Our Plans and God's Providence

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[0:00] As I was preparing the message, I thought about my own life and I remember as a little boy, I didn't think very much.

! Let's say I thought broadly about the future. I knew at the time what I wanted to become and how much money I wanted to have. Those kinds of things. Very, very broad terms. But planning was not a ritual that I engaged in per se.
And then as I grew into adulthood as a young man, planning was quite routine and ambitious and rigorous.
However, as I grew older, and I wish Cedric had warned me about this, old age really does something to me.
I don't plan as much as I used to.
[1:11] I still plan, but it's quite interesting to really think it through, to think about how there is this ebb and flow, if you will, of planning.

And I guess there might be practical reasons why that is as well. But I don't know whether that's been your experience, but it's been mine.
However, we are now at the beginning of a brand new year. And I suspect that like many, if not everyone here, you've got a plan to do something.
Perhaps it's a plan to get a new job. Perhaps it's a plan to lose some weight. Perhaps it's a plan to eat healthy.
Stop drinking those Cokes. Those kinds of Cokes. Perhaps it's a plan to go through, well, that's, perhaps it's a plan to go through the Bible cover to cover and to pray earnestly every day.
[2:21] Perhaps it's a plan to not argue with your wife or your house husband as regularly as you did. Who's laughing at that?

Or not at that. Tim said not at all. But boy, that's ambitious, Tim. Yeah, you really did apply for that one. Perhaps this year you're planning to get three days in school.
I know I wouldn't be surprised if that's Andre's plan to repeat what he is accustomed to doing. But I'm sure that you've given thought to the year.
There are all kinds of things perhaps we've not mentioned that you were thinking about. But what are you planning this year?
What are you planning this year? And even more important than that question, what you're planning this year, the question ought to be, how are you planning this year?
[3:30] How are you planning this year? Today we will examine what James tells us about planning. James is a straight talker.

As many, if not all of you know, he does not mince words. In the passage that forms the basis for our message today, James is very direct.
Here James brings us face to face with our insignificance, if you will. While reminding us that it is ultimately the Lord who controls the future and not us.
Let us pray. Father, we need your help in this moment. Guide our thoughts, guide our minds, and open these words to us so that we might grow thereby.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. I'm going to ask you to turn to James, the book of James. And we're going to consider a few verses.
[4:53] James chapter 4, verses 13 through 17. James chapter 4.

James chapter 4, verses 13 through 17. James writes, 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.
Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

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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.
[6:06] James is telling us real clearly that there is a wrong way and a right way for a believer to plan.

And so to help us to focus our message this morning, we are going to consider these verses in James under two broad headings.
The wrong way to plan. And then the right way to plan. But before considering these two points, I think it's helpful for us to settle on a few fundamental issues.
The first is, to whom is James writing? I think that's a good question to pose and to answer before we get into this.
Is James writing here only to business people? I mean, certainly the illustration that he uses might suggest that. Come now, today or tomorrow, we'll go into such and such a town and make a profit.
[7:26] But is he? It's easy to say that James is talking to some wealthy person who might be a traitor of some kind. But I think it's clear.

I think it's clear to us that James is talking to everyone. Every believer who plans. And everyone does plan. Really. Whether it is an elaborate plan or whether it's a simple plan.
For instance, some of us are planning now what we're going to cook for lunch today. Or how we're going to spend tomorrow. But whatever the plan is about.
Whether it's about education, business, marriage, starting a family. Whatever it is. These words of James pertain to all of it.
James is writing to believers and James is telling us how we ought to plan. He's telling us how we ought not to plan. But what is a plan? A plan is an intention to do something in the future.
[8:35] Whatever it is. And James in these verses sets out four components of a plan. In this illustration that James uses, James helps us to see that a plan helps us with answering the question, when?

When am I going to do something? Here, these men said today or tomorrow we will go. And we will trade for a year. Plan also tells us what we are going to do.
What I will do. Plan sometimes might answer the question where we intend to do such and such.
And of course, a plan tells us what the desired end result is.
The Bible does not prohibit planning. Indeed, the Bible expressly encourages planning. Consider Proverbs 6 and 6.
Which says, Go to the aunt, O sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise. And verses 7 and 8 say, Without having any chief, officer or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in habit.
[10:07] The point that is being made here is that the aunt plants. The aunt, when he is able, gathers food, and shares it with others in his colony.

But planning is not to rise from a lack of trust in God. That's the essence of what is being shared by James.
We are told in Matthew 6, verse 25 through 33, that the Lord cares for us. And that we should not be overly concerned about the future.
And that's the underlying point. That the Lord, he cares for us. And while planning is a natural thing that we do, we should not do it without faith.
We should not do it as if we are afraid of what the future holds. What the Bible does prohibit is planning without having God's providence in view.
[11:29] So let's consider now these two points. The first being the wrong way to plan. The wrong way to plan.

The overarching point James makes is that the unbiblical planner is, number one, presumptuous. That is, he fails to observe limits. He simply assumes that things will happen as planned because he plans them.
And James makes the point, I want to repeat it, that the problem is, that one plans and one is presumptuous, believing that just because you plan it, it's going to happen.
It's going to happen just because you've written it down, just because you have energetically thought it through. The second point James makes in the verses that we read is that the unbiblical planner is arrogant.

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[12:45] The unbiblical planner is boastful, believing that he is it. The Bible says a lot about pride and arrogance.

And as believers, we know that we don't want to have a presumptuous attitude, nor do we want to be arrogant.
But let's look very specifically at what James tells us about the wrong way to plan. James begins this section of chapter 4 with these words, Come now!
Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow. James uses effective language to characterize the person who does not plan with God in view.
James says, Come now! As if to say, stop talking foolishness. When somebody says to you, Come now! Come now! Come now! Let's talk!
[13:51] I want you to consider this. I want your mind to be engaged. Come now, man! Come now! Come now! Think!

James says that to you, He's really asking you to have your mouth communicate with your brain before it communicates with someone else.
James sees a planner who does not have God in view as an unwise person. Someone who is not thinking clearly.
So it would be accurate to say that James calls believers to be thoughtful when we are planning. Do not ignore biblical principles is the essence of James' point here.
Come now! Come now! But this, the unbiblical planner, as we said, is presumptuous. Here is what this planner says.
[14:59] The illustration that James gives to us. This planner says, Today or tomorrow, we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

Sounds innocent enough. But what presumption? What presumption? These men proceeded as if they controlled things.
As if things were going to happen just as they intended. As if they controlled the prices in the marketplace.
As if they determined what the competitors would do or whether there would be competitors. They acted as if they controlled whether someone would rob them or cause them harm on their way to the marketplace.
You see the point that I am making? The point that I am making is that so many things can happen. Right? There are just so many things that you and I cannot possibly anticipate that can happen between now and the event that we wish to occur.
[16:16] James, the worldly mindset reflects the fact that we feed ourselves with pleasures before we obtain them. That's one of the challenges that you and I have as human beings.

When we look into the future and we see this thing that we would like, we feed it into our spirits and we pursue it as if it's going to happen because I want it.
I want it. And I can taste it. I can taste the straight A's and I can taste the results of it. I can taste it.
But James deals with presumption at a very basic level. Look at what he says in verse 14. He says, you are talking about one year when you don't even know what tomorrow will bring.
You see that? James is saying, here it is, you're planning for 2022. You, all of 2022. And you don't even know what tomorrow, which is the 10th, right?
[17:30] I think, yeah. The 10th will bring. Consider what has happened even in our country over the last couple years, over the last few years, the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

They have affected all of us in one way or the other. Imagine how disruptive they could have been to our plans.
Godly planning is not presumptuous. We don't presume that just because we desire it, just because we said it's going to happen.
The ungodly planner does not see his life for what it is. The ungodly planner has a view of his life that is unreal, that is just not right.
James tells us that the ungodly planner does not realize that his life is missed. See what he says in verse 14.
[18:42] What is your life, James asks. Remember now, James is posing this question within the context of planning. And within the context of planning, James is saying, as you plan in this fashion, as you plan in this fashion, you're not considering who you are.

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You're not considering what is your life. What is your life, you who are planning X, Y, Z in 2022? And then he responds to the question that he poses.
His response is, for you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Now it seems, you might say, well, James here is bursting my bubble already.
James is telling me, listen, you are not the plan because of who you are. You are just a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.
But we'll see in a moment what James is truly saying. A mist, James says, that comes, that is seen, and it dissipates.
[19:59] Appears for a little while and it dissipates. I believe that there are two aspects of this mist that James has in mind that he would wish us to consider.

Number one, the brevity of the mist. The brevity of the mist. I think James is saying to us, as you and I plan, we need to consider that our lives are brief.
And that's true even for the youngest among us. Brief. 100 years. Or even say, you might say, well, you know, by the time I get to be 70, people will be living until they're 120 on average.
Maybe. Maybe that's true. But even 150 years is short. The brevity of life. The brevity of life. And you don't know whether you are going to live to that ripe old age in any event.
A mist is here. One minute and gone the next. Indeed, it has no control over how long it will last.
[21:15] The second point I think James wants us to see here is the impact of mist on the overall scheme of things.

James is really speaking direct here. He is saying that our lives in and of themselves are insignificant. Insignificant.
James says, you, for you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.
I know we don't like to hear that, but James' point is that we place too much importance on our lives. Remember now, we are still talking about planning. James is helping us to have the right perspective, to have the right disposition, to approach our plans in the right way.
James says to us, the unbiblical planner, he is presumptuous. The unbiblical planner does not realize that his life is mist. He does not realize that he is going to live forever.
[22:22] And he does not realize that his life is insignificant in the overall scheme of things. This reality, the reality that our lives are like mist, should cause us to approach life with a deep and abiding humility.

That's what James is telling us. James says, when you put life into perspective, when you realize who you are, it ought to give you a sense of humility.
When you know that you don't know the future. When you know that you are here today and gone tomorrow. James says, you ought to approach life planning with humility.
Ultimately, James is saying that the ungodly planner lacks humility. James explains that some boast and brag arrogantly about their plans.
This is a warning. This is a warning. James says, some boast and brag arrogantly about their plans, perhaps for what they might consider good reasons.
[23:41] Maybe historically, something has happened. And you can say, based on history, this is where I'm headed.

Maybe you've done it before. Maybe the stars are aligned. Whatever the reason, the reason why such boasting is evil is because it leaves no room for God. And it puts too much emphasis on self.
James is speaking to the believer and James is saying to us that we ought not be boastful.
The godly planner is humble in that he knows his place. And he knows God's. The godly planner knows his place. And he knows God's place.
He does not think too highly of himself. He is low in spirit and he is reliant on God. He is reliant on God.
[24:44] That's the godly planner. So what is James telling us? What's the right way to plan? We have looked at the wrong way to plan. When we boil it down, James is telling us that the right way to plan is to have God's providence in view.

Now what are we talking about when we say that?
What does that mean to have God's providence in view? See, because James is telling us already that this planning that you and I are going to pursue this year, what we are doing now, he's saying that you are not the star of your plans.

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That's what James is saying to us. It's not about you. He is saying to us that God is the one who makes it happen.
But what is this word providence? The word providence is nowhere found in scripture. It is a word that is used to explain God's relationship with his creation.
[26:01] It means that God is ultimately in control of creation, not only to preserve it, not only to preserve it, but he also directs it to fulfill his purpose.

That's the point. Now you're beginning to see it. James is saying that, you know, that's the point. James is saying that when we plan, we ought to have the providence of God in view.
Why? Because God is ultimately in control of creation, not only to preserve it, but he also directs it to fulfill his purpose.
Imagine then your plan lining up with his providence. That's the point. You get that? Now that's the end of the message. In other words, God is sovereign over creation.
We see this in Proverbs 19, 21, which says, Many are the plants in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that stands.
[27:11] We also see in Daniel 4, verse 35, all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing.

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing. And he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. And none can stay his hand or say to him, what have you done?
King Nebuchadnezzar said these words after seven years of punishment. Essentially, when we speak of the providence of God, we are speaking about the fact that God is involved in the affairs of man.
We believe that nothing happens unless God permits it. Nothing happens unless God permits it. Straight A's don't happen unless God permits it.
The business achievements don't happen unless God permits it. He operates in the world.
[28:25] He directs it to fulfill his purpose. We believe that God is not surprised by anything.

So James shrewdly summarizes the appropriate disposition of the believer with these words.
James said, you and I, when we are planning, this ought to be our posture.
He uses these words to help us to see it. He says, our posture should be, if the Lord wills.
If the Lord wills. If the Lord wills. James says that those words should characterize the attitude and the disposition of the believer.
Of a godly planner. But does saying these words, if the Lord wills, always indicate that one has the right perspective of planning?
[29:33] Just merely saying these words? And then someone does not say those words for whatever reason. Is it an indication that he is not a godly planner?

You and I have seen examples, no doubt, of both types of people. And we have done things in both ways as well.
But is James really saying to us that we ought to say these words whenever we talk about our plan? If the Lord wills. I want to just talk about this for a moment.
Is that what James is saying to us? Is James saying, you know, whenever you say, I'm going to do such and such. Or do you always say, if the Lord wills? I don't believe that James is saying that to us.
There are many examples in scripture where people have talked about plans and not used those words. Indeed, we have, we can become so immersed in those words that we say them without real meaning.
[30:44] We say them without real meaning and any thought whatsoever. We say them only for our conscience's sake.

Or perhaps to impress others. If the Lord wills. If the Lord permits. James is saying to us that the reality of the providence of God should govern our lives.
That should be the basis for our plans. It informs how we plan. What we plan. It informs when we plan.
And why we plan. It is not the words that matter so much. It is the posture of our hearts. My point is this. James is saying to us that we ought not be presumptuous.
We ought to have in our hearts, Lord, thank you. And this is what I would like. These are the things that I am pursuing. The desires of my heart.

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[31:54] The desires of my heart. If it is your will. If you permit it. James is saying that ought to be our posture.

Personally, I don't often use those words. Though I am often aware of them and seek to live in view of them.
We should be careful not to pretend to be God reliant or humble by using, by just spouting those words.
At the same time, we should be prepared to demonstrate that we know our place by using them.
What I am saying is that, you know, we are not to just use them just because we want to impress someone.
Make them think that we are religious and humble. But at the same time, you know, it's good to say to someone, you know, if the Lord permits this.
[33:01] Because it really helps that person to see, to read into your heart. To know that you are speaking.

Not as someone who is boastful or presumptuous or thinks he is more than he is. I am missed. I am nothing but if the Lord permits this.
The key is ensuring that our heart is aligned with the words that we speak. James tells us that the planner knows that the duration of his life rests in the hand of God.
Our plans must rest comfortably within the crucible of God's providence. That's the point. In fact, our plans must be shaped by God's providence.
It's not good enough for us to devise plans without regard to the Lord's purpose. And then ask him to bless them. It is apparent that the planners James writes about plans were shaped from the perspective that they were unmindful of their own mortality.
[34:17] They did not view life through the prism of their mortality or their and their insignificance.
But James says that the Lord alone controls the length of our lives, not us.

Ultimately, it is God who decides. God who decides. This truth should shape the way we approach our plans. God who decides.
God who decides. So that's why we ought to begin our planning with prayer. What is it that the Lord is saying? Isn't this amazing?
Think about it for just a practical moment. The Lord who is all-powerful. Who is providential.
Who still orchestrates the affairs of man today. And here we are, little puny us who are going to live for 150 years.
[35:21] And then we are going to die and we don't even know what tomorrow is. But imagine, imagine if our hands are in the hands of the one who knows all things.

Imagine if our plans, imagine if our aspirations align with his. Imagine if we know his desires for us.
And our plans are set in motion along those lines. It is the Lord who controls the length of our days.
He controls everything. There are two important points that I would wish that they not escape us with respect to.
But let me, before I do that, I want to just share with you an encounter that Paul had. And how Paul interacted with these words, if the Lord wills.
[36:29] Acts chapter 18 gives us an account of Paul's trip to Ephesus. And a conversation he had with the Jews in the synagogue. When he was leaving, the Jews asked him to stay.

And Paul says, I will return to you if the Lord wills. And I want you to get this picture now.
Here, Paul is in Ephesus. And he is, you know, having founded this church. And they are desirous of Paul returning.
And no doubt Paul wants to return as well. But Paul, in response to them, says, I will return to you if the Lord wills.
At other times, Paul used similar language. But they are just using that as an example. There are things that we can draw from that point. The first is that Paul understood that the length of his life rested in the hands of God.
[37:43] Paul understood that. So while Paul might have been desirous to return. While Paul might have wanted to return. While he perhaps planned to return.

Paul says, if God wills. If the Lord permits. He lived in view of that reality. Next, while no one could argue that Paul's plan to return to the Ephesians and the Corinthians appeared to be noble and worthy on their face.

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And no doubt they were. They might not have been a part of God's agenda. It might not have been a part of God's agenda. What's the point?
The point is that, you know, it's not everything that is good that we believe is good. You know, oh boy, you know, we want to start a new church somewhere.
Well, that's on its face. That sounds like a good thing. What if it's not God's will? What if it's not what God desires for us in this season? The godly planner realizes that the achievement of his plans rests squarely and solely in the hands of the Lord.
[39:04] The planner realizes that the achievement of his plans rests squarely in the hands of the Lord. Proverbs 16, verse 9 says, Proverbs 16, verse 9 says, The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

The heart of man plans his way, but it is the Lord who establishes his steps.
Not only are our lives in God's hands, but our ultimate success rests with him as well. Listen to what James says, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.
This does not mean that if the Lord wills, we will not do this or that. This goes back to the godly planner accepting the reality that the achievement of his plan rests with God.
It's about God and not ourselves. It's amazing. We see this every day in simple things. Two men set out with the same goal.
[40:18] They are similar in every critical way, yet one is apparently successful while the other falls flat. Why is that?

Providence of God. Why is that? The providence of God. So for us, how do we interact with these few words that James gives to us in chapter 4, verses 13 through 17?
How do we interact with them? What are the practical implications for us today as we move into 2022? I want to share just a few things real quickly.
The first is, the truth we have heard should give us an unshakable confidence in the future.
I think that's the crux of the matter. But these words of James should not frighten us.
[41:32] Instead, they ought to give us unshakable confidence in the future. Why? Because it is God who controls the future. That's James' point. James is saying, God controls the future.

And not any man. Not any man. Not your friend and not your enemy. Not your supervisor. And not your neighbor.
James is saying, God is providential. It's not your circumstance. We are on the Lord's side.
That is why we are able to say, and God is able to make all grace abound to you. So that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.
Bound according to who? Bound according to who? Bound according to the Lord. Bound according to God. And how do we view our challenges and our successes?
[42:39] We view them through the prism of God's providence. That's the point. If you believe God is good, if you believe God is wise, then he knows what is best for us.

And as believers, that's how we ought to go through 2022. Believing that God knows what is best for us.
He knows what is best for you. He knows it better than you and I do. He knows what is best for you. He knows how we might be transformed into the image of his son.
The next point. We should live humbly before one another, realizing that it is God who is the real power broker, and not any of us.
Not any of us. Let us view ourselves and our plans for who we are. For who we are and view our plans for what they really are.
[43:53] These plans that you and I have. If the Lord wills. If the Lord wills. Lord, give me a thirst for what you would desire for me.

That's a good way to start. That's a good way to start the year. Lord, plan in my heart. You, the one who controls everything.
Plan in my heart what you would wish for me to do and to achieve and to become this year. Give me a thirst for it.
Give me a desire for it. A longing for it. Next point. To plan after praying to God.
It's one thing to plan and ask God's blessings, but it's another to ask for God's blessings and then to proceed to plan. And the final point.
[44:55] Similar to the first one. Let's be comfortable where we are. Under the results of our efforts. Not comfortable to the point of complacency and mediocrity, but let's not beat ourselves up

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for a plan, for example, that did not walk as we had hoped.

You know, I think all of us can point to plans that we had put into motion last year, even. Maybe some of us were some of us last week, yesterday, that did not walk the way we expected.
The thing that we planned for last year did not work. And so we are almost timid about this new year.
Timid about planning. Timid about trusting the Lord for anything to guide and to direct and to help us. Timid about it. Oh, I don't want to get my hopes up.
I don't want to be disappointed again. But listen to what James says. James tells us that it is the Lord himself who is providential.
[46:13] He acts in our affairs. You are but missed. James is saying to us that we got to get our attitudes right. We got to get our mindset right.

But James concludes this portion of scripture in verse 17. In verse 17, he writes, So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it for him, it is sin.
So then, as we plan, let us do so knowing that God is providentially in control. James is helping us to see that having read these words, having seen what James is saying about us, putting us in the right perspective, viewing ourselves as missed, as insignificant, viewing God.
Viewing God as all-knowing. James says, you know these things, but go ahead and do them. If you don't do them, James is saying, for you that is sinful.
But you know, the truth is, none of us, none of us plans perfectly.
[47:51] None of us. None of us. None of us. None of us. None of us. None of us. None of us. Hears from God about everything that we wish. None of us.

None of us. Has the right attitude all the time. But the good news is that Christ died for our sins of arrogance and presumption.
Aren't you glad that he did that? Aren't you glad that Christ died for your sin and my sin of arrogance and presumption?
So we can approach 2022 knowing that even in our imperfect state, we have an advocate, Jesus Christ.
I got to tell you, that's a big one for us. That's a big, big one. Oh my. Oh my. As I think about it myself. Thank you, Lord, that Christ died for my sin of presumption and arrogance.
[48:57] I'm going to invite the praise team to come now as we pray. Father, Lord, we know that for many people who are present today, we heard this message from different perspectives.

For some, oh Lord, there is fear and trepidation of 2022. Lord, for some, they are looking at it and saying, I don't know how I'm going to escape the challenges that I see ahead.
For others, Lord, it's just a fear of plotting. It's a fear of really putting oneself out there on the limb, as it were. For others, Lord, they have come, Lord, to a place where plans are already in motion, but have not been vetted in this way.
They are of their own making, Lord. They have not considered the brevity of their own life, the insignificance of their life.
They have not considered, Lord, that you are acting in our affairs. For others, Lord, you've not even begun to plan.
[50:31] You've just not thought about it in any real way. Father, wherever we are, you know. We know that you know. Lord, we pray in the name of Jesus that you would have your way in our lives.

Lord, help us to leave this place with the right attitude of who we are and who you are. Help us, O Lord, to be more deliberate with respect to pursuing the mind of Christ.
Help us, O Lord, to understand, to pursue an understanding of what you would have us to do. Lord, I pray in the name of Jesus that indeed you would give to each believer present an insatiable desire for the things that would bring you pleasure.
Lord, we pray in the name of Jesus that we are in the name of Jesus that we are in the name of Jesus. Lord, we pray that if it is your will that the plans of our hearts will come to fruition.
In the name of Jesus, we pray and all God's people say, Amen. Amen.

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