

WHICH ROAD WILL YOU TAKE?

A STUDY IN JAMES

What Is Your Life?

As I contemplate the brevity of this life, something my grandfather used to say comes to mind. “Just when you are ready to live, you waddle off to the grave.” Life is short no matter how long we live. If there is something important you need to do, don’t put it off for a better day. **2 Corinthians 6:2 (ESV)** ...*Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.* Do not neglect what is truly important. The psalmist David understood that apart from God life is fleeting and empty. **Psalm 39:4-7 (ESV)** ⁴ *“O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!”* ⁵ *Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah* ⁶ *Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!* ⁷ *“And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you.*

The Complexity of Life

Read James 4:13 (ESV) ¹³ *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”—*

The Tyndale Commentary says, “These businessmen whom James addressed are characterized as deliberate and self-confident planners. They decide where they will go, when they will go, how long they will stay, and they are absolutely certain that they will gain profit from their venture. The picture James paints here would be familiar to his readers. The first century was a period of great commercial activity. Many Jews were active in these business comings-and-goings. Large numbers of Jews had settled in cities throughout the Mediterranean world for commercial reasons. The people James pictures are easily recognized also by the modern reader. The distance between cities may be greater, transportation quicker and the business activities different, but the ‘bottom line’ is the same—profit.” **Mark 8:36 (ESV)** ³⁶ *For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*

Don’t be included in the numbers who consider making profits more important than making disciples for Christ. Don’t leave God out of your plans. There is nothing wrong in having a business or making a living. It is wrong, however, to make plans without seeking the Lord’s will first. Don’t forget that He is the one who is blessing you and meeting your needs.

Read James 4:14 (ESV) ¹⁴ *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.*

The blessing of a long life is fleeting at best. **Proverbs 27:1 (ESV)** ¹ *Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.* Methuselah, the grandfather of Noah, lived 969 years – longer than anyone else has ever lived. Methuselah’s life span is not the norm. David wrote in **Psalm 90:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰

*The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. And yet when this earthly life ends, for the believer the best is yet to be. The Apostle Peter said in **2 Peter 3:8 (ESV)** ⁸ *But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.* I am reminded of the chorus to the song Sweet Beulah Land: “I’m kind of homesick for a country – To which I’ve never been before. – No sad goodbyes will there be spoken – for time won’t matter anymore.”*

Don't be deceived by Satan's lie that you have lots of remaining time to live for Christ, to enjoy your loved ones, or to do what you know you should. Does knowing that our life is a vapor – here today and gone tomorrow mean we should stop planning because life is short and uncertain? No, we don't stop planning; we don't 'drop out and give up'. Instead we make it a point to live our best for our Savior daily!

Read James 4:15-16 (ESV) ¹⁵ *Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”*
¹⁶ *As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.*

James directs the business people to qualify all of their plans and hopes with reference to the will of the Lord. The Tyndale Commentary suggests that it is not surprising that the formula ‘if God wills’ or ‘if the gods will’ was widespread in pre-Christian Greek philosophy and religion. The very generality of the phrase has led some commentators to suppose that James may have in view non-Christians in this paragraph. However, it should not be overlooked that James speaks of *the Lord* rather than ‘God’. The will of the Lord is to be acknowledged as the condition under which the Christian is to view both his life itself and his specific plans.

Proverbs 16:33 (ESV) ³³ *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.* We cannot control future events – we may think we can – but we cannot. We do not have the wisdom to *see* the future nor the power to *control* the future. Don't boast about what you are going to do! Boasting has its root in the sin of arrogant pride. **1 John 2:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ *For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.* Don't make the foolish mistake of ignoring the will of God when you make plans.

Read James 4:17 (ESV) ¹⁷ *So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*

James told his readers *what is right*; if they now *fail to do it*, they are sinning. We tend to think that doing wrong is sin and forget that sin is also not doing what is right. For example, it is a sin to lie; it can also be a sin to know the truth and not tell it. When God puts a thought to do something good for someone into our mind, we should do it! We can be sure Satan will not be putting “good thoughts” into our hearts. Following the leading of the Holy Spirit gives a renewed and refreshed vitality to our faith. It is good to have goals, but goals will disappoint us if we leave God out.

How will we react if God steps in and rearranges our plans? Will we continue to trust Him and love Him more or will we be out of sorts, mad and disgruntled? It is not wrong to plan ahead. It is the wise. However, trust God for the changes in life that bring good times and bad. When we put God's desires at the center of life we will never regret it. We serve a Mighty God and He deserves our faithfulness.

A Condemnation of Those Who Misuse Wealth

As we approach this passage, keep in mind that James is not condemning money. **1 Timothy 6:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.* Vernon McGee comments, “The problem is not in the coin; the problem is in the hearts of men and women. It is the love of money that is the root of all evil. James was not condemning people just because they were rich but because of their wrong relationship to their riches. He was concerned with how they got their money and what they were doing with it after they got it.”

Read James 5:1-6 (ESV) ¹ *Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.* ² *Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.* ³ *Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.* ⁴ *Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.* ⁵ *You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.* ⁶ *You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.*

Tyndale comments that James speaks in tones of the Old Testament prophets and mentions judgment for the unrighteous rich. *The miseries that are coming upon* the rich refer not to earthly, temporal suffering, but to the condemnation and punishment that God will bring on the day of judgment.

Those trusting in riches and not the LORD have a big surprise coming. **Proverbs 11:4 (ESV)** ⁴ *Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.* James proclaims the worthlessness of riches, not the worthlessness of the rich. The Life Application Bible reminds us that today's money will be worthless when Christ returns, so we should spend our time accumulating the kind of treasures that will be worthwhile in God's eternal Kingdom. In the time of the early church, wealth was gauged in three main ways.

(1) **Grain.** Grain was stored in large bins or silos. But James says of it in verse 2 – *Your riches have rotted.*

(2) **Clothing.** In those days most of the poor only had the clothes on their backs. More outfits to wear was a sign of wealth. Jesus warned that clothes are subject to the ruin of moths. **Matthew 6:19 (ESV)** ¹⁹ *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,*

(3) **Gold and Silver.** James knew that gold and silver do not literally corrode or rust. He is making the point that when God brings judgment, even earthly gold and silver will be doomed. What good was gold and silver in A.D. 70 when Titus destroyed Jerusalem and slaughtered a million Jews? What good will gold and silver do us when we face the judgment of God?

Why would James speak to those who were outside of the church and would never read this warning anyway? It's similar to when the Old Testament prophets pronounced woes on Israel's pagan enemies (see **Isaiah 13-19**). The LORD's message always go out to everyone. His warning should encourage Christians

then and now to know that He will judge the wicked and warns us to not fall into any of these sins. We can be tempted to pursue wealth, mistakenly thinking that happiness lies in getting rich.

James charged the wealthy with four specific crimes: (1) hoarding up their wealth, (2) cheating the laborers who did the work, (3) the wealthy themselves living in luxury and self-indulgence, and (4) the wealthy condemning and killing the just.

You might be thinking, “These scriptures aren’t for me. I’m not wealthy and never will be.” First, I must remind you that when you become a “child of the King” you have a richness that money cannot buy. Christians are the recipients of the gift of eternal life and that makes us wealthy indeed. We are rich but do we share it? We have the Divine Architect’s plan of salvation written in our hearts and often we keep it to ourselves. I believe we often remain silent out of the fear of rejection. Let’s be careful that we do not deprive those who are poor spiritually and desperately in need of the saving knowledge of Christ Jesus. If they refuse to reject what the Lord offers, it will not be because we remained silent.

Also, we don’t have to be wealthy to be preoccupied with things.

- Do we spend more time in selecting our Christmas decorations than we do in meditating on the Christmas story? **Luke 2:13-14 (ESV)** ¹³ *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,* ¹⁴ *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*
- Do we spend more time and money on earthly clothes and accessories than we do on concentrating on heavenly garments? **Colossians 3:12 (ESV)** ¹² *Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.*
- Do we fill our thoughts with our earthly wages and company benefits rather than sharing the reality of **Romans 6:23 (ESV)** ²³ *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*
- Are we worried more about scammers getting into our bank accounts than we are storing treasures in heaven? **Matthew 6:20 (ESV)** ²⁰ *but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.*
- Have we forgotten who made us ‘rich’ and how He did it? **Ephesians 2:13 (ESV)** ¹³ *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

What is your life? Never forget this life is a gift from God! Make the most of it for Him!