

“Our Plans”

*Proverbs 21:30; Judges 21:25; Ecclesiastes 2:11;
Jeremiah 32:6-15; James 4:13-17; Ecclesiastes
12:13-14*

So . . . what are your plans?



Plans, plans, plans . . . 12-month plans, 3 year plans, 5 year plans . . . so many plans. Yet, so often our plans are undone by things out of our control: 9/11, covid, recessions, illness, and so on. So, what are we to do. Give up planning and live every moment only in the moment? That seems pretty unrealistic. What then, we ask???

A good place to begin in rethinking all this is the wisdom literature in the Bible: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and James.

If you've read Ecclesiastes, you might be asking yourself what a passage from it is doing in a series on the book of Proverbs. Indeed, you don't have to read much of Ecclesiastes before you find yourself asking how this book made it into the Bible at all!

At first glance, Ecclesiastes seems to endorse a despairing view of life and creation. In the opening phrases, we are introduced to the Teacher's teaching: "Perfectly pointless, says the Teacher, perfectly pointless. Everything is pointless." The Hebrew word that the CEB translates as "perfectly pointless" is *hebel*, which literally means breath or vapor. The NRSV uses the archaic word "vanity" because of its long tradition in English literature – "vanity of vanities!" But the word means pointless or meaningless.

The wonderful thing about Ecclesiastes is that by painting vivid pictures of a purposeless, godless life, Ecclesiastes points us toward the futility of any life not grounded in God and even the futility of all life if there is no god.

And James' point in today's passage is much like that. He isn't saying we shouldn't plan. Jesus told his disciples to count the cost (Luke 14:28), to know what they were undertaking. Planning is fine, presumptuousness is not. **When we imagine that we can go about making our merry way in the world without grounding our decisions and actions in God, then we are being presumptuous.** We begin to pull our life apart – the Sunday part that is God's and the Monday-Saturday part that is ours to do with as we see fit. N. T. Wright writes:

Here is a Christian who is running a small business. All right, he thinks to himself (and perhaps says to a friend), we shall go off to a different town and ply our trade there and make some money. He (or indeed she; there were independent businesswomen in the ancient world, as we know from Acts and elsewhere) thinks that the future can be planned like that, all laid out. Perhaps there is even a suggestion that, since we are now the people of the Messiah, our plans can be made more securely, because God is on our side!

Whatever the case on that point, James again has stern words in store. Don't you realize, he says, what your life is like? Think of the mist you see out of the window on an autumn morning. It hangs there in the valley, above the little stream. It is beautiful, evocative, mysterious; yes, just like a human being can be. Then the sun comes up a bit further, and ... the mist simply disappears. That's what your life is like. You have no idea what today will bring, let alone tomorrow.

The lesson, once more, is humility, applying what had been said in verses 6 and 10. Learn to take each day as a gift from God, and to do such planning as is necessary in the light of that. This, indeed, has been built into Christian understanding to this day, so that many people will say 'God willing' or 'if the Lord wills', to make it clear that in their proposals for the future they are taking care not to usurp God's sovereignty. Sometimes this is even shortened to the Latin abbreviation 'DV', standing for *Deo volente*,

‘God willing’. That too, of course, can just become a slogan which people say without thinking, and perhaps without really meaning it. But at least it serves as a sign that this particular lesson of James (unlike some others, sadly) has been taken into the bloodstream of Christian understanding.¹

One of my favorite “small” stories in the Bible is about Jeremiah and his embrace of God’s future rather than despairing and planning for the world that everyone else saw.

Let me explain. A long time ago, *Early Edition* was a popular television series. It told the story of a young man who was visited daily by a yellow cat delivering a copy of tomorrow’s paper, sending the hero on a mission to prevent a pending tragedy that the “early edition” revealed.

I guess as a metaphor, the prophet Jeremiah is the cat from *Early Edition*. Both in word and deed, Jeremiah brought God’s message about Jerusalem’s coming destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. Jeremiah brought this message to God’s people in what he said and, more so than any other prophet, in what he did. But whereas the cat turned the message over to someone ready to do something about it, Jeremiah’s message went unheeded.

By the time we get to today’s Scripture passage in Jeremiah, the Babylonian army has besieged the city. It didn’t take a magical cat or even a prophet of God to know what was coming – devastation and exile. Utter ruin. The death of Jerusalem.

Sure, I’ll take that bet

But in today’s passage, Jeremiah is given another symbolic action to accomplish. With the Babylonian army arrayed outside the walls of Jerusalem, God tells Jeremiah to go out and buy a plot of land in his hometown of Anathoth, about three miles northeast of Jerusalem.

I wonder what was going through Jeremiah’s mind. This must have seemed as idiotic to him as it would to anyone else. The death of Israel is at hand and Jeremiah is supposed to go make a land investment. Five times in this brief passage, Jeremiah makes it clear that this is God’s doing, saying “Thus says the LORD.” Based on all the other stuff God had told him to do, Jeremiah probably figured that the land would be lost, just as the loincloth was ruined (Jeremiah 13) and the earthenware jug broken (Jeremiah 19).

But instead, v. 15 makes clear that this time, the action is not an enactment of loss but of hope. God is having Jeremiah buy the land for the future, the day when the Israelites would return to Judah. Jeremiah was going to make a profit on this field of hope.

Notice also the care that is paid to the details in this story. There are witnesses, the money is weighed, the deed carefully preserved. This is a symbolic act, but it is also quite real. Jeremiah is putting real money on the line. He is not just standing on the promises of God; he is betting on them!

Jeremiah is investing in the future, but it is not merely educated guesswork. Jeremiah’s bet is an act of trust and hope. There is risk to it. Jeremiah may be God’s prophet, but he is still a man, still one of us, subject to the same fears and uncertainties as all humans. If you doubt this, just picture Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even our Lord and Savior was not immune to fear.

But regardless of how risky this investment might have seemed to him, Jeremiah lays out the money because his hope rests on his confidence in the promises of God. His hope and our own is not a matter of mere wishes or carefully calculated probabilities. Our hope lies in our confidence that God is faithful. Our hope lies in the will of God; we trust that living in God’s way, 24-7, is indeed the way to the good life we all seek. We can never presume that we know a way that is better than God’s way. Reflecting on the passage from James, J. A. Motyer writes:

[This is] the sin of presumptuousness, which comes from a wrong understanding of ourselves in relation to our own lives and ambitions. It is interesting—and typical of James—that this sin too is put

¹ Wright, N.T. (2011). *Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John and Judah* (pp. 31–32). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox Press.

before us as a sin of speech. We are not now, however, defaming a brother; we are talking with a like arrogance to ourselves. We assure ourselves that time is on our side and at our disposal (*today or tomorrow*). We make our plans as if personal ability (*and trade*) and the profit motive (*and get gain*) were the only issues to take into account. We overlook frailty (*a mist*) and ignore the fact that even the small print of life is in the hands of a sovereign God (*if the Lord wills*). Yet we know better all the time (*knows what is right*), but self-confidence makes us *boast*, and *all such boasting is evil* and a sin against knowledge.

What is this presumptuousness of which James speaks? It first touches life: *today ... tomorrow ... a year* (13). It is the presumption that we can continue alive at will. Secondly, it touches choice: *today or tomorrow we will go ... spend a year ... trade*. It is the presumption that we are masters of our own life, so that we need to do no more than decide and, lo and behold, it will happen like that. Thirdly, it touches ability: *and trade and get gain*. Of course, we shall succeed if we want! We can do it!

Once more -- it is all so ordinary, indeed so natural. That is exactly the point. When James exposes the blemish of presumptuousness, he exposes something that is the unrecognized claim of our hearts. We speak to ourselves as if life were *our* right, as if *our* choice were the only deciding factor, as if we had in *ourselves* all that was needed to make a success of things, as if getting on, making money, doing well were life's sole objective.²

An Overview of Ecclesiastes

There seem to be as many approaches to Ecclesiastes as there are commentators, so don't be surprised if you find it challenging. One way to see the book's structure is to compare it to Job. In Job, there are the introductory scenes, followed by the long (and fruitless!) speeches by Job and his friends, followed by the arrival of God and the restoration of Job's fortunes. Ecclesiastes opens with a short prologue where the narrator tells of the Teacher's sayings (1:1 — 1:11). Then there are 11 or so chapters where the Teacher speaks for himself (also fruitlessly!). At the end of the book, our narrator returns and offers us some perspective (God's perspective!) on the Teacher's philosophy. (12:9-14)

In *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Andrew Hill & John Walton suggest that there are four main themes in Ecclesiastes:

- We should not expect life to be self-fulfilling.
- Our frustrations in life are unavoidable.
- We must accept the seasons of life.
- We can enjoy life only through a God-centered worldview.

Many Old Testament writers paint pictures for us, calling us to look for the truths behind the picture. For example, Micah 4:1-8 is a picture of God's kingdom. I tend to see Ecclesiastes as a picture of a life lived without God. It is a bleak picture that pulls no punches. If there is no God or if we choose to live as if there is no God, then life is "meaningless," and we might as well "eat, drink, and be merry." There are a few brighter moments in the book, but they only lure one back into the Teacher's world of the absurd, back into his efforts to make his way through his meaningless life. If you believe your life has no purpose or meaning, his advice is pretty good!

Ecclesiastes testifies to Israel's willingness to confront the hard realities of life, the sense of purposelessness and drift that afflict us all from time to time. Israel saw that for mature, caring adults, life is not very simple, and it is not a life of endless victories. The ordinary experiences of life test our faith. Still, as the narrator tells us at the end of the book—when all has been said and all the absurdities of life confronted, we are called to our duty: "Fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13).

² Motyer, J. A. (1985). *The message of James: the tests of faith* (p. 160). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.