

**JAMES 4:13-17**  
**GREAT QUESTIONS OF LIFE:**  
**WHAT IS YOUR LIFE?**

“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. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”<sup>1</sup>

Yesterday is a wrinkle on your forehead  
Yesterday is a promise that you’ve broken  
Don’t close your eyes, don’t close your eyes  
This is your life and today is all you’ve got now  
Don’t close your eyes  
Don’t close your eyes

This is your life, are you who you want to be  
This is your life, are you who you want to be  
This is your life, is it everything you dreamed that it would be  
When the world was younger and you had everything to lose<sup>2</sup>

**T**hus sang Switchfoot in a song that declares, “This is your life.” The lyrics certainly invite reflection as people consider the speed with which life passes. This awareness of the brevity of life is not something with which only we of this age appear to be concerned. Long years past, Job declared:

“My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle  
and come to their end without hope.

Remember that my life is a breath;  
my eye will never again see good.”

[JOB 7:6, 7]

At another point, the suffering man cried out:

“My days are swifter than a runner;  
they flee away; they see no good.  
They go by like skiffs of reed,  
like an eagle swooping on the prey.”

[JOB 9:25, 26]

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<sup>2</sup> “This Is Your Life,” © Universal Music Publishing Group

Adults delight in asking children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Almost inevitably, children respond with answers that reflect values communicated from their parents. “I want to be a fireman.” “I want to be a nurse.” “I want to be a scientist.” Children pick the values that appear most exciting to them. Generally these responses reflect noble values as parents will have instructed their children with values that will prove a benediction to their lives.

There may be a few exceptions to the exciting aspect of future work. I recall one group of children who were near unanimous in responding, “I want to be a garbage man.” We had a man in the congregation who drove a garbage truck. His run included picking up from a number of big department stores and major distributors of sporting goods and appliances in the Lower Mainland. Consequently, his garage was filled with cast-off goods that he scavenged because they were last year’s model or because they were the wrong colour or because they had been returned for minor problems. However, seldom do we hear children speak of being a Christian, of being a godly person, or being holy and righteous. The likely reason for this deficit is that we who are parents do not often speak of such positions as reflecting the values we esteem.

People of a certain age may recall a television series entitled “This Is Your Life.” Hosted by Ralph Edwards, the show was sort of a precursor to contemporary reality television; the show ran on NBC from 1952 to 1961. Featuring guests who were surprised by Edwards on live television, the show would take the guests through their life in front of an audience including friends and family. Generally, the memories were pleasant as people were told how much they encouraged others, or how they influenced others, or how they were instrumental in some significant way. Occasionally, however, there were surprises that were not so pleasant.

In the text before us, James confronts his readers with the demand that they reflect on their lives. However, the brother of our Lord does not wait for the answer from those to whom he is writing—he aggressively thrusts the answer forward. It is disturbing in some respects. However, if we will accept his purpose, the question asked will impel us to excel. James’ question will compel sober reflection and drive us to adjust course so that God is glorified.

**THIS IS YOUR LIFE!** — “What is your life?” The question is posed from a perspective that we don’t anticipate. We know this to be the case because James immediately answers the question for us—he doesn’t give us opportunity to frame the question, he frames it for us. His concern is the eternal impact of one’s life rather than the manner in which mankind assesses life.

Mortals assess life on the bases of benefits provided to the race; and the benefits valued speak of our existence in this life. We know that we are here but a short while. Shove the knowledge of our mortality ever so far from our consciousness, and we still know that we must die. This body is destined for death. Though it was designed for immortality, sin ruined the creation and our bodies lie under the sentence of death that reflects our fallen condition.

We urge our children, and our grandchildren, to get a good education. We do so because we know that society values the educated person. It is essential that I should pause for a moment to caution all who listen that not all education is equally valuable. In our present world, many people push education at university levels. Some studies will be more beneficial in preparing an individual to earn a living than others. Whilst I am appalled at the general lack of ability demonstrated by my contemporaries to employ this English tongue to its greatest power, those who earn an advanced degree in English studies may find it difficult to use the training to earn a living. Part of that negative assessment arises from modern ideas that depreciates grammar and repudiates ennobling literature from the past in favour of trash that masquerades as literature.

Individuals that earn degrees in womyn's studies, black studies, Ebonics or gay studies will perhaps be qualified with some training to flip burgers or to drive cabs. Universities that offer such diversity training do their students no favours; administrators of such programmes should be ashamed of themselves as they are robbing the students of opportunity to be educated. Even a sociology degree or a psychology degree will likely make it difficult to gain employment. Surprisingly, even those who continue to flood the field of law may discover that they are ill prepared to earn a living.

Those who equip themselves with degrees requiring rigorous academic preparation will always find employment—society values such training and rewards those willing to exert the effort to be so trained. Those who obtain training preparing them to work with their tools will readily find employment. Preparation for any of a number of positions within service industries will assure students of employment.

I've said these things to emphasise the fact that society values the labours of people who contribute in some way to society. We show our evaluation through recompense for work performed. The higher society's valuation the greater the remuneration. Rigorous preparation is valued more highly because fewer individuals will exercise the effort to obtain the training. Additionally, we reward those who assume responsibility over great enterprises. CEOs and CFOs accept responsibility for administering corporations and overseeing people's investments, and they are rewarded handsomely because they assume responsibility for such oversight. Individuals that contribute little to society will receive less reinforcement through salary.

James appears to recognise this social evaluation as he addresses those who are focused on obtaining recompense for effort expended. He writes specifically to individuals who are intent on making a profit. These are people who anticipate travelling, saying to themselves, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" [JAMES 4:13].

This is not a plea to ignore planning; rather, this is an admonition to ensure that one's priorities are in order. The young person who fails to equip himself or herself for employment is foolish in the extreme. Likewise, the individual who ignores setting aside funds to provide for unforeseen emergencies is in a precarious position when tragedy does strike. The head of a family that has no health insurance, the labourer who has no disability insurance or the primary wage earner for a family who has no life insurance to ensure that final bills are paid and that family needs are provided for is flirting with disaster and jeopardising others who depend on that one. The Faith of Christ the Lord would instruct us to accept the responsibility of caring for our family. Listen to the Apostle as he instructs believers in these matters.

"If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" [1 TIMOTHY 5:4-8].

Later, providing further instruction concerning these same issues, Paul will write, "I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. For some have already strayed after Satan. If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows" [1 TIMOTHY 5:14-16].

The assembly of the Lord does have responsibility for members who are incapable of providing for themselves and who have no family to provide for them; however, family members bear primary responsibility to care for their own family members. Let me say quite clearly, government cannot and will not provide for you. You may imagine that you are paying into social insurance and that it is moneys owed to you at retirement. Old Age Security and the Canada Pension Plan are not funds into which you pay; these are taxes. When the people paying these taxes are unable to provide enough funding to care for the elderly and injured of the nation, the moneys will not be available. OAS and CPP are not government obligations to which you have a right; they represent moneys that government allocates through redistribution.

What is James' problem with planning, then? He is addressing successful people. They profess themselves to be Christians, of that we are quite confident. However, the issue that James addresses is that those planning have neglected the most important aspect of their being—how will they relate to God? The language James has heard from these individuals and which he now echoes reflects self-confidence and assurance. The planning exhibited is carried out as though they were in full control of tomorrow. These merchants planned their departure, the length of their stay and the time of their return without ever thinking of God.

You might anticipate a parallel between what James inveighs against and something the Master addressed on one occasion. Jesus told the people crowding about Him a parable. This is the parable He told. "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, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all 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! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God" [LUKE 12:16-21].

The individual who arranges her days without considering the will of God thinks very much like another man of whom the Master spoke. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it" [MATTHEW 7:24-27].

I am compelled to point out a fact that may make us uncomfortable; nevertheless, it needs to be brought to the forefront. To assume that we can depend on our plans, though we have not considered the will of God, is foolish in the extreme. Focus on the sixteenth verse: "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil" [JAMES 4:16]. Depending on your planning without considering the will of God is boasting. Moreover, such boasting is evil. Boasting is the sin anticipated in the thirteenth verse. The merchants in question are not castigated for their wealth; neither are they excoriated because they pursued wealth. The acquisition of wealth is not sinful; neither is labouring to gather wealth sinful of itself. The problem is that they are pursuing their business without considering God; and they then boast about their plans. None of the actions described are sinful of themselves. James describes the everyday affairs of life—and that is the point. What James describes is so ordinary, so natural. We live as though life were our right, as if what we choose is the only deciding factor, as if we had all we need to make a success of life within ourselves. We act as if doing well is all there is to life.

The underlying point that is easily forgotten is that God is sovereign, and His will must be considered in every aspect of life. The sinful action lies in depending on our own plans. When God is not in control of our planning, boasting becomes evil. In effect, James is accusing these businessmen of playing God. Perhaps he could accuse many within leadership of our churches of playing God. Assuredly, his words could expose many of us for acting as though we are God. We plan our holidays, plan our recreation and we plan our daily routines without a thought of God. It is as though we relegate God to a brief time we allocate on Sunday, continuing our routines without a thought of Him or His will. James calls such a lifestyle “evil.” He uses a very strong word. He could have used other, less powerful words; but he was deliberate in choosing this particular word because he was seeking to shock those who read.

How often have I attended a church business meeting and thought to myself, “Where is God in this?” We fling a perfunctory prayer heavenward, the prayer being tantamount to saying, “God, we’re going to do some planning. Come, approve of the plans we are formulating.” Though we may not actually pray in that manner, the words capture the attitude of our meetings. Too often, when I have suggested that we pray about a matter before acting on it, the recommendation has been met with dismissal, and on occasion with barely disguised irritation. Though the group may pray, it is evident in too many instances that the prayers are directed at those attending the meeting rather than being directed to the Living God. James would say that when we are acting in that manner, we are doing what is evil, wicked, harmful or vicious.

We act as though we are God, and we never even pause to think of what we are doing. Let me take just a moment to point to some of the problems that must inevitably arise because we act as though we are God. The brother of our Lord points out that the first problem that arises. As mere mortals, ***we have no idea what the future will bring.*** “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” [JAMES 4:13, 14]. None of us is able to say what will happen today, much less what will happen a year from now. Each of us is but one heartbeat away from the end of life. God alone knows when our life will end.

Playing God with our lives is risky because ***we have no assurance of a long life.*** We are frail, transient, insubstantial. Our lives are comparable to a “mist,” a vapour, a wisp of fog that will shortly burn off. “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” [JAMES 4:14]. Walk outside any day during winter. You will have bundled up so that you can stay warm—coat, tuque, gloves, perhaps even a scarf around your neck. You exhale, and what happens? Your warm breath is seen as a mist that dances in the frigid air before disappearing forever. That’s life. That’s not simply the life of a young person—that is ***your*** life. Though you live ever so long, it seems as if time flashed past. You recall days from childhood, vaguely remembering the names of people long departed... Was it yesterday that you graduated from school? Your wedding was only a short while ago. Before you know it—poof!—life is gone. Time passes, we are betrayed by the weakness of our aging bodies, but the mind continues to imagine that we are the same, youthful individuals we were, when was that?

When we act as though we were God, ***we are guilty of ignoring God’s will for our lives.*** James provides the needed corrective when he cautions those who read his missive, “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” [JAMES 4:15]. We mouth the words, “God willing,” as though they were a cliché, a superstitious verbal talisman that we attach to our plans so we won’t appear presumptuous. However, we have already acted arrogantly in formulating plans that failed to seek or to include the mind of God; now, James’ words confront us in our sinful pride.

James concludes the chapter with a warning. In effect, James is saying, “You have been warned; the truth has been placed before you. Should the merchants continue their lives in their self-confidence that permits them to dispose of their days according to their will, they must see that their actions are sinful. They have been warned that the future is not in their hands; rather, the future is in God’s hands. Just so, we need to consider when making plans, whether for our own work, whether for our family, or whether for the congregation, we must seek the will of God. Is this not the teaching of the Master? “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [necessities of life] will be added to you” [MATTHEW 6:33].

The warning is particularly pathetic because James is not saying something with which his readers would be unfamiliar. That is what makes his warning so powerful! “Whoever knows the right thing to do” implies that those reading his words were aware of the will of God. Perhaps they had allowed themselves to become consumed by the ordinary affairs of life, or perhaps they were focused on the future, or perhaps they had fallen into the trap of compartmentalizing their lives into religious and secular—whatever had happened, they needed to be reminded that awareness of what was right meant they were responsible to do what was right. Failure to do what they knew to be right was sin.

**UNCERTAINTY OF TOMORROW** — As mere men, you and I have no control over what will happen tomorrow. To be certain, we are responsible to prepare ourselves and our family for the vicissitudes of life, and especially are we responsible to prepare for the inevitability of death. The tragedy of the inevitable is that few actually prepare, and James has exposed what is perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses for any of us—we live as though we are in control of what is going to happen. We need to heed the consistent message of the Word.

Throughout the Word of God are statements cautioning all people to consider their end. Solomon cautioned those who would heed his words,

“Do not boast about tomorrow,  
for you do not know what a day may bring.”

[PROVERBS 27:1]

The words anticipate all that James has addressed. To live as though we have control over tomorrow is to boast; and James has revealed that such boasting is wicked.

There is an aspect of James’ choice of words that puts things into perspective. He asks the questions, “What is your life?” We would expect him to say, “It is a mist.” However, take note of the text, it says, “You are a mist.” James exposes the flaw in human planning without God; it is not merely that life moves so fast that it is here and then gone, our presence is fleeting, and therefore all our planning is nugatory; our plans disappear quickly, just as we ourselves must disappear quickly. We mortals are transient, a mere will-o’-the-wisp, ignis fatuus; our presence is evanescent. We resemble Hosea’s description of the Ephraimites.

“They shall be like the morning mist  
or like the dew that goes early away,  
like the chaff that swirls from the threshing floor  
or like smoke from a window.”

[HOSEA 13:3]

David, in the thirty-ninth Psalm, prayed for wisdom in light of the transience of life.

“O LORD, 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 handbreadths,  
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.  
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah  
Surely a man goes about as a shadow!  
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;  
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!”

[PSALM 39:4-6]

It would be easy to despair in light of our lack of control over what is elemental. It could be tempting to fall into the trap that so frequently defines the modern world, grasping the moment because it is all we have. Man’s nihilistic attitudes that reject all authority and that refuse to consider responsibility to prepare for what must inevitably come is in great part the response of the fallen mind to despair.

Such thinking excludes the wisdom which the Preacher presented long years ago. “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity” [ECCLESIASTES 12:1-8].

**CERTAINTIES FOR TOMORROW** — The real question is how we shall approach life. Despite our efforts, the outcome of our ventures is always in doubt. Therefore, James is pushing the reader to trust in God’s graciousness rather than trusting in human plans. The Prophets of the Old Testament present this as a central feature of all that they would have to say. Trusting in one’s own plans is foolish, and especially when the individual can trust in God. Though we would expect that the lost of this world would not consult God, it should shock us that those who profess to know Him have little respect toward Him.

There are some certainties that James compels us to acknowledge. *Our frailty is evident.* None of us have control over our lives. Jesus taught those who are His disciples, “Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest” [LUKE 12:25, 26]? We must learn to consider the will of the Master as we prepare for life. It is not that we must not plan for tomorrow; however, we must recognise that we are responsible to God who gives life. With the Psalmist, each Christian must learn to say:

“I trust in you, O LORD;  
 I say, ‘You are my God.’  
 My times are in your hand;  
 rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!”

[PSALM 31:14, 15]

*The fact that we must one day stand before God is a certainty.* The lost shall assuredly stand before the Great White Throne; there, they must hear those awful words, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness” [MATTHEW 7:23]. How terrifying it will be when the lost hear the Son of God pronounce sentence, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” [MATTHEW 25:41]. Whenever the preacher makes such declaration, he does not do so merely to frighten the lost; he speaks with a tenderness born of knowledge of the Holy One; he seeks your good and God’s glory.

We who know God must also appear before Him. Paul warns believers, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:10]. No believer in the Risen Son of God should ever treat lightly the apostolic revelation. “We will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written,

‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
 and every tongue shall confess to God.’

“So then each of us will give an account of himself to God” [ROMANS 14:10b-12].

For each of us, James reminds us that we have an ethical dimension to life. “If the Lord wills,” implies that every action reveals who we are. Either we act from faith, or we act from self-will. The principle stated by the Apostle is, “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” [ROMANS 14:23].

It is obvious from reading James that this expression is not a mere cliché such as Muslims mouth when they conclude each sentence “in shā Allāh.” James teaches us that we must always remember that we serve a sovereign God. God is not a distant deity to whom we give obedience as mere form; He is our Father. Neither should we imagine that God so constructs our lives that we are unable to assume responsibility for our actions. We are responsible for what we choose in the routine of life; we are responsible for the omissions that mark our lives. Nor is God a disinterested deity who intermittently inserts Himself into human affairs and the remainder of the time leaves us to our own devices. We who know God are well aware that He seeks our good. This is the reason Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Your will be done” [MATTHEW 6:10]. This is not resignation to “Whatever will be, will be”; this is a declaration of submission to our Father. This is the desire that God’s ethical will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Let me cut to the chase. The Psalmist has stated, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” [PSALM 14:1]. If there is something worse than being morally deficient and denying that God exists, it would have to be knowing that God exists, professing to believe that He exists and then acting as though He is not God. Such practical denial is blasphemy. Then, worse still is the point where we begin to live as though we were God, at which point we have become idolaters. God alone has the right to be Master over our lives. When we plan our lives as though God were irrelevant, we have ceased to live as though He were sovereign.



Focus again on verse seventeen: “Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” [JAMES 4:17]. James has provided two rules to guide our lives. First, ***we must know what is right***. The grave danger here is that we imagine we know what is right because of tradition or through habits; what we need is to pattern our lives according to God’s Word. Why do churches change pastors with boring regularity? Isn’t it because the church burghers are ignorant of God’s Word? Should the preacher inform them of the will of God as revealed through the Word of God, they are offended because it fails to meet their test of tradition. You, as one who professes to know God, must ensure that you are familiar with what He has said in His Word. You are obligated not merely to attend the services of the congregation, but to listen as the message is delivered, assessing what is said and comparing it to the Word of God. Then, ***we must do what is right***. We must refuse to do what is wrong, replacing what we have been doing with what is right. This is the pattern expected of each Christian: ***know***, and then ***do***.

Life is not a continuing right; it is a daily mercy. Because this is true, we must avoid the sin of presumption. That is what is happening when we fail to remember God in our planning. Living without reference to the True and Living God is sinful arrogance. It is the essence of sin—the mark of a fallen man. As Christians, if we have slipped into playing God, if we have fallen into the trap of failing to live as though Christ is Master over life, we must stop now. When we Christians begin calling the shots, when we begin making our own plans, we are sinful.

To the business person, is God’s glory central to your planning? Or is the business the most important thing in your life? To the professional, what role does God play in your daily preparation for service? To the housewife and mother, how does God factor into the routine of caring for your family? Let me speak plainly to the church leader, for I am one, what role does God play in planning for the conduct of church services? How does God rule over His congregation as you plan for future ministry?

I wonder if we really think of the words of the old hymns when we sing. Or have we have fallen into the trap of merely mouthing the words? Frances Ridley Havergal left this account of one hymn. “I went for a little visit of five days. There were ten persons in the house; some were unconverted and long prayed for, some converted but not rejoicing Christians. He gave me the prayer, ‘Lord, give me all in this house.’ And He just did. Before I left the house, everyone had got a blessing. The last night of my visit I was too happy to sleep and passed most of the night in renewal of my consecration, and these little couplets formed themselves and chimed in my heart one after another till they finished with ‘ever only, ALL FOR THEE!’”<sup>3</sup>

Take my life and let it be  
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee,  
Take my moments and my days—  
Let them flow in ceaseless praise,  
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my voice and let me sing  
Always, only, for my King;  
Take my lips and let them be  
Filled with messages from Thee,  
Filled with messages from Thee.

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth W. Osbeck, 101 Hymn Stories (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI 1982) 240

**GREAT QUESTIONS OF LIFE: WHAT IS YOUR LIFE?**

Take my will and make it Thine—  
It shall be no longer mine;  
Take my heart—it is Thine own,  
It shall be Thy royal throne,  
It shall be Thy royal throne.

May God give us wisdom as we respond to His Word. Amen.