

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
May 3, 2020

## **Life Is Fragile**

James 4:11-17

It's hard to plan during a pandemic. There's so much uncertainty. So many things seem beyond our control. There are more questions than answers. And when there is an answer, it's often, "We don't know." In the coronavirus crisis, we've gotten more accustomed to living in a "not knowing" kind of atmosphere, which, as I said, makes it hard to plan.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't plan. In fact, at a time like this, plans become even more critical. We need plans. We need a plan for lifting stay-at-home restrictions. We need a plan for testing. We need a plan for contact tracing. We need a plan for developing therapeutic medicines and vaccines. We need a plan for reopening the economy. We need a plan for how churches and other religious groups can eventually resume services and activities. We need plans because they help point us forward, and give us greater assurance that's there's a way through this tunnel and back out into the light.

Our plans are also a way of taking what can seem unmanageable and making it at least more manageable. But manageable doesn't mean completely under control. That's the thing about plans. They can give us the illusion that we have things under control. That our lives are well-arranged and in order. That progress is inevitable. That all we have to do is execute our personal plan, and everything will run smoothly, and turn out fine.

That is, until everything changes. An accident happens. A natural disaster strikes. A person does something terrible to us. A relationship disintegrates. A job gets eliminated. A disease attacks. A death occurs. A pandemic spreads. Suddenly our plans look very different, very helpless. Things that seemed settled and secure turn out to be incredibly fragile.

In the film *Table for Five*, Jon Voight plays a divorced father named J. P. Tannen, who was often absent from the lives of his three children. He wants to come back and renew his relationship with them, so his ex-wife and her new husband allow J. P. to take his children on a summer cruise through Europe to Egypt. During their vacation, J. P. receives the tragic news that the children's mother died in a car accident. There's a scene where J. P., his girlfriend, and the three children stand in front of the great Sphinx. As they marvel at the sight, nine-year-old Truman asks his father, "Why did they do these?" "To try to make themselves permanent," says J. P. "It worked!" declares Truman.

"Did it?" J. P. replies. "Look, its face is half gone. One day there will be nothing here except sand. These were just a man's dreams; that's all they were. A man's dreams won't keep him alive. Nothing is permanent. Nothing stays the same. You can never know what's going to happen next. The only thing you can be sure of is that whatever you think is going to happen, probably won't."

J. P. turns around and walks to a smooth stone slab. A huge pyramid is seen beside him in the background. "I didn't know that when I was your age. I thought everything worked out

the way you wanted it to. Like my marriage to your mom, for instance. I thought it was a permanent thing. I really thought we had something as permanent as the pyramids, or maybe more. But it wasn't."<sup>1</sup>

Things that seem very stable, lasting, and permanent can be much more vulnerable than we realize. Our plans don't ensure predictability, and our calculations don't guarantee that we're in control. In today's Scripture passage, James has some very sobering news for folks who lay out their plans as if things are completely predictable and controllable. After warning some in the congregation who are acting arrogantly by slandering others, James turns his attention to some others whose arrogance is tied to doing business and accumulating possessions. These traveling entrepreneurs have prospered materially, and have an inflated sense of confidence about themselves and their future. They don't realize that the foundation on which they've built their affluence is incredibly shaky.

I like the way that Eugene Peterson renders today's text. James gives these businesspeople a jolt of reality, saying: "And now I have a word for you who brashly announce, 'Today—at the latest, tomorrow—we're off to such and such a city for the year. We're going to start a business and make a lot of money.' You don't know the first thing about tomorrow. You're nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing. Instead, make it a habit to say, 'If the Master wills it and we're still alive, we'll do this or that'" (4:13-15).

It sounds like these members of the fellowship have lost a sense of perspective on themselves. They're thinking and planning as if they're the Lord of time and events, when in fact their living in a world that's made by and belongs to the only one who is Lord. Instead of living wisely in God's world, they're living in a bubble they've created where "success" is defined by the amount of goods that one can accumulate. They've become closed off to God as the giver of life and all that sustains it. They're focused more on their own plans than on God's plans, and have lost sight of their own limitations and vulnerabilities.

James' warnings may sound a little over the top in a context like the present, when so many business owners and their employees are struggling to stay afloat. With millions of stores, shops, and restaurants closed down, and record numbers of workers applying for unemployment, it may sound like James is coming down too hard on the entrepreneurs who create jobs and economic opportunity. But James' message, while it includes the pursuit of wealth, also goes beyond economics into all areas of life where we grow proud and complacent, and lose sight of just how fragile our lives really are, individually and together.

Listen again to the itinerary going on in the minds of the traveling traders in today's text, and you'll recognize some of the things that we too prize in our own lives, yet easily take for granted. "Today or tomorrow...." The gift of time. "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city,..." The gifts of travel and mobility. "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there,..." Again, the gift of time. "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." The gifts of purpose and income. Put all these together, and you see several of the basics of life that we need yet regularly neglect, and that can quickly be endangered or taken away from us by all sorts of life events, including the coronavirus pandemic. Time. Mobility. Travel. Jobs. Purpose. Income.

Life is fragile. Our bodies are fragile. Our economic system is fragile. Our food supply is fragile. Our schedules are fragile. Our plans are fragile. More fragile than we often realize, or admit. The words of the psalmist ring true, especially at a time like this: "The life of

mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more" (103:15-16).

Christopher Hitchens was an outspoken atheist. Just over a year before his death, he joined his brother Peter, a person of faith, at an event where they debated and discussed the place of religion in public life. At one point in the discussion, each was asked to look at matters from the opposing viewpoint. Christopher was asked what he thought was "Christianity's greatest contribution" at both a societal and an individual level. He said:

I haven't been asked that in those terms before, but I find it strangely easy to say what it would be from the prayers I used to intone and the hymns and psalms I used to sing and the lessons I used to read and hear. The greatest contribution of Christianity in my life is the reminder of the complete ephemerality [the state of being temporary, short-lived] of human power, and indeed of human existence—the transience of all states, empires, heroes, grandiose claims, and so forth. That's always with me, and I daresay I could have got that from [other sources], too. But the way I got it and the way it's implanted in me is certainly by Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Our Christian faith keeps us in touch with how impermanent life is in this present world. Unplanned and unpredicted things happen in our lives, our families, and our communities. Countries sometimes flourish and sometimes fall. Pandemics sweep across national borders. We're transient beings living in a transient world.

"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow," says James. "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." Now this doesn't mean that we should refuse to do any planning in our lives. Envisioning what's ahead, and anticipating the things that you want to be and do, are part of what it means to be alive and purposeful in this world. Read the obituaries of individuals who have died of the coronavirus, and you'll see story after story of people who had plans for their lives, or whose lives included many plans fulfilled. We grieve with their families and friends. We mourn over the plans that the deceased never got to pursue. Like all of us, they hadn't anticipated what has happened during the past couple of months.

In a recent article for *The Wall Street Journal*, biblical scholar C. Kavin Rowe begins by recalling a time when he preached a sermon on death to a relatively young congregation. He says,

As I greeted congregants after the service, many smiled the Southern smile that means, "We know our manners but don't like what you said." Yet one elderly couple stopped to talk. "We've never heard a sermon on death here," I recall the wife saying. "We needed one. We're old and we know what's coming."

The Covid-19 pandemic has swept away the illusions that led the congregation—and much of the world—to ignore death. The virus will kill only a small minority of the world. Yet its prevalence has reminded people everywhere that if Covid-19 doesn't kill them, something else will. This realization recalls a truth central to the Christian tradition: No one will get out of life alive.<sup>3</sup>

The subject of death is no theological abstraction to Rowe, who is now in his mid-forties. He goes on in his article to speak about how he and his dying wife, currently in hospice care, have grown closer together and deeper in their faith during her experience of illness. Facing the truth about mortality has enabled them to focus even more on the things that really matter. He writes, "Death no longer seems far away; training for it and experiencing its closeness has brought certain gifts. These gifts of clarity of purpose and love are what human beings spend much of their lives longing for and failing to find."<sup>4</sup>

According to James, instead of saying, with pride and self-satisfaction, "We're going to go here and there, and do this and that," we ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (v. 15). That's not a matter of being morbid, or trying to spread doom and gloom. It's a matter of confronting and telling the truth about ourselves and about the world. The truth that life is fragile, that we're all incredibly vulnerable, and that so much is beyond our ability to predict or control. But at the same time, the truth that God is sovereign, that you can rely upon his unfailing love, and that because of Jesus' death and resurrection, you can live purposefully in the present, and face your own end with hope and the assurance of life beyond death, through faith in the risen Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Table for Five (Warner Brothers, 1983); written by David Seltze. Directed by Robert Lieberman.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hitchens, The Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, "Can Civilization Survive without God?" (October 12, 2010). Cited at <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2013/may/4051313.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, "Dying Gives Us a Chance to Confront Truth." *The Wall Street Journal* (April 23, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Rowe, "Dying Gives Us a Chance to Confront Truth."