

James 4:13-17 If the Lord Wills

I have two main truths: 1) God is sovereign; and 2) Life is a mist; followed by a number of applications.

1. God Is Sovereign. This passage, and the book of James, screams “*God is sovereign.*” *He is the “Lord!”* Look at 4:15: “**Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills . . .**” And then in 5:4, which cannot be separated from this passage we read, “**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.**” Through the years, the sovereignty of God has been the focus of an overwhelming number of passages. For this truth is foundational to EVERYTHING. It is like an anchor that grounds us from drifting away from the truth. There is not one square inch in the universe in which God is not sovereign! He is the LORD!

In our context, we see merchants, those who have means to make money. And they are making decisions and running their businesses as if they themselves are in control, as if God is not sovereign, at least over their lives. In v. 13 James says, “**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 profit . . .**” And then in vv. 14-15, “**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.**” These people have the means to travel and live in other cities, buying and selling and making profit. This is what businesspeople do. At one place the prices are low. At another they are high. I remember my dad telling stories about Charlie Cannon, the owner of Cannon Mills back in the 50 and 60s. He would send one man he trusted and give him a lot of money to go straight to the cotton farmers, travelling all over the USA to buy their products cheaply, cutting out the middle-man. And this is what we see in James’ context; merchants doing business. Now, James is not condemning profits. Making money is not a sin. And he is not condemning good planning in our vocations. But conducting the business of making money in disregard to the sovereignty of God is sinful! This is pride, thinking YOU\WE are the one responsible for our good fortune. This is a strong rebuke from James. And vv. 16-17 says, “**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.**” We will come back to this in application.

Beloved, we are not in ultimate control of what will happen tomorrow. We do not know the specifics of our future. But, God DOES KNOW what will happen tomorrow. For HE is THE SOVEREIGN LORD! Listen to these verses. Ps. 33:8-11: “**Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him! For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.**” Prov. 16:9: “**The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.**” Prov. 19:21: “**Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.**” Is. 46:9-11: “**I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’ calling a bird of prey from**

the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.” Dan. 4:35: “**All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”**” Eph. 1:11: “**In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will . . .**”

Brothers and sisters, from eternity past (if I can say that) when God said, “Let there be light,” and on through eternity future, God is the Lord! He is sovereign! And when we act as if we know what tomorrow will bring . . . and then think that our own efforts are the ultimate cause of our success (in whatever endeavor) . . . and then we boast in our hearts as if we are the cause of blessing. This is sin! God is sovereign!

2. Life is a mist. I must admit that I am at a loss of words to pinpoint this truth because there is so much here. I could say, “Life is short.” And this is certainly true. It is short and full of troubles. I could say “Life is fleeting,” which is also true. But there is still more. Look at v. 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.**” So, I will use James’ word. It can also be translated as “smoke.” It is there for a few seconds only. And then it is GONE.

I think in order to grasp James’ meaning we must compare ourselves with God. Here, we must consider our first truth: God is the Sovereign Lord. He is the eternal God. In 1:17 James says, “**He is the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.**” He is holy. We are not. He is all powerful, we are not. He is all-seeing, we are not. He does not change, but we are always changing. He is self-sufficient, not needing anyone outside of Himself to give Him life or meaning. We are reliant on food, air, sunlight, etc. He is the creator. We are the created. He is so transcendent from us in this regard that we really have a hard time comparing ourselves to him. You might say, “look at the tiny little gnat.” Look how much greater I am than that gnat. Look at the great differences in size, in splendor, in dignity, etc. And think how much greater you are than the gnat! But, we must remember, both the gnat and everyone of us are creatures. And what we think are vast differences DO NOT COMPARE with the infinitude of distance between us and God.

And when we see this perspective, we begin to understand how sinful it is to think we can accomplish ANYTHING by our own will. This is the height of idolatry! So, James is saying if we think our lives belong to us and our plans are dependent on our good efforts when they so quickly come and go (like a mist), shouldn’t we spend our efforts on greater matters having to do with faith and submission to the will of God. Shouldn’t we spend more time and effort seeking wisdom from this GREAT GOD! (James 1:5). Shouldn’t we spend more time and effort pursuing godliness as we desire to HIS glory shine forth in our lives, our families, our work places, and the world! The LEAST we can say is “If God wills!”

After considering these two truths, I think we can clearly identify their sin. If we compare ourselves as creatures with a very short life on this earth, as a mist or smoke that appears for only a second and then is gone with the eternal, sovereign, Lord of the universe, who lasts forever,

shouldn't we be more concerned with those things that are more important for eternity, matters of faith, and humble submission to the will of God? And when we look at our gifts and talents shouldn't we ALWAYS give thanks in humility, ALWAYS say, "*If God wills,*" ALWAYS count every second as precious in this life. And shouldn't our proper response be to say, "YES, LIFE IS SHORT," this is why I want to take every opportunity to be obedient in both my heart and my actions to the commands of Christ? How arrogant of the ant to look up at me and say, "Go ahead and try to squash me."

So, How do we respond to these truths? I have a number of applications for the rest of our time.

Application: When you leave God out of your planning, you are just like the world. Jesus speaks about this kind of attitude in Matt. 24. He says, "**For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.**" (Matt. 24:37-39). Let me say that if what I am describing is what is normal in your life, maybe you are not a Christian. Because, brothers and sisters, this is what Christians do. We know God is sovereign. We know life is mist. And so, our plans reflect a heart that says, "*If God wills.*" If this is not you, maybe today's message is a call to repentance and faith in Christ!

Application: Knowing that God is sovereign and life is a mist gives us great clarity in the midst of trials and tribulations. As sickness and death come our way we should always remind ourselves, who is in control, and ask ourselves, What is our life? As we look at the rapid changes in this country and as we witness a great sense of a lack of justice from all sides on so many different issues, we must know that God is moving history to the end that He desires. Let me say that as Christians, we are the only ones who really know understand the truth. 2 Cor. 4:4 says, "**In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.**" This means that we must be lights in this world by obeying the command of Christ to make disciples. When we go into the world armed with clarity, we can tell our neighbors clearly that God is in control.

Application: Knowing that God is sovereign and life is a mist leads to the greatest of peace and comfort in this life. Brothers and sisters, God knows our life is a mist. He knows the great unattainable chasm between his transcendence and our lives as sinners is a mist. This is why God sent his Son, the Lord Jesus. The incarnation of Christ says to the world, "*Look unto Him. In Him you will find peace. In him you will see the culmination of my sovereign love.*" Only in Christ can our sins be forgiven! Only in him can we find peace!

Application: Trusting in the sovereignty of God is not fatalistic. We are not robots. We must still plan. Remember "We makes our plans, God directs our steps" (Prov. 16:9). We still plan and work to better ourselves and our neighbors. But in the process, we do what is right and godly in all our decisions. We may not always know the right choice concerning a job or a move or particular decision. But, we can be godly and do what is right as we make our decisions. God has given us everything we need for life and godliness in this world.

Application: Do not worry! God cares for you. His purpose for you is your good. And the reason this will happen is because He is sovereign. And what He says He will do! I often think of Is. 40. In vv. 6-8 he says, “A voice says, “Cry!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” **All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.**” And then Isaiah brings words of comfort saying in vv. 9-11: “**“Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.**” And then later in the chapter he says in vv. 28-31: “**Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.**”

Application: Your life is not your own. You a creature of the living God. And you are created for his glory, whether in judgment or salvation. Therefore we must always say, “Your will be done.”

Application: Now you know what sin is. There is no excuse. Not trusting in the sovereignty of God in this short life, full of troubles is sin. Look at v. 17: “**So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.**”

Application: To know that God is sovereign and that life is a mist, and live our lives accordingly is wisdom. This is James’ desire for God’s people. To be wise is to know God is sovereign and that life is a mist. And with these truths, we wise.