

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

¹³Come 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^a." ¹⁴Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow^b. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away^c. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that^d." ¹⁶But as it is, you boast in your arrogance^e; all such boasting is

^a **4:13 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.** Once again James is striking up a conversation with an imaginary person to teach a lesson. These words are simply an illustration of an attitude, but notice the elements of that attitude: "I know where I am going, how long it will take and the results." Remember that James already showed us that wars begin when people do not get what they want. He must have heard his Master-brother's parable of the rich fool who also had this attitude:

Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." Luke 12:13-21

This is about more than greedy business people or children squabbling over an inheritance. You may have a dream house, a dream job, a dream vacation or a dream marriage, but this text teaches us that our dreams must bow the knee to God's dreams.

This passage fits properly into James' discussion of worldliness. The attitude of the world toward planning and goal-setting, even among those who claim to be believers, is practical atheism. Pious statements like "God willing" mean nothing if the heart is craving the things of the world. It is good to say, "God willing" of when he wills to bring you low or shatter your dreams you can still say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

^b **4:14 yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.** The key words here are "you do not know." Implied in this statement is that God *does* know what your life will be like tomorrow.

^c **4:14 You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.** The word for "vapor" only occurs elsewhere in the New Testament in Acts 2:19, where smoke or steam is pictured. The original word is the source of our word "atmosphere." Vapor is elusive. It is possible to contain it only until something happens to release it. Then it is gone. The brevity of life should temper all planning in your life. The message is: don't waste your life. Wise people often evaluate their priorities based on the old rhyme:

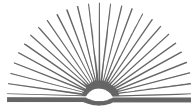
*Only one life,
`Twill soon be past;
Only what's done
For Christ will last.*

^d **4:15 Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."** Underlying this statement is more than a nice-sounding phrase used by religious people. By

James 4.13-17
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

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evil^b. ¹⁷Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin^{c,d}

saying “God-willing” you are saying he does more than allow events. He plans them. You are saying, “He might not be willing and that’s okay with me—in fact, I will take pleasure in having my plans smashed to bits if it pleases him.”

There are two ways of looking at the term “will” of God. The first is His *moral desire*. It is possible for you to know everything about this aspect of the will of God. He has revealed it to you completely in His word. You do not need to pray about God’s moral will. You need to seek it out and obey it. Ephesians 5:17 says, “...do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”

The second way the term “will” of God can be understood is used here. It refers to His *eternal decree*. You normally (unless Scripture prophesies) cannot know this part of God’s will until it happens. You also do not need to pray about this because God’s purposes will be accomplished.

Practically speaking, you might be wondering about decisions you have to make. You might wonder: “If I don’t have to pray concerning God’s will for my life, aren’t my decisions atheistic?” Not if you apply the proper kind of praying recommended earlier in James. If you want to know God’s moral will you have to study. If you want to know God’s eternal decree you have to pray. But “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). When you face major decisions, obey the moral will of God, pray for the wisdom of God and wait for the eternal will of God.

^a 4:16 **But as it is, you boast in your arrogance.** Praying about plans is often less committing results to God than it is an attempt to bring God onto our team. After all, what visionary leader wouldn’t want the Creator of heaven and earth to endorse his plans? Can’t you hear the planning meeting? “Okay, we’ve got a vision guy, a finance guy and a marketing crew. What do you say we approach God about the possibility of joining us? He might really round out the completion of our vision.”

James is pointing out the arrogance of dreaming big without being fully aware that the living God is the king, not a useful team member. What he wills happens. It is arrogance to suppose that our corrupt wills have any power against the free will of the sovereign God.

^b 4:16 **all such boasting is evil.** James is not saying that planning is evil. This would contradict the commands and examples elsewhere in the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus did not flit about during His ministry with no agenda. Paul did not set out on his journeys without a plan (only remember how often God changed Paul’s plans). What is evil is not *planning* but *boastful planning*. Boastful plans are those that do not take into consideration that God may have other plans.

^c 4:17 **Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.** James is teaching the concept of “sins of omission.” It is not enough to stay away from what is wrong. You should also pay attention to doing what is right. Proverbs 3:27-28 says:

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, “Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give it,” when you have it with you.

In this context, James (note the word “therefore”) is saying that the “good” you ought to do is keeping Christ at the heart of all your plans. The broader context of this letter shows the “good” that should come out of the life of a child of the One who gives everything good. Neighbor-loving people do not simply stay away from bad things. They do good things. This is the big picture of a faith that works.

^d 4:13-17 This study could carry the title “Keeping Your Plans in Pencil” or “Shattered Dreams.” You should make plans. It is just good stewardship of time to make such decisions. However, behind every plan needs to be the awareness that God may change it. Here is the attitude you need:

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1. Learn to enjoy it when God changes your plans. It is good to confess that God has planned the future—hard times as well as easy. It is better to confess the truth and know it is best for you. It is best to take what God gives you and rejoice in it.
 2. Plan with eternity in view. The marks of a good plan include how well it can endure over time. Ask yourself, “What difference will this make in 100 years?”
 3. Create an active plan to do good. Do you know some good you could do? Purpose in your heart to find a way to get it done for the glory of God.

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