



## **Exchanging Presumption for Providence (James 4:13-17)**

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I wouldn't wish life with the coronavirus on anyone. It's brought an early death to over half a million people, sent shockwaves throughout the global economy, and pulled the plug on some of my favorite expressions of church life. I miss the faith-stirring effect of loud singing. I miss the gift of a hand resting on my shoulder in prayer. I miss lingering over lunch in the foyer and a host of other ways God created us to move toward and not away from one another.

Four months in, however, I can already see one way the coronavirus has been good for my soul. It has exposed the degree to which I have derived peace and security from making and executing long-term plans. The Bible repeatedly commends the wisdom of anticipating and preparing for the future. Prov 21:5, "The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance..." Prov 22:3, "The prudent sees danger and hides himself..." Isa 32:8, "He who is noble plans noble things..."

But it's one thing to make plans for the future. It's another thing to look to my plans to give me comfort today and hope for tomorrow. Why is that a problem? Because it's precisely at that point that my "plans" become my functional god. I trust them to give me joy and life. I trust them to make everything wrong right. And I sin against the One True God in the process because to the degree I'm trusting the power of my plans to heal and restore I'm not trusting the saving power of Jesus.

The Lord has kindly disrupted some of my long-term plans and made it difficult to quickly replace them, forcing me to depend more on him and less on myself. That's always a good thing and almost always uncomfortable because it's not natural. What's natural? To depend on ourselves, right? To take comfort in feeling like we're in control of tomorrow. What's unnatural? The quiet confidence that comes from remembering we're not in control. God is.

Trusting God forces us to relinquish something we hold incredibly dear – our perceived power of self-determination. We love to tell ourselves and one another, "You can be and do whatever you want to be or do as long as you don't give up." It's why we're drawn to rags-to-riches stories or why Rocky reruns never seem to grow old.

Human ambition can be an incredible force for good. You should be ambitious to use your gifts and abilities for the good of our neighbor and the glory of God. But our ambition goes south the moment we jettison a critical attitude called humility. Humility expresses itself in countless ways, but at the end of chapter 4, James zeroes in on one of



the most important. Humility recognizes there's only one person on the throne of the universe and it's not you or me. It's God.

Isaiah 46:8–11, “Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.”

God's plans always come to pass. Ours may, but they may not because we're not sovereign. You can't say what God says in Isa 46:8-11. Humility remembers that, which is the divinely intended effect of Jas 4:13-17. **James wants us to be a people who move through life with the quiet confidence that comes from knowing we're not in control. God is.** That sort of humility doesn't mitigate our ambitions. It doesn't lessen our ambitions. It sanctifies our ambitions. It keeps our ambitions in the realm of reality, a holy means of serving God instead of a sinful attempt to replace him. James pushes us in that direction by making two main points.

## **1) THE MORTALITY OF MAN REVEALS THE FOLLY OF PRESUMPTION**

James' target audience is crystal clear in v. 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.’” James isn't claiming to make a direct quote. He's capturing an attitude, an ethos, an approach to life where we presume a unilateral ability to determine when, where, what, and how long we will accomplish something. It's a way of thinking, speaking, and acting that assumes the ability to impose our will and desires on the future with impunity.

It's an attractive presumption. We do it in the business world when we describe our 3, 5, or 10-year plans with supreme self-confidence. We do it in our personal lives when we mentally map out the next 10-15 years of our life and boast to ourselves and others about all our plans for the future. We do it as dads and moms when we implement certain parental strategies assuming they will guarantee a certain kind of child. We even do it in the church when we declare how much money we're going to raise or how many baptisms we're going to have, or how many ministry initiatives we're going to start.

Notice James doesn't say having a business plan is wrong. He's not criticizing planning, per say. He's exposing the folly of assuming that because we want or have planned to do (fill in the blank) we will most certainly achieve (fill in the blank). Why is that foolish?



James gives us two reasons in v. 14. The first concerns the limits of our power. The second confronts the essence of our nature.

First, you say you're going to do such and such, "yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring!" He's right, isn't he? We don't know the future. There are times we can make an informed guess. But some of the most tragic events in our lives (miscarriages, car accidents, layoffs, break ups) or in our nation (the JFK assassination, 9/11, a stock market collapse, a coronavirus pandemic) we never see coming. We may acknowledge them as existing within the realm of possibility, but we don't know when or where or how they will show up.

Why not? Because our knowledge is finite. We don't even know all there is to know about the past or the present, let alone the future. Not so with our Creator. He's the One, as the prophet Isaiah said, who declares "the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done." In other words, God doesn't just know the future because he has some sort of cool superpower that enables him to peer into it. He knows the future because he ordains the future, he plans the future, he orchestrates the future, down to the smallest detail of your life and mine.

God knows exactly what will happen tomorrow. Beyond what he has revealed us in his Word, we have no idea. Prov 27:1, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring." That's the first reason our presumptive planning is foolish. As finite creatures, we simply don't know what tomorrow will bring.

The second is even more humbling. Look again at v. 14. "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." No amount of self-esteem will ever change the fact that you are mortal, friend. Your life has a beginning and, barring the return of Christ, it will have an end.

Do you fancy yourself a great businessman, a great athlete, a great engineer, a great parent, an exceptional friend, a rising artist, or a skilled musician? Do you think of yourself as straight, gay, transgender, black, white, or some other ethnic or sexual badge the world clings to as the essence of your nature? The God who created speaks what is actually true. "You are a mist. You are a smoky vapor. You are here for a brief moment. And then you will vanish."

In our pride, we prefer to think otherwise, don't we? It's incredibly humbling to remember the fragility of our life. It's what makes v. 14 feel like a smack in the face. And yet, it's also strangely comforting. Why? Because we know it's true. So much of our life, so many of our modern comforts and conveniences, our healthcare system included, is



designed to punt our mortality downfield, to keep it out of sight and out of mind. But death always wins, doesn't it?

You could be the greatest basketball star in the world, and your helicopter suddenly crashes into a California hillside. Part of what makes the Bible so comforting and Christianity so compelling is that it resonates with reality. It speaks the truth about our life in this world.

So why does death always win? It wins because when sin entered God's perfect world, man became mortal. Becoming a Christian doesn't make you an exception to the rule. When you turn from sin to trust and follow Jesus you become a dearly beloved son or daughter of the King. But when it comes to your life in this world you remain a mist, a smoky vapor.

Have you ever watched smoke curl up from a fire and dissipate into the sky? Have you ever squeezed a spray bottle on a hot day and watched the water droplets float away in the wind? Have you ever seen the sun come up and melt away a bank of fog along the river? That's what all of us are like, friends. We're a mist because we're mortal.

It's the height of folly for mortal men to think, and speak, and act as if we are immortal God. We're not. We're creatures. We're weak. We're small. We're dearly loved for Jesus' sake. But our life in this world is no more enduring than a blade of grass. So don't assume you know what you will do or accomplish tomorrow. You simply don't know what the future will bring. Today could be the last day of your life.

Christianity isn't alone in asserting the folly of presumption. There are many secular philosophers who recognize the limits of human self-determination given our morality. But here's the critical difference. Christianity doesn't stop there. Yes, we're a flash in the pan, a blip on the radar, our life is transient and passing away. But the truth of our existence and the reality of the world we live in goes deeper. Point #1: The mortality of man reveals the folly of presumption.

## **2) THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD REVEALS THE WISDOM OF SUBMISSION**

I love how theologian Douglass Moo describes the importance of James' second point in vv. 15-17. "It is not enough to recognize that one's own life is uncertain and transitory...What these merchants need to go on to reckon with is that their lives are also in the hands of God."



In our arrogance and presumption, what do we tend 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.” What does the humility of wisdom say instead? Look at v. 15. “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”

Friend, the fact that you’re not in control doesn’t mean the world in which you live is out of control. Your entire life, from start to finish, along with every aspect of the world around you, past, present, and future, is firmly under the sovereign control of God. The foundational spiritual reality governing every material reality in the universe, your existence included, is clearly set forth in Ps 93:1, “The LORD reigns.” And in that single sentence, that single declaration, we discover the secret to all our joy in the present and all our hope for the future.

The creator of all things, the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God is not arrayed alongside of us like some kind of superhuman power, attempting to make the best of things. He is seated on the throne of the universe, high and lifted up, worshiped and adored from eternity past, surrounded by cries of, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” Why? Because he’s arrogant? No. Because he is supreme in majesty, spotless in beauty, overflowing in justice, full of mercy, unrivaled in wisdom, and perfect in power. He’s the Sovereign One.

So you may be small. You may feel the weight of your own mortality and finitude. But you are not alone in a meaningless universe, friend. God created you. God loves you. And he is right now doing what he has always done. He is reigning supreme over every aspect of your life. And if you doubt that because you don’t have a category for how anyone could be in control, given the turmoil within you and the suffering around you, could it be that you have reduced the ineffable mystery of his will to the borders of your finite understanding?

If everything God did made sense to the mind of a finite, mortal man, what kind of “god” would he be? A God of our own making, not the God of the Bible. And certainly not a God worthy of your trust for he would be no greater than you. But he is greater, friend. He is wiser. You are not ultimately in control, but he is.

Notice his sovereignty does not abrogate human agency or mitigate your responsibility. James doesn’t say we should simply say, “If the Lord wills” and throw planning to the wind. Rather, God’s sovereignty frames and grounds and tempers all of our plans and goals and dreams for the future with a deep and reverent humility that recognizes only what Almighty God ordains will come to pass. Prov 19:21, “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.”

God created us with a free will in the sense that we have an ability to make real choices that have a real effect on our world and future. But we are not free in an absolute or non-contingent sense. All of our activity is subject to the sovereign will of God, which is both humbling and comforting, humbling because it reminds us the Lord is God and I am not, comforting because who among us is wise enough to work all things together for our good and God's glory?

Friend, if your will is supreme you should be terrified. But if God's will is supreme (and it is), you should be exceedingly glad. For it means all he has purposed and promised, including the eternal joy of all who trust and obey him, will surely come to pass. 1 Cor 2:9, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him."

All our plans for the future as Christians, at home, at work, in the public square, or in the church, should be characterized by a profound humility rooted in God's sovereignty and a profound confidence enabled by the same. For God is not up in heaven letting us do whatever we want to do and periodically whacking anyone who gets out of line. No, he is actively, lovingly, and wisely working all things according to the perfection of his will. Isa 14:24, "The LORD of hosts has sworn: 'As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand...'"

A deist, a Muslim, or an animist might say, "If god wills, we will live and do this or that." What Christianity asserts is radically different. "If the Lord wills, if the God who created the world and came into the world to rescue us from sin and death, securing our eternal joy through Jesus, wills, we will live and do this or that." Jas 4:15 isn't a nod to a panoply of generic spiritual forces. It's a declaration of quiet confidence in the sovereign reign of King Jesus.

Theologians of old called the doctrine of providence. And I know of no better definition than the one found in the Heidelberg Catechism.

**Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?** A. Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty - all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand.

**Q. How does the knowledge of God's creation and providence help us?** A. We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we



can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from His love. All creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they can neither move nor be moved.

Friend, don't live or speak about tomorrow as if you are calling the shots. As James says in v. 16, don't "boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." Why? Because to think or speak or act as if we are sovereign or our will is supreme is to reject the truth about God. Presumption isn't just foolish. It's evil. It's a sin of the heart by which we posit a universe where God is not who he has revealed himself to be. It's an act of rejection by which we deny the truth of divine providence.

It might feel like an insignificant omission – "Oh yeah, I guess I forgot to factor in the sovereignty of God." In reality, friend, it's functional atheism, which is why James says in v. 17, "So whoever knows the right thing to do" – whoever knows we should move through life with the quiet confidence that comes from knowing we are not in control, God is – "and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

To think, plan, or act absent a conscious, abiding, humble, and glad submission to the providence of God isn't a mistake. It's a sin of which we must repent. It's the great arrogance behind not only our self-confident assertions, but also the multitude of fears and worries we carry about the future. We project ourselves and those we love into a godless universe. We imagine a situation where God is not working all things together for the good of those who love him and assume that's exactly what will happen.

Winning the battle with fear and anxiety and winning the battle against self-confident planning requires the same sort of repentance – a humble recognition and turning away from the pride that functionally writes God out of the equation. We're not in control, friends. But that doesn't mean no one is. God is. And in that we rest.

## **CONCLUSION**

Reading the obituaries or walking through a cemetery could be one of the best things you do for the health of your soul this week. We need to pray as Moses did in Ps 90:12, "So teach us to number of our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." We need the reality of our mortality to expose the folly of our presumption.

But then we also need to steep ourselves in meditation on the Word of God where our souls can be lovingly confronted, day after day, with the reality of providence to which we humbly submit. Planning is good. Planning is wise. But it is the plans of God that will prevail.



So when you plan something that is good and it comes to pass, what do you say? “Lord, thank you. That ultimately happened because you brought it to pass. To you be the glory.” And when you plan something that is good and it does not come to pass, what do you say? “Lord, I trust you. May *your* kingdom come, and *your* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” May the Lord grant us humility to be a people who move through life with the quiet confidence that comes from knowing we’re not in control. God is.