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[0:00] I'm glad to be back with you again, and you know, singing these songs, I was just thinking about it, and I'm so glad Ben raised kind of the backstory to It Is Well With My Soul. You know, it's sometimes easy to sing these words here on Sunday morning, but they're dangerous words to sing, because it's a lot harder to live them out day by day.

Especially when we're in the seasons when it's not peace like a river, but it's sorrows, like sea billows roll. And so, it's so good to remember that there are Christians that have walked before us that by God's grace and by His Holy Spirit have actually been able to still find joy in the Lord, even in hard things.

I'm sure Horatio shed many tears in those days, even when he was writing that song, and yet there was a joy that was underneath and through it all. And in some ways that connects really well to what we're going to be looking at this morning.

We're going to be looking at James chapter 4, verses 13 to 17. And, you know, I don't know about you, but as I was singing those words, part of my heart was just praying and saying, God, help me to just faithfully live those words out.

Help me to faithfully run the race all the way to the end, still following you. Help me to still say It Is Well With My Soul tomorrow or next week or the month after when sea billows roll.

[1:24] I can't do that on my own. I need your grace and your strength. I want to live well for you, and I desperately need your help. And I think all of us this morning, as we think about our life, we want to live life well, right?

We want to live life well. We want to get to the end of our lives and look back and say there was meaning, there was purpose there. I ran the race well. It wasn't a waste.

We don't want to get to the end and feel like we're just a failure, right? And so we want to run this race well. We want to follow God.

And yet, sometimes we're left wondering, how do I do this well? How do I live life well? How do I live a good story, so to speak, that's worth maybe reading at the end?

That maybe my neighbors or my family could read and be proud of and say, God was at work in your story, right? We want that. We desperately want that.

[2:24] And we desperately need His help to do that. And I'm thinking of probably this morning there are a variety of people here. Some of you are younger and you're starting out on the adventure of life.

And there's so much promise and potential ahead of you. You're just getting ready to head off to college. You're finishing up high school. You just finished college and starting your job. And there's so much excitement and potential ahead of you.

And you're excited about it. And maybe some of you this morning are maybe somewhere in the middle of the story. And you're kind of now just wondering, am I just stuck in the monotony?

Because I had all this excitement at the beginning.

And now it seems like it's just driven by Monday to Friday, 8 to 5. And I get to the end of every week and just wonder, what did I do with my week? Or maybe some of you here this morning are towards the end of the story.

And maybe you have a lot of joys as you look back on it. But maybe there's also a lot of sorrow. And you're wondering, was my story worth it? To every single person here this morning, God has a word for us this morning from the book of James.

[3:31] And he says, I want to help you know how to live well for me. In this crazy life, when the sea billows roll or not, I want to help you to live well for me.

And God speaking through James is going to give us two keys that are simple, they're clear. Clear, sometimes hard to use, but clear to help us live well.

To live out a good story. And so let me pray and ask that God would help us to hear. And also to act on what we hear this morning.

Amen. Amen. Let me pray. Father, this morning we are so grateful that we come here not to prove something, not to earn something, but to receive.

You are the God who defines yourself as the giver of all good gifts. The one who gave us the most precious gift. Jesus Christ, your only son.

[4:36] A substitute. One who died in our place. So we could even gather here this morning. So we could know that we don't need to fear our banishment from God. So we can have hope that by your Holy Spirit, which you've given to us as another gift, we can follow you all the way to the end.

And so this morning I pray that your word would help us. That you would help us to listen to these two keys. And then to put them into action. So that we might live well for you.

For your glory and our good. Amen. Let me read James 4, verse 13 to 17. James is writing this letter to a church that is going through hard things.

And he's also writing to give them just practical advice of what it means to live well in this world. So we pick up in chapter 4, verse 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.

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.

[5:53] 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. This is God's word. So here James introduces us to this first key.

And he starts out introducing us to kind of this generic type of person. Right? In verse 13, you have basically a normal business person. You know, they're going to go to a town and do business and make a profit.

And when you first hear that, you think, well, there's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with working and making a profit. But James is going to pick up on something that's underlying this person.

It's this attitude that's underlying their behavior. And you can almost call it the it's all about me attitude. I'm going to go here tomorrow. I'm going to go do this.

[6:51] I'm going to see this profit. I'm going to do this. It's all I, I, I. It's all about me. They're the captain of their own fate. They're living for their own profit. And it sounds like they're trying to control their future and plan it all.

I'm going to plan my future. I'm going to make my plan and work my plan. Right? And on one hand, you read that and you think, well, on one hand, that just feels like our default a lot of times.

Right? I mean, just by nature, we tend to just default to that way of living. You know, we're very kind of self-focused people by default. You get up in the morning, you think, what do I want for breakfast? What do I want to do today?

What do I want to do with my life? What am I going to do next? And just by default, without even trying, we just start thinking that way. And we also have this default of thinking that we actually complain about what's going to happen in our day, and it will mostly happen.

Right? But James, right away, doesn't waste any words. He's not a word waster, James. It's very concise. He says, wait a minute. That attitude is foolish and it's arrogant.

[7:54] It's foolish, he says, because in verse 14, he says, yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. You don't know tomorrow, never mind next week or the next month or the next year.

So, if you're thinking you're going to go here for a year and make profit, you don't know that. You're foolish. You fail to consider the fact that there's a big piece of the equation you're missing, and that's that you don't know the future.

It's not in your hands. You can't foresee it, right? And so, maybe you're thinking, okay, tomorrow I'm going to mow the grass. The weatherman, after all, told me only 30% chance of rain, so that's always right.

And yet, you wake up in the morning, it's pouring rain, and now all your plans for that day, all that work you want to do outside are gone. Frustration. Or maybe it's something more serious.

Like, you're going along, you're thinking you're only a couple years from retirement, and all of a sudden, one day, your boss calls you into the office and says, oh, by the way, we're downsizing. Here's your pink slip.

[8:57] You didn't see it coming. You don't know. You don't know what tomorrow brings, never mind next year. So, James says, if you think you can just plan out your future, and you can just work your future, and it's all about you, wait a minute, slow down.

You don't even know what tomorrow brings. But not only that, he says in verse 14, he says, what is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

So, he's saying, not only do you not know the future, you don't even know how much of the future you'll have. Not only do you not know the future, you don't even know how much of the future you will have.

Life is short. It's a breath. It's a mist. It's gone. You've all seen that, right? Maybe you're driving early in the morning on a trip or to work, and there's that mist hanging over the road.

Twenty minutes later, it's all gone. Like that. And James says, that's what your life is like. A mist. It's here. It's gone. And so, if you think you can just plan out your whole life, you don't know what tomorrow's going to bring.

[10:06] You don't even know if you'll have a tomorrow. And so, he paints this picture of our lives as a mist. And so, imagine with me that there was a certain patch of mist out on Highway 50.

We'll call this patch of mist misty. Very creative, I know. And misty decides, you know what? I think today I'm going to mosey on over to the Grand Canyon and see the sights. That'd be pretty foolish, right?

Because misty isn't going to last long enough to make it to the Grand Canyon. And misty has no control over the conditions that even allow for existence. And James says, but that's what you're like, too.

You're like a mist. Here and gone. So, why do you think you can plan out and control your whole life when it could be gone like that?

Because we tend to, by default, assume that we know the future, that we can control it, that we can plan it out, that we can shape it the way we want. You know, if I was to ask most of you, how long do you think you'll live?

[11:08] Most people would say, well, probably at least into my 60s. That's the average, somewhere in the 60s. But you don't know that. Or if I was to ask you, will you make it to the end of today?

Most of us would, by default, assume, well, of course I'll make it to the end of today. But James says, you don't know that. You don't know you'll make it into tomorrow. You don't know.

And so, you're foolish if you're thinking that you can just assume this control over your future, this, assume this ability, this power to shape the future in your image, in your way.

And the thing is, the reason why we think this is because a lot of the times, the future does play out the way we want it to. There's enough times where it works out just like we want that it can give us the illusion that it will always work out the way we want.

There's just enough times we get it right that we think we'll always get it right. And James here right away, he doesn't, he's not trying to be mean, but he wants to burst that illusion, burst that bubble, and say, this is not reality.

[12:17] That's not how it works. You're a fool if you think that. But not only are you a fool, he says, but in verse 16, he says, as it is, you boast in your arrogance.

All such boasting is evil. Not only is it foolish, he's saying, but it's arrogant. It's evil to claim to have that kind of ability and control.

And here's why. Because the only person that knows the future, the only person who shapes and controls the future is God. And so when you think, I can shape and control the future, James is saying, what you don't realize is you're trying to be God.

And you're not. And that's arrogance. You don't get to pretend to be God. I mean, I don't get to stand up here and pretend to be the President of the United States of America because I'm not, right?

That would be arrogant of me to just assume that. And James is saying it's arrogant if you claim to be God. Now, I'm sure you're not going around verbally telling people, hey, by the way, I'm God.

[13:20] Did you know that? You're probably not doing that, right? But James is saying it's so easy to just drift into this thinking that practically we act as if we're our own God.

That practically we're controlling our own future, our own destiny. And James is saying it's not how it works. We're tempted to think that we get to write the story of our life and we get to write it the way that we want it to turn out.

Right? We're going to write our own stories. I saw this quote on the Internet. I was looking up the idea of story. And it said, your life is a story. Make it a bestseller. It's all about you. You write your story and you make it turn out the way you want.

And James says that's not how life works. We can't write our own stories. We can't have them turn out always the way we want.

But you might say, why can't I? Isn't it my life? Shouldn't I get to run my life? After all, it's mine. And so James is going to tell us something in verse 15.

[14:26] He says, instead, you ought to say if the Lord wills, we will live. He said, if the Lord wills, we will live. I think what he's saying is he's saying, look, even your living is a gift from God.

Even your very life isn't really yours. It's a gift God gave you. It's His life that He gave to you. It's not yours. That's why you don't get to decide how it turns out all the time.

Because it's not yours. It's the life He's giving to you. It's only if God wills. Only if He gives it to you that you have it. So that's why He has the right to write our story.

So if you think about it, has anyone here read Lord of the Rings? Okay. Everyone should go home and read it. It's a great book. But anyways, maybe you won't go home and read it. But it's a great story.

It's an epic story. And it was written by a guy named J.R.R. Tolkien. Now, if I don't like the ending of the story, I just can't change the ending, send it to a book publisher and say, print this version instead.

[15:30] I think it's better. Because it's not my story, right? It belongs to Tolkien. He's the one that wrote it. It's his story. I can't change it. Or similarly, imagine that the villain in the story, a guy named Sauron, in the middle of the story decides, you know, I don't like how this story ends with me losing.

I'm going to change the story. I'm going to win instead. It wouldn't work, would it? Because he's not the author. He's just a character in the story. He can't decide how the story turns out.

He's just a character. He makes his choices. They matter. But at the end of the day, the ending will be what Tolkien wants it to be. And Sauron can't change it. And the same way, James is reminding us here, wait a minute.

You're not the writer of the story of life. You're not the main author. There's only one main author of the story of life. And it's God.

Psalms 139, verse 16, says that before we were even born, every one of our days were written down in God's book of life. He's the writer.

[16:38] He's the one that's writing the whole story. And so not only are we not the author of our story, we're not even the main character of the story. We're minor characters in the story.

And it's so easy for us to think the story is all about us and that we get to decide how it turns out. And James wants to say, that's not how it works. That's not how it works. There's someone else

writing the story.

It's the Lord who's writing the story. He's the main author. And I think if we stop and think over our lives, whether you're a teenager or older, you've probably experienced those days where life doesn't turn out the way you want, right?

Those hopes turned into disappointments. The joys turned into hardship and sorrow. And one of the reasons why I think God plans that out to happen is because he wants us to learn we're not the writer of the story.

He, too, is trying to sometimes burst our little bubble and say, wait a minute. You're not the writer. I am. It's not always going to turn out the way you want.

[17:55] It's going to turn out the way I want. And I want you to trust me in that. I'm the one writing the story, not you. And that's why James really says, verse 15, he says, instead you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

James is saying, look, if God really is the one writing the story, then what we need to do is rest and trust in the storytelling God.

Don't try to just keep fighting him and writing your own story. Trust the storytelling God. Trust that what God will write is what will happen and that in the end, it will be seen to be good.

If the Lord wills, we'll live and do this or that. And I don't think James is saying here, you know, this is some stock phrase you use, you know, like always throw this out just to make sure you're not proud, you know, like, Keith, see you next week, if the Lord wills.

You guys want to meet at the park later? If the Lord wills. It's not that kind of thing. It's not some stock phrase. It's this mindset that has embraced the fact that God is the storyteller, that God is the one who's going to write the story and that even if I'm going to make my plans, I'm going to maybe make them in pencil, knowing that God might change them.

[19:19] And then I'm going to trust him with the edits he makes because he probably knows more than I do. It's the kind of attitude that says, I'm going to be wise.

I'm going to try to think things through. But at the end of the day, what God will allow to happen, I'm going to trust, is better for my overall good than what I had planned out.

It's an attitude of trust. It's an attitude of giving up ultimate control, even as you're still faithful with your daily choices. So how do you know if you've got this kind of attitude, if you have this first key, this trusting the storyteller?

Well, I think the key to knowing if you have that key is how do you respond when life doesn't turn out the way you want? When the story of your life doesn't turn out the way you wanted it written, is your response anger, frustration, and you stay there in that.

If that's the case, it's a good indication you're not trusting God to write the story. One of my favorite authors, Andy Wilson, has this quote. He says, when life doesn't turn out the way you want, there are only two responses at the end of the day.

[20:31] The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord, or curse God and die. There's only two basic responses at the end of the day.

Blessed be the name of the Lord, or curse God and die. And I don't say that tritely. I know that's hard. It's hard to trust God and bless Him when things are hard.

I'm not throwing out that tritely. But it is that clear. There really are only two options. There's a variety of sub-options under each one. But at the end of the day, we either are trying to run our own lives and frustrated when God doesn't run it our way, or we're trying to be faithful and trusting Him with the way He writes our story.

So when you've got that day planned out and it doesn't turn out the way you want, does that lead to anger towards your family because you're frustrated about how the day didn't turn out?

When you don't get that promotion or someone breaks up with you, do you wallow there and stay there for a long time, that bitterness and frustration? Or is there sadness, but then a turn towards trusting?

[21:44] Or what about when you really have just a couple of household chores you want to get done while the kids are napping and they don't nap the way you want and you have no time and anything done that you want?

How do you respond? Is there just this wallowing in anger and frustration, or is there, okay, how do I be faithful now that God's written the story differently than I wanted? So then what I had planned for the day, okay God, but help me be faithful with how you have written out this day.

So again, it's not that we don't plan. It's not that we don't think. It's not that we don't seek to be faithful, but it's that we have that flexibility and that trust in God. That is key number one.

It's trusting the storyteller and the storyteller is not you. It's God. And it's trusting Him because of what we sang about.

We sang about God and His character. I believe everything that you say you are. I believe I have seen your unchanging heart. And it's because we know the storyteller.

[22:51] It's because we know who God is and how good He is that we can trust Him even when things don't turn out the way we thought they were going to turn out. That is the key. Number one, trust the storyteller.

You want to live well for God all the way to the end? Trust the storyteller. Trust the storyteller. Especially when the story isn't turning out the way you want. But now we need to look at a second key.

We don't just want to trust the storyteller. We need to then be faithful and obey the storyteller. Because if we trust God to write the story, then we still need to ask the question, well then how do we live faithfully our part?

If God's the writer and He's writing us in as characters into this story, how do I faithfully live out as that minor character that God has written me to be? How do I obey Him and walk faithfully?

And I know that a lot of times in my life, growing up, I always thought the answer would be somehow very mystical. You know, like, I would pray and somehow it would show up in the clouds. So that's what I hoped for anyways. You know, it's like, you just want to wake up in the morning and for God to just make it so clear.

[24:00] You know, like, could it be in the clouds or maybe like I pour like my alphabet cereal and like the letters, you know, form something. You know what I'm talking about? Has anybody ever wished that? You know, be honest.

You've wished that at some point. You're wrestling with this hard thing and you just want this really clear answer. And we think it's going to be all mystical. And sometimes God does work in those supernatural ways. But most of the time, He actually speaks a lot clearer than even we think.

And this is what James is getting at in verse 17. He says, look, here's what it means to live well for God. Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Or in other words, go and do the thing you know you're supposed to do. That's what James is saying. Now, obviously, James is presupposing that you probably know what the right thing is to do because otherwise you can't go do it.

So if you think about it, if you're going to faithfully live out your character role, you need a script. You need a script that tells you here's how you're supposed to act in this scene. And God gave us that.

[25:02] It's called the Bible. This is where He spoke. It's not rocket science. It's not mystical. He put it right here in this book. He said, look, I've already spoken to you.

I've already told you what to do. It's this whole book. Read it. There's lots of things in there. And rather than worrying about the future and trying to plan it all out, you don't know that.

Don't worry about that. You just focus on doing what I've told you to do. Moses says the same thing to the people of Israel back in Deuteronomy 29, 29. He's talking to the people of Israel.

They're about to go into the promised land. The old generation's died off. The young generation's about to come in. He says, look, the secret things belong to the Lord, but the things He has revealed belong to us and to our children that we might walk in them.

The secret things belong to the Lord. You don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. That belongs to the Lord. Don't worry about that. You just be faithful to walk or obey.

[26:04] It's a picture of walking. Obey what He's clearly told you to do. That's what God's done all the way through this Bible. Even if you're just to skim the letter of James, here are some things that God has told you clearly to do.

He's told you to trust Him in the midst of trials. That when you feel like you don't have the wisdom to get through trials, to ask Him for wisdom. He said, endure trials.

He said, care for the widow and the orphan. He said, be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. He said, don't show favoritism. He said, bridle your tongue.

If we just stop there, just with that very short list, just from the book of James, the first three chapters, that's a lot of things that we now know the right thing to do.

So what does living for God faithfully look like? Don't worry about tomorrow. Today, play your role faithfully. Do those things today. Today, when you're with your family at lunch or with friends or when you're with interacting with people after church, be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

[27:12] When you're in the middle of conflict with someone, a co-worker, marriage, be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. When you see a widow or orphan in need, care for them.

Bridle your tongue. When you go through trial, trust God in the midst of it. That's what it looks like to live for God faithfully. So what would it look like if those things permeated our life more and more on a daily basis?

What if you were known in your neighborhood, in your workplace, amongst your friends, as the person who is quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to be angry?

Imagine how that would honor God and imagine how at the end of your life, if all people could say about you was, they were quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

That would be a life well lived. And what I love about this vision that James has given us, that God has really given us, is that living for God is a lot of ordinary, mundane, daily choices.

[28:20] And that means that every one of us can live for God. You don't need to be a superhero. You don't need to be a super Christian. You don't need to be a missionary. Every one of us can live well for God by living in all these faithful, small ways every single day.

And what I also love about that is that means that the ordinary matters. Moms, loving your kids when you're tired from lack of sleep and they're throwing another fit and being slow to speak and slow to anger, that honors God.

That has meaning. It's not just mundane. It's not pointless. It honors God. When you go to work, and as Paul says, you don't grumble or complain, even if you're not the most amazing worker, if you just go to work, work hard, and don't grumble or complain, even if no one notices, God sees, and he says, well done.

You're living well. Do you see how all of a sudden, every day, it can now be filled with meaning.

Every day can be filled with purpose. Every day, you can be living out the role that God has given you faithfully.

Faithfully. And so, that's the second key. The first key is trusting God to write the story, to trust him to write it out how you want, but the second key is now, now that you've trusted God with writing the future, now that you're gonna just trust him with that, and you're not gonna get all bent out of shape about it, it frees up your mind and your heart to be focused on the second key, faithfully obeying him daily.

[29:57] So often, we spend all kinds of time worried, thinking about the future, when 95% of our energy should be spent on doing the things he's clearly told us to do, and then the future will be written just the way he wants, whether we're worried about it or not.

Don't overcomplicate living well for God. It's trusting him and then obeying him in all the small, daily things. I hope you see that what I love about this pass from James is that it makes living well for God clear.

Now it's hard, right? It's hard to trust God. It's hard to obey all the time, but it's clear. It's clear the path we have to walk on, and it might be a long one and a hard one up lots of steep slopes and around crazy curves, but it's there, and God's calling us to walk it.

But I just want to finish with a final encouragement. If you are going to use these two keys, we need to remember who the storytelling God is and the story he's telling.

Because if you want to trust God, it's going to be hard if you don't know who he is. That's why it's so important we sing songs we did this morning. Because when we sing those songs, we're reminded that God is good.

[31:18] And that the story he's writing is how, even though we all deserve judgment, he's writing a story in which he sent his son to save undeserved people like us.

That's the story he's writing. I don't know how your little story is going to fit into that story at every point. I don't know if your little story from the human perspective will always turn out well. But when it's part of this bigger story, you can trust the God who's writing your little story. Because the big story he's writing is very good. And so this morning, do you trust him? Do you trust him as the storytelling God? Have you given up control of your life to trust him to write the story? And that's not a one-time decision, friends.

That's a daily decision to wake up and trust the day and the next day and the tomorrow and the tomorrow after that to him. And if you do that, then you're freed up to obey him.

[32:20] I just want to encourage you. You will find that along the journey of obedience, there will be many, many failures. You will fail to do all that you know is right to do and it will be sin.

And yet, the story God's writing is the story that he sent Jesus to die precisely for people who would fail to live well. Jesus is the main hero because he's the only one that lived perfectly, that always did the right thing and then he died for people that consistently do the wrong thing.

And then he rose again, ascended into heaven and on this Pentecost Sunday, we're reminded that he sent his Holy Spirit to indwell us so that our natural tendency to just be all about me could be transformed formed by his grace, by his word, and by his spirit so that maybe, just maybe, we could actually live faithfully.

Not perfectly, but faithfully. And get to the end of the race and find the storytelling God awaiting us at the very end of this very good story in a very good place with these words on his lips, well done, good and faithful servant.

enter into the rest I have written for you. Let me pray. Father, we all know that just by nature we want stories that are easy to live in, that are comfortable for us, that only give us rest.

[34:05] And yet, because of our sin, we have allowed trouble to enter the world. But that didn't catch you by surprise. You had that as part of the story and you had something even better in the story.

Your son to die and rise again to defeat sin, to defeat death and offer final rest. Think of the words of Jesus who says, come now you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

My yoke is easy. Father, you've made it clear what it means to live for you well, to trust you, to obey you. And it's hard to live it on our own but we're so grateful that we're not living it on our own.

We have your Holy Spirit. If we've trusted in Christ, we have your Holy Spirit living within us. We have the grace of the gospel at work in our hearts and lives and we even have one another, your church family, encouraging us, spurring us on.

So help us to live faithfully, to trust you and obey for there is no greater way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey.

[35:16] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.