

If the Lord Wills

James 4:13–17

Sermon by Ken Puls
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Open your Bibles to James chapter 4. Our focus this evening will be verses 4–7 in James 4. As we prepare to welcome in the new year, I want to remind us of what James teaches in this passage concerning how we are to think about the future, and how we are to make our plans and set our course for the coming days.

Let's read together. Hear the Word of God.

James 4:13–16 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

James 4:17 Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Verse 13 reminds us that life is filled with opportunities and choices. We hear of people making plans, setting goals, and engaging in travel and commerce.

James 4:13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit."

You see here that these plans are well thought out. They are filled with self-confidence and self-certainty. They say:

- "we will go—to a certain city" (literally "to this city")
- "we will spend the year there in that place"
- "we will buy and sell and make a profit"

Now, in one sense, there is much to be commended here. We see confidence and ambition. There is initiative and determination. We read in—

Proverbs 16:1a The preparations of the heart belong to man,

And there are certainly preparations being made here in verse 13 of James 4. But there is something noticeably absent. What is missing? If you know the rest of Proverbs 16:1, you know the answer.

Proverbs 16:1b But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

It is right and good to make our plans, but we must always acknowledge the Lord. The answer is from Him. The outcome is in His hands, not our own.

In verse 14 of James 4, we are reminded of two important truths.

1) From our vantage point, life is uncertain.

He says:

James 4:14a whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow.

We are cautioned in—

Proverbs 27:1 Do not boast about tomorrow,
 For you do not know what a day may bring forth.

In one sense, our life here on this earth is very fragile. As much as we plan and prepare and save, there is much that is unknown and uncertain. We can and should set our schedules and plan our ways—but there are countless ways God can redirect our steps and change our plans. There are so many contingencies, mishaps, tragedies, and trials that can befall us, that at times we wonder if it is worth making plans at all.

But there is a greater sense in which our life here on this earth is very certain and sure. We have a loving and gracious God who has numbered our days and who providentially directs all our steps. Apart from His good pleasure, nothing can befall us. Paul teaches us in Romans 8:28 that “He works all things together for good to those who love Him, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” Even those things that may appear to us to be trouble and painful, He uses to sanctify us and grow us in grace.

This is why it is so foolish for us to boast in tomorrow, when our boast should be in Christ. Only God knows what each day will bring forth. Our hope must be in Him.

James also teaches us that—

2) Life is brief.

Verse 14 continues:

James 4:14b For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

There are many passages in Scripture that remind us of the brevity of life.

David prays in the Psalms

Psalm 39:4–6 LORD, make me to know my end,
And what is the measure of my days,
That I may know how frail I am.
Indeed, You have made my days as handbreadths,
And my age is as nothing before You;
Certainly every man at his best state is but **vapor**. Selah
Surely every man walks about like a **shadow**;
Surely they busy themselves in vain; He heaps up riches,
And does not know who will gather them.

Psalm 103:15 As for man, his days are like **grass**;
As a **flower** of the field, so he flourishes.

And in Psalm 102—

Psalms 102:3 For my days are consumed like **smoke**,
And my bones are burned like a **hearth**.

Isaiah 40:6–8 compares the brevity of life to the eternity of God’s Word.

Isaiah 40:6–8 All flesh is **grass**,
And all its loveliness is like the **flower of the field**.
The **grass** withers, the **flower** fades,
Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are **grass**.
The **grass** withers and the **flower** fades,
But the Word of our God stands forever.

From our vantage point life is uncertain and brief. Our days are numbered. We have only a certain amount of time that God has determined for us on this earth. And so we must acknowledge the Lord. He holds our days; He gives us our days. And so we must use our days wisely for God’s glory, for the good of God’s people, and for our own good. Rushing on through life without acknowledging the Lord is arrogance and sin.

In verse 15 of James 4, we are told how to think of the coming days.

James 4:15 Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.”

We are to acknowledge God in all our ways.

This is how David prayed:

Psalms 25:4-5 Show me Your ways, O LORD; Teach me Your paths.
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You are the God of my salvation;
On You I wait all the day.

Psalm 31:14–15 But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD;
I say, “You are my God.” My times are in Your hand;
Deliver me from the hand of my enemies,
And from those who persecute me.

Psalms 40:8 I delight to do Your will, O my God,
And Your law is within my heart.

Doing God’s will is how Jesus lived.

John 4:34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.”

John 6:38–40 “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

It is how He taught His disciples to pray—

Luke 11:2 So He said to them, “When you pray, say:
Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And how He Himself prayed.

Matthew 26:39 He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”

Acknowledging the Lord’s will is how Paul ministered among the churches.

1 Corinthians 4:19 But I will come to you shortly, **if the Lord wills** ...

1 Corinthians 16:7 For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, **if the Lord permits**.

Acts 18:21 but [he] took leave of them, saying, “I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, **God willing**.” And he sailed from Ephesus.

When we make our plans and set our course, if we fail to acknowledge God, we sin. We fall into the snares of self-confidence, pride, and presumption.

James says this plainly in—

James 4:16 But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

Boasting in ourselves, as if we knew what was in store for the day, is sin.

James concludes in verse 17 with a warning:

James 4:17 Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

As we enter this new year, let us set goals—even ambitious goals. Let us make our plans—with intention and determination. But let's not follow the world in its blindness and darkness in trying to set our course apart from God and the light of His Word.

Every day that God gives to us is filled with choices and opportunities. We can squander them. Or we can use them to His praise and glory—acknowledging Him and seeking first His Kingdom.

My prayer, as we enter another uncertain year ahead, is that you enter it in the full confidence of knowing God and full light of His faithful Word.

Let us pray.

kenpulsmusic.com
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