

Pride

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we like to think that we're in control of the future, and that's why we live most of our lives making plans, great plans. We've got calendars full of all kinds of activities.

But then do you remember COVID-19? It's not hard to forget COVID-19, is it? We had all our plans, they were all in our calendar, along came a pandemic, and it changed everything. All the plans in our calendars from March 2020 onwards had to be cancelled. And basic things like going to school, like seeing family, going to work, going on holiday, going to church for some, getting married, all the plans had to be postponed or cancelled. The best laid plans for the year of head when COVID hit came to nothing. And through the pandemic, we learned a lesson, if we didn't know it already, the lesson that we are not really in control of our lives. No matter how much we like to think that we are, it taught us that we aren't. And so as we come to this next section in the letter of James, we're urged not to boast about the future as if we're in control of it, because the reality is we are not in charge of our future plans. We don't really control our lives. And so the issue James is tackling in these verses is essentially pride. Pride. He's warning us against the arrogant presumption that we are in control, that we are in charge, that our plans will all happen. And so it's dangerous, whoever we are, whether we're here this afternoon and we call ourselves a Christian, or even if we wouldn't, James wants us to understand how life really works. Because we don't even know what will happen tomorrow. You might have plans for what you will do, but for many of us, those plans may not even take place. And we don't know really how long we've got to live, do we? We might think we've got years ahead of us, but we may not have. And so we shouldn't boast about our plans for our life as if we are in full control, because we aren't. And yet God is. God is in control, and that's why we must acknowledge

God as we live our lives. And so this afternoon we're going to look at these verses under two headings. They're up there. First of all, presumptuous planning doesn't acknowledge God, verse 13 and 14. And secondly, proper planning does acknowledge God. So it's all about how we respond to God. Presumptuous planning doesn't acknowledge God, but proper planning does. So first of all, presumptuous planning that doesn't acknowledge God, verse 13 and 14. You'll notice that James here is addressing a specific group of people. Verse 13, now listen, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money. Well, it sounds like the people James is addressing are merchants or traders, business people who earned their living by traveling around the world seeking their fortune, going from place to place, selling their goods in order to make a profit. But James here challenges the presumptuous nature of their planning, because with all their strategic business forecasts, there's an arrogance and it assumes that they are in complete control, that their plans will all come to fruition. I guess they sound a bit like the contestants on The Apprentice, if you watch The

Apprentice with Lord Alan Sugar. And they all like to boast about how great business acumen they have. They like to boast of their grand plans. They like to secure this £250,000 investment from Lord Sugar. And so James here repeats this kind of confident business speak that people often have in their planning. So he says, we will go to this or that city, we will spend a year there, we will carry on our business plans, and we will make money. All sounds so simple, doesn't it? And it's got this contemporary feel to it. I guess just like listening to a discussion around any board table in a company, where the company's got its strategic plans for significant expansion into new markets with greater profit margins. And I know that's the kind of air that some of you breathe when you turn up for work on a Monday morning. But it's not planning for business expansion or making money that James is criticizing here. He is not saying that wise planning for the future is a bad thing, or even that making money is evil. He's not suggesting we shouldn't have clear goals with realistic timescales to achieve certain results. He's not against that. Far less is he suggesting we should just abandon pensions and life insurance and savings. No, what James is criticizing here is the kind of planning that has no thought for God, that completely ignores that there is a God. Because it's a presumptuous planning that believes we are actually in control. And it fails to acknowledge that God is in control.

It's almost like a practical atheism that goes about life as if God isn't there. Of course, an atheist is somebody who doesn't believe in God. A practical atheist is someone who lives as if there wasn't a God.

[5 : 48] And that's why it's not so much the behavior that James is rebuking, but the arrogant attitude that's behind it. The one that assumes I am in charge and I can shape my own life with my own planning for the future, with my own power, with my own personality. I can do it all myself and it will happen.

But we ought to know that no matter how meticulous our planning is, we are never able to fully protect against the unexpected, are we? For example, there are just so many variables when it comes to financial planning, like war in Ukraine or stock markets. So many things that make a difference to the practical daily living of our lives and change our future. As James is saying, it's presumptuous to think that we can map out the future for our lives, for our families, with any kind of certainty. And yet, we do like to talk about our lives as if we're in control of them. So James is condemning the kind of conversation that you would hear from your typical middle-class Glaswegian. So if they're younger, they might say something like, well, I'm going to work hard for a few years in the city, I'll expand my CV, get a foot on the property ladder, get married, have some children, and that's how it's going to be. Or if they're middle-aged, they may say, well, I'm going to be promoted at work, or I may even start my own business, I'm going to build an extension out the back of my house, I'm going to send my kids to the

Glasgow Academy, and that's how it's going to be. Or if they're older, they may say, well, we're going to live in the house as long as we're able, but then at some point, we're going to downsize, and then we're going to share out all the money between the kids and the grandkids, and then we're going to go off cruising around the world. That's how people talk, isn't it? You might hear that kind of conversation if you go to a dinner party in the west end of Glasgow. You may even hear that conversation afterwards in church too. But James is not suggesting that this kind of conversation shouldn't take place, because it is wise to plan for the future, but he's saying it is foolish to think that it will all happen just as we plan. It's foolish to think that we are actually in control, and all these things will be just as we think they will be. And yet, that is how we tend to live our lives, isn't it? Whether we call ourselves a Christian or not. And so James is saying this really is a dangerous way to approach living your life. Why? Well, he tells us in verse 14, why you do not even know what will happen tomorrow? What is your life? You're a mist that appears for a little while, and then vanishes, vanishes. So he's reminding us just how little control we actually have in our lives. And he states it with these two obvious facts. The two facts are, one, life is unpredictable, and two, life is brief. So first of all, life is unpredictable. He says, why? You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. Now, that's a startling reminder just of how pointless, presumptuous planning can be, because we cannot even predict what will happen tomorrow. Just think how many times you've woken up in the morning expecting your day will go this way, soon to realize your day is not actually going to go the way you had planned that it would. And perhaps we're alerted to a health issue. That's why the day is changed. It's different. Or maybe family breakup, maybe the loss of a job, maybe the death of a loved one, maybe financial trouble, the betrayal of a friend. Just anything we didn't see coming will change our day. Because life is unpredictable, isn't it?

And so James wants to remind us of this, so we don't arrogantly think that we are in control. But life is not just unpredictable, because he says that life is brief. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. See what he's doing? He's comparing your life and my life, our complete existence, to a disappearing mist. And mist is a great image to use, because we know what it's like to wake up on a misty morning. The mist can be thick. You can't see to the end of the street. And yet it soon disappears when the sun comes out. And then you forget the mist was actually there, because you're enjoying the sunshine. James is saying your life is like that.

It is so brief. And I guess the older we get, the more we realise just how quickly our life passes away. The birthdays come around far more quickly. It's going to be my birthday next month. I can still feel the taste of the cake I had for my birthday last year. So close, so quick. And our physical strength as we get older begins to fade. Any kind of recovery after sport just takes longer and longer. And that is a normal pattern of life, isn't it? That's how it usually goes. We are born, we grow old, and then we die.

[11:11] And that, in a sense, is the best case scenario. But we're all aware that life can end tragically far sooner than our three score years and ten. And yet, however our life ends, the reality is that life is brief and we're gone. And of course, nobody likes to think that they're just like a mist that soon vanishes. We like to think that we are special, significant, important, and that we leave our mark on the world. That we've made a difference when we're gone. And yet, the sad reality is that we are soon forgotten about when we die. Just an example. I wonder if you know the names of your great grandparents. Just think. Do you know their names? Probably not. If you do, well, do you know what they did for a living? Probably not. And even if you do know who they were and what they did, do you ever actually think about them? No. Just proving James's point. We are like a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. And it's not nice to think this way, is it? But James gives us a brutal reality check in case we get carried away and think that we are so significant. But James says, what is your life? You're a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Just like everybody else who has gone before us and just like everybody else who will come after us. We can't determine the future.

We don't even know what will happen tomorrow. We're not in control of our lives or our plans, no matter how much we like to think we are. And that is why we should not arrogantly presume that we can control the future. And Jesus also spoke about this, didn't he, in his parable of the rich fool. The rich man had plans to expand his business in order to retire early. And yet he'd failed to take into account the possibility, even the probability of sudden death. And so God's verdict in the parable on his life was, you fool. And that's exactly what we are if we think that we can control our lives.

And that's why James is warning us against this kind of presumptuous planning that doesn't acknowledge God. Because instead he wants to give us an altogether different and yet far better perspective.

And that is proper planning does acknowledge God. And we see that in verse 15 to 17. And this is really the point that James wants to drive home. It's a need to acknowledge that God, our creator, is sovereign, that he is in control and we aren't. And so just notice in verse 13 and 15, both assume that we will make plans. But the difference in verse 15 is this phrase, if it is the Lord's will or if the Lord wills. And so whether we say this or not, there's a fundamental difference between a life that does acknowledge God and his sovereign power and a life that doesn't. And so James is reminding us to take God's will into account whenever we're making any of our plans. So it is the Lord's will whether we live or die. It is the Lord's will whether we do this or that. It is the Lord's will whether our plans are fulfilled or whether they fall to pieces. And so yes, we should make plans, but always with this awareness that if it is the Lord's will, only then will those plans come to anything. So James wants us to recognize just how utterly dependent we are on God for every single thing in our lives, even our schedule for tomorrow. Things only happen if the Lord wills. Why? Well, because everything is governed by a wise and good and sovereign God. And the sooner we recognize this in life, then the better. So James is not saying there's some kind of magical significance to the words, if the Lord wills, but if we're pious, and at the end of every sentence, we just throw on, if the Lord wills, then there's more chance of our plans working out. And he's not suggesting we put to DV, Deo valente, Latin for God willing, on the end of all of our cards and invitations. No, he's more concerned about the kind of attitude that we adopt in our lives. One that recognizes God's will will be done. Not my will, but his. And that God knows what will happen tomorrow. I don't. And that God is in control of my life. I'm not. And so we'll adopt the approach to life that's expressed in Proverbs chapter 19 verse 21 that says,

Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. And so when we recognize that everything is dependent upon God and subject to God's will, well, it will stop us adopting this kind of proud and presumptuous approach and perspective on life.

[16 : 46] And it will also stop us approaching life with a fatalistic perspective, the kind that says, Whatever will be, will be. Rather, James is saying the kind of proper perspective that we need is one that believes God is in charge and so trusts that he knows exactly what he's doing with my life and with this world. And that's why Jesus taught us to pray, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In fact, it's our prayers that really express our dependence on God. How much we expect that God's will will be done. Because if we fail to acknowledge this in our pride, we will always be thinking and living as if it is my will that will ultimately be done. And so James says in verse 16, As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil is evil. He's talking here to the original readers, those he's addressing. But he's highlighting the problem that is not just a failure to acknowledge God, but the arrogance that goes along with it.

James says that boasting in what we have achieved is evil. Because when things go well for us, well, we like to think that we deserve the credit, don't we? And we forget that God is sovereign.

And yet God is the author of the great drama of history. And God is directing this great drama towards its glorious end. And so we are only characters in the story. We don't get to write the script. And yet we do like to dream up the kind of parts that we ought to play in this story.

And then we like to bask in glory and take credit for when we do well. Seeking the plaudits for what we've done. Like, well, the qualifications we've achieved at school or university, or the position we have risen to at work, or the home we live in, or the money we've made, or the awards that we've received. It's so easy, isn't it, to take pride in who we are, or in what we think we have accomplished? And yet the danger James is warning us against is that we just rule God out of all of this. And we think it is entirely down to us. All such boasting is evil, says James. So I wonder what happens when people praise you. Do we like to take the credit, thinking, yeah, yeah, I deserve this? Yeah, haven't I done really well here? Thank you. Thank you. Take a bow.

Do we do that? Or do we realize that it really is only down to God's goodness and God's grace? God giving me the bodies, giving me the skills I have, the gifts, the abilities, it's down to him.

[19 : 46] It's not me. Because if we haven't grasped that it is all down to God instead of us, then we will never be able to cope when things don't go according to plan. Just think, for example, if we fail to acknowledge God in all of life, then we will bounce back and forth between pride and despair. Okay, so pride, well, when life goes well, we're full of pride because we're thinking, yeah, haven't I done well? Yet when life doesn't go according to plan, then we're full of despair. It's hard to handle life because we think, well, I must have done something wrong. It hasn't worked out because of me. And so we'll never be able to handle any kind of failure or tragedy if we arrogantly think that we're in control of our lives. And so can you see just how traumatic life is if we don't acknowledge God?

If God is kept out of the picture, we've got the wrong perspective on life. And that's why James wants to give us the right and better and truer perspective on life, one that fully acknowledges that God is God. Because when we do, then we'll always trust his good, his wise and sovereign will, however things work out. And so this will bring comfort rather than despair when things don't seem to go according to plan. And it will bring gratitude rather than pride when things do seem to go according to plan. Because we're humbly trusting God for the outcome, not ourselves.

But just in case we think it doesn't really matter about factoring God into our planning, James concludes the section with a clear principle for us in verse 17. He says, if anyone then knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. So it's not simply enough to know what we ought to do. James is saying, you also have to go and do it.

Because if we don't, then it's sin. Now James is talking about a failure to do what God requires of us. Sometimes this is called sins of omission, omitting to do what we ought to do. Because if we know what God wants us to do and we don't do it, then we sin against God. And so while James reminds us that we can't control the future, he's also saying to us, you're responsible for how you live in the present right now. So sin is not just what we do, sin is also what we fail to do. And yet we don't often like to think of sin like this, do we? And yet we're just as guilty for our failure to do the right things as we are for doing the wrong things. And so we think to ourselves, well, I'm okay. I haven't sinned because I haven't done anything wrong. And yet our failure to do what is right means we're guilty of sin. And so presumptuous planning that doesn't acknowledge God is foolish and is ultimately sinful. It is proud and it is arrogant. But proper planning that does acknowledge

God is wise. Why? Because it expresses a humble submission and dependence upon God. And yet no matter how hard we try, we still like to think that we are in control of our lives. We still like to think that we are the boss, the master of our fate and the captain of our soul. We reckon that is our rightful role. I mean, so we may even live our lives as if God just isn't there at all. And yet the problem is this is a rejection of God. It's evil and it deserves God's punishment. And so our situation is hopeless.

[23 : 51] And yet the good news is that Jesus came into this world to do what we can never do for ourselves. Jesus lived the life that we should have lived because he lived in full submission to his father God. Jesus' life was utterly dependent on the will of his father. So Jesus said in John chapter 6, And in obedience to God the father's will, Jesus was willing to die on a cross in our place for our sin.

So even as Jesus faced death, he said, And then he prayed again, And so Jesus willingly drank the cup of God's wrath on the cross. So we need never have to.

And so that is why we have got to swallow our pride and our arrogance and submit our life to God by turning from our sin and trusting in Jesus. Because only when we do this can we make our plans before God and trust that his will will be worked out in our lives, both for our good and for his glory.

And so we've got a choice. We all have a choice when it comes to God. We can say to God, Thy will be done, your will be done. Or we can say, My will be done. And if we're not prepared to offer our lives to God by saying, Your will be done, well in the end God will confirm our choice by saying, Okay, to us, Thy will be done, your will be done. You've lived your life as if I wasn't there, taking no account of me and your decisions and in your planning.

Well, your will be done. You lived without me all of life, lived without me for all eternity. And that's why James' warning here is so stark. Because God doesn't just control our earthly lives, God controls our eternal destinies. And so the challenge is, well, flee from all pride. Flee from all arrogance. And trust God. Trust God knowing that his will, his way for life is best. He knows better than we do. So let's not try and control our lives or think that we can do it ourselves.

[26 : 39] We need God's help. And the good news is that God has come to us in Christ to do for us what we could never do and to be with us now and forever.