

A Mist That Vanishes, Riches That Rot
James 4:13-5:6
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Read James 4:13-5:6

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”
(Hebrews 4:12)

Introduction

Any Survivor fans here today? My kids were watching an old season of Survivor recently where, as most of the shows go, two tribes were pitted against one another in challenges and whoever lost each challenge had to vote a member of the tribe out of the game. But this particular season introduced a new wrinkle - “Redemption Island,” which was an area where those who were voted out could live for a while and then duel with other castoffs in order to rejoin the game. The first person voted out of the game was named Matt Elrod, a premed student at Lipscomb University. He was a young, friendly guy who you found out quickly was a Christian. And despite being voted off early, Matt impressed everyone, he befriended and treated every person who was sent to Redemption Island with him well, and then beat them the next day in their competition. He read the Bible with other cast members and several of them either found faith or rediscovered their faith, saying that was a bigger takeaway from the experience than winning a million dollars. One woman named Julie said, “I see Matt’s story with God, and I am looking forward to going back home, finding a church and getting involved.”

Matt was interviewed after the show aired and said, “God was with me every step of the way... I praise His name for just letting me be a vessel for Him. That’s been my reward for all the struggle and all the strife I’ve been through.”¹ He saw everything that happened in the game as the will of God, often explaining to the cameras or to Jeff Probst, the host, that whatever was happening was “what God wants me to experience” or “what God has for me.” At one point he was so exhausted from his ordeal that he wanted to go home, but he announced that he would leave his future in God’s hands, and if he won the next challenge, then it was God’s will to stay.

It’s unusual to hear someone talk about God’s will so often, especially in the midst of a reality TV competition. I had some questions and wrestled with Matt’s calling everything that happened to him God’s will, though in one sense, everything that happens to us is part of God’s plans. But did God really decide that Matt should win all of those challenges? Did the Almighty orchestrate his being backstabbed twice by the eventual winner, Boston Rob? Not meaning to get too theological, but what did Matt even mean when he used the phrase “God’s will” - did he mean God’s sovereign decretive will, preceptive will, or His permissive will?² In other words, did God make things happen, desire for things to happen, or simply allow them to happen? I’m sure a lot of people who don’t believe in God would ask: if you interpret everything that happens to you as God’s will, then how can you ever be “out of God’s will”? Isn’t it a little too convenient to always see God working things out for you?

¹ <https://www.christianpost.com/news/survivor-matt-elrod-lost-the-game-but-won-souls.html>

² <https://www.monergism.com/discerning-god's-will-three-wills-god>

In our sermon text today, James is going to talk about the will of God. He won't answer all of those questions that I've raised, he's not really even going to define it, but he will remind us that we need to live our lives aware of the fact that God is sovereignly in charge of all things. And no matter what happens in life, we need to be alert to the possibility that God may have other plans for us. Additionally, God's moral will (what I earlier called His preceptive will) is that we treasure the right things on this earth, and when we get our priorities out of line, we can count on James to boldly rebuke us. In light of the fact that our lives are not very long in the grand picture of eternity, James can't believe how some people spend their lives ignoring the afterlife, so he has some choice words for those who are so arrogant as to believe that they can do anything they want in life, regardless of God's rule and reign. Perhaps we will feel the sting of James' rebukes and recognize ourselves in these verses. The first section is

I. A Rebuke of Arrogance: Don't Presume Anything in Life (4:13-17)

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"— 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. 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. ¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

I had an elder at my last church who used to respond to anyone saying, "see you tomorrow" or "we'll plan to do that this weekend" by responding: "Lord willing and the creek don't rise." Another elder at that church was fond of saying, "you never know what a day will bring," which is an echo of verse 14. They were both ways of reminding others that we may think that life is going to continue the way it has been and we will be able to fulfill all of our plans, but the Lord can intervene or send something our way that will totally wreck our plans. James has found a new way to say what Proverbs 16:9 said – "*The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.*"

Most of you know my story early in 2020: this church had voted to hire me in December of 2019, and we agreed on March 9, 2020 as a good day for me to begin my tenure as pastor here (*yes, yesterday was my four-year CenterPoint anniversary*). So, I wrapped up all my responsibilities at my last church, packed my car with my filing cabinet and boxes of books, and a suitcase for the week, and drove out that Monday morning. I told everyone: "I'm heading to Smyrna, Delaware to pastor this great church." I might as well have been the fictional businessmen that James quotes in verse 13 – "I will go into such and such a town and spend time and work." Because what did that week bring? A worldwide pandemic that shut everything down for the next three months. We didn't even have one service in person before I drove back to Virginia, we wouldn't meet in person until June. I had literally just read a book called *Every Pastor's First 180 Days: How to Start and Stay Strong in a New Church Job*, and had made all the notes, had all these ideas. Pretty much all out the window because, as Survivor Matt would say, God had something else for me, for all of us.

An economist named Irving Fisher once confidently declared that "stock prices have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau."³ Unfortunately, it was 1929 and three days later the market crashed and the Great Depression began. There are lots of quotes like that where people have been dead wrong ("the Titanic is unsinkable"), those are easy to pick on. But James reminds us that we all think like that: if we decide to do something, put it on the calendar, and put the necessary energy into making it happen, that we're good to go. But don't ever be so presumptuous to assume that your future is guaranteed just because you make plans, for you don't even know for sure what will

³ <https://time.com/3207128/stock-market-high-1929/>

happen tomorrow. We often say that the only two things that are sure in life are death and taxes, but James says that there's actually only one sure thing: God's will that He plans and executes.

This may sound like James is against either making a profit in business or in planning ahead, but he's not forbidding either one. It's the thought process of a Christian who has completely left the Lord's will out of his plans that he's rebuking, not the planning itself. He actually calls it arrogance. In today's economy, you have to plan ahead if you are going to book a flight that works for you, secure a hotel room at a decent rate, get tickets to events you want to attend before they sell out. A lot of things can't wait until the last minute, so plan, but be flexible. I love planning way ahead, so these verses make me nervous. I plan my sermon texts anywhere between six months and a year ahead so that I know where I'm going and what resources I need to start getting. Those plans are never set in stone, as the Lord moves things around or opens different doors, I'll adjust as needed. Peter Davids says that

“this advice is not simply to add a ‘God willing’ at the end of every plan. Rather, it is to plan with God. Each plan is evaluated by His standards and goals; each plan is laid before God in prayer... (with a) belief that God *does* will, not a pious hope God won't interfere. Plans made with careful prayer and aimed at God's goals need not be insecure.”⁴

The next three verses are

II. A Rebuke of Greed: Don't Count on Your Riches to Save You (5:1-3)

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.

Imagine that someone offered you a deal: I'll give you 50 more years of life and all the money you need so that you never have to work again. You can travel anywhere you want, eat anything you want, buy anything you want, and enjoy the finest things in life. The only catch is that you have to spend the last year of your life being tortured in a dungeon. How many of you would take that deal? I know that I wouldn't. The rich whose wealth blinds them to what will happen after they die have made that deal, except that it's not going to be for a year, it will be for the rest of eternity. I don't know exactly what hell will look like, I'm not saying it's going to be torture, but we have an adjective – “hellish” – that conjures up terrible images. James tells the rich who only care about treasures on earth that if they knew the miseries waiting for them in eternity, they would weep and howl.

So clearly, these are rich unbelievers who have not made peace with God. Not that rich Christians can't learn anything from this passage; they too should be reminded how empty wealth is, that it will eventually corrode and rot like everything else that we hold tightly to in this world. Most of our wealth today is on paper, or more accurately, sitting on a website behind a username and password; it's not tangible to look at or touch like gold and silver. If you have stocks, bonds, mutual funds, 401ks, IRAs, all those things – they don't have to rust or corrode for them to be ruined. All that has to happen is the market or the economy collapse, or the company you've invested in or with goes out of business, or someone hacks in and wipes you out. Now, I'm not saying you shouldn't own those things, because Proverbs says that we should store up and the Scriptures indicate that we should be good stewards of the treasure that we are entrusted with. But it's similar to the last section about planning with no regards to God's will: if we just accumulate without any regards to God's call on our lives, if we only store up treasure on earth and not in heaven, it will all eventually be taken from us. And then, what will be left? The actor Jim Carrey said this (or at least the internet

⁴ Peter H. Davids, *James* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1995), p. 113.

says that he did): “I think everyone should get rich and famous, and do everything that they ever dreamed of, so that they can see that it’s not the answer.”

James is echoing his brother, Jesus, rather strongly in verses 2-3. Matthew 6:19-21 – *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.”* I think that verse 2 is saying that the reason that your riches and your clothing sitting in storage and developing rust or holes is a problem is because money and clothing should be used to help others. That’s why they will be evidence against you when you are judged: they are proof that you ignored the needs of those around you and just lived for your own luxury and self-indulgence. So the question that all of us need to ask is not, “How much do I have and how much more do I need?” It’s, “Am I being faithful to use what God has allowed me to have in a way that honors His priorities? Do I support my family and my church? Do I turn a blind eye to the needy while chasing after frivolous expenses that I think will satisfy me, but quickly bore me?” God entrusts His people with resources, fully expecting them to be faithful in the big and the little things, and to be content, as Paul said in Philippians 4:12, in plenty or in want.

The last three verses give

III. A Rebuke of Oppression: Don’t Take Advantage of Your Employees (5:4-6)

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.

Whereas the last section talked about the sin of hoarding and greed, with the implication that you have not shared and been generous, this section talks about those who actively oppress and hurt other people to gain their wealth. James either knew of specific cases of business owners who defrauded their workers, or he knew their reputations and that it happened often enough to be a pattern. Most commentators say that verse 6 is not really saying that the rich killed people in cold blood, but that in cheating them of their wages, they were keeping them from being able to feed their families. These poor laborers were living what we call “hand to mouth” – their wages from one day bought them dinner that night and breakfast the next morning. Deuteronomy 24:14 says:

“You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the Lord, and you be guilty of sin.”

Who hears the cries of the cheated laborers? Verse 4 says “*the Lord of hosts*”; the commander of the armies of heaven. The threat of judgment and retribution is very clear in that phrase. The Lord defends the downtrodden, His judgment will make things right in the end. Verse 5 talks about the day of slaughter, a different way of referring to the final judgment. When a pig is going to be slaughtered, the butcher wants as much meat as they can get from the body, so they fatten the pig up, right? The greedy wicked do the work for them, fattening themselves up on what they cheat others out of.

As I’ve done whenever the text that I’ve preached on included discussions of money, I want to remind us what is actually condemned. Money is not evil, money is neutral; it’s simply a bartering tool, it can be used for good or evil. “*The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil,*” 1 Timothy 6:10 says. Having more money than the average person is not necessarily condemned. There could be a

lot of reasons for having wealth – having the skills that are in demand in the current job market, hard work, inheritance, or timing the real estate market well. But we see three main things condemned in the first 6 verses of James 5: hoarding, self-indulgence, and fraud. There are certain temptations that those with great wealth face: a false sense of security, a desire to control others, and pride. When the wealthy are selfish, greedy, unkind, and unjust, the Lord is set against them.

1 Timothy 6:9, 17: *“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction... As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”* Don’t let yourself off the hook just because you believe in Jesus, don’t own any silver or gold, aren’t a wealthy CEO, and don’t have any employees that you cheat out of their wages. You can still fall into the snares of wealth. The bottom line is that how you spend your money, how generous or stingy you are, and who you’ll hurt to gain it all shows how much you trust God.

Maxey Jarman was the head of Genesco, a shoe company with 75,000 employees.⁵ He was a believer who loved to give his money away in huge sums. Later in his life, there was a downturn and his fortunes reversed; he had basically nothing. People came to him and said, “I bet you regret all that money you gave away.” And he replied, “Are you kidding? What I gave away is all I’ve got left.” He knew the wisdom of storing up treasures in heaven.

Conclusion

I want to go back to verse 14 - *“What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”* If you were here for our sermon series on Ecclesiastes a few years ago, this will ring a bell because Solomon said over and over that life is meaningless, and the Hebrew word he used could also be translated as “vapor” or “mist.” The next time you breathe out vapor on a freezing cold day, stare at it and see how quickly it goes away. That’s a picture of your life. I know that to a kid, you feel like you have all the time in the world, but I feel like it’s just been a few years since I graduated from college and got married, and bam, here I am at 50. James says your life is a mist, Psalm 102:3 says your *“days pass away like smoke.”* Live and work as though your life is short, because it is. Not in the YOLO sense of having as much fun as you can without worrying about the consequences. No, “make the best use of the days” and “redeem the time” that you’ve been given.

I was thinking this week of three Christian men that I was friends with – one in his 30s, one in his 40s, and one in his early 50s. And each one of them was going to do some sport or activity – one playing basketball, one playing golf, and one going scuba diving. Each one of them had a heart attack and died. None of them knew that day would be their last day on earth, but they each lived knowing that when their final day came, that they would be absent from the body but present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). You never know what a day will bring. It wouldn’t be a bad thing to periodically walk through a cemetery and read the inscriptions on the tombstones. You’ll see all different lengths of life, all kinds of names, maybe quotes or tributes about them. You know what you won’t find there? Their net worth, how many houses they owned, how many companies they ran. But they’re all dead and gone, remembered by very few on earth, but living on into eternity. That can quickly put your life into perspective.

Our last verse (6) – *“You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.”* There was a righteous person who takes up a fair amount of space in your Bible who was

⁵ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1981/winter/8111087.html>.

condemned and murdered. He did not resist those who needed to silence Him because He undermined their power and positions because He had been sent on a mission that He knew would end in death. It was God the Father's plan that God the Son, Jesus Christ, would submit to an unjust crucifixion. That was the great climax of redemption, the great atoning sacrifice, where Jesus died in place of His people who deserved death and punishment. Jesus took our place, so that we could be forgiven and saved for an eternity in heaven with Him. We just sang:

"What is our hope in life and death? Christ alone." Not our savings and investment levels.

"What is our only confidence? That our souls to Him belong." Not that we do enough good works or achieve a level of righteousness.

"Who holds our days within His hand, what comes apart at His command? And what will keep us to the end, the love of Christ in which we stand."

Beloved, eternity awaits every man and woman. Will you be ready and are you living your life in light of God's sovereign rule, knowing that at any moment your life could end and you could be called before Him? Let's pray.

Benediction

Philippians 4:19-20 - *"And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen."*