

Where Is God When Life Goes Sideways, Part 5

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Preacher: Walt Alexander

[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Be eager to hear from the Lord this morning. We're going to continue this series, Where's God When Life Goes Sideways?

It has gone sideways in many ways, and so we're eager to hear and to listen. So James 4, I'm again reading verse 13. If you'll look with me there, we will dive in.

This is the Word of God. 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 while and then vanishes.

[1 : 08] Instead, you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast in your arrogance, and all such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him, it is sin.

It is sin. That is the Word of God, and I'm eager to unpack this morning. You know, in one of his columns earlier this week, sports writer Jason Gay wrote these words.

Hi, my name is Jason. Welcome to my schoolhouse. I used to write about sports, but like many parents now, my 9 to 5 workday is now consumed with teaching school.

For me, a 5-year-old and a 7-year-old. Just to be clear, this is not one of those know-it-all columns in which the author gives smart advice about how to teach children in quarantine.

[2 : 11] There is no smart advice here. I'm lousy at this. My children are plunging in aptitude with each passing minute. I think I saw one of them carve Black Sabbath into the kitchen table with a pocket knife, and I swear they've started smoking in the bathroom.

But my kids are stuck with me for as long as this goes. And I know what you're thinking. You have a 5-year-old and a 7-year-old. How hard can it be? Well, I've got news for you, friends.

School has changed. You can't simply pick your nose and roll right into high school anymore. Let me tell you how it works, though, in my home. My wife and I wake up in the morning.

We make the kids breakfast, and then I start yelling at them to get dressed. I call this the opening yell. Then the kids run around for 20 minutes, ignoring everything we say.

After that, it's time for morning meetings, a.k.a. Zoom calls with their respective classes. Once the morning meetings are done, I give my children free range time.

[3 : 19] They're given the option of A, running around and making a mess, or B, running around and making a mess while Daddy looks at his phone. But it's not all bad, he continues.

Here's the upside. I know so much more about my children. You can go to all the parent-teacher meetings in the world, but there's nothing like riding shotgun to see what they're all about, what they're challenged by, what enthralls them.

I know that my five-year-old loves to draw and write, and my seven-year-old has a knack for math and science. They both love animals and nature. The other day, they found a bird's nest, and they acted as if they had won the World Series.

All in all, he continues and concludes, we're doing the best we can. Early on, I tried so hard to avoid descending into chaos. The helpless feeling of the wheels have come off.

But the longer this goes, the more I realize the wheels are always off. That's the status quo of quarantine. I've learned to appreciate those moments that happen once in a while when the children are engaged in learning, figuring it out independently, and there's a brief period of okay in the world.

[4 : 30] The wheels have briefly come on. A minute later, it's back to chaos, and that's fine. I'm no teacher, and after the month we've all had, I figure chaos is a learning experience, too.

I imagine we can relate. Many of us can relate. Our homes have suddenly transformed into school rooms, and we are now teachers. But you know, it's not just the kids who are going to school right now.

We all are. We may be learning more about our kids, which is a totally wonderful thing, what they're good at, what they love, what they want to do with their lives. But we're all learning how to trust in a God that we can't see, how to hope in a future that we don't understand.

We're learning how to lament, how to walk in a falling world. We're learning how hard times come to stretch us and strengthen us. Actually, you know, we're learning how to live.

This morning, as our economy begins to reopen, our workforce begins to slowly return, and we look to resume some of our routines, James has much to say to us.

[5 : 39] And a word where we're going is, your life is not yours. All your days are from the Lord and for the Lord. Your life is not yours. All your days are from the Lord and for the Lord.

Just to be clear, you know, these series or this series is not our typical way of doing preaching or the way we organize series. We typically go verse by verse and expositionally through a chapter.

I can't wait to get back to Acts probably next week. But this morning, I do believe this is where God has us. The first point, we're going to take this out in three points. This first one is, most plan and live with little regard for the Lord.

Most plan and live with little regard for the Lord. You know, a couple weeks ago, we looked at the opening verses of James, if you remember that. And in these verses, James, the Lord's brother, returns to one of his favorite subjects again.

He returns to money. You know, these verses are blunt and direct. You know, they're addressed to Christian businessmen and women in the church in the arrogant way they plan and do business and live.

[6 : 46] Look down in verse 13. He says, Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit. There's a couple things we need to see.

First off, that it's not wrong to plan. You know, this verse has been misused to say, planning and preparing ahead is wrong. You're getting that little nest egg that Dave Ramsey tells you to get.

It's wrong. It's not. Proverbs 21.5 says, The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance. So it's not wrong to plan, nor is it wrong to make a profit.

The abundance there is financial. A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. Proverbs 10:4. And in fact, the picture we have right here of going to such and such a town and doing such and such a thing, this idea of moving from town to town to shop and sell goods is one that's very familiar in the first century.

In a day without the mass distribution or Amazon Prime, you brought what you needed in person to be sold to someone else in person. If you had goods to sell in another town, you would partner with someone.

[7 : 55] Either you would go or they would go to set up shop, to go to market, to sell and trade and make a profit. That's what we saw several weeks ago in the lives of Aquila and Priscilla.

If you remember that, they moved about all throughout the first century world to sell goods and to make tents. And so what they're planning to do in this first is not necessarily wrong.

It's not wrong to plan and profit, but it's wrong to plan and profit without regard for the Lord. That's what James is after. James is after this confidence.

James is after this underlying attitude. In verse 13, it's not an actual quote that we have here, but it's an underlying attitude that we'll just go wherever we want.

When we decide, we'll go wherever we decide to go. And there we'll spend and make a trade and we'll profit. They're confidently planning to profit wherever they decide.

[8 : 54] And they're boasting about it. Look in verse 16. He says, you ought to say, you know, if the Lord wills. But in verse 16, he says, you boast in your arrogance and all such boasting is evil.

So James, though, is not rebuking them for doing business, not even for planning to do business. Business works on principles, which without a global pandemic generally work.

And so James is not rebuking them for that. James is rebuking them for the deliberate, unrestrained self-confidence that defines them.

James is focused on an underlying arrogant attitude. They're essentially saying, I am intelligent. I am upright.

I am unstoppable. It reminds me of the famous poem Invictus. I am the master of my faith. I am the captain of my soul.

[9 : 55] What you're supposed to take away from that verse 13 and from that point is that at the center of their confidence in life is I. I make decisions. I make money. I make success.

There's no regard for the Lord. There's no consideration of his ways and no factoring in of his opinion. Now, in the midst of COVID-19, I doubt any of us are saying, I am the master of my faith.

I'm the captain of my soul. We can't even go to the gym without a mask. As theologian Mike Tyson once said, everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.

And we've been punched in the mouth. So much of our life has been turned upside down. But after staggering from the punch, what are we finding in our hearts?

What's the underlying attitude of our lives? So much of our culture is built on an independent spirit. I mean, we're Americans. The American way is self-made men and women making decisions and doing their own things.

[11 : 04] And yet, this season, the curtain has been pulled back to reveal how connected we are. This virus has spread all over the world to all types of people, both the wealthy and the poor, so quickly.

Because we're far more connected than we realize, even us in McMinn County. And it's also shown how dependent we are on one another. We need others to stay home for us to be healthy.

We need places like Tyson Foods to stay open so that we can eat. We need folks to buy takeout cars and I-Veam so that we can work and pay the bills.

See, what the Lord wants to do right now is snuff out an independent spirit in us. How much of it is still there? How much do we lean on our own understanding?

How many of our decisions leave little time for prayer? How much are we really willing to let folks in? Into how bad our marriage is or how tight our finances are.

[12 : 09] What is most difficult right now? Is it really the empty calendar? Or the canceled plans? Are the bills coming in? Or is it the loss of control?

Is it life being reduced today? Today? Is it the requirement to depend on the Lord?

The Lord's trying to teach us how to live. Your life's not about you. It's about the Lord. Point two. Life is short and ordered by God's plan.

Life is short and ordered by God's plan. Needless to say, the Lord does not take kindly to being disregarded. Again, James is direct. You say all this, but you don't know.

Look in verse 14. He says, Yet you don't know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

[13 : 10] In a word, he says, your life is brief. Who are you? Do you really know the future? You don't even know tomorrow. Tomorrow. You can't even guarantee tomorrow.

You're a mist. This is just a metaphor. It's a fog that dissipates with the morning sun. Or it's the smoke that blows away from a candle with the shift of wind.

It's short-lived. It's here for a moment and gone. Psalm 39 stacks up these metaphors when the psalmist says, Oh, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days. Let me know how fleeting I am.

Behold, you have made my days a few hand breaths, my lifetime as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath. Surely a man goes about as a shadow.

What am I? A hand breath, a mere breath, a shadow, basically nothing. And James is getting in their face. He's saying, you don't even realize it. You're like a teenager who thinks you know what you know.

[14 : 15] You're so sure, so convinced, so confident. You have no time for anyone else. Not that we've ever met a teenager like that. But James said, you don't know what you think you know.

You boast in what you know, but all you know is your arrogance. All you know is based on your arrogance, your way of seeing the world, your knowledge, your puffed up confidence.

Do you not realize your boasting is built on arrogance? You aren't intelligent, upright, and unstoppable. You're arrogant, evil, and fragile.

You are missed. Who are you? A doctor? A doctor? A mother?

A brother? A sister? A businessman? Businesswoman? A teacher? An engineer?

[15 : 13] A Christian? Add this to the list. You are missed. There's no doubt that one thing the Lord wants us to take out of this pandemic is life is fragile.

We are fragile. But it's not just that your life is brief. Your life is ordered by God's plan. That's what he's doing.

You're hemmed in by the Lord in a wonderful way. Look down in verse 15. He says, instead of saying what you're saying, instead you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

Instead of boasting in what you think you know, you should say, if the Lord wills. That's the way you boast in what he knows. There's one certainty in all the heavens and the earth, and it's the will of God.

It's according to the will of God that we live or die. It's according to the will of God that we do this or that, that we go into this town or that town, that we sell and trade and make a profit. It's according to the will of God that everything in heaven and on earth is ordered.

[16 : 22] Isaiah 46, I am the Lord and there is no other. I am God and there's none besides me. Declaring the end from the beginning from ancient times, things not yet done. I have spoken and I will bring it to pass.

I have purpose and I will do it. In this wonderful little book called The Coronavirus and Christ, John Piper says, the sovereignty of God is all-encompassing and all-pervasive.

He holds sway over this world. He governs wind, lightning, snow, frogs, gnats, flies, locusts, quail, worms, fish, sparrows, grass, plants, famine, the sun, prison doors, blindness, deafness, paralysis, every disease, travel plans, the heart of kings, nations, murderers, and spiritual deadness.

And all of them do his sovereign will. The psalmist says in Psalm 19, all things are your servants. Lord, if those verses don't settle it, I don't know what will.

The Lord is the one certain thing in this universe. But what about now? What about a coronavirus?

[17 : 45] What about a global pandemic? As one author has said, this is not a time for sentimental view of God. Either the Lord is in complete control or we should be terrified.

It's not just that life is brief. It's ordered by God's plan. And James wants us to embrace it. James is not trying to get us to say, if the Lord wills before we say or do anything.

James is after a change of attitude, a change of heart. Doug Moo says about these words, he says, James attributes no magical significance to the words themselves. They're not an incantation.

They're not a formula. But if the Lord wills can become nothing more than a glib formula without real meaning. James, rather, wants us to adopt the attitude expressed by the words as a fixed perspective from which we view all of life.

The point is not a formula or reciting specific words. If the Lord wills. The idea and what James is after is a change of heart that results in a fixed outlook for all of life in which we view all of life as under his sovereign sway and us as utterly dependent upon him.

[19 : 09] James wants to take us back to school. James wants us to learn this lesson. And what a better time to learn this lesson than right now. James wants us to humble ourselves before the Lord.

James wants us to be aware of the ways we disregard him and plan without him. James wants us to love Jesus Christ and love him more than anything else. James wants you to decrease and Christ to increase.

James wants your self-confidence and your self-esteem to go down so that your Jesus confidence can go up. James wants to change the way you live so that you make your decision not based on your confidence but his resources not based on your gifts but his power.

James wants us to teach wants to teach us how to truly live. You see the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a good news that Jesus Christ stood in our place and bore the penalty for our sin and set us free.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is favor with God. But the gospel is also power to raise us and let us walk in newness of life just like TK said this morning.

[20 : 22] And that's what James is helping us see. He wants this change of attitude. Not a formula to throw on top but a change of attitude, a change of heart in which we embrace Jesus Christ as our love, as our strength, as our all in all.

I love the way John Piper says it. I love Jesus Christ. And as I say it, I want to make clear what I mean. I admire Jesus Christ more than any other human or angelic being.

I enjoy his ways and words more than I enjoy the ways and words of anyone else. I want his approval more than I want the approval of anyone else. I want to be with him more than I want to be with anyone else.

I feel more grateful to him for what he has done for me than I do to anyone else. I trust his words more fully than I trust what anyone else says.

I'm more glad in his exaltation than in the exaltation of anyone else, including me. That's what James is after. He's after this change of heart and attitude in which we love Jesus Christ and live for him and the strength he supplies.

[21 : 34] Life is brief, temporary, momentary passing away. Yet it's ordered by God's plan such that every moment is a gift and precious because the next isn't promised.

You know, we must come to grips with what one author calls the time dominance of life under the sun. Life is a race against time.

Vince Lombardi once said, I didn't lose. I just ran out of time. And that's the way it feels. Doesn't time ticks and talks. Time weighs down on us. It makes us late.

It gives us deadlines, endings, and cuts us off. It never looks back, never turns back, never restarts. It gives no redos, reruns, or second chances. Time comes and goes and is always running out.

Time is hard on us. Just this week, my dad's first cousin died alone at the young age of 62. Time runs out.

[22 : 38] But time also presents endless opportunities. Time opens the doors to friends and slow evenings in the backyard. Time leaves unplanned moments to stop and talk with a neighbor to ask how they're holding up and how it goes in their soul.

Time gives us the gift of work, of pouring out years packed with hours and days of doing good and providing. Time slows to running, playing, reconnecting, and lovemaking.

Lego building, football throwing and swimming. Praying, reading, eating till we're full. If we look and see, time is always giving, even as it passes quickly away.

One of my favorite songs the past couple years captures the briefness, the brevity of life so well. It's by Jason Isbell.

He's writing to his wife. He says, It's not the long flowing dress that you're in. It's not the light coming off your skin.

[23 : 44] It's not the fragile heart that you've protected for so long or the mercy in your sense of right and wrong. It's not the way you talk me off the roof. Your questions like directions to the truth.

He says, It's knowing that this can't go on forever. Likely one of us will have to spend some days alone. Maybe we'll get 40 years together.

But one day I'll be gone. One day you'll be gone. It gets even clearer in the second verse. Maybe time running out is a gift.

I'll work hard till the end of my shift. And give you every second I can find. And hope it's not me who's left behind.

This can't go on forever. Likely one of us will have to spend some days alone. Maybe 40 years. One day I'll be gone. Your life is not yours.

[24 : 44] It's a gift. Your shift will soon be over. You don't know when it's coming. Who thinks about tomorrow and adds a single hour?

How will you wish you'd spent your life then? How will you wish you were known to your spouse, to your kids, your co-workers, and your neighbors?

What will you wish you had done more of? More overtime? More sports leagues? More movies or shows? I doubt it. You'll wish you gave more away.

Several years ago, R.C. Sproul, Jr. lost his wife to cancer and simply said, I wish I held her hand more. Your life's not yours.

All your days are from the Lord and for Him. The Lord wants you to come out of pandemic differently. The Lord is not trying to pause this frenetic pace of your life so that you just return back to it when we get through it.

[26 : 03] That's not what the Lord is after. The Lord wants to change the way you live. Point three, live one day at a time.

Live one day at a time. How do we live now? If we're a mist and God is in complete control, how do we live now?

And, you know, the one certainty under heavens and the earth is the will of God, but none of that is permission to give up or give in. It leaves no room for coasting or cruising, no time to resign or retire.

Just let the Lord do what He's going to do. It has no place in the Christian life. All of this changes the view from the sky.

Have you ever been up in a plane? Ever seen how puny Depot Hill and Star Mountain are from the sky? There's a settled certainty that is meant to mark our lives in the day of uncertainty because of Jesus and the view we see from the sky.

[27 : 16] Here it is. The truth that the will of God is the one certainty in all the heavens and the earth, combined with the promise that this God is our Father and has only good for us, should fill us with unspeakable confidence and calmness.

Henry Martin, the missionary to India and Persia, died of the plague when he was 31, wrote these words in his journal just months before his death.

He said, To all appearance, the present life will be more perilous than any I have seen. But if I live to complete the Persian New Testament, translating the Persian New Testament my life, after that will be of less importance.

But whether life or death is mine, may Christ be magnified in me. If he has work for me to do, I cannot die.

Many have paraphrased this statement to say, I'm immortal till Christ's work in me is done. I think that's so right. I think that's the way we're supposed to live.

[28 : 22] Not in fear and in panic and in worry. I think it was Cyprian during one of the plagues in the early first centuries. He was just saying, The plagues taught them that they should not be afraid of death.

I think that's what this is supposed to teach. So it's supposed to change our life from the sky. There's a settled certainty that we know because of our hope that is in heaven. But it also changes life on the ground.

It changes life on the ground because I don't concern myself with the unknown. I live one day at a time. I think that's what's going on in verse 17.

It says, Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it for him, it is sin. The idea is that you sin or you disobey not just by what you do, but by what you don't do.

So if you know you're supposed to have this attitude and this way of living, then it should characterize your life in active obedience. And so we obey.

[29 : 26] We pray. We love. We serve. We work and strategize. We weep. We eat and play. One author, Zach S. Wine, says, When the unknown taunts your mind within the season, you find yourself.

Give yourself to the next thing in the place you are. Knit your palms into a rope. Then stand for a while and pray. Knit, pray, knit, pray.

Eat, drink, enjoy your family. And notice the sun. Give thanks for its light. Take pleasure in its gift. God is near. The way forward, more often than not, is found where you are.

I just love that. Give yourself to the next thing. And the next thing. And the next thing. And the next thing.

Our lives are not meant to be defined by worry and anxiety, but by the next thing that's before us. Your life is not yours.

[30 : 33] All your days are a gift from the Lord. All your days are for him. If we take this to heart, this season with all its wreckage is a gift.

If we take it to heart that we are missed. But yet we don't cave in to fear and anxiety.

Because we hold on to the truth that God is greater. And his will is certain over anything in this world.

Then this season will be gracious. Because it will teach us how to live and depend on the Lord. That's what we need more than anything else.

Let me pray for us. Father in heaven. Cast ourselves before you. Confess our need for you.

[31 : 35] We pray that you would help us. To get this. Vision. To get this picture.

We pray that you'd help us to humble ourselves before you. Lord, so many ways we can spend our season kicking against the goads. Kicking against what you want us to learn.

Lord, make us teachable. And humble. Make us thirst to know you and to love you. Give us strength.

Lord, we pray. Provide for us in every way, God. We cast ourselves upon you. We pray that you provide for us according to your riches in Jesus Christ. We want to base our view of the future upon our resources or our understanding or our emergency funds.

We want to base our hope in the future upon you. Upon your promise to never let the righteous go hungry. Your promise to provide for us and meet us.

[32 : 49] Your promise to never leave. God, help us as we confide in you and hide in you. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

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