

Facing Uncertainty

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. Those of you who are here, those of you who are listening in from home, as we worship the Lord this morning, turn with me in your Bible, if you have one, to the book of James.

James chapter 4, verses 13 to 17. James chapter 4, verses 13 through 17.

Let me read these verses. 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. As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

[1:12] So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. Some Bible passages seem to ring so obviously true in the age of COVID.

And I think this is one of them, right? Here we have a warning directed towards people who are making plans and setting goals and anticipating results with far too much confidence.

Now if you just think over the last six months, probably all of us can identify plans that have had to be canceled, goals that have needed to be adjusted, and results that didn't come through in the way we would have expected.

And as we look ahead to the next six months, one of the few things that we can be certain of about this world is that many things will continue to be uncertain. What's school looking like in the fall?

Well, still up in the air. What about the job market in six months? That's pretty unclear. Will we see a resurgence of COVID in Connecticut this fall?

[2:15] Well, maybe. What will be the long-term effects? Socially, politically, economically, of this pandemic that we're living through? Well, we'll have to see how those develop, for good and bad.

We're living in a time of uncertainty. And for many of us, uncertainty produces anxiety. Right? If we know what's coming down the pike, we can prepare ourselves for it.

If it's already happened, then most of the time we can somehow reconcile ourselves to what has already happened. But when so much of what we used to take for granted is now uncertain, we can feel constantly on edge.

According to a Census Bureau study, rates of anxiety and depression in the United States have doubled since January. And ironically, younger people, 18 to 29, have had by far the highest increase in rates of anxiety and depression, even though younger people have by far the lowest chance of dying from COVID.

Older people, 70 and above, report only one-third the rate of anxiety and depression as younger folks. Interesting.

[3 : 30] Right? Now, different ones of us are prone to feel anxiety for different reasons, whether it's health concerns or whether it's financial stress or whether it's political turmoil or whether it's worries for loved ones.

But the anxiety we experience is not always in proportion to the danger that we actually face. Sometimes we can feel far more anxiety than is actually warranted.

Or sometimes we can feel no concern at all when we actually should have some serious concerns. Now, we may not be able to control all our feelings of anxiety, but the thing is when we let anxiety drive us, it can either make us debilitated and paralyzed and unable to do nearly anything except worry and worry more, or we can become angry and volatile because we don't like feeling anxious and we don't like the uncertainty and we want it to go away, but it won't.

Now, it's also possible to respond to uncertainty not so much with anxiety, but rather with arrogance. Right? Many people have become just fed up with all the restrictions.

And perhaps in some cases, with some warrant, some people see that some particular restriction doesn't completely make sense, and so they've decided, I'm just going to do what I want to do.

[5 : 01] I don't want anybody to tell me otherwise. Now, of course, that attitude has often surfaced in many circumstances and times, right?

That's what James was dealing with. In verse 13, he addresses business people who are making confident plans to travel and trade and make money. Now, as far as we know, they weren't, James doesn't mention anything about plagues or pestilences, but in the ancient world, there was always the possibility of wars, conflicts, famines, plagues, civil unrest, economic decline.

Those are always possibilities in the ancient world, and especially when you would travel outside of your homeland. But, of course, these people, in verse 13, who are talking, had a cushion to protect themselves.

They were business people. You know, 70 to 80 percent of people in the ancient world could not fathom traveling to a different place, settling there for a year, starting a business there, because they didn't have the capital to do that.

They didn't have the money to travel far, right? They couldn't, they were people who were living at a subsistence level, surviving day to day, right? So these people James was speaking to were relatively well off in the ancient world.

[6 : 11] They had enough capital, enough freedom, enough resources to consider traveling to a different city, settling, living abroad for a year, starting their business, trading, and making a profit in the end.

Now, there's nothing wrong with any of the things they were planning to do. There's nothing, you know, the Bible never says it's wrong to travel or live abroad or trade or even try to make a profit, right?

All of those are legitimate human activities. But the problem, James says, is that these people were boasting in their self-centered arrogance. Notice that their plans are all about themselves.

There's no acknowledgement of factors beyond their control. There's no mention of God at all. And there's no apparent concern for other people's well-being. They're only thinking about what I want to do and how I'm going to accomplish it.

Now, how do we face an uncertain world without falling into ungodly anxiety or ungodly arrogance? That's the question we're dealing with this morning and that James is speaking to.

[7 : 22] So, in this passage, what we're going to see is two truths to remember and two instructions to follow. Two truths to remember and two instructions to follow.

So, first truth to remember we see in verse 14. Life is unpredictable and short. You don't know what tomorrow will bring.

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. You know, over and over the Bible reminds us of how short and unpredictable our lives on earth are.

In the Psalms, Psalm 39, verse 5 and 6, Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath. Surely a man goes about as a shadow. Surely as a breath they are in turmoil.

Or in the book of Job, Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers.

[8:28] He flees like a shadow and continues not. Or in the Prophets, Hosea 13, 3, We are like the morning mist, Like the dew that goes early away, Like the chaff that swirls from the threshing floor, Like smoke from a window.

Right? All of these metaphors, A breath, A shadow, A flower, The chaff, The dew, The morning mist, Smoke from a window, Emphasize how fragile our human lives are.

We are not invincible. We are not indestructible. We are not ultimately in control. Now some of us have, Some of us like these people in verse 13, May have resources and connections and choices That cushion us against the bumps and bruises That we would otherwise feel more acutely in life.

But none of those resources and connections and choices Can save us from dying in the end. And over and over the Bible reminds us of this fact.

Now I think during the course of this pandemic, Pretty much everyone has been forced to acknowledge That the first half of this verse is true. You don't know what tomorrow will bring.

[9:42] Right? Now of course, Some people knew that pretty well beforehand. If you've experienced trauma, Trauma teaches you that lesson. You don't know what tomorrow is going to bring.

Now some of us have been sailing along pretty well And we thought we had a good handle on life And maybe it was hardest for us To recognize the unpredictability of life.

But here's the question. Have we faced not just the first half of this verse But also the second half? Life is not just unpredictable. Life is short. You are a mist, James says.

You know, there were maybe a couple of weeks in March When it felt like many people were really grappling with their mortality In the face of this new and mysterious virus.

You know, since then, The world has largely moved on from that topic. Right? We're focused on all kinds of other things now. Suppressing the virus, Finding a vaccine, Reopening the economy, The coming election, All kinds of other turmoil In the world.

[10:53] And these are all legitimate topics to consider and discuss. But have we shifted our focus to all those things That we think we can control Or maybe at least a little bit influence Because it's too uncomfortable to face the fact That one day, And it could really be any day, Our time on earth will be done.

And we can't do a thing about it. We are a mist that appears for a little while And then disappears. Have we come to terms with that? You know, even if COVID were to completely disappear off the scene tomorrow, Our bodies are still vulnerable to disease And accidents and violence And toxic chemicals and old age.

We are fragile. And the Bible repeatedly confronts us with this truth. First of all, just because it's true. The Bible says a lot of things just because they're true.

Undeniably. But the Bible also repeatedly confronts us with this truth Because until we face this truth, We will not be able to truly live wisely In the time that we have.

It's only by facing this uncomfortable truth That we can live humbly And courageously In the time that we do have on earth. Moses prayed, as we heard earlier, Teach us to number our days That we may gain a heart of wisdom.

[12:14] Now, I suspect that this is one reason Why older people in general Have been far less anxious and depressed During this pandemic. Even though they have a far greater health risk.

Many older people have grappled with their mortality. And many younger people haven't. But you know, the Bible's words are for all of us.

Young and old alike. So that we all might become wise. It doesn't happen automatically as we age. It happens as we take to heart The lessons that God is teaching us Through his word And along the way of our lives.

So life is short And unpredictable. That's the first truth That James wants us to remember. But the second truth that James Points us to in verse 15 Is that our lives are in The Lord's hands.

And if the first truth Life is short and unpredictable Is a humbling truth The second truth Is a reassuring truth. Our lives are in the Lord's hands.

[13:24] If the Lord wills We will live and do this or that. James is not just saying James is not just Sort of making a general acknowledgement That life is uncertain And we can't predict what will happen.

James is specifically reminding us Our lives are in the hands Of the Lord himself. God is the one who gave us Life and breath In the first place.

God is the one who sustains our lives Until our last breath. So we're not just subject to Circumstances we can't predict And other people's choices That we can't control.

The world that we live in Is ordered by God's providence. In other words, The God who created all things Holds all things together By his power. He's the one who holds together The atoms and the molecules And the tiny particles That none of us really understand How they work.

He holds the world together. And yet, the Bible also says This fallen and sinful world Is also standing under God's judgment.

[14:34] When we look at the world And see chaos Or lies, violence, disharmony, Selfishness, bitterness Those are all signs Of the fallen and broken state Of this world And of God's righteous judgment.

In other words, God Giving us over To our selfish and foolish desires And letting us see Some of their harmful And destructive effects.

And yet, the Bible says That God not only sustains The world in his providence And the world is under His righteous judgment But it's also sustained And kept by his steadfast love.

God has not unleashed His judgment Finally and completely. He also holds us together In his steadfast love. He hasn't let our world Unravel completely.

Because he's showing us His kindness and patience And forbearance And calling us To see his steadfast love That is ultimately shown to us In his son Jesus. You know, we will not Always understand Why things happen The way they do.

[15:44] But the Bible says We can know the one Who holds us And holds all things In his hands. Notice that here In verse 15 James doesn't just say If it is God's will.

Even ancient pagans Would say things like If the God's will. James says If the Lord wills. And now sometimes In James The Lord Refers to Jesus Christ himself.

Chapter 1 verse 1 And chapter 2 verse 1 Sometimes in James The Lord refers to God the Father As in chapter 3 verse 9. You see, in the Old Testament The Lord, Yahweh Was the personal name Of God.

The God who makes And keeps his promises. The God who has come To dwell with his people. The God who is gracious And merciful Slow to anger And abounding in love. And that's a reassuring And energizing truth To know that our lives Are in the hands Of the Lord Who has promised To never leave us Nor forsake us.

And that gives us courage To plan and pray And work Because the Lord himself Has put us here For such a time as this And it also gives us Humility It gives us freedom To recognize That we are not the Lord And our choices And our plans Are not the last word.

[17:06] Now throughout The book of James James echoes the wisdom Of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs And he does so here As in many other places Proverbs encourages Careful planning.

Proverbs 21 verse 5 Says the plans Of the diligent Lead to abundance. Proverbs 20 verse 18 Says plans are established By counsel By wise guidance Wage war.

Proverbs also reminds us That whatever our plans May be It's only the Lord's purpose That will prevail In the end. Proverbs 19 verse 21 The human mind May devise many plans But it is the Lord's purpose That will be established.

Or 16.9 In their hearts Humans plan their course But the Lord Establishes their steps. And when we look To the New Testament We see the Apostle Paul Putting this principle Into practice.

Many times To the church in Ephesus He said Acts 18.21 I will return to you If God wills. Or to the church In Corinth he wrote I hope to spend Some time with you If the Lord permits.

[18:09] 1 Corinthians 16.7 To the church in Rome He wrote I'm asking Praying that somehow By God's will I may succeed In coming to you. Now Paul doesn't Include this phrase If the Lord wills Every single time He talks about his plans It's not a magic word.

Right? Sometimes, right, We, you know, Those of us who are parents Teach our children Please and thank you And sometimes Those are even called, right, The magic, What's the magic word? Please.

Right? But, you know, You can say please And thank you Without really meaning it. Without really having respect And honor for the person You're speaking to. Right? Those words Are only supposed to cultivate In us an attitude Of respect and honor For whoever we are dealing with.

And in the same way This phrase If the Lord wills It's a good phrase to use But it's meant to cultivate A respect and honor For the God Who is sovereign And in charge Of all of our plans And who oversees all things.

Right? So whether or not We say those words As we're Explicitly As we're talking about Our plans All of our plans are We're meant to be reminded That all of our plans Are subject to that Subject to that provision.

[19:28] So, two truths to remember Life is short and unpredictable Our lives are in the Lord's hands. Now, James gives us Two instructions to follow That flow out of these two truths In verse 16 and verse 17.

So, first instruction to follow Verse 16 Don't boast in arrogance Instead, plan with humility. See, the major problem That James seems to be dealing with In these verses Is arrogant presumption.

And this is especially A temptation for those of us Who, like the business people In verse 13 Are relatively well off. The people in verse 13 Could make travel plans They had enough money To move to a new city They had enough capital To launch a business there They had options.

And compared to most people In the ancient world Nearly everyone Not everyone But the vast majority Of people in America today Have options that Most people in the ancient world Could never have imagined Right?

The ability to Get in a car And travel The ability to even Get on a bus And travel The ability to Move To a new location A new apartment A new house Right?

[20:56] The ability to Consider multiple options About what Our job might look like Or our career might look like Again, not everybody Has all those options Some people Are just trying to survive Day to day Right?

Maybe you're just trying To survive day to day You feel like I don't have many Of those options You know But many of us Have at least some options And the more options We have The more this Warning The more seriously We need to take this warning Now Having options Is a gift Right?

Having options Is not a bad thing It's not evil When God put Adam and Eve In the garden He gave them A wealth of options He said You can eat from any tree In the garden There are so many good options That are open to you And he said to them Be fruitful and multiply And fill the earth He gave them a mission And he gave them All kinds of options About good ways To fulfill that And yet what happened?

They fell into arrogant presumption They disregarded the wealth Of options that God Had given them And they arrogantly presumed To take from the one tree That God had prohibited You see Having options Whether it's wealth Or privilege Or leisure time Or the means to travel It's a blessing from God But it comes with this temptation Because having options Allows us to feel Less directly Dependent on God For our every breath Having options Creates the temptation To think that we are More in control Of our lives Than we really are Having options Makes it easier To distance ourselves From and even ignore The needs of Hurting people Around us Now over the last six months Many of us have had Options removed In fact I know

Many people who were You know Ready to graduate And take a job And the whole rug Has gotten pulled out Under them Right? All kinds of All kinds of options Have been suddenly Taken away Travel plans You know All kinds of things And many of us I think have been Reminded to be grateful For the simple things The things that we used To take for granted Even just Having a meal to eat I think that during This pandemic God It's like God Has taken a bright Yellow highlighter To certain biblical truths That we have far too Long ignored And neglected And disobeyed And he has said Look See See what I said here Two thousand years ago It's still true Proverbs 21 Or Proverbs 27 Verse 1 Don't boast about Tomorrow For you don't know What a day may bring

[24:03] Here's the question Will we listen To what God Is saying to us Through this pandemic And become the wiser For it in the long run Or will we just Adapt unhappily For the short term And then return To our old arrogant ways In the long term The truths in these verses About the shortness of life And the sovereignty of God Are not just true During a pandemic They are true at all times And in all places When the world feels calm And peaceful And happy And when the world Is in turmoil And upheaval And chaos The truths Remain the same And God is reminding us To take these truths To heart And to live wisely To live courageously And yet to live humbly In light of them What about right now?

What does arrogant presumption Look like right now? Let me suggest A couple of things I think arrogant presumption Could look like An unwillingness to admit That your current understanding Of the pandemic Could be wrong In one respect Or another Now I've talked to Many of you And I read the news And I've heard all kinds Of perspectives On this pandemic Right?

Probably we all have Right? A very wide range And guess what? A lot of these perspectives Directly contradict each other And can't all be true At the same time Now We can be confident Of the things That God has Revealed In his word Because guess what?

There are many things That the Bible has said And the church Has consistently taught For 2,000 years They're not going to change tomorrow Christ died on the cross For our sins He rose up from the dead On the third day Jesus Christ is the same Yesterday Today And forever We can hold on To those truths With confidence And they won't change But this virus Has been around For less than a year Now whatever you think Of the virus Or the government's Response to it Or society's Response to it Or our church's Response to it You and I Might look back 5 or 10 years Down the road Or even 5 or 10 months Down the road And we might see Some things about This situation differently Right?

That's at least A strong possibility That we will look back And say Huh Well In hindsight I guess that looks Sort of different And we can't Completely predict What our insights Down the road Are going to be So let's acknowledge With humility What we know Only tentatively And in part Right?

[27 : 05] We have to make decisions Based on limited knowledge Right? We shouldn't just do nothing But we have to acknowledge What we can know With confidence And what we know Only tentatively And partially Second What might arrogant Presumption look like Right now?

Well Very practically Consider what are you Hoping to accomplish In this next year? Right? Like these people In verse 13 They're talking about Their plans For the next year Now it's good To have plans And goals If you don't have Any plans And you don't Have any goals Then You should start Praying about that And maybe talk With somebody else About What are you Intending To do Over this next year How are you Intending to grow?

Right? But look at the People's goals And plans In verse 13 It's all about Themselves I want to I want to Travel And live Abroad There I have Ambitions For career And business I want To make A profit God And other People Were nowhere In the picture Now let's Consider our Own plans And goals Are they Centered On ourselves On our own Desires And our own Ambitions Is God In the center Of the picture Or is God Only on the Periphery Or not even Really in the Picture What about Other people What about Other people Who God Has put Around you Even people Who God Has given you A responsibility To love And care for You know According to The Bible Self-actualization Is not the Ultimate goal Of life It's far More about Coming to Love God And love Our neighbors And be the People that

Christ is Making us To be So as you Make plans And goals Think about These questions Practically What are your Spiritual goals For the next Year How are you Seeking to Grow in the Knowledge and Love of God Now that's Something that No earthly Circumstance Can ultimately Hinder God's work In us Through his Spirit Second How can You grow In love For other People Let's say You know If you run A business Right This passage Is sort of Slanted toward People who run Businesses Right Merchants In the Ancient World What does It look Like to Serve your Customers And your Employees Despite the Challenges that The pandemic Presents Or if You're a Student Or an Employee What is How can You love And serve Your fellow Students Your employer

And the People that You are And your Customers People you're Responsible to Serve and Care for Have you Submitted your Plans and goals To the Lord In prayer Right That's a good Place to start Because when we Give our plans And goals to the Lord in prayer God starts to That's one way That God starts To put in us Godly desires And godly Ambitions And he starts To reshape Things around What he is Wanting to do With us Which will Ultimately be Far more Valuable And far more Lasting than Just what we Come up with On our own So that's the First instruction To follow Don't boast In arrogance Instead plan With humility Then Verse 17 We come to The second Instruction to Follow As we come To the conclusion Of this passage Don't be Paralyzed by Anxiety Instead act With courage Whoever knows The right thing To do Or knows The good That he can

[30:55] Do And fails To do it For him It is sin Now on first Glance This saying Might seem To come Out of Nowhere Right It doesn't Seem immediately Connected to This discussion About plans And goals And if the Lord wills To verses 13 and 16 But it creates An important Balance Right If verses 13 through 16 Warn us Against the danger Of arrogance And presumption Verse 17 Warns us Against the danger Of being Controlled Or paralyzed By our anxiety You see Sin is not Just doing And saying And thinking Things that we Shouldn't It's also Failing to do The things That God Has given us To do Proverbs 3 27 Says Don't Withhold Good From those To whom It is Due When it Is in Your Power To act Right Think about What James Has said Already About what True Faith In Action Looks Like Visiting Orphans And widows In their Affliction Right Caring For the

Most Vulnerable Treating All people Fairly And without Partiality James gave An example In chapter Two If you See a Brother or Sister In Christ Who doesn't Have enough Food Or clothing Don't Just pray For them Don't Just wish Them well Make sure Their needs Are met Right Whether you Do it Or whether You Sound the Alarm bell And get Other people Involved And get Get the Community Involved In caring For each Other Right And if we Neglect to Do The things That Jesus Has instructed Us to Do That is Also That Can also Be a Form of Sin Right Not Not Only Doing the Things That we Shouldn't See I Think today There's a Danger of Arrogance And presumption Of acting In selfish And foolish And short Sighted Ways But there's Also a Danger of Being paralyzed By anxiety And in And in the Process Missing Missing The Opportunities God Has Given Us To do Good To the Body Of Christ And to The Surrounding

World And to Honor His Name You know So think About what Opportunities Has God Laid before You in This season Now Some of Those May involve Some Risk And If it Involves Risk You need To use Your Discernment As we Always Must About What Risks Are worth Taking Not Every Risk Is worth Taking And Not Everyone Should Take The Same Risks Again In A Pandemic Or Otherwise But Here's The Thing Sometimes We Hold Back From Doing Good Not Because We Thoughtfully Assess The Risk And Discern That It's Unwise But Simply Because The Task Is Uncomfortable And Inconvenient And You know I think We Over The Last Few Months We've Been Trying To Navigate This Balance As a Church Right We We Want To Be Careful We Don't Want To Encourage People To Take Foolish And Unnecessary Risks At The Same Time We Want To Be Courageous We Want To Actively Love One Another And Carry Out The

Mission God Has Given Us Even If That Is More Inconvenient Than Usual One of The Resources I Have Found Most Helpful Over These Last Few Months Is A Series Of Two Articles That Were Published In March And April By Andy Crouch And His Colleagues They Run An Organization Called Praxis And These Articles Are Written Especially To Business And Organizational Leaders But I Think There's Wisdom In Them For Everyone But Particularly If You're In A Position Of Leadership I Would Highly Recommend You Read These Articles But Here's A Little Excerpt The First Article Written March 20 Began This Way We're Not Going Back To Normal And Right Four Months Later That's Certainly Right Right The Coronavirus Is Not Just Something For Leaders To Get Through For A Few Days Or Weeks Instead He Wrote We Need To Treat COVID 19 As A Change That Is Like To A To Perhaps One To Two Years Or Even More And The Article Continues Christians

Of All People Are Equipped To Face The Current Reality With Both Clear Eyed Realism And Unparalleled Hope We Are All Operating With Profound Uncertainty Not Only About The Future But Even About The Present But We Have Confidence That Jesus Is Lord That His Spirit Is Even Now Working Powerfully In All Of Our Lives And That God Is Good This Time Can Be A Moment Of Amazing Creativity Though Also A Time Of Unavoidable Pain And Loss Many Resources Are Suddenly Unavailable To Us But The Most Essential Resource Is Still Available And The Most Important Reality Has Not Changed God Has Called Us To A Time Like This He Has Given Us A Mission And A Community To Serve Alongside And Our Most Important Resource In Leading Is Trust In The Context Of Love Now He Goes On To Give Some Practical Thoughtful Instructions About How Business And Organizational Leaders Can Navigate This Season But Here's What He Says At The End Of This Article Which I Think Is

[35 : 57] Applicable To Every One Of Us And A Question We Can All Be Asking Ourselves A Year From Now Ten Years From Now You Will Think Back And Ask Yourself These Questions Did I Do My Very Best To Act In That Time Of Crisis Knowing As Little As I Did With The Resources That I Had And Did I Love And Honor My Family Friends Neighbors Coworkers And Customers He Writes Your Organization Will Survive This Season Or It Won't That Is No Prescription For Apathy Or Passivity It Is A Green Light Of Freedom To Take Action Things God Will Accomplish His Purposes And Has Actively Placed You In Your Position Brothers And Sisters God Has Brought Us To Such A Time As This By His Grace May We Plan With Humility And May We Act With Courage Let's Pray Father Thank You For These Words From James Thank

You For How Direct And Clear Both His Warnings And His Encouragements Are Thank You That You Do Not Want Us To Live In Denial Thank You That Your Word Confronts Us With Truth Even When It Is Uncomfortable But Thank You For The Reassurance That Our Lives Are In Your Hands We Pray That You Would Enable Us To Walk With Humility And With Courage In This Season And For The Rest Of Our Lives That You Have Given Us On This Earth We Pray All These Things In Jesus Name Amen