

WHEN GOOD PLANS ARE NOT GOD'S PLANS

James 4:13-17

Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit.'¹⁴ You don't even know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are like smoke that appears for a little while, then vanishes.¹⁵ Instead, you should say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."¹⁶ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.¹⁷ So it is a sin for the person who knows to do what is good and doesn't do it.

INTRODUCTION

A lady received a brochure promoting a tour of Israel. She had the time, money, and health to go but wondered if this was God's will. Rereading the pamphlet just before going to bed, she noticed the airplane for the trip was a 747 jet. She tossed all night, restlessly weighing the pros and cons of fulfilling her lifelong ambition to visit the Holy Land. At the moment she awoke the next morning, she noticed her digital alarm clock read "7:47." She exclaimed, "It must be the Lord's will for me to take that tour!" She went.

A pastor who'd previously served as a deacon toyed with the idea of buying an honorary Dr. of Divinity degree from a diploma mill to increase his reputation. One day he read **I Timothy 3:13** in his KJV Bible: "For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree. . . ." He took this as the sign God was directing him to buy this honorary degree.

A professor signed a contract in April to teach in a Christian college that fall. He then received a better offer in August from another Christian school. He wrote the first college, "I've prayed about God's will, and I've signed with another school." **Psalms 15:4** (NIV) declares God rewards one "who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind." Yet, this teacher convinced himself that God approved him breaking his word. This left the first school scrambling to find a replacement just weeks before a new school year began. Can God's people become skilled in convincing themselves that their plans are also God's plans, regardless of what God tells them otherwise? Sadly, yes.

A motorist driving cross-country would be foolish casting lots at every main fork in the road or deciding which roads are through routes based merely upon appearances, instead of consulting a road map or G.P.S. The Bible provides us with a G. P. S., "God's Positioning System," to guide our journey through life. Many verses urge us to seek God's guidance or promise God's guidance, as **Psalms 25:4**: "Make Your ways known to me, LORD; teach me Your paths"; **Psalms 32:8**, "I will instruct you and show you the way to go; with My eye on you, I will give counsel"; and **Proverbs 3:5-6** (NKJV): "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." Finding God's will need not be a game of chance nor a matter of twisting Scripture out of context. A Bible text taken out of context often becomes a pretext to excuse doing what *we* want to do and deceive ourselves this is what God wants. Today we will consider Planning That Is Not of God and Planning That Is of God.

I. PLANNING THAT IS NOT OF GOD (James 4:13-14)

"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit.'" On the surface, do such plans seem ungodly or unworthy of the Lord's servants? No. **James 1:1** says this letter is addressed, "To the 12 tribes in the Dispersion"; to Jewish Christians dispersed by persecution in Israel throughout the Roman Empire. James wrote around A. D. 50, at the height of the *Pax Romana*, a period of relative peace lasting 200 years. The safety provided by its troops on land and on sea throughout Rome's vast Empire, the stability of Roman law, and the greatest system of roads and communication the Western world had known, ignited an unprecedented age of business expansion and the founding of new, thriving cities. Jews were often offered great incentives by town founders to relocate to new communities, for wherever Jewish industriousness took root, money and trade soon followed.

This is the background to **James 4:13-17**. As former pastor of many of his immediate readers, dating to their years together in Jerusalem, James knew these Jewish Christians would be tempted to get caught up in the rush to make big profits, like people getting gold fever. We can imagine a believer pointing to a spot on a map and saying, "Here is a new city where there are great trade opportunities. I'll go there, get in on the ground floor, trade for a year or more, make my fortune, and come back rich!" If God inspires this vision in one's heart, such plans are *good* plans because they are mainly *God's* plans. Many founders of America's most successful companies have been servants of our Savior, including William Colgate (1783-1857), Thomas Welch (1825-1923), James L. Kraft (1874-1953), and James Cash (J. C.) Penny (1875-1971). These humble businessmen also believed they were God's stewards and didn't own anything, as **Psalms 24:1** (NASB) declares, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." They were fully aware God had guided them to their impressive success and never lost sight of their commitment to place their entire lives, including their fortunes, at God's disposal. They lived by the words of **Romans 14:7-8** (NLT): "[W]e don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. ⁸ If we live, it's to honor the Lord. And if we die, it's to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."

Ever since Adam and Eve decided they could improve upon God's perfect and loving plans for their lives, there's been a sinful desire in our hearts is to live independently of God—to take this life God gives us for the purpose of filling us with His goodness and love, on a world He made, sustained only by oxygen and food He makes possible, in a body He designed to house our immortal spirit—and then to act and plan as though we owe God little more than the token "thank you" given a distant relative who sends us nice presents on our birthday or at Christmas. Rick Warren states in his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, "You cannot fulfill God's purposes for your life while focusing on your own plans." How much has God taken an active part in designing the person you are and His plans for you? **Psalms 139:13-16** (NCV) proclaims, "You [God] made my whole being; You formed me in my mother's body. ¹⁴ I praise You because You made me in an amazing and wonderful way. What You have done is wonderful. I know this very well. ¹⁵ You saw my bones being formed as I took shape in my mother's body. When I was put together there, ¹⁶ You saw my body as it was formed. All the days planned for me were written in Your book before I was one day old."

A man had gone into the crawl space of his church just above its high ceiling to make some repairs. His anxious wife waited below. A group of visitors had entered the church from the rear and were quietly and reverently walking toward the front when the concerned wife called out to her husband with uplifted eyes, "Honey, is everything all right up there?" "Yes, dear," he hollered back. "My work up here is nearly done. I'll be down to join you shortly." The startled visitors rushed from the church! Like most of us, they weren't fully prepared for one of them to suddenly drop dead and depart this earth for Heaven, though they knew this might happen. But they certainly weren't prepared to see someone suddenly drop back to earth *from* Heaven!

An unknown sage coined the motto wise people often echo: "Plan like you will live forever; live like you will die tomorrow." **Psalms 118:24** advises, "This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Each day we live is a gift of God to accomplish His plans in our lives and in those around us.

"You don't even know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be!" James reminds us, "For you are like smoke that appears for a little while, then vanishes." James chose the least certain of three New Testament Greek words for "know," in **vs. 14**, to emphasize our limited knowledge of our future. Do we "know" with mathematical certainty "what tomorrow will bring"? About 30 years ago, a Tucson girl riding to church in her wedding dress was killed by a drunk driver on what she "knew" would be her wedding day. Or does God often confide to us "insider" information that close associates are often privileged to "know" to the exclusion of others? How often do you claim to know for certain "what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be!" when all you really have is an assumption? Will Norton had just graduated from high school on Sunday, May 22, 2011, filled with dreams about his future. Suddenly, around 5:45 P.M., a multi-vortex tornado $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile wide, with winds of 200 mph, roared through his hometown of Joplin, MO, appearing

directly in his path. When the Humvee Will had been driving began flipping, he was sucked through the side window. His Dad, who was riding with him, heard Will reciting Bible verses. This young man fully expected to find himself wrapped in his Heavenly Father's arms if the tornado killed him. Will's body was found later in a pond. His life on earth was done but discovering God's plans for him in Heaven had just begun!

"You don't even know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are like smoke that appears for a little while, then vanishes." We can get carried away with our ability to plan our lives or the lives of others. We can resent the idea, perhaps even without realizing it, that God still claims the authority to decide what's best and to assert the priority of His plans over ours. There's a joke of an Engineer, an Architect, and a Planner, all Christians, standing before God's Throne. God says to them, "Before deciding your place of service in Heaven, I must first ask you what you most believe in." The Engineer looks God in the eye and declares, "I believe engineering to be for the good of all. Nothing else brings such joy to so many people, from the slums of Rio to the bright lights of Barcelona. I've devoted my life to bringing happiness to people through good engineering and would feel privileged to carry out whatever engineering tasks you might assign me in Heaven." God offers the Engineer a choice seat close to the His Throne. He then turns to the Architect. "And what do you believe?" The Architect passionately proclaims, "I believe that good art and design are fundamental to the quality of life. I've spent my whole career designing the most artistically inspiring and practically beneficial homes and buildings possible. I would be honored to enhance the quality of life in Heaven for Your people." God, moved by the passion of his speech, offers the Architect a seat even closer to His throne than the Engineer. Finally, he turns to the Planner. "And you, a planner, what do you most believe?" "I believe," says the Planner, "that you're sitting in my seat."

Regardless of how good our plans look to us, regardless of how much we convince ourselves our plans are also God's plans, do we act and plan as though God's will is an afterthought? If we don't live each day primarily to cooperate with God to accomplish His work in us and in those around us, to best ready them and us for our eternity in His presence, our plans are not really good plans because they are not truly God's plans.

II. PLANNING THAT IS OF GOD (James 4:15-17)

"Instead, you should say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ So it is a sin for the person who knows to do what is good and doesn't do it." James uses strong language to impress our guilt upon us if we don't hold loosely everything and everyone about us. Our lives should be in God's hands, not ours. Clutching onto people or plans as though we have a right to them, as though our happiness depends upon them regardless of God's will, is rooted in the age-old distrust of God's will that Satan planted in the minds of Adam and Eve (**Genesis 3:1-6**). The one other time the Greek word translated "arrogance" in **vs. 16** appears in the New Testament is **I John 2:15-16**. The Apostle John insists that those who get caught up in "the boastful pride of life" of the ungodly "world," the arrogant self-importance of taking pride in planning one's future independently of God's will, lack genuine "love" for our Heavenly "Father." James warns us, "All such boasting is evil." His chosen word for "evil" is rooted in the idea of "bringing trouble" to ourselves or others by "actively opposing God's will." **Jesus** described Satan as "the evil one" in **Matthew 6:13** (see also **I John 5:19**) using a form of this same Greek word. Plans made independently of God's will often align us with Satan, place us at odds with God's will in more ways than we realize, and trouble us more than we know is possible.

James 4:15 declares, "you should say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." This is not simply adding a "God willing" to our plans, with hopes He won't interfere, but laying our plans before God and giving Him opportunity to confirm or deny if they are truly His plans. My favorite place to live in the U. S. is Tulsa, OK. I attended college there one year and then taught there for three years in a high school. In 2009, a Southern Baptist mission church near where I once lived advertised for its first pastor. I had good friends in this area who may have helped to grow this church. This seemed like a good opportunity for Loretta and me in many ways. But when I spent serious time in prayer about such plans, God clearly told me

to drop all thoughts about it. The next year, this church sought a pastor, and the rest is history. But how can we know if it's truly God speaking to us when we are seeking His guidance about our plans? **Luke 8:15** assures us the guidance of God's Word will bear godly fruit in us if we have "heard the word with an honest and good heart"; with a heart truly open to God's will.

It comes down to a matter of trust. We know we're always better off with God's plans than our plans, if we take to heart **Isaiah 55:8-9** (NLT): "'My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,' says the LORD. 'And My ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.'⁹ For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways and My thoughts higher than your thoughts.'" Joni Eareckson Tada turns 70 in October. She's been paralyzed from the neck down since age 17 due to a diving accident. Joni has been an inspirational source of encouragement to millions by embracing God's plans as her plans. Joni testifies, "He has chosen not to heal me but to hold me. The more intense the pain, the closer His embrace."

CONCLUSION

In the opening pages of his autobiography, *An American Life*, Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) writes, "I was raised to believe that God had a plan for everyone and that seemingly random twists of fate are all a part of His plan. My mother - a small woman with auburn hair and a sense of optimism that ran as deep as the cosmos - told me that everything in life happened for a purpose. She said all things were part of God's plan, even the most disheartening setbacks, and in the end, everything worked out for the best. If something went wrong, she said, you didn't let it get you down: You stepped away from it, stepped over it, and moved on. Later on, she added, something good will happen and you'll find yourself thinking - 'If I hadn't had that problem back then, then this better thing that did happen wouldn't have happened to me.'

Reagan faced two life-changing setbacks after graduating from college in 1932. First, the girl he dated for eight years throughout high school and college, Margaret Cleaver, left him for another man. They became engaged towards the end of college and agreed to marry when she returned from her teaching job and a trip to Europe. Before the year was over, she returned the engagement ring to him by mail, enclosing a note explaining she'd gotten engaged to another man in Europe. This was a crushing blow in and of itself. Then Reagan was turned down for the position of sporting goods manager at the new Montgomery Ward's store in Dixon, IL. At the height of the Great Depression, jobs were hard to come by. Montgomery Ward's was known for its high-paying positions (\$12.50 per week; at a time .01 would buy two pounds of pinto beans), and for its employment stability. But the supervisor chose to hire a recent athletic high school graduate. Without this job, Reagan was forced to look elsewhere for income.

Reagan continues in his autobiography, "After I lost the job at Montgomery Ward, I left home again in search of work. Although I didn't know it then, I was beginning a journey that would take me a long way from Dixon and fulfill all my dreams and then some." One of his college professors encouraged him to try broadcasting. Reagan caught on as announcer of the University of Iowa football games. He received twice as much as Ward's paid; his salary quadrupled within two years. His job as a sportscaster led him to California in 1937 to cover spring training for the Chicago Cubs. While there, he did a screen test for the Warner Brothers movie studio, which immediately signed him to a contract that grew into a film career spanning three decades and 50+ films. His popularity from films and television induced General Electric to hire him as a public relations representative touring the United States giving pro-business talks, in which he spoke out against excess government control and wasteful spending. In 1966, he stunned the political world; defeating an incumbent Democrat by 1,000,000 votes to become California's Governor. After winning a second term in 1970, Ronald Reagan became our nation's 40th President in 1980. God used him to pull our nation out of an economic tailspin and bring the Cold War to an end by policies that led to the Soviet Union's break-up.

Reagan concludes his comments upon the superiority of God's plans over his own plans, despite his two life-changing setbacks after graduating from college in 1932, by stating "My mother, as usual, was right."