

Making Plans in God's Will

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn back in your Bibles to James chapter 4. James chapter 4, we're going to be looking at the little section at the end of the chapter from verse 13, so verses 13 to 17.

And I've entitled the sermon, Planning for the Future and the Will of God. Planning for the Future and the Will of God. So James chapter 4, and we're looking at verses 13 to 17.

Well, let's start with a question. What are your plans for the future? What are your plans for the future? Perhaps you have big plans for the rest of your life.

Or maybe, some people here, well you're only really thinking about next week. Still, you have plans, don't you? You might perhaps have a very detailed idea about what you're going to do next week, or next month, or next year, or even longer into the future than that.

Or you may just have some very general ideas. But I think it's true to say that we all make plans.

For some people here, you might have plans for a new job.

[1 : 13] You might have plans to start your own business. Some, perhaps, will be planning for and thinking about retirement. Where will you go?

How much money will you have? What will you do with your time? Where will you live? Et cetera, et cetera. Younger people might have in the back of their minds, I'm going to go to university at some point, and I'm going to study.

And after that, perhaps I'll get a job, and I think I might do this, and then I'll go there and do that.

Some people have their lives all mapped out in front of them, don't they? Others might be thinking, perhaps in the future I'll get married, or I'll start a family.

We all make plans. As Christians, we all make plans.

The people in the world around us all make plans. And the question that James is holding out before us this morning is, how must our planning for the future differ from those who are not believers?

[2 : 19] What's the difference between the way Christians should think about the future and plan for the things in their future, versus those who don't know the Lord? We remember that James is writing to Christians to encourage them to grow maturity.

He wants them not to be double-minded. We saw that in the reading earlier. He wants them to be single-minded, whole-hearted in their thinking. Not Christian in some respects, but thinking like everyone else in others.

And their attitude to the future, our attitude to the future, is part of this growth to maturity. And it's part of this single-mindedness, this Christian outlook on life.

And he desires that his readers should have that in this area. So look at verse 13 with me. This is where he starts. Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow, we all go into such and such a town, and spend a year there, and trade, and make a profit.

Listen up, he says. Listen to me, you people with plans. With confident future plans. What are these people confident about?

[3 : 30] These were presumably some believers in the churches that he was writing to. They're confident about the timing. Today or tomorrow, we're going to do something. They were confident about the place.

We're going to go to such and such a town. They were confident about how long they were going to be there. We'll spend a year there. They're confident about what they're going to do. We're going to trade. And they're confident even about the result.

We will make a profit. That's pretty good detailed future planning, isn't it? They know where they're going to go and when, how long they're going to spend there, what they're going to do, and how much money they're going to make. Such confidence.

Such certainty. The world around us makes plans like that. And we are tempted, inclined to do the same and to think the same way.

So what then does James have to say to these people? And what can we and what must we learn from his words here? How do we approach planning, in other words, from a Christian perspective? [4 : 30] How do we think about our futures? And I have three points. The first two are much longer than the last one. It's worth bearing in mind. So the first one, and they're all R's as well, which might help a little bit.

The first one is this. Recognise that you don't know the future. Recognise that you don't know the future. You see, the problem with an approach to planning, which says, next week I'm going to go on holiday, or next month I'm going to start a new job, or next year I'm going to go to university, or in five years' time I'm going to retire, is that the future is unknown to us.

We simply can't be confident about it at all, as much as we might like to be. Look at verse 14. James says to these people, OK, you've made your plans, you're going to do this and you're going to do that.

Yet, you do not know what tomorrow will bring. It's quite a put-down, isn't it? Quite a knock-back for these confident planners.

You do not know what even tomorrow will bring. So you're going on holiday. It's a good plan to have. But tomorrow, the airline might go bankrupt, the holiday company shut down.

[5 : 49] If you're going further afield, you might find that there's a war, or a political situation, or a natural disaster, and you can't go. Maybe you've got a new job lined up.

Tomorrow, there might be a huge financial crisis. Another international banking scandal. Everything goes down. The company doesn't exist anymore. No more jobs. Now, it's not cheery, but it's true, isn't it?

Someone's going to university. A few years' time, perhaps, for some people here. You discover you didn't get the grades. Or the government's changed the funding system. Or something else has happened.

Maybe you've got your retirement all lined up. Everything's planned. You know what you've got to spend. You know where you're going to go, and what you're going to do. And tomorrow, you get health news.

It's not good news. There may be no retirement. This is not cheerful stuff. But it's true. And James says, Okay, you've got your plans all laid out for years to come, but you don't even know what tomorrow will bring.

[6 : 57] And the future is unknown to us. Not even tomorrow. You can't even be sure about tomorrow. But he goes further.

Let's read on in verse 14. 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.

When you think about your future plans, we're not to stop at just recognising that we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, that our plans might get derailed, that something different might happen.

But we're to realise this as well, that not only are our plans uncertain to us, but so even is the question of whether you're going to wake up tomorrow.

That's what he's saying. Our lives are not certain. What's going to happen to our future, rather, is unknown to us. It's bleak. It's a real...

[7 : 57] I mean, it's quite a response to these people, isn't it? We've got all our plans laid out and James says to them, stop. Even your life might not continue tomorrow.

Look at the picture he uses. It's mist. Your life is a mist which possibly could be smoke, but both give the same picture. Think of a misty morning.

You look out the window and everything's kind of hazy, isn't it? There's a bit of a sort of foggy mist out there. The things that you normally see very clearly out your window are just outlines and shapes and you peer out into the distance and you can see, well, really nothing at all.

But then up comes the sun. And suddenly, almost just like that, the mist has dissipated, it's gone, and everything's clear again. That mist which seemed so permanent and thick just a few minutes ago, it's gone.

And James says, that's your life. Gone. In an instant. It can be. Or the smoke from a bonfire, and there'll be bonfires in just a few weeks' time, I guess, and the fire burns and the sort of thick smoke

comes up and it's hanging in the air and it gets in your eyes and you can't see through it.

[9 : 09] But then a strong wind comes across and it all blows away and it's as if it was never there. It's just blown and gone. And that, says James, is your life. And as Christians, God's Word calls us to recognise this truth.

No matter how solid and permanent our lives seem, no matter how much we feel like we're going to keep going forever, we're not. Our lives are fragile and temporary.

And just like the mist, when the sun comes up, any one of us could be gone tomorrow. It's true, isn't it?

We know that. So that's the first thing we have here. When we're making future plans, we need to remember how uncertain the future appears to us.

how that we do not know our future. Could it be that some people here are in danger of thinking like these people, these people in the churches, these Christians who were arrogantly planning for the future as if they knew and controlled what was coming up?

[10 : 19] Well, their attitude, I think, reminds us of the rich farmer that Jesus tells us about in Luke 12. And I'm just going to read that, Luke 12, verse 16 to 21. And Jesus told them a parable saying, the land of a rich man produced plentifully.

And he thought to himself, what shall I do? For I have nowhere to store my crops. And he said to himself, or rather he said, I will do this.

I will tear down my barns and build larger ones. And there I will store my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years.

Relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, fool, fool, this night your soul is required of you and the things that you have prepared, whose will they be?

So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. If you're not a believer here this morning, that's you.

[11 : 26] Making your plans, hoping to live as long as you can and enjoy life as much as possible, all the while, hiding from the truth that one day, perhaps soon, your life will end and you will face God.

Everything you've stored up will be gone, all of your plans will be derailed and you aren't ready. But Jesus calls you to himself, to trust in him, to find forgiveness and salvation and safety and hope of heaven.

So come and trust him if that's you today. But Christian believers here, we cannot, we must not have that attitude that says, I know the future, I'm going to get myself ready, I'm going to store up all my stuff, I'm going to make my plans, I'm going to set out what I'm going to do and I know and I'm going to be in control.

James says, you're not in control, you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow and even your life is just a mist that gets blown away. So the first part of the Christian attitude to planning for the future and thinking about the future is simply this, to recognise that we don't know the future.

We're not in control of the future. That's the first thing. He knocks back that confidence. But secondly, firstly we've had recognise that you don't know the future.

[13 : 00] Secondly, he says, rely on the Lord's will. Rely on the Lord's will. Because right now you might be wondering what the point of all this is really. Sure, we know that the future is uncertain.

Sure, we don't know if our lives are going to continue. But how does thinking along in that way help me to do anything? How does that help me figure out my future plans? How does that give me any comfort or hope? It seems pretty bleak and it is.

But we need to be knocked back first so that we understand how we approach this positively, if you like. Because I do have to make plans. I do have to assume that I'll be here tomorrow or in ten years time, don't I?

Well, yes. So the second part of this attitude, this Christian attitude to the future is rely on the Lord's will. How does recognising this uncertainty help to grow a more Christian attitude in us?

That's the question, isn't it? Because what it does is it points us back to God. It points us back to our heavenly Father. Look at verse 15. Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

[14 : 16] If the Lord wills. When we say that and think that, we are recognising recognising that God has an eternal plan that governs all things no matter how big or small.

We're talking about God's providence here. God has planned when you live and when you die. He's planned what will happen to your business plans if you have them.

He's planned what your pension will be like, how your university studies are going to go, who you might marry, what kind of family you will have. He knows every detail.

He has planned it all. You and I, well, we don't know those details. It's hidden from us but God sees it and controls it fully and therefore, what else can we say?

What else must we say than if the Lord wills? Notice a little bit more carefully what this verse says. It's interesting because it doesn't say perhaps what we might expect which is this.

[15 : 22] If the Lord wills, today or tomorrow we'll go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make money, etc. It doesn't say that. It says this. If the Lord wills, we will live.

We will live. You see, having brought us to a face-to-face with our mortality, with the temporariness of our lives on earth, having shown us that we're like the mist, James now calls us to look at the one who holds our lives in his hands.

The one who has planned how long we will live and when we will die. We could have sung from Psalm 139 and verse 16, And all the days that I should live which you ordained for me were written in your book, O Lord, before they came to be.

Though our lives are uncertain to us in the way we look at them, they're not really uncertain. They're unknown to us, yes, but our lives are not random chance.

God has planned our lives. He knows what's going to happen and the Christian attitude to making plans for the future recognises that God has planned them and recognises that we'll live just the number of days that he has ordained for us.

[16 : 51] They were all written in his book before we were born. He knows every single one of those days in all their detail. So that's the great truth, isn't it?

It is. If the Lord wills, we will live and we will do this or that.

So do we make plans? There's the question. Perhaps if we can't know the future and God knows it all, we don't make plans. Maybe it's wrong for us to save. Maybe it's wrong to think about buying a new house in a few years' time.

Maybe it's wrong to think I need a better job so I can make more money. Perhaps next year I'll get some training and then I'll be able to do it and I'll be able to feed my family better or perhaps I'm going to retire in five years' time and then I'll think about doing this.

Maybe it's wrong to do all of that. Is that what James is saying? Well, no, because he carries on. He says, if the Lord wills, we will live. That's the big thing.

[17 : 52] My continued life, living, rests on Him and I will say, if the Lord wills, I'll live another week, another month, another ten years. But also, if the Lord wills, we will live and we will do this or that.

If the Lord wills, we will do this or that. Having acknowledged then that we depend on God's will, we will make plans.

We'll make wise, reasoned, God's honouring plans for the future. And we will trust that whether or not they happen and whether or not they come to be in the way we imagined it is according to God's will.

We may have that long period of retirement or we may not. We may get that degree or we may not.

We may marry that person or we may not. We may be successful in careers or we may not.

But we must plan and we trust the Lord to carry out his will. So two, I've got two misconceptions that I think it's helpful for us to deal with here, just briefly.

[19 : 06] The first one is, is James telling us that we must always say God willing when we talk about the future? Well, not exactly. I mean, I think it is a very good thing.

Christians often do say God willing, I'll do this or that and that's helpful because it reminds us of the truth. But actually, James is less interested in how we form our sentences and how we speak here than about our heart attitude.

I make my plans and in my heart I'm always acknowledging God's providence will determine the outcome. So we may well say God willing, but if we don't, what's more important is not exactly what we say but where our heart is.

So that's the first thing. This is a heart attitude we're talking about. And secondly, some people might say, oh, this means then that before I do anything, before I make any plans, I need to find out what God's will is for my future career or my investment in a property or where I'm going to move to.

But actually, that's not what James is saying. James says, we don't know tomorrow. We don't know if we're going to live or die. We don't know if our plans are going to be successful.

[20 : 17] And God isn't going to tell us. We're not going to get a voice from heaven or a special prompting or something that's going to say, go and get this job now. Go and do this. Move there. I just don't think we are. That's not what James is saying.

He's saying, we don't know. But acknowledging that we don't know and acknowledging that God does, we make our plans and we look to him to carry out his will.

And that's liberating, actually, because we don't have to spend all our time trying to figure out what God's will might be. And at the same time, we're not sat here so uncertain about the future, worrying that things won't happen.

We trust it to God. We make our plans confidently and we go ahead and we trust God to work out his will. And that's comforting, I think. And it's reassuring.

God will carry out his will and I will make wise plans and trust him to do what's right. That's the balance, I think, here. So let's pause and ask ourselves again. How do you, how do I, think about the future?

[21 : 18] Is this attitude that the Lord will carry out his will and I will trust him? Is that the atmosphere in which I make my plans?

But here's a question and it's an important one. What if God's will for my future is hard? What if my plans are going to fail?

What if they're failing right now? What if I face disappointment and discouragement to pray in those circumstances if the Lord wills when everything's falling apart, when there's just suffering and discouragement and almost despair?

It seems very hard. And here's another one. What if God's will isn't good for me if it's really not what I want?

Is God in some way sort of a distant God? Is there a kind of fatalism almost to this? Is God just dishing out good or bad to various people on some basis that we don't understand?

[22 : 19] If God wants good for me, great, but if he doesn't, then that's not good, is it? What does that mean for me? Haven't we all prayed? Well, I've prayed this, I'm sure.

Your will be done, but Lord, please not that. Your will be done, but please let my plans go ahead. Please let me move to this place, marry this person, have this job.

Please let that be your will. And if it's not, it's hard, isn't it? I preach to myself here as much as to anyone else. What's the key to understanding this?

Or perhaps better, who is the key to understanding this? And the answer's found in Jesus. The answer is found in Jesus. You see, Jesus shows us and reminds us that God is not a distant deity just passionately handing out good or bad as he pleases and we're just, if we get the good, great, and if we get the bad, well, I'm lucky, you know, that's just how it is.

No, this is the God who sent his Son. This is the God who sent the Lord Jesus Christ. Think about Jesus living his life on earth.

[23 : 30] Think about his attitude towards this Father's will for a minute. Here he is speaking in John chapter 6 and verse 38. For I have come down from heaven, he says, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

And in that context, that will was to save those people whom the Father had given to him. I have come not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. Jesus knew what it was to continually, faithfully submit himself to the will of God.

But it was easy for Jesus, someone says. It wasn't uncertain for him. He knew exactly what God's will was for his life. That's true. He did, didn't he?

Imagine it. Quite apart from any other knowledge, from his earliest days he studied the Old Testament scriptures. And he saw and he knew that the whole of this book spoke about him. So not only him, but anyone else who was prepared to read it and understand it saw the whole of his life mapped out. He saw the suffering that was to come. He saw his purpose for existence.

[24 : 44] It's there, it's clear. He knew just what was coming. He was the son of God and he knew and he saw what God's purposes were. So yes, Jesus was different, but what, consider the, what he faced.

He knew God's will, but how terrible it was for him. How great and dark the cross was that loomed in front of him and yet he set his face and he went willingly to it.

Listen to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion. Speaking to his disciples, I was speaking, yeah, speaking to his disciples.

It's Matthew 26 verse 38. Then he said to them, my soul is very sorrowful even to death. Remain here and watch with me.

And going a little further he fell on his face and prayed saying, my father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.

[25 : 55] Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. Jesus in his humanity shrank from the terror of the cross that he faced.

and yet he prays, not as I will, but as you will. In the face of being made sin, he prays, your will be done.

In the face of having the wrath of God poured out on him in full, your will be done. Jesus knows what it is to say, your will be done, facing the toughest and darkest of times that anyone has ever and could ever face.

so friends, when we make our plans, believing if the Lord wills, we know that even if what we face is actually disappointment and sadness and suffering, Jesus knows and understands what it is to pray that prayer, facing the greatest of pain and anguish and despair.

our great high priest has done the same and he knows and he feels and he cares and he's with us. When all of our plans fall apart, Jesus knows what it is to face the darkest of times and pray your will be done.

[27 : 15] But actually, perhaps even more importantly than that, Jesus prayed your will be done in the face of God's wrath so that Christians never have to face that wrath.

Apostle Paul in Romans 8 and verse 31 says, What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

See, this is the truth. God is for us. He did not spare his son. Jesus looked the cross in the face and even as he swept drops of blood and threw himself on the ground in agony, yet he went forward to that cross.

God gave up his own son and his son willingly went and died for us. He fulfilled God's will. The wrath was drunk to the full and our God is only for us.

There is no judgment for us. God gives us graciously all things and if he gave up his son for us, we know that all the things that he gives to us, even the hard things, even the difficult things, are for our good.

[28 : 35] God's will for us, though we can't see it, though we don't know it, though at times we fear it, it's for our good. God's will. And so, as we face a future that is hidden from us, we pray and we say, if the Lord wills, and we know as we look to our heavenly Father and we look and see what Jesus did, that it's for our good, no matter how difficult it may be.

Because we have confidence in the person, we trust his will. A more trivial example, I guess, perhaps, but a friend of mine, not too long ago, organised his honeymoon and he kept the destination and what they were doing and all that kind of things completely secret from his wife-to-be.

And she didn't find out until she saw the tickets pretty much at the airport. And even then, actually, she didn't really know where the place was. So until they were getting on the plane, she had no idea. Was she worried? I don't think so.

Because my friend, knows about travelling and he knows where to go and what to do. And she had complete confidence in him that it was going to be great. And it was. It really was. Because she trusted the person and had great faith in him that he loved her and was doing what was good for her and knew what he was doing, she wasn't worried.

If that's true in such a small thing as that, then we look to God and we have great confidence in what he will bring us for the future and we pray if the Lord wills and we have that attitude of if God wills because we know that he is for us and he loved us and he did not spare his only son and therefore whatever comes is for our good.

[30 : 21] And so we make our plans believing if the Lord wills, I will do X, I will do Y and Z and if he wills something else, then that will actually be better.

Isn't that a glorious thing? So we saw firstly then that we must recognise that the future is unknown to us. Secondly, that we must rely on the Lord's will and thirdly and very briefly but importantly

remember that not to do so, that not to rely on the Lord's will is actually sin.

Read verse 16 and 17 again with me. As it is you boast in your arrogance, all such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing and fails to do it, to him it is sin.

James is quite stern here, isn't he? He's been quite serious. He's rather telling these people off, I think. And that's because of what he says in verse 17.

It's wonderfully true, we've just seen, that to be able to trust our lives to the will of a God who is for us and loves us and provides for our best is a liberating and comforting and confidence giving thing.

[31 : 48] However, James wants us to see that not to do this, to make our plans as if we were in charge, is arrogant and evil. To fail to trust God's will, and acknowledge God's will, is sin.

Verse 17 is a, it could be seen as a general statement. It's attached to the rest of our passage by the word so, so we know that James is connecting these things together, but it's a thing that's true anyway.

To know, to know what we are to do and to fail to do it is sinful. sins of omission, I guess is the technical term.

Things that we know we should do but we don't do. Do you remember Jesus giving us a picture of the last judgment in Matthew chapter 25? The sins that he highlights there are sins of omission, things that should have been done and weren't.

He says if you see someone hungry and you don't feed them, or thirsty and don't give them a drink, or a stranger and you don't welcome them, or sick and imprison and you don't visit them, that is sin and it's evidence of an unrepentant heart, evidence of judgment.

[32 : 59] So likewise in this context not to acknowledge and rely on God's will when we make our plans is sin. We are not to be double minded, we must not compromise with sin in this area and therefore we must rely on the Lord's will.

So as we close then, how will you make plans? How will you think about your future? And how will you avoid sinning against God? How will we have a Christian attitude in this?

Firstly, we recognise that we don't know the future and if we don't even know whether we'll be alive or not tomorrow, it would be arrogant to plan as though we can control the future.

Recognise that you don't know the future. Secondly, we saw rely on God's will. As you make your plans, the attitude of your heart and your mind must be, if the Lord wills. And that brings us great contentment and freedom too because of what God did in sending Jesus Christ means we know he's for us and his plans are good for us.

Rely on the Lord's will. And lastly, we bear in mind that this is serious, that this matters because to do anything else is sin. We thank the Lord for his word.

[34 : 20] Shall we close by singing? And it's from Psalm 37. The traditional version of Psalm 37 and it's on page 252.

We're singing verses 3 to 9. Set thou thy trust upon the Lord and be thou doing good and so thou in the land shalt find and verily have food.

We're singing verses 3 to 9 on page 252.