

James: The Practical Christian

The Peril of Presumption

James 4:13-17

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The Peril of Presumption

Scripture

Jim Elliot was martyred fifty years ago today on January 8, 1956. The life and death of Jim Elliot is the testimony of a man committed to the will of God. He sought God's will, pleaded for it, waited for it, and—most importantly—obeyed it.

Jim Elliot's martyrdom at the tender age of only twenty-eight and the subsequent books and movies of his life have been the catalyst for sending thousands into pastoral ministry and the mission fields.

I myself am one who has gone into vocational ministry because of Jim Elliot's life and death. It was while reading Jim Elliot's biography as a third-year student at the University of Cape Town that I sensed God calling me into the ministry.

Jim Elliot was an intense Christian, bent on pleasing God alone and not man. He was a gifted writer, speaker, and teacher. His most famous line is well-known: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Jim Elliot was a student at Wheaton College in Illinois. Many of his friends were convinced Elliot's spiritual giftedness should be concentrated on building up the church in the States.

Elliot, however, wanted God's will, not man's. After many protracted prayer sessions, Elliot sensed God's call to a foreign field, specifically South America. "Why should some hear twice," he said, "when others have not heard the gospel once?"

Correspondence with a former missionary to Ecuador and hearing of a tribe—the Aucas—that was never reached with the news of Christ's redemption set his course. In the winter of 1952, Elliot and a friend who shared his vision set sail on a freighter, the *Santa Juana*, for the jungles of South America.

Elliot's focus on obedience to God's will led to a disciplined and slightly unorthodox courtship of Elisabeth Howard, whom he

met at Wheaton College. They longed to be married, but Elliot would not agree to marriage until he was certain of God's will.

Elisabeth and Jim were both called to Ecuador as missionaries. Almost one year after arriving, they were finally engaged. On October 8, 1953, they were married in a civil ceremony in Quito, Ecuador.

After their wedding, Elliot continued his work among the Quichua Indians and formulated plans to reach the Aucas.

In the autumn of 1955, missionary pilot Nate Saint spotted an Auca village. During the ensuing months, Elliot and four fellow missionaries dropped gifts from a plane, attempting to befriend the hostile tribe.

On January 6, 1956, Jim Elliot and four missionaries landed on a beach of the Curaray River in eastern Ecuador. They had several friendly contacts with the fierce tribe that had previously killed several Shell Oil company employees.

Two days later, on January 8, 1956, all five men were speared and hacked to death by warriors from the Auca tribe.

Life magazine featured a ten-page article on their mission and death. Here is part of what was written: "They learned about the Aucas as they and their wives were ministering to the Quichua-speaking and Jivaro Indians. The Aucas had killed all strangers for centuries. Other Indians fear them but the missionaries were determined to reach them. Said Elliot: 'Our orders are: the Gospel to every creature.'"

Jim Elliot did not presume to plan his life apart from God. He zealously sought God's will for his life. It ended in his death, but it was a death whose seed still brings forth fruit for the gospel's sake.

James addresses this very issue in our text today. In James 4:13-17 James helps us not to get caught up in the peril of presumption. Let us read James 4:13-17:

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." ¹⁴ Why, 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. ¹⁵ **Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”** ¹⁶ **As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.** ¹⁷ **Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.** (James 4:13-17)

Introduction

A middle-aged farmer wanted to be a preacher for years but wasn’t sure if it was God’s will. One day, while he was working in the field, he decided to rest under a tree. As he looked up into the sky he saw that the clouds seemed to form into the letters *P* and *C*. As he thought about it, he realized that *PC* stood for *Preach Christ!* Immediately, he jumped up, sold his farm and went out to preach Christ. He was convinced that this was what God was leading him to do. Unfortunately, he turned out to be a horrible preacher. After one of his sermons a neighbor turned to his wife and whispered in her ear, “I’m not so sure that God wasn’t just trying to tell him to *Plant Corn!*”

It’s very difficult at times to discern the will of God for our lives. Even Jim Elliot spent many protracted hours seeking to discern God’s will for his life. And because it is so difficult to discern the will of God most of us don’t think much about God’s will for our lives in our normal day-to-day decisions and planning.

Although we don’t want to admit it, even we who are Christians often live our lives like practical atheists. Consciously or unconsciously we have a tendency to imagine ourselves as the final authority over our lives and our future.

In his famous poem titled “Invictus” humanist William Ernest Henley summarized man’s view of life by writing, “It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll; I am the Master of my Fate, the Captain of my Soul.”

This is the worldview that says: “Since you are the Master of your Fate, you better pull yourself up by your own bootstraps—for

you are facing life and the future on your own. Oh, you can go ahead and pray if you want to, but since you're the Captain of your Soul and the one really calling the shots, you better chart your own course, and then take charge and make it happen."

Lesson

Such a view of life can cause irreparable damage not only to you but also to those around you. James knew that. So, in order to help us not stumble and fall, he addresses this problem in James 4:13-17. He does so first by looking at the problem of presumption. Then he helps us understand the perspective of providence.

I. The Problem of Presumption (4:13, 14)

First, let's look at the problem of presumption.

James presents us with this problem of presumption in a very creative and interesting way. In verse 13 he paints a colorful picture of a group of business people discussing their plans together: **"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.'"**

You can almost see them at their planning meeting, hovering around a table with a large map out before them. They are plotting out the various trade centers and cities they are targeting for the next year. They want to target the most lucrative markets. So they point out that in this particular city they will have a fine market for wine and silks and pearls. And in this one for gold and embroidery work and dyes. They even select the time limits: **"We will spend a year there."** They even go so far as to project the actual profits they will make.

In verse 16 James tells us, **"As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil."** Don't misread what James is saying here. He is not in any way condemning careful planning or the making of a profit in business.

The Bible is filled with the call for us not to be slothful in business or any other endeavor in life. A businessman who doesn't think and plan ahead is a foolish businessman. A student who never plans ahead for an exam is a foolish student. A father who never thinks about a long-term financial plan for his family is a foolish father. A mother who doesn't plan the affairs of her home is a foolish mother. God approves of wise planning. The one who doesn't plan is foolish!

What is condemned here is that attitude that enters into such planning without a humble recognition that it is God and not man who controls the future. James is challenging our very natural, audacious disregard for the reality and providence of God in even the most minute details and decisions of life.

In verse 14 James gives two reasons why you should be careful to avoid this presumptuous perspective toward your future.

The first reason why you should be careful to avoid this presumptuous perspective toward your future is because you have no knowledge of tomorrow. James writes in verse 14a, **“Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.”** So, how then can you presumptuously plan without respect to the only one who holds tomorrow in his hand?

I have come to believe that ignorance concerning the future is a God-given blessing and not a liability. Oh, I know we would all like to join with the fictional characters in *Back to the Future* movies and be able to bet on sporting events and invest in the stock market with a knowledge of all that is going to take place. But I think that God in his wisdom has very wisely hidden the future from us. Think about it. If God were to let you look ahead and see your future prosperity, you might become extremely careless. If you saw ahead to the adversity and personal losses you are going to be facing, you might despair.

God has hidden the future from you for a very good reason. It is so that you might be compelled to trust in him wholeheartedly and completely every moment of every day of your life. The Bible

teaches us that the people of God shall live by faith (Romans 1:17). And without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

The second reason why you should be careful to avoid this presumptuous perspective toward your future is because you have no assurance how long you will live. In verse 14b James writes, **“What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”** I love the way the Philips version renders this, *“Just a puff of smoke, visible for a little while, then vanishing into thin air.”* James’ point is that you have no assurance of a long life! You have no promise that you will live for ten more years, one more year, one more week, one more day or even one more hour. You have no assurance you will see your children grow up, or that the project you’re now working on will be finished. In fact, this past week may have been your very last week at work! You don’t even know if you’ll make it home from church today.

In Psalm 103:15-16 the Psalmist writes, “As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”

Death is like that! Most of us will probably be caught by complete surprise. That is why it is so important for you to be ready. James’ point is that your life is very, very brief. Every day of your life, every breath you take is totally dependent upon God. You are always just one heartbeat away from eternity.

Did you know that your days, from a heavenly perspective, are numbered! You will never live one day, or one hour, or even one second longer than God has planned for you to live. In Psalm 139:16 the Psalmist writes, “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

James’ point is that since your life is but a vapor, you should avoid the arrogance and audacity of living out your life, day in and day out, as if you are really the one in control of it all.

II. The Perspective of Providence (4:15)

Second, let’s observe the perspective of providence.

In verse 15 James writes, **“Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”**

In your planning for tomorrow or next week or next month or next year or for ten years from now, God wants your planning to be done with his will in mind.

There ought to be small parentheses written in all the sentences of your planning. “Lord, you may interrupt at any time. In fact God, I welcome you to do so. Change this whole plan in accordance with your will and I’ll accept it from your hand.”

The apostle Paul showed a keen awareness of the will of God at work in every event of his life. While at Mars Hill we find him making that great statement, “In him (that is, Christ) we move and live and have our being” (Acts 17:28). That was not just a bare, abstract, theological statement. It was the foundation for his very existence. It was the premise upon which he ministered, suffered, lived and died for the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Paul wrote to the Romans in Romans 1:10 he said, “I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you.”

When he arrived at Ephesus to speak to the Jews, they asked him to stay for a longer time, but he did not consent. Instead he said, “I will return to you again if God wills” (Acts 18:20).

He made similar statements to the Corinthians and the Philippians.

Does James mean in verse 15 that we must add as an appendage to all our statements, **“If it is the Lord’s will. . .”**? I don’t think so. This phrase can so easily degenerate into a mere passive cliché with no heart reality. We’ve all heard people use this phrase, “Lord willing,” as a kind of cute, Christian addendum to all their statements. But for most of us, I believe we probably do need to start using this phrase more often. We should use it not to try to sound spiritual but to acknowledge boldly before others our recognition of and submission to the sovereign will of God in all the activities and plans of our lives.

Whether you use this phrase audibly, or it's just something you simply remind yourself of in the inward recesses of your heart, it really doesn't matter as long as you are seeking to be sensitive and aware of the sovereign will of God in your life.

It is learning to say, "If the Lord wills, we will take on that new project." Or, "If the Lord wills, we will expand." Or, "If the Lord wills, we will have that amount of money we need by the end of next month or next year." Or, "If the Lord wills, I will keep this job." Or, "If the Lord wills, we will have a child." Or, "If the Lord wills, I will be healed."

This does not mean that you then sit back and become slack in your responsibilities. You don't use this truth as an escape hatch to sit on your hands and "let go and let God!" Notice in verse 15 the words, "**we will do this or that.**" The idea here is that you develop a plan and then you work hard to carry out that plan, but as you do, you must always acknowledge and rest in God's good and perfect will for your life.

In Proverbs 16:9 we are told: "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps."

Conclusion

Proverbs 21:30 says, "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord."

That is what we are meant to learn from verses 16 and 17. In verse 16 James makes clear that if you presume upon your future, such presumption is seen by God as nothing more than arrogant boasting. James says: "**All such boasting is evil.**"

In verse 17 James goes on to say, "**Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.**" When you know that God is the sovereign ruler over all the events of life and then you live out your day to day life in denial of that truth—as if you are the master of your own fate—James says here that that is very serious sin.

If you continue to live out your life as if there is no God, calling your own shots, being your own umpire—you are living in sin. I can't put it any clearer than that. And as a minister of the Gospel I am obligated by God to tell you that.

Why is this such a serious sin? Because God wants the very best for your life. He knows the pain that will be yours if you live out your life as a practical atheist. That's why he wants you to have a constant, daily awareness of his perfect, sovereign will always being worked out in your life.

Let me close our time with two practical ways that an awareness of God's sovereign will is meant to impact your life.

First, trust God with your future plans. Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails."

Things don't always go the way we plan them. At best, our plans are tentative, because we can't see ahead. We make plans but many times God has a much better plan. That's why he sometimes changes our plans so that they will fit perfectly with his plan.

This is why you must learn to be humble, flexible and tentative as you look to the future, knowing that God may have a totally different plan than what you are now thinking. In his sovereignty he may very well change those plans according to his perfect will.

When people wrote letters in Colonial America, they would often write at the end of the letter the initials, *DV*. That is *Deo Volente* in Latin. *Deo Volente* means "God willing." You must learn to live life with the perspective that all things come to pass only according to the will of God. That is why you must trust God with your future plans.

Second, your problems always have a divine purpose. Your life is not a series of random events that have no meaning. The Bible teaches that if you know and love Jesus Christ, nothing can come into your life without the heavenly Father's permission. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his

purpose.” God is an expert at taking your problems, and bringing a greater purpose out of them.

God can take even your most ugly and sinful failures and turn them into something that is beautiful—for your good and his glory.

In Acts 4:27 we find that God did just that when he took the sinful acts of those who were crucifying Jesus and used them to carry out exactly what his “will had decided beforehand should happen.” The crucifixion of Christ is the supreme example of how God can work through even the most sinful actions to accomplish his perfect plan.

Some of you are struggling with a problem today. You don’t understand why you are in the position you are in. You keep asking why things don’t change for you, why the problem isn’t getting better, why it is that some people are trying to hurt you or get your job.

Whatever problem or situation is weighing you down today, let me encourage you to stop struggling with your circumstances. Look past the pain, and learn to rest in the truth of God’s sovereign purpose being worked out in your life.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

Look past the pain. Know that God is in control. Trust him with your plans. Know that all your present problems have a divine and eternal purpose.

Jim Elliot diligently sought the will of God for his life. He trusted God with all of his future plans. And he also knew that all of his problems had a divine purpose. His life, though short, was rich, full and meaningful. Today, we honor him for that.

It is the only way to live and die. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Sovereign God, we are in awe of you, as we think about your absolute control over all things in the universe—from the smallest atom to the stars that move in their courses. Open our eyes that we may see you as the Sovereign Ruler of not only the world in general but of our lives in particular.

O God, may none here today be guilty of the most serious sin of rejecting your grace and forgiveness and the free gift of eternal life given to all who trust in Christ. Cause those here today without Christ to see this moment as the very moment you have sovereignly designed for them to trust Christ.

Lord, cause all of us to find in your sovereign will for us a deep sense of peace about our future plans and our present problems. Grant us your grace so that we may learn to open up our lives to you this and every day to interrupt and direct our plans according to your perfect will. We ask this in the name of Christ. Amen.

CHARGE:

An understanding of God's absolute sovereignty gave David Livingstone a remarkable boldness and courage as he faced an uncertain future. When he was asked why he didn't fear going into Africa, he answered, "I am immortal until the will of God for me is accomplished." And that is equally true of your life and God's plan for you. You are immortal until the will of God is accomplished for your life! Therefore expect great things from God and attempt great things for him, knowing that he will always direct your steps according to his perfect will. Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.