



Real Faith.
Real Life.

LESSON

12

Week of March 26

If the Lord Wills

Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that" (James 4:15).

Devotional

That life is hard and so much of it uncontrollable is a lesson that most of us learn early in life. Though we may live in denial for a time, tragedy and misfortune soon force us to reckon with our inability to make things work out the way we want.

Regrettably, we are far more prone to deny our own lack of control and behave as if there is nothing we cannot do. The wisdom of the world tells us that we can be self-sufficient, and so we arrogantly speak and act as if we are sure of the future.

Today, James reminds us of our place in the world. In keeping with his concern to contrast life according to God's wisdom with life according to the world's wisdom, James tells us that we cannot be absolutely sure of what tomorrow holds, and therefore we must remember not to presume against the will of God (4:13–16).

The people James seems to have in mind are wealthier Christians who are most likely involved in the practice of trade (v. 13). These wealthy individuals have responded to the difficulties of life by confidently boasting in the future profitability of their enterprises. It is important to note that James is not condemning the possession of wealth or even wise planning for the future. Wealth can be used for furthering the kingdom of God and planning is an essential part of the stewardship God requires of us. Rather, James is condemning the idea that money can bring any security to us. The wealth we possess today could be lost in an instant; it is fleeting just like our lives (v. 14). It brings us no real security, and we cannot boast in it. Rather, we must trust all that we have and all of our future into the hands of the Lord who alone determines what shall come to pass (v. 15).

Also, James is not condemning all assertions about the future or saying that the statement "if the Lord wills" is a magic phrase that guarantees our trust in God's hidden providence. Rather, he is speaking to matters of the heart. In all that we do or plan, we must remember that the future is unknown to us and that ultimately only God can be trusted to work things out. This trust must be evident in our lives whether or not we always expressly verbalize it.

CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

The call to recognize God's sovereign will over the future is incumbent upon the rich and poor alike. And though the statement "Lord willing" is not a magic phrase conveying absolute trust in God, it is often true that when such wording is absent, so too is confidence in God's sovereignty. As you plan, remember God's hidden providence and Calvin's wise assertion that "the practice of saying 'If the Lord will or permit,' ... ought to be carefully attended by all the godly."¹

Open it

1. Describe what shopping looks like to you. Are you one who plans your trip carefully and full of lists and details, or do you go with a general idea but open to change, or do you have no plan at all?

Read it

JAMES 4:13-16

Explore it

2. What does James caution people not to do?
3. What reason does he give for this caution?
4. What does James compare our life with?
5. What happens when we know the right thing to do but don't do it?

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/if-lord-wills/>

Apply it

When preaching through this epistle, a brother in Christ told me that he was so thankful for James and all that it was doing in his life and in the life of our church. Then he said, “What I’m most thankful for is that James only has five chapters.” This brother had discovered something to which many Christians can testify: James turns our lives in this world upside down. But it does this for the good of God’s people and for the good of God’s glory among the lost and the poor.

Different books of the Bible cause different effects in our lives and in the life of the church. Books like Ruth are going to comfort us, while books like James are going to challenge us. As long as we let the Word do the speaking and the leading, we can know that God is going to do what is best for us as His people, what is best for those around us who are without Him, and ultimately what is best for His glory in all the world. His Word is good, and we can trust it— every bit of it— even when it’s difficult. If I had to sum up this last part of the book of James, I would say this is a picture of faith that perseveres.²

6. Why do you think that James spoke so forcefully to people that he said he loved? In what ways would this letter have given hope and comfort amidst use of such tough words?

7. Why is it necessary for us to study all of Scripture including the difficult parts? What happens if we don’t comprehensively study the Scriptures?

Business travel in the first century was fairly common, and verse 13 pictures a businessman confidently planning to make a profit in the future. James calls talking about your business affairs as if they are certainties “boasting” or bragging, that is, doing things in your own strength without admitting dependence on God. James is warning us that we can become so consumed with the material realm, thinking about our plans, plots, and strategies to work and make money, that we become blind to spiritual realities. The problem is not the planning in and of itself but planning in such a way that God has no place in the plans.

² Platt, David. Exalting Jesus In James (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 1781-1789). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

James is referring to a situation in which these people were arranging to do something in the coming year in order to make money, when the reality is that they didn't even know if they were going to see tomorrow! These people were acting as if all their plans were certain, but they were living in arrogance, not acknowledging that their breath could be taken away in an instant. God is sovereign over life and death. Your life is a mist, a smoke (v. 14). Your life is like a vapor, here one second and gone the next, and you will live until tomorrow only if the Lord wills. What a humbling reminder this is: not one of us is guaranteed that we will be alive tonight to lay our head on our pillow.³

8. What things do we assume or take for granted, and yet, if we think about it, have no real control over?

These businessmen were arrogantly assuming that they would wake up tomorrow, that they would safely get to the city, that their business venture would be successful within a year, and that no one would rob them of their income. They were presuming all of these things about an unknown future that they had no control of and no guarantees about!

9. How would you define being presumptuous? When have you, while dreaming or planning for the future, trusted in your abilities and plans, while ignoring the providential, sovereign reign of God in your life?

James 3:16 says that when we go about life without seeking God's will in our lives we boast and live in arrogance. This arrogance and boasting comes from an attitude that our own will and power are supreme and that our trust is in our accomplishments and plans, not in God's. It is this type of worldly wisdom that causes us to ignore the fact that God is running the cosmos which includes all our lives! God tells us this is evil. As Christians, the only thing we can boast of is what Christ has done for us!

10. James tells us to pursue godly wisdom instead of worldly wisdom. How can the truths of James 3:13–18 combat against presuming upon the future?

³ ibid

11. We tend to govern our lives by what we want, not always what is best for us. What things cause us to seek to make plans without God?

God is sovereign over life and death and over our activities and our accomplishments. “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that” (v. 15). Everything we do, everything we accomplish, and everything we attain is ultimately under the sovereign will of God. Now the intent here is not to create a passive fatalism in our minds that says, “Well, God has determined everything, so I’m just going to sit back and do nothing and see what He decides to do.” No, remember that James gives plenty of commands to obey and actions to take. James is talking about activity throughout this book, but he’s talking about activity that is humbly dependent on the sovereign God of the universe.

Every accomplishment and every activity, literally every breath, is acknowledging, “I am alive, and I am working only by the sovereign grace of God.” James isn’t saying that before we do anything, we always need to say out loud, “If the Lord wills” (though saying it often wouldn’t hurt us).

The point is to have a mind-set that says, “I need the grace of God, and I am dependent on the will of God in every facet of my life.” James describes a radically different way to live in this world, particularly in the busyness and the business of our lives. This world tells us to live like we’re going to be here forever, urging us to make our plans, acquire our possessions, and work to build our portfolio. But James tells us to submit to God. Don’t live like you’re going to be here forever. Instead, live and plan and work like your life is short and like you don’t want to waste it on worldly things. Live like you want to spend your life humbly before the sovereignty of God and ultimately for the glory of God. As the people of God, we ought to make our lives— the mist that comprises who you are for the short while you are here— count under His sovereignty for His glory. Be finished and done with self-sufficiency in this life, and live your lives radically dependent on the sovereignty of God.⁴

12. How might your plans change if you were forced to run every decision by God before you moved ahead?

James says that we shouldn’t get too far ahead of ourselves when it comes to planning because of four important truths regarding life. Each of these gives us reason to pause, seek God’s face and move cautiously yet confidently in the way that God leads. These four truths include:

⁴ Platt, David. *Exalting Jesus In James (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 1802–1816). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

- **The complexity of life...**Whether we acknowledge it or not, life is far from simple.
- **The uncertainty of life...**Jesus reminds us that “no man knows what a day might bring.”
- **The brevity of life...** We are but “a vapor or mist,” here today and gone tomorrow.
- **The fragility of life...**We have no power over the myriad of circumstances that affect our lives.

13. Which of the above elements of life have caused your plans to change abruptly?

14. Which of the characteristics above do you think about the most? Which one the least?

James is not giving a trite formula that we need to tack onto every sentence. Sometimes Paul used the phrase, “if the Lord wills,” when speaking about the future (Acts 18:21; 1 Corinthians 4:19; see also, Romans 1:10; 1 Corinthians. 16:7; Philippians 2:19, 24), but sometimes he did not (Acts 19:21; Romans 15:28; 1 Corinthians 16:5, 8). But he always depended on the Lord and bowed before His sovereignty with regard to the future. So, James is giving us a mindset that needs to permeate all of life. We need continually to be aware of our finiteness and dependence on God and His sovereign purpose in every aspect of life. Sometimes we should say, “if the Lord wills,” but even if we don’t say it, we should think it.⁵

15. How can the fact that God is deeply concerned and closely involved in your life help you make better decisions?

16. How can planning be wise? When does our planning become sinful?

⁵ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <http://www.fcfoonline.org/content/1/sermons/091105M.pdf>

17. When approaching a typical day, how much does God and His will figure into your plans? How can you become more concerned and focused on knowing and doing the will of God?
18. In what ways does God reveal His will to His children? What advice would you give someone who is seeking to follow God's will but doesn't seem to know what it is?

The chapter ends with a warning which is far more general, and indeed far more worrying, than what has gone before. Not to do what you know you should do is actually to sin! It isn't enough to avoid the obvious acts of sin. Once you learn the humility to accept God's royal law and to live by it, to accept God's sovereign ordering of all life and to live within that, then you will see more clearly the positive things to which you are being called. This may be a major life-decision, a question of your whole vocation and path of life. Or it may be the small Spirit-given nudge to do a small act of kindness for a neighbor or stranger. But once you have had that nudge, that call, then to ignore it, to pretend you hadn't heard, is a further act of pride, setting yourself up in the place of God.⁶

James 4:17 declares, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." **A sin of omission** is a sin that is the result of **not doing something God's Word teaches that we should do**. It is generally used in contrast with the corresponding phrase "**the sin of commission,**" or **sins that a person actively commits**.⁷

19. Give an example of a sin of omission and commission. Why are sins of omission so much easier to downplay than sins of commission?
20. What one thing is God calling you to be obedient with? What blessing might come from your obedience in doing that right thing?

⁶ N. T. Wright. *James (N. T. Wright for Everyone Bible Study Guides)* (Kindle Location 315). Kindle Edition.

⁷ <https://www.gotquestions.org/sin-of-omission.html>