

PLANS AND ASSIGNMENTS

This morning, we'll move along with our final look, for the time being, at the Book of James. And, we'll see how James describes a uniquely human trait, and it is this: The way so many people go about *planning* the way that they'll live their lives. So let's see what James is pointing to in this fairly short passage: ¹³ Now listen to me, you that say, "Today or tomorrow we will travel to a certain city, where we will stay a year and go into business and make a lot of money." ¹⁴ You don't even know what your life tomorrow will be! You are like a puff of smoke, which appears for a moment and then disappears. ¹⁵ What you should say is this: "If the Lord is willing, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶ But now you are proud, and you boast; all such boasting is wrong. ¹⁷ So then, if we do not do the good we know we should do, we are guilty of sin. James 4:13-17 (TEV)

So, what is James trying to say? Don't plan for the future? Stay away from rich people? Forget about making money? Are those the things that he is trying to tell us? Well, if they were his thoughts, then let's see how well they line up with the rest of Scripture?

- Is James speaking out against planning for the future? No, because Solomon says: ⁵ The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty. Proverbs 21:5 (NIV) That's telling us that planning can be a good thing.
- Is James speaking out against rich people? I don't think so because Proverbs tells us: ⁴ Lazy people are soon poor; hard workers get rich. Proverbs 10:4 (NLT2) So we can't beat up on Joel Olsteen on that point alone.
- Well, maybe he is warning us against the evils of capitalism and profit making—is that what the theme is here? Nope—for the Scriptures assure us: ²³ Work brings profit, but mere talk leads to poverty! Proverbs 14:23 (NLT2)

So, wait a minute, James! Where in the world are you coming from? Is there anything whatsoever in the Scriptures upon which you could possibly support your assertions in chapter 4? Well, James would tell us, "*Yes, there actually is.*" He would point us to the Book of Proverbs to show us that his words are completely supported by Scripture, because if we look in Proverbs, it tells us this: ¹ We can make our own plans, but the LORD gives the right answer. Proverbs 16:1 (NLT2) That is what James is focusing upon—he is telling us how to order our priorities when making our personal plans for the future. And the number one priority should be to never leave God out of our life planning process—on all decisions, both great and small.

When God's Word tells us something like that, it usually provides us with illustrations as to how this should look when applied to a person's life. And that is certainly the case when it comes to making our plans in a manner that takes God into account—in a manner that our plans will be consistent with God's plans. Let's start with two people who had a hard time understanding that their plans needed to be adjusted in order to be consistent with those of God.

For example, Jonah had a plan. His plan was to tell his people, the Israelites all about God because he was a prophet of God. And that was not an unworthy plan. In fact, it was a plan that had great merit. Telling God's people about God is a very good thing. In fact, that is what I am trying to do this morning. But as good as Jonah's plan was, God had a different plan. God's plan was for Jonah to take the message of His salvation to a people who were not so familiar with that message. You see, God wanted Jonah to bear the message of salvation to the people of Nineveh—the place where modern day Mosul is located in Iraq. The problem was that Jonah didn't want to have anything to do with that plan. The last thing that he wanted to be a part of was a plan that did anything good for the Ninevites. He viewed the people of Nineveh as the worst enemy of Israel and the only thing that he wanted for them was their destruction. And so, instead of following God's plan, Jonah planned a different trip. Nineveh was about 500 miles to the east, but Jonah set sail on a fast ship in the opposite direction for Tarshish, about 2,000 miles to the west on the coast of Spain. His plan was to get as far away from Nineveh as you could possibly get. And we all know how the story went for Jonah. Instead of landing in Tarshish, he ended up in the belly of a whale until God finally got him to quite reluctantly get on board with God's plan. And he eventually preached God's message to Nineveh and because of that salvation came to a great many people. Now is Jonah a good example of following God's plan? Of course not! Jonah is the worst example we could imagine. If a man of God, like Jonah, who both knows God and God's plan for his life, yet rebuffs God—well, it doesn't get much worse than that. The bottom line is that we definitely don't want to be like Jonah. Why?—because at the end of the Book of Jonah, he was sitting there outside the city bemoaning the fact that God had shown mercy to the people of Nineveh. You see, what we have with Jonah is what we have with so many people in the church today. It is a conflict between their wills and the will of God.¹ It is a conflict that puts their salvation very much in doubt. You can't serve God and enjoy the blessings of His plan, if all you do is insist that your plans take priority over His.

Let's move on to the next guy who was also a man of God, yet his initial planning was anything but godly. This man's name was Saul. Saul had a plan. His plan was to round up as many Christians as possible and beat them up, throw them in jail, or better yet—simply kill them. Saul was to Christians of the 1st century what Hitler was to the Jews in the 20th century. But God had a different plan for Saul.

God wanted him to be perhaps the greatest missionary and Christian theologian who would ever lived this side of Jesus Christ. So when Jesus appeared to Saul on that Road to Damascus, Saul was surprised to learn that the plan he'd been following was so out of sync with God's plans. Saul thought killing Christians was a good thing, yet Jesus presented Saul with a very pointed question when He asked, "Saul, Saul—why are you persecuting Me?" And when Saul asked who was addressing him, the answer came back, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to **kick against the goads.**"²

Yes, it is hard to kick against the goads, especially when those goads represent God's plan for your life. Today, we are not so familiar with "*goads*" as Saul would have been. But, "*goads*" were long pointed sticks that farmers prodded their oxen with to make sure that they kept going in a straight line when they were plowing. And if the oxen kicked against these sharp goads, they soon found out how painful it could be kicking at pointed sticks. And this encounter with the Risen Christ changed everything for Saul—who now would be renamed "*Paul*"—because he didn't pull a Jonah. He didn't continue to kick against the goads and from that point on he made sure that all of his future plans were *God-directed*, not merely *Paul directed*.

Now there are also examples of those who, once they heard the call, they readily conformed their life plans to God's plans. We have Abraham, who was called by God to move along with his family from the City of Haran in Mesopotamia all the way to what would be the Promised Land in Palestine. While his dad remained back in Haran, Abraham kept with the plan—he kept right on going.³

And what about Jesus' disciples? Peter, Andrew, James and John had big plans in the fishing business—they wanted to make a profit too. But when Jesus offered them His new plans—he'd make them "fishers of men"⁴—they dropped their nets and left their boats behind. No more slaving at their jobs just to end up rendering taxes to Caesar; rather, they decided to render unto God what certainly belonged to Him.⁵ Or take Matthew, who had set up a great plan with his cushy government job collecting taxes for the Romans. The tax business was even more profitable than the fishing business. Yet, we are told when Jesus beckoned to him to come and follow, he just stood up and walked away from his tax booth to pursue the most profitable plan of all as he followed His Lord and Savior.⁶

You see, these are differing examples of what it means to plan for the future. Some people act a lot like Jonah, they know what God wants of them, but they ignore His plan and head in the opposite direction. Others think that they are acting according to God's plan but, like Saul, they are only doing more harm than good. And unless and until they truly focus their eyes upon Jesus and the truth of God's Word, they never see the light in that Damascus Road, and they just remain (unlike Paul) kicking so painfully against those goads. But a few, like Abraham and like the Jesus' disciples—they truly get it.

They hear the voice of God and acknowledge the goodness and wonder of His call. They believe the words from the Prophet Jeremiah which proclaim: ¹¹ “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Jeremiah 29:11 (TLB) What is this future of hope and how do we attain it?

Well, to answer that, we need to begin to understand the future as something that offers us tremendous opportunity. Pastor and Christian writer, C. Neil Strait, hits upon this when he said: *“The future is an opportunity yet unmet, a path yet untraveled, a life yet unlived. But how the future will be lived, what opportunities will be met, what paths traveled, depends on the priorities and purposes of life today.”*⁷ And that, indeed, is the problem—what will your priority and purpose in life be as defined from today’s perspective? Because if your priority and purpose is solely dedicated to pursuing ***your plans, apart from God***, you might as well jump on that same cruise liner that Jonah jumped on. But, if your life-planning priority takes God seriously, and includes Him in all your plans, then that future of hope will become a reality.

The Apostle Peter tells us that the basis of our future hope lies solely in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For he says: ²¹ Through Christ you have come to trust in God. And you have placed your faith and hope in God because He raised Christ from the dead and gave Him great glory. 1 Peter 1:21 (NLT2) Paul affirms this saying: “This truth gives them [we Christians] confidence that they have eternal life, which God—who does not lie—promised them before the world began.” Titus 1:2 (NLT2) That is why James was so critical of those who foolishly proclaim: “Tomorrow we are going to such and such a town, stay there a year, and open up a profitable business.” James 4:13 (TLB) Not only do they presume to know the future, but they state with great confidence their life-purpose in executing their own selfish plans, again completely apart from God. And it is about people like that who Paul speaks of when he says: ¹⁷ Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. 1 Timothy 6:17 (NLT2)

I read something earlier this week in Decision Magazine—it’s a publication of the Billy Graham Evangelical Association. The article was an interview with Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy Graham. Anne has been a Christian writer and speaker for about 40 years now. The interview focused on a difficult time that she has been going through lately. Anne was diagnosed with breast cancer last August. Her plans as a writer and speaker for Christ came to a screeching halt as she had to endure seven excruciating chemo treatments, and then surgery, followed by a month of daily radiation treatments. The interview was conducted the day before her last radiation treatment. The interviewer

asked her what she thought that God had been teaching her through this awful experience. This is how she responded: “Many people who are diagnosed with something like this wonder, *Why did this happen to me? Why didn’t God protect me? Does He not love me? What did I do to deserve this?* I felt like I needed to set an example as someone who loves the Lord. I love Him more today than I did when I was first diagnosed. This cancer is not any indication that I’ve been bad or that He doesn’t love me or that He hasn’t blessed me. ***It’s just my assignment.*** It’s what He’s given me so that I can use it to glorify Him. . . I feel like I couldn’t have made it through without that constant companionship of the Holy Spirit. He has enabled me to get up every morning to do what I’ve had to do, to handle some of the horrendous chemo side effects. I think that my overall message after going through this is ***the blessings of God.*** He has poured out His blessings, and if there’s one thing I’d say to women who are going through this [***or to anyone else going through any other difficult times in their lives***], it would be to ask God to give you the eyes to see His blessings because they’re all around you. But we miss them if we don’t look for them. We shouldn’t be so focused on our own pain or our own discomfort or disappointments or the fact that ***what we had planned didn’t come about*** that ***we miss what He has for us.***”⁸

It is almost as if Anne Graham Lotz were speaking with the Apostle James—because they are both definitely on the same page regarding what our attitude, as Christians, needs to be about God’s plans of our lives. She spoke so well, so eloquently about her appreciation and acceptance of God’s plans—what she refers to as His ***assignments*** within her life. God has an assignment for you in your life. God has great plans for you. They may be very different from what you have planned. They may even be very painful at times, but His plans are so very much better because they do, in fact, offer to you ***“a future and a hope”*** in eternal life. For anyone who may be ***“kicking against the goads”*** or setting sail in a fast boat away for God, it’s time for a new plan. Life, as James reminds us, is but a ***“puff of smoke”*** that dissipates on the breeze. Maybe it’s time to evaluate your life plans. If they don’t reflect God as the central part of that planning process, then it’s time to accept the plan that Jesus has for you, before your ***“puff of smoke”*** is forever gone.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
June 9, 2019
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¹ Clifton J Allen, *Broadman Bible Commentary – Hosea-Malachi*, (Nashville, Tennessee: WORDsearch, 1972), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 181-182.

² Acts 9:3-5 (NKJV) ³ As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. ⁴ Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

³ Genesis 11:31 (NLT2) One day Terah took his son Abram, his daughter-in-law Sarai (his son Abram's wife), and his grandson Lot (his son Haran's child) and moved away from Ur of the Chaldeans. He was headed for the land of Canaan, but they stopped at Haran and settled there.

⁴ Matthew 4:18-22 (NLT2) ¹⁸ One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living.

¹⁹ Jesus called out to them, "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" ²⁰ And they left their nets at once and followed him. ²¹ A little farther up the shore he saw two other brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, repairing their nets. And he called them to come, too. ²² They immediately followed him, leaving the boat and their father behind.

⁵ Matthew 22:18-22 (NLT2) ¹⁸ But Jesus knew their evil motives. "You hypocrites!" he said. "Why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Here, show me the coin used for the tax." When they handed him a Roman coin, ²⁰ he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" ²¹ "Caesar's," they replied. "Well, then," he said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." ²² His reply amazed them, and they went away.

⁶ Matthew 9:9 (NLT2) ⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

⁷ C. Neil Strait, Edythe Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 231.

⁸ Decision Magazine, "Looking for the Blessings, Even in Cancer—A conversation with Anne Graham Lotz," Vol. 60, No. 6, June 2019, 35-36.