



# CAPITOL COMMISSION™

## The Illusion of Control (James 4:13-17)

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*As we go through life, certain myths present themselves and call for us to believe. I'm not referring to whether UFOs and Bigfoot exist or if Elvis is alive. The hardest myths are the ones we face every day, that impact the way we think, live, decide and treat others. Maybe the biggest myth of them all is the illusion that we humans are in control of our circumstances. Our passage from James this week gives particular attention to this myth and how we should approach it.*

*James 4:13-17 - <sup>13</sup> 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"—<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." <sup>16</sup> As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. <sup>17</sup> So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*

### I. PRESUMPTUOUS PLANS (4:13-14A, 16)

On an initial glance, these first words could be construed to mean that planning of any kind is the wrong thing to do. The hypothetical person presented here is making plans that will affect business, relocation and finances. Maybe you have thought through this same scenario in your life or made similar plans for your career and family.

There seems to be a strange warning against planning here, since we are told that we don't know what will happen tomorrow. Interpreting these verses, however, reminds us to compare Scripture with Scripture, because God's Word will not contradict itself. So what do we make of this ostensible forbidding to making future plans?

The key may be found in verse sixteen. This whole section is devoted to the issue of control and verse sixteen describes the planner of verse thirteen as a proud person, boasting in their arrogance. The original word for boasting here refers to an attitude of insolence and emptiness, relying on human strength and ability.

We are all guilty of this at points in our lives, but is your life characterized by it? Are plans made with the underpinning motivation of self-seeking and self-actualization? This is pride and flies in the face of a life that is trusting in a sovereign God who disposes of matters as he sees fit. This is confirmed several times in books such as Proverbs.

*Proverbs 16:9 The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.*

*Proverbs 19:21 Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.*

To make plans without any thought of God's ways or purposes is an empty and futile way to prepare. Our passage even goes so far as to say it is evil. Arrogance is detestable to the Lord and it often shows up in how people approach their future, seemingly deciding their own path and relying on themselves to make it happen.

### II. ACCURATE ASSESSMENT (4:14B)

If we shouldn't have a boastful outlook about how we are going to make our own way in the future, then how should we view it? The statement that we don't know what will happen tomorrow is true. The pride of human strength withers in the truth of humanity's actual frailty. We must see the nature of our lives accurately, that is, we aren't here on earth very long.

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**"THE DUST WILL RETURN TO THE EARTH AS IT WAS"  
ECCLESIASTES 12:7 --- OUR BODIES ARE JUST TEMPORARY  
HOUSING FOR OUR SOULS. - ANNE GRAHAM LOTZ -**

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Our life is called a mist, a vapor. In the whole scheme of things we aren't in this life very long. As living souls, we will live forever, but our time on earth is short. Knowing and staying aware of this is crucial to understanding how to think about the future. Moses, who wrote Psalm 90, put it this way:

*Psalm 90:10, 12 The years of our life are seventy,  
or even by reason of strength eighty;  
yet their span is but toil and trouble;  
they are soon gone, and we fly away.  
So teach us to number our days  
that we may get a heart of wisdom.*

Acting as if you will live forever or that there are no future consequences to today's choices typifies how many folks deal with life. The illusion is that you are in ultimate control of your life, but the stark truth is that God is the only one who truly knows the future and brings about his will and purpose in his way and timing.

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### III. SENSIBLE SUBMISSION (4:15)

So how do we look at decisions about insurance, saving for our children's college fund or our retirement? This passage is addressing arrogant future planning with no thought of God. Making plans is not the problem. Making plans while not relying on God and trying to wrestle control away from him is the problem.

This requires submission. Following Christ is a life-long pursuit of subjecting our wills to his and joyfully accepting his plan, whatever that may be. We don't know the future, but he knows the beginning from the end. His knowledge of all things makes him the most trustworthy one we can lean on.

Some of you know that last June I had an illness that resulted in my right leg being amputated below the knee. It came on quickly, with little warning and months later, I am still recovering and adjusting. It will affect me every day for the rest of my life. The greatest thought that comforts me through all of this pain and upheaval is that God knew. He knew before it happened. He knew what I was going through in the middle of it. He knows now the frustrations and blessings I experience. He knows what will happen tomorrow as I continue down this road.

My point is that his plan is good. It may mean some suffering, but will result in a deeper understanding of who he is and give many opportunities to love others better and receive the love of others.

*Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*

*Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

### IV. CONVICTED CONSCIENCE (4:17)

The conscience is a great thing if it is informed in the right way. With strong moral bearings one's conscience can keep a person out of much trouble. What we know guides how our conscience will help or hinder us. How many times have we said, "He knows better than to do that."? The Lord, through the pen of James, reminds us here that he holds us accountable for what we know. The right things that we know should be done should channel our actions in the right way. If they are neglected, we have sinned.

What a strong indictment for the one who refuses to carry out what he clearly knows is the right thing to do. Keep in mind the context of this paragraph, which is the sovereignty and control of God. We may know this truth in our head. When we make our plans for the future, though, we could forget or suppress that truth, boasting in our ability to figure it all out for ourselves. James calls such thinking evil and sinful.

### CONCLUSION: INSTRUCTIVE ILLUSTRATION

Saul was one of the most promising yet tragic characters in the Old Testament. A charismatic political leader, he was Israel's first king and had a tremendous platform to influence his people for good. As his reign progressed, though, Saul slowly moved further and further away from following God, spiraling into despair and paranoia.

The climax of Saul's fall came in 1 Samuel 15. God gave specific orders to Saul to take the army of Israel and move against the Amalekites. The clear goal was total destruction. Leave nothing. There was no ambiguity.

Saul planned for the future in a boastful manner, deciding for himself what the battle plan should be.

*1 Samuel 15:9 But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them.*

When Saul was confronted by the prophet Samuel, he shifted blame to the army and tried to justify his actions.

*1 Samuel 15:15 Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction."*

Saul knew what God wanted and willfully rejected it, all the while declaring he had done the right thing. Samuel had to relate the disastrous consequence.

*1 Samuel 15:26 And Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel."*

Taking control from God is not possible. Regardless of our feelings of importance, we do not control tomorrow. That should be left to God who is in control and we must trust him for the future.