

Human Life a Dream

by John Wesley

Human life is like a dream, and we must consider the condition of our lives before we wake up into real eternity.

Scripture: Psalm 73:20, Matthew 6:19-21, Luke 12:20, Romans 8:24-25, 2 Corinthians 4:18, Colossians 3:2, Hebrews 9:27, James 4:14, 1 Peter 1:24-25, 1 John 5:12

Topics: "Eternity", "The Nature of Life"

Description

John Wesley reflects on the transient nature of human life, comparing it to a dream that vanishes upon awakening. He emphasizes the folly of the wicked who live as if their earthly existence is eternal, forgetting their mortality and the reality of eternity. Wesley urges listeners to recognize the fleeting nature of life and to prepare for the inevitable awakening into eternity, where the true essence of existence is revealed. He highlights the importance of faith in Christ as the connection between the temporal and the eternal, encouraging believers to live with a constant awareness of their spiritual state. Ultimately, Wesley calls for a life rooted in the love of God, which transcends the shadows of this world.

Transcript

"Even like as a dream when one awaketh; so shalt thou make their image to vanish out of the city." Ps. 73:20.

1. Anyone that considers the foregoing verses will easily observe that the Psalmist is speaking directly of the wicked, that prosper in their wickedness. It is very common for these utterly to forget that they are creatures of a day; to live as if they were never to die; as if their present state was to endure for ever; or, at least as if they were indisputably sure that they "had much goods laid up for many years:" So that they might safely say, "Soul, take thine ease; eat, drink, and be merry." But how miserable a mistake is this! How often does God say to such a one, "Thou fool! this night shall thy soul be required of thee!" Well then may it be said of them, "O, how suddenly do they consume!" -- perish, and come to a fearful end. Yea, "even like as a dream when one awaketh; so shalt thou make their image to vanish out of the city."

2. But I would at present carry this thought farther; I would consider it in a general sense, and show how near a resemblance there is between human life and a dream. An ancient poet carries the comparison farther still, when he styles life, "the dream of a shadow." And so does Cowley, when he cries out,

O life, thou nothing's younger brother!

So like, that we mistake the one for the' other!

But, setting these and all other flights of poetry aside, I would seriously inquire, wherein this resemblance lies; wherein the analogy between the one and the other does properly consist.

3. In order to this, I would inquire, First, What is a dream? You will say, "Who does not know this?" Might you not rather say, Who does know? Is there anything more mysterious in nature? Who is there that has not experienced it, that has not dreamed a thousand times? Yet he is no more able to explain the nature of it, than he is to grasp the skies. Who can give any clear, satisfactory account of the parent of dreams, sleep? It is true, many physicians have attempted this, but they have attempted it in vain. They have talked learnedly about it, but have left the matter at last just as dark as it was before. They tell us some of its properties and effects; but none can tell what is the essence of it.

4. However, we know the origin of dreams, and that with some degree of certainty. There can be no doubt but some of them arise from the present constitution of the body; while others of them are probably occasioned by the passions of the mind. Again: We are clearly informed in Scripture, that some are caused by the operation of good angels; as others, undoubtedly, are owing to the power and malice of evil angels (if we may dare to suppose that there are any such now; or, at least, that they have anything to do in the world). From the same divine treasury of knowledge we learn that, on some extraordinary occasions, the great Father of spirits has manifested himself to human spirits, "in dreams and visions of the night." But which of all these arise from natural, which from supernatural, influence, we are many times not able to determine.

5. And how can we certainly distinguish between our dreams and our waking thoughts? What criterion is there by which we may surely know whether we are awake or asleep? It is true, as soon as we awake out of sleep, we know we have been in a dream, and are now awake. But how shall we know that a dream is such while we continue therein? What is a dream? To give a gross and superficial, not a philosophical, account of it: It is a series of persons and things presented to our mind in sleep, which have no being but in our own imagination. A dream, therefore, is a kind of digression from our real life. It seems to be a sort of echo of what was said or done a little when we were awake. Or, may we say, a dream is a fragment of life, broken off at both ends; not connected either with the part that goes before, or with that which follows after? And is there any better way of distinguishing our dreams from our waking thoughts, than by this very circumstance? It is a kind of parenthesis, inserted in life, as that is in a discourse, which goes on equally well either with it or without it. By this then we may infallibly know a dream, -- by its being broken off at both ends; by its having no proper connection with the real things which either precede or follow it.

6. It is not needful to prove that there is a near resemblance between these transient dreams, and the dream of life. It may be of more use to illustrate this important truth; to place it in as striking a light as possible. Let us then seriously consider, in a few obvious particulars, the case of one that is just awaking out of life, and opening his eyes in eternity.

7. Let us then propose the case. Let us suppose we had now before us one that was just passed into the world of spirits. Might not you address such a new-born soul in some such manner as this? You have been an inhabitant of earth forty, perhaps fifty or sixty, years. But now God has altered his voice: "Awake, thou that sleepest!" You awake; you arise; you have no more to do with these poor transient shadows. Arise, and shake thyself from the dust! See, all is real here! all is permanent; all eternal! far more stable than the foundations of the earth; yea, than the pillars of that lower heaven. Now that your eyes are open,

see how inexpressibly different are all the things that are now round about you! What a difference do you perceive in yourself! Where is your body, -- your house of clay? Where are your limbs, your hands, your feet, your head? There they lie, cold, insensible!

No anger, hereafter, or shame,

Shall redden the innocent clay;

Extinct is the animal flame,

And passion is vanish'd away.

What a change is in the immortal spirit! You see everything around you; but how? Not with eyes of flesh and blood! You hear; but not by a stream of undulating air, striking on an extended membrane. You feel; but in how wonderful a manner! You have no nerves to convey the ethereal fire to the common sensory; rather, are you not now all eye, all ear, all feeling, all perception? How different, now you are thoroughly awake, are all the objects round about you! Where are the houses, and gardens, and fields, and cities, which you lately saw? Where are the rivers, and seas, and everlasting hills? Was it then only in a dream that our poet discovered,

Earth hath this variety from heaven

Of pleasure situate in hill and dale?

Nay, I doubt all these vanished away like smoke, the moment you awoke out of the body.

8. How strange must not only the manner of existence appear, and the place wherein you are (if it may be called place; though who can define or describe the place of spirits?) but the inhabitants of that unknown region! whether they are of the number of those unhappy spirits that "kept not their first estate," or of those holy ones that still "minister to the heirs of salvation." How strange are the employments of those spirits with which you are now surrounded! How bitter are they to the taste of those that are still dreaming upon earth! "I have no relish," said one of these, (a much-applauded wit, who has lately left the body,) "for sitting upon a cloud all day long, and singing praise to God." We may easily believe him; and there is no danger of his being put to that trouble. Nevertheless, this is no trouble to them who cease not day and night, but continually sing, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth!"

9. Suppose this to be the case with any of you that are now present before God. It may be so to-morrow; perhaps to-night; perhaps this night your "soul may be required of you;" the dream of life may end, and you may wake into broad eternity! See, there lies the poor inanimate carcase, shortly to be sown in corruption and dishonour. But where is the immortal, incorruptible spirit? There it stands, naked before the eyes of God! Meantime, what is become of all the affairs which you have been eagerly engaged in under the sun? What profit have you reaped of all your labour and care? Does your money follow you? No; you have left it behind you; -- the same thing to you as if it had vanished into air! Does your gay or rich apparel follow you? Your body is clothed with dust and rottenness. Your soul, indeed is clothed with immortality. But, O! what immortality? Is it an immortality of happiness and glory; or of shame and everlasting contempt? Where is the honour, the pomp, of the rich and great; the applause that surrounded you? All gone; all are vanished away, "like as a shadow that departeth." "The play is over," said Monsieur Moultray, when he saw the ball pierce the temples of his dying master. [Charles XII, King of Sweden, at the siege of Frederickshall.] And what cared the courtier for this? No more than if it had been the conclusion of a farce

or dance. But while the buffoon slept on and took his rest, it was not so with the monarch. Though he was not terrified with anything on earth, he would be at the very gates of hell. Vain valour! In the very article of death, he grasped the hilt of his sword! But where was he the next moment, when the sword dropped out of his hand, and the soul out of his body? Then ended the splendid dream of royalty, -- of glory, of destroying cities, and of conquering kingdoms!

10. "How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!" What are the weapons that are so terrible among us, to the inhabitants of eternity? How are the wise, the learned, the poet, the critic fallen, and their glory vanished away! How is the beauty fallen, the late idol of a gazing crowd! In how complete a sense are "the daughters of music brought low," and all the instruments thereof forgotten! Are you not now convinced, that (according to the Hebrew proverb) "a living dog is better than a dead lion?" For the living know, yea, must know, unless they obstinately refuse, "that they shall die; but the dead know not anything" that will avail for the ease of their pain, or to lessen their misery. Also "their hope and fear, and their desire," all are perished; all of them are fled; "they have not any portion in the things that are done under the sun!"

11. Where, indeed, is the hope of those who were lately laying deep schemes, and saying, "To-day, or to-morrow, we will go to such a city, and continue there a year, and traffic, and get gain?" How totally had they forgotten that wise admonition, "Ye know not what shall be on the morrow! For, what is your life? It is a vapour that appeareth awhile, and then vanisheth away!" Where is all your business? where your worldly cares, your troubles or engagements? All these things are fled away like smoke; and your soul is left. And how is it qualified for the enjoyment of this new world? Has it a relish for the objects and enjoyments of the invisible world? Are your affections loosened from things below, and fixed on things above, -- fixed on that place where Jesus sitteth at the right hand of God? Then happy are ye; and when He whom ye love shall appear, "ye shall also appear with him in glory."

12. But how do you relish the company that surrounds you? Your old companions are gone; a great part of them probably separated from you never to return. Are your present companions angels of light? -- ministering spirits, that but now whispered, "Sister spirit, come away! We are sent to conduct thee over that gulf into Abraham's bosom." And what are those? Some of the souls of the righteous, whom thou didst formerly relieve with "the mammon of unrighteousness;" and who are now commissioned by your common Lord to receive, to welcome you "into the everlasting habitations." Then the angels of darkness will quickly discern they have no part in you. So they must either hover at a distance, or flee away in despair. Are some of these happy spirits that take acquaintance with you, the same that travelled with you below, and bore a part in your temptations; that, together with you, fought the good fight of faith, and laid hold on eternal life? As you then wept together, you may rejoice together, you and your guardian angels perhaps, in order to increase your thankfulness for being "delivered from so great a death." They may give you a view of the realms below; those

Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace

And rest can never dwell.

See, on the other hand, the mansions which were "prepared for you from the foundation of the world!" O what a difference between the dream that is past, and the real scene that is now present with thee! Look up! See!

No need of the sun in that day,

Which never is follow'd by night;

Where Jesus's beauties display

A pure and a permanent light!

Look down! What a prison is there! "Twixt upper, nether, and surrounding fire!" And what inhabitants! What horrid, fearful shapes, emblems of the rage against God and man, the envy, fury, despair, fixed within, -- causing them to gnash their teeth at Him they so long despised! Meanwhile, does it comfort them to see, across the great gulf, the righteous in Abraham's bosom? What a place is that! What a "house of God, eternal in the heavens!" Earth is only His footstool; yea,

The spacious firmament on high,

And all the blue, ethereal sky.

Well then may we say to its inhabitants,

Proclaim the glories of our Lord,

Dispersed through all the heavenly street;

Whose boundless treasures can afford

So rich a pavement for his feet.

And yet how inconsiderable is the glory of that house, compared to that of its great Inhabitant! in view of whom all the first-born sons of light, angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven, full of light as they are full of love,

Approach not, but with both wings veil their eyes.

13. How wonderful, then, now the dream of life is over, now you are quite awake, do all these scenes appear! Even such a sight as never entered, or could enter into your hearts to conceive! How are all those that "awake up after his likeness, now satisfied with it!" They have now a portion, real, solid, incorruptible, "that fadeth not away." Meantime, how exquisitely wretched are they who (to wave all other considerations) have chosen for their portion those transitory shadows which now are vanished, and have left them in an abyss of real misery, which must remain to all eternity!

14. Now, considering that every child of man who is yet upon earth must sooner or later wake out of this dream, and enter real life; how infinitely does it concern every one of us to attend to this before our great change comes! Of what importance is it to be continually sensible of the condition wherein we stand! How advisable, by every possible means, to connect the ideas of time and eternity! so to associate them together, that the thought of one may never recur to your mind, without the thought of the other! It is our highest wisdom to associate the ideas of the visible and invisible world; to connect temporal and spiritual, mortal and immortal being. Indeed, in our common dreams we do not usually know we are asleep whilst we are in the midst of our dream. As neither do we know it while we are in the midst of the dream which we call life. But you may be conscious of it now! God grant you may, before you awake in a winding-sheet of fire!

15. What an admirable foundation for thus associating the ideas of time and eternity, of the visible and invisible world, is laid in the very nature of religion! For, what is religion, -- I mean scriptural religion? for all other is the vainest of all dreams. What is the very root of this religion? It is Immanuel, God with us! God in man! Heaven connected with earth! The unspeakable union of mortal with immortal. For "truly our fellowship" (may all Christians say) "is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. God hath given unto us eternal life; and this life is in his Son." What follows? "He that hath the Son hath life: And he that hath not the Son of God hath not life."

16. But how shall we retain a constant sense of this? I have often thought, in my waking hours, "Now, when I fall asleep, and see such and such things, I will remember it was but a dream." Yet I could not, while the dream lasted; and probably none else can. But it is otherwise with the dream of life; which we do remember to be such, even while it lasts. And if we do forget it, (as we are indeed apt to do,) a friend may remind us of it. It is much to be wished that such a friend were always near; one that would frequently sound in our ear, "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead!" Soon you will awake into real life. You will stand, a naked spirit, in the world of spirits, before the face of the great God! See that you now hold fast that "eternal life, which he hath given you in his Son!"

17. How admirably does this life of God branch out into the whole of religion, -- I mean scriptural religion! As soon as God reveals his Son in the heart of a sinner, he is enabled to say, "The life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." He then "rejoices in hope of the glory of God," even with joy unspeakable. And in consequence both of this faith and hope, the love of God is shed abroad in his heart; which, filling the soul with love to all mankind, "is the fulfilling of the law."

18. And how wonderfully do both faith and hope and love connect God with man, and time with eternity! In consideration of this, we may boldly say, --

Vanish then this world of shadows;

Pass the former things away!

Lord, appear! appear to glad us,

With the dawn of endless day!

O conclude this mortal story,

Throw this universe aside!

Come, eternal King of glory,

Now descend, and take thy bride!

[August 1789]

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