

What Is Your Life? **James 4:13-17**

Introduction

Adam was cursed with death as the consequence for his sin: “For dust you are and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). Since that time, this has been man’s condition. His life is a vapor. The one thing you know about your life is that it will end one day. You do not know when or how or where—but you do know that death will come. You can plan, you can make predictions, you can recognize patterns and forecast—but you really cannot know what tomorrow will bring. Another part of the human condition, however, appears to be that we forget this all too quickly. What is your life?

Walk Through the Text

James has just rebuked the envy of the brethren (perhaps even envy toward those who are persecuting them) which is sparking fights and wars among them (v. 1-10), the solution to which is humility before the Lord. Following this, he gives several warnings. First, that the brethren should not speak evil of each other, because this kind of slander attempts to usurp the authority of God (v. 11-12). Now, in a similar line, James rebukes those who would plan and scheme in a way that attempts to usurp (or ignores) the sovereignty of God. They say they will go and live for a year in a certain place and make a profit, but James calls them to come and consider their ways. (v. 13). They do not even know what will happen tomorrow, for their lives are vapor, or as Job says, a shadow that fades and continues no more (v. 14; Job 14:1-2). Instead, they ought to acknowledge that their plans are always subject to the Lord’s plans (v. 15). To plan apart from that is arrogant boasting. All such boasting is evil (v. 16). Their arrogance reveals a sin of omission—they know what they should do (acknowledge God’s sovereignty over their plans) and yet do not (v. 17; cf. 1:22, hearing but not doing the word).

Even a Vapor

Remember that James is writing to people who have likely been displaced recently. But now here they go, making plans with an attitude that James perceives as arrogant and dismissive of God’s sovereignty over them. The same is certainly true of us as well. What is your life? How often do we forget our frailty and our dependence on the Lord for everything? Do we recognize this as “boasting in our arrogance”? Consider this in the context of James’ initial exhortation (1:2-4). One reaction to trials is to take matters into our own hands and make plans and rely on our human endeavors. Rather, we are to “let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (1:4). Patience here does not necessarily mean doing nothing, but it does mean waiting on God’s timing and submitting our plans to Him as we deal with the situation. And this requires humbling ourselves before the Lord (4:10).

This arrogance has great effects downstream. We live in an age of an abundance of tools and technology that enable us to plan with no acknowledgement of God (though this is itself nothing new). And with this seeming increase in knowledge comes a great temptation—to think that we can predict and plan apart from the Lord. James identifies this presumption as arrogant boasting. He goes even further to say that all such boasting is

evil. Is it any wonder that, given these things, we live in a time where culturally we also say that a boy can be a girl or that the life in the womb is no life at all or that we have the right to select (or “assist” others in selecting), the day of their death? This is not to say that checking the weather forecast is the cause of transgender ideology. But we should see that a presumptuous use of our wealth of knowledge apart from acknowledging the will of God and gratitude to Him is the same root sin of autonomous pride. This arrogant boasting is at the root of our madness, and it is evil because we reject the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:21-22) instead of humbling ourselves before the Lord (v. 10).

Deo Volente

James does not, however, rebuke making plans for the future. Nor does he rebuke seeking to make a profit. Rather, he rebukes the proud and vain labor that schemes and builds apart from submission to the Lord (cf. Ps. 127). Instead, we ought to remind ourselves and others of the Lord’s will over our plans. The Puritans and others were known to conclude their letters with “D.V.” for *Deo volente* (“God willing”). We see examples of this in Scripture (e.g., Acts 18:21, 1 Cor. 4:19). We also see many plans made in Scripture without this condition stated. The point is not the words used, but the disposition of the heart. That said, Jesus also tells us that our words are a reflection of our heart (Matt. 12:34). Why is it that often speaking this way feels awkward or forced out of place? Given James’ exhortation, perhaps those sentiments reveal something about our view of our plans.

James here shows us the humility of submitting to the sovereign plan of God. Christians ought to plan and act, acknowledging all the while that God is the one who establishes our steps, and that apart from His decretive will, our plans will come to nothing. Understanding God’s sovereignty over our plans, in addition to obedience here, is also a great comfort. Jesus argues this way (Matt. 6:25ff, 10:28-31), and Paul, assuming this, forbids giving into anxiety (Phil. 4:6-7). In fact, this is the frame of mind needed in order to obey James’ exhortation to count all the trials as joy. If God is over our plans, then when they go awry, we recognize God’s hand in it. And in this way, we humble ourselves before and submit our plans to the Lord, looking for Him to lift us up and asking Him to establish the work of our hands (Ps. 90:17). What do you do when your plans go awry? Reminding ourselves regularly of the sovereignty of God instead of grasping for our plans enables us to obey James’ first exhortation: count it all joy when you encounter various trials.

Conclusion

What is your life? Do you see it as your own, or is it given to you to be submitted to the Lord? What will tomorrow bring? If God has appointed today as the day of your death, are you ready? Is your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone as your Lord and Savior? You do not know what tomorrow will bring, and so “today if you hear His voice do not harden your hearts” (Ps. 95). Instead, today, call on the name of the Lord Jesus. And if you have, call on Him again. Submit yourself to Him and His plans for you in the midst of all your endeavors. James asks, what is your life? But given all of this, we also should ask, Whose is your life? We should pray with the psalmist, “So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom.”