

REMEMBER HOW FLEETING IS LIFE
Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
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No. 6: Remember

Text: Psalm 89:47 "Remember how fleeting is my life."

Prior to my departure at the end of January I have been asked to write out all the things I do so that when I am no longer here someone else can do them.

I have noted that while there are many responsibilities to being a Senior Pastor, some are more important than others. So I find myself saying to my colleagues, "Remember to do this. Don't forget to do that."

Our Heavenly Father does the same to us. He gives us many instructions on how to live a godly life, but from time to time he says "Remember." When we hear this word "remember" we know that God is underlining a particular aspect of being a disciple so that we don't overlook it. We have been working our way through this list of remembers and today we come to **REMEMBER HOW FLEETING IS LIFE.**

We find this in Psalm 89 where the Psalmist laments, **"Remember how fleeting is my life." (Psalm 89:47)**

This song reminds us of an essential truth that we must never forget. It is found again and again in scripture for **the Bible emphasizes the shortness of life.** We tend to forget that. We think that our life is going to go on forever. But it doesn't. We are always dying. Every beat of our pulse reduces the number remaining. Even while you are listening to this message you are all being carried towards eternity at lightning speed.

The Bible uses graphic images to illustrate the brevity of a life. It speaks of our existence as a breath. Listen to David. **"Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is... Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure." (Psalm 39:4-5)**

When we go outside on a cold morning we can see our breath. It hovers for a moment in the icy air and then vanishes. The Bible says that is a picture of us.

Then Solomon refers to life as a shadow asking, **"Who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?" (Ecclesiastes 6:12)**

"Ah," we say, "but that's the Old Testament. It's always so depressing." But listen to what James has to say in the New Testament when he asks,

"What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." (James 4:14)

All the biblical pictures of life are of transitory things like grass. Moses tells God, **"You sweep people away in the sleep of death—they are like the new grass of the morning: In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered."** (Psalm 90:5-6)

This all sounds depressing and Ethan, the author of this psalm, echoes our hopelessness when he tells God, **"Remember how fleeting is my life. For what futility you have created all humanity! Who can live and not see death, or who can escape the power of the grave?"** (Psalm 89:47-48)

So with that as background **THE BIBLE OFFERS TWO OPTIONS FOR LIFE.** What option we select depends on what we think happens when we die. Some believe that this life is all there is. When our heart stops beating and our brain functions cease – that's the end. If that is the case it is wise to choose **pleasure.**

We read about a man who made this choice in our scripture reading. He was a rich farmer and he was determined to grab all the gusto while he could. So he said to himself, **"You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."** (Luke 12:19)

The focus is all on himself and his own comfort. There is no concern for others. And why should there be? He is only on this earth for a short while, then there will be eternal nothingness.

I recently drove by a bar in Chicago called "Eat, Drink and Be Happy." If death is the end, then pleasure is a sensible choice and it is the one many people take.

The problem is we are not certain there is nothing after death. Anthropologists have discovered that virtually every people group has a concept of existence beyond the grave. We might wonder where this came from.

Solomon pondered this and came to this conclusion, **"God has set eternity in the human heart."** (Ecclesiastes 3:11) In other words, the reason we feel that we are eternal beings is because an eternal God has placed that conviction in our subconscious.

This rich farmer discovered this to his cost. He grabbed pleasure and adopted the philosophy, **"Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you."** (Luke 12:19-20) He had an appointment with death that evening.

The Bible tells us that men and women never cease to exist. Once we are born we live forever. The curtain is never drawn on our life. There are hints of our immortality in the Old Testament.

Solomon tells us, **"The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (Ecclesiastes 12:7)**

However, it is from Jesus that we have the plainest statement of our inability to escape existence for he said, **"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear God's voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned." (John 5:28-29)**

So if there is life after death the choice of pursuing pleasure is inadequate. Instead we need to choose **purpose**. For the Bible says that all of us will one day stand before God and he is going to ask us "Why should I let you into my heaven?" And we better have a good answer to give to the Creator of the universe.

So **IF WE ARE ETERNAL BEINGS, HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE?**

Thankfully we don't have to guess for God has given us the answers.

First, if we are wise we will **SEEK THE LORD'S WILL**.

This is James' counsel after telling us that we are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. He goes on to advise us **"You ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'"** (James 4:15)

So what is the Lord's will? First his will is that we should love him and live for him. God wants us to enjoy him and all he has for us. God longs for us to use our gifts for his glory and for the benefit of others. So life starts to have significance when we put our faith in Christ. That doesn't mean that life will be easy, but it does mean that it will be purposeful.

There was a man called Peter Waldo who lived in Lyon, France. He was living for pleasure. One day he was sitting at a banquet enjoying a good meal when suddenly one of the other men sitting at the table collapsed and died.

Waldo was shocked into action. He went home and started to read the Bible. As a result he met God. He now had a life of purpose. He wanted to serve others. So he founded a Christian community that became known as the Waldensian church.

The second way we are to live as eternal beings is to **REDEEM THE TIME**.

Paul urges us to **"Redeem the time, because the days are evil."** (Ephesians 5:16) To redeem the time means to spend it wisely. To make the most of every opportunity. We are not to let the hours slip away through our fingers but rather be intentional in how we use them.

Then we won't come to the end of our life with a long list of regrets. Instead we will be able to look back with satisfaction on how God has used us.

Now to be open to opportunity means we need to be sensitive to the Spirit of God.

We invite the Holy Spirit to guide us so we know which opportunities to seize with both hands.

I have been reading about Sir James Simpson. He was a great friend of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He was a Scottish obstetrician who was deeply troubled that women had to endure surgery without anesthesia. He was the first to use chloroform, having first tested it on himself. It was a lifesaving medical breakthrough.

A journalist asked Simpson about his greatest discovery. He replied, "I am a sinner but Jesus is a great Savior." He went on to describe how he became a believer saying, "I looked and saw Jesus, my substitute, scourged in my stead and dying on the cross for me. I looked and cried and was forgiven. It seems to be my duty to tell you of that Savior to see if you will not also look and live." Simpson was an immensely successful man but he chose a life of purpose with Christ.

To redeem the time also means we keep short accounts with other people. We don't allow bitterness to build up in our soul. We want to daily ask God's forgiveness for our sin and regularly to ask forgiveness from others.

David Watson was a great pastor and evangelist who was diagnosed with terminal cancer. In the last year of his life he wrote a book called *Fear No Evil* about his experience of facing death.

One morning he woke up with a revelation that all his sermons and evangelistic outreaches were meaningless compared to the love of God for him. David also realized that the love of God was meaningless if he didn't demonstrate it.

So he sat down and wrote a series of letters to various people that he had offended, expressing his sorrow and regret and asking for their forgiveness. David Watson didn't want to meet his Maker with unfinished business on his conscience.

One of my heroes is C.T. Studd. He was a world-famous cricketer who played for England. He came to know Christ as his Savior. He surprised the nation by giving up his cricket career and going to serve as a missionary in China with Hudson Taylor.

He said, "I know that cricket would not last and honor would not last and nothing in this world would last, but it is worthwhile living for the world to come."

Studd went on to add, "I do not say don't play games, or cricket, and so forth, by all means play and enjoy them, giving thanks to Jesus for them. Only take care that games should not become an idol to you as they did to me. What good will it do anyone in the next world to have been the best player that has ever been and then think of the difference between that and winning people for Jesus.

C.T. Studd spent a decade in China working in a rehabilitation center for opium addicts, sharing the gospel and seeing lives transformed by its truth.

While he was in China his father died and left him a sizable inheritance. But rather than keeping it Studd immediately gave it all away to support ministries led by George Muller and D.L. Moody. He explained, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him."

C.T. Studd was a man who redeemed the time. He wrote a poem which in part goes:

*Only one life, 'twill soon be past.
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

Then if we are eternal beings it is wise to **LIVE WITH ETERNITY IN VIEW**. Now I confess I do not find this easy. For this world is too much with us. So we naturally focus on this life, not the next. But there are certain behaviors we can embrace that will help us develop an eternal perspective.

A good starting point is reading scripture because the Bible is a book about eternity. It describes an eternal God who wants an eternal relationship with us. It speaks about heaven and hell and the importance of laying up treasure in heaven.

To gain an eternal perspective, I have found it a useful exercise to visit a garbage dump. Make it a teaching moment by taking your children along. Then remind them that every physical thing we value will one day end up in the garbage.

We are naturally materialistic and acquisitive. We tend to put things before people. But the most precious thing we have will one day be broken and useless. It will be reduced to rubbish.

When I was a seminary student I worked as a garbage collector for a couple of summers. It was invaluable preparation for ministry. During the day we picked up people's rubbish from the curb. At the end of the day we took it to the garbage dump which always smelled terrible. There were birds and vermin feeding on the rotting food.

It is a sobering thought to stand in your house and recognize that one day it will be torn down. To sit in your new car and think that one day it will be crushed for scrap.

How different is our service for God? We can't take any of this world's goods with us, but Revelation tells us, "**Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord... they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.**"
(Revelation 14:13)

That text tells us that the one thing we can take with us is our service for Christ. Think of that. Those of you who teach Sunday School or work with the youth or visit the elderly. Think of that. Every time we put something in the offering we are placing it into God's bank account.

Then to help me keep eternity in view I have found it valuable to visit cemeteries. Gretchen and I walk among the tombstones reading the epitaphs.

A common theme of these is a statement claiming the person in the grave will never be forgotten. Then you look at the state of the grave and realize they had been forgotten. We might be remembered for two generations at the most but after that our name disappears.

Reading epitaphs can be both entertaining and edifying. Here is one from Bedford, England.

*Here lies the body of Thomas Proctor,
who lived and died without a doctor.*

How about this one from Massachusetts,
*In memory of Jane Bent,
Who kicked her heels and away she went.*

I like this one:
*Here lies Wild Bill Smee
Who ran for sheriff in '83.
He also ran in '84
But he ain't running any more.*

Dr. John Potter was Archbishop of Canterbury. He died in 1736. His tombstone reads:

*Alack and well a-day
Potter himself is turned to clay.*

There is a poignant one from India.
*Sacred to the memory of the Reverend Smith,
who after 20 years of unremitting labor as a missionary was accidentally shot by his
native bearer.*

Then comes the text:
Well done, thou good and faithful servant.

Last month a number of us were in Italy. We saw many beautiful places but the one I found most moving was the American Cemetery in Florence. There were thousands of crosses marking the graves of American forces who died in the Second World War in the advance towards Rome. Many of them were young men of 18, 19, or 20. I looked for the graves of those who came from Minnesota.

I was so grateful for those soldiers who died in the fight against fascism so that we might be a free people. Our group gathered in the chapel for a prayer of thanksgiving and then we sang the *Star Spangled Banner*. Surrounded by thousands of graves we were reminded of how fleeting life can be.

A very practical exercise for living with eternity in view is to plan our funeral. I have found it a profoundly helpful spiritual exercise to choose the hymns and scripture readings I want when I die. An additional benefit is the help this will be to our family when the time comes.

We know the importance of writing out a financial will. As Christians let's write out a spiritual will so that our children and grandchildren know what was of ultimate importance to us. We can describe our faith story and urge them to follow Christ as we have done.

Now some would say we cannot know what happens when we die. But the Christian disagrees, for Jesus left heaven to come to earth and tell us about it. He came to tell us what happens when we die.

He experienced death himself but was resurrected on the third day, so he is qualified to speak on this subject. Jesus assures us that death is not the end, and best of all he offers us eternal life.

John tells us, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in Jesus is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (John 3:16-18)**

One day all of us will stand before God. It is going to be a terrifying time because everything we have done, both good and bad, will be revealed. While our sins will condemn us, our good deeds will not save us because none of us can meet God's standard of perfection.

Instead, it is faith in what Jesus has done that gives us hope. If we are living a life of purpose for him we have nothing to fear. One of the greatest statements in the Bible is found at the beginning of Romans, chapter 8.

Listen to these wonderful words:

"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death." (Romans 8:1-2)

So it is vital that we are in Christ Jesus. If we are not we are in great peril. How awful it will be to hear those words from the mouth of Jesus, **"Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41)**

So it is essential that we receive God's remedy for our sin. That remedy is Jesus himself. The Bible tells us, **"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."** **(Acts 16:31)**

Perhaps you have heard the gospel before but you have never made a commitment to Jesus. Perhaps you are a Christian but there is some uncertainty in your mind about whether you will go to heaven and you would just like to make sure.

In the silence of your heart you can pray to invite the Savior to come into your life and cleanse you of your sin and empower you to live a life that honors him. That prayer will make you a new person. A new husband. A new wife. A new employee. You can be absolutely certain you are right with God and you are going to heaven.

Our Victory Verse for this week tells us that death does not have to be loss. For the Christian death will be gain. So let us say it together with joy.

For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.
Philippians 1:21