

## "The Time of Our Lives"

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"We had the time of our lives," people say. One assumes they had a great vacation or a really wonderful New Year's party. But listen:

Seventy Years is all we have -  
eighty years If we are strong;  
Yet all they bring us are trouble and sorrow;  
life is soon over and we are gone.

Such is the Psalmist's definition of "time of our lives." A dose of reality therapy for a new year. Hardly a party! Yet, as we all know, reality does contain cause for celebration, as well as sacrifice; time for laughter, as well as loss.

Each of us has this one time to live, this brief period which we can fill with what we will; within which we can use our particular gifts, abilities, and opportunities for what we choose.

At age eighty, Dr. David Read, the long-serving, outstanding Scots minister of New York's Madison Avenue Presbyterian church, preached his final sermon, Someone who was there told me that Dr. Read said that over the decades he had preached many thousands of sermons which, like this last one, would doubtless be forgotten. But as a postscript to them all, he had one thing for his congregation to remember: God loves you.

How will each of us spend the time of our lives? What will its theme be? Will it leave a simple, memorable postscript? How will we live? Will we live for pleasure, personal profit, or status? Will we live for sensuality, excitement, or Mankind's good? Or will we live for God's glory? These are a few of the many ways in which the time of our lives can be spent.

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I know that no motive is pure and unalloyed - even the best motives have traces of selfishness. In our lives, one motive will emerge stronger than the rest. Is that motive focused on self, on others, or on God? All of us leave a message - a message of faith, fear or frustration; either one that encourages, or one that produces greater hopelessness.

Many years ago, long before the current drug scene, the twenty-year-old grandson of former British prime minister Harold Macmillan committed suicide. The young man had known every advantage of birth, position, and education, yet he was a slave to drugs, to which he had been introduced by "a friend." The family doctor told the coroner that there was no serious illness; he was highly intelligent and was always after something to stimulate him. "This was the whole pattern of his existence - somewhat unstable, and sort of groping for facts in life generally." Note this phrase, "Groping for facts in life generally." To how many does that apply right now?

Surely one fact of life that should guide us on how to live is the fact of its briefness - short enough

without deliberately cutting it shorter. It may seem obvious to say, "Life is short," but there is profound implication in that phrase. If Psalm 90 gives us the span of our time, then Job 7:6 gives us the speed of our time. Job says, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle."

The vivid figure of speech tells anyone who has ever watched a weaver at the loom that this is what life is like. As the shuttle bearing the thread (the woof) flashes backwards and forwards between the cross threads (the warp), so our days flash past - morning to evening, evening to morning - faster even, says Job, than the weaver's shuttle. What does this vibrant picture tell us about living the time of our lives?

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The obvious point of comparison between our lives and the weaver's shuttle is speed: the swiftness with which our days go by and the swiftness with which the shuttle flies. This truth makes little impression on the young. To those with all life ahead, time drags waiting for next Christmas. Only as one grows older is the speed of time better appreciated. The older you become, the faster it seems to go. Yet the lesson of the flying shuttle is not simply that time flies. (Time flies for all, whether people realize it or not). The lesson lies in our asking how well our time is filled. Has the best been put into it? Or are the flashing days cluttered with trivialities, half-finished attempts, botched opportunities, and the careless waste of precious hours?

The weaver's shuttle is not only swift, but accurate as it moves back and forth carrying the yarn with it. With each flashing pass, it fulfills its function. Though it speeds, it performs its task. A racing shuttle with no woof left behind in the warp is futile. Yet that is the picture of so many lives: all speed, rush, stimuli, but nothing of worth left to show for it - nothing done well. Such people resemble mad touch-typists going at great speed, yet whose accuracy is so faulty that the resulting pages are nonsense. Life may be swift, but that is no reason to make it meaningless. As the old mission hymn puts it:

Give to each flying minute

Something to keep in store;

Work, for the night is coming,

When one works no more.

The first lesson of the weaver's shuttle: Do it well. For the day will come when you and I will stop. We will lay down the tools of our trade, the end of our attempt at earthly living. No more touching up botched work. No more going back to lift life's dropped stitches. No further chance to delete our mistakes on time's computers. Such as it is, your record and mine will have to stand as we leave them when Death comes to the door. So don't let all your plans for goodness, love, and service wait for another occasion in more suitable surroundings. Don't let this day's work and worship, compassion and companionship go by unconsidered. Do whatever you are working at now as well as you can, for you can never relive this day.

That is one reason for "doing it well." Another is this: Paul said to the Colossians, "Whatever ye do, do it heartily as to the Lord. The New English Bible translates this, "Put your whole heart into it, as if you were doing it for the Lord." We do it well not merely because time is limited; we do it well for a Master. To each one of us in our different daily tasks comes this call which transforms duty into delight: we do it

well because we do it for Him. Days may be swifter than a weaver's shuttle; nevertheless, do well whatever comes within their scope.

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The second lesson of the weaver's shuttle: If in this life we do it well, we must also do it now. Do the good now! The swiftly traveling shuttle carries with it a specific length of thread which, like life itself, will run out at some point. Our time shuttle carries with it a definite amount of weeks, months and years.

My first parish was a rural community near Lockerbie in Scotland, where the church was surrounded by a graveyard. One particular stone had been put up with a man's name along with his date of birth engraved on it. There was no date of death, because it had not yet taken place. The man had erected the gravestone to himself, possibly because he didn't think anyone else would. Obviously he didn't know the second date. Not one of us knows our own second date.

The fact that we do not know the length of our thread of life is often an excuse for not "doing it now." To think we are bound to have more time to do that kindness or make up with so-and-so or speak an appropriate word - there's no "bound to" about it. An incalculable amount of misery, suffering, and remorse is directly the result of not doing the right thing now, and putting off the God-given noble impulse or generous purpose until some other time. Why would God have given us that good impulse unless He had meant us to act on it?

If all the kind letters had been written when first thought of, how many lonely souls would have been cheered? If the friendly visit had been paid when it was first thought of, it might have made all the difference to that relationship. Never suppose that you can make up with a neglected friend by visiting them in a hospital. Repent on your own deathbed if you like, but not on someone else's! If in the present, we fail to do certain good things, the chances are we will never do them. Postpone evil, but never good.

Patience Strong has a verse about the way people act when someone dies - flowers are sent and notes written. She goes on:

Their good points we remember; their failings we ignore.

We wish we'd been nicer, and done a little more.

We speak of them with kindness and loving things are said ...

But isn't it a pity we wait until they're dead?

It's more than a pity, it's a tragedy - this folly of not doing good now and being too late forever.

So if there is a kind purpose in your heart for a living soul, express it to them now. If you're thinking of beginning a better way of life this year, begin it now. If you propose to end your days a loyal servant of Christ, then volunteer now. For now is the day of salvation. We all have so much time - we don't know how long. Use it now before we reach the end of the line on the weaver's swift shuttle of life. So whatever it is, great or small, that will make you a better person, benefit others, and glorify God; whatever impulse is in your heart for right - do it now.

Job says, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle." Therefore let them pass not only with speed, but

with accuracy - do it well! Therefore value their time and use it for good - do it now!

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The last lesson of the weaver's shuttle: Realize that your individual piece of the pattern is part of a larger design so that in all you do, do it for the future, beyond death. Do it for eternity.

This is a matter of right perspective. Although you have only this "time of your life" which moves swifter than a weaver's shuttle, you can use it not only to brighten the present, but also to shape the future through your influence on others in ways you could not possibly imagine. You have now the opportunity to make your own personal contribution to God's pattern - His working out of all things.

At memorial services, I often use the second verse of a poem entitled, "The Weaver" which I learned as a boy. The author is unknown except to God, who alone knows how many have been helped by these words:

My life is but a weaving  
Between my Lord and me,  
I cannot choose the colors  
He worketh steadily.  
Ofttimes He weaveth sorrow,  
And I, in foolish pride,  
Forget He sees the upper  
And I, the underside.  
Not till the loom is silent  
And the shuttles cease to fly,  
Shall god unroll the canvas  
And explain the reason why.  
The dark threads are as needful  
In the Weaver's skillful hand,  
As the threads of gold and silver  
In the pattern He has planned.

"Not till the loom is silent" We cannot judge a great woven design by a portion, but only by the finished product. And this is the Christian interpretation of life - that whatever we do now, be the threads we handle dark or bright, we do for eternity. Handling the somber as well as the shining is all part of the

pattern. Now is the start of the way we shall be - bad or good, cowardly or courageous, a lost wanderer or a child coming home to God. This time of our life is not an unfinished, meaningless fragment of weal or woe, but part of the pattern of eternity.

We don't get this perspective from Job. He says, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and spent without hope." We don't get it from the Psalmist, who says, "Life is soon over and we are gone." Where do we get our confidence? From the Resurrection of Christ. Paul speaks of the victory we have through Christ which opens up new vistas, not only upon the future, but upon the present. He says in the last verse of 1 Corinthians 15:

Therefore, my beloved, work for the Lord always. Work without limit, since you know that in the Lord, your labor cannot be lost

For the Christian, life is not a broken column, a half-finished story, an unrealized dream, an incomplete circle, In God is fullness, wholeness, completeness. In the Lord nothing of worth, nothing of truth, nothing of goodness and right is ever in vain. All the pieces fit.

John describes how at the Last supper the disciples are squabbling about who is the greatest. "And Jesus, knowing that He was come from God, and went to God ..." (from God ... to God, the complete circle), "took a towel and washed the disciples' feet."

Even the most lowly, ordinary act has a new significance when we see it as part of the whole pattern. The Christian's greatness lies not in the length of days or in great things, but in doing all things faithfully "as unto the Lord" against the background of God and in the perspective of eternity.

Like Christ, we too are come from God and to go God. However swift the weaver's shuttle of this mortality may fly, the way in which we handle life, even at its most hard or humdrum, is of eternal significance and worth. Even if, like Job, our days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, nevertheless we shall remain confident, with Paul, that our labor in the Lord cannot - cannot - be lost.

May we live the Christian life in this year by doing it well, doing good now, and doing all things for eternity. Then we will have - here - the time of our lives.

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Almighty God, who has given us this chance at life, forgive us as we have botched it and failed in the past. The great Good News is that you do love us and are ever ready to give us another chance if we seek your help, guidance, and forgiveness. We do that now, praying that from this day on we may use the time of our lives in ways which will please you, bless others, and build up our own souls for your Presence. Hear this our prayer through Christ. Amen.