

I'VE GOT PLANS!

James 4:13-17 • FCBC • Feb. 19, 2023

Intro: We've been in the letter of James the last few months—a letter written to us to underscore the difference that faith makes. James is incredibly practical. He insists that faith is more than merely head-bobbing—something we confess we believe but otherwise makes little difference practically in our lives. Instead, James gets disturbingly real with us. He assumes we will face problems and won't know what to do. But then he doesn't tell us how to live trouble-free, but how to live when troubles come. Do we bitterly complain? Or do we use them as an opportunity for growth? It depends on our faith. He figures we'll sweat out temptations that may often get the better of us. But our faith will expose the temptation and teach us better ways in the future. He knows we'll say things we don't mean and shouldn't express, and likely will burn others with our tongues, but our faith will convict us of the evil and change our conversations to more constructive and healing interactions. He understands the pull of money and status and how it affects how we see and treat those who have it and those who lack it; but our faith redefines for us what matters most and reshapes how we see every other person who steps in front of us. Today we come to another way that real faith shapes us: it alters how we plan our lives.

•We all have plans. We live today, but we want to tinker with tomorrow. When tomorrow comes, we want to be ready—we want to shape our days to accomplish our dreams & goals. And there's nothing wrong with that! If you don't plan, you won't get assignments done, or pay bills on time, or make & keep appointments. Without planning, your vacation might turn into a disaster, or your job might turn into a permanent vacation. It's God who tells us to take one day in seven off—and if you don't plan, you won't even do that! Obviously, planning is important—probably more than we realize. James tells us that it is one of the places in our lives where our faith is most needed, and most tested. Your plans reveal more about you than you know: what you plan and how you're planning reveals what you think about life, and ultimately what you think of God.

I. [THE PROBLEM]

4:13-14

[A. WE MAKE PLANS] (vs. 13)

¹³**Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" —**

To get their attention, he begins abruptly: "Hey! Listen up!" At this time in century one, towns were springing up everywhere due to relative peace, a common language and good roads. Jews saw an opportunity to make money, so many traveled to growing cities, making deals and selling goods, and returned much richer in a year or two. The

opportunities were like plump, ripe clusters of grapes on the vine. James is quoting the typical businessmen's plans; lit. *are saying*—i.e. this is how they operate! They've got it all figured out:

The Time: "Today or tomorrow" (their departure date);

The Location: "This or that city";

The Duration: "spend a year there";

The Activity: "carry on business";

The Goal: "make money"—they're confident in the outcome!

• Planning is not wrong, nor is making an honest living. In fact, planning for the future is admirable. One of my favorite cartoon strips is Zits—about the misadventures of 17 year old Jeremy Duncan. In one of them, Jeremy is talking with his fuddy-duddy dad. Good planning is a good idea. And there's nothing wrong with what they were saying; But it's what they *didn't* say, what they *failed* to take into account that isn't right.

God plays no part in their thinking. They're self-assertive in their travel plans, & self-confident in their time schedules, & self-centered in their goals. Operating as though God doesn't exist or doesn't care. This is part of the *worldliness* that James has spoken so forcefully against! But James says what we believe ought to make a difference in how we plan; our faith should practically affect our future. They should listen to King Solomon: [Prov. 27:1]. James corrects them: *We make plans:*

[B. BUT LIFE IS UNPREDICTABLE] (vs. 14a)

^{14a} **yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.** i.e.

[1. The future is uncertain.] Do you know for sure what will happen tomorrow? "I'm getting up at 6 a.m., getting ready for school; I'll go to this/that class, turn my homework in, eat lunch at MacDonald's with my friends, flirt with that cute guy/girl, be home by 2:30..." *Wait! Are you sure?* Tomorrow will be the same as every other Monday: in to work, plow through the hours, take a lunch break—dig out from under the pile, get over the hump on Wednesday and look forward to next weekend when I can..." *Wait! Tomorrow is promised no man.* The future is a complex interaction of people, timing, events, and opportunities all controlled by (not us, but) God.

• A few summers ago, we were floating in kayaks on the Deschutes River; it was hot, and we weren't moving very fast. Two large inflatable boats of teens, passed us—and we laughed and joked with them as they quickly slid by. Ten minutes later on an open stretch, we saw they were out of their boats, and jumping off a large rock next to a rope swing—it was about 30 feet up. I felt uncomfortable about it—but there was an adult on shore, so I kept quiet. About half an hour later we came to our port of exit, but as we pulled our kayaks in, we heard people crying and screaming. Apparently one of the

teen boys jumping from the rock hit the water wrong, went under, came up for a moment, submerged again, and never again surfaced. He was found hours later drowned. As we had passed him by, none of us—not even he—knew that he was living the last twenty minutes of his life. The heart of the problem is not that they had a faulty time-management technique, but that they possessed a faulty understanding of themselves. Not only is the future uncertain, *my life* is too: (vs. 14b)

^{14b} **What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time then vanishes.**

[2. My life is fragile.] What's our life like? When James searches for an apt picture of life, he pulls no punches: you are a *fog*, a *mist*, *vapor*. Something hardly substantial. Life isn't solid, sure, secure, guaranteed; it's *fragile*. Every day, we assume the one thing that we clearly cannot assume: that we will be alive tomorrow. The only certainty about life is that it will end sooner or later. And it may come at a time unexpected & in a manner unforeseen. We don't know *when* or *how* we will die. Just that each of us *will*. So if the solidness of our lives is like a mist which so quickly dissipates—if *we* are like *that*, think how uncertain our plans really are! *So does that mean we don't plan? No. James' offers a correction* (vss. 15-16):

¹⁵**Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."** ¹⁶**As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.** *So here is:*

II. THE CORRECTION

[A. FACTOR IN GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL WILL] His *what?* His *providential* will. *Providence?*

Q: What shapes your life? *Coincidence* or *Providence?* Before you answer, think about each of those ideas:

- [*Coincidence is the occurrence of events that happen at the same time by accident, but seem to have some connection.*] *They really don't. It just appears that way. But it's actually just random. The connection is in your mind, but there's no real purpose or reason or guiding hand behind it.*
- The exact opposite of coincidence is *Providence*. *Providence is divine guidance and care; God's power directing and using every event in human history.* God is in control, even when we're not! James insists we should factor that into our plans. He isn't discouraging or forbidding planning. In fact, he assumes we will: But instead of brashly and thoughtlessly saying, "we will leave and go here/there, do this/that...", we should say, "if it is the Lord's will..." In other words,

[1. We should express our dependence on God.] What these planners lacked was a sense of God's providence that rules our lives. James implies we don't know for sure what the Lord's will is.

- Theologians rightly divide God's will into two aspects: [Deut. 29:29] his [secret (providential) will] which He always carries out, which no one can thwart. There are

things that God allows or does that are His will—including things He won't allow or do. So it's secret in the sense that he doesn't necessarily reveal *why* He is doing it or *why* he allows it, or why He isn't doing it or allowing it. It is His, not ours, to know. But there are things He very much wants us to know—i.e. His [revealed will]—and it is found most clearly in the Bible. The Scriptures give us guidance and direction—and express God's clear will for us. Do we always do it? No. Does God *make* us do it? No. But it is His desire/will for us. So there are things we do know and things we don't know. And in fact, we don't even know what we don't know. It all should humble us.

- So James is doing more than just inserting the right words into our mouths: “if the Lord wills...” He's trying to correct our perspective and shape our hearts. What we ought to say aloud sometimes, and whisper often, and never forget is that God's providence rules our lives. We are dependent upon God for more than we think—even for our next breath.

- Paul's awareness of the uncertainty of plans, but the certainty of God's providence: [Acts 18:21, 1 Cor. 4:19, 16:7/x]. We ought not take for granted some very basic things: that the Lord is willing for this to happen (e.g. business trip, a vacation, even a trip to Costco), and that we will be alive, and that the Lord will order the opportunities and give us strength to take advantage of them. The key to avoiding sinful self-sufficiency is maintaining a godly perspective: that God is in the backdrop of every human life. *But:*

[2. If we *don't*, we cultivate arrogance.] Not taking God into account with our plans is both unrealistic & foolish. We can't control all the variables of life. We can't even be sure of life. But not figuring God into the picture is not only off the mark, it's evil: The Apostle John warns us: [1 John 2:15-17]. The word *pride* here is the same word *arrogance* here. Does it mean being really full of yourself? A bragger with a big head? Maybe. But not necessarily. It could sound like this: “Look, I don't really care what God says. I can do whatever I want. It's *my* life. I've got plans. Nobody has the right to tell me what I can and can't do, or what they think I *should* do.” That's not only proud and wrong, it's *evil*. But it doesn't even have to sound that *defiant*. For it to be arrogant, all you need to do is say...¹³ **Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”**—(vs. 13), and mean it. Period. Nothing more, nothing less. And your thoughts may be *godless*. *Godless*.

- But don't picture God as some grump/control freak who doesn't like anyone else to assert any control. eg “Hey Gabriel, you see that guy down there? He's getting a little big for his pants. Let's take him down a notch or two...” He then uses his providence to pull the rug right out from under us. NO! When we plan, factoring in God's providence

doesn't mean that we've just got to take into account that God might thwart us. Instead, it puts a wonderful spin on anything that happens. We know God loves us and uses his providence to do good for us in every situation. So when something happens that we didn't expect, or when what we did expect doesn't happen—we can trust God's providence to get us through. When we plan, and at the last second our plans fall apart, we know that God is working to do good for us, and we can rest. His timing may not be ours, and time and again we should ask ourselves, *Where is God in all this?* I've learned that there's a reason. Even if we can't figure it out. Factoring in God's providence to our plans eases our disappointments, opens our eyes to a larger perspective, and comforts us with hope—God is at work even when circumstances take a turn we hadn't seen coming.

- Not only should we take into account God's providence which shapes our days, and someday calls us home, we should also focus on *God's revealed will*:

¹⁷So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. So:

[2. FOCUS ON GOD'S REVEALED WILL] (vs. 17)

- James points out that the sin isn't just that we do something we are *forbidden* to do; but that we *fail to do* what we *ought to do*. And what ought we to do? What God has told us. i.e. all our planning, we ought to concentrate on God's *revealed* will for us, not just on our own schedules and goals and plans. Our focus should shift: We all have many plans that may or may not happen; but there are some things we ought to make certain do happen—those things which God clearly tells us to do in Scripture. If we *don't do* what God has *told us to do*, we are sinning, even if we have planned to do a lot of other things that aren't sinful. Like what? Like this: [Micah 6:8/x]. God does have plans for you and me. Point is to keep our focus always on what God has revealed for us, and to factor into all our plans what he hasn't revealed—what He providentially will do with us.

- When the Jews were taken captive to Babylon, when their homes were destroyed and their land full of smoldering rubble, God spoke to them through the prophet Jeremiah. They saw their lives as having taken a terrible turn; they hadn't planned to live out their lives in a foreign land. God counseled them to settle down and build houses & be a light to their Babylonian neighbors; and to focus on principles and promises in Scripture. Then he reminds them: [Jer. 29:11/x]. Factoring in God's providential will gives you perspective & hope; focusing on God's revealed will gives you guidance and direction.

III. YOU HAVE A CHOICE

- In discussing the uncertainty of the future, my sixth grade teacher rammed the point home: "Nobody knows what tomorrow will bring. Some of you probably won't live to be 40." (which seemed to be an ancient age to me at that time). In fact, some of you

might not live to graduate from high school. In fact, someone sitting in this classroom might not see 7th grade.” We all were looking at each other like deer caught in the headlights. (“Not me!?”) About a month later, the girl who sat next to me was returning from a neighborhood market on her bicycle. At dusk. In the fog. And because Gretchen lived in Ridgewood, she had to cross the country road. And in the twilight, and the fog, an oncoming car did not see her, and hit her—and she died. I’ll never forget that empty desk. It so unnerved us, the teacher finally moved it, leaving an empty space.

- The lesson we’re to learn is not an easy one. The point isn’t that we need to make a choice between living a self-sufficient life and a God-dependent one. Instead, the lesson is that we are *not* self-sufficient; that we in fact *do* live in dependence upon God, whether we are aware of it or not. Every person is at God’s mercy. His providence rules every life. In light of that, we ought to be humble, and factor that in to every dream, every decision, every plan, every schedule. And we ought to focus on God’s plan for our lives that he has made clear to us in the Scripture. “If it is the Lord’s will” should make us humble. And “Because it is the Lord’s Will” should shape our plans. We should plan to do God’s will.

- God providentially used that empty desk to bring me to Christ. It brought home to me how fragile life is. How badly I longed to have certainty about what happens after death. Over the years I’ve learned to plan to do God’s will. And if I don’t get to see the next decade, or next year, or even next month, it will be OK. Because I know I’ll see the One who has providentially shaped my life all the way through.

(Pray)

*O God,
My life is in your hands!
You order my steps and determine my days,
and someday, you will call me home.
Help me see just how dependent I really am on you,
and help me remember what you’ve clearly given me to do.
I want to live my days to honor and glorify you.
Amen*