

What is the measure of a life well spent? How do you know whether you are wasting your life or investing it in the things that really matter?

In today's world we have several yardsticks by which we measure a life. One is usefulness. We are pragmatists at heart. We feel that if a person does something useful for society, whether it is a profession or a trade, he or she spends his or her life well.

Another yardstick we use is busyness or sheer activity. Our lifestyles reflect our values here—we're all extremely busy people. Our weekly calendars are full to the brim. We have the notion that if you just sit around, you're wasting your life.

We also gauge our lives by adventure and excitement. If we can't get it firsthand, we pick it up vicariously on TV or at sporting events. Our heroes lead exciting lives, either through romance or life-and-death risk taking. We read magazines that tell us about the rich and famous, secretly wishing that our lives could be like theirs. We generally think that a person who dies rich and famous has achieved success.

Behind all of these yardsticks is that of personal happiness. Even if a person dies poor and unknown, if he or she was happy or content, that is what matters.

Against these yardsticks of a life well spent, I want to introduce you to Anna. She comes on the biblical page, is described in three short verses, is not even quoted directly, and is gone.

Luke 2:36-38 is but a short but powerful account telling us who Anna is.

"Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem."

If we met a modern-day Anna, we would probably find her a bit odd. Her values clearly are out of sync with those of modern Fiji. Can you picture a TV reporter interviewing her?

Reporter: What is your name?

Anna: Anna, daughter of Phanuel, tribe of Asher. I'm Jewish.

Reporter: Whose daughter? Wanna spell that? How old are you, Ma'am?

Anna: Some say I'm over 100, but others say I'm 84. I like that better!

Reporter: Well, either way you've been around the block a few times. I'll bet you've had an interesting life. What have you done?

Anna: Like most Jewish girls, I got married in my teens, but my husband died when I was in my early twenties, before we had children. I've been going to the temple almost every day since then.

Reporter: You go to the temple every day? That's amazing! What do you do there?

Anna: Well, I fast and pray a lot. And, I'm a prophetess, so I hear messages from God now and then.

Reporter: Right! (He thinks to himself, "Maybe this story belongs in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, not on TV!")

What does this brief glimpse of Anna's life teach us?

A life devoted to God is a life well spent.

By our world's standards, we might look at Anna's life and think, "What a waste! Eighty-four years, most of it spent in the temple fasting and praying! You've got to be kidding! That's not the kind of life I want to live." I'll grant that we're not all called to devote ourselves to a ministry of prayer and fasting. Obviously, God had gifted her in that way, and she lived accordingly. But apart from her unique gifts, the principle holds true: *Anna lived fully devoted to God*. God looked on her with favour. In the Bible, every fact is confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Along with Simeon, God chose Anna to bear witness to the infant Jesus as the Messiah. She played her God-given role well. Her life was well spent.

But you still may be thinking, "Come on, didn't Anna really waste her life?" You may not verbalize it, but you may be thinking, "Religion has its proper place, but this is a bit extreme. Why spend your life in devotion to God?"

1. Devotion to God is really all that matters.

Isn't it? Stop and think about it—what else matters in this life? The Pharisees and scribes thought that their religious duties were what mattered. They scurried around the temple precincts that day performing their rituals, oblivious to this unique baby who was being dedicated to the Lord. It gave them a sense of pride to be able to say, "All my life I have kept the commandments of the Torah." But they missed the Messiah because they were really more devoted to themselves than to God.

The Sadducees thought that political influence and power were what mattered. “Life after death,” they scoffed, “is just pie in the sky when you die. What matters is here and now!” A group of them passed within yards of the child and Anna as they debated the latest edict from Rome.

The temple merchants thought that a good income was what mattered. They hawked their temple money and sold their officially approved sacrificial animals within earshot of this humble couple and their newborn son. They lived well and left a nice inheritance to their children when they died. But they missed God’s Saviour that day. In contrast to all these, Anna knew that devotion to God is all that matters. She recognized the child as God’s promised Messiah. She was wiser than all the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

I read recently of a man who thinks he knows how to live to be 120. I thought, “Okay, let’s grant that he succeeds. Then what?” Even if we could figure out how to live 900 years, like the early patriarchs, we still have to die and face eternity. In light of that, devotion to God is really all that matters in this life! With it, we can enjoy earthly blessings if God grants them. Without it, everything is an empty shell. The fact is, not everyone can attain the things that the world labels as success. But the gift of being accepted into God’s family is possible and open to all.

The question for us this morning is, are we whole-heartedly devoted to God and His purposes. Is it really all that matters to us or are we playing church? The tragedy of Samabula Church is that we have people who have been associated with the church and Christ for many, many years, some since they were born. But very few, a small minority are occupied with Christ Himself and His work. Everyone wants the religious experience, but not the Saviour or the Saviour on their own terms. As such they have missed the Saviour all together.

Anyone who has really encountered the Saviour and been transformed by Him can never be the same person again. Are we truly saved by Him or are we spouting the lines to look like we belong to the club? Because if we are, then we are no different to the Pharisees and all the religious and learned figures of the time of the Lord Jesus Christ when He lived among us. We can be beside Him yet, our eyes cannot see Him, our hearts are closed to Him. We have walked right past Him. We may have attended Sunday school and youth and Bible studies and the activities of the church. But if the Lord Jesus has not touched us and transformed us then we have missed the thing that matters the most.

2. Devotion to God is available to everyone.

No matter what your station in life, you can devote yourself to the Lord, and that makes whatever you are and whatever you do count in light of eternity. Take Anna, for example.

Anna was a woman. While Jewish women enjoyed more respect in that day than women in other cultures, there still was a fair amount of discrimination against them. The rabbis did not approve of the same amount of instruction in the Torah being given to girls as to boys. They regarded women's minds as not adapted for such investigations (Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* [Eerdmans], pp. 132-133). The women were restricted to an area of the temple called "The Women's Court." They could not enter the inner court where the ceremonies were performed. According to Josephus, women and slaves could not give evidence in court (cited by Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* [McGraw-Hill], 1:156).

And yet the Lord is pleased to include the testimony of Anna concerning the Lord Jesus. God is no respecter of persons. He is pleased with the devotion of any person, male or female.

Anna was a widow. In fact, she had been widowed at an early age. She easily could have grown bitter toward God. She could have complained of her loneliness. Widows in that culture didn't have much opportunity to get an education and learn a business or trade to provide for themselves. They were often the target of unscrupulous businessmen. No doubt Anna had experienced a difficult life. And yet she did not turn her back on God. In fact, God declares that He has a special concern for orphans and widows: "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows is God in His holy habitation" ([Ps. 68:5](#)). Anna took refuge under God's protective care. Her trials drove her to deeper devotion to God, not away from Him.

Anna was elderly. While the elderly was more respected in that society than they are in ours, they were still subject to the abuse of the unscrupulous. In our pragmatic society, the elderly are often viewed as useless. They can't take care of themselves. They can't make a living. Thankfully, God does not view the elderly as useless or as a burden on society! If an elderly person is devoted to God, their life and death is precious in His sight ([Ps. 116:15](#)).

Anna despite her status was a well adjusted person, engaged in Israel's life and useful to the Lord. She was at the centre of God's will.

The point is, no matter what your station in life—male or female, young or old, rich or poor—you can be devoted to God and He will be pleased with your devotion. The world may ignore or despise you, even the church (for such is the world view of the church) but God always has had such a godly remnant. They are the salt of the earth; they preserve the whole mass from corruption. You can be counted among them.

Thus, we've seen that devotion to God is all that matters; it is available to all. Will you devote yourself whole heartedly to God? This is the message of Christmas. A life already redeemed and purchased by God. To recognise it and surrender it to Him and live for Him.

You cannot be devoted to God unless you have been redeemed by His Son. That redemption cost Him dearly, but He offers it to you as a free gift that you can only receive by faith. Have you received this free gift? And those of us attending church for decades, have we really been transformed by the Lord Jesus? Are we really a child of God? Are we living for His purposes?

On Friday I was invited to the GPS for their thanksgiving service lunch, although I don't go for lunches. I went because it was an opportunity to share the word of God to the teachers. And the work of teachers esp now is related very much to the Christian life and living. Three words should characterise our life in Christ: suffering, sacrifice and service. All these three were seen in vast quantities in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour and example. He did not say you do this and this and this and never led by example. He lived and demonstrated this. The question is are our lives reflective of these three critical qualities: suffering, sacrifice and service. And these things are not optional and not a, b or c. They are and should be all the above. All three need to be found in every Christian. If they are not, I suggest that we have not really died to ourselves. We are still holding on to our way and not God's way. We need an encounter with death to help us experience what the new life in Christ is and how we need to live it. Pray for such an encounter!

Last week when we met physically, we had some frank and open discussions. We did some reflection and visioning. One man who we barely notice said something profound amidst all the usual rhetoric. He said we need to pray more and need to see the men praying more together and fasting. How true this is. Instead of men praying personally and corporately they are keeping silent. Have we thought of how this must make the Lord feel? How does this make the women and girls and boys feel?

Others said we need more elders and deacons and rightly so. But do we know what it even means to be a member, a part of the body of Christ. Do we know what these offices in the church mean? The word deacon in Greek means servant and slave. Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ and His slave and for His purposes. We don't need training on how to be elders. We need training and practice in how to be an effective servant of God!

Christmas is this week. Forget the lovo and roast and curry goat or duck and trifle and what have you. What service are we bringing and can we bring to the Lord our King. What sacrifices have we made, and will we make? What suffering will we endure or have endured or are willing to endure.

Shall we pray and we'll continue with Anna next week.

Dear Heavenly Father and our saviour the Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that You would fill us up *and* complete our joy in You by allowing us to live in harmony *and* being of the same mind *and* one in purpose, having the same love, being in full accord and of one harmonious mind *and* intention.

³ Help us to do nothing from factional motives [through contentiousness, strife, selfishness, or for unworthy ends] or be prompted by conceit *and* empty arrogance. Instead, in the true spirit of humility (lowliness of mind) let each of us regard the others as better than *and* superior to ourselves [thinking more highly of one another than we do of ourselves].

⁴ Let us esteem *and* look upon *and* be concerned for not [merely] our own interests, but also for the interests of others.

⁵ Let the same attitude *and* purpose *and* [humble] mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus: [Let Him be our example in humility:]

⁶ Who, although being essentially one with God *and* in the form of God [possessing the fullness of the attributes which make God God], did not think this equality with God was a thing to be eagerly grasped *or* retained,

⁷ But stripped Himself [of all privileges and rightful dignity], so as to assume the form of a servant (slave), in that He became like us *and* was born a human being.

⁸ And after He had appeared in human form, He abased *and* humbled Himself [still further] and carried His obedience to the extreme of death, even the death of the cross!

Therefore [because He stooped so low] God has highly exalted Him and has freely bestowed on Him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ That in (at) the name of Jesus every knee should (must) bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ And every tongue [frankly and openly] confess *and* acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. **Amen.**

Best wishes for a sacrificial, service-driven and at cost-to-self Christmas to everyone.

3. Devotion to God takes many outward forms, but always involves worship, witness, and waiting.

- **Worship:** Most likely Anna did not live in the temple, but Luke means that she was there all the time. The word translated “serving” (NASB) has the nuance of worship or service to God. Anna’s worship took the form of “fastings and prayers” (2:37). Fasting means going without food for some period of time, and is usually joined with prayer. For the Jews, the most common fast lasted from sunrise to sunset, although longer fasts are mentioned in the Bible. The Day of Atonement was an annual national fast. Otherwise, fasting was done in times of personal or national distress, or as preparation for special times of seeking the Lord. While there are no commands in the New Testament epistles for us to fast, there are examples of fasting ([Acts 9:9; 13:3; 14:23; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27](#)). Personally, I have found fasting to be a beneficial way of setting aside time to seek the Lord in times where I needed to know His will or in times of crisis.

Anna’s worship also took the form of prayers. Some of God’s saints are especially gifted for the ministry of prayer in that He enables them to devote large blocks of time to it. Part of that time involves interceding for others, but part of it also will be devoted to praise and thanksgiving. The main thing in prayer is to seek God and commune with Him.

Even if you are not gifted in the ministry of worship and prayer, you need to set aside time to seek the Lord as Anna did.

- **Witness:** Anna couldn’t keep it to herself; she “continued to speak of Him” to others (2:38). If your cup is brim-full, you can’t help but slop some of it on others. If you are excited about your relationship with the living God who sent His Son to save you from your sins, people around you will know about it. Some believers justify their not witnessing by saying, “I don’t talk about it; I just live the message.” But part of living the Christian life *is* talking about it!

We all talk about the things we love. Have you ever been around a sports fanatic? What does he talk about? “Did you see that game last night!” Have you ever been around a young man or woman who has just fallen in love? What do they talk about?

Yes, you need to be tactful and sensitive. Yes, you need to wait on the Lord for the right opening. But, all too often we don't err on the side of being too bold or insensitive. The order, by the way, is important: Worship first, then witness. The reason Anna was telling everyone about the Lord Jesus was that she spent much time in private devotion with the Lord. All too often, the reason that we do not bear witness is that we have lost our first love.

- **Waiting:** Not only Simeon and Anna, but others also were “looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). While that phrase has nationalistic nuances, it also refers to the spiritual redemption that God had long ago promised and now was bringing to fruition for His people ([Isa. 40:1, 9; 52:9; 63:4](#)). J. C. Ryle (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 2:74-75) observes that although these people lived in a wicked city, they “were not carried away by the flood of worldliness, formality, and self-righteousness around them. They were not infected by the carnal expectations of a mere worldly Messiah, in which most Jews indulged. They lived in the faith of patriarchs and prophets, that the coming Redeemer would bring in holiness and righteousness, and that His principal victory would be over sin and the devil.” Even so, those devoted to God in our day “wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come” ([1 Thess. 1:10](#)).

Devotion to God is really all that matters. It is available to everyone. It takes many outward forms, but always involves worship, witness, and waiting for His final redemption to come.

4. Devotion to God is one and the same with devotion to Jesus Christ.

Anna was devoted to God, but the second she saw the baby Jesus, she thanked God and began to speak of Jesus to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Note:

- **God the Son and God the Father are inextricably joined in Scripture.** In [Psalm 2:7](#) Messiah states, “I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He [God] said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’” This does not mean that the Father brought the Son into existence at a point in time. Rather, the “today” is the day of God’s decree. Since it is an eternal decree, it means that Christ is eternally the Son of God, one with the Father. While we can never fully understand the nature of the Trinity, we must affirm the revealed truth of Scripture, that the eternal relationship between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity is expressed as that of Father and Son.

This means that you cannot know God the Father apart from God the Son. In [John 8:19](#), Jesus told the Jews, “You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also.” [First John 2:23](#) states, “Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.” You cannot separate God and Jesus Christ. Those who say they worship God but who deny the deity of the Son of God are sadly mistaken. Jesus claimed, “He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent Him” ([John 5:23](#)).

- **God the Son is the Redeemer of God’s people.** In the eternal decree of God, God the Father determined to send God the Son to bear the sins of His elect. The entire human race is in bondage to sin and under the just condemnation of God’s law. But, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us ... in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” ([Gal. 3:13-14](#)).

To understand the concept of “redemption,” you must keep in mind three things.

First, *redemption implies antecedent bondage*. A free person does not need redemption; slaves need redemption. Every person is born enslaved to sin and under the curse of judgment imposed by God’s holy law. Second, *redemption implies cost*. A price must be paid to buy the slave out of bondage. Since the wages of sin is death, that was the price to redeem us from our sins. A sinless substitute had to die in our place. Jesus Christ did that on the cross. Third, *redemption implies the ownership of that which is redeemed*. Since Christ bought us with His blood, as Paul states, “... you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” ([1 Cor. 6:20](#)).

Many years ago, Dr. A. J. Gordon was the pastor of a church in Boston. One day he met a little boy in front of the church who was carrying a rusty cage with several birds in it. Gordon asked, “Son, where did you get those birds?” The boy answered, “I trapped them out in the field.” “What are you going to do with them?” “I’m going to play with them for a while and then I guess I’ll feed them to an old cat we have at home.”

Dr. Gordon asked the boy how much he would take to sell the birds. The boy answered, “Mister, you don’t want them. They’re just old field birds and they can’t sing very well.” Gordon replied, “I’ll give you two dollars for the cage and the birds.” “Okay, it’s a deal,” said the boy, “but you’re making a bad bargain.”

Gordon paid the boy who left happily with his money. Gordon then walked around behind the church, opened the cage, and freed the birds. The next Sunday Dr. Gordon took the

empty cage into the pulpit and used it to illustrate his sermon on redemption: He paid the price so that these creatures in bondage, doomed for destruction, could go free. He said, “That little boy said that the birds could not sing very well, but when I released them from the cage, they went singing into the blue, and it seemed that they were singing, ‘Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed.’” (Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* [Assurance Publishers], p. 1231.)

You cannot be devoted to God unless you have been redeemed by His Son. That redemption cost Him dearly, but He offers it to you as a free gift that you can only receive by faith. The instant you receive it, He will free you from sin and judgment. You can go your way singing His praises, devoting your life to Him who loved you and gave Himself for you ([Gal. 2:20](#)).

Conclusion

On his deathbed, Matthew Henry, whose commentary on the whole Bible is still widely used almost 300 years after his death, said to a friend, “You have been used to take notice of the sayings of dying men—this is mine: that a life spent in the service of God and communion with Him, is the most pleasant life that anyone can live in this world.” Anna would agree. A life devoted to God is a life well spent. A life devoted to anything else, no matter how noble, is a life ultimately wasted.

Whatever you do for a living, make sure that love for the Lord Jesus Christ is at the heart of why you are living. Then, whether you live a short or long life on this earth, you can have the assurance that you have spent it well.