

## A Fading Mist

James 4:13-17

Shakespeare's MacBeth expresses one approach to life in this age of trouble: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Depressing, isn't it? I still remember memorizing those verse in high school. "Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow...full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." But with that depressing declaration, I need to ask—how does the emptiness of that despairing hopelessness differ from what James says in our text, "For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away." A vapor that vanishes. The ESV translates the verse with the word 'mist.' And it fades away. It vanishes!

The difference is this. James is addressing those who foolishly think that they actually have control of their own lives and can plan for the future accordingly, and though it might sound similar to Shakespeare, his answer is profoundly different than that offered by MacBeth. For when James says, "For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away," he immediately moves to the thought of God's sovereign providence as the sustaining and governing force of all of your life.

v.15 "Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

So James' concern is not so much in response to those who despair of any meaning at all in life, but of those who arrogantly think that they have life well under control themselves. I understand this problem, for one of the negative side effects of my childhood being raised in a stable and secure home environment, is that I can foolishly act as if I have life under control. I was raised and lived in one single house throughout my childhood, and the events of life came about just as I planned. As the youngest of six, my oldest sister left for college when I entered third grade. And I knew from then that I would go to college. I never had any bad years. Junior high even went well. Senior high went very well. And so did my years at college—I had known for years exactly what I wanted to do. And I graduated, and began working at age 21 doing exactly what I had always wanted to do.

But I am not boasting at all, because along the way, God had given me some good warnings. Such as a good friend who once said to me, in effect, "Your life is too planned out." She was correct. And a Sunday School teacher gave me this wise advice when I was about to graduate from high school, "Never make your plans so firmly that you don't give the Lord an opportunity to change them." I still remember that warning. I believe that is the sense of James' words before us this morning.

v.13

Those words are a warning. The opening words are a rebuke, "Come now..." Listen to my correction.

### I. BEWARE THE SIN OF ARROGANCE.

James makes clear that that is exactly what he is referring to.

v.16

Last week we studied the self-righteous, self-opinionated,

smearing of others, speaking against others. Here is the equally godless self-assurance so prevalent in the sales business. Now, there is nothing wrong with being a salesman, though I must admit by my own personality I could never do well at that job and the year or so I was employed doing just that before I came here was the hardest year of my life. But selling things is important. Yet what is dangerous is the delusion of thinking that by setting your own goals, establishing your own objectives, defining your own vision statement and purpose statement, by crafting a clever business plan and pursuing all of that with a vigorous and optimistic diligence, that you will automatically succeed.

The arrogance is somewhat expressed by those popular motivational slogans such as, “Be all that you can be.” Motivational speakers are still in high demand today, and make good money is helping people achieve their full potential. And while some of that is all well and good, for often in our laziness or disorientation, we need motivation. Still, the underlying fundamental principle is wrong. You cannot succeed simply by having a good plan! You cannot achieve success simply because of your own self-will and determination. In fact, according to verse 16, “All such boasting is evil.”

James calls boasting exactly what it is, “You boast in your arrogance.” It is,

#### **A. The evil boasting of self-reliance.**

The great spiritual danger of self-reliance is that you walk by sight and not by faith. The great spiritual obstacle that blinds to reality is that you actually think you can succeed that way. And the foundations of motivational speaking are often and readily brought into the church, with the great overemphasis today upon goals and objectives, vision and purpose statements, and all the

means of the world are used to evaluate and stimulate the outward growth of the church.

I know this sin all too well, and to take James’ words to heart, it is evil! It is evil to boast in your own wisdom. It is evil to boast in your own strength. And sometimes you boast simply by depending upon it, by depending upon yourself.

Again, I understand this warning. I was raised in a very success-oriented family, and I was very successful. I am thankful for much of that, for on the good side of all of that, I was able to take advantage of many opportunities that lay before me. Yet self-reliance is not success. There is no success merely in achieving your own goals. For that which the world calls success James calls arrogance.

Giving up those plans and goals of mine was the hardest aspect of the decision I faced when I began to consider going into the ministry—leaving behind my career. My one year old career for which I had been in training for at least ten years. Quitting my well-paying job with great professional opportunities as a civil engineer just didn’t fit in with that ten-year plan for my life at that time. I suspect some in my family thought I had lost my mind. I gave up the stability and security of a good job for seminary. Not only did I not get paid, I had to start paying tuition again! And move half way across the country.

It was a time of great sanctification. For I knew what God had called me to do—to give up the evil boasting of self-reliance. And,

#### **B. The evil boasting of personal planning.**

I remember about my second year of college getting out a catalog and planning all my courses until I graduated—which

courses, which semester. And I set a graduation day--a quarter early. We were on a quarter system, with three quarters making up one full school year. I graduated early. I got what could have been a career job, much like my other brother who worked 45 years for the same company who hired him as a college graduate. At the time, I took my Engineer in Training Exam right on schedule, and I enrolled in graduate school to start my master's degree at night while I worked during the day. Right on schedule. And verse 13 was quite a rebuke to me.

v.13

“Come now,” you who have it all planned out! Come now you who think that by planning your life you will succeed in life. Come now you who think you can get rich and prosperous in the things of the world simply by following the determination of your own plans. Come now, and repent! As J.B. Phillips paraphrases, “As it is, you get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence. That sort of pride is all wrong.”

This is good to think about, and good questions for all of us to consider. When you make your plans for the future, do you rely upon yourself? Do you trust in your own strength or ability? Do you try to chart the course for the future of your life with a certainty and confidence that comes from your own arrogance? When it comes right down to it, you must be willing to walk by faith and not by sight.

“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... 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.”

May God use those plain and ordinary words to define the way you look at life! And with that, as James ends this passage,

## **II. DO WHAT YOU KNOW TO BE RIGHT.**

v.17

Sadly, even professed Christians will get sidetracked from what they know to be right--because they have a plan. They had a goal and an objective. In order to achieve those plans, maybe a man will take on two jobs, or work such excessively long hours away from home that he becomes estranged from his wife or exasperates his children. Ministers are certainly not exempt from that temptation, giving all his attention to the building of a successful church and not to the nurturing of his own family. Many people fall into this temptation, perhaps because of the demands of a difficult job or other duties and responsibilities. But maybe it is because of his own selfishness. Or arrogance.

Here is the connection, I believe, between verse 17 and the verses before it—those who are heavily engaged in their own planning and self-reliant endeavors in the pursuit of life's successes fail most often to do things they know to be good. They think themselves to be doing good because they avoid doing the things they judge to be bad. Maybe they don't get drunk or are unfaithful to their wives. Maybe they work hard and provide for their families. Maybe they are faithful in caring for their children or even working in the church. Yet in their pride, they are willing to neglect things that they find less interesting or attractive.

Do you realize that pride will actually keep you doing things you know are right! Thinking that you have everything under control, all planned out, can actually keep you from doing that which is good because it might not fit into your specific plan. So

we get careless or negligent in that pride, thinking we are doing what is good simply by fulfilling our own plans and goals. So we read,

v.16-17

So stop boasting, and repent. If you know the right thing to do and don't do it, it is sin! Specifically,

#### **A. Put away the sin of neglect.**

Sins of omission, we often say. Not being or doing what God commands. I know I should keep my mouth shut instead of gossiping, I know I should stay away from that particular temptation that so easily trips me up.

Or even more seriously, I know that I am to be faithful to my wife. I know I should not say certain things, or use those certain words, or lose my temper. I know I should show compassion to that person in need. We all know those things. And yet pride is so often what lies behind the neglect of those good things. The pride of self-reliance, and so to do what you know is the right thing, you must,

#### **B. Exercise godly dependence upon the Lord.**

And that's how this exhortation in verse 17 fits with this particular context. In rebuking those who arrogantly set their own plans for their lives, in calling them to depend upon the Lord and not upon themselves, he urges them to do what is right.

Do what is right, even if it doesn't fit into your plans! Do what is right, even if it might cost you in your job or your career, even if it might cost you financially. Say to yourself, "I'd rather be right than President." I'd rather be right than popular. I would rather be right than successful. I'd rather be right than prosperous.

If you can say those things, and say them honestly and sincerely, then you have rightly understood what James is writing. And you can go back a few more verses in this context,

v.6 "But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble." 7 Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."

So beloved, before the Lord, search your own hearts with the very tough questions. Don't be content simply to identify what things you are doing that you shouldn't be doing. But also ask God earnestly, "What things should I be doing, in humble dependence upon you, that I am not doing."

If you are anything like me, you shy away from the difficult things. That's not unusual. You avoid hard things, and think that if you do that enough they will go away. But they seldom do. So whatever the circumstance might be in your own life, depend upon the Lord and do what you know to be right.

Now for a few practical suggestions of how to go about that. A few things to settle in your own mind to keep you from the proud arrogance of self-determination and to stimulate a genuine and hearty dependence upon God. And all these suggestions are focused upon the idea of humility, specifically the humility of submission. That is what you ought to be seeking.

### **III. SEEK THE HUMILITY OF SUBMISSION.**

The humility of recognizing that you are not the master of your own fate, that ultimately you have no control even over the affairs

of your own life. And beloved, that is humility of the highest order. You are not in control. What does James say in this regard? First of all,

**A. Let the future remain unknown.**

v.14

That's what is wrong with making such concrete and specific plans for tomorrow--you don't know what tomorrow will bring. There are actually two rather opposite dangers in forgetting this, and one is clearly the thought that you can bring about tomorrow by the way that you live and act today. If you do certain things today, then there will be certain anticipated and predictable consequences tomorrow. You can plan it all out, as we have studied, in your own arrogant self-reliance.

There is an opposite danger, too. Simply put, it is called worry. You worry about tomorrow, and overly concern yourselves with the thoughts of the future in a frantic attempt to avoid danger and trouble. And yet what does Jesus so wisely declare?

Mat. 6:25 "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? 28 And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"

"Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" In other words, if I may paraphrase Jesus, "What good is it going to do?" He continues,

Mat. 6:31 "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

Jesus' solution--instead of worrying about tomorrow, the unseen and unknown, you should seek those things you know to be right! "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." And tomorrow? Let tomorrow remain unknown. "Do not be anxious for tomorrow."

Does that mean that you shouldn't save for retirement? Well, if it does, I'm a hypocrite. As I turn 65 next month, actual retirement is still several years away, maybe eight, nine or even ten years, Lord willing. But I think about it regularly and I have sought to lay aside sufficient savings to provide for myself and my family. I continue to have life insurance as well, in case I don't live long enough to provide adequately for my wife. So James doesn't tell us not to save for retirement, when we become unable to work. But he does tell us not to fix your life upon the needs of tomorrow. Providing for your family is a life-long obligation, but beyond acting responsibly and diligently today, tomorrow must remain unknown. You cannot predict what will happen, so don't worry about might might happen!

Oh the worst fears that we have are often those fears of those things that might be, or could be? The unending hypothetical

possibilities. But beloved, those things that might be or could be belong to the realm of God's secret providence, the secret things that belong to the Lord. And if you are going to live with the humility of submission instead of the pride of self-reliance, then you must let those secret things remain with the Lord.

Deut. 29:29 "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

What should you concern yourself with? "The things that are revealed." Namely, as Moses says, "all the words of this law." So instead of worrying about might happen tomorrow, instead of giving attention to all the possible or hypothetical events of the future, give your attention to the fullness of the requirements of his holy law today! Instead of worrying about what might happen next week, focus on delighting yourself in the Lord on this his holy sabbath day. Instead of worrying about how much you might or might not have in the future, concentrate upon how God would have you to be generous and faithful with what you do have.

Do you see the point? There are so many good applications of this, beginning with the contentment to let the future remain unknown. Trust God for the future even if it perhaps remains entirely unknown. And with that,

## **B. Recognize the temporary nature of your present existence.**

v.14

Now, that ought to be very humbling. Not depressing nor despairing, but rightly humbling. This is the measure of your importance, everyone of you. You are "a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away." A vanishing mist, like the frequent morning fog upon on the mountain in Fancy Gap. Most

days, as soon as the sun shines, it is gone. You are like the dew on the grass. As soon as the morning air warms, it disappears.

As I said in my introduction, this is far different from the godless philosophy that would produce only despair, declaring the utter insignificance of our lives in such a way as would lead you to conclude that Ecclesiastes chapter 1 is correct and accurate,

Eccles. 1:2 "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. 3 What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? 4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. 5 The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. 6 The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. 7 All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. 8 All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun."

I don't want to lead you there. James doesn't lead you there, for there is one more final aspect in this quest for godly humility, and that is the active acknowledgment of the sovereign Lord. So you must still recognize that this world doesn't revolve around you! And comparatively speaking, you must realize that you are not very important or significant. Not you considered by yourself. You are a fading mist. A vanishing vapor.

Consider Psalm 90. This is written also by Moses.

Ps. 90:1 "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. 3 You return man to dust and say,

“Return, O children of man!” 4 For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. 5 You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: 6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. 7 For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed.”

There it is. A brief and temporary existence. And even worse, is the reality of sin throughout the years of that existence.

Ps. 90:8 “You have set our iniquities before You, Our secret sins in the light of Your countenance. 9 For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; We finish our years like a sigh. 10 The days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away. 11 Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath.”

But then, do you see hopeless despair in the Psalm? Obviously not. Rather, those words are the context for the riches of faith to grow deeply. And the awareness of the brevity of life leads to the conclusion of the importance of using the brief years of your life for God’s glory! You are a vanishing mist, so rather than being consumed with your own worldly success and prosperity according to your own plans and purpose, spend those few short days doing what is most important.

Ps. 90:12 “So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom. 13 Return, O LORD! How long? And have compassion on Your servants. 14 Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days! 15 Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, The years in which we have seen evil. 16 Let Your work appear to Your servants, And Your glory to their children. 17 And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us, And establish the

work of our hands for us; Yes, establish the work of our hands.”

Beloved, don’t ever lose this perspective that your days on earth are few. Seventy, maybe 80 if you have the strength. Maybe even 90. But that’s it. Just a drop in the bucket of eternity. So when you get all wrapped up in your schedule and the activities of your life, when you are consumed by the goals and ambitions you have laid out for yourself in this life, remember James’ words,

v.14 “For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.”

Recognize the temporary nature of your present existence, and then, and here is where it all fits together, then,

### **C. Submit to the Lord’s active oversight of all the circumstances of your life.**

Such personal, practical advice.

v.15

Instead of making your own plans and depending upon your own wisdom and preparations for the future, say, “If the Lord wills.” That’s not a desperate resignation of any meaningful hope and confidence in life, but faithful recognition of God’s eternal purpose and good providence in everything that comes to pass.

Notice that planning for the future is not altogether done away with. “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” But what a marvelous context for those plans, “If the Lord wills.” If God will bring it about! Let me encourage you to use those words in your normal conversation, when you speak of the future. When you speak of your future plans, add the words, “Lord willing.”

It may seem a bit artificial if you aren't used to saying that, but still try it. Try it whenever you speak about something future, whether it is tomorrow, next week, or next year. Try using the words, even if it seems artificial, as a reminder of the reality that must always be in your mind whether you use the words or not. You don't have to use the exact words as a formula, of course. It isn't the words themselves that are so important, but what they express about your heart.

The words themselves can get repetitive, but try using them sometimes anyway, to teach yourself how to think. And think this way, always, that whatever plans you make for the future, the secret things belong to the Lord. And there is great freedom in that. His providence governs all the circumstances and details of every day that yet remains in your life. His active oversight of those circumstances is ultimately what determines exactly what will come to pass.

So with humility, with a childlike trust and utter dependence upon God, knowing that he is good, wholeheartedly submit to his providence, freely and joyfully. Don't despair of what might be tomorrow. Don't even be afraid. Don't be careless or negligent either, but do all that you know to be right. And look forward to the future with your own appropriate plans, and anticipate it eagerly, with this commitment earnestly settled in your mind, "if the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

Look to the future with that faith, with an abiding trust in the goodness of his sovereign and eternal purpose. And look to the future with great hope, for although it is unknown to you, it is perfectly known and perfectly planned by your own heavenly father. As you make your plans with regard to the future, let this thought govern them all, with confidence and encouragement, "if the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."