done wrong once, will you do so again?—Ah, there may be no evening to your day; or if an evening, it may be gloomy and unpropitious. What if, at the *third* hour, when Christ said "Go ye into the vineyard," you went not, he comes out and calls also at the *sixth* hour? Will you now obey?

But there are those with whom it is already *afternoon*, evening, almost night. A word I have for you also. There is a little working time left—work then in haste—for the soul—for eternity! The evening is a part of the day, though it be the *last* part of it. And if you have stood idle all the day hitherto, O, be industrious for God and heaven now. You surely have no time to lose. For, behold the Judge standeth at the door. And

"This is the summons that he brings,
Awake—for on this transient hour,
Thy long eternity depends."