

A Study in James
Part 14 – “Do You Know Who Holds the Future?”
James 4:13-17

Planning for the future has never seemed more important than it does today. We hear from so many sources encouraging us to make careful plans for the future. Most businesses have their long-range forecasts and plans; many churches are also taking this approach to their planning. This is carried over into our personal lives also.

There is a need to plan for the future in this way. However, there is a wise and a foolish way to plan for the future; and, it takes clear thinking.

Too many of us are like the two hunters after their first grizzly bear, drawing their licenses, they went to the Rocky Mountains to find and kill the trophy of a lifetime. It seems that as they arrived and set up for camp in an isolated cabin high in the mountains, they decided to draw between them for the first chance at a bear. After the lot was cast the one who lost had to stay in the cabin and cook while the other hunter went out to search for bear signs. He began to search and finally found a very fresh trail. He followed it, nearly with his nose to the ground. As he rounded a bend, suddenly he came face to face with a ten foot Grizzly bear! The bear went up on its hind legs ready to attack with paws as big as his head and claws longer than his fingers. The hunter panicked, turned to run, and dropped his rifle. The bear was gaining ground as the hunter came near the cabin. The hunter, knowing his only hope was to elude the bear, reached the door to the cabin, threw it open and stepped aside as the bear lunged for him. With the bear now inside the cabin, he shut the door and called out: “You skin this one and I’ll go get another!”

Too often we face the future just like this hunter; our noses are to the ground and we only plan one step at a time, never looking forward. Often when we do plan for the future, we do so with a view to the world in which we live. We make our plans for our future as though we have the power to determine that future denying that only God holds the future.

Today’s Scripture is one of the clearest definitions of this contrast between the world’s way of planning and God’s way.

TAKE YOUR BIBLES PLEASE...

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. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. 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. (James 4:13-17 ESV).

In Palestine the Jews generally adhered to an agricultural way of life. In the Diasporah they were frequently merchants and bankers. Curtis Vaughn, noted Greek scholar and translator of the NIV, explains that the Dispersion, “which gave them connections all over the world and let them know at once of any new opening for trade, led to their being constantly on the move.”

This passage, which is a discussion of their business plans and pursuits, condemns them for failure to take God into account. James declares the wise man is one who faces the future with his plans knowing that God holds the future. He sets these two contrasting plans before us.

First, the Way of the World (vv. 13-14).

Here James says the way of the world says, "I hold the future." As Jewish life transitioned from an agricultural society to a more metropolitan commercial society, James lets us look into the thinking of a first century traveling merchant. The picture is of that merchant talking to himself saying, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit." His plans are made. This particular trip will involve traveling to a city, staying a year, buying and selling, making his profit. He had it all planned. His future was all planned and charted. It was an expression of bold presumption.

The worldly man who approaches the future as though it were held securely in his hands ignores two important facts:

1. **First, he ignores the very fact of his limited knowledge.** Careful consideration of life will reveal the truth of this. No one knows for certain what tomorrow holds. This is true in every realm of life. While predicting the future has become something of a science in some realms. We are still made constantly, sometimes painfully, aware of this truth. Even our friendly meteorologists, with their "4-Warn Doppler Radar" cannot be positive about the future. Wise men acknowledge their ignorance about the future. Solomon knew this, and wrote, *Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring* (Proverbs 27:1 ESV).
2. **Second, he ignores the very nature of his human existence.** James writes, *What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.* Literally this statement calls attention to the character of human life. The question is answered in that our life is a vapor, a mist, which by its nature appears for only a short while and then vanishes away. This calls attention to the frailty and brevity of life. Our human existence is such that it can end without warning. At the very most it will only last a little while. Really the only thing certain about our life is we will die. Our human existence in this world will soon end. And, we do not know when that end will come. The worldly man falsely assumes that he is immortal. He chooses to ignore that he will die and that he does not know when.

Jesus warned about this approach to life in his most cutting parable. He told of a successful farmer who laid his very careful plans for the future without any regard to God. Jesus described him as a great fool.

And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21 ESV).

If you had approached this farmer and asked him who holds the future, he would have replied, "I do." This is the way of the world.

Second, the Way of the Wise (vv. 15-17).

The wise approach to life is given in the last two verses of our passage. In looking to the future, the wise are ready to acknowledge that it is in the hands of God. He reigns as the King of the ages. The future will be determined by his will and not our plans. His pleasure will be determinant.

1. *This means that we are totally dependent on God for even life itself.* Whenever we talk about the future, we must acknowledge that we have no future apart from God. We are living today only because God has willed it so. If you want to see yourself as you really are, you must admit that you cannot live for one second with the gift of God. Wise men acknowledge this.
2. *This means that we are also totally dependent upon God in everything that we do.* We do "this or that" only by the permission of God. The moment that God withdraws his permission, everything will cease. Our plans are completely at his pleasure and by his permission.

Perhaps the best example of this from the New Testament is the life of the Apostle Paul. He lived with a constant awareness of his dependence upon God. He was always ready to admit and acknowledge that all his future plans were subject to the will of God (cf. Romans 1:10; 1 Corinthians 16:7; and Acts 18:21). This was one of the secrets of his victorious life. He was willing to live for God to be God. He did not replace God, rather he submitted to Him.

A Closing Thought

This approach to life is the humble approach. This is what it means to humble ourselves in the sight of God. The way of the world is proud boasting. That is empty and vain. It is the braggart who is boasting of things he does not possess. All such glorying in what man is able to do is evil. The wise way to approach life is to glory in God and in what He is able to do. He is to be acknowledged in all our ways as the One who holds the future.

In October each year America's oldest, most prestigious, and most difficult automobile race is held. It is the POR Road Rally. Headquartered in Marquette, Michigan, it is an endurance race characterized by the thunderous roar of laboring engines, snorting exhausts, whining gears, and spinning tires. The competition rages for hours over areas that span the Upper Peninsula, often with a long jaunt into Canada as well. The ragged road race is known as the "POR" as it stands for "Press On Regardless."

In the contests of life it is much the same. Only those who persist, knowing that God holds the future, will experience the thrill of the finish line.