

Pictures of Life

By C. H. Spurgeon

“What is your life?” James 4:14

It well behoves me, now that another year of my existence has almost gone, standing on the threshold of a fresh era, to consider what I am, where I am going, what I am doing, whom I am serving, and what shall be my reward. I will not, however, do so publicly before you; I hope that I may be enabled to perform that duty in secret; but rather let me turn this occurrence to another account by speaking to you of the frailty of human life, the fleeting nature of time, how swiftly it passes away, how soon we all shall fade as a leaf, and how speedily the place which knows us now shall know us no more for ever.

The apostle James asks, “What is your life?” and, thanks to inspiration, we are at no great difficulty to give the reply; for Scripture being the best interpreter of Scripture, supplies us with many very excellent answers. I shall attempt to give you some of them.

I. First, we shall view life with regard to ITS SWIFTNESS.

It is a great fact that though life to the young man, when viewed in the prospect appears to be long, to the old man it is ever short, and to all men life is really but a brief period. Human life is not long. Compare it with the existence of some animals and trees, and how short is human life! Compare it with the ages of the universe, and it becomes a span; and especially measure it by eternity, and how little does life appear! It sinks like one small drop into the ocean, and becomes as insignificant as one tiny grain of sand upon the seashore.

Life is swift. If you would picture life, you must, turn to the Bible, and this evening we will walk through the Bible-gallery of old paintings. You will find its swiftness spoken of in the Book of Job, where we are furnished with three illustrations. In the ninth chapter and at the twenty-fifth verse, we read, “Now my days are *swifter than a post*.” We are most of us acquainted with the swiftness of post-conveyance. I have sometimes, on an emergency, taken posthorses where there has been no railway, and have been amazed and pleased with the rapidity of my journey. But since, in this ancient Book, there can be no allusion to modern posts, we must turn to the manners and customs of the East, and in so doing we find that the ancient monarchs astonished their subjects by the amazing rapidity with which they received intelligence. By well-ordered arrangements, swift horses, and constant relays, they were able to attain a speed which, although trifling in these days, was in those slower ages a marvel of marvels; so that, to an Eastern, one of the clearest ideas of swiftness was that of “a post.” Well doth Job say that our life is swifter than a post. We ride one year until it is worn out, but there comes another just as swift, and we are borne by it, and soon it is gone, and another year serves us for a steed, post-house after post-house we pass, as birthdays successively arrive, we loiter not, but vaulting at a leap from one year to another, still we hurry onward, onward, ever onward. My life is like a post: not like the slow wagon that drags along the road with tiresome wheels, but like a post, it attains the greatest speed.

Job further says, “My days are passed away *as the swift ships*.” He increases, you see, the intensity of the metaphor; for if, in the Eastern’s idea anything could exceed the swiftness of the post, it was the swift ship. Some translate this passage as “the ships of desire;” that is, the ships hurrying home, anxious for the haven, and therefore crowding, on all sail.

You may well conceive now swiftly the mariner flies from a threatening storm, or seeks the port where he will find his home. You have sometimes seen how the ship cuts through the billows, leaving a white furrow behind her, and causing the sea to boil around her. Such is life, says Job, “as the swift ships,” when the sails are filled by the wind, and the vessel dashes on, cleaving a passage through the crowding waves. Swift are the ships, but swifter far is life. The wind of time bears me along. I cannot stop its motion, I may direct it with the rudder of God’s Holy Spirit; I may, it is true, take in some small sails of sin, which might hurry my days on faster than otherwise they would go; but, nevertheless, like a swift ship, my life must speed on its way until it reaches its haven. Where is that haven to be? Shall it be found in the land of bitterness and barrenness, that dreary region of the lost? Or shall it be that sweet haven of eternal peace, where not a troubling wave can ruffle the quiescent glory of my spirit? Wherever the haven is to be, that, truth is the same, we are “as the swift ships.”

Job also says that life is “*as the eagle that hasteth to the prey*.” The eagle is a bird noted for its swiftness. I remember reading an account of an eagle attacking a fish-hawk, which had obtained some booty from the deep, and was bearing it aloft. The hawk dropped the fish, which fell towards the water; but before the fish had reached the ocean, the eagle had flown more swiftly than the fish could fall, and catching it in its beak it flew away with it. The swiftness of the eagle is almost incalculable; you see it, and it is gone; you see a dark speck in the sky yonder; it is an eagle soaring; let the fowler imagine that, by-and-by, he shall overtake it on some mountain’s craggy peak, it shall be gone long before he reaches it. Such is our life. It is like an eagle hastening to its prey; not merely an eagle flying in its ordinary course, but an eagle hastening to its prey. Life appears to be hastening to its end; death seeks the body as its prey;

life is ever fleeing from insatiate death; but death is too swift to be out run, and as an eagle overtakes his prey, so shall death.

If we require a further illustration of the swiftness of life, we must turn to two other passages in the Book of Job, upon which I shall not dwell. One, will be found in the seventh chapter, at the sixth verse, where Job says, "*My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle,*" which the weaver throws, so quickly that the eye can hardly discern it. But he gives us a yet more excellent metaphor in the seventh verse of the same chapter, where he says, "O remember that *my life is wind.*" Now this excels in velocity all the other figures we have examined. Who can out stride the winds? Proverbially, the winds are rapid; even in their gentlest motion they appear to be swift. But when they rush in the tornado, or when they dash madly on in the hurricane, when the tempest blows, and tears down everything, how swift then is the wind! Perhaps some of us may have a gentle gale of wind, and we may not seem to move so swiftly; but with others, who are only just born, and then snatched away to heaven, the swiftness may be compared to that of the hurricane, which soon snaps the ties of life, and leaves the infant dead. Surely our life is like the wind.

Oh, if you could but catch these idea, my friends! Though we may be sitting still in this chapel, yet you know that we are all really in motion. This world is turning round on its axis once in four-and-twenty hours, and besides that, it is moving round the sun in the 365 days of the year. So that we are all moving, we are all flitting along through space, and as we are traveling through space, so are we moving through time at an incalculable rate.

Oh, what an idea this is could we but grasp it! We are all being carried along as if by a giant angel, with broad outstretched wings, which he flaps to the blast, and flying before the lightning, makes us ride on the winds. The whole multitude of us are hurrying along, — whither, remains to be decided by the test of our faith and the grace of God; but certain it is that we are all traveling. Do not think that you are stable, fixed in one position; fancy not that you are standing still; you are not. Your pulses each moment beat the funeral marches to the tomb. You are chained to the chariot of rolling time; there is no bridling the steeds, or leaping from the chariot; you must be constantly in motion.

Thus then, have I spoken of the swiftness of life .

II. But, next, I must speak concerning THE UNCERTAINTY OF LIFE, of which we have abundant illustrations.

Let us refer to that part of Scripture from, which I have chosen my text, the Epistle of James, the fourth chapter, at the fourteenth verse: "For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." If I were to ask for a child's explanation of this, I know what he would say. He would say, "Yes, it is even a vapor, like a bubble that is blown upward." Children sometimes blow bubbles, and amuse themselves thereby. Life is even as that bubble. You see it rising into the air; the child delights in seeing it fly about, but it is all gone in one moment.

"It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." But if you ask the poet to explain this, he would tell you that, in the morning, sometimes at early dawn, the rivers send up a steamy offering to the sun. There is a vapor, a mist, an exhalation rising from the rivers and brooks, but in a very little while after the sun has risen all that mist has gone. Hence we read of "the morning cloud, and the early dew that passeth away." A more common observer, speaking of a vapor, would think of those thin clouds you sometimes see floating in the air, which are so light that they are soon carried away. Indeed, a poet uses them as the picture of feebleness, —

*"Their hosts are scatter'd, like thin clouds
Before a Biscay gale."*

The wind moves them, and they are gone. "What is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." So uncertain is life!

Again, if you read in the Book of Ecclesiastes, at the sixth chapter, and the twelfth verse, you will there find life compared to something else, even more fragile than a vapor. The wise man there says that it is even "*as a shadow.*" Now, what can there be less substantial than a shadow? What substance is there in a shadow? Who can lay hold of it? You may see a person's shadow as he passes you, but the moment the person passes away his shadow is gone. Yea, and who can grasp his life? Many men reckon upon a long existence, and think they are going to live here for ever; but who can calculate upon a shadow? Go, thou foolish man, who sayest to thy soul, "Thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease! eat, drink, and be merry;" go thou, and store thy room, with shadows; go thou, and pile up shadows and say, "These are mine, and they shall never depart." But thou sayest, "I cannot catch a shadow." No, and thou canst not reckon on a year, or even a moment, for it is as a shadow, that soon melteth away, and is gone.

King Hezekiah also furnishes us with a simile, where he says that *life is as a thread which is cut off.* You will find this in the prophecy of Isaiah, the thirty-eighth chapter, at the twelfth verse: "Mine age is departed, and is removed

from me as a shepherd's tent: I have cut off like a weaver my life." The weaver cuts off his thread very easily, and so is life soon ended.

I might continue my illustrations at pleasure concerning the uncertainty of life. We might find, perhaps, a score more figures in Scripture if we would search. Take, for instance, the grass, the flowers of the field, etc. But though life is swift, and though it is to pass away so speedily, we are still generally very anxious to know what it is to be, while we have it. For we say, if we are to lose it soon, still, while we live, let us live; and whilst we are to be here, be it ever so short a time, let us know what we are to expect in it.

III. And that leads us, in the third place, to look at LIFE IN ITS CHANGES.

If you want pictures of the changes of life, turn to this wonderful Book of poetry, the Sacred Scriptures, and there you will find metaphors piled on metaphors. And, first, you will find life compared to a *pilgrimage* by good old Jacob, in the forty-seventh chapter of Genesis, and the ninth verse. That hoary-headed patriarch, when he was asked by Pharaoh what was his age, replied, "The days of the years of *my pilgrimage* are an hundred and thirty years; few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not obtained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage." He calls life, a pilgrimage. A pilgrim sets out in the morning, and he has to journey many a day before he gets to the shrine which he, seeks. What varied scenes the traveler will behold on his way!

Sometimes he will be on the mountains, anon he will descend into the valleys, here he will be where the brooks shine like silver, where the birds warble, where the air is balmy, and the trees are green, and luscious fruits hang down to gratify his taste, anon he will find himself in the arid desert, where no life is found, and no sound is heard, except the screech of the wild eagle in the air, where he finds no rest for the sole of his foot, — the burning sky above him, and the hot sand beneath him, — no roof-tree, and no house to rest himself; at another time he finds himself in a sweet oasis, resting himself by the wells of water, and plucking fruit from palm-trees. At one time he walks between the rocks, in some narrow gorge, where all is darkness, at another time he ascends the hill Mizar; now he descends into the valley of Baca anon he climbs the hill of Bashan, and a high hill is the hill Bashan and yet again going into the mountains of leopards, he suffers trial and affliction.

Such is life, ever changing. Who can tell what may come next? Today it is fair, tomorrow there may be the blundering storm; today I may want for nothing, tomorrow I may be like Jacob, with nothing but a stone for my pillow, and the heavens for my curtains. But what a happy thought it is, though we know not how the road winds, we know where it ends. It is the straightest way to heaven to go round about. Israel's forty years wanderings were, after all, the nearest path to Canaan. We may have to go through trial and affliction; the pilgrimage may be a tiresome one, but it is safe; we cannot trace the river upon which we are sailing, but we know it ends in floods of bliss at last. We cannot track the roads, but we know that they all meet in the great metropolis of heaven, in the center of God's universe. God help us to pursue the true pilgrimage of a pious life!

We have another picture of life in its changes given to us in the ninetyeth Psalm, at the ninth verse: "We spend our years *as a tale that is told.*" Now David understood about tales that were told; I daresay he had been annoyed by them sometimes, and amused by them at other times. There are, in the past, professed story-tellers, who amused their hearers by inventing tales such as those in that foolish book the "Arabian Nights." When I was foolish enough to read that book, I remember sometimes you were with fairies, sometimes with genii, sometimes in palaces, anon you went, down into caverns. All sorts of singular things are conglomerated into what they call a tale.

Now, says David, "we spend our years as a tale that is told." You know there is nothing so wonderful as the history of the odds and ends of human life. Sometimes it is a merry rhyme, sometimes a prosy subject; sometimes you ascend to the sublime, soon you descend to the ridiculous. No man can write the whole of his own biography, I suppose, if the complete history of a man's thoughts and words could be written, the world itself would hardly contain the record, so wonderful is the tale that might be told. Our lives are all singular, and must to ourselves seem strange; of which much might be said. Our life is "as a tale that is told."

Another idea we get from the thirty-eighth chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah, at the twelfth verse: "I am removed *as a shepherd's tent.*" The shepherds in the East build temporary huts near the sheep, which are soon removed when the flock moves on; when the hot season comes on, they pitch their tents in the most favorable place they can find, and each season has its suitable position. My life is like a shepherd's tent. I have pitched my tent in a variety of places already; but where I shall pitch it by-and-by, I do not know, I cannot tell. Present probabilities seem to say that —

*"Here I shall make my settled rest,
And neither go nor come:
No more a stranger or a guest,
But like a child at home."*

But I cannot tell, and you cannot divine. I know that my tent cannot be removed till God says, "Go forward;" and it cannot stand firm unless he makes it so.

*"All my ways shall ever be
Order'd by his wise decree."*

You have been opening a new shop lately, and you are thinking of settling down in trade, and managing a thriving concern; now paint not the future too brightly, do not be too sure as to what is in store for you. Another has for a long time been engaged in an old establishment; your father always carried on trade there, and you have no thought of moving; but here you have no abiding city; your life is like a shepherd's tent; you may be here, there, and almost everywhere before you die. It was once said by Solan, "No man ought to be called a happy man till he dies," because he does not know what his life is to be; but Christians may always call themselves happy men here, because, wherever their tent is carried, they cannot pitch it where the cloud does not move, and where they are not surrounded by a circle of fire. God will be a wall of fire round about them, and their glory in the midst. They cannot dwell where God is not the bulwark of their salvation.

If any of you who are God's people are going to change your condition, are going to move out of one situation into another, to take a new business, or remove to another county, you need not fear, God was with you in the last place, and he will be with you in this. He hath said, "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God." That is an oft-told story of Caesar in a storm. The sailors were all afraid; but he exclaimed, "Fear not! thou carriest Caesar and all his fortunes." So is it with the poor Christian. There is a storm coming on, but fear not, thou art carrying Jesus, and thou must sink or swim with him. Well may any true believer say, "Lord, if thou art with me, it matters not where my tent is. All must be well, though my life is removed like a shepherd's tent."

Again, our life is compared in the Psalms to *a dream*. Now, if a tale is singular, surely a dream, is still more so. If a tale is changing and shifting, what is a dream? As for dreams, those flutterings of the benighted fancy, those revelries of the imagination, who can tell what they consist of? We dream of everything in the world, and a few things more! If we were asked to tell our dreams, it would be impossible for us to do so. You dream that you are at a feast; and lo! the viands change into Pegasus, and you are riding through the air; or, again, suddenly transformed into a morsel for a monster's meal. Such is life. The changes occur as suddenly as they happen in a dream. Men have been rich one day, and they have been beggars the next. We have witnessed the exile of monarchs, and the flight of a potentate; or, in, another direction, we have seen a man, neither reputable in company nor honorable in station, at a single stride exalted to a throne; and you, who would have shunned him in the streets before, were foolish enough to throng your thoroughfares to stare at him. Ah! such is life. Leaves of the Sibyl were not more easily moved by the winds, nor are dreams more variable. "Boast not thyself of to-morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth." How foolish are those men who wish to pry into the future! The telescope is ready, and they are going to look through it, but they are so anxious to see, that they breathe on the glass with their hot breath, and they dim it, so that they can discern nothing but clouds and darkness. Oh, ye who are always conjuring up black fiends from the deep unknown, and foolishly vexing your minds with fancies, turn your fancies out of doors, and begin to rest on never-failing promises! Promises are better than forebodings. "Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed."

Thus I have spoken of the changes of this mortal life.

IV. And now, to close, let me ask, WHAT IS TO BE THE END OF THIS LIFE?

We read in the second Book of Samuel, chapter 14, and verse 14, "We must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again." Man is like a great icicle, which the sun of time is continually thawing, and which is soon to be as water spilt upon the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. Who can recall the departed spirit, or inflate the lungs with a new breath of life? Who can put vitality into the heart, and restore the soul from Hades? None. It cannot be gathered up again; the place that once knew it shall know it no more for ever.

But here a sweet thought charms us. This water cannot be lost, but it shall descend into the soil to filter through, the Rock of ages, at last to spring up a pure fountain in heaven, cleansed, purified, and made clear as crystal.

How terrible if, on the other hand, it should percolate through the black earth of sin, and hang in horrid drops in the dark caverns of destruction! Such is life! Then, make the best use of it, my friends, because it is fleeting. Look for another life, because this life is not a very desirable one, it is so changeable. Trust your life in God's hand, because you cannot control its movements, rest in his arms, and rely on his might; for he is able to do for you exceeding abundantly above all that you ask or think; and unto his name be glory for ever and ever! Amen.