

FAITH THAT WORKS - PART 9:
"TOMORROW'S PLANS IN GOD'S HANDS"
JAMES 4:13-17

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone. I'm Jeff - one of the pastors at HMCC of Jakarta. And it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today.

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Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 9 of our sermon series called "Faith That Works" - Where we're going through the book of James together.

The title of today's sermon is "Tomorrow's Plans in God's Hands."

Before we begin, let me pray for us.

<prayer>

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Introduction

When was the last time your plan went perfectly? When every single detail turned out exactly the way you imagined them to? I know for me, that doesn't happen very often.

Even something as simple as 'having dinner with a friend' doesn't always go according to plan.

- Sometimes I had to reschedule because I couldn't make it.
- Sometimes I was able to make it, but then I arrived late.
- Sometimes I arrived on time, but the food I wanted was not available.
- Sometimes it's available, but then it took longer than I thought.

There's hundreds of ways that our plans could go wrong in any given moment.

- And even when everything seemed to go perfectly as planned... something can happen at the very last second, and suddenly we're left flustered.

It seems like the only thing we can count on is that things won't go according to plan.

And depending on how big these plans are, that can be pretty scary for us.

So in our passage today, James addresses this topic of planning. The question that he raises is this: who is actually in control of tomorrow's plans? Is no one in control? Are we in control? Or is it someone else?

James reminds his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that God is the one who is in control.

The One Thing

Don't boast in tomorrow's plans, but humbly trust in God's sovereign hands.

Scripture Introduction

If you have your Bibles with you, please turn to James 4:13-17.

For context - In the previous passage, James reveals that when Christians fight with one another, it's actually not because of any God-glorifying reasons, but ultimately we fight because of our own self-centered passions and desires.

That's why James exhorted his fellow Christians to humble themselves, and to repent, and to entrust themselves to God - who is the one and only lawgiver and judge.

In the verse immediately before our passage, James says this:

"There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

James asks, "Who do you think you are?" / "You're not God!" / "Who are you to judge your neighbor?"

So now, in today's passage, he'll continue to speak to these Christians who tend to look at themselves as "god" of their own lives.

Let's read James 4:13-17...

James 4:13-17 (ESV)

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"— 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. 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. 17 So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

This is God's Word.

Overview

I. How we often plan (vv. 13-14)

II. How we ought to plan (vv. 15-17)

Heads-up: we'll spend more of our time on the second point...

I. How we often plan (vv. 13-14)

Look at verse 13 - James says, "come now" - He's demanding attention from his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ! And more specifically, he's addressing those who are making plans about their future - those who are already thinking about tomorrow and finalizing their plans for the upcoming year. And really, he's addressing all of them - Because we all make plans, right? (We may hate making plans, we may love making plans, but we all make plans).

And if we look at this plan in verse 13, it actually seems like a well thought out plan.

This person has an end goal in mind (he wants to make a profit). So he mapped out the next steps that he needed to take to reach that goal.

- He's thought about what he wants to do (it's to trade - or to do some kind of business).
- He has a specific location and target market in mind (in one of the towns).
- He has a specific time frame (one year).
- And he has a start date (today or tomorrow).

That's pretty good project management. It's not a bad plan.

And to be clear, what James is not saying here is that Christians should never make plans for the future. Because when we look at the book of Proverbs - it teaches us to look at the ant who prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest; that it's actually wise for us to work hard, plan ahead, and to be well prepared for the future (Proverbs 6).

And James is also not saying that Christians should never do business and make a profit. Jesus himself - in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) - taught us that we're to faithfully invest the resources that God has entrusted to us for the sake of his Kingdom.

So James is not saying that Christians should never make plans or never do business or never make profit. No; what he's addressing here is presumptuousness. It's assuming that everything would go according to our plans if we just plan well enough or work hard enough or invest smart enough... Then we can control the outcome of what we desire... As if everything depends on us, and us alone.

- That's what he's warning us against.

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Because notice - what's wrong with this picture? The plan seems to be well thought out - it has all the important factors. But it left out the most important factor. Notice what's missing here? There's no mention here at all of God.

What does that say about this person's plan? What does it reveal about this person who made this plan?

- It shows that he basically thinks that he's sovereign; that he's the one who's in control of his own life. And he basically thinks that God is irrelevant. Not worthy enough to be in this picture.

Now, how about us and our plans?

- If I ask each and everyone of us here today, I think most of us would say that - *"No, of course God is the one who is sovereign and completely in control over our lives. He's everything to us. We're not in control, God is. And we're ok with that."*

That's great. But remember what James has been highlighting in this entire book - *Show me! If that's what you believe in, show me that your faith is not dead! Show me that your faith is alive! Show me by your works; show me by the way you live (and now, James is saying - show me... by the way you plan... that your faith in the Lord is alive).*

Friends, how we plan for our future... reveals where our faith is truly in... Is it truly in God? Or is it actually in ourselves?

So let's think back on how we often plan... What do we usually think about?

- Before starting a new school semester or a new job - Do you think of all the things you need to do to make a good impression?
- Before expanding your business or getting a promotion - Do you think of all the milestones that you'd need to reach before you can take that next step?
- Before starting a relationship - Do you think of all the ways that you need to improve so that someone would be interested?
- Before having a child - Do you think of everything that you need to prepare so that you can be more ready?

Again, making plans is not necessarily wrong. But do we feel like we need to almost force these things to happen, as if all the stress and burden is on us to make sure that the outcome that we want would happen with certainty? No wonder we're prone to feel overwhelmed and anxious and even in panic about our future.

But what would that reveal about who we truly think is in control? We may say with our mouths that God is sovereign, but practically, we may function and live as if God is not even present (or as if God is far away and cannot impact our lives), and that we're the ones in control.

<pause>

And some of us may say, “No, I’m not like that. In fact, I’ve totally given up on planning. I know that I’m not in control. And my situation will never get better. Nothing is ever gonna change or improve.”

Well, such a negative outlook on life - where we already assume the worst outcome - It’s essentially the same thing... We’re imagining a world without God. And we’re functioning and living as if God is not in control.

But it’s essentially the same. When God is not in our plans, we’ll either think of ourselves and our lives either too highly or too lowly.

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So now James gives us a reality check... He wants to reorient our distorted views, so we can rightly see who God is and who we are.

Look at verse 14 - James makes 2 things very clear for us: That we’re not sovereign over the details of our lives, and we’re not sovereign over the duration of our lives.

First, we’re not sovereign over the details of our lives.

- James says, “You make these plans... yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.”
- “You don’t know what’s exactly going to happen tomorrow or in the future.”

- You don’t know if you’ll make it to that town.
 - What if you get redirected to another town or you have to stay in your town?
- You don’t know if you can spend a year there.
 - Maybe it’ll be less than a year. Maybe you’ll be stuck there and spend more than one year there.
- You don’t know if you can trade or do business there.
 - Maybe you’ll have to pivot to another business strategy.
- And you don’t know if you’ll make a profit.
 - Maybe, maybe not.
- You just can’t know 100%.
 - As humans our view of the future is very much limited.

Personally, I planned to be a doctor in California. Now - as you can see - I’m not a doctor. And I’m not in California.

- Most of us are probably not living the lives that we planned for ourselves.
- Each and everyone of us just don’t know what tomorrow will bring.

And not only us individually, but globally, the entire world doesn't know what can happen tomorrow - Not even the most powerful presidents and not even the most influential businessmen can.

- We don't have to look too far back to be reminded of this. We just have to take a quick look back to 2020 when a virus shut down the entire world - vacation plans canceled, weddings postponed, businesses closed down, and loved ones passed away.
- From our collective experience, we know that we're not in control over the details of our lives.

Second, we're not sovereign over the duration of our lives.

- James asks, What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Have you ever seen someone blowing smoke - You can see it linger in the air for a bit. But then after a little while, it just disappears into the air.

That's what our lives on Earth are like - we're here only for a brief moment.

- And just like a mist, one day, our lives on Earth will also end. And that day is coming closer and closer each day, and perhaps will come much faster than we'd like.

<pause>

On March 1st 1927, it seemed like any other day at a coal mine in Wales. Except on this day, there was suddenly a massive explosion that killed many men who were there. And some time afterwards, this is what Martyn Lloyd-Jones - a pastor - had this to say about it:

[Quote]

"No sooner do we think that all is well, [that] something dreadful happens; no sooner do we feel that certain dangers have been removed once and for all, [that] they reappear in all their horror. Only just a fortnight ago one of the inspectors of mines had said in a lecture that 'we had seen the last of pit explosions, in all probability.' We boast of our advance of knowledge and of the way we have been able to harness the forces of nature to our own uses, but every now and again we are summarily reminded of their strength and our own impotence. Of everything that is uncertain in life, the most uncertain of all is life itself. No one can predict what will happen next, no one knows at what moment that final blow will come and we shall cease to be."

- Martyn Lloyd-Jones

[End quote]

We are not in control of details nor the duration of our lives. So who are we to say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" As if we're the ones in control? No, we are mere humans.

And what a humble reminder this is from James.

So first, 'how we often plan.' And second...

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II. How we ought to plan (vv. 15-17)

Let's look at verse 15 - James says, "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'"

So now, James reorients our view of God. God was the most important factor who was previously missing and disregarded. And now, He's become the center point of this plan - Nothing can happen if it's not according to His divine will.

Notice the two things here that James is highlighting about God's sovereignty - and it's exactly the same two things that he just said that we're not sovereign over, but...

- God is the one who's sovereign over the duration of our lives and the details of our lives.

First, God is sovereign over the duration of our lives.

- It's interesting here how James didn't just say, "If the Lord wills, we will do this or that." No, he backs up a bit, and first he says, "If the Lord wills, we will live..."
 - He's not even taking that for granted.
- He's helping us see here that - even for the most basic of human functions (that we may overlook, such as breathing) - God is the one in control of that.
- He's the one orchestrating our next breath, our next heartbeat, our next meal, our overall health, and our safety.
- At any moment, God - in His providence - can take our lives away (He gives, and He takes away). So it's only if the Lord wills, that we'll even be alive and conscious to see tomorrow...
 - He's the one in control of how much time we have left on Earth.

Second, God is sovereign over the details of our lives.

- Another interesting thing here is that what James says here is not very specific: "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."
- "This or that" can literally refer to anything and everything. But that's the point. You can replace it with anything that you're planning to do and it'd be true - anything and everything can only happen if the Lord wills.
 - We see this in the life of Joseph - in the book of Genesis.
 - His life didn't go according to his own plans - he was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt, and then he was imprisoned in Pharaoh's prison for years. Who would've planned that for their own lives?

- But this was all part of God's sovereign will - His plan was for Joseph to be in Egypt at that very moment in history. And it was God's divine will for Joseph to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, and later... to save Egypt and his family from famine, including the lives of his brothers who he'd forgive (Gen. 37-50).
 - What was meant for evil, God used for good.
 - At every step, God was the one in control over Joseph's life and over world events.
- And if we keep reading our Bibles (from Genesis to Revelation), we see that God continues to be sovereign over the lives of His people, and over all of human history since before the beginning of time... up till today, and up till tomorrow... He'll continue to be in control into the eternal future.

And this is why James is teaching us to say, "[Only] if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

- We're to acknowledge God's providence as we live and make plans for our lives.

And so practically, we can say "If the Lord wills" or "God willing" when we make plans, I think it'd be helpful for us to do that. It doesn't have to be at the end of every sentence, but repeating these words throughout the day may be helpful because it's instructive - it teaches us and reminds us throughout the day that God is the one who's sovereign over the duration and the details of our lives. So it can definitely be beneficial for us to include this saying more in our daily vocabulary.

But here's the thing... What James is talking about here is more than just saying, "If the Lord wills." Because ultimately, it's not just about what we say, but more about what's in our hearts...

- Because - to be honest - even Non-Christians can say, "God willing." So more than the saying itself, what's actually in our hearts as we make our plans?

That's why in verse 16, James says:

As it is, you boast in your arrogance...

As it is... The words (used in verse 13) reveal that what's in their hearts is arrogance - they boast & think of themselves too highly, and they think that success or failure is decided by their own efforts.

And you know what? Nowadays, this may not sound all that bad. In fact, our society seems to admire men and women who call themselves "self-made" - It may even be inspiring to hear their stories... How out of their own hard work and sheer will, they're able to be successful in what they do (maybe we want to be just like them - "self-made" men & women). It certainly sounds like a feel-good story. But in actuality, no one is really self-made.

- No one controls when & where they're born, no one controls the family they're born into, the natural gifts & talents that they have, the opportunities afforded to them, the health that sustains them, the people who've helped them along the way...
- So even regardless of God, I think anyone should be able to see that to regard yourself as "self-made" is actually arrogant.

But in regards to God, James is saying that all such boasting is - not only arrogant - but is evil. And highly disrespectful towards God.

Now, this would be so shocking to James' audience! "Evil"! That's a strong word. I don't think these early Christians would label themselves as "evil." If someone should be labeled "evil," they're probably thinking of their persecutors - those who are going against the spread of the Gospel, and torturing & killing Christians - those are the guys who just do whatever they want, and go against what God wants! They're the ones who are evil!

That may be true. But at the heart level, they're actually not very different (and it's the same with us). Because when we plan our lives without acknowledging God, then essentially what we're saying is: "God, I don't need you! I'm the one who's sovereign and in control of my life, not you. I do what I want, and I decide how I want to do it." Now, we may not say this outright, but when we make self-reliant plans, this is the kind of boastful heart posture that we actually have.

And isn't this actually the heart posture of all sin? "I do what I want regardless of what God wants. God, I don't actually need you."

- This is why such boasting is evil - because it's essentially a rejection of our God's sovereign rule. And it's sinful.

<pause>

That's why in verse 17, James then says, "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

Now, what's being described here is the sin of omission. Usually when we think of sin, we think of doing something that we know we shouldn't do. But the sin of omission is the other side of that coin: It's not doing something that we know is the right thing to do.

And in context, what James is referring to here is when someone knows that the right thing to do is to acknowledge God, but then they fail to acknowledge Him in their planning - That'd be a sin of omission.

And what's interesting here is how personal this sin is. James emphasizes that "for him" it is sin. For that particular person, it is sin. That's so interesting...

Because imagine 2 people...

- Let's say that both have the same exact plans (like the one in verse 13).

- And let's say that both even say, "If the Lord wills" (like in verse 15).
- But let's say that one is truly surrendered to God and His sovereignty, and the other is just saying it, but still fully dependent on themselves... Then "for him" - for the one who fails to acknowledge God at the heart level... for him, it is sin.

<pause>

Now, some of us may be thinking, *"Ok, then how can I make sure that I have the right heart posture that's truly surrendered to God when I make my plans? Because I don't want to sin against Him."*

Well, that'd be a good thought. But I'm not sure if that's the right question to ask. Because what we may mean when we ask that question is... How can I feel fully surrendered in my planning? (How can I feel surrendered, so that I no longer feel stressed or anxious about my plans?)

And I think we'd want to be careful here when we think about our feelings. Not that our feelings are not important, but our feelings can be tricky - Sometimes it can fluctuate, sometimes it can be deceiving, and sometimes it can lag behind.

- Which means that even when we've already surrendered our plans to God, the feeling of peace and comfort may not always be there right away and needs time to catch up.

But then this is where faith comes in. Because even when the feelings may not be there yet - by faith - we can still trust in God's sovereignty... Even when things may not be going according to our plans (This is what James has been talking about: "Faith That Works").

So I think an easier way to think about this is if we ask ourselves another question: If I truly believe that God is sovereign over my life, then what would I do in this moment?

<pause>

And I think there's a lot of things that we can do because our lives are so different. And in a way, I think that's great. That means that there's a lot of different ways that we can express our trust in God... and a lot of ways that He may be glorified...

- So for you, it may look like sharing the Gospel with your loved ones, and then trusting that God will be the one working in their hearts... That their conversion and salvation don't depend on your own persuasive skills but it ultimately depends on God's sovereignty.
- It may look like trusting - not in your timing - but in God's timing as you pursue a relationship - not rushing to date an unbeliever, but being patient and investing more time to get to know other brothers and sisters in Christ.
- It may look like resting in God's sovereignty even though you yourself are currently feeling sick and unwell.

- It may look like investing in one another's lives, but then trusting that God will be the one to grow our church.

In all these ways, I hope that we can find comfort in knowing that it all doesn't depend on our own efforts. We can sleep at night because it's all in God's hands.

So let's take some time tonight to really think about this: If I truly believe that God is sovereign over my life, then what would I do in this moment?

- And I encourage us to talk to someone afterwards, and share your reflections with one another, so that you can keep each other accountable in your planning.

For now, let me share a couple of practical things that we can do to help us with our next steps..

First, we can pray over our plans each morning.

- So each morning, we can take a look at our calendar, and pray over each of the things that we have planned for the day, surrendering each one to the Lord.
- And some days, it may be a big day...
 - You may say, "Lord, this is it. It's the day I've been waiting for - it's time for my big presentation. Or it's time to find out if I got that job promotion, or if I'm gonna be accepted into that school. Or Lord, it's my wedding day."
 - But whatever we have planned for the day, may we be able to pray... "Lord not my will... but your will be done. Help me to trust in your sovereignty for the rest of today..."

Second, we can praise God, as we reflect on what happened each day.

- So each night, we can reflect on what happened during the day.
 - And for the things that went according to plan or even better than planned, we can give God all the glory!
 - We can pray, "Lord, thank you so much for a great day! That went even better than I expected! I know that's not my own doing but because of you. So thank you so much Lord!"
- Or maybe things went horribly wrong. Then in those moments, may we also give God all the praise, and may we continue to put our trust in the Lord.
 - We can pray, "Lord, help me to continue to put my faith in your sovereignty. Help me to rest in your Hands."
- Something that we often don't plan in advance is pain and suffering.
 - But back in Chapter 1, James mentioned that it's through times of suffering - when our faith is tested - that our faith is purified and strengthened by God.

- Because what if your plan is to strengthen your marriage or friendships by having vacations together, but then God's plan is to strengthen it through conflict?
- What if your plan is to be successful and rich, but then God's plan is to point you to something else that's even more valuable than earthly riches?
- During these times of difficulties, I'm reminded of Isaiah 55, where God's Word says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Church, let's not boast in tomorrow's plans, but humbly trust in God's sovereign hands.

Conclusion

As we conclude, let's be reminded of how God is worthy of our trust.

And this is because our God is not only sovereign, but He is also good. If God is sovereign, but He is evil - then we should be trembling in fear. If God is good, but then He's not sovereign, then that doesn't do us any good - we still have to rely on ourselves. But praise God that He is sovereign AND good. How do we know this? When we look at the cross.

The Good News is that God's will is for repentant sinners to be saved because of Jesus.

Earlier, I mentioned that no human can truly know what tomorrow will bring. But that's not entirely true. One person in history was able to foresee his death and that person was Jesus. And that's because Jesus is not only fully man, but he's also fully God. And even though Jesus knew what'll happen to him, he still willingly died on the cross for the sake of His people. And he took the punishment that we deserved and died for us. But he did not remain dead - because Jesus resurrected and defeated sin & death.

And now, for those of us who truly repent of our sins & put our faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, when our time on Earth passes like a mist in the air, we'll still have all of eternity awaiting for us in Heaven. And there, we'll be with God and His people forever.

So yes, our life on Earth may pass quickly, but the Good News is that - in Jesus - we may have eternal life.

The Good News is that our God is not only sovereign, but He is good. And we can entrust all of our plans to Him, and we can sleep well tonight.

Let's pray.

<prayer>
