

If The Lord Wills
James 4:13-17
ABC 7/28/19

Have you ever played with the life expectancy predictors on the internet? I did some of that this week. It's research! Anyway, I got a wide variety of answers. I didn't like the one that said I had 14 years, 9 weeks, & 1 day before I die at 70 yrs old. Slightly better was the one predicting I will die on Sunday, Nov 25, 2040 (78 yrs, 1 month, 7 days old). At least I'd make it above the average age of death for males in the US (76.9). On the other end, one said I'd live until I'm 95. Not sure I want that either! Can't imagine being around in 2057. Surprisingly, none of the sites I checked told me I'd live forever. Obviously, our time is limited. It can be used or wasted, invested or squandered. But either way, once used, it can never be regained. How much time do you have left of this life? Only God knows, right? Ps 90:12 says, **teach us to number our days, That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.** Have you numbered your days? It's hard to do since no one knows how many days they have left, not even sites on the internet. What we do know is that, as the psalmist says, **in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them** (Ps 139:16). Because that's true for all of us, we must walk by faith, knowing our future is in God's hands.

There was a movie released in 1989 called, *Casualties of War*, which starred Michael J Fox & Sean Penn. It tells the story of a group of soldiers during the Vietnam War who committed a horrible crime, & one of the soldiers, played by Michael J Fox, Private Eriksson, witnesses this crime but doesn't participate in it & doesn't do anything to stop it. There's a scene where his conscience begins to gnaw at him & he says these words:

Just because each of us might at any second be blown away, we're acting like we can do anything we want, as though it doesn't matter what we do. I'm thinking it's just the opposite. Because we might be dead in the next split second, maybe we've got to be extra careful what we do because maybe it matters more. Maybe it matters more than we will ever know.

That's James' message today. Maybe it matters more. So often in our lives, we live like those soldiers, don't we? Just because we know that death is certain, that life can end at any moment, we live how we please, not as God tells us. James says that matters more than we can ever imagine. The solution to the brevity of life isn't to live as though it doesn't matter but as if it matters more than we can now know. **11-17 PRAY**

James' main concern in this little letter is genuine faith. Not just a verbal faith but one that changes every aspect of our lives. As we've seen recently, genuine faith works itself out in a lifestyle of humble repentance which shows itself in our relationship to God & to one another. One of the connecting themes through chapters 4-5 is humility. In 4:1-12 James hit our need for humility to resolve conflicts & have harmonious relationships with one another. Part of humbling ourselves before God is not speaking against one another as fellow members of God's family. As we humbly repent & love one another as commanded, we realize the only solution to the uncertainty of life is to trust in the sovereign grace of God & the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. Because God is in charge & we are not, because this is His plan & not ours, we must humble ourselves before Him & obey His will. Here in vss 13-17 James turns to the subject of humility with regard to the future. He's confronting an arrogant spirit he'd observed among some of those within the churches. Although these people professed to know & follow Jesus, they were living with the worldly attitude of making plans without taking into account their own mortality & God's sovereignty. Sounds like today, doesn't it? So pervasive is our culture's arrogant independence of God that even many Christians attend church, marry, choose their vocations, have children, buy & sell homes, expand their portfolios, & coast with the currents of culture without thinking of God's will for them. Many Christians never pray about God's will regarding their vocation, family direction, church involvement, finances, or leisure activities. They change Augustine's, *Love God & do as you please*, to, *Do as you please & say you love God*. The Holy Spirit challenges this casual arrogance through the hard-hitting words of James here.

1. You Who Say 13

This is a picture of a successful businessman. **A.** He has a **plan**: **Today or tomorrow we will go...** Like any smart businessman, he leaves room for contingencies. It's a wise way to approach business because you can't control all the variables & it's good to have a plan. **B.** He has a **place** in mind: **To such & such a city...** Maybe he's thinking about expanding into a small neighboring city or a teeming metropolis. But he has a specific place in mind. **C.** He has a **period** of time set: **& spend a year there...** He knows it won't happen overnight & so plans in advance for the coming year. **D.** &

He intends to make a **profit: & engage in business & make a profit**. Why make plans, why travel, & why stay for an extended period if you don't plan on making a profit? There's nothing wrong with any of this. Show me a businessman who doesn't want to make a profit & I'll show you a man who'll soon be out of business. We all should plan, think ahead, & have a goal. What is wrong here? Put simply, these people have left God out of their thinking. They believe (as most Americans do) that they're the master of their own fate. They approach life as if they were in control. Note the phrase, **You who say...** That's a tip-off. They not only make plans, they brag about them to others. They think nothing can stop them. See a hint of pride & arrogance here? The problem that James points out is they were planning as if they were sovereign & they weren't bowing before the only sovereign God. They were arrogantly making plans for their future but their plans didn't include God. Their trust wasn't in God but in their own wisdom, business ventures, & the money they supposed they'd make. They were assuming they were in control of their future & everything would go according to their plans. When we act this way, & we all do at times (at the very least), we're a fool for leaving God out of the equation. We presume we can control our own future. We presume our plans can't fail. We presume our inevitable success. We're fools, not because we make plans, but because we leave God out of them. Not because of our dreams, but because we left God out. Not because of our desire to make a profit, but because we left God out. We can make all the plans we want & they can be good, sound ones. But there are many things we don't know which vs 14 speaks to.

2. You Do Not Know 14

There's much we don't know, isn't there? 1st, none of us know **what our life will be like tomorrow**. No one knows what tomorrow holds. Sometimes we forget how little control we have over things. A house fire, a call from the doctor, a natural disaster, an economic downturn, a terrorist attack & all your plans are for naught & your life is changed forever. Things happen so quickly, a speeding car, a stray bullet, a sudden stroke, an unexpected heart attack or aneurism & people will soon be saying all kinds of good things about you at your funeral. None of us know what tomorrow holds: a financial reversal or inheriting millions, an accident or a windfall, a wild-fire or the return of Christ.

We don't even know what will happen 10 minutes from now, let alone tomorrow or next year! These businessmen were arrogantly assuming they'd wake up tomorrow, they'd safely get to the city, their business venture would be successful within a year, & no one would steal their profits. They were presuming all of these things about an unknown future they had no control of & no guarantees about.

When was the last time you thought of the brevity & uncertainty of your life?. James reminds us life is like a vapor that appears for a moment & then vanishes away. Anyone who's ever blown hot breath on a cold window knows you have to work fast to write your name before it disappears. That's your life, a vapor that begins to disappear the moment you're born. As the author of the book *Fight Club* has one of his character's say, *On a long enough timeline, the survival rate for everyone drops to zero.*¹ According to some, what is meant by this statement & the book as a whole, is that if you wait long enough, every dream will be shattered, every plan will fail, & every companion will desert you. It alludes to a larger theme that materialistic possessions are inconsequential & death is the only certainty, a constant for everyone. No matter who you are or what you've done, death will take you.² That's true, isn't it? Death will take each one of us unless the Lord returns 1st. If you want to know your future, go browse a cemetery & look at any headstone. There's a name & 2 dates with a dash between them. That's what you get when you die: a little *dash* to summarize your earthly existence. Evidently, God wants us to grasp & internalize the brevity of our lives because the Bible contains many parallel similes. Job says, **As a cloud vanishes & is gone, so he who goes down to the grave does not return (7:9)**. As a wispy cloud disappears before us, never to be seen again, so is our life. Again Job says, **My days are swifter than a runner (9:25)**. Here he comes & there he goes. That's our life! Again Job says of his days, **They skim past like boats of papyrus (9:26)**. As a sail is seen on the horizon, then is gone, so is my life. King David sang, **My days are like an evening shadow (Ps 102:11)**. The shadow is there, but in a minute its shade fades, & is swallowed before one's eyes by the night & is gone forever. In the

¹ Chuck Palahniuk, p 18

² Ishan Nigam, www.quora.com/What-does-this-line-from-Fight-Club-mean-On-a-long-enough-timeline-the-survival-rate-for-everyone-drops-to-zero

same Psalm we read, **For my days vanish like smoke** (3). Poof! In another place David says, **You have made my days a mere handbreadth** (39:5). Here one imagines David holding his hand up before his people as he sings & pointing to the short journey across his palm. & then, of course, there is his famous, **As for man, his days are like grass** (103:15). It sprouts, greens, withers, & is gone. Words are piled on words, simile upon simile to get the idea across to us. One author says, *Lives are curlicues of fire cut briefly in the dark with a glowing stick.*³ Have you ever made orange curlicues in the dark with a hot stick or a sparkler & watched them fade away? One after another for thousands of years men & women have been living short lives, & the total of them isn't but a blip compared to the endless duration of eternity. No one lives forever. We are born, we live for a time & then die. Everyone of us. We're all terminal. The only difference is, some of us know it, & the rest of us act like we're going to be here forever. If you live each day as if it might be your last, one day you'll be right. Sportscaster Vin Scully once remarked about an injured player, He's *listed as day to day. Aren't we all?*⁴ Or, as has also been said, *life is like a roll of toilet paper. The closer you get to the end, the quicker it goes!* That's true, isn't it? It's prideful presumption to say we're going to do this or that, travel here or there, without humble acknowledgment of the sovereign will of God. You may protest that to think about such things is morbid & depressing. I'm not suggesting you obsess on the shortness of life & your own death. But if you never think about them, you won't live in proper dependence upon God. You'll proudly make plans & go on about life as if you'll be forever young & healthy. James says, **you boast in your arrogance** (16).

3. You Ought To Say Having shown the folly of announcing what we're going to do tomorrow or next year without reference to God's will, James gives us a godly alternative. **15**

Interestingly, the expression **if the Lord wills** doesn't appear in the OT, though it's used several times in the NT. Paul promised the Ephesians, **I will come back if it is God's will** (Acts 18:21). To the Corinthians he said, **But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing** (1 Cor 4:19; cf Rom 1:10; 1 Cor 16:7; Phil 2:19, 24; Heb 6:3). However, in similar instances he talks confidently about his

³ Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage*, p 71

⁴6/7/1991, Cub-Dodger game, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/12/08/day-to-day/>

future plans without using the phrase (Acts 19:21; Rom 15:28; 1 Cor 16:5). From this we can see the right mind-set, dependence on God, is more important than saying the right words. There's a better way than relying on ourselves, our own wisdom & knowledge, & our own pride. Instead of presuming we know everything, we should think & say, **If the Lord wills...** That's crucial because we don't know what the Lord's will is regarding the future. As has been often said, *Do you want to make God laugh? Tell Him your plans.* We should make plans but do so with the realization that they may not be God's plans for us. & we must be OK with that!

Why does James say, **if the Lord wills**, & not, *if God wills*? **Lord** is the most common title for Jesus in the NT. I think James is telling us that the **Lord** who wills is the same **Lord** who dies for us. He always wants what is very best for us, whether we realize it or not. That changes everything when we think about God's sovereignty. The Bible says that God's sovereignty is absolute. He is God & we are not. He is sovereign & we are not. He controls the past, present, & future, we don't. His sovereignty goes down to the hairs of your head It goes down to the very molecules that comprise the physical reality that we see & touch & taste. He's over all of it. It's complete in scope. It's inexhaustible in its wideness. It's absolutely unalterable. It's fixed. God has planned it all. That's the message on every page of the Bible. But it also teaches that God isn't some kind of a manipulative tyrant, a puppet master who makes us little more than zombies who have no choice in anything. Somehow human responsibility is factored in as well. That's a subject for another time. What's the importance of saying, **If the Lord wills**? Those words don't mean anything if you merely recite them. This isn't a magic formula. A mantra to be repeated endlessly. James isn't giving some kind of mystical spell we need to tack on every sentence. We're to have an attitude that acknowledges God's will is superior to our own desires & plans. This is how we should live every day of our lives. Does that mean we have to say, **if the Lord wills** every time we say something about the future? No. We've probably all known people who say it continuously, but never live like they really believe it. *God willing* is to be the posture of our heart & mind at all times. This should be the constant refrain of our hearts as we conduct the affairs of our lives. *If God wills* must be written over young people's plans of what job to pursue, what education to get, who to marry, & a

host of other things. Older people need to say from the heart, *If God wills, I will spend my time... If God wills, my children will become... If God wills, I will help in this ministry...* & on & on it goes. All of us should have this attitude. Having it requires a life of dependent prayer in which everything is taken before God. When Paul visited Ephesus in Acts 18, the believers asked him to stay longer. He declined because he had other plans, but he said this in vs 21: **I will return to you again if God wills.** That's how we should all live. We make our plans, we set our schedule, but we leave the outworking of all of it in God's hands. *I might come back. I want to come back. I intend to come back. But only if God wills.* If Paul didn't know his own future, how can we know ours? Prov 16:9 reminds us that **the mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs or determines his steps** (cf Prov 3:6). That speaks of God's control of every detail. I'm sure you've heard that *man proposes, but God disposes.* That's true, isn't it? We can make all our plans & have our whole life mapped out, but in the end, God determines every step you take. Every *IF* of your life & of mine, is in God's hands. James is riveting our attention on the fact that God is totally sovereign. When we make our plans the correct posture for us isn't to say, *IF*, & then be terrified. It's to say with utter confidence, *If the Lord wills, we'll show up to church next Sunday; we'll wake up tomorrow morning; we'll take another breath.* The only *IF* that matters is the *IF* James tells us about here. The God of the Bible is the God of *IF*. Every *IF* is in His hands, therefore you can trust Him. The uncertainty of life doesn't need to wreck you, doesn't need to make you crumble, & doesn't need to cause sleepless nights. No, James says if you understand this, this *IF* changes everything & rids us of that uncertainty. We are not sovereign, God is. **If the Lord wills.**

Notice too that James assumes you should acknowledge God as the sovereign over your business life. The idea that church is one sphere, but work is an altogether different sphere isn't biblical. Jesus is Lord of all of life, from family to work to leisure. Your plans should reflect that you aren't in charge, Jesus is. We all must conduct our business dealings in a manner that pleases & glorifies Him. Don't make the mistake of thinking you'll be here forever. The only thing that matters is doing God's will.

4. You Boast 16

This could be translated, *As it is, you boast about your pretensions. All such boasting is evil.* This is the only time this word for **evil** is used in the NT. It's a strong word. Not just marginally bad, but actually **evil**! He says if we live this way, if we presume upon God, if we say we can do as we please & we make our plans taking no thought of God, not praying nor seeking His guidance, if that's how we live, we live as practical atheists & we arrogantly & evilly boast & think we're in charge of our lives. Some of those James was writing to were actually bragging about their accomplishments apart from God. The same word is used in 1 Jn 2:16 of **the boastful pride of life**. They're saying, *Look what I've done on my own. Sure, God gave me life, but it's my brains, my plans, & my energy that makes me so successful.* This was amazing arrogance. James says, **All such boasting is evil.** It's easy for us to think, *I've succeeded because of my own hard work & smart business sense.* We disdain others, thinking, *If they'd only work hard as I have, they'd succeed too.* But we're forgetting Paul's pointed question to the proud Corinthians, **What do you have that you did not receive? & if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?** (1 Cor 4:7). Everything we have comes from God by His grace. We fall into pride when we don't keep that in mind. Most of us wouldn't be so crass as to outwardly boast like this. But inwardly? God knows & He has his ways of dealing with us. The great Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, learned this the hard way. As head of Babylon at its prime, he walked one bright day on his palace roof. Below stretched Babylon's busy canals & the tiled walls of the city. Before him rose the famous Hanging Gardens, one of the ancient world's 7 Wonders. He couldn't contain himself as he cried, **Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power & for the glory of my majesty?** (Dan 4:30). God's judgment came swiftly as Nebuchadnezzar fell to all fours, thinking himself an ox & began to dine on the grass until he came to his senses years later (34-35). If God did this with pagan King Nebuchadnezzar, how much more will He not suffer His children to go on living in their arrogance? Boasting is foolish because you don't control your own future. It's not only foolish, but is **evil** because boasting places you in the position of God. It's a sin to act & live as if you'll never die. That's the ultimate presumption. We all like to feel indispensable, & we are indispensable until we

aren't. As the old saying goes, *The graveyards are filled with indispensable men.*⁵ In the US the average life expectancy is 79.3 years. Here's what that means:

If you are 35, you have 531 months left.
 If you are 45, you have 411 months left.
 If you are 55, you have 291 months left.
 If you are 65, you have 171 months left.
 If you are 75, you have 51 months left.

If you're 80 or above, congratulations. You're in bonus time! But the truth is, some of us won't make 79 years. We'll get cancer or have a heart attack or be in an accident or some other calamity will take us. Others will live to be 80, 90, or even 100+, thanks to good genes & modern medicine. But it doesn't matter how long we live. What matters is what we do with the years God gives us.

James closes with a challenge to do the truth he's given. **17**

At 1st glance, vs 17 seems somewhat disjointed from the preceding vss. It may refer to all that James has said up to this point. But the word **therefore** seems to connect it to what James has just said. I think it's a summary in the sense that James is telling us what the main problem he's been focusing on for the past 16 vss really is. They are sins of omission. There are 2 different kinds of sins the Bible gives us. Sins of commission – things we do that God tells us not to do. But then there are sins of omission, things God has commanded us to do that we fail to do. & James says that's the problem here. & he's going to unfold more of that in 5:1-6. He's going to show us more of the consequences of practical atheism. But James adds vs 17 as an encouragement to do what he's just commanded. He's told us what is right. If we now fail to do it, we're sinning. We can't take refuge in the plea that we've done nothing against God's commands. Scripture makes it abundantly clear that sins of omission are as real & serious as sins of commission. The servant in Jesus' parable who fails to use the money he was entrusted with (Lk 19:11–27) & the *goats* who failed to care for the outcasts of society (Mt 25:31–46) are condemned for what they failed to do. Another teaching of Jesus reminds us very forcibly of James' words here: **That slave who knew his master's will & did not get ready or act in accord to his will, will receive many lashes** (Lk 12:47). We can never look at God & say, *Dad, I didn't know*. We know pride is wrong. We know worldliness is

⁵ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/11/21/graveyards-full/#note-3015-1>

wrong. We know the things that he's been describing here are things we all must work on. We know the **right thing to do**. Are we doing it? We're to embrace the truth that our life is short & we have no control over its brief span. We must live the truth, **if the Lord wills**. Make your plans, set your goals, dream big dreams, & then commit it all to the Lord. That's the message of this passage.

In the years following WW2, Bob Pierce founded *World Vision*, an agency that 1st helped children in orphanages in foreign countries by getting Americans to financially sponsor them. Near the end of his life, when asked how he accounted for what God had done through him, he replied that early on he learned to pray a very simple prayer: *Lord, I give you the right to change my agenda any time you like without informing me in advance.*⁶

That's the kind of prayer God answers because it's based on the truth that God is God & He has the absolute right to do whatever He wants. Many of us are unhappy because we're constantly fighting God for control. We've never surrendered our agenda to Him. Many of us want to make deals with God. We want to negotiate with the Almighty about the terms of our service. We want God to rubber stamp our plans. That's not how it works. That simple prayer by Bob Pierce captures the true application of this passage. God already has the right to change our agenda any time He likes. But how much happier we will be if we acknowledge it at all times. Perhaps we can come to the bottom line this way. We're not in control of anything. That's a hard truth for us to confront because most of us are control freaks who want to rule over our little corner of the universe. But that's conceit. Time has a way of evening things out. Death comes to all sooner or later. A person who will not say, **if the Lord wills** is destined to live a miserable life & to die a miserable death. You are not the master of your fate. You are not the captain of your soul. The sooner you realize that, the happier you will be.

Let me draw one simple application: Hold lightly to what you value greatly because it isn't yours anyway. All we have belongs to the Lord. Make your plans & dream your dreams. But hold your plans & dreams lightly because you don't control the future. You've seen the commercials that say, *You're in good hands with Allstate*. As true as that may be of the insurance company, it's far truer of our Heavenly Father. You're in good hands when you're in His hands because His hands rule the universe. Put your life in His hands & you'll always be in His will. Is God calling you or me

⁶ Quoted by Ray Pritchard, www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/what-is-your-life/

to do His specific will? Perhaps to give up something? If so, may we say, *Lord, I am willing*. Is God calling us to go somewhere & we're resisting? If so, may we say, *Lord, I am willing*. Perhaps He's calling us to accept a difficult responsibility. If so, may we say, *Lord, I am willing*. The spiritual logic here is inescapable. **What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while & then vanishes** (14), but our destiny is eternity with God. May our heart-cry in all of life be, *if the Lord wills*.

If you don't yet know God through Jesus, it's not too late. You don't know when you'll die or when Jesus will return. You don't own what you think you do. You don't control your destiny, life, or future. God is in control & in His grace He's allowed you to be here to hear of His grace & if you haven't repented & trusted in Christ, come to Him now as He gives grace to the humble to repent. By His abundant grace, you can leave your sin, live for Him, love Him, & trust Him because God judged Him in your place on the cross, the One who before that event prayed to the Father words that must also be ours, **not My will but Your will be done** (Lk 22:42).