

I wonder what songs you would choose if you sat down to create a service plan for your funeral? The question might sound a little morbid, but if we are to take the transient nature of life offered in this passage seriously, we shouldn't be afraid of making such plans a normal part of our discourse.

As you scan down lists of favourite funeral songs you will always find the Frank Sinatra's song "My Way" in the Top 10. It contains these words,

"I did what I had to do  
And saw it through without exemption  
I planned each chartered course  
Each careful step along the byway  
But more, much more than this  
I did it my way."

Central to this song is the individual. The individual is at the centre of their life. They plan the course and they do what they want to do.

This take on life is a similar take to some of the Christians that James is seeking to admonish and bring back to God in this passage.

But before we go any further let's rewind a little and gain some broader context.

Up to this point James is warning the church of many underlying attitudes within us, which lead us astray and place us on the wrong side of God. Problems that include:

Selfish desires and cravings.

Corrupted human desires.

Human hearts still needing God's transformation.

This week and in Chapter 5, James details lives that reveal these inner problems.

James begins both these readings with the words, "Come now,..." It's a change of direction that is direct and has the effect of grabbing people's attention and leading them into some self-evaluation. So, who does James have in his sights?

Read with me verse 13, "Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money."

1st century was a time of increasing trade and commerce. Traveling merchants would use the Roman road system to travel vast distances in search of new custom. This kind of attitude and outlook on life, would have been popping up all over the place, both inside and outside the church.

But just in case you are a businessperson watching this and you're beginning to feel a little hot under the collar at first reading, it's not the "doing business" that James has a problem with here, nor is problem simply "making money."

What James is taking issue with is the life lived without God at the centre. This is someone who has usurped God in their life, and placed themselves front and centre, to plan, make decisions in isolation and with an arrogant self confidence that by their selfish planning they are assuring themselves of success.

This is the problem. Now you might not live your life with this posture outright, but have there been moments? Times, when you've thought that you could take control and do a better job of your life than God? Have you seen this tendency in your life before?

What is James' pastoral corrective to this attitude?

James says in verse 14, "Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring....."

This rebuke pierces through such egotistical dreaming by simply presenting the reality of life. How can you be so self-assured by your selfish plans of future prosperity when in reality, you have no idea what is in store for you tomorrow!

James then possess a question for them to enable further self-evaluation, "What is your life?"

How might they respond? You could imagine something along the lines of, "Well I'm currently worth 500 pieces of silver and counting, I've already acquired another rustic townhouse in Corinth, where I will make my fortune next year by imposing large taxes on the Peloponnese overland trade route."

This is the kind of mentality that James is dealing with here. It's a life not liberated by God, but a life enslaved to Mammon.

Jesus said on his sermon on the mount, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Matthew 6:24).

"You cannot serve...". Means you cannot be a slave to both God and money. The word slave can be problematic but to briefly explain, in salvation: Christians become slaves (Doulos) of Christ which brings liberation from sin and new life in the Spirit; slavery to mammon, on the other hand, brings ruin.

Archbishop Justin Welby, who was an oil executive before being called to the ordained Ministry writes this, "In so many human crises, money plays a part. Debt and desire for things enslaves many people I know and draws them into lives that are in service of Mammon, a master they neither choose nor want, but who tricks them by playing on insecurities, on good intentions and on reasonable ambitions." (Justin Welby, Dethroning Mammon: Making money serve grace)

It's this kind of life that James is admonishing. Lives enslaved by mammon and driven by their feverish individual pursuit and certainty of greater riches.

Now what is James' answer to the question, "What is your life?"

The second half of verse 14, "For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

It's quite a comedown!

But this is a skilled pastor at work with a word in season for these hardened hearts. It is a pastoral need, to bring such people down to earth with some home truths. An endeavour which, like the prodigal son, will hopefully bring people to their senses (Luke 15:17 NIV) driving them from the "distant land" of their own making and back home down the driveway to God.

The word for "mist" could also be translated as "puff of smoke." Both descriptions convey the truth that this life, that is a gift from God, is transitory. We are here one minute, then, later we are gone and for many of us, we don't know when our death will be. That is what life is like.

This reality is captured so well in the liturgy for the committal,

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,  
slow to anger and of great goodness.  
As a father is tender towards his children,  
so is the Lord tender to those that fear him.  
For he knows of what we are made;  
he remembers that we are but dust.  
Our days are like the grass;  
we flourish like a flower of the field;  
when the wind goes over it, it is gone  
and its place will know it no more.

Such beautiful words that capture the transitory nature of life that James is teaching.

So, what are we to do in response to this reality? Just hide away at home? Keep ourselves in cotton wool and hope for the best? James says in verse 15, "15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."

If the Lord wishes. This is not my way; it is God's way. Gone is the life lived without God at the centre, instead, God is brought back front and centre. And rightly so, we are made in His image. His breath brings life, His Holy Spirit brings new life to us and His words are the words of eternal life.

He has power over the transitory nature of life. God who has removed the sting of death, God who is making all things new again, a world without end – it's this God and His will that we are to make our appeals to for all our plans.

In Romans 1:10 Paul writes, "I pray now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you." When I applied for the Minister post at St Bart's, my attitude was that if it's the Lord's will it will happen, if it's not God's will, then it won't happen and it's God's will for me continue ministry in the Hills.

And it's this posture and attitude that is very different to the attitude that James critiques at the beginning of this passage. In the Christian life, there is no room for "I did it my way." There is no room for an arrogant self-sufficiency that claims assurances through our own scheming.

Instead, we are to be a people that say, "Lord if it be your will..."

But what happens when we seek God's will - what happens then?

"If the Lord wishes, we will live...". When we pray for God's will to be done, when we seek to align our wills with His we encounter the source of life itself through which God brings life to us!

Jesus says, "The thief has come only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." John 10:10.

Do you think you are experiencing this abundant life that Jesus offers you? If the answer is no, and there could be many reasons why not, consider are you grounding your life in seeking God's will, or have you taken over the steering wheel and driven yourself to exhaustion for an imagined future that may never arrive?

That's not the Lord's will for your life. You don't need to do it your way. God already has a plan for your life, you don't need to invent your own.

The Lord spoke to Jeremiah the Prophet, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11)

Whilst spoken to Jeremiah, this passage reveals God's general will for His people.

God has plans for you to prosper and flourish, plans that will give you hope and a future. And it all begins with seeking God's will and receiving His life. When we do this, we will live, and we will "do" verse 15.

There is much contained in this short word – "do." The life of God, in His will, does not make us idle or withdrawn, we are to do good works! Which brings us back to James' great theme of faith, leading to works done in gentleness – we are called to do, to serve, to bless. The life of faith, seeking God's will, will bring life and issue in doing good works.

But a final question - what if we seek God's will, receive His life, know what we need to do, and we don't do it?

James writes in verse 17, "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin."

I'm sure we can all recognise this in ourselves, in the church and in the world around us – these are the sins of omission. Failing to speak the truth or act with righteousness and justice in the world.

What might get in the way of us, knowing the right things to do, the right faith/works, but fail to do them?

Fear of what will other people think.

Resistance to change.

Not possessing a mature faith.

Or simply forgetting.

All of these can lead to us sinning, by knowing the right things to do and not doing them.

Brothers and sisters, there is much here to get in the way of living a faithful life. The main thing is ourselves. We can put ourselves in positions that displace God, His will and His plan for our lives. But even when we seek God's will, receive His life and know what we are being called to do, things can get in the way, that prevent us doing good works and sinning.

Praise God that he has provided a way back for us.

May you know that God calls you back to know Him, His will and the forgiveness He offers.

May you know that God gives you His life and life abundantly.

May you know the good works prepared for you to do, and may He empower you to carry them out with boldness and courage.