

Faith that Works // Our Plans, God's Providence

As 21st century Americans, we love the idea that the future is ours to create! This idea is so deeply ingrained into our society and culture. I am the master of my fate, I'm the captain of my ship. I set the course of my life, and I have good plans for me. Plans to prosper me. Plans to give me a hope and future.

But as we get to the middle of James four, James begins to address this mentality that was infiltrating the church in the first century and is present now

James offers them, and us, a bit of a different approach to life.

James 4:13-17, "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'— 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. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

PLANNING

At first glance, it sounds like James is saying, "*Don't make any plans because who knows what might happen tomorrow?*"

But there are plenty of other places in scripture that talk specifically about the lazy, passive, or the foolish person as the person who fails to plan.

Proverbs 20:4, "The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing."

In other words, a person that doesn't plan, is a person that refuses to connect future results with today's decisions. They don't connect today's passivity, with tomorrow's consequences. The Bible calls that person a sluggard. And while our lives might not be categorically foolish, or lazy, or characterized by passivity, we all make allowances for things failing to see future implications, or consequences. It may be areas of life where we've decided that occasional over-indulgence is okay, or we justify losing our temper, or we make allowances for gossip. Or maybe it's an area of life that we've put on cruise control, like marriage or parenting.

One of the big challenges we face at home is how we navigate electronics with our little ones. We've set some healthy boundaries for them, but it's always a work in progress and a bit of a moving target. Just last weekend, my wife was out of town for a few days. So, Dad's at home with the kids...it's party time! Pizza, popcorn, movie, and game nights! So, I let the kids download a game that we could all play together, and this particular game had a bunch of jump scares in it. That night, I woke up at 3:00am and couldn't fall back asleep, so I asked the Lord, is there anything you want to tell me? Almost immediately, the scripture comes to mind:

Philippians 4:8 "...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

And I realized, in an effort to have a fun weekend with my kids, I stepped out of God's design for them. The next day, I went back to them, and owned it, not making the Lord the bad guy, "God told me no more fun!" No, I just owned it and said, "Guys, I'm sorry. I made a mistake. As followers of Jesus, we want to fill our minds with good things, and while it was kind of fun and exciting to get scared together, I realized there's nothing really good for us or wholesome about the game. As your dad, I'm responsible for you, and I want to be more careful about what we're filling our minds with."

Now, I was expecting a unified revolt, rioting in the streets. But they just asked, "No more?" and I said, "I'm sorry, no more. But let's come up some other fun things we want to do together this weekend." And that was that. I share that with you because there was a brief moment in that process where I thought, "I've already allowed it, it'll be too much of a problem. It'll ruin their weekend. I don't have the energy to be the bad guy right now." And all the excuses, all the reasons NOT to make it right came flooding in. But as a parent, what I allow or encourage in my children today reap consequences, for their future. And on top of that, my kids received infinitely more through the ownership of a mistake and retraction of a decision than if I allowed passivity to win.

See, we don't plan to become an addict or alcoholic. We don't plan to end up with a broken marriage. We don't plan to allow unhelpful things into our children's lives, and yet, it happens, because we don't connect the dots of today's allowances, today's decisions, with future consequences. James is not telling us, don't make plans. In fact, James is telling us to make plans. Because planning isn't the problem, presuming is.

PRESUMING

James 4:13-14, "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'- 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."

See, the problem isn't about planning. The problem is the arrogance and pride behind the planning. "*We're going to go here, spend some time, and triple our investment!*" That's not about planning, it's about presuming the outcome that we can manage it, we can make it, we've got this down.

Then, James says our lives are a mist! A vapor. Life fog on a mirror. It's there one second and gone the next.

3 realities of life James gives us through this analogy...

1. Life is Fleeting

2. We Are Forgettable

No one remembers a "mist." We are far less significant than we often think. In a hundred years, no one will remember who we were. No one will care what about our opinions or reminisce about that one social media rant we thought was so profound—no one will care!

There's so much emphasis in our culture on leaving a legacy, and don't get me wrong, what we pass on to the generations coming up behind is unbelievably important, but if I want them to remember anything, it's not me, it's Jesus.

Ecclesiastes 1:4, "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever."

Psalms 103:15-16, "As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more."

3. Life is Fragile

A vapor disappears with the wave of a hand. James says, *"All our arrogant presumptions about tomorrow are in vain, because the smallest thing--one accident, one phone call, one bad diagnosis - things completely outside of our ability to control, if we're a mist, the wave of a hand could change everything."*

In light of all these principles, how should we approach the future?

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

James 4:15-16, *"Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."*

James is telling us that presuming outcomes takes God completely out of the equation. It assumes a dominance over life that no finite human being has. It requires humility to acknowledge that we can't control outcomes— that anything good in our life is by God's grace. That every good thing in our life ultimately has come from His hand, not from our ability to plan or exercise dominance or control over the circumstances of life. An arrogant person cannot see the grace of God over their life. Look at King Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, one of the most prosperous and powerful nations in history.

Daniel 4:28-33, *"All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king answered and said, 'Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?' While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, 'O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you'... Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws."*

He went insane and ate grass like a cow for seven years! See, only the fool looks at the past and fails to see God's grace in it. What's worse is looking into the future and thinking it's under our control. That's why James then says, we should instead say, **James 4:15** *"If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."* This recognizes how small we are, and how BIG God is. It recognizes the providence of God: That He's good and He's in control. And if that's true, it means that we can loosen our grip.

Maybe there's a situation in your life today that you've been trying to control.

- A position you keep gunning for and the door keeps slamming shut.
- An argument you keep trying to win and it never quite goes the way you think it will.
- A relationship you keep trying to force.
- Maybe it's a child that's walked away from God, and you're having a hard time being patient with them, loving them well, and trusting God's faithfulness to complete the work He began in them.
- Or maybe instead of being passive with your kids, your temptation is to control them, and you're carrying so much anxiety because of it and the world they're growing up in.

James is inviting us in this passage to release control of the outcomes! Don't presume to know or be able to control the end of the story.

Proverbs 16:9, "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps."

What's that telling us? Make plans. Be diligent in your planning. But recognize that God is in control, He sees infinitely more than we can see, and He'll guide our steps along that path of life.

Psalms 90:12, "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

Job 14:5, "...his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass..."

God knows the end from the beginning. Numbering our days gives us a heart of wisdom. It helps us get our priorities in order knowing that tomorrow is not guaranteed.

Mark 8:36, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"

What do I gain, if I succeed in every other area of life but fail in the things that matter most? Maybe today you're recognizing your priorities are so out of order. You're trying to keep up with a frantic culture, set on proving its own significance, and you're filled with anxiety just trying to keep up. Or you've thought, man if I could land that position, or promotion, and you're giving it everything you've got, and you're sacrificing your relationship with God in order to make it work. Or maybe you've made small compromises over time, and you didn't mean to get to where you are in

your marriage, or in your habits, but somehow, you ended up here, and you know it's not good. Or you think if your business could just make that next sale, it would be enough. And we're all living like this is all there is, trying to gain the world but losing our souls. But if I'm just a mist, I'm not all that important. And if God is in control, I can take a breath and let go.

If I don't know God, and I'm just a blade of grass, and fleeting mist, and in the grand scheme of human history, I'm a speck of dust, it will cripple you with anxiety. All the circumstances you will try to control but cannot, will end up killing you over time. Maybe you will gain the whole world, but you'll lose your soul.

You know what's incredible? We're a mist that God knows. A mist that God sees. I'm a mist, here today and gone tomorrow, but God knows my name! You may be a like the fog on a mirror, but you are so significant to Him that God Himself entered into human history to rescue you from a life and eternity without love, purpose, significance and meaning.

If He did that for you, and He's that good, that loving, and He's the one in control, it means you and I don't have to be. It means that situation we've been white knuckling... holding onto like our life depends on it... you can let go, you can breathe. Maybe you can get a good night's sleep knowing that you don't have to make it happen, or force your will, or have it all under control. He loves you, and He's got you covered.

Maybe you've fallen into the trap of thinking that this life is all there is, and you've been living solely for your own fulfillment, and self-interest, failing to recognize God's grace in your past, or considering God's plans for your future. Maybe you've never made the decision to trust your life into kind and loving hands of God. You've never heard God say over you how wonderful and significant you are to Him. Maybe you've never recognized the reality that Jesus' death is the very thing that proves His love for you, and you need to come back to Him or give your life to Him today. Don't wait to respond to God's invitation.