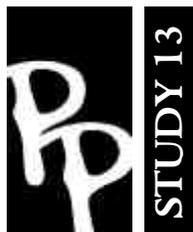


# GOD WILLING



## James 4:13-17

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: The doctrine of God’s providence
- 📁 Over to you

### Introduction to the passage

The lesson of these verses seems so well known that we might be surprised to find it here. But it is the simple lessons that we so often forget, and as with this one, our neglect can indicate deeper problems. The connection with the previous verses is easy to see. Nowhere is human pride more clearly seen than when we live our lives without reference to God, as though he does not exist. This is the folly that James deals with here.

### What these verses mean

Verse 13

**Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.”**

James says, “Now listen,” because he wants to alert people whose minds are set on their own way of life and who do not normally stop to take stock of what they are doing. We can imagine a group of traders poring over a map and pointing to one place and then another. The only thing in their minds is their plans, and they can already relish the pleasure of the profits they will make from their trading. James is not just addressing Christian believers

who are traders, he uses those generally in commercial business as an illustration to make an important point for all believers. Such traders display an attitude which all believers can so easily adopt. What then are these attitudes? Notice how the phrase “we will” is relevant with each phrase.

you who say	the outward sign of a whole attitude of life which is total arrogance. The idea that there could be failure in their plan has not even been part of their thinking.
[we will] today or tomorrow	looking into the future to make specific plans as to what will take place.
we will go to this or that city	it is as if they own the place and speak about their business as if nothing in the world could stop them
[we will] spend a year there	no account is taken of other things that could affect or change their timetable. The heart is stupidly secure and utterly insensible
[we will] carry on business and make money	not just making money but the love of making it. That was the whole purpose of the exercise.

In all this God does not feature anywhere in the plans being made.

Verse 14

**Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.**

We might want to ask, what is wrong with a group of businessmen planning like this? Surely they would be very poor at their job if they made no plans? James would agree with that so far, but then he makes the statement that immediately exposes the problem. He says, in effect, here you are planning a whole year’s work, when, for example, you do not even know if, for you, tomorrow will exist (Prov. 27:1). Such people want to be independent but God says that they are ignorant. Look how James continues.

**What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.**

James has not yet mentioned God in this passage, but he is compelling us to face facts that will drive us to realise how dependent we are on God. Having

exposed our ignorance about the future he now points to the evidence of our frailty and the uncertainty of life itself. The illustration James uses is the mist that lingers for a little while and then quickly disappears. In God's timescale this is how the life of a person appears to him. The prophet Daniel reminded the Babylonian king Belshazzar, "God holds in his hand your life" (Dan. 5:23). Jesus told the parable of a rich farmer to whom God said, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you" (Luke 12:20). Since life itself is so fragile and uncertain, it is foolish for us to place all our confidence in our plans, our wisdom or our skills.

Verse 15

***Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."***

Some people react to the uncertainty of life by indulging in a life of pleasure: "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (1 Co.15:32). This is as foolish as laying plans as though we can be sure of the future. Other people conclude that the best thing is to do nothing because we cannot be sure of anything. But a Christian is right to make plans as the apostle Paul did (Rom. 15:23-29; Philm. 22). James' teaching continues the theme of humility we found in the last study. We are to live all the time aware of our dependence on God. Too often we make our plans and then add "God willing", when it would be better for us to say this, and mean it, before we begin to think about what we want to do. An unbeliever says, "It is my life and I can please myself what I do with it." A true believer may not use the words "God willing" before every decision, but his or her whole attitude of life will be, "My life belongs to God and I want always to please him in everything I do and his will is always best."

Verse 16

***As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.***

The reference to boasting and bragging is to empty, loud-mouthed arrogance. The sense of the original Greek words used is claiming something which is false. Here James is saying that men are boasting that they can make a success of life without any reference to God. Such boasting is false because the person is not in control of everything. It is godless and therefore it is evil.

Verse 17

***Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.***

If we know that God requires us to submit our lives to him, with our aims and ambitions, and we fail to do so, James says that this is sin. But in making that clear to us, James moves from a particular example to a general principle. This general principle covers anything in which we know what we should do, but we fail to do it. This is called a sin of omission (from the verb

to omit), which we tend to treat lightly as a matter to be regretted. (By contrast a sin of commission [from the verb to commit] is a sin we know we should not do, but do.) But James calls it sin, so it requires more than regret. Sin requires repentance before God and a plea for his pardon and cleansing (1 John 1:8-9).



## Summary

The message of these verses can be summed up in the words of the prophet Micah, "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Sadly, there were Christians in James' time who were acting arrogantly as they planned the future for themselves. They were like commercial traders, who acted as if they were in control of everything and could manipulate life to fit in with their wishes. Life is short and hangs by a thread. It is compared to mist, which appears and then suddenly goes. The Scripture has many warnings. We are not in control of the length of our lives. The Christian believer must recognise the sovereignty and will of God. James is not saying that before we make any decision we should always use a form of words such as "God willing", as a kind of ritual. His point is that a genuine Christian will want his or her whole life to be directed by the Lord. We will submit ourselves to him each day and we will believe that when our plans are hindered in any way or at any time, it is the Lord's intervention and it will be better for us.



## A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

### **Theme: Submission to God's way**

If we are sincere when we say "God willing" what will this mean in practice?

#### **I A right relationship with the Lord**

- a. We will want our lives to be pleasing to the Lord.
- b. We will believe that his way is best for us, even if it is not what we would wish.

## II A right understanding

A course of action cannot be according to God's will if it involves disobedience to his Word. For example –

- If our plan involves the deception of other people.
- If, as a believer, we plan to marry someone who is not a Christian
- If our plans mean the neglect of our family.
- If our plans hinder our regular fellowship with the Lord and with his people.

## III A right attitude

Having committed our way to the Lord we should persevere in it.

- a. We must not think that we will have no problems. The disciples of Jesus went with him into a boat to cross the lake. The next thing was a tremendous storm, and then they saw their Lord's amazing control over nature as he calmed the storm with a word (Luke 8:22-25).
- b. When things go wrong we may think we have made a mistake or even that the Lord has deserted us. But as we persevere, we find he has something to show us we had not expected, and which would not have been possible if everything had gone as we planned.

**Note** This is the life of faith to which the Lord has called us.



### Focus Point: The doctrine of God's providence

The title we have given to this study is "God willing". It concerns the future and our attitude to what is completely unknown to us human beings. Many people wake up each morning not knowing that it will be their last morning on this earth. Before the day is finished their life has gone – tragically, unexpectedly, accidentally, sorrowfully. None of us knows when our last day will be. An event may occur which changes our lives – a bereavement, accident, war, natural disaster, economic collapse, relationship breakdown, becoming rich, falling in love etc. People look to the future and make plans without taking into account any of the above possibilities. When all these events happen each and every day, it is because of the chaotic world in which we live and which is out of control. What James has been implying is that God, the all powerful Creator, is in control and the Christian believer wants his or her life to conform to God's will. So as the Christian thinks of tomorrow and beyond, it is in the context of God's great plan. Plans that are made are made with God in mind and pleasing to him. If the plan is cut short or cannot take place because of an event, then the believer acknowl-

edges that the plan was subject to God's purposes and God has overruled. The Christian is able to do this because of the biblical doctrine of the providence of God.

The doctrine of God's providence is a difficult one for our finite minds to grasp and understand. Every believer comes to the point where he or she has to believe the doctrine even if they do not fully understand how it fits in with other teaching of Scripture.

#### *Definition of the doctrine*

- God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he
- (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them (*preservation*)
  - (2) co-operates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do (*working in agreement*)
  - (3) directs them to fulfil his purpose (*government*)

#### **Preservation**

God preserves all things he has made (Col. 1:17; Heb 1:3). He also causes them to maintain their properties with which he created them. God preserves water that it continues to act like water. He makes grass to continue like grass. He causes the paper on which this sentence is printed to act like paper, so that it does not dissolve into water or change into a living plant. It will retain its properties until it is acted upon by some other part of creation and its properties changed – for example being burnt by fire. The paper will continue to act like paper so long as God preserves the earth and the creation that he has made.

God's providence provides a basis for science. God has made and continues to sustain a universe that acts in predictable ways. Man was able to visit the moon because scientists could rely on and be confident in unchanging factors. Every moment of the day there are planes flying in the sky because of the stable, unchanging properties (and their laws) of the universe. The fuel that was put into a car yesterday to make that vehicle go will have the same effect tomorrow and next year. The reason for that is because God's providence sustains a universe in which created things maintain the properties with which he created them.

#### **Working in agreement**

God brings about all things according to his will (Eph. 1:11). No event in creation takes place that is outside his providence. This is hidden from our eyes unless we read it in Scripture. It is not clearly evident from the observation of the natural world around us. Wayne Grudem lists eight areas in which the universe works in agreement with God's design.

1. *Inanimate creation*

There are many things that happen in creation which we think of as natural occurrences, but the Bible states that God causes them to happen (Ps. 148:8; Job 37:6-13). The grass grows, the stormy wind blows, the snow falls, the earthquake shakes the ground.

2. *Animals*

God feeds the animals and the birds (Ps. 104:27-29; Matt. 6:26, 10:29).

3. *Random or chance events*

Casting lots or throwing dice is typical of random events. The outcome of such an event is from God (Prov. 16:33).

4. *Events fully caused by God and fully caused by the creature*

The cause of many things that happen, such as grass growing and rain falling, can be explained. However, it would be incorrect to reason that if we know the natural cause of something in this world then God did not cause it. Nor is it correct to think that events are partly caused by God and partly caused by other factors. God works and directs through the distinctive properties of each created thing. So events can be 100% attributable to God and 100% attributable to the created world. The divine cause of each event works as invisible, behind the scenes. This is the primary cause that plans and initiates everything that happens. But the created thing brings about actions in ways consistent with the creature's own properties, ways that can often be identified by observation. These are the secondary causes of everything that happens and the most evident to us.

5. *The affairs of nations*

Scripture speaks of God's providential control of human affairs. God makes great nations and destroys them (Job 12:23). He rules the nations (Ps. 22;28). He determined the time of existence and the place of every nation on earth (Acts 17:26) and the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1).

6. *All aspects of our lives*

This is the most difficult for us to work out and apply. Yet Scripture throughout affirms that God brings about various events in our lives. This ranges from God planning our days before we were born (Ps. 139:16; Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15) to our daily food (Matt. 6:11). All our actions are under God's providential care. Success and failure come from God, our talents and abilities are fashioned by him. God influences the desires and decisions of people, especially in believers, working and willing them for his own good pleasure. All of these directions by God are unseen (primary causes), but this should not lead us to deny the reality of human choices and actions. Scripture affirms that people do really cause events to happen. We are significant and responsible. We have choices that bring about real results. God has made us in a wonderful way that has

given us the property of willing choice. How does all this fit together? God causes all things that happen. He does so in a way that he somehow upholds our ability to make willing, responsible choices. These choices have real and eternal results for which we are accountable. Scripture does not explain how God combines his providential control with our willing and significant choices. We therefore have to accept both so as to be faithful to the teaching of all Scripture and not fall into the situation where we deny one aspect or other.

7. *Providence and evil*

The question that is often asked when a disaster or evil thing happens is: "Why did God allow it?" If God does cause everything that comes about in the world then the question arises of the relationship between God's responsibility and the evil that takes place. Scripture is clear that God does not do anything evil. He does cause evil things to come about through the willing action of moral creatures. God cannot be blamed for any evil or for taking pleasure in anything evil. Human beings must take all responsibility for the evil they do. God hardened Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh also hardened his own heart. The evil that Pharaoh did arose out of the evil desires of his heart. The purpose behind God's hardening Pharaoh's heart was that so God could show his power so that God's name may be proclaimed in all the earth (Rom. 9:17). God is not to be blamed for evil that he has brought about through secondary agents. Very often God uses events, including evil human beings, to bring judgement on sin. This is probably the best way we can understand how God can righteously bring about evil events. All human beings are sinful creatures and none deserve God's favour or mercy. Therefore, when God brings evil on human beings, whether to discipline them, lead them to repentance or to bring judgement and condemnation on hardened sinners, God is not doing wrong. Everything works in God's good purposes to bring glory to him and his people. In punishing evil in those who are not saved in Christ, God is glorified through the demonstration of his justice, holiness and power (Ex. 9:16; Rom. 9:14-24). The most evil deed of all history was ordained by God. This was the crucifixion of Christ – God's holy servant. God predestined this to take place (Acts 4:27) and yet it was lawless men who crucified and killed him (Acts 2:23). God's plan and foreknowledge are linked with the moral blame of the actions of lawless men. They were not forced by God to act against their wills. God brought about his plan through their willing choices for which they were responsible.

8. *Free will*

If God exercises providential control over all events does man have a free will? Man cannot act outside of God's sustaining and controlling activity.

He cannot make decisions that are not caused by anything external to himself. In that sense man is not free otherwise Hebrews 1:3 would not be true. It is not possible for man to be totally free of God's control. However, man is free to make willing choices that have real effects. God does not place restrictions on man's will to make decisions. We act in accordance with our own desires. In that sense we have a free will. If we did not have such free will, then we would be subject to fatalism or determinism and would conclude that our choices do not matter or that we cannot really make willing choices.<sup>1</sup>

### **Government**

God has a purpose in all he does and he governs all things so that his purposes will be accomplished. He does everything according to his will, in the host of heaven and amongst the inhabitants of the earth (Dan. 4:35). God is sovereign over all and works his purposes out in every event that happens.

### **Conclusion**

God works through human actions in his providential management of the world. The danger is that we neglect human responsibility in the light of God's sovereignty. In God's providence we are still responsible for our actions, which have real and eternal consequences. Obeying God brings about reward and eternity with God. Disobedience leads to punishment and eternity without God. Our actions do have real results and change the course of events. Neglect of my body will cause a likely earlier death than if I look after it. God has ordained that events will come about by our causing them. However we do not know what God has planned, but by trusting and obeying him we will discover the good things that he has planned. We should take care in exercising wisdom and caution in our lives. God has ordained prayer as a significant means of bringing results about in the world. We discover that God has ordained our prayer to bring about significant changes in the world. The doctrine of God's providence should make us act and not sit around waiting for things to happen. This doctrine should encourage the Christian believer to trust in God's sovereign control with the realisation that the use of the ordinary means is necessary for things to come about in the way that God has planned them.

*The material used in preparing this Focus Point was taken from Wayne Grudem's Bible Doctrine – Essential teachings of the Christian faith (Inter-Varsity Press).*

<sup>1</sup> We freely choose according to our nature, which is sinful. Therefore apart from grace all our free choices are governed and contaminated by our sin. Indeed prior to conversion even those choices considered to be good in the eyes of men are in fact sinful ones because they were not done for the glory of God (e.g. Sacrifices and prayers are unacceptable to God, see Proverbs 15:8, 21:4, 28:9). We freely choose according to our fallen sinful nature and therefore have no ability



## Over to you

People in your society may be very fatalistic. Does this view of life come into your church? If so, how would you deal with the problem?

As a church leader, do you plan your ministry and the work of the church? If not, should you? If you do, in what attitude do you undertake your planning?

It is our privilege to train our people to order their church life and their personal lives according to the Lord's pattern that he has given us in the Scriptures: that is, to think biblically. Has this been the aim of your ministry?

*Footnote continued from page 9*

to do good works that are pleasing to God, which is why we need his grace to be at work in our hearts to change us. In this sense the only people to have a genuinely free will with the equal ability to good or evil were Adam and Eve. We now have a freed will.