

“How to Plan Ahead”

Remember back in 2010 when Eyjafjallajokull, however you say it, here is the spelling of it, but it was an Icelandic Volcano that erupted and spewed ash into the upper stratosphere and disrupted air flights to Europe for several weeks? The expansive cloud of high-altitude grit from an Icelandic volcano left airline passengers stranded around the globe. Airline officials were forced to ground nearly three in four European flights. The cloud of ash drifted across an area including the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Poland, northern France and Austria, and Russia it traveled at about 40 km/h. The highly abrasive ash cloud could have caused aircraft engines to fail if enough glass particles melted inside the engines and jammed the machinery. Aviation experts said that the volcanic plume caused the worst travel disruption that Europe, and the world, has ever seen.

It was what most people called “an act of God.” Why is it only in situations like that, that we call events such? If you were to ask people on the day before it erupted, a Wednesday, they would have told you that they made arrangements to travel Thursday, stay abroad for a specific length of time and conduct business, go on vacation or visit friends or family. There would have been proof in their minds by holding the airline ticket and making specific plans.

The problem in all of this is the failure in their plans to consider God. God has His own plans and when we ignore, deny, or disobey His will, there are significant consequences. We all know that life is far from simple. It is a complex matrix of forces, events, people,

contingencies, and circumstances over which we have little or no control, making it impossible for anyone to ascertain, design, or assure any specific future. Despite that, some people foolishly imagine that they are in charge of their lives. They deny the need for a God Positioning System in their lives. Sadly, such people ignore not only the existence of God's will, but also its benefit. Christians have the comfort of knowing that the sovereign, omniscient, omnipotent God of the universe controls every event and circumstance of their lives and weaves them all into His perfect plan for them (Rom. 8:28).

So today's questions are these, "How are we to plan in light of God's will? Why would it be silly to plan without considering God's will? What if we execute our plans in a direction contrary to what God has revealed? James tells us in considering the planning process of the blessing of acknowledging God's will? In James 4:13-17 he points to 1) The Foolishness of Ignoring God's Will (James 4:13-14), 2) The Arrogance of Denying God's Will (James 4:16), and 3) The Sin of Disobeying God's Will (James 4:17). James however shows us 4) The Blessing of Acknowledging God's Will (James 4:15).

First, the Foolishness of Ignoring God's Will (James 4:13–14). 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. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes (ESV). In James 4:13, the first negative response to God's will is foolishly ignoring it, living as if God did not exist or was indifferent to and benign toward human behavior. James begins his address with his words come now which are an insistent, even brash call for attention. They also indicate disapproval for the conduct they address. James is in effect saying

“Listen up!” or “Get this!” The phrase come now appears in the New Testament only here and in James 5:1.

The targets of James’s rebuke are those who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town/city, and spend a year there and trade/engage in business and make a profit.” The Greek text literally reads “the ones who are saying,” indicating people who habitually live without regard for God’s will. The underlying Greek verb, legô, means to say something based on reason or logic. James rebuked those who habitually think through and articulate their plans as if God did not exist or care.

Note that James has no quarrel with the merchant’s occupation. Nor does he write about the ethics of buying and selling...James takes the businessmen to task for their disregard for God. To them money is much more important than serving the Lord. They make plans for the future without seeking the will of God. Jesus had a comparable teaching in Luke 12:16-21. It was a parable about a man with no GPS system. It illustrated the folly of leaving God out of one’s planning: And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God" (ESV).

The Bible repeatedly stresses the shortness of human life. Job, possibly the first book of

Scripture to be written, says much about life's ephemeral nature. In Job 7:6 Job lamented, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to an end without hope." To James's audience, their ignorance of the future and the frailty and brevity of human life should give pause to those who foolishly ignore God's will. James would impress upon us this critical piece of knowledge: that God is the one who sustains our lives, that each day's twenty-four hours are not "ours" automatically, that God controls time and gives it as one of his good gifts, and that we would be already blown away in God's judgment were it not for his mercy.

Secondly, James tells us that without a GPS system we arrogantly deny God's will.

James 4:16 says, "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil" (ESV). We will deal with verse 15 in the final point, but here in verse 16, the first wrong response to God's will is presumptuously ignoring it, living as though God and His will do not exist. But there are also those who, while acknowledging that God exists and has a will, nevertheless arrogantly reject it. Those in the first group are practical atheists—living as if God did not exist. Those in this second category are self-theists—refusing to submit the uncertainties of life to God, they set themselves, their own goals, and their own wills above God. God's will, though acknowledged, simply is not as important to them as their plans. Though such disdain does not characterize the life of a believer generally, even Christians are often guilty of setting aside God's will in favor of their own plans.

Those who deny God's will, James says, boast in their arrogance. Such is the arrogance, James says, of those who deny the will of God. This makes the arrogance not merely the manner of their boasting but rather the object of their boasting. The sin James is

exposing is not merely a sin of omission (neglecting to recognize God’s rule over their affairs), it is a sin of commission in that they even boast about their self-sufficiency. Perhaps no one has expressed this defiant attitude toward God any more clearly than William Ernest Henley in his famous poem “Invictus”: ends with these words,

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

That poem clearly reflects the attitude of so many who know God exists, but arrogantly defy His will.

James then leads us to understand that without a proper GPS system we commitment the Sin of Disobeying God’s Will. James 4:17: “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (ESV). In James 4:17 we see James shift his emphasis from whether we *know* God’s will to whether we *do* God’s will. Verse 17 seems at first not to fit the thrust of the paragraph. He may have made a jump in his line of thought without articulating the intervening steps, but it is entirely consistent with the rest of the letter for James to tell his readers to carry out their inward attitude with outward actions.

Those guilty of this third negative approach to God’s will affirm God’s existence and acknowledge the supremacy of His will—then proceed to disobey it. James rebuked such people with the statement that whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. Those in this third group know God’s will, and affirm that it is right. But just

refuse to do God's will. Doesn't that happen to us all the time? It happens to me. Paul said the same thing in Romans, "Oh wretched man that I am, the things I know I should do, I don't do and the things I know I shouldn't do...I do." Those of us who know God's will are responsible to obey it, and if we fail to do so, we sin.

The sin of this third group is actually more serious than that of the first two groups. We see this with the story of the wayward prophet Jonah. And it provides a classic illustration of one who knew the will of God, but refused to do it. Called by God to preach to Nineveh, the reluctant prophet instead attempted to flee to Tarshish—about as directly in the opposite direction as possible. Only after being severely disciplined by God did Jonah finally submit to His will. Those who disobey God's will likewise suffer the consequences. In 1744 Louis XV of France was smitten with a malady which threatened to cut his days short. The historian Thomas Carlyle tells us that France was in terror, and Paris seemed like a city taken by storm. The churches resounded with supplications and groans, and the prayers of priests and people were continually interrupted by their sobs. This widespread manifestation of tender interest and deep affection for Louis XV brought him the surname of "Louis the Well-beloved." The love of the people for their young king was not inspired by what he had done, but by what they hoped he would do. For years the nation had been crushed under the heel of a cruel tyrant, and they regarded the accession of Louis XV as the dawn of a brighter and happier day. They loved him because in him rested all their hopes. That was in 1744. Thirty years later, Louis XV again lay sick. But the churches did not resound with excessive groanings. Sobs did not now interrupt any prayers, for no prayers were being offered. In fact, "Louis the Well-beloved" had become

the most hated man in France. In 1744 he might have asked, “What have I done to be so loved?” and in 1774, “What have I done to be so hated?” The truth is, he had done nothing. We can not afford to do nothing.

Finally, we need to understand that with a proper GPS system we will always realize the Blessing of Acknowledging God’s Will. James 4:15 says, “Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that" (ESV). In contrast to the negative, sinful responses to God’s will already discussed, in verse 15, James gives the positive side. Instead of the practical atheism, self-theism, or flagrant disobedience of the first three responses, James exhorts his readers to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” This fourth alternative and positive response to God’s will, that of acknowledging and obeying it, generally marks true believers. The Puritans filled their speech and correspondence with the Latin equivalent *Deo Volente*, “God willing.” And the Methodists followed the same practice. In fact, godly Methodists regularly signed their letters with the initials D.V., and placards and circulars about coming events also had D.V., *Deo Volente*, If God Wills. In some circles and cultures, the cliché “if the Lord wills” is rather common. Through its repeated usage it begins to lose its intended significance. But James tells the merchants to use this formula. He shows them that their lives are in the hands of a sovereign God and that they should acknowledge him in all their plans.

This phrase does not appear in the Old Testament. In the New Testament era, however, the apostle Paul teaches the Christians its proper use. Here are a few examples:

1. When Paul left Ephesus, he said to the Jews, “I will come back if it is God’s will” (Acts 18:21).
2. He told the Corinthians, “I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing” (I Cor. 4:19).
3. He promised the believers in Corinth to spend some time with them “if the Lord permits” (I Cor. 16:7; also compare Phil. 2:19, 24; Heb. 6:3).

What these early teachers of Christianity were saying was that this world is not a closed system. There is an influence outside the natural world and that influence ultimately determines the success and failure of plans. *USA Today*, just this past Tuesday, chronicled such an event. Remember when the Deepwater Horizon blew up and all the experts were telling us that the oil was going to get in the “Loop Current” and end up all over the east coast? They asked in the article, “Why didn’t the oil come up the east coast?” Remember how we prayed and millions of people prayed across the globe that the disaster be contained and mitigated? Well in that *USA Today* story, let me read a portion to you about what “Miraculously” to me anyway occurred. But to the “experts” it was purely a coincidence. (Read article highlighted. *The natural world is replete with a host of organisms that combine as a community to decompose oil—and no single microbe, no matter how genetically enhanced, has proved better than this natural defense. “Every ocean we look at, from the Antarctic to the Arctic, there are oil-degrading bacteria,” says Atlas*) What an amazing coincidence. That looks like a blessing and intervention by God. In fact when they asked the question 40 days ago, “Where did all the oil go?” Their explanation included microbes that we didn’t know about, ate it.

Acknowledging God's will affirms His sovereignty over all aspects of life. We live only because God so wills it, for He controls life and death. God also controls everything people do and all the circumstances of life. Responding to God's will that we be in his Positioning System is yet another test of a living and true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. A strong desire to do the will of God is a sure mark of a transformed life.