

If the Lord Wills: James 4:13-17
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What plans of yours have been thwarted? What are some plans you've made, big plans or maybe little plans, and then it didn't end up going the way you had planned, not even a little bit? It's like your plans hit a brick wall, and busted into pieces. Maybe you were in a romantic relationship that completely fell apart, unexpectedly. Maybe you had plans for your children that have not come to fruition. Maybe you had goals for your education, for your career, and for one reason or another you have not been able to attain those goals. Maybe you went shopping on black Friday and didn't get all the things you were hoping to get. Or maybe you were really hoping NOT to go shopping on black Friday and somehow got roped into doing so. There are many things we plan for, hope for, look forward to, that don't end up happening.

On the other hand, think about things that have happened in your life that you did not plan, things you were not anticipating . . . things that were a complete and unexpected surprise. A surprise pregnancy, a surprise job offer, an unexpected illness, an unexpected friendship. There are both pleasant surprises and very difficult surprises.

My point is, there's plenty of things in life that we plan for, and that don't end up happening. At the same time there are plenty of things in life that we don't plan for, that do end up happening. And I begin this way because I want us each to consider this fact of life, as we approach this passage of Scripture that warns us against arrogance in our planning, and exhorts us to be humble and God-centered in the way we think and speak about our plans. If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

As we look at these verses together I want to ask two questions. The two questions are, "How?" and "Why?" First of all, how should we think and speak of our future plans? This text tells us very clearly what we should *not* say and what we *should* say. And the second question is: why should we think and speak of our future plans in this way. These verses give us reasons for the instruction.

I. How should we think and speak of our future plans?

Verse 13 begins with the words, "Come now." The words are meant to get our attention—to say "listen up," "be warned." Then he states who he's addressing, "you who say . . ." He's addressing those who speak in a certain way about their future plans. But, of course, it's much deeper than what we say. It's about the intentions of our hearts and the attitudes of our hearts.

Listen to what this person says, and then we'll think about what might be wrong with it. "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit." James writes this in a general way so that we can all identify with it. These are the kinds of plans we all make, and must make. We plan where we're going to live. We plan where we're going to work. We make plans for education. We make travel plans. We make plans to buy or sell. We plan what we're going to eat. Our lives are filled with plans. We're constantly making plans for the future, whether it be for this afternoon or for next week or for 10 years down the road.

So now we're wondering, well, what's wrong with that? What's wrong with making plans? Is James saying that we shouldn't plan at all? Should we never make any housing plans or meal plans or business plans or education plans or travel plans? Is that what James is telling us? It's hard to imagine life without any plans.

James is not saying that we shouldn't plan. This is clear from verse 15, where we're told to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." Those are plans. We will do this or that—that's making plans. So the issue here is not making the plans, but the attitude of your heart in making plans.

Let's look again at verse 13. Notice how these plans are stated. We will go to a certain city. We will spend a year there. We will trade. And we will make a profit. There's quite a bit of confidence in those plans, isn't there? And we might want to ask some questions of this person, like, How do you know you'll spend a year there? Could it turn out to be less than a year or more than a year? How do you know there will be opportunities to trade? And how do you know that you'll make a profit.

Maybe the person has done all kinds of research and knows the opportunities for trading certain commodities and knows that there is the potential for profitable business. But the point is that the person James has in mind here is a person who makes his or her plans without the recognition that God is sovereign over all of my plans, and oftentimes His plans are different than my plans. So the point is not that we shouldn't make plans. The point is that we must acknowledging God's sovereignty over all things and understanding that our plans are always subject to His plans.

Andree Seu Peterson had an insightful piece in *WORLD* magazine this week. The title is "Looking Forward: Anticipation is in our nature, and our maker wants it that way." She talks about the smiling faces of those walking into restaurants, anticipating the enjoyment of a good meal. She talks about the rhythm of 3 meals a day, looking forward to those times to stop and eat, and the weekly rhythm of a work week with the anticipation of resting on

the weekend. Having worked in several factories and textile mills, she recalls the dominant topic of the 15-minute break and lunch break. “When’s my break? 20 more minutes till break! Hey, I didn’t get my break! Can’t help you now, I’m going on break.”

And she tells of a young man she knows, who is not a believer and therefore does not have a God-centered focus in his plans, who is always anticipating his next big vacation. Peterson writes, “It is obvious to me that [this young man] lives for these travels, and that he needs them like a drug to make his life bearable between them.”

But then she concludes, “It is the Master who has made us all [with this sense of anticipation]. He has no interest in us changing this peculiarity about us. He only wishes that anticipation would be fixed on things above, not things below that pass away. Anna and Simeon, by all outward appearances, had nothing going for them. But they ventured daily to the Temple in anticipation of Messiah’s coming, and were not disappointed.” That is a good word for us to hear. In our anticipation of Christmas, and of many other things, is it the Lord Jesus who is the focus our hopes and plans, or are we putting our hope in other things. You know, if we’re clinging so passionately to a particular plan of ours, what might that reveal about the idols in our lives? Like that young man who needs that next vacation like a drug.

There’s something very humbling and sanctifying about acknowledging, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” Stacy and I are very excited that December 18th is our 20th wedding anniversary. And we’re very much hoping, and planning, to get away for several days together to celebrate this anniversary. We’re hoping to do that sometime in February or March, because it looks like that’s when my parents will be able to come here to stay with our kids, so that we can go away. But there are a few things still up in the air about these plans. My parents live in Minneapolis, where my sister and brother-in-law also live. My brother-in-law serves with Wycliffe Bible Translators and takes frequent trips overseas as part of that ministry. When he’s gone, my parents help my sister with her kids. And there’s the likelihood that he will be on a trip sometime in March. Also, my dad is a chemistry professor, so there’s his teaching schedule that’s a factor as well.

So this passage is good for me to meditate on, as I’m really wanting these anniversary plans to come together in certain way. I have to hold these plans with an open hand. If the Lord wills.

It’s not wrong to plan, but let’s be mindful of our attitude as we plan. We ought to have a God-centered focus in our planning. Notice the clear contrast between verses 13 and 15. Verse 13 represents the arrogant attitude of someone who ignores God’s sovereignty. Verse 15 demonstrates the alternative attitude:

“Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’” If the Lord wills. Those are wonderful words, humble words, words that show our dependence on God and our submission to Him.

They’re not magic words. Don’t think that by merely voicing this short phrase you are obeying the text. It’s about the intentions of your heart and the attitudes of your heart. I’m sure there are plenty of times when individuals say these words but are not truly submitting to the Lord’s will. And we should make the opposite point, too, that the person who is submitting to the Lord’s will does not necessarily have to say these words every time plans are made. Let’s not become legalistic about this. It’s not primarily about saying the words, but living with an attitude of dependence on God. And when we *are* aware of our dependence on God, it will often be evident in the way we make our plans and in the way we speak about our plans.

Let me share with you several examples from the New Testament. Our Lord taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). And then He modeled that for us in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He prayed, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36, ESV) And listen to these statements by Paul. In Acts 18:21 the Jews in Ephesus wanted him to stay longer, but he declined and said, “I will return to you if God wills.” In Romans 1:10 he writes, “I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.” And near the end of the letter, also, he asks them to pray “that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.” In 1 Corinthians 4:19, “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills.” And 1 Corinthians 16:7, “I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.”

Jesus and Paul both model for us a humble submission to God’s will. We make our plans. We express our desires to God in prayer. And we do all of this with the understanding that God is completely sovereign over all things. As it says in Ephesians 1:11, He is the One “who works all things according to the counsel of his will.” So as we plan and as we pray, we ultimately must say, Your will be done. If the Lord wills, I will live and do this or that. That’s how we should think and speak of our future plans.

Listen to what Jeremiah Burroughs says about this. He was a Puritan preacher in England in the 1600s. This is from his book called *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. He writes, “A gracious heart is contented by the melting of his will and desires into God’s will and desires; by this means he gets contentment. This too is a mystery to a carnal heart. It is not by having his own

desires satisfied, but by melting his will and desires into God's will. So that, in one sense, he comes to have his desires satisfied though he does not obtain the thing that he desired before; still he comes to be satisfied with this, because he makes his will to be at one with God's will." (page 53)

Doesn't that sound awesome! Isn't that something to yearn for, to pray for, to humble ourselves to a place of submission and contentment such that we can be satisfied in whatever the Lord wills for us.

What a stark contrast to the self-will described at the beginning of James 4, with the fights and quarrels that come from us not getting what we want. To submit ourselves to God's will, to melt our will into His . . . that will bring peace and contentment.

Paul Miller, in his book *A Praying Life*, says this . . . see if you can identify with him . . . "The great struggle of my life is not trying to discern God's will; it is trying to discern and then disown my own [will]." (page 157)

Saying, "if the Lord wills" and meditating on that reality, is a way of loosening our grip on self-will.

II. Why should we think and speak of our future plans in this way?

The next question that we can consider is, Why? Why is this so? Why are we commanded to make our plans along the lines of verse 15 rather than verse 13?

1) We are ignorant of the future (verse 14a)

First of all, we are ignorant of the future. This reason is given in verse 14, "yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring." This is a humbling thought. And it's a humbling thought that we need to be reminded of often. Because if we haven't had a major surprise in our lives lately, it can be very easy for us to think that tomorrow is going to be just like today, and next week is going to be just like this week, and next year will be just like this year. And we can begin to think that we *do* know what tomorrow will bring. But if you have lost a loved one in a sudden tragedy, or you've been let go from a job without any warning, or a relationship has taken an unexpected turn, then you've experienced the uncertainty of tomorrow. Don't let the routine of today lull you into the delusion that tomorrow is necessarily going to be the same. We can tell ourselves that we know what tomorrow will bring, but in reality we don't. We are not omniscient. We don't know the future.

God, on the other hand, does know the future. He is omniscient. He knows all things, and He controls all things. He not only knows everything that will happen to you tomorrow and

the next day and every day after that, but He is also sovereign over each and every one of those events. He knows your future, and He controls your future.

Therefore it is foolish for us to make our plans for the future without acknowledging this. It is foolish for us to think that we can plan out our future without recognizing our lack of knowledge and God's infinite knowledge, our lack of power and God's infinite power. How can we say with any level of confidence, "I'm going to go to this city, spend a certain amount of time there, carry out these plans, and achieve the intended outcome"? We don't know that! Only God knows what will happen, and we need to make our plans acknowledging His sovereignty and humbly submitting to His will.

2) Life is a mist (verse 14b)

The second reason why we must acknowledge our dependence on God is because life is a mist. This is what James says next in verse 14. "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." Have you ever thought about your life as a mist? A vapor? Think about waking up in the morning and looking out the window and seeing a dense fog. But then it's only a short time before the sun rises and the fog has cleared. That's how brief and fleeting our lives are. We think we're so permanent. We think we're here to stay. We think that we're invincible. But a heart attack or a car accident or cancer can end our lives so quickly. And if not, even for those who live into their 90s, those 90 years are but a vapor in light of eternity.

I read this week about a couple who are about to celebrate their 80th wedding anniversary. John and Charlotte Henderson. They have a combined age of 211. They're the oldest married couple alive. John is 106, and Charlotte is 105. And, by the way, if you're looking for some marriage advice . . . they say that the secret to a strong marriage is a moderate lifestyle and being cordial to your spouse. They make it sound so simple!

Well, even for John and Charlotte, their combined 211 years is like a mist. Relative to most others, they have lived a very, very long time. But relative to eternity, it's a vapor.

It's crucial for us to realize that this life is quickly passing away. Whether we die today or in 80 years, this life is but a vapor. And therefore we must not put our hope and our trust in the things of this world—the enjoyments of this life. This life is going to be gone, and then what? When you die, then what? We will all live for eternity either in heaven or in hell. And so the challenge to each of us is to take this very short life and make it count for eternity.

The first step is to repent of your sin and trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. The sinful life is the life that ignores eternity, ignores God, and puts oneself at the center of the universe. But that is a foolish way to live because you don't know when your time will come and you will stand before the lawgiver and judge of the universe (as we saw back in verse 12), the one who is able to save and to destroy. Do you know, friend, what will happen to you on that day? Will you be saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ? Or will you be destroyed because you persisted in unbelief and rebellion against God? It is foolish to ignore eternity, to ignore God, and to put yourself at the center of the universe. It's also a miserable life to live, because you will miss out on the richest joys and pleasures imaginable. You will miss the pleasure of seeing and knowing God if you're so enamored with yourself, so engrossed in earthly things.

In Luke 12:13-21 Jesus shares a parable of a rich fool. He tells of a man whose land produced so plentifully that he didn't have enough space to store his crops. So he began to make plans, and they were plans that did not acknowledge the sovereignty of God nor did he acknowledge the brevity of life. He said, "I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." He had stored up much treasure here on earth, and he planned to enjoy it. The parable goes on, "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Life is a mist. We won't be here long, friends, and therefore it's foolishness to get too comfortable here. It's foolishness to store up our treasure here. You know, when we welcome people into our homes, we'll sometimes say, "Make yourself at home." But God's Word tells us, Don't make yourself at home here. This is not your home. We are sojourners here, merely passing through on our way to our eternal home.

3) Planning that ignores God's sovereignty is arrogant (verse 16)

A third reason why we must acknowledge God's sovereignty in our plans is because planning that ignores God's sovereignty is arrogant. This is in verse 16, "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." The word for arrogance here is found in only one other place in the New Testament, and that is in 1 John 2:16: "For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and *pride* in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the

world.” And the next verse says, “And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

Arrogance is bound up with self-centeredness, and the idea of autonomy and independence. Like the rich fool in Jesus’ parable, who thought he had it made. He didn’t need anybody’s help. He didn’t need to depend on anyone. He was living under the illusion that he was completely independent. And that illusion is accompanied by much pride. The same is evident in James 4, where the person who makes plans without acknowledging God’s sovereignty and without submitting to God’s will, is said to be boastful and arrogant and evil.

Paul Tripp preached a sermon on this passage entitled, “The Delusion of Self-Sovereignty.” That’s really what this is about. We live with the false notion that I’m in control, that I’m independent, that I can make it on my own. This is boastful and arrogant, and it is a total delusion.

Proverbs 27:1 says, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.” That’s exactly the point that James is making. You don’t know what tomorrow will bring, he wrote in verse 14. And your life is a mist. Therefore it’s ridiculous to boast in your plans or your wealth or your talents. Instead say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”

4) Planning that ignores God’s sovereignty is sin (verse 17)

Finally, we come to verse 17 and find an additional warning against arrogant planning, another reason why we must think and speak of our future plans in a humble way. And the reason is this: Planning that ignores God’s sovereignty is sin. Now, it’s not immediately obvious how verse 17 fits into this section. It says, “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” This is what we would call sins of omission, and it can be eye-opening to realize that we are all guilty before God, not only for sinful deeds that we have actively committed (sins of commission), but we are also guilty because of the good things we have failed to do (what we’ve omitted, sins of omission). We primarily think of our sin in terms of the wrong things we have done. We are guilty because we have lashed out in anger, or entertained lustful thoughts, or spread gossip and slander, or we have harbored bitterness in our hearts, or we have lied, cheated, stolen. We have actively committed a variety of sins in our actions and our thoughts and our attitudes. But have you ever thought about the fact that we are also guilty because of the good things we have *not* done? We have not served one another as we ought. We have not been bold enough in sharing the Gospel. We have not demonstrated love to our spouses as we should. We are

not as diligent in prayer and Bible reading as we ought to be. For these sins of omission, we must seek the Lord's forgiveness.

I think James makes this point here to show us that our plans for the future can be sinful in this way. They can be sinful by omitting a clear acknowledgement of my dependence on God. The plans themselves might not be sinful. Notice that the plans stated in verse 13 are not inherently sinful. It's not as though the person is saying, "we will go into such and such a city and spend a year there and lie, cheat, and steal and thus leave with a tremendous profit." No, the assumption is that it's a legitimate business venture. The problem is that the person fails to acknowledge his or her dependence on God. And this is sin.

Here's a practical application point for each of us. Sometime later today, or this coming week, get out your calendar. Maybe you have a paper calendar that you use, or a calendar that you have on your computer and phone. Get that out and take a look at some of the plans you have coming up in the next few months. Family gatherings, travel plans, work commitments, activities that you're involved in, ministry commitments. And just take some time to consciously submit all of those plans to the Lord. Simply acknowledge before the Lord, I don't have ultimate control over these plans. This calendar is Yours, God. And if any or all of these plans end up being changed in some way, I yield my will to your will. Let our prayer be that our will and desires will melt into God's will and desires.

We've seen this morning, first of all, *how* we are to think and speak of our future plans. We are to acknowledge, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." And then we've also seen 4 reasons *why* we should think and speak in this way about our plans. We are ignorant of the future. Life is a mist. Planning that ignores God's sovereignty is arrogant, and it is sinful.

I want to close with some lyrics from a song by Bebo Norman, which I like very much. The song is "I Will Lift My Eyes," and he sings, "I will lift my eyes to the Maker of the mountains I can't climb; I will lift my eyes to the Calmer of the oceans raging wild; I will lift my eyes to the Healer of the hurt I hold inside; I will lift my eyes, lift my eyes to You." I think those are appropriate and encouraging words for us at the conclusion of a message like this. We must lift our eyes away from the plans and the pleasures and the pains of this life, and we must lift our eyes to the One who is powerful and eternal. So with all of your plans for the future. With all of your worries concerning the future. With all of your hopes and dreams and concerns and anxieties, look to Him. In our ignorance of the future, look to the One who knows all things and controls all things. With an awareness of how

fleeting this life is, look to the One who is eternal. Say, Lord I trust You. And *if You will*, we will live and do this or that.