

Lord Willing

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[0 : 0 0] So, if you were a monk who lived in the Middle Ages, you'd live in a monastery, and you would subscribe to what was called a rule of life. Basically, like, they weren't setting new New Year's resolutions. Every single time, they'd say, this is the things that we're going to do, the practices that we're going to do in community with your monk friends in order to order our life.

And so, you would hold to what were called daily offices, and these daily offices would be these regular times, depending which monastic order you were a part of, would depend on how often that you would do it, but you would come together in order to read scripture, and to pray, to confess sin to one another, to encourage one another. And after, you know, holding this daily office, you would turn to your monk friend, and you would say to them, I'll see you again in three hours, deo valente. Deo valente just being the Latin for God willing, or Lord willing. It's taken from our passage in James chapter 4. Lord willing. Maybe some of you know this practice. Maybe some of you know what it's like to live before the internet existed, right? I know what that is like. Before emails were there, and you could fire them off, or text messages, or WhatsApp, or whatever you kids do with your Snapchats, and things like that. Before that, you would have to, if you wanted to communicate to somebody, you'd have to write a handwritten letter, and it would take a long time to get there, and many, many things could happen on a long journey. And so, as you wrote your letter, you'd usually date it, and you'd sign your name, and you would put the initials D, period, or full stop, excuse me,

D, full stop, V, full stop, standing for deo valente, meaning, deo valente, Lord willing, this letter will reach you. It's a phrase maybe you used, it's kind of a Christianese phrase. Hey, can we get coffee this week? Oh yeah, Lord willing, let's get it on Monday. If you're from the American South, you say Lord willing, but there's another phrase that you add at the end of it, and it's Lord willing, and the creek don't rise. Are we going to finish the barn by winter? Lord willing, and the creek don't rise. It's a pretty straightforward statement. It's a pretty straightforward passage that I read to us. It's a confession that God is in control, and it's this call to a heart posture of humility. But here's the thing, just because something is simple and straightforward does not mean that it's easy. In fact, this is one of the most challenging verses in all of the Bible, to live deo valente, Lord willing. What does that mean for us? Here's our outline in three parts. What does it mean to live Lord willing? In our passage, what we see is a clarification for the controlling, a comfort for the controlling, and a course, a path for the controlling. A clarification, a comfort, and a course. First off, a clarification for the controlling. In verse 13, James seems to have in mind what he's envisioning is merchants in the first century. You can kind of imagine a scene that he's lying out, you know, that you've got this, you know, these business entrepreneurs, these merchants in the Roman Empire, and they've gathered around the table, and they've rolled out a map of the known world around the Roman Empire. And they're planning, they're saying, okay, here's what we're going to do. We want to make a profit in, you know, the year, whatever, 54 AD. What we're going to do is, first off, we're going to open up a Gregg's in Ephesus, because no Gregg's has never not turned a prophet, right? And then we're going to move to Pergamum, and then we're going to move to Thyatira, and as the sausage rolls roll out, the prophets are going to roll in, and we are just going to be swimming in denarii. Sounds like a good plan, right? And James says to that, echoing Proverbs 27, verse 1, James says, don't boast about tomorrow. You don't even know what tomorrow will bring.

That's the crux of the issue for James. Pride, arrogance, the illusion of being in control. And he says in verse 16, you boast in your arrogance.

You don't have to be a merchant, a business entrepreneur, to be somebody who holds to this cherished illusion of control. Some years ago, a friend sent me this YouTube video. I'm sure it's still there. You can look it up. Not now. Later, it's called, if you search Baltimore Landslide.

[4 : 53] And where it is, it's 26th Street in Baltimore in the United States, and somebody's filming it on their iPhone. And what you're seeing is they're standing on the far side of the street. There's the road. And over here is a bunch of cars parked along the road. And they are slowly falling into the ground like this. And it goes on for about a minute and 20 seconds. You can hear people complain.

Ah, they had all this time to do something about it, and nobody did anything. Or, I'm not going to go try to get my car. Oh, that seems too dangerous. And people are complaining and whining and talking and talking and extends for a while. And then all of a sudden, the cars don't just start going like this.

They go into the ground. And there's these trees and telephone poles and wires and things like that. And all of it, not just the cars, sucked into the ground. And guess what? All of the complaining and the whining, it just stops. And instead, you just hear, ah!

It's like the illusion of control just gets ripped away. It's gone. And for everybody in that moment, you know, their response is like, holy cow, I'm not in control. Do you know what that feeling is like?

Do they have the illusion of control ripped away? Maybe I could back up for a second and ask this question. Are you somebody who likes to be in control? Are you? You know, we can talk about different personality types. You know, there's people who are more type A, and the way that they express being in control is trying to order not just their life, but everybody else's life. They're there to give help people, right? They're there to help you be your best self if you would just follow their plans. Others of you, you're like, no, no, no, my personnel, I'm not a type A. I am more go with the flow. But guess what? You still like to be in control because you don't want anybody to tell you what to do. You're just going with the flow. If everybody else would just go with the flow, things would be okay. No matter where you are on that spectrum, we all have hopes, we all have dreams, we all have things that we'd like to see happen. And a lot of times we like to think we are in control. We admire people who have a steely resolve. There's no its, ends, or buts about it. I'm going to do it. We like Yoda's advice, right? Do or do not. There is no try. Put that on a bumper sticker on your car. We cherish this illusion of control when it comes to our plans. I'm going to admit, Americans, we love our plans. It's like our manifest destiny. If you dream it, you can achieve it. I'll say this too, carefully in all humility, since I've been here, Scottish people, I've noticed, love their holiday plans. I'm sure this is not every single person, but I have talked to more people since I've been here in my entire life. It's like you go on your summer holiday and it's like I've already booked the next years. I have never planned anything in my life a year ahead. I don't know what I'm doing next week.

[8 : 15] It's amazing. And now, don't get me wrong here. I'm saying that there's nothing wrong with plans. There's nothing wrong with making plans, right? In fact, the book of Proverbs, which James draws from in this, it holds up the goodness of making plans, of thinking ahead, right? You know, the ant who stores up food for the winter, that's good. It decries the lazy sluggard who does nothing, and life just kind of happens to them. It's not a good thing. You read verse 13 of James 4, when he says, come now, you who say today or tomorrow will go into such and such a town and spend a year there in trade and make a profit. I don't know about you, but I'm reading that, I'm going, that sounds pretty good. That's my kind of person. Bring them to the church plant.

I want that person on my team. That sounds fantastic. And again, you're right. The Bible holds up planning as well. Proverbs 13, 16, a wise man thinks ahead, a fool doesn't, even brags about it, right? So if you're just going, hey, you know, I've never made a plan in my life. Well, look at me.

The book of Proverbs would say, hey, kind of a fool, right? Proverbs 13, 22, a good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children. Oh, so to plan financially for the future, it's not a bad thing. In fact, it's a good thing. Proverbs 21, 5, the plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty. So what's going on? See, if we look at our passage, though, the problem isn't with plans. The problem is one of the heart. It's not a problem with making plans. It's a problem of wanting ultimate control. Living without regard to God and living as if we are the ones who are in control. And what is James? What's James' response to that sort of attitude, that sort of heart posture? Wake up your life. It is a mist, a vapor, a mist. The word in Greek, it's literally like vapor smoke. It's this kind of Ecclesiastes 1 type of phrasing there. And he's like, it is like you're walking down Dumbarton Road on a blustery Glasgow day and somebody's vaping and they let go of smoke and that wind just comes and goes whoosh! And you can't even smell the strawberry bubble gum anymore.

And James says, that, that right there is what your life is like. I don't know about you, I go, thanks James! That's super depressing, right? Like if you think about that. And it is. It is if you live your life without regard to God thinking that you're the one who's ultimately in control. And this boasting, it doesn't necessarily get verbalized. It starts as a heart issue. Later gets verbalized. What comes out of the mouth is in the heart, Jesus says. There's a famous poem called Invictus by William Henley. It's a movie based on it. I think about rugby, right?

And there's this, this phrase, this little line in, I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my destiny. Modern Western people love that. We love that. I am the captain of my fate. I'm in control.

[11 : 31] I'm the one who makes decisions. This is what Doc Brown says to Marty McFly in Back to the Future. Your future is whatever you make it. So make it a good one. And it can appeal to us, right? It can appeal to us. Because we like to have our finances under control, and our kids under control, and our work life under control, and our time management under control, and our weight under control. And what happens then is we zoom past the virtue of self-control and try to cling to this illusion of complete control. If I could just be in control, everything would be okay. You ever thought that? You ever said that? And because we live under the illusion of control, what happens is the result is that we all struggle with worry and anxiety and restlessness. It's vicious, a very vicious thing, this illusion of control. And James, he doesn't want you to live with that restlessness. So he rips this illusion away, and he says, listen, if you want wisdom, humble yourself. And you know where humility starts?

Realizing that you are not in control. And this doesn't say that your choices don't matter, that you have no agency, or that planning is bad. It's not an encouragement to neglect your duties. It's a clarification for the controlling, those who think that they are self-sufficient. James says, you want to go home after worship service? You know, you'll stay and have a cup of tea or coffee and talk to some people, but you're longing to get home and eat that delicious lunch that you've prepared. James would say to you, you don't know if your car is going to start. You don't know if you're going to fall into a coma in the next three seconds. Ultimate control. It's an illusion. The ground falls away.

So that's the first thing. James makes an important clarification for the controlling. Simply, you're not in control, right? But here's the thing. When that clarification comes, it's hard. So second thing is a comfort for the controlling. A comfort for the controlling. We often live with this illusion of control. And when that clarification comes, there's this author named Wendell Berry, and he calls it an awful clarification. An awful clarification. Because when it comes, it doesn't always drive us to this heart posture of humble gratitude. That's what it should be. Hey, look, this isn't what God's in control.

We should live dependent on Him, humble, thankful lives, right? Does that always happen? When that illusion gets ripped away? No. So many times when that happens, it throws us for this tailspin of doubt, depression, restlessness. Fall into the ground. See, there's so many things in life, sometimes good things, that we plan. Have they happened? You know, maybe not just in this last year, but in your life, you plan to be known by friends, many friends, yet you feel alone.

You plan to be successful in your work, and yet you feel stuck. You plan to have a great holiday that you planned so hard, and your stinking family members keep messing it up, right? You plan to be in a certain career, and yet you've lost jobs, and gone into others, and you look around, and you're just like, how did I even get here? You plan to be closer to God in your 20s, and your 30s, and your 40s, and your 50s, and yet you just feel His seeming absence.

[15 : 14] You plan to be done with that vice, and yet it lingers. You plan to be wed in bliss, and yet you're so tired of fighting with your spouse. You plan to have kids who grew up and did the same things, and believed the same things that you believed, and yet they remain frustratingly their own person. You planned to be different than your father who was angry, and different than your mother who was controlling, and yet you see yourself, and you seethe with anger, and you want to be in control, and you don't want to admit that you're so much like them. Maybe you just planned to have kids. God hasn't answered that.

So many plans. So many of them good plans. Good things. And when the illusion of control gets to be revealed to be just that, an illusion, it hurts. And so what ends up happening is we live with this constant fear and low-grade anxiety as we walk through life. The clarification for the controlling quickly turns into a need for comfort for the controlling. We are told that life is like a mist, a vapor, and then you feel that, and it makes you shudder. What we need to realize is that there's something more. Because you see, when we realize that, what ends up happening when that illusion of control gets kind of ripped away, the things that we feel like we want to be in control of, do you know what we end up doing? We end up grasping for something else to be in control of. This is why young people practice self-harm. In a life maybe filled with abuse and harm done to them, they feel like they're completely out of control, and they want to be able to control something that they can feel. We all medicate ourselves in different ways when we feel out of control.

So what is the comfort then? What is the comfort in our passage? I don't know. But thankfully, there's a context to the book of James, right? He doesn't just write this and then leave us on our own. There's a context to the whole Bible, but there's something that just came before, and I mentioned it at the very beginning of the sermon as a key context. In verse 10, just a few verses before what we read, James says, if you humble yourself, to humble yourself before the Lord, and he will exalt you. Now, I don't know about you. I'm looking at a bunch of Presbyterians. I'm a Presbyterian too. When I hear that verse, humble yourself before the Lord, and he will exalt you, what stands out? I've got to humble myself, right? Oh, listen, like I know, like I'm a sinner. Like we've grown up believing this, right? It's preached to you every single day. It's job security for us ministers, right? Listen, I don't know what we're going to do in the new heavens and new earth, but right now we've got a job. It's guaranteed because we struggle with humility, and I'm supposed to humble myself. We're not just Presbyterians. There's a bunch of Scottish Presbyterians. Hey, Lord, help me to humble, and we don't hear the second part of that verse. Humble yourself. But do you hear the second part? God will exalt you. God will exalt you. What does that verse mean? It means that God actually wants to bless you. This isn't some name it, claim it, magical formula type of a thing. Hey, look, God, I did that thing. Now where's the blessing? Where's the exaltation? There's a long view in the Christian life. But what it's saying is that those who abandoned the pretense of self-sufficiency, the promise is that you will receive the very life of God. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

That the God who is actually in control, he promises to be for you. Do you believe that? That he's for you? You know, a lot of times I think many of us struggle with this control because our desire for control is because we doubt God's goodness.

And that he doesn't just put up with us, but that he actually loves us. And that he isn't going to abandon you, but he's actually committed to you. And his desire is to fill you with his presence and sustain you through the storms of life. But here's the thing, y'all.

[19 : 44] This passage makes it so crystal clear that is not on our terms. It's not on our terms. It's on his. But we serve the one who is in control and we know that he's good.

In 2024, what I would hope is that we would all have this deep conviction that God loves you. And he loves this world. And that love is embodied in Jesus. And we can have a relationship with him.

And if we come in humility, we are changed by that love. God's grace is for the controlling. It clarifies for us. Hey, listen, you think that struggle's just an inch deep? Uh-uh.

It goes down miles. But it's also a comfort that there is a God who is in control. And he's good. He's good. You're more loved and secured in Christ than you could ever dare to hope.

One of my seminary professors, I remember an illustration he gave and he said, consider a parent's relationship to their children as God's relationship to us as our loving heavenly father. You know, with my kids, we try to explain things if there's a rule. Try to explain as much as possible. But sometimes, especially when they're younger, they can't grasp all that. You know, hold daddy's hand when we cross the street. Why? I don't go like, hey, you know, who knows if the driver's paying attention or force equals mass times acceleration. No. They just need to do it, right? I'm going to hold my hand. I'm careful with strangers. You don't go into all the details of things like that. But they need to trust you. Would you call your child who obeys you irrational?

[21 : 22] No, no. They're at their most rational when they do listen to you. Why? Because they know that you know more than them. But more importantly, they know you. That you're for them. That you love them.

God, he's our heavenly father. He's more perfect and loving than an earthly father. And he's shown us in the cross that he loves us in the resurrection that we can trust him with our pain. That's Romans 8, 32. He did not spare his own son. How will he not also graciously give us all things?

So, James, he gives us a rather blunt clarification for the controlling and then swoops in. There's this comfort for the controlling in what he's talking about. So, last thing, a course for the controlling.

To sum it up, control is an illusion. We're all struggling with it. And Jesus comes to deliver us from this illusion. And then in verse 17, James writes, so whoever knows the right thing to do, okay, to commit your plans to the Lord, right, to know you're not in control, humble yourself before God, not make arrogant plans and boast about them.

If you know the right thing to do and you fail to do it, it's sin. I think when I remember when I first read this passage, I was just, I felt like it didn't fit. Like, you know, you're looking at the little section that they put the headings on and you're like, that last verse doesn't seem like it goes with it. But it really does because what James is basically, it's a really simple thing he's saying.

[22 : 45] Like, if you're struggling with control and you know God's the one who's actually in control and you should live Lord willing, what he says at the end is, if you know it's the right thing to do and you fail to do it, it's sin. What's he saying? I'm serious about this. I'm serious. We're all struggling with this and I really, really want you to put this into practice, to live Deo Valente, to live Lord willing. In other words, this is such an easy area of life to pretend.

Because what he's saying, it's not a problem of plans, right? It's a posture of the heart. And so what can we do? We just put on the words around it and say, oh, I know how to speak in a churchy way. And yet really inside, oh, you know you just want to be in control. You want things done your way. Listen, I see this in my own life and every single church I've been in, I know people who struggle with this. It's everywhere. It's all of us. You see it get manifested in church life, right? Wanting to be in control. And it can be very, very forward. People have to do things my way.

Or it can be passive aggressive. Either way, it's harming you and it's harming other people and it's not honoring the Lord. So what does it look like? What does it look like? Don't have time. I know we've got kids and there's no Sunday school today, so you're like, wrap it up, Nate, right? Just three points of application to set a course for the controlling and then I'll pray and you can sing. First off, humble yourself and your plans before the Lord. Whether it's New Year's resolutions, whether it's church planting, church things, just things you want to accomplish in your life, whether it's your own workout plan, no matter what it is, humble your plans before the Lord. Again, it's a heart posture. Does this mean that every single plan that you make, you have to say, Lord willing?

The Apostle Paul says things when he writes people about how he's coming and he doesn't always say, Lord willing, but sometimes he does. So maybe for some of us who realize this is a real area of struggle, maybe that's just working it into your vocabulary. Maybe if you're planning your diary, you just write the initials DV at the top of it and pray over those things. It's not a magical incantation, it's a bent of the heart. It's a bent of the heart then to maybe spend some time asking questions of yourself. What am I trying to control? Where am I trying to be God? How can I learn to trust God with my plans? Okay, so humble yourself in your plans before the Lord.

Second point of application, boast in your weakness. Did you see what James wrote in verse 16? You know, having this illusion of control. He says, you boast in your arrogance. Flip it around then.

[25 : 30] What does Paul say in 2 Corinthians 12? I don't boast in my weakness. When I am weak, he is strong. I desperately want the power of God to rest on me. That doesn't mean celebrating sin.

Hey, look at all the awful things I've done. Who cares? No, no, no, no, no, no. But it means actually verbalizing your weakness. And maybe, in general ways, but you know what could also help? Is finding friends, other Christians in your life who you can actually say real things to, where you can actually be honest and say, this is where I struggle wanting to be in control. And if you don't have that, you know where's a good place to start? City groups, prayer meetings, tea and coffee, hanging out with people, women's Bible study, first Friday, no matter what it is. It's a great place to start to cultivate those things. Do you have a friend in your life who will speak truth to you as you're talking and who will call you out and say, hey, listen, I think the reason that you're so angry and you're so stressed right now is because you think that ultimate control is promised to you. Do you have somebody who will say that to you? Spouse, a friend, family member? Do it in a loving way, guys. But sometimes it's just literally like James says, wake up. We need that. Say some of this stuff aloud and you know what you'll find? You know what you'll find? That God's grace is actually sufficient for you. Last thing then is, the last point of application is to cultivate gratitude. Because here's the thing, the problem isn't with making plans, right? And what happens when those plans actually go according to plan? The holiday goes perfectly, the church stuff that you're planning goes swimmingly. You know, the wedding that you're planning is just, oh man, it's so great.

The things that you're trying to improve in yourself, they actually go and you're losing weight and you're a kinder, what are you supposed to do? Be angry about that? No. No problem with those if you do not give thanks. There is a problem, I should say, if you do not give thanks.

Bad things when we fail to give thanks to the Lord. Maybe that means you can give thanks to the Lord by praying. You don't just go to your list of like, God, hey, I have all these needs, that's what I do. Hey, there's like 20 things I need you to fix in my life and other people's lives. But to start with giving thanks. We live in a broken world, full of sin, really, really hard things. And at the same time, creation is aflame with the kindness of God. We give thanks. Give thanks for what he's done.

And here's the thing. Do you know what would happen when it just doesn't just happen in your life? People who live Lord willing, who renounce this illusion of control and cling to the God who's in control, giving thanks to him, seeking his face, making our plans and laying them before him.

[28 : 41] Do you know what would happen? It's going to be such a witness. Such a witness to the world. The whole world is struggling with this illusion of control.

To have a people who very humbly say, that is us, we struggle with that too. But we know one who is in control and we know that is good. It will be a beautiful thing. May we all, in 2024, live Deo Valente.

We know that.

Like,