

Introduction

Scripture speaks of the will of God in two different ways. These are two separate and distinct realities. It is imperative that we realize the difference. One way the scripture speaks of the will of God is the will of command. He has revealed his will for how we live. If you do God's will in this sense, you are being obedient to his commands. In this first reference, God's will is not always done. Every time a person disobeys the Lord, his will is being broken. The second way the scripture speaks of the will of God is the will of decree. It relates to what God as Sovereign Ruler has determined that will actually come to pass. This decree includes that there are times when persons will not keep the Lord's commands. His decree includes for example, that Satan would fall and that human beings would disobey God and fall into sin. Unlike the will of command, the decreative will of God is always done. You cannot obey or disobey it; you can only participate in and see it unfold one moment at a time. So we only know God's will of decree as we look back at what he has brought to pass in the past. However, we do know that his will of decree governs providentially whatever is going on. This morning we are focused on this second concept and how knowing God is sovereign must affect our planning, hopes, and expectations.

[Read Text and Pray]

From the beginning of chapter 4 James has been hammering away at worldliness. Loving the world and the things in the world manifests a heart that has turned against God. Being driven by our fleshly desires amounts to adultery and enmity with God. Although there are many ways in which friendship with the world manifests itself, James initially addresses the hostility it produces in the midst of relationships. He pleads, "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers." James then moves on to address another manifestation of worldliness. It involves how we look at the future. James summons us to consider how we frame our plans, hopes, and expectations. To leave God out of the picture is ignorant, but it is also arrogant and evil. James's main point is that every Christian must look to the future with a heart of surrender to the sovereignty of God. James communicates this point by providing us first with a portrait of presumption, then he presents the problems with presumption, and finally he points to the preventative for presumption.

So, first, let's consider . . .

I. The Portrait of Presumption.

The portrait of presumption is presented in terms of a declared plan. It is personified by those who assert their confident intention to determine their own destiny. They speak like this, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and make a profit." What they are saying represents more than a plan. Plans are good. Planning is wise. The Bible promotes planning. Proverbs 14:15 says that "the prudent gives thought to his steps." Proverbs 21:5 says, "The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty (who does not plan) comes only to poverty." So the Bible tells us we ought to consider the future and consider where we are headed, and we ought to plan. Planning will be blessed.

What James addresses here is not the fabrication of a plan. Rather, it is a bold, self-confident assertion of intentions, the fulfillment of which is taken for granted. The folks who are stating they will make a profit are counting their chickens before the eggs hatch. But even more than this, they are speaking as if future success, future satisfaction, future accomplishment, depend simply upon their own determination. Accomplishment is a given; it all depends on what they decide to do.

Let's scan the statement James has brought before us. The statement is "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit." Now let's notice the variables that are involved. There is a time variable—today or tomorrow. Today or tomorrow—it does not matter—whatever I decide. There is also a geographical variable—such and such a town. That detail seems to be unimportant as well—wherever we decide to go. There is a financial variable. It is assumed that the economy will be robust. There is also a variable of duration—a year. We are going to stay a year. All these variables are assumed to be favorable. Ultimately everything depends simply upon the determination WE have to go and stay and trade, and WE WILL make a profit.

The mindset that is represented here is one of presumption. It presumes all these variables will be favorable. Presumption may be defined as acting or thinking with unwarranted boldness. Presumption assumes no mitigating factors. It assumes smooth sailing. In fact it may refuse even to acknowledge threatening possibilities. It is boldness and confidence that is not warranted by circumstances. It blinds itself to them. Presumption is a boldness and confidence that fails to account for opposition or disfavorable circumstances. And that is what these folks are doing that James calls forth to stand and be corrected.

And we can apply what James is saying to more than plans. Hopes and expectations also should be included in our understanding of presumption. We all have hopes about life which may be differentiated from plans. They are not what we intentionally and strategically seek to bring to pass out of a plan. And yet there are outcomes for which we hope and which we come to expect. It includes not only what we ourselves do but also what others might do to or for us. We think life ought to go a certain way. And when it does not, it is apparent that we hoped or expected it to be otherwise because we become angry or disappointed and feel justified in being so. We presumed. We wrongly assumed. We wrapped our expectations in worldliness and it exposed the darkness of our hearts. But this is presumption. We think that because we plan it or because we expect it or hope it, it ought to be. To be otherwise is just unacceptable or we start trying to manipulate things to be the way we wanted, hoped, or expected.

We know that there is something wrong with presumption because we have all learned in life that countless presumptions have failed to come to pass as we had hoped, dreamed, or planned. In this light, let's think of the life of Joseph the son of Jacob. We read his story in the second half of the book of Genesis. Surely, life did not turn out for Joseph the way he thought it would. He had the dream that his family would one day bow down to him. His father had demonstrated his favoritism with the gift of the many-colored coat. He was the trustworthy son sent to check on his brothers. But then his very own brothers sold him into slavery to a place far from home. And though he was faithful and honorable as a slave, he was falsely accused of assault and sent to prison. After some years he told his story to a man who had the opportunity to be able to appeal for his release. But that man said nothing for two whole years. You know, Joseph had to be wondering. None of his hopes, expectations, and plans had come to pass. But it was through all that the Lord was preparing him for an enormous opportunity. Joseph humbled himself and the Lord exalted him.

What are some of your disappointments in life? How is the life you are now living different from what you had hoped and dreamed? What expectations, especially the ones you feel justified to have, have been violated in your life? Even though we know better, we still have this tendency to presume. We presume we will be safe. We presume we will not be inconvenienced. We presume that justice will be served in our regard, that those who take advantage of us will get what they deserve for their wrongs or they will change their ways or they will finally be sorry. We presume we will be spared a deadly disease or live to a ripe old age. We presume our marriages will be like a

fairy-tale and all our children will be wise. But our presumptions have not kept bad things from happening. They have not guaranteed that only desirable conditions have come to pass in our lives. And yet we still often default to presumption.

As we hear James say, "Come now," we need to be open to ourselves and to the Lord. We need to search ourselves to look for this sin in our lives. Where have we made plans that depend solely upon our own choice? Where have we guarded hopes that our lives would look a certain way? What expectations have we developed that a variation in factors beyond our control has obliterated? We need to detect the presence of presumption where it is in us. We also need to recognize the fallacy of it.

So next, we see how James points to . . .

II. The Problems with Presumption

James wants us to notice several problems here.

A. First, presumption disregards our ignorance of the future. James points out, "you do not know what a day may bring forth." There is a striking contrast here. Did you notice the duration of the plan? Those who presume upon the future determine they are going to make a profit over the period of 365 days, but James rightly points out, "you don't even know what ONE of those days may involve." It is a truth also found in Proverbs 27:1, which urges, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you DO NOT KNOW what a day may bring." How true that was this week in Virginia! Did you see where the small town of Whitewood was basically washed away because of heavy rains and flash flooding? Some four inches of rain fell in an hour in that area. The town is located in a valley and the sudden fall of rain filled the rivers and creeks feeding the Dismal River which rushed through the town and flooded a hundred homes and washed some away. You never know what a day may bring forth.

Jesus told a parable about a wealthy man whose land was highly productive. He faced a dilemma because he lacked adequate storage for all his harvest. So he tore down his barns and built bigger ones. His goods were enough to richly supply the man for many years and he decided to take it easy for the rest of his life. But that night the Lord required his soul of him. You never know what a day may bring forth.

Every single day unexpected things happen. They completely alter the course of people's lives. Many days IT WILL happen to you and to me. The problem with presumption is we base our certainty and expectations on knowledge we simply cannot have or demands we simply have no right to make. Only God knows what every day will bring forth.

B. Second, presumption ignores the brevity and frailty of life. Our life is but a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. What is a mist? Think about it. A mist happens momentarily. It is the result of various conditions. And as soon as those conditions change, it is gone. A mist is powerless to control anything. The mere wind can blow it away and the sun will burn it off suddenly. A mist depends upon the right conditions; it cannot control those conditions. Therefore, it may suddenly appear and disappear just as suddenly. Our lives are a mist. We as humans are dependent and temporary. Presumption pretends we are in control and have all the time in the world. But in arrogance it deceives itself. The Bible says our lives are but a breath (Job 7:7), a shadow (Psalm 102:11), like a flower of the field (Psalm 103:15).

We do not have time to waste presuming on the future. Jesus could return. We could have our home swept away. We could catch a terrible disease. The economy could take a downward turn. That person we have been meaning to witness to could die suddenly. That person who is making our lives miserable could be around for 20 more years. We are dependent creatures; we do not rule the future. We do not control how people treat us. We are not the arbiters of justice. We are here at the pleasure of God. And the moment he requires our souls of us will be our last moment on this earth. Presumption ignores these truths. And it imperils us. We only go around once. And it is brief. Our lives do not consist of our possessions, of our rights, or of worldly hopes.

C. Now there is a third problem with presumption. It reflects an arrogant heart. James says in verse 16, "As it is you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." In its ignorance and in its refusal to account for its dependence, unwarranted boldness reveals pride in the heart. My life is about me, for me, and controlled by me. I am my destiny-maker. Remember what James said about how to conquer a worldly heart? He said to humble yourself before the Lord. Presumption disregards the sovereignty of God and exalts self as the sovereign. It is boastful and evil. So do not be presuming. You know it already. Presumption denies what it already knows to be true. And to know the right thing to do and fail to do it is sin. So repent!

III. The Preventative for Presumption

The key for preventing presumptive thinking is pinpointed by James in verse 15. He writes, "Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" The key for correcting the sin of presumption is to replace the sovereignty of God in your understanding of life and in your looking to the future. We need to be careful not to look at these verses in a superstitious way. James is not saying that we can make things better if we simply add a phrase whenever we state our plans. He is talking about an underlying attitude and recognition on the basis of which and in line with which we formulate our thoughts and ideas about the future. He is talking about our outlook, our attitude, and our determination.

James ascribes both our living AND our doing to the will of God. The ultimate reason we live is because it is God's will for it to be so. And the ultimate reason we will be able to do anything in life is also because it is the will of God. It is not merely his direct control over us, but because of his control over all circumstances that surround us. God is in control of all the conditions that might affect all of the variables that have to do with whether we might go to such and such a town, whether we would go there today or tomorrow or never, and whether we could stay there a year and whether we might actually trade and make a profit.

We should bear in mind that Psalm 139:16 tells us that the Lord was right there when we were being knit together in our mother's womb and every one of our days was written in the Lord's book before even one of them came to pass. He is Lord over our lives. He is the author of life. We live at the pleasure of God. Long ago he determined the number of days we would live. We completely depend upon him to be alive.

We also need to keep in mind that God governs every aspect of history and does so according to his own purposes. Ephesians 1:11 declares that we are "predestined according to the purpose of him who works ALL THINGS according to the counsel of his will." Our life and our place in the world and our circumstances are determined by the purpose of God. He works all things accordingly. That is what he pleases. All of life is subject to the will of God. The truth is that we cannot live apart from the will of God. We can go nowhere and do nothing if he is not pleased to allow it and enable it. And James is saying that this reality must be a part of our thinking, planning, hoping, and expecting

for us to not be arrogant and boastful, for us not to be presumptive in our hearts. It completely changes the way we look at life and the course of our lives when we start with the understanding that whatever will happen will happen ONLY "if the Lord wills." That is, if it is according to his ordained purpose and plan.

The preventive for presumption is a submission to this reality. We must embrace the fact that our God is in the heavens and does what pleases him. And part of humility before God is accepting and affirming that he is God and it is right for him to do what pleases him. After all as the one who alone is holy, the best of all outcomes are the ones that he has chosen. Our lives are not our own. We exist for the Lord. As Paul says in Romans, "For from him and through and to him are all things. To him be glory forever."

Now, to accept that God's will is the ultimate deciding factor in our living and in our doing is to embrace that God's plan has a particular focus. His plan has specific goals and is driven by purposes that see making a profit as secondary. God's main goal for his people is NOT that we are successful in achieving our worldly plans. God's main purpose in the world is to magnify His greatness through the salvation and sanctification of sinners through the work of Jesus Christ His Son.

God sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins and to reconcile sinners to himself. Jesus suffered on the cross to pay for our sin debt. And all who will turn from self-seeking to trust in Christ's finished work will be reconciled with him. But then God's predetermined plan for those who trust in Christ is that we become like Christ. And God employs all things in our lives to accomplish that purpose. This is how we know that for those who love God all things work together for good. What God is doing, what he is WILLING, is that everything in our lives results in increasing spiritual maturity, steadfastness, and Christlikeness. Therefore, any plans we make, any expectations we hold, must welcome it if it is the determination of God to do otherwise. We must see injustices, inconveniences, trials, pains, suffering, persecutions, failures, and the like as determined by the Lord to increase our godliness.

And understanding them this way, we can welcome them and rejoice in the midst of them instead of being angry and resentful. Think how much of our anger or displeasure comes along because we have formed certain expectations in our minds of the way things ought to be. And when things do not conform to those expectations, we direct our anger at people who are the visible explanation things are not the way they ought to be. All the while the ultimate explanation is God. His will is the reason your plans did not come to pass. His will is the reason he allowed an annoying person to invade your life. He is the reason you experience various trials. It is all because you need these experiences. These things are there for God's purpose for you. And therefore our anger and our disappointment is ultimately directed at God. We are arrogant and prideful and it nauseates the Lord and keeps us from doing the other will of God. God is using these things to address the worldliness that is still in our hearts. When we are anchored in the assurance that what the Lord wills is what is best for us, when we are truly humble before the Lord, the phrase, "if the Lord wills," becomes an expression of glad surrender to the Sovereign Lord, who if he does not do as I plan or hope or expect, it truly is because he has something better for me that I might grow to be more like Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The life of Joseph the son of Jacob, is remarkable. It is remarkable because he appears to have been completely humble to the Lord's sovereign rule over his life. We do not ever see him complaining. He experienced several severe injustices in his life the effects of which spanned

decades. But in the end, he held no resentment toward those who were closest to him and who had hurt him the most—his own brothers. They are the ones who sold him into slavery and claimed to their father that he was dead. They were also the ones who showed up in Egypt prostrating themselves before Joseph who had risen to the position of prime minister. They were the ones who worried Joseph would pay them back for the evil they had done and begged Joseph for forgiveness. And it was Joseph who said, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”

You can only behave like that if you have it settled in your heart that God is sovereign and wise and good, and whenever his plans diverge from yours, it is because they are far better. And that is how to prevent presumption.