

Planning for the Future

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who knows just how it was in the ancient world of the early Church, but today a lot of us find it all but impossible to live without calendars. Check the Google calendar or a Franklin day planner for most of us, and you will see dates written down many months into the future; planned vacations, upcoming weddings, appointments at school or work; you name it and we mark it down, even a year or more in advance. So, how do we square all that with Jesus' famous words in the Sermon on the Mount about not worrying about tomorrow? Or, as we will see today on Groundwork, how do we square all of that with some far more direct words from the Apostle James at the end of James 4? Well, today we will dig into that very question. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are in the sixth part now of a seven-part series that we have been doing on the epistle of James – James the brother of Jesus, one of the leading elders of the early Church. So, we are coming near the end of that and we are now into the fourth chapter, where there is a very curious little snippet in the larger letter there.

DAVE BAST

It is rather curious, but it is also – I think it is fairly well known – at least, I have always been aware of it – if I thought about what is in James, this is one of the passages that would come to mind. Here is what it says; let's dive right into it:

^{4:13}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." ¹⁴Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷If anyone then knows the good they ought to do and does not do it, it is sin for them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is; interesting little text. It does not have a whole lot to do, if you were reading all of James, it does not seem to have a lot to do with what came before or what comes after. It is just sort of plunked in there.

DAVE BAST

In a sense, it is practical wisdom, I guess. That is one of the things that sort of ties James together. He has a lot of very practical observations about the life of faith and how we ought to live, and how our faith ought to be operative. You know, faith shows itself in works, and one of the works he is talking about here is sort of negative. Do not boast. Do not boast about the future.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I actually had a couple choose this as their wedding text once. I will not say who it is, but if they are listening, they know who they are. It only happened the one time, but it did make for an interesting wedding text because, indeed, it does talk about the future, and weddings sometimes, of course, are about the future of people.

DAVE BAST

The ultimate in planning, isn't it? The logistics of a modern, North American wedding would be daunting for Patton's Third Army, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is right. It is interesting, too, that James basically says something that on the one hand, objectively speaking at least, we know is true. We do not control the future. We do plan. We can do it all we want, but we do not control the future. I remember in the spring of 2013, my father-in-law got suddenly very sick one evening, and within 48 hours it proved to be a fatal illness. He was 88 years old, but it kind of came out of nowhere. When I first saw him in the emergency room, I remember he looked up – he was having a lot of pain – but he looked up at me and he said, “Well, you never know what a day will bring,” and indeed, we don't. So, on that level, James is just being common sense wisdom. You are arrogant, James says, if you really think you know for sure that you can map this out and it will for sure happen just because you did it. You do not know. Your life is a mist – a vapor. It sounds like the writer of Ecclesiastes at that point...

DAVE BAST

Yes; or maybe a philosopher, you know. I mean, this is something that reflective people obviously know. Most of us do not think about it because it is kind of a negative idea. We do not want to dwell on that or it is depressing; but, you know, here today, gone tomorrow. That is James' point. We live very brief, sort of momentary lives. You ought to take that into account when you are making your plans for the future. Yes, you never know what a day will bring, or a night. We have all had that, I am sure – that experience – if we live long enough...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure.

DAVE BAST

Of a day ending very differently than what we expected, and perhaps in a way that will change our lives forever, as we experience some loss or some injury.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes they are happy surprises, too, and you cannot believe... but the point being, right, we cannot even see far enough into the future to know what is going to happen definitively by the end of the day when we get out of bed in the morning. So, God is in control, James is saying, and you ought to acknowledge that even in how you talk. Some of us will probably remember that this did used to be a little more than it is now – it almost sounds a little antiquated when I hear it now – but when I was a kid, not that long ago, though increasingly long ago, I used to hear a lot of Christian people whenever they would talk about the future or some engagement or something they had coming up they would throw in the little letters: DV. Well, then, Pastor, we will plan on your preaching for us in four weeks, on May 20 – DV.

DAVE BAST

DV; which represented a Latin phrase: Deo volente – God willing.

You talk about when you were a kid... when I was a kid that phrase or those letters used to appear in our bulletin announcements. I do not know if we were more conservative, but you know, you would be looking at the bulletin on Sunday morning before church as you are sitting there and you would read something like: The women's missionary society will meet on Wednesday afternoon at 1:00 – DV. Which we do, we kind of

smile at that now; but, this is what James says, right? He is talking about people who simply make their plans without any thought that there might be something that might interrupt those plans. He thinks perhaps of these merchant traders who would go out in their sailing ships and they would say: I am going to go to such-and-such a city and I will stay there for X amount of time, and I will buy and I will sell and I will make a lot of money; and he says that is stupid, that is foolish; instead, you ought to say if the Lord wills, I will do this or that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, which is again where that DV came from. I remember when I was a kid some Dutch people, I think, used to think it stood for: Da Lord villing; but it is, as you say, Deo volente – if the Lord wills – and James says that is what you should think; that is how you should talk; and we will think about that a little bit more in the next segment, too.

DAVE BAST

I guess the point is, do we make our plans provisionally, recognizing that we really do not run the show; we really are not in charge; there are things out of our control.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it may be, too, that James is also saying that the kinds of plans you would make for the future might be of a different sort if you defer to the Lord's will. I mean, there are certain things that you just could not plan to do. You could not plan some dirty business deal. You could not plan some illegal activity. You could not plan to have an affair if you then followed it with if the Lord wills, because you would know right away, I guess I should not do that in the first place.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But another thing we are going to want to think about in just a moment is, true to form, as we have seen all through this series, James is not subtle; he does not mince words; and he says that to not talk that way – to not defer to the will of God is arrogant boasting – and before this little passage is finished, it is a kind of sin, and kind of a serious sin. So, we will want to think about that. If we do not say this overtly all the time – whether we say “DV,” as people used to do, or “Lord willing,” if we do not throw that into our conversations regularly, is that automatically arrogant boasting on our part? So, we will think about that next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives, and I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are, today, Dave, in part six of a seven-part series on the epistle of James – a letter of James – and as we said in the first segment of this show, we are in James Chapter 4, in an interesting little passage where James is talking about planning for the future, and basically saying whenever you make a plan, whatever it is, do not say: I am going to do this; say: I will do this if the Lord wills it. Always defer to the Lord, because if you do not, James says in his bare-knuckle way, that is arrogant boasting.

DAVE BAST

And it is sin, he adds; so, okay; do we take this literally? Do we literally have to repeat the words whenever we announce some future idea or plan? And if we do not do that, are we guilty of the kind of sin that James suggests here?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And even more than that, even before we get to whether we say it or not, another question to ask first perhaps is, is James saying all future planning, is itself bad? So, if you go to the store and you think, well, it is Tuesday and I think Thursday night I am going to make spaghetti and meatballs for my kids for dinner, so I have to buy the spaghetti and the sauce and some hamburger. Is that wrong? Should you just say: Well, I don't know. I cannot plan for Thursday, so if we have spaghetti, we have spaghetti, and the Lord will provide.

DAVE BAST

Take no thought for the morrow, as the Sermon on the Mount says. Do not think about tomorrow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I have some money deducted from my paychecks for a retirement account. I do not know if I am going to live to retirement. Is that wrong? In other words, we will get to in a bit exactly how we speak about this, but maybe a prior question is, is James really attacking all future planning, or is he only saying: No, future planning is fine, as long as you couch it in God's hands and put it in God's hands.

DAVE BAST

Well, there is always a temptation for a certain kind of person to be a rigorist in their understanding and application of scripture – to be sort of a wooden literalist, and I think most of us instinctively know that is really not the way to go, that we press these things to extreme... I mean, there are Christians who sincerely believe it is wrong to have insurance because that shows that you are not trusting in the providence of God to take care of you. There are Christians who might say, no, it is wrong to have a calendar or to plan a meeting for next week, or to plan your vacation because that is presuming upon things unless you carefully write DV after every item. I think most of us recognize it is the spirit of the thing that James is addressing and that Jesus is addressing, too, in the Sermon on the Mount. The spirit with which we think about our own future, and the fact that as we make plans – and it is right and prudent and good that we should do so – we always have at least in our minds, or at the back of our minds, the often usually unstated condition that this is true if I am allowed – if it is permitted – if God spares me – if the Lord wills. So, plans, yes, go ahead and make plans, but recognize that they have a built in condition to them. There is always an “if.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and so, James... You are right, Dave. I mean, it would be easy to go overboard, and of course, James' language tends to go overboard itself a little bit, so James is really easy to go overboard with since he is kind of out there rhetorically as it is, but it would be fairly easy to say: Oh, well; see, this just means you have to clear your Google calendar and unplug it and uninstall it from your computer. No, that is not what he is saying. It is not necessarily the case that all planning is to rob God of His sovereignty; however, there is a kind of planning that could do that, and I think this is what James is worried about here. So, one extreme would be to say: I will do no planning at all because God will take care of me, and I think that is what Jesus meant, and what James means. On the other extreme would be people who make future plans never referencing God; never wondering if this is what God wants them to do, for one thing; never giving the contingency that it will only succeed if God wants it to succeed, not because I am clever and planned ahead. I do not always like pop sayings, but the pop saying: People never plan to fail, they fail to plan. It is sort of like, if you plan, you will not fail. That would be to say, well, James would want to say: No, you have to plan, but with God in mind at all times, because to bracket God – that is the arrogant boasting I think James is getting at. Never to reference God in your future – how you talk about your future and how you plan for it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; not only not to reference God, but the arrogant boasting – or the arrogant boaster – is the one who says: I did this. I am going to do this. I achieved this. I accomplished this. I *will* do this. I will do what it takes. I am going to succeed. It is me, me, me. God has a way... You know, the Bible says that God opposes the proud – He resists the proud. James had just said that in an earlier passage that we looked at. So, that kind of

arrogance that thinks it is all about me, it is all on me, it is all up to me – James says: No, that is really sinful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, there is a lot of – and the more we have done this series, even, I have noticed this, Dave, and we are going to see it in our final program as well – there is a lot of Old Testament background to James. Without calling attention to it, James is steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, and you know, one of the things we remember from the Old Testament is that after the Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years – and there, of course, they had to depend on God for the manna every morning, and if they had water to drink it is because God provided it in the midst of a place of death; but then, of course, just before they go into the Promised Land, there is this thing called the book of Deuteronomy, which is one long sermon from Moses to the new generation; and what is the number one thing Moses is worried about? Well, that when they get to the Promised Land, and they have smartly dug wells and they have nice vegetable gardens and they are doing all of the gardening themselves and they are not waiting for manna. They have a well, they do not need God to give them water. They are going to say: Ah, the strength of *my* hand and the cleverness of *my* mind has wrought me these things; and so, the repeated refrain in Deuteronomy is: Remember and do not forget. You are as dependent on God in the Promised Land as you were in the wilderness. Do not ever think this is all due to you; and I think that is the arrogant boasting James is also worried about. Even if you make a future plan that goes through, it is still all God, and if you forget that, well then you have cut yourself off from your source of life, which is God Himself.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly. Well, I think there are still one or two practical things that we can say about this – try to put it in a positive way. James is mostly negative here – do not do this – do not do this – but, in just a moment we will try to wrap this up by expressing what we think he is saying positively, for what it means to live by faith.
BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, where we are looking at a very interesting set of lines and verses from James Chapter 4, where James is talking about the future, and how do we talk about the future? How do we plan for the future? How do we both live and talk in such a way that we make it clear that we are conscious of the fact that our future is in God's hands, finally, and not our own?

DAVE BAST

Right; and I think, to put it positively, what James is really urging us to do here is to live by faith – live in trust – live in dependence – and remind ourselves of that dependence if we are tempted to forget it – that we depend on God every day for every thing, and that as we think about the future, even as we make plans, we need to remember that the future will be determined by God's will for us; more so than by our plans and schemes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we said in the earlier segment that it is always tempting to be kind of a flat-footed, wooden literalist on passages – and particularly on passages are as fairly harsh and black and white as James tends to be – we said in the previous segment that whatever else James is saying here, he is not saying never plan because that would not be prudent or wise, but he also talks about saying instead, you have to say: If the Lord wills it, we will do that; and there, too, how literally do we have to take that? I do not want to cash it out totally; but I mean, if you are in line at the checkout line at the grocery store and the clerk notices that you have picked out some fresh jalapenos and says, “Oh, I see you have some tomatoes and jalapenos here, what are you going to do with that?” Do you have to answer, “Well, if the Lord wills it, I am going to make salsa Thursday night when we have company over. We are going to have chips and cheese.” And if you do not say, “If the Lord wills it, I will make salsa,” are you guilty of the arrogant boasting James is talking about? How far does even that verbal expression go?

DAVE BAST

Well, here is an interesting point, Scott. You know who does take James literally, Muslims. Insha' Allah peppers the conversation of any Arabic speaker; and actually, for that matter, Persian speakers as well. Insha' Allah – God willing. It strikes me, even Muslims who have become Christians... I have a great friend who is Persian, and who is a wonderful believer, but when we are talking, his Middle East background comes out, and I will say: Well, okay, let's meet at such and such a time, and he says: Yes, God willing. Yes, God willing. He is very conscious of that. So, yes, verbally to throw it in can be good – can be a good thing; but mentally, to hold it – hang onto it – is even better.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I think a lot of people might find it a little overly fussy – a little overly pious. They might think they are calling attention to their piety if they really did say to the grocery store clerk, "Well, the Lord willing, I am making salsa on Thursday;" but what is not overly fussy is to recognize and to get into the habit so much of what we have seen in James, Dave, but in other series we have done, too, particularly in the New Testament, so much of Paul's concern, the Apostle John's concern, here James' concern, and I think Jesus' concern, too, is that we develop the right habits – the right habits of mind, the habits that translate into practice, but also just in terms of how we think about the future. Do we really think of it in terms – even big things and little things – do we really regularly say: Yes, but ultimately God is in charge. I am comforted by that. My life is qualified by that. I know I am not the master of my own destiny, like a lot of people act. Only God knows and only God will ensure thus and so in the future. So, that has to be a habit of how we think.

DAVE BAST

I like the phrase you used: Habits of mind or habits in the way we think. It is another way of saying we live by faith. Our faith is happy to put our lives in God's hands. I think you can actually go in a different direction and make another mistake with this, "If the Lord wills," business. You can almost become obsessed by the things that could go wrong – by the bad things that could happen; and there are people we know who are paralyzed by fear. They cannot think about the future without thinking: What if I am killed? What if someone close to me dies? What if someone gets cancer? And it becomes terrifying, because, hey, it could happen – you know, it is out there. So, in a positive sense, to talk about the will of God for our future is to trust Him that He will do good for us, and He will see us through, and do not take counsel of your fears, as we say. Do not become terribly frightened. Some people become so frightened about the future they will not go outside.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; certainly James is not trying to encourage a fearfulness where the future is concerned; and he certainly is not saying: Look, hey, oh, the future is just dumb luck – blind fate. No, no, no; he is not saying to qualify how we talk about our future plans on account of that. He is saying it is in God's hands. So, what James wants to produce here is not fear but gratitude.

You know, sometimes people who have had a close call with death – maybe a near death in a car accident, or they survived cancer – you will often hear people say: Well, now I see each new day as a gift. You know, I did not think I would make it through that chemotherapy; I was sure that truck was going to hit me, but it missed; so now, I see each day as a gift; and that is great, and that is an absolutely legitimate way for people to talk, and people really feel that way; but I think James wants us to say: You do not need a close call. Every day is a gift of God, and one of the things that can happen when you frame your future in terms of DV – the Lord willing – is that you recognize: Yes, my future will be a gift, and so is right now, and so is today. So, he is trying to generate gratitude.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely. You know, this business... He reminds us that our life is a mist, and in earthly terms, that is true. We are fragile. We are frail creatures of dust, and feeble is frail, as the hymn says; and we do not last. Someday soon we will not be here, but of course, there is a much deeper Gospel truth that the New Testament affirms, and that James also believes, and that is that in Christ we have a secure future, and when we are no longer here on earth, we are with the Lord – present with the Lord, as the Apostle Paul said – so

that we walk forward into the future with faith, not with terror or foreboding, confident that we are always in God's hands; that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ; all of those wonderful Gospel truths.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, that nurtures gratitude; and right, as you just said, Dave, it also nurtures a certain serenity and calmness of frame, and peace.

I mean, some of the most uptight and also ungrateful, by the way, but some of the most uptight, terrified people you meet are people who are convinced it is all up to me. It is all up to me. The whole future. I have to work like a dog because if I don't it is going to fall apart; and James is saying: Hey, rest easy. If the Lord wills – that is how you talk – but the Lord does will things for you, so be grateful and be calm and go forward in faith.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and His ultimate will for us is good; it is a blessing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation today. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit us at groundworkonline.com and tell us what you are thinking.

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