'Our plans within God's will'

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[0:00] And so I thought I'll begin by asking you, how do you plan your holidays? I know many of you like traveling, many of you have already started planning,! You've got trips lined up for the summer.

But how do you plan for your holidays? I think there are two general approaches, maybe two extremes. On the one, you might be the type of person that would just land somewhere and then go from there as it takes your fancy.
No need to book ahead. No need to plan. Take it easy because after all, you're on holiday and you don't want to stress about such things.
The other approach is to plan meticulously. Choose your accommodation carefully. Make sure it's the right price, of course, but it's got to be convenient to where you'd like to go.
Plan your itinerary so that you don't get caught out with an attraction being closed. If you're at a theme park, you know, wonder whether you've bought the, what do you call it?
[1:09] The fast pass or things like that. Yeah, save some time or value for money. I don't know. Do you think you're at a time or that your favourite restaurant is not fully booked? Do your research and plan as much as you can because, after all, you're on holidays and you don't want to be stressed about such things.

Now, I think your approach probably depends on your personality and that's probably true about life in general as well. Some of you probably put a lot of thought into every detail of your life and then you come and tell me that you're overthinking things.
You're heavily invested in your goals. Others, because probably they can afford to, they might have rich parents or something, they have not a care in their life.
What will be, will be. Okay, Sarah? Sarah. Now, last week we considered what life was like living in humble submission to God.
You might remember if you're here. And actually, I then said to you that there was blessing in humble submission to God. Well, today James moves on to applying this specifically to our plans.
[2:26] How should we live humbly, submitted to God's will, with our plans? Now, it's a short passage, but beginning in verses 13 and 14, we're confronted with the first of two immutable realities of life, which is in your outline.

The first one is the brevity and fragility of life. And so James writes, Now listen, you who say today and tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money.
Why? You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. So here's someone that James says has a distorted view of reality.
They presume that they can go about life in full control of their events. There is a false confidence that what they plan will come to pass.
Now, I'm pretty sure all of you realize that that is certainly not true, right? It doesn't matter how rich you are. For example, there is no guarantee, is there, that it will stop tragedy or disappointments from befalling you.
[3:42] Anyone could be caught up in an instant in a car accident or be struck down with a life-threatening illness. And then all of a sudden, our plans for tomorrow, don't even think about the distant future, are all up in the air.

Such is the fragility of life. So too is its brevity. James says that our life is like a mist.
You might think that 70 years is a long time. That's the sort of yardstick for the life of any person. But it's nothing, really.

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I know, because I've already used up nearly 80% of my quota. And then, you know, when we're done, like a mist, we leave very little trace of it.
Sure, maybe to close friends and family, but otherwise, not much else. Now, of course, we rarely go about kind of making explicit boasts like this person in verse 13, right?
[4:51] But I think often we approach life as though we have all the time in the world. You know, we want to enjoy life first and then make our sacrifices later.

Or we want to make sacrifices to advance our career now and then think about spending time with family later. We set our hearts on many things, you know, like travel.
If you've got a trip booked, just imagine if you had to cancel it, how you'd feel. Career progression, getting married, having children, buying a house, living until an old age without any worries in life.
I don't know whether it's still popular nowadays, but when I was young, which wasn't too many years ago, people used to ask one another, what is your five-year plan?
Now, do you still get asked those things? Do you still talk about those things? Now, there's nothing wrong with them, right? But sometimes, we make those plans and then we feel entitled to them.
[6:03] And that is to ignore the brevity and fragility of life because sitting alongside this first immutable truth in life is the second one in your outline, the sovereignty of God.

And so, James says in verse 15, instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that. Now, here, James is already beginning to apply the truth, but before we do that, we want to look at the basis on which he has based his application, the truth.
And the truth is the Lord's will. Because God is sovereign, his will always prevails. And the attitude that was criticized in verse 13 runs into trouble because it does not take God's will into account.
There is no recognition that God's will might override our plan. Now, there is one other possible alternative to recognizing that God is sovereign, and that is to believe that he does not exist.
I'm not going to get into a long discussion today about God's existence, but if you believe this, then ultimately the world is random. You know, what happens is subject to blind fate.
[7:22] It doesn't change the fact that life is fragile and brief. Instead, I think it makes life even more frightful, isn't it? Because what happens to you is just the luck of the draw.

You can try as hard as you want, but fate will decide. There will be no reason for it. The outcomes will be cruel.
But if you believe that God exists, then by very definition, God, he has to be the creator, and thus in full command of the world.
Thus, he has to be sovereign, which, if you pause to think about it, is actually not a frightful thing, but actually a source of great comfort, provided we're humbly submitted to God's will.
And so that is the first of the two possible responses that James gives us. Only one he encourages, the first one, and that is to plan in humble submission to God's will.
[8:26] Make our plans subject to God's will. If the Lord wills, is what he says. We will do this and that. The other possible response, it's actually in verse 16, is to boast oblivious to God's will.

As it is, he says, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone then knows the good that they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.
To boast is to be overconfident in our plans, to think that whatever we plan will come to pass. Now, the plans themselves don't need to be evil.
They may be good and worthwhile plans. You know, it might be a plan to start up a charitable business, raise money for, you know, some cause around the world. It may be plans to serve God.
As a church, we can make such plans as well, to have bold plans to grow in number. But if we go about it arrogantly, that's the adjective that James uses here for these schemes, then it's boasting and it's evil.
[9:31] And James then gives an added warning because here he's not speaking to those who are ignorant of God. He's actually speaking to believers who know what's good, who ought to know that the good here is to humbly submit to God's will.

These are the believers who ought to know that God is sovereign. And you know, by the very fact that they've been reading James' letter, well, they should know at least who God is. And yet, if despite the fact that they know that life is fragile and brief, and their lives are in God's hands, they fail to live in recognition of this, then they're sinning.
They're persisting in evil even when they know what's right. And one day, they will have to give an account when they come face to face with God. Because at that point, God will say to them, you

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knew that I am sovereign, and yet, why have you gone about your life as though you're in full control?
Why have you not prayed? Why have you not submitted your plans to me? Why have you boasted about everything that you're planning as though it will come to pass? As though I don't exist, or I don't have a say in your life?
So really, that's James' point. It's a pretty short passage, and the application is pretty clear. But I want to now come to the third point, which is just spend some time working out in detail what if the Lord wills means in practice.
[11:07] What does it look like when we try and apply it from day to day? Because it's not just merely saying, if the Lord wills. Just any sentence you may say, if the Lord wills, da-da-da-da-da.

If the Lord wills, I'll just keep going where I want to go. That is not a magic kind of formula that if you say it, then it will come through. Or if you say it, then you mean it.
So the first thing to say is that if the Lord wills, then we're allowed to plan, but we need to hold our plans lightly. That's the first point. In fact, we're instructed to plan with thought and care.
Because if you look at the rest of the letter, James says, if you need wisdom, ask God for wisdom. And wisdom is all about asking God to help you plan, isn't it? Showing you the way. So the brevity of life and God's sovereignty does not give us the license to be reckless.
It's not going the other way and saying, oh, just eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow you die. So why bother planning? It doesn't mean squandering our money. It doesn't mean wasting our time on meaningless activities.
[12:11] No, planning is good and wise. And if you read through the Bible, there are many Proverbs that extol the virtue of planning. God Himself in the Bible commands the Old Testament, in the Old Testament, Israel to plan before they entered the land.

And in the New Testament, the church are given instructions to plan how to grow God's kingdom. But such plans have to be held lightly. That is, it's subject to God's will.
Yes, we seek God's wisdom and then we make choices based on what we believe to be wise and good. But then we have to acknowledge that sometimes, despite our best efforts, we're going to get it wrong.
Or even that we just don't know that God didn't tell us at the time that we were making our plans so that He can overrule. Not because He wants to, but He hasn't told us so that we will step out in faith and then He will reveal as we go along.
So we hold them lightly so that if our plans change and God makes plain what we actually should do instead, we don't become resentful of God.
[13:19] We change. We don't become bitter and think that God hates us or that we've been dealt a bad hand because we've been let down.

We respond as Job did. Many of you will know Job's story. He was a wealthy man, had lots of children, but then God took it all away without telling him why. And so he says at the end of the first chapter, the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.
May the name of the Lord be praised. And so likewise, our goals and our hopes in life, whether it's our careers, our health, our desire to be married, to have children, they are all subject to the Lord's will.
He alone decides what ultimately happens with us. And if things don't turn out as we desire or in the way in which the world would consider is a blessed thing to happen, then we mustn't conclude that God is against us.
Because as Christians, the brevity and fragility of life is actually just the flip side of another wonderful truth. Life is short only because it brings eternity so much closer to us.
[14:36] Right? For as Christians, the moment our life ends, our life with God in His presence begins. Friends, that is not a curse, right?

That is a blessing. And so the second principle then is that we ought to plan for this life, this earthly life, with eternity in mind.
Life is short. You're not going to take anything with you. You may have a long bucket list. You may not do everything you desire.
Instead, plan with eternity in mind. Jesus said, store up your treasures in heaven where moths and thieves cannot destroy. And so we want to invest, store up those treasures, right?

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Invest in things that matter for eternity, which is people, right? Believing in Jesus, going to be in heaven. Let's invest in them.
[15:40] Discipling Christians, encouraging one another, you know, with our one-to-one Bible reading or at our Bible study or just giving words of encouragement so that we all get to that eternity, right?

Now again, this doesn't mean that we just do all of that and do nothing in this life, right? It's still okay to feed and clothe yourselves and I'm glad you've done that today.
It's okay to save up money, all right, for your house and then later on for your retirement and then hopefully one day for your children. It's okay to go on a holiday. It's okay to renovate your home.
But plan in light of eternity, which means set your priorities right in life. You can do all those things but are you also pouring your energy into things that matter for eternity, into relationships that will last, relationship with God but relationship with others as well so that they too might get to eternity.
And when you do that, it relativizes your plans in this life, right? You know how to hold them lightly because you know that actually there are more important things in life.
[16:55] You can hold them loosely while at the same time clinging on tightly to Jesus, which is a thing that matters for eternity. And what's more, it actually helps sharpen your focus, right?

You've got so many choices in life but if you know that you're planning with eternity in mind, it helps you to decide how you will spend the precious time that you have on this earth, which is not long, on things that really matter.
Investing in God's kingdom. And guess what? When you start doing that, you'll find that more and more your plans actually will align with God's will, isn't it?
That if the Lord's will becomes, it is the Lord's will. Now, you may not know the details, right? The specifics, but the big outcome of what the Lord's will is for your life is already clear in the Bible.
He wants you to be more Christ-like, right? He wants you to spend more time sharing the good news of Jesus with others.
[18:03] He wants you to encourage one another with God's word so that everyone can be built up, the church can be built up, in maturity, in Christ. That's the big picture of the Lord's will, right?

The details, yeah, we might not know, but the more you do those things, the more the if the Lord's will actually is the Lord's will. You don't really need to worry about whether it is the Lord's will or not.
Then it leads then to the third principle on the other line, because as you plan and the Lord wills, we need to remember the goodness and kindness of the Lord. And that's the key difference, isn't it, between believing that the Lord is sovereign and His will prevails, and believing that God does not exist and therefore we're subject to fate.
Because when we believe in God's sovereignty, we believe that whatever He wills in our life is for our good and is the result of His kindness to us.
Chapter 1, James has already said, every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. And so, no matter how we experience life, whether they are trials or not, if we believe in God's sovereignty, we can give thanks to God that they are good gifts to us, given to us even though we may not see it fully yet, as His blessings for our life, where He has our eternal good in mind.
[19:34] And when we do that, we then acknowledge it by giving thanks and remembering that He is good and kind to us. Even though life may be difficult, our hearts are to be thankful to Him so that we can cultivate joy and trust in Him.

So, really, the summary on the next slide, for us to live our lives in humble submission to the Lord and to acknowledge God's sovereign will is to plan but to hold our plans lightly, is to plan but with eternity in mind.
And thirdly, as we do to remember the Lord's goodness and overflow in thanksgiving to Him. Now, if we do these things, there are a lot of other side benefits.
I mean, you might not think they're side, they're actually quite good benefits, but, you know, when you live like that, not only do you live then in God's will, you'll find yourself less anxious in life.
You'll find yourself more contented. you'll find that you're actually able to be generous to others, that you're patient in suffering, that, you know, you appreciate the very small things in life.
[20:47] You take more joy in seeing other people being blessed. You don't need to feel like you need to be in control of every single thing in your life, every single moment of the day.

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and you learn then to know when you can let go of things, because God is in control. That we do our best, we plan, but then otherwise, we can sleep easy, knowing that if we happen to stuff up, well, God will override for our good, right?
Because He has something better in store for us. We plan and we think, oh, yep, this is what's good for me. Well, God says, no, because I've got something better, not worse for you, right?
Now, I want to close because James, many thousands of years before James wrote this, King David already knew this. And when we read the psalm that Brendan read, Psalm 39, he showed us, and I want to read that again to inspire us his approach to living in God's will in spite of difficulty.
Now, when you read the first three verses, you'll see that David was not writing at a time of comfort or ease, but actually where he has enemies and he is a bit distressed. verse 1, I said, I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin.
[22:06] I will put a muzzle on my mouth while in the presence of the wicked. He's trying hard to control himself. He wants to lash out, but he says, no, I remain utterly silent, not even saying anything good, but my anguish increased.

My heart grew hot within me while I meditated. It's reflecting on God. the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue. And then as he speaks, he reflects on the reality of one of those immutable truths that we talked about today.
Verse 4-6, How true, isn't it?
Now, when troubles hit in life, I wonder whether this is how you do what you do.
That is, firstly, orientate yourself to the truth and the reality of life, rather than become so concerned about the solution or how you're feeling.
[23:24] And the immutable truth that David is talking about here is life is short, but God is in control. And then listen now, verse 7-11, how David keeps responding. He says, So yes, David does look to God for hope, but he also reflects on whether he's partly responsible, that God in his sovereignty is disciplining him so that he might repent and be forgiven.

But then finally, in verse 12-13, he maintains his hope in God because God is good. Hear my prayer, Lord, listen to my cry for help.
Do not be deaf to my weeping. I dwell with you as a foreigner, a stranger, as all my ancestors were.
Look away from me that I may enjoy life again before I depart and am no more.
Now the instruction here is to look away in anger, not look away and ignore David. Look away in anger such that even before he gets to eternity, he might enjoy life today before he departs.
And so this is not boasting, is it, in arrogance, but rather humbly submitting to God's will. yes, daring to ask that God might hear him and even help him to enjoy life even when it's difficult.
[25:08] Help him to enjoy life even though it's so fragile so that when he is ready to depart, he would be able to give thanks to God. Now of course, when we are Christians, when we believe in the Lord Jesus, then God's answer to such a cry for help is always yes and amen.

Because Paul says all of God's answers are yes in Christ Jesus. Yes in this life, even with suffering and trials, but certainly a resounding yes when we get to eternity.
So friends, I hope we're inspired by David, but also warned and encouraged by James to submit humbly! to God's will, to make our plans, but allow God to do with them as he wills, so that he might show us his kindness and goodness, and more importantly, achieve his perfect will in our lives.
Let's pray. Lord, give us wisdom that we may plan our lives and those of our loved ones in humility and in accordance with your will.
Help us to hold on to them lightly and to be surprised when actually they change, but for our good, for our blessing. Teach us to live for eternity, to be filled with thankfulness, firstly for your Son and his gift of eternal life, but after that for all the other many blessings in this life.
[26:41] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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