

JAMES 4:13-17

APPROACHING TOMORROW

“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.”¹

The world economy is changing at a dizzying pace; uncertainty defines modern life. Respected corporations are declaring bankruptcy while corporate executives squander obscene amounts of moneys. Stock markets are crashing, primarily because of the ineptitude and excesses of politicians who thought they could engineer social outcomes favourable to their pet philosophies. Retirement funds and life savings are wiped out overnight and people without a stake in the country live off the largess of politicians who impose ever-greater tax burdens on the middle class.

It is as though we are watching the Apocalypse unfold before our eyes, as a voice cries following the opening of the third seal, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine” [REVELATION 6:6]. The necessities of life during the Great Tribulation will be severely limited, while luxury items will be readily available, if one has the money to purchase them.

Soon, the voice of a mighty angel will be heard exulting over the great Babylon that will be thrown down:

“So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence,
and will be found no more;
and the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters,
will be heard in you no more,
and a craftsman of any craft
will be found in you no more,
and the sound of the mill
will be heard in you no more,
and the light of a lamp
will shine in you no more,
and the voice of bridegroom and bride
will be heard in you no more,
for your merchants were the great ones of the earth,
and all nations were deceived by your sorcery.”

[REVELATION 18:21b-23]

While we are not now in the Great Tribulation, current events certainly highlight in bold relief and with terrifyingly real probability the imminent prospect of the Great Tribulation.

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James is not making an eschatological statement; his letter offers eminently practical instruction for anyone endeavouring to live a godly life in the here-and-now. And though events are moving at a rapid clip as the current economic meltdown erodes the dreams of multitudes, the instruction James offers will help any Christian who labours in the world today.

THE BEST LAID PLANS... — “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.” I recall a story that I heard years ago when I first began to preach. A preacher asked a young man to describe his plans for the future. “Well,” said the young man, “I intend to complete university.”

“And then?” inquired the preacher.

“Well, I suppose I’ll get a job and work.”

“And then?” inquired the preacher again.

“I’ll probably get married.”

“And then?” inquired the preacher yet again.

“I’ll save my money for retirement.”

“And then?” inquired the preacher one more time.

“Well,” began the young man, somewhat more hesitantly, “I’ll retire and enjoy my days.”

“And then?” asked the preacher.

“I suppose I’ll die,” said the young man, now surprisingly sober.

“And then?” asked the preacher one final time.

This present life is a vestibule to eternity. How we fare in eternity is determined by our actions in this present life. James is not arguing against planning how to conduct one’s life; he is cautioning against planning for tomorrow without considering the will of God for your life. As an ad that is current on television states, time is like money; it is not how much you have that matters, but how you spend it. No one has full control over life; and assuredly, no one knows the day of death. The Wise Man has written, “No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death” [ECCLESIASTES 8:8].

In light of James’ forceful reminder of the brevity of life, several important issues related to the conduct of one’s life must be addressed. Though I cannot hope to exhaust all that could be said, perhaps even should be said, concerning these vital issues, it is nevertheless important that we take time to consider certain issues since understanding the biblical view will enable each of us to conduct our life in an honourable and profitable fashion.

The first issue to be considered is whether one should plan for days that are yet ahead. There appear to be an increasing number of individuals who are fatalistic in their approach to life—they believe “what will be, will be.” They hold to a view that one has no control over future events. This particular view appears to be gaining popularity as the age progresses toward a conclusion. Younger Canadians, especially, seem convinced that they are unable to change the outcome of life. They hold to a determinist view. It is almost as though our youth had become hyper Calvinists or as if they tacitly held to a strange form of Islam in the conduct of their life.

To be certain, there are portions of the Word that appear to suggest that future events are set and inalterable. I have no intention of fighting again the battle between Calvinists and Arminians—those who hold to predetermination in issues of salvation and those who exalt man’s will in salvific issues. I am more concerned at this time with whether the events that occur in one’s life are the result of serendipity or whether there is a master plan being worked out behind the scenes of life.

There are consequences that attend every choice. As certainly as smoke flies upward from the fire, so sin brings death. The Apostle Paul declares, “The wages of sin is death” [ROMANS 3:23]. In this statement, he is but iterating an earlier warning from God that was penned by Ezekiel: “The soul who sins shall die” [EZEKIEL 18:20].

By the same token, that one who chooses to obey God shall live. Again, Ezekiel writes, “If a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all [God’s] statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die” [EZEKIEL 18:21]. It is the same promise, clearly defined, that Jesus spoke when He said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life” [JOHN 5:24].

So it is that in the greatest issue of life, our choice has consequences. We can say with certainty that our future is determined in great measure as result of the choices we make. If I choose to drink and drive, there are potential consequences. It is almost inevitable that my practise will eventually result in harm both for myself and for others who are compelled to share the road with me. If I choose to live a morally dissolute life, there are grim consequences. Both my health and my character will be threatened. If I choose to live a life that is false, there are consequences that I must ultimately face. The choice becomes in time a habit, and the habit becomes as it were chains to bind my spirit.

On the other hand, when I choose to be honest and honourable and godly, there are consequences. Solomon has written,

“When a man’s ways please the LORD,
He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

[PROVERBS 16:7]

A man or woman of character merits the respect of those who know him or her. All who know such a person speak graciously of them, and though others may never share their desire for doing what is good and honourable, they will respect the man of character, or the woman of character, because of the integrity that guides the life of that individual.

More generally, one should plan for those things which happen in the normal course of events. The normal course of events is that we age and eventually the body succumbs to the ravages of time. What happens during that interim between birth and death is important because we bear responsibility for others who depend upon us. Paul says, “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 5:8]. Men are responsible to prepare themselves for a life of service to those whom they love.

The reason a boy studies and trains for work is not merely in order to earn money; he is preparing himself to be able to provide for his own family. His life is being moulded by the modelling of his father and through the instruction of his mother; and all his training, whether at a workbench or in the field or behind a desk, is preparation for assuming responsibility to care for the family that he will one day have. We purchase life insurance, not because we imagine that we will somehow benefit from it, but because we are concerned for the welfare of our loved ones after we have departed from this life. We secure medical insurance so that our families will receive appropriate care in the event of catastrophic health crises. We save a portion of our earnings so that we can respond positively to crises and not jeopardise the security of our family. All this is planning that is wise and necessary if we will assume godly responsibility.

In light of the necessity of preparing is the question of whether God has a plan for one's life. Many people imagine that God has a specific plan, and they obsess their mind with attempting to know the detailed plan they imagine God has prepared for them. Young people are often concerned with God's plan for whom they should marry. Paul addresses this when he cautions the Corinthians that a widow is "free to be married to whom she wishes." However, he qualifies this permission with the simple restriction, "only in the Lord" [1 CORINTHIANS 7:38].

Students are frequently exercised over which field of study to pursue, just as working people often expend considerable energy worrying over which job to take or which city they should live in. Again, the Bible grants freedom to the child of God, providing they seek God's glory in their studies and in their labours, and even in the choice of locations in which to reside. We are taught that whatever we do, "do all to the glory of God" [1 CORINTHIANS 10:31]. The teaching is akin to that which is provided elsewhere in Paul's letters. In his Colossian letter, Paul writes, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the Name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" [COLOSSIANS 3:17].

Candidly, there are some professions that are difficult, if not impossible, to justify before the Lord. It should not be necessary to remind you that any work that is immoral or unethical cannot be performed to the glory of God. Prostitution, distributing pornography, tending a bar, dealing drugs, are each activities that simply cannot be performed to the glory of God. On the other hand, if a field of study or a profession or trade provides for one's family, contributes to the welfare of society in general, and can be pursued without compromise of moral, ethical or doctrinal integrity, then the child of God has freedom before the Lord.

Does God have a plan for your life? Absolutely! God wills that you be holy and especially that you be morally pure. We are taught, "This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter" [1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-6a].

It is the will of God that you be joyful, prayerful and thankful. Paul instructs Christians, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" [1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18].

Moreover, it is the will of God that you be a good person, living a life that honours Him who gives you life. Peter writes, "This is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor" [1 PETER 2:15-17].

Whatever labour occupies your mind, whatever endeavour you pursue, whomever you marry, search your heart to ensure that you are submitted to the will of God. If the course of action you propose is moral and ethical, if the decision you are making honours God, if through performing the deed that lies before you, you are revealing the goodness and the holiness of God, you may act knowing that you are doing the will of God. It is for this reason that He has left you here rather than removing you immediately following your salvation.

A final issue that I believe worthy of our consideration is whether we can change the events that appear planned for life. We cannot know the precise events that will transpire in the future, but we do know Him who holds the future. Knowing God, and drawing from His strength, we can respond to the events of life in a godly manner that glorifies His Name. As His people, we can draw on His wisdom and appropriate His strength to respond in a manner that honours His Name.

What a wonderful encouragement is provided to the child of God who endeavours to walk according to divine wisdom through Isaiah when he writes:

“Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the Lord God is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation”

[ISAIAH 12:2]

Preparing His disciples for the great tasks that would lay before them, the Master said at His ascension, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.” Then, he conferred that authority of those who would follow Him when He commanded, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Therefore, we have authority when we serve Christ, witnessing and instructing all in righteousness. Was that somehow insufficient to allay any fear we might have, the Master concluded with this comforting promise: “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” [MATTHEW 28:18b-20].

THE REALITY THAT DICTATES TO LIFE — “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” You have no guarantee concerning life. Life is brief. Was it only yesterday that I held a little girl in my hands and marvelled at the power and the goodness of God to give life? My mind is still the mind of a young man, fresh and vibrant and moving rapidly to acquire new knowledge; but my body keeps saying, “No so fast!”

The rivers of British Columbia have grown wider, swifter and deeper than they were just a few short years back. The paths that lead up the mountains have grown steeper and the obstacles are more numerous than they were just a short while ago. Surely, I am not ageing? Surely, it is the land that is changing. I’m the same as I always was. But I am growing older, and the grey hairs testify that I have a date with death. The muscle aches, the dimmed vision, the pains in my joints, all remind me that the body is wearing out.

Years ago, when I first came to faith in Christ the Lord, the saints seemed more focused on His coming. The urgency of winning others to the Faith impelled those believers to speak of Him, to invite others to life, to urge them to believe the message of life. Those saints would often cite a couplet that I haven’t heard in many years.

Just one life, ‘twill soon be past,
what’s done for Christ is all that will last.

They were right! There is need for urgency if we will prepare others for the return of the Master. The promise of the Lord is that He will come again, at a time that no one knows. When He returns, there will be no time to prepare. Jesus warned, “As the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” [MATTHEW 24:27].

Whatever will be done must be done now. If I will win a loved one to faith, it must be now. If I will encourage a downhearted saint, it must be now. If I will serve others, it must be now. If I will tell of the glories of Christ the Lord, it must be now. There is no guarantee that we will have tomorrow. It is for this reason that the Apostle urges that “Now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” [2 CORINTHIANS 6:2b].

Serving one another, fulfilling the ministry that God has assigned, each of us will do well to heed the words of the author of the letter to Hebrew Christians when he insists that we must “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” [HEBREWS 3:13].

Challenged on one occasion by a crowd of people, Jesus spoke pointedly of the necessity of acting with dispatch. His words provide a commentary on the necessity of moving quickly to accomplish whatever task should lie before us. Jesus said, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you” [JOHN 12:35a]. This saying echoes an earlier saying when Jesus encouraged His disciples to focus on the task at hand. He said, “We must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work” [JOHN 9:4]. Just so, our opportunity to do good—to serve Christ and to advance His cause—is fleeting. The opportunity to accomplish some great thing will soon pass.

Inwardly, each of us realises the brevity of our life. However, the most of mankind fails to seize the opportunity presented by the brief moment we call now. David bemoaned, “My days pass away like smoke” [PSALM 102:3]. Asaph compared life to “a wind that passes and comes not again” [PSALM 78:39]. Job spoke of his life as “a breath” [JOB 7:7] and spoke of his words as wind [JOB 6:26]. Solomon compared the presence of an individual to a shadow [ECCLESIASTES 6:12]. Not only is our presence is fleeting, but when we have passed, the memory of our presence will be quickly forgotten [see ECCLESIASTES 9:5b]. The impact resulting from our presence is minimal, and within days after we have been removed from the scene, it is as though we never were.

It was this knowledge that caused Solomon to ponder the issues arising from man’s life. He concluded that God’s work endures forever, but the labours of man are transient. Thus, all that will remain of man’s toil is that which honours God [see ECCLESIASTES 3:1 ff.]. The dark knowledge that he would not make much of an impact on those who would follow, and even those who knew him would quickly forget him. After death, no one would tremble at the thought of meeting him, and no one would thrill at being in his presence.

So, Solomon concluded that the one significant thing that anyone can do is to keep God’s commands. “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” [ECCLESIASTES 12:13, 14]. To be consumed by demands of your work, to be exclusively focused on a relationship, to be absorbed in a project, are unwise if you fail to consider the will of God.

Should you die this day, your co-workers will continue tomorrow as though you had never been present. Your passing will necessitate some extra work on their part as they clean out your desk and assume some of your duties until someone else is appointed to care for the tasks that you left undone. Though relationships with our loved ones are sweet and bring us great joy, with our passing, life goes on. Though some may occasionally think of us, the routine of life dictates that they will scarcely think of us in a very short while. The recreational pursuits that bring us such joy now will be pursued by others who will seldom think of what we did. Truly, our life is as smoke in the wind, as breath exhaled on a cold November morning, as a mist that is burned away before the rising sun.

With each birthday we number our years, but God’s Word tells us to “number our days” [PSALM 90:12]. After all, we live one day at a time, and those days grow swifter with each passing year. Because life is brief, we need to invest our days, rather than merely spending our lives. Certainly, none of us wish to waste our lives. Shouldn’t we be concerned about the impact of our life? Shouldn’t we be worried that our presence is ultimately insignificant as the drama of time is played out?

A NEW APPROACH TO A LIFE PLEASING TO GOD — “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.” Solomon urged those reading his dark missive to consider the will of God. Paul points those who are disciples to focus on the eternal impact of their life. And James compels us humbly to seek God’s will.

It seems apparent that James is echoing Solomon’s words recorded in the Proverbs:

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

[PROVERBS 27:1]

With his words, James confronts those of us who are living for the moment rather than living for eternity. Tragically, that description applies to many who are believers in the Risen Son of God. Such people are intent on earning wages, fixed on growing a business, focused on the temporary—their life is defined by the transient. Consequently, they fail to see the importance of the eternal. Though they might well contend that they are trying to provide security against the inevitable, if they fail to consider the will of God they are ignoring the most significant aspect that will secure the future.

Throughout the years of my ministry, I have known too many believers who made no difference in the world. They were good people, but their lives had no lasting significance. They worked hard, kept a neat yard and attractive houses. They were loved by their family and respected by their friends. However, when they passed from this life, though their family mourned, within weeks—months at the most—they received hardly a thought from those who continued in this life. The demands of the day occupied the minds of their loved ones; and those who had known them only casually or who had never known them, were unaffected by their absence. So it shall be for us if this moment is the focus of our existence.

Among the multitude of professed Christians who made no lasting impact in the world, many of whom are still walking about, I cannot think of anyone who was turned to Christ through their witness. These saints would contend that they live good lives, but there is no testimony of grace, no evidence of God’s power, no presentation of the Good News to the lost, no impassioned plea to lost loved ones and friends to be saved. For many of them, I never heard them speak of their concern for lost family members, never heard them express concern that for their lack of power. Though most of those whom I recall were undoubtedly meticulous about planning their lives—how they should recreate, where they would holiday, what they would eat, where to invest their retirement funds—they failed to take into account the will of God.

During my years among fundamental Baptists in the southern United States, I would often hear believers caution against sacrificing the permanent on the altar of the temporary. The saying was warning against becoming so absorbed with the immediate that one failed to remember the eternal. It was a folksy way of iterating John’s teaching that “the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” [1 JOHN 2:17].

James is not suggesting that we need to become formulaic in our speech. Though some people are ever so cautious to say precisely the right words, concluding their prayer with the mantra “In Jesus’ Name,” or prefacing their statements concerning intent with the formula, “God willing,” James is more concerned for our attitude than with our words. Saying the words, “If the Lord wills,” does not mean that you are seeking His will. It is doing that will of God that is vital, not simply speaking of the will of God.

Would you please God? Those who are outside of Christ cannot please God. The first necessity for pleasing God is to accept the sacrifice that He has presented—Christ the Lord. For the most part, however, I am addressing Christians, and I must believe that we who are believers want to please God. Even when we choose to pursue our own interests, there remains a longing deep in our heart for us to know and to do the will of God. This is nothing less than the Spirit of God which dwells within the life of each believer, and that Holy Spirit longs for God to be glorified through the manner in which we live out our lives [see JAMES 4:5].

May I point to a few steps that will enable each of us to please God? They are drawn from James' words penned in our text. First, ***cultivate the knowledge of God in your life***. This is a plea for each Christian to recognise that what is done reveals the reality of God to someone who watches us. It is encouragement to remember that we are ambassadors for Christ, and for many people, we represent the only hope of heaven that they see. Remember that the Spirit of God lives in you, that He yearns to direct your thoughts and your steps. He seeks to glorify the Saviour through the conduct of your life.

Nicholas Herman, known as Brother Lawrence, was a Carmelite lay brother who wrote "The Practise of the Presence of God." The book exalts the mundane aspects of life as opportunities to reveal the love of God to those about us. Common business is the medium of God's love, and the will of God is reflected through the conduct of our lives. If we recognise His presence in our life, we seize the opportunity to glorify Him through what we do.

Again, ***recognise the brevity of life***. Know that this world is not your final home. Because you are a Christian, your "citizenship is in Heaven, and from [there] we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" [PHILIPPIANS 3:20]. Moreover, the days of your pilgrimage will be brief. What is to be accomplished must be done shortly, for there is no further time granted to us. Paul urges us, "Look carefully ... how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. And ... be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" [EPHESIANS 5:15-21].

Humbly seek the will of God in each aspect of life. James cautions against boasting arrogantly. Instead, we will do well to "humbly welcome the message implanted within" us [JAMES 1:21 NET BIBLE]. Humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God ensures that at the proper time He will exalt us [see 1 PETER 1:6]. There are no small issues that are so unimportant that our attitude and our conduct are of no consequences. As children of the Living God, each act and each thought has eternal significance. Therefore, we need to learn and practise humility before the Lord, seeking and accepting His will for our lives.

Above all else, ***familiarise yourself with the will of God and determine to do that will***. Perhaps the greatest deficit contributing to our failure to do the will of God is ignorance of the Word of God. Few Christians in this day have read the Word, must less sought to understand the Word.

David confessed:

"I have stored up Your Word in my heart,
that I might not sin against You."

[PSALM 119:11]

I encourage each member of this assembly to set a goal to read the Bible daily. Perhaps you have but a few moments in your busy life, read a verse, or a paragraph, or a chapter. Then, having read that portion of the Word, meditate on it throughout the day, returning to it often, discovering the will of the Father.

Above all else, I urge you to assure your heart that you have faith in the Living Son of God. Receive the forgiveness of sin that is freely offered to all who will receive Him as Master of life. Know that He has provided the only sacrifice acceptable to the Father, and that He conquered death, rising from the grave. Therefore, the Word of God promises each individual, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation." Then, citing the Prophet Joel, Paul writes, ***"everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"*** [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13 NET BIBLE].

That is our sincere prayer for each one reading this message: believe this Good News and begin today to do the will of the Lord. For all who are Christians, determine to redeem the time, seeking and doing the will of God to the praise of His glory. Amen.