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January 1st, 2023

James 4:13-17

He Holds Tomorrow in His Hands

As we all woke up this morning and saw the sun rise, not only was it the dawn of a new day: it was the dawn of a new year. We celebrate the New year as a holiday, because we're recognizing that something special and unique is happening: we're marking the passage of time, this unique moment where "yesterday" means "last year." Time is always passing us by, often without our notice - but the New Year is a time to stop and recognize that the river of time is still flowing: one year has passed away, and another one has come. So it's only natural that we stop and recognize the significance of this. It's appropriate for us to think back and reflect on the past year that's just ended - and even more appropriate to thank God for the past year, both the good and the bad, the trials and the blessings He brought our way, just as we did in our corporate prayer time earlier. But as you think back on the past year, it's possible that you can't help thinking of all the ways you wish it would have gone differently. So as we look ahead at the new year stretching out before us, many people get a rush of excitement, the hopeful thrill of a fresh start on the horizon. This is why so many people make "New Year Resolutions," making plans to do things differently this time, setting new goals for the new year. The New Year is a time of reflection and planning; of looking back and looking ahead.

And so it is the perfect opportunity for us to examine the way we think about our future: the way we make plans, the way we view and use our time, and what driving motivations in our hearts lie behind it all. It's the perfect opportunity for us to pause and ask ourselves some questions of examination: "How do you view your time? Do you view it as *yours*, or as belonging to the Lord? How do you make plans and goals for your future: do you make them according to what *you think is right and best*, according to your own will? Or according to the will of God? When you look ahead to tomorrow, to the new year, 2023, or to the long horizon of the rest of your entire life - what's your posture? Is it one of arrogance and pride, thinking it's yours to plan and decide? Or one of humility? Does your future lie in your own hands or in the hands of the Lord? And let's say you know the right answer to the question: if you're a Christian, then we know that the right answer is *supposed to be* that our future is in God's hands, not ours; but the million dollar question is: does your life really *reflect* that belief? Do you functionally live this way? Or do we instead make plans and goals and guarantees about the future as if it was

all up to us? As if it's our future to plan out according to our will? As if we know what's best or what will happen? Do we live as if God is really in charge, or do we live under the delusion that we are the masters of our own destiny? The non-Christian, secular, atheistic way of making plans doesn't bring God into the equation: it thinks that the future is whatever we want it to be, that we should try to shape it according to whatever we will. But the *Christian* way of thinking acknowledges that God is sovereignly in control of the future - even *our own personal future* - that He has numbered our days according to His will and Has planned out our lives; and so the Christian way of making plans is one of humble open-handedness before the Lord, making all of our plans *tentatively*, making them contingent upon the Lord's will, seeking His will to be done in our future lives, not our own will. So the question is: do we use our time, view our schedules, and make our plans as *functional Christians* or as *functional atheists*?

That's the topic this passage, James 4:13-17, tackles head on. All throughout this letter, James has been showing us that our lives should reflect our faith in Christ; that genuine faith must be put into practice, it must bear fruit; genuine faith is a working faith. And he's been applying it to all kinds of practical issues - the way we deal with trials, the way we speak and use our words, the way we use our money and relate to those in need, the way we treat each other, especially within the local church. So now he addresses the way we view the future and make plans, asking the provocative and convicting question: do we do so in self-centered arrogance and pride? Or in the humility and God-centeredness that is consistent with faith in Christ? The words of this passage force us to reckon with the fact that we cannot know or control the future, that our time in this world is fleeting and often far briefer than we know, and that everytime we boast about what's going to happen in the future or what we're going to do reveals evil pride, arrogance, and self-reliance in our hearts. But this passage also points us to a better alternative, a better way to live and think about the future: the freeing comfort of humbly trusting the Lord with our future, setting all of our days beneath His will, not our own.

But in order to humbly rest our hearts and thoughts of the future in the Lord's hands, we must first confront the arrogant pride that tempts us to think that the future lies in our own hands. So first, we must come to terms with *the uncertainty of the future and the futility of trying to control it*.

I. We Do Not Know What the Future Holds, Nor Can We Control What Will Happen (4:13-14a)

Once again, James begins the new section by addressing the congregation with a challenge and a rhetorical question. But this time, he breaks the flow up a bit, trailing off mid-sentence and making one of his main points before giving the rhetorical question. We read, in vv.13 and the first half of 14: “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.” Here, James is setting up the issue he wants to address by referring to a common scenario often played out in life: the picture is one of your typical businessman or merchant making business plans: they confidently say, “tomorrow we’ll go here and do this and make this much money.” We’ll go on this business trip next week, we’ll spend this much money and make this much of a profit. I’ll start this work project in the next town or county over, or I’ll head out of state; I’m going to plan out how long it will take and how much money I’ll make. This is very common, standard fare for the workplace, especially if you’re in charge of your work schedule or in any kind of leadership or management role. So what’s wrong here exactly? What’s the problem with this that James is pointing out? Is he saying that it’s wrong to make business plans whatsoever or that it’s wrong to work and make money? No, not necessarily. It is a very good thing to work hard and be good stewards of our resources, and making a profit is part of that, in order to provide for ourselves, our families, and others. For example, in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, we’re commanded to not be lazy but to work hard and earn a living for ourselves; and this requires plans to be made to start and complete work projects, to get things done, to make a profit. If you own a business and don’t make any plans whatsoever about what you’re going to do tomorrow, about what business trips you might need to make, how long a project might last, what goals you need to set to accomplish it, or what profit you expect to make from it - well, if you don’t think about those things at all, then you’re probably not going to get much accomplished, make a profit, or stay in business for long! So clearly, the Bible teaches us that it isn’t inherently sinful to make plans for work or in order to make a profit.

So *what is* James saying here, then? What’s the sin problem he’s identifying? The issue is not making plans *per se* - the issue is making plans in a presumptuous, prideful spirit, thinking that you know exactly what’s going to happen, that you can somehow control your future, or guarantee that you’ll accomplish your plans and goals. A couple verses down, v.15, makes clear that the sin issue here is *pride*: “As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.” The issue isn’t making plans *per se* - it’s all about the posture of our hearts as we do so, focusing

on our perspective. And this is obviously not limited to people making business plans - that's just a hypothetical example. The point is addressed to all of us: he's calling us out anytime we try to arrogantly assert our own wills on our future, or boast about tomorrow as if we arrogantly presume to know what will - or even what *should* - happen, as if we're prideful and foolish enough to think we have any control over the future whatsoever! And that's exactly James's point: "yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring."

As I mentioned earlier, it's the New Year, and that means people are wistfully making New Year's Resolutions. Reflecting on the past year often drives us to want to make changes in the new year. Maybe as you think back on the last year, you realize you didn't read much, so you set a goal to read (and finish!) a certain number of books this next year. Maybe you've been reflecting on the state of your soul, your spiritual health, so you want to set a goal to reading the Bible more this next year: maybe that means reading through the whole Bible for the first time, or maybe just reading it *daily* for the first time. Maybe, as the holidays are ending, and you're reflecting on the holiday pounds we've all packed on from Christmas hams and special treats, you're reflecting on your physical health, too, so you set a resolution to get back in shape. So it's no surprise at all that this coming week - the first week of the year - is always the busiest week at the gym of the whole year: it's chock full of people motivated by their new year resolutions, determined to start the year off right! But there's a reason why that first week is the busiest *of the whole year*: it's because the vast majority of these new gym-goers don't come back. They set a goal, they start off strong, but for whatever reason, the plan fails.

And this is by no means limited to New Year's Resolutions. This is a common experience for all of us, all throughout life: we make plans, we set goals, we have hopes and dreams for the future, that just don't work out. We don't know what tomorrow holds and we can't guarantee what will happen or what we will do. In fact, as you may have noticed today, I can't even guarantee what sermon text I'll be preaching on week to week! If you were here last week, or if you looked at the schedule online, then you would have seen that I had originally planned to preach on this passage *plus* the next one, James 5:1-6; but as I began to study that passage this week, I realized that it doesn't go with *this* passage, like I originally thought, but goes more naturally with 5:7-12; so despite my plans that I made months ago, and despite what I said last week, the Lord saw fit to make this week a living parable of our sermon passage: I don't know

what tomorrow will bring, and I can't even guarantee what I'll be preaching on next week, let alone months from now!

As the famous line goes: "the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." No matter how carefully we plan, no matter how hard we try, we simply just can't control what's going to happen in the future. We can't guarantee that we're going to accomplish what we set out to do. We can't foresee all the variables that lie before us in our paths. We may *think* we know, we may come up with all kinds of schemes and contingency plans, only to have something completely unexpected happen and dash all our well-laid plans to pieces. And when this happens, it's quite humbling, isn't it? It puts us in our place; it reminds us that we have severe limitations - not only in what we can control, but even what we can know. No matter how smart or educated or well-read or well-organized or highly motivated we may be, we will *never be able to know what the future holds*. We can never overcome the mystery and uncertainty of the future. It's just the way it is; it's part of being a human, of being a creature: we just don't know the future, and we never will. That belongs to God, and to God alone. We don't know what's going to happen; the future is uncertain; we don't know what tomorrow holds for us. And that means we *certainly* can't control it. You can't guarantee what will happen, and you can't even guarantee what you will do!

In fact, we don't even have a guarantee that tomorrow will come. And this brings us to the next point of our passage: the very sobering reminder of *the fleeting, transient nature of our lives...*

II. We Don't Even Know How Long our Lives will be (4:14b)

James now gives us one of his classic rhetorical questions, followed by the answer: "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." The point is clear: our lives are fleeting, temporary, and transient. Each of us is like "mist," like "a puff of smoke" or a "vapor," as some translations put it. Our days on this earth are like a "mist," like the morning fog that is gone with the heat of the noon day sun; our lives are as quick and fleeting as smoke from a fire or steam from a pot of boiling water on the stove that quickly dissipates into the air and is gone, just like that. So it is with our lives. Our time on this earth is short, fleeting, and temporary.

Our lives flash before us in the blink of an eye; the older we get the faster time seems to fly by, doesn't it? And even when time seems to drag on, or if we're young and feel like we have

all the time in the world, the harsh reality is that we're all going to die, and we don't know when, and for all we know, our lives may in fact be far shorter than we think. We're here today and gone tomorrow. Not only do we not have certain knowledge of what the future holds or what tomorrow brings, we don't even have certainty that we will live to see tomorrow! This is a brutal, blunt reminder that we are mortal creatures; that we are frail and fragile and don't last forever; we all have an expiration date. We all make plans for the future, and yet for all we know, we may have far shorter time on this earth than we think.

How's that for a cheerful holiday message, to start the New Year on an encouraging note? This isn't something we like to be reminded of - it's a brutal, harsh reality. But not only is it sobering - it's necessary in order to have a thoroughly *biblical* and godly outlook on life. What we see here is a clear echo of the book of Ecclesiastes, where we see the author say over and over again that life in this world is "vanity, vanity," that "all is vanity" - but the literal word used there for "vanity" is actually the same word for "mist" or "vapor." Ecclesiastes teaches us that if we only live for what we can gain in *this life*, in *this world*, then all of our days and toil and endeavors are meaningless and insignificant, since we're here today and gone tomorrow. *But*, that's not where the message ends! If we live not for this life, but for the life and world to come, with our eyes on eternity and what truly matters, then our lives gain eternal value and meaning as we live them out underneath the will of God! And that's exactly what James wants us to see here.

This is an exhortation for us to not just have an *earthly* view of our future, but an *eternal perspective* on the days that lie before us. First and foremost, as we think about the future, the most important question is not what we will do tomorrow or next week or 10 years from now - that is, if we're still living by then and if the Lord hasn't returned yet! No, the most important question is: what does our future hold *if tomorrow doesn't come*? What does your future hold on the other side of the grave - in eternity? Perhaps thinking about the future in general makes you stressed out and anxious. Maybe thinking about the brevity of life, the reality of your own mortality and inevitable death, stresses you out even more, makes you even more anxious. If that's the case, then this is probably a pretty uncomfortable passage to read, and a pretty uncomfortable sermon to listen to. And so if that's you, then I want to ask you, and prompt you to genuinely ask yourself: what is it that makes you so anxious, so worried and concerned about the future? About death? If you're not a believer - if you have not personally placed your faith in Christ - then unfortunately, that means you actually *should* be anxious and worried about the

future. After all, if you're not trusting God with your future, then what hope do you have to trust in? You don't know what the future holds, you don't have any control over what will happen. If this world is all there is, and there is no God, then it makes perfect sense to be anxious and stressed out! And if that's true about life, how much more so about death? And this is because, if you're not trusting in Christ alone for salvation, then what awaits you after this life is far *worse* than anything that could happen to you in this life! We're all going to die one day and we're all going to stand before the Lord in judgment, and every single one of us has sinned against the Lord - and that means we deserve to be sent into eternal judgment in Hell for our sins.

But the glorious, good news of the gospel of Christ is this: Jesus Christ, the God-Man, came into the world, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again, so that if we repent from our sins and turn to Christ in faith, He promises that He will forgive us, that we will be redeemed by His blood and saved from our sins! If you're not trusting in yourself but are trusting in Christ alone for salvation, then on that day, God will declare us to be "not guilty," to be "righteous" with the very righteousness of Christ, all because of His gracious love, as a free gift to all who come to Him! So that means that if you're trusting in Christ this morning, you don't have to fear death! You don't have to worry about eternity! No, you don't have certainty about tomorrow - but you can have certainty and assurance about your salvation and that eternal life is yours, because it doesn't depend on what we do or don't do, it depends on what Jesus has done for us! And if that's true, if we really don't have to worry or be anxious about what eternity holds for us because we are in Christ, then that means we don't have to worry about what our future holds for us in this life either! It means we're freed up to stop worrying about the things that don't matter; we're free to spend our time on what truly matters!

The gospel brings the humility we need to confidently, bravely face the future by trusting not in ourselves, but in the Lord. Which brings us to our final point...

III. Instead of Arrogantly Boasting in our Will for the Future, We Must Trust in the Lord's Will for our Future (4:15-17)

James now turns to give us an alternative, godly way to view our time, think about the future, and make plans: instead of arrogantly boasting in tomorrow, pridefully thinking we know what's best and trusting in our own will for the future, we should instead humbly acknowledge God's sovereignty and trust in *His* will for our future. We see this in vv.15-17: "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.”

As we’ve clearly seen, we should not speak about the future as though it’s a certainty, as though we have control over it, or have certain knowledge about what will happen, for this is *arrogance, sinful pride, and evil boasting*. But we might be tempted to think that this isn’t that big of a deal. We might be tempted to think this way if we only think about sin as something that we *actively do* - that is, that sin simply means *doing the wrong thing* - sins of *commission*. BUT James reminds that there is another category of sin - sins of *omission* - that we can sin by *not doing the right thing*; that anytime we know the right thing to do and don’t do it, we are sinning against the Lord. And so it is with whether we are humbly trusting the Lord with our future and seeking His will for our lives, or whether we are arrogantly trusting in ourselves and our own plans and will for our lives. This is no light thing: it is a matter of sin because it is a matter of the *heart*. Our hearts and values are revealed in how we use our time and make plans for the future; the way we prioritize our time will reveal the priorities of our hearts, what we love and cherish, and who (or what) we worship. If we set our agenda and schedules based on our own desires and what we think is best, rather than what the Lord says is best, we are sinning. If we know we’re called by God to do something, but instead make excuses for why we just can’t fit obedience to God into our busy schedules, then we are grievously sinning against the Lord. And make no mistake, this is the height of arrogance and pride: it is *idolatry* - the idolatry of *self*. When we make our time, plans, and schedules all about *our own will* rather than the will of God, we are arrogantly putting ourselves in the place of God.

So instead, we must humble ourselves before the Lord; we must acknowledge that we are not in control, we don’t know what the future holds, we don’t even know what is best - but we must trust that the Lord *is* in control, and He *does* know what’s best. This is what James is getting at when he commands us to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As Christians, when we talk about the future, we should not presume to know what will happen or arrogantly guarantee what we will do - we are told to humbly say, “I plan to do that, *if the Lord wills*.” “I’ll go there, I’ll do this or that, *Lord willing*.” But if we turn this into a legalistic exercise, to where the point is *just* that we’re always saying these words, then we’ve missed the point. This is not meant to be just some trite, religious-sounding phrase we throw around; it’s not

about legalistically ticking off the box to make sure we say this everytime. It's about making sure we understand the principle - that it reflects the posture of our hearts!

It's like how we are to pray "in Jesus's name." For example, in John 14:13-14, Jesus says, "Whatever you ask *in my name*, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." This is why we often end our prayers with saying something like, "In Jesus's name we pray, Amen." But we're also told, in Matt. 6, not to heap up "empty phrases" in our prayers. So if we simply tack on "in Jesus's name, Amen," onto the end of our prayers but *don't know why or what it means*, then it's meaningless, and just an empty phrase. But if we pray it because we understand it and *mean* it - that we are being so bold as to come before the Holy God and boldly *ask Him* for things, not because we think we deserve them, but because we come in the name Jesus, who has given us the free invitation to come under the representation of His own name and authority - well, then, that's not an empty, trite phrase at all! It's a very powerful way to end our prayers, marking it as a gospel prayer of faith.

And so it is with the phrase James gives us here: "if the Lord wills." If we simply tack on "Lord willing" or "if the Lord wills" onto the end of our sentences and don't know why or don't mean it, then it's meaningless. *But* - if we understand it and *mean it*, then it's a very powerful way to remind ourselves and each other that we are not in control of the future, that we do not know what tomorrow holds, and that we cannot arrogantly presume or guarantee what we will do - but we do boldly assert that *God* knows, that *He* is in control, and that we can trust His sovereign will for our lives. It's a way of boasting not in ourselves but in the Lord! This is why it is a very Christian thing for us to say "Lord willing" or "if the Lord wills" when we're talking about our future plans!

It means we must recognize *God's sovereignty* over our lives and the entire future. We can't force our will onto reality. But God sovereignly "works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). We may plan to do this or that next week, to take a trip next month, to finish that project, to buy that house, to make a certain amount of money, or so on and so forth - but whether or not it will happen is completely up to the Lord; if God's wills it to happen, it will happen; and if not, then it won't. The difference is whether or not we are trying to compete against the Lord's will, or are *trusting* in the Lord's will for our lives. THE first is the path of sin and unbelief; the second is the path of faith. In our arrogance and pride, we stubbornly cling to our own plans, our own will for our lives. But humble faith compels us to look to the future with

open hands before the Lord; to pray, as Jesus taught us to pray, “Not my will, but your will be done;” “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” That’s what James is getting at; that’s what the posture of our hearts should be.

So as we look forward to this new year, and to the rest of our lives, let us let go of an arrogant, evil boasting or self-reliance, and let us instead humbly trust the Lord with our lives - not only in this life, but in eternity. Let us trust the Lord’s will for our lives and in all things, as a way of reflecting that our faith is in Him alone - that we truly believe the gospel, that what Jesus has done in the past - on the cross - has secured our future for all of eternity. And if you’re not a believer this morning, God’s gracious promise is for you to: if you turn away from trusting yourself and trust in Christ alone, this eternal security for the future can be yours, too! If you have any questions about that, I’d love to speak with you. Let us pray.