

# What Is Your Life?

by J. Vernon McGee

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*The Bible teaches that human life is characterized by uncertainty and brevity, but we can find hope in Jesus Christ.*

**Duration:** 44:45

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:1, Job 9:2, John 1:29, Acts 16:30, Hebrews 2:3, James 4:14

**Topics:** "Eternal Life", "Spiritual Priorities"

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## Description

In this sermon titled 'What Is Your Life?' Dr. McGee explores the brevity and uncertainty of human life. He emphasizes that life is a place of decision and preparation for eternity. Using the example of a rich man in a parable, Dr. McGee warns against the dangers of placing too much importance on worldly success and neglecting spiritual matters. He encourages listeners to acknowledge their dependence on God and to live in accordance with His will.

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## Transcript

Over the last several weeks, we've been airing a series of sermons from the book of James. Dr. J. Vernon McGee calls it GU, God's University. Today's sermon is another in his series, James Prepares Us in the College of Life.

The subject to be studied today is life. No, this is not a class in biology or psychology or physiology or even sociology. All those courses talk about life, but they're just dealing with the superficial aspects of life.

Our modern universities seldom have any answers to the real questions of life. Psychology can't really solve the problems of life. Biology, physiology, and the health sciences aren't able to solve man's problem of the brevity of life.

Secular courses in religion and ethics don't solve the mystery of life. And sociology doesn't give us answers to the inadequacy of life. But the Bible talks about the problems of life, and the psalmist said that our life is like grass.

As the flower of field, it perishes. But God's Word also has answers too. It tells us about the source of life, the meaning of our present life, and the glorious future of life for the believer.

We'll hear about those today in Dr. McGee's message from James 4, verse 14, which he called What Is Your Life? Dr. McGee first gave this sermon while pastor of the Church of the Open Door in downtown Los

Angeles, where he served for 21 years. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, may your word refresh the hearts and lives of all who hear it.

May your spirit open the eyes of your children, that they may know you more. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen. We're turning tonight to the fourth chapter of the epistle to James, and begin our reading at the 13th verse.

I want tonight to use another translation than our authorized version. We're using tonight the Amplified New Testament. I believe that it brings out a very special meaning here in this particular section, and you watch your Bible as we read.

Come now you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a city and spend a year there and carry on our business and make money. Yet you do not know the least thing about what may happen tomorrow. What is the nature of your life? You are really but a wisp of vapor, a puff of smoke, a mist, that is visible for a little while and then disappears into thin air.

You ought instead to say, if the Lord is willing, we shall live and we shall do this or that thing. But as it is, you boast falsely in your presumption and your self-conceit. All such boasting is wrong.

So any person who knows what is right to do but does not do it, to him it is sin. I want to invite your attention this evening especially to this 14th verse of the 4th chapter of James, and it reads, yet you do not know the least thing about what may happen tomorrow. What is the nature of your life? You are really but a wisp of vapor, a puff of smoke, a mist, that is visible for a little while and then disappears into thin air.

Our subject this evening is, what is your life? The Bible contains the answers to all the big questions of this life. It asks some of the most puzzling and pertinent questions also, and it raises some of the most important and informative problems, and it also gives to us some of the naughtiest questions and problems that you possibly can imagine. But the Bible asks these questions in order to answer them, and you will find that this is but one of the questions that we have tonight.

If you go back to the very beginning, before man got out of the Garden of Eden, God was asking him a question, and God came down and said to man, Where art thou, Adam? And when God asked that question, my friend, the very question is the answer to those who say today that religion is man's quest for God. The Bible presents no such pursuit as that. The Word of God does not say that man is searching after God, rather it presents man running away from God, and it's God after man.

And here at the very beginning we find God asking the question, Adam, where art thou? And man didn't get very far out of the Garden of Eden until he asked a very impertinent and a very supercilious question as far as he was concerned when Cain asked the question, Am I my brother's keeper? May I say that that's still a good question in this day in which we live. And then when God's people broke the first commandment, the first commandment that God gave, in fact the first two commandments, had to do with making an image or having any other gods before them. And finally when God's people went into idolatry, he asked them the question, to whom then will you liken me? They were not able to make an idol that looked like God.

And then you will find that when Abraham went yonder to the top of Mount Moriah with his son Isaac, Isaac asked him a question, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And that question was asked in order that God could answer it, and it took God a long time to answer that question. Nineteen hundred

years went by, and one day John the Baptist pointed the finger and said, behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. When you come to the book of Job, which may be the oldest book in the Bible for that matter, you find many thought-provoking questions, and questions that are still as good in the twentieth century as they were at the very beginning of man's history.

One of the questions that you find in the book of Job is, how can a man be just with God? Is it possible for any man to do anything that will make him right with God? And of course the answer is, man cannot make himself right with God, only God can make a man right with himself. And then God asked this question, a question that should be on the front page of every geology book, where was thou when I laid the foundation of the earth? That's a good question, and no one can answer that question. And then here is a question that is a very pressing one for multitudes of people today, if a man dies, shall he live again? It's a good question.

It's a question that multitudes today are seeking the answer to. And the Bible, my friend, has the answer in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and our hope in him. Then when you move on to the book of Proverbs, you find a good question there, who can say I've made my heart clean, I'm pure from my sin? No man can say that unless he's come to Jesus Christ and had his sins washed away and forgiven by coming to the Lamb of God who does take away the sin of the world.

And the Old Testament closes with a good question, will a man rob God? And the answer is a bold affirmative because man had been robbing God of the glory and the honor and the worship that belongs to him from the very beginning of time. And then the New Testament opens with a question, and that question comes from wise men who come out of the mysterious east, and they say, where is he that is born King of the Jews? They were looking for him. Then my beloved, a lawyer came to this one one day and said to our Lord, who is my neighbor? It's a good question.

A judge, a Roman pilot who had brought before him a prisoner one day asked the question, what is truth? And the one who is the way, the truth, and the life stood right before him. And then we find that as you move through that the most brilliant Pharisee of them all was ignorant of the greatest thing that any man can be ignorant of, and that is he asked the question, who art thou, Lord? He did not know the Lord Jesus Christ. And a man can be educated, my beloved, and if he knows not this wonderful Savior, may I say to you, he is ignorant indeed.

And then as you go through, you will find our Lord raising many questions. He asked his disciples, whom do men say that I the Son of Man am? That's still the question, my beloved, that he's asking men today in Los Angeles. Who is Jesus Christ? What do you think of him tonight? Then one night at midnight a Philippian jailer came breaking into a jail where all the doors were open, and he said, what must I do to be saved? And he received God's answer, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.

And then there is a question that the Bible asks that even God cannot answer it. And that question is this, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? And my friend, tonight you and I do not have the answer to that question. Even God can't answer that question tonight, because if we neglect so great a salvation, we cannot escape.

And then here is the question that James asks, what is your life? And the answer is here. As the answer to all these questions are found somewhere in the Word of God. No exception except the one that we gave tonight.

And as Mr. Steadman showed us this summer, that you will find in the Bible an answer to all of the questions right close by. It may be an inch this way, or an inch this way, or it may be an inch straight down, or an inch straight up, but you will find it somewhere, if you please, in the Word of God. And so the question that James asks is a question that can be answered.

What is your life? Now James is not raising a biological question. He's not, my beloved, trying to say that he wants to find out about the origin of life. God asked that question and answered it at the very beginning when he said that God created man in his own image.

And actually that has not been improved on from that day to this. Biology and science are no nearer the answer today than they were hundreds of years ago. They have no answer to the origin of life.

Darwinian evolution is becoming passé. Amoeba to man, of course, has not gone out. It's become a very refined sort of a statement today, but it has been refuted and not all scientists are in agreement.

They are not as sure of the elements of water as they are of some other things, but they are pretty sure that there's two atoms of hydrogen goes with one atom of oxygen and it makes water. Of course, there are other things in Los Angeles water, but scientists say that's what is the answer there. But they are not in any agreement about the origin of man and the assured findings of science are not so assured, rather hazy today.

Oh, they have pictures. I was looking not long ago at a chart and it showed how it began at the beginning and I noticed a great big frog in the list in our family tree and I never see that, but what I think of the little dog girl that goes along, I think with that, what a wonderful bird the frog are. When he stands, he sits almost.

When he sits, he stands almost. When he hops, he flies almost. What a wonderful bird the frog are.

May I say to you that's rather hazy, is it not? And may I say to you the origin of man is rather hazy, unless you accept God's statement that God created man in his own image. But that's not the question that is raised here by James when he says, what is your life? He's not discussing what we are physically. We are told today that we have 16 chemical elements that go into our makeup.

They tell us, for instance, that there is enough lime in each one of us to make whitewash that would whitewash a small chicken coop. There's enough iron in each one of us that would make about two shingle nails. There is enough phosphorous in each one of us that would make about a dozen matches.

And you wonder why some people are so touchy, but nevertheless, that's all the phosphorous that there is in them. And they say if you bring all of these elements together that you could sell them before the war for 98 cents. And there's good news for us tonight.

Due to inflation, man now is worth \$1.17 physically on the market today. That's what man is physically. But that's not the question that James is asking in order to answer.

He's not talking about the origin of life, but the question is, what is the nature of your life? And he's not, therefore, talking either about some philosophical or psychological question. He's not raising now the question that man philosophically is a body and he's a soul and he is a mind. He's not talking now psychologically about man, that he has emotions and imaginations, feelings and senses.

Our philosophy has no final word and no solution. Man tonight just hasn't come up with the answer philosophically to the origin of man. I heard the story about a couple.

They were moving along in life and neither one of them had gotten married. And they started going with each other, Rappaport and Sophronia was their names. And they had moved along pretty far.

The courtship was brief because they were moving along in life. And finally they got married. And Rappaport, as every good husband does, he each night would wash the dishes after the dinner and then he would go into the living room and he would get down one of these instruments that you play.

What do you call those instruments that you play like that? A cello. That's what Mr. Hewlin says that it is. Well, Rappaport played the cello.

And every night he went through this. After he washed the dishes, he'd get the cello and he would play back and forth. Back and forth.

And finally one night, Sophronia said to him, she said, Rappaport, why is it that Cassell and all these other great cellists, why is it they play on all the strings and you only play on one of them? And he said, well, they are looking for the right tune and I've found it. May I say to you tonight, my beloved, philosophy cannot say I have found it. They have not found it and they are still playing on one string, if you please.

They have no answer to it at all. Now James is practical. He wrote the proverb of the New Testament.

Actually this is a simple question. What is the nature of your life? And the answer, I think, is very obvious here. He's speaking of two factors which enter into our lives, which characterize our lives.

The first one that enters into our lives we find expressed here in this verse, verse 14. Yet you do not know the least thing about what may happen tomorrow. He says you do not know the least thing about what may happen tomorrow.

And what is your life? Well, my beloved, our lives are filled with uncertainty. That's the thing that characterizes our lives, uncertainty. There are multitudes of people tonight that are walking around uncertain about the future, uncertain about themselves, no assurance at all.

The thing that characterized their lives is uncertainty. And that's the thing that James says will characterize our lives, uncertainty. May I, do you want another poem that reveals just that very thing? Because there are many that have been given to us today.

Gillette Burgess gave us this little bit of doggerel that expresses this very thought. He says, I wish that my room had a flower. I don't care so much for a doer, but this walking around without touching the ground is getting to be quite a bore.

My beloved, may I say to you tonight, that little bit of doggerel expresses the lives of a great many people tonight. They're not touching the ground. They're not on a foundation.

Everything is uncertain as far as they are concerned. The writer to the Proverbs confirms this. In Proverbs 27, 1, he says, boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day will bring forth.

And that's the thing that has characterized human life down here, and it actually characterizes your life and my life. It's uncertainty. We do not know what a day will bring forth.

They were, our Lord said, in Noah's day. They were eating and drinking and giving in marriage, and there was nothing wrong with that, but they did not know until the flood came and took them away what was in the future. They did not believe Noah, and everything for them was uncertain.

They had no foundation to rest on. They had no hope when the judgment came. Goliath, the giant, it got pretty monotonous for him every morning.

He went out and walked up and down the lines of Israel, and he said that if you're not a bunch of cowards, send me out a man to fight me. It got to be a very monotonous sort of an experience for him. And one day he went out and he said to them as he left, boys, I'll be back in a few moments.

And he went out and boasted again of his prowess and his ability, and that's the day he did not come back, because a little shepherd boy buried a rock between his eyes. That little shepherd boy was David. We know not what a day will bring forward.

Ahab was going to battle and Micaiah came in and gave a prophecy against him. And he said as he left, take that man and lock him up, and when I return from the battle tomorrow, I'll take care of him. And Micaiah gave him one parting word.

He said, you won't be coming back tomorrow. We do not know what a day will come, will bring forth, and that very day Ahab went down in death in his own chariot. And then my beloved Rabshakeh, the great captain of the hosts of Assyria, stood before Jerusalem and he said, yonder to Hezekiah and Isaiah on the wall, I'm leaving now, boys, but I'll be back in a few days.

My masters called me the king of Assyria because the Egyptians are coming against us. I'll be back. You can count on that.

I'll be back. He never came back, for the angel of the Lord went through the hosts of the Assyrians. We know not what a day will bring forth.

Belshazzar made a banquet, and even the handwriting on the wall didn't mean anything to him. He said to Daniel, he said, fine, we appreciate you reading this. I'm going to make you the third ruler of the kingdom, and tomorrow we'll give you all the honors.

Daniel says, keep all your honors to yourself, because tomorrow you won't be around to give anything. And that night we are told that Darius the Median came in and Belshazzar was slain that night. We know not what a day will bring forth.

And the writer to the Proverbs says, boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day will bring forth. It was William Henley who wrote *Invictus*, which to me is blasphemous, because it presumes to put man in the place of God, as if man was sure of himself. Well, and he says this in this poem, out of the night that covers me, black as a pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul.

In the foul clutch of circumstance, I have not winced nor cried aloud. Under the bludgeoning of chance, my head is bloody but unbowed. Beyond this place of wrath and tears looms but the horror of the shade, and yet the menace of the years finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishment the scroll. I'm the master of my fate, I'm the captain of my soul. Those are brave words, but they're blasphemous.

No man is the master of his fate, no man is the captain of his soul. And it was Dorothea Day who answered him in her little poem, My Captain. Listen to her, out of the light that dazzles me, bright as the sun from pole to pole, I thank the God I know to be for Christ, the conqueror of my soul.

Since his the sway of circumstance, I would not wince nor cry aloud under that rule which men call chance. My head with joy is umbly bowed. Beyond this place of sin and tears, that life with him and his the aid, that spite the menace of the years, keeps and shall keep me unafraid.

I have no fear though straight the gate. He cleared from punishment the scroll, Christ is the master of my fate, Christ is the captain of my soul. Oh, tonight life is uncertain, my friend.

No man can boast himself of tomorrow, for he knows not what a day will bring forth. Then there is something else that characterizes life that is mentioned here, and that is brevity. Do you notice how this lovely translation gives it to us? He says, what is your life, and then he answers it.

It's a wisp of vapor, it's a puff of smoke, it's a mist, that's all. I know there's somebody here tonight or listening in that is saying, well, I've been warned before. I've heard evangelists talk about how uncertain life is, and they said that I might go out and not have another day to accept Christ.

And look, here I am tonight, and I've come to this hour, luck's on my side. I pick a four-leaf clover, I carry a rabbit's foot, it's a left-hand rabbit's foot, caught by a red-headed man in a cemetery on the dark of the moon. And I've got luck on my side.

Don't talk to me about this thing. May I say that I have news for you that may be true, and you may go to a ripe old age. But even if you go to a ripe old age, your life is nothing in the world but a mist on a mountainside, that's all.

That's how fragile it is. That's how tenuous it is, just a mist on a mountainside, just a wisp of vapor. I always enjoy looking yonder at these high Sierras, and then I love to look out my backyard to these Sierra Madras.

I love to watch the mountains, and many times you'll see in the morning mist settling on the sides, and then you look up in an hour and you wonder where it's gone. That's our life. Oh, the brevity of human life.

The psalmist says in Psalm 90, 10, the days of our years are threescore years and ten, and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow, for it's soon cut off, and we fly away. Our lives are just a bit of ledger domain. Now you see it, now you don't.

I think tonight that when I came to the Church of the Open Door eleven years ago, may I say to you that that great company of people that sat down front here, they're not here tonight. They've all passed out of this world into the presence of the King. Their life, like your life and my life, is like the mist on a mountainside, and anywhere you look today, that will be brought to your attention.

You want to look at the mountains or out yonder into the heavens? The psalmist says, when I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained, what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the Son of Man that thou visitest him? What's man when you look out at the

heavens? Those heavens that we believe now are almost eternal. Those heavens that we know have been there billions of years. What is man when you look at the heavens? When you look about you, my beloved, at the tracks of the dinosaurs that walked here, they're gone now, but we are told that each one of them lived a thousand years.

The redwoods, when you stand in their presence, they tell you they've been here a long time, and they tell us how short-lived we are. Names that we love to hear, Holmes says, have been carved for many a year on the tomb. Why? Because man is like the mist in the morning, that the oncoming sun drives away.

Our life is so brief, our life is that brief, that uncertain. I remember a very fine young couple in Nashville, Tennessee. He was a son of one of the executives of the large insurance company there, and he had met a lovely girl and was engaged to her.

They began to build their home and fill it with antiques. They traveled everywhere. They spent a young fortune in getting antiques for this lovely colonial home that they built.

They built it out in Belle Meade, one of the loveliest homes there. Then the day came and they were married. They'd made every preparation.

It was a lovely wedding, and they went on their honeymoon. They were turning a curve in North Carolina, up in the great Smoky Mountains, and a car ran them off. Both of them were killed.

The father of the boy went to the home, locked it up and left it, and for two years that lovely home stood there. I've driven by it many times and I've stopped. I've looked at that home and said, they made all the plans in the world for down here.

They thought somehow or another everything was sure and certain down here, but life is uncertain, life is brief, and they never even occupied that home. Oh, my friend and I, these factors remind us that this life that we're living down here is a place of decision. All that this life is, it's a launching pad for eternity, and we ought to spend as much time in preparation for the launching as these eight young men, that one of them will be flung out into space before too long, all of them being prepared.

My friend, tonight may I say to you that you are on a launching pad. It's marked uncertainty, it's marked brevity, and one of these days you'll be flung out into eternity. May I say to you this evening that this life is the place for decision.

This life is the place that you and I make our preparation for eternity. The Lord Jesus told about a man, a rich man, a man that was a keen businessman and a success down here. But here's what he said about him, he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully.

And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do? Because I have no room where to bestow my fruits. And he said, This will I do. I'll pull down my barns and build greater, and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods, and I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years.

Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee. Then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided? Now our Lord didn't say that that man was a fool because he built bigger barns.

And he didn't say that that man was a fool because he was a success in business. But he did say that man was a fool for putting all of his eggs in one basket. And that was down here in this world.

He said that man was a fool for making preparation for this life in view of the fact that life was brief and life was uncertain. And because of that, he made no preparation for eternity. May I say to you tonight that the brevity of life and the uncertainty of life is speaking loudly to you and me and saying to us tonight, get ready for eternity.

You're on a launching pad. One of these days you'll be pushed out. And now God is saying to you and to me, behold now is the accepted time.

Behold now is the day of salvation. Again he says today if you will hear his voice, harden not your heart. May I say to you that down here in this world of uncertainty and brevity, you can have an assurance.

You can have a hope. You can have a certainty. And there's only one thing you can be sure of, and that's to be sure of your salvation.

That's the only thing in the world. Someone said that the only thing that's sure is death and taxes. But tonight, friends, there's something else that's sure, and that's your salvation.

You can be sure of that. Paul could say this, in the world of uncertainty, in a world of brevity, he could say, I know whom I have believed, and I'm persuaded that he's able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day. The Lord Jesus Christ said concerning his sheep, I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish.

And tonight he offers eternal life. That's the only kind of life God's offering is eternal life. That's the only thing that's sure tonight is the eternal life that's offered in Jesus Christ.

He says that he that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. And these things, he says, I have written unto you, that ye might know that ye have eternal life. God says, come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord.

Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Come now, now. Life's uncertain, life's brief, you're on the launching pad.

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wood.

Up yonder in Death Valley, that is a place in which you stand and you can see Mount Whitney, and you can see Badwater, the lowest and the highest place in the United States from one place. And my friend, God has put you and me in the place tonight where we can choose heaven or we can choose hell. You're on the launching pad.

He says, come now, let us reason together, saith the Lord. I'm wondering if you were here this evening, you have never come to that place of decision for Jesus Christ. God has brought you to it again.

You may have been there before, but God's brought you there again tonight. And he's given you the opportunity tonight to make a decision. I've got too much respect for your intelligence to say that you won't have another opportunity.

You may, but I can also say you may not. I do say that there will come a time when it will be the last opportunity. God gives you a chance, and he's reminding you because of the brevity and because of the uncertainty of life.

Come now, right now, let us reason together, saith the Lord. Though your sins be as scarred, they shall be white as snow. Do you have a need today? Christ has all the answers to your needs.

As Dr. McGee has said, he has answers to the problems of life, the questions of life, the brevity of life, the mystery of life, and the inadequacy of life. We know that the Holy Spirit is speaking to some of you, inviting you to accept Christ as your Savior. To help you better understand God's plan of salvation for your life, we'd like to send you our Salvation Packet.

To receive yours, call us at 1-800-65-BIBLE anytime and leave a voicemail message with your name, address, and the call letters of this station. Today's sermon was titled, What is Your Life? It's available in four different formats. You can get a copy on a single cassette or as part of a 12-sermon tape album called James Prepares Us in the College of Life.

The sermon also comes in a written format as a single booklet by the same title or as a chapter in Dr. McGee's hardback book, Living by Faith. For ordering information on all these products, you may contact one of our service operators at 1-800-652-4253 Monday through Thursday from 6am to 4pm Pacific Time. As you know, Through the Bible is a worldwide ministry reaching into over 100 languages and dialects.

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