

Rev. Lex DeLong / General Adult

Borrowed Breath: Learning to Live by The Source / James 4:13–17

"We drift into spiritual arrogance when we draft our futures without consulting the Architect; true wisdom writes every plan in pencil and hands the eraser to God."

Notes

01/18 James 4:13-17, "The Arrogance of the Calendar: Submitting Our Plans to the Sovereign,"  
Scripture: Isa. 55:8-11

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Proverbs 19:21 "21 Many plans are in a man's heart, But the counsel of the Lord will stand."

Proverbs 16:9 "9 The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps."

James warns the merchants who say, "We will go, buy, sell, make profit." He calls them "vapor." The sin isn't planning; the sin is planning as if we are autonomous. *Literal Hermeneutic on "Vapor" (atmis)*. It's a mist. It has no substance to hold itself up.

**Sermon Outline:** The Illusion of Certainty

**Series:** Borrowed Breath (Week 3)

**Text:** James 4:13-17 (Primary); Isaiah 55:8-11 (Secondary)

**Title:** The Illusion of Certainty: Curing the Presumption of the Calendar

**The Main Idea**

"We drift into spiritual **presumption** when we trust the **illusion** of a guaranteed tomorrow; true wisdom writes every plan in pencil and hands the eraser to the Architect."

**Introduction: The Illusion of Control**

We are three weeks into the New Year. The "fresh start" adrenaline is fading. The digital calendars we synced and the apps we optimized in December are now filling up with notifications, alerts, and obligations.

Many are obsessed with the "Five-Year Plan," retirement strategies, and calendar management. We view time as a commodity we ourselves own, spend, and trade.

We plan what we will do on our day off, on vacation, or when we retire.

We are always planning for tomorrow.

As we walk through this time together today, I want you to continue reminding

yourself, the problem is not that we plan, but that we plan as if we own our days rather than the Lord.

### **The Series:**

- Week 1: God is the Source of breath.
- ++Week 2: Anxiety comes from trying to be the King of our own delivery system.
- ++Week 3 (Today): We confront the "Illusion of Certainty"—The tendency to assume we have enough breath to guarantee tomorrow.

James 4:13 "13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.""

## **I. Recognize the Presumption of Ownership (James 4:13)**

We often fall into the trap of a misplaced sense of ownership. Theologically we know that all things are the Lord's, we understand that all that we have is His, but then there are those everyday things that we experience, that we do, that we work with, even the very beating of our hearts, that falls off the radar of His ownership. When that happens with those things, we begin to plan, to do, and to experience things without even a thought of God in them. Soon we begin to make plans in the wake of life's happenings that drive us to the shore of this world, instead of the peace of His presence, lovingkindness, and compassion.

### **A. We naturally draft strategies that appear responsible to the world**

James starts with "Come now" (*Age nyn*). This isn't a polite invitation; it is a singular imperative, like grabbing someone by the lapels to snap them out of a daydream.

Look at the verse again and note the last phrase, "engage in business..." James here uses the word *emporeusometha*—which literally means 'to go trading.' It comes from the root word *Emporos*—the high-stakes merchant. These weren't local shopkeepers; they were the 'Type-A' risk-takers traveling dangerous trade routes. Their plan checks every business box: Time ("Today or tomorrow"), Location ("such and such a city"), Duration ("a year"), and measurable Result ("make a profit").

**Note:** Again, I want to remind us all...

God is not against planning; He is against presuming

Proverbs 30:25 speaks of the ant to prepare its food in summer (planning ahead), according to God's design, His plan.

The sin, the concern being spoken of here by James isn't the planning pen; it's the presumption of whose hand is writing with it.

The issue that stands at odds with our Sovereign Lord is that...

## **B. We practice "Hidden Atheism" when we budget time we don't actually own**

**...by thinking or acting like we are the ones that have the pen firmly in our grasp, writing what we know tomorrow will hold, as if we are guaranteed that of which we write.**

**Lets review for just a moment, the traps we are tracking through this series on the "Breath" that we live by as we start the new year and begin to plan:**

First we have the...

"Breathing Atheist" - thinking and acting like it is our ownership of tomorrow and not God's

The first week we discussed what I would label the "Breathing Atheist," what we are as we live in what we think is our own power, without giving even as much as a thought about it being God given.

Then we looked at the...

"Functional Atheist" - thinking and acting like we are choosing when to access/use God's power

Last week we discussed the "Functional Atheist," what we are when we assume that we are choosing when to do things with God's power. Such and such will happen because I prayed for it, we prayed for it, I got so many to pray for it.

Today we are considering the...

"Planning Atheist" - when we presume ownership of the 'calendar,' of tomorrow

Here in James 4, we see the "Planning Atheist."

In James' writing here, these merchants weren't just planning a vacation; they were planning an empire.

They believed their potential wealth insulated them from life's turns and even at times from God's reality, if they even gave any thought to God at all.

Their sin wasn't lack of organization; it was *godlessness (ungodliness)*. When we presume ownership of the calendar, we are again attempting to occupy the throne of the Sovereign.

## Illustration: The Napoleon Mistake

There is a famous story regarding the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Before the Battle of Waterloo, a general reportedly approached him and cautioned, "Sir, we will have a great victory, but we must remember that man proposes, but God disposes."

Napoleon, in a moment of supreme arrogance, allegedly shot back: "**I want you to understand, Sir, that Napoleon proposes, and Napoleon disposes.**"

History tells us what happened next. That afternoon, a heavy rain fell—something outside Napoleon's control—which bogged down his artillery in the mud. He lost the battle, his empire, and his freedom.

When we presume we own the future, we act like Napoleon.

We claim a power that belongs to God alone.

If we intend to cure or avoid the presumption of the calendar, the "Planning Atheist," we must ...

## II. Remember the Fragility of Our Breath (James 4:14)

James 4:14 "14 Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."

Of course we plan for tomorrow, next week, month, year - remember from the start...

### **The problem is not about planning, it's about presuming**

There is an old Latin saying, "Deo Volente" meaning God Willing. In the early 1900's it was common for the English to end their personal letters with Deo Volente or D.V. It means God willing, and it's thought that the phrase was pulled from James 4:13-15.

See, the problem is that often...

### **A. We confuse our calendar entries with guaranteed certainties**

"You do not know what will happen tomorrow." When we put a "9:00 AM Meeting" into our phone, we feel a sense of control. But James exposes this as a deception. The gap between *planning* Tuesday and *living* Tuesday is entirely out of our hands.

### **B. We must realize we lack the structural integrity (Power) to guarantee our own plans**

"For what is your life? It is even a vapor (*atmis*)."

Here James gives us a Linguistic Visual. Atmis describes smoke from a fire or steam from a pot. It looks substantial for a moment—it can even block out the sun—but if

you try to lean on it, you fall right through.

James is likely echoing the Old Testament wisdom of Ecclesiastes, where life is called "hebel" (a breath/vanity/fleeting).

**Illustration:** When James wrote this letter, the disaster of Pompeii (79 AD) was likely recent news or a known historical tragedy. In Pompeii, recent archaeologists discovered bodies preserved in ash doing exactly what James described: **buying and selling.**

They found a baker putting bread in the oven. They found merchants counting coins, like in this picture. They were in the middle of their "year," executing their "plans," when suddenly a vapor (pyroclastic cloud) swept down and ended their timeline instantly.

In this passage, James isn't being poetic; he is being literal. One moment you are "buying and selling," but it's all just a vapor and at times, like in Pompeii, literally consumed by a vapor. The next moment, the vapor vanishes and what was accomplished by a truly sovereign hand is all that remains.

We treat tomorrow, the future, like a paved road we can walk on. However, the text says we are just passing through the mist that is here one minute and gone the next.

You cannot build a heavy, five-year load on a foundation of smoke; it will simply fall through.

Knowing this, there is only one option that is seated in reality. We must choose — choose to...

### **III. Release the Control of Our Calendar (James 4:15-16)**

James 4:15–16 "15 Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." 16 But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil."

Letting go is rarely easy. Trusting someone or something outside of ourselves is an emotionally heavy lift, especially when we can't feel the support before we take the leap.

I remember ziplining off a ski mountain with my son-in-law. The ride down was exhilarating. At the top, I could sit back into the harness, feel my weight fully supported, and trust the equipment because I could feel its tension holding me up. But when we descended off the mountain, we reached the final platform—a small deck suspended 40 feet in the air.

One by one, the attendants unhooked us from the sturdy zip line and clipped us into a rappel line. To my eyes, that line looked no stronger than the woven leash I used to use to walk our family dog, Mysty. I watched the people in front of me, including my son-in-law, step off the edge and glide gracefully and safely to the grass below.

Then, it was my turn.

The problem was that I could no longer *feel* the concrete reality of the support. I couldn't experience the hold until I was already in the air. Frozen by the need for control, I couldn't bring myself to simply step off and trust the rappeler to slow my descent safely to the ground.

Eventually, realizing there was no other way down, I sat on the very edge of the wood. I shimmed forward, inch by painful inch, until my center of gravity passed the point of no return. Down I went. I reached the ground safely, just like the others, but there was a difference. The others landed unscathed. I arrived with a back full of scratches from the rough edge of the platform I refused to let go of.

### The Application

As children of God, we often strive to maintain control. We wait to "feel" the support of His hand before we are willing to trust and move. The truth is, we will eventually get to where God wants us to be—He is faithful to bring us home.

However, we choose the manner of our arrival. Some of us will reach the finish line with peace, having trusted the "mechanism" of God's sovereignty. Others will arrive with the scrapes and bruises of a difficult journey, simply because we insisted on doing God's will our own way, clinging to the ledge until the very last second.

If we desire to avoid life's scrapes and bruises, we must trust God's plan and...

## **A. We must choose to replace our demands with a posture of surrender**

"If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." *Deo Volente'*

This isn't a magical phrase we tack onto the end of a sentence; it is a theology of dependence. We acknowledge that our very survival ("we shall live") and our success ("do this") are not prerogatives claimed by us, but permissions granted by God.

For centuries, Christians took James 4:15 so seriously that they wouldn't write a letter without adding two letters at the bottom: **D.V.** You see it in the letters of the Puritans, the Methodists like John Wesley, and even in business ledgers from the 1800s. A merchant would write: *"Meeting in London, Oct 12, D.V."* They weren't being superstitious; they were being honest. They knew the date on the calendar was a proposal, not a promise.

## **B. There comes a point when we must choose to stop stealing glory from the only One who inhabits the future**

"All such boasting is evil," James says here

The word for "boasting" here is alazoneia. In ancient Greek culture, an alazon was a charlatan or "quack doctor" wandering from town to town selling cures he didn't possess. When we guarantee our future, we are selling a product (time) that isn't in our inventory.

James calls this "evil" (poneros). This isn't just a mistake; this isn't simply that we forgot; it is active malice. It suggests that ignoring God's sovereignty is a hostile takeover of His throne. True submission means writing with the pen loosely so the King can guide it to write His plan rather than our own. It is to give God the final say.

After all of this, James leaves us at a point of no return, the center of gravity is beginning to pull us forward off the platform and soon, if we don't make the choice to step off into tomorrow in faith, we will be pulled off by the gravity of God's will, scraping our back along the way.

To escape the scrape and feel the peace of a safe descent into tomorrow, the only choice we have is to...

## **IV. Respond to the Urgency of Today (James 4:17 & Isaiah 55)**

James 4:17 "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."

James holds no punches. We know the only true reality is that God holds tomorrow, and today is just a fleeting vapor that is here and gone.

### **A. We cannot afford to procrastinate when our time is vapor (James 4:17)**

- Omission: Most of us confess sins of commission. James warns us about the sin of omission. The "good" here isn't just finishing your to-do list; it is the humble submission we just discussed. It is the act of bowing the knee.
- The Connection: If life is a vapor, procrastination is presumption. To say "I will help that person tomorrow" or "I will submit to God next year" is a sin because you are betting God's mercy against a day you don't own. Wisdom says, "I must obey now."

**Illustration: The Rabbi's Advice** There is an ancient rabbinic story about Rabbi Eliezer, who taught his disciples: "**Repent one day before you die.**" His disciples were confused. They asked, "But Rabbi, how can we know the day of our death?" The Rabbi smiled and replied: "**Exactly. Therefore, repent today.**" This is a picture of his final resting place. It is a powerful visual that connects to the reality that he, too, was a "vapor" who had to face his own mortality.

One way or another...

## **B. We must/will submit our limited logic to God's higher vantage point (Isaiah 55:8-9)**

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways."

We plan based on ground-level visibility; God plans from the Heavens. Handing Him the eraser and letting Him guide our hand as we write about our plans for tomorrow isn't losing control; it is upgrading to a higher intelligence.

## **C. We anchor our fleeting vapor to God's effective Word (Isaiah 55:10-11)**

I want you to see something fascinating in the physics of these two verses. Look at James 4—he calls life 'vapor.' Now look at Isaiah 55—he calls God's Word 'rain.' Do you see the difference? One floats away and disappears; the other comes down heavy, and remains. This isn't just poetry; it's a **hydro-logical contrast**.

When we look at these two texts side-by-side, we see a contrast between two very different types of water.

Man's Life (James 4): Atmis (Mist/Vapor). It rises up, disappears, and waters nothing.

God's Word (Isaiah 55): "Rain and Snow." It comes down, saturates the earth, and produces life.

James reminds us that our plans evaporate like smoke, Isaiah points out that God's Word saturates like rain.

To make a vaporous life count, we must align our temporary breath with His enduring purpose.

### **Conclusion: The Pencil and The Eraser**

Let me say this one last time—this is not a call to passivity. We are not called to drift like leaves in the wind; we are called to be diligent farmers who plow the field (that's our job) but trust God for the rain (that's His job).

Visual:

Imagine your calendar app or your life plan.

Most of us write in permanent digital ink—we get angry when God interrupts us.

"We drift into spiritual **presumption** when we trust the **illusion** of a guaranteed tomorrow; true wisdom writes every plan in pencil and hands the eraser to the

| Architect."

Are you willing to let God erase your plan for "tomorrow" so He can write His purpose for it?

Are you willing to end every plan you "write" with DV, God Willing?

One way or another, God will get you to the place on the ground where He wants you to be, where He knows that there is safety, the only difference between providence and a step of faith are the scrapes and bruises that might be present or avoided.

"If God wills...His ways are higher than our ways."

Pray...