

# Sermon Series: Wisdom that Works

## #9 Wise Planning James 4:13-17

I wonder lately if you've heard the phrase: "the best laid plans"?

Dashed hopes and dreams are too familiar with right now: **weddings** cancelled, **projects** scuttled, **staff** stood down, **bills** mounting, hopes and dreams **dashed**, and in some cases, health is ruined and lives are lost. Many are left asking, "What have I done to deserve this?" "Why is the universe against me?"

The saying "**Best laid plans**" doesn't originate with a **Kathy Lette book**, nor with the **1999 feature film** with that title, even **Ted Lasso** didn't think it up.



Nor does it come from songster **James Blunt**, who sang, "Tell me why all the best laid plans, fall apart in your hands; And my good intentions never end, the way I meant."



In reality, "**best laid plans**" originates with **Scotsman, Robert Burns** from a poem written in 1785<sup>1</sup> when he accidentally disturbed a mouse's nest while ploughing a field.



American John Steinbeck took Burns' theme a step further in **Of Mice and Men**. He pointed to the **fragility** and **impermanence** of what we like to call "home", and the harshness of life for some in our world.



The story goes that in the early 1980's a retired couple was so alarmed by the threat of nuclear war they undertook a serious study of all the inhabited places on the face of the earth. Their goal was to determine where in the world would be the least likely place affected by a nuclear war – a place of ultimate peace and security. They studied and travelled, travelled and studied. Finally, they

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<sup>1</sup> His poem is titled, *To a mouse*. The full line reads, "the best-laid schemes o'mice an' men gang aft a-gley."

found the place. At Christmas time they sent their priest back home a card from their new safe haven – **the Falkland Islands**. In April of **the very next year** Great Britain declared a territorial war on Argentina regarding sovereignty over their new home. Peace was shattered. The couple were **devastated** and **perplexed**. Their grand plans were **foiled**.

**Planning** for the future is something we all do. But in James 4:13-17 it seems at first hearing that God is **down** on planning. We read:

<sup>13</sup> Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ <sup>14</sup> Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

There’s an old saying: **“How do you make God laugh? Make a plan.”** Is this how James views the practice of planning our lives? **Does God hate** planning?

**No!** Instead, James is once again addressing **one particular group** in the churches, the **wealthy**. God is **not against** planning. God is **not against** making money or developing a business either. Instead, as James has shown before, God **opposes the arrogant**. And this was the problem at hand. **Vss. 16 & 17...**

As it is, you boast in your **arrogance**; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin. (Jas. 4:16,17).

Some **wealthy** Christians were boasting **brazenly as if they could discount** God from the equation of their own grand plans, hopes and dreams. They flaunted their **control** over the future. At the same time, they **were happy to wilfully neglect the poor** immediately around them in the churches. James calls out...

- their **ignorance** of the **fragility** of life,
- their **arrogant** sense of **independence** from God,
- their **hubris** regarding future **self-advancement**, and
- their **wilful neglect** of the **poor**.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Not merely a matter of knowing the right theology, but once again, James is concerned with what lies behind the actions; what is exposed as on the inside: the true self, the heart and attitude as most important.

**REFLECT** – Let’s pause to reflect for a moment. Let’s firstly be sensitive to those today whose grand plans have been shattered by Covid-19. Let’s not be unsympathetic to anyone who has set a hope, and seen it dashed on the rocks. Furthermore, you may not be among the arrogant of heart. You may even be powerless to plan right now. If that’s the case, let this text be a lesson to bank for another day. Let’s learn what James teaches lest we be unwise in case freedom, wealth, and power to plan our own destiny becomes ours in spades.

Note that James **offers not just** a warning but a **better wisdom** to take up in our planning. **In verse 15** he writes...

... you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’

If James was rebuking the **arrogant** in the churches, he also intended to **commend** the humble in heart. Max Lucado tells a short story to highlight the difference:

**A little girl is on the beach.**<sup>3</sup> On her knees she scoops and packs the sand with plastic shovels into a bright red bucket. Then she upends the bucket on the surface and lifts it. And, to the delight of the little architect, a castle tower is created. All afternoon she will work, spooning out the moat and packing the walls. Bottle tops will be sentries. [Lollipop] sticks will be bridges. A sandcastle will be built.



Big city. Busy streets. Rumbling traffic. **A man in his office.** At his desk he shuffles papers into stacks and delegates assignments. He cradles the phone on his shoulder and punches the keyboard with his fingers.



Numbers are juggled and contracts are signed and much to the delight of the man, a profit is made. All his life he will work. Formulating the plans. Forecasting the future. Annuities will be sentries. Capital gains will be bridges. An empire will be built.

**Two builders of two castles.** They have much in common. They shape granules into grandeurs. They see nothing and make something. They

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<sup>3</sup> Lucado’s original has a boy on a beach

are diligent and determined. And for both the tide will [eventually] rise and the end will come.

Yet that is where the **similarities cease**. For the little girl sees the end while the man ignores it. Watch the girl as the dusk approaches. As the waves near, the wise child jumps to her feet and begins to clap. There is no sorrow. No fear. No regret. She knew this would happen. She is not surprised. And when the great breaker crashes into her castle and her masterpiece is sucked into the sea, she smiles. She smiles, picks up her tools, takes her father's hand, and goes home.

The grownup, however, is **not so wise**. As the wave of years collapses on his castle he is terrified. He hovers over the sandy monument to protect it. He blocks the waves from the walls he has made. Soaked and shivering he snarls at the incoming tide. 'It's my castle,' the man [defiantly declares]; but the ocean need not respond. Both know to whom the sand belongs.

Lucado ends by saying to us, "Go ahead and build, but **build with a child's heart**. When the sun sets and the tides take, applaud. Salute the process of life, take your Heavenly Father's hand and go home."<sup>4</sup>

James too would urge us to prefer **the heart of the child**. James 4:15 reflects the ancient wisdom of *Proverbs* 3:5-6,

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge God, and your paths will be made straight."

This resonates with the example and teaching of **Jesus** who said we should entrust "**tomorrow**" into the hands of our heavenly Father.<sup>5</sup>

Let me commend to you **3 P's** to help put James' wisdom into practice...

1. **Prioritize** God's sovereign purposes in your life plans,

When you construct your plans for the future, ask **where does God figure?** Is God off-limits to some areas of your future? How does God's

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<sup>4</sup> Max Lucado, *More Stories for the Heart*.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 6:19-34

master plan in the Gospel **factor** in your **future** thinking? Does contributing to justice and peace play a role? As **Prov 3:27** says, “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.” First then, **Prioritize** God’s plans over all, as you make your own.

2. Secondly, plan your life with God's **Perspective** in mind,

James 4:14, sounds like the teaching of Ecclesiastes<sup>6</sup>, and the Apostle Peter<sup>7</sup> who remind us that life is **fragile** and **fleeting**, and not in our control. I am just one of 7 billion people on the planet, and statistically even more insignificant in all of history. Humility is the rational response. In all this, Jesus then shows me how much **I’m loved** and **known** by God.<sup>8</sup> I can ask God to form in me true **humility** and bold **hope**, that comes from seeing life through God’s eyes. Consider God’s **perspective** when planning.

3. Recognize God's **Providence** on the journey.

Thirdly, **whatever the outcome** of our plans, whether good or bad, ask God’s help to learn to **celebrate** the promise that God’s **presence** and **providence** is with us every step of the journey. Jesus said, “I am with you always.” He gave us his Spirit to comfort, strengthen and guide.

The **best laid plans** of mice and of men (and women) are indeed as frail and fraught as each other. But when we set the priority of God’s sovereign will over our own, when we see the world from the perspective of God’s vision beyond our own limited insight, and when we trust in the promise of God’s providential help and comfort, our lives, whatever the future outcomes may be, will display the wisdom that comes “from above”.

**Steve Webster**

**St Michaels North Carlton**

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<sup>6</sup> Eccles. 1:11

<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 1:24

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 139:1-12; Matt. 10:29-31