



The Letter of James Bible Study Session 11 James 4:13-17

Study By
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Greek NT

<4:13> Ἄγε νῦν οἱ λέγοντες, Σήμερον ἢ αὔριον πορευσόμεθα εἰς τήνδε τὴν πόλιν καὶ ποιήσομεν ἐκεῖ ἐνιαυτὸν καὶ ἐμπορευσόμεθα καὶ κερδήσομεν· <4:14> οἵτινες οὐκ ἐπίστασθε τὸ τῆς αὔριον ποία ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν· ἀτιμίς γάρ ἐστε ἢ πρὸς ὀλίγον φαινομένη, ἔπειτα καὶ ἀφανιζομένη. <4:15> ἀντὶ τοῦ λέγειν ὑμᾶς, Ἐὰν ὁ κύριος θελήσῃ καὶ ζήσομεν καὶ ποιήσομεν τοῦτο ἢ ἐκεῖνο. <4:16> νῦν δὲ καυχᾶσθε ἐν ταῖς ἀλαζονείαις ὑμῶν· πᾶσα καύχησις τοιαύτη πονηρά ἐστιν. <4:17> εἰδότι οὖν καλὸν ποιεῖν καὶ μὴ ποιοῦντι, ἁμαρτία αὐτῷ ἐστιν.

Die Gute Nachricht Bibel

13 Nun zu euch, die ihr sagt: »Heute oder morgen werden wir in die und die Stadt reisen! Dort werden wir ein Jahr lang Geschäfte machen und viel Geld verdienen.« 14 Woher wisst ihr denn, was morgen sein wird? Was ist euer Leben? Es gleicht einem Dampfwölkchen, das aufsteigt und sich sogleich wieder auflöst. 15 Sagt lieber: »Wenn der Herr es will, werden wir noch leben und dies oder jenes tun.« 16 Ihr aber seid stolz und überheblich; und ein solcher Stolz ist verwerflich. 17 Im Übrigen gilt: Wer die Zeit und die Mittel hat, Gutes zu tun, und es nicht tut, macht sich schuldig.

NRSV

13 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." 14 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. 15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. 17 Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

NLT

13 Look here, you people who say, "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit." 14 How do you know what will happen tomorrow? For your life is like the morning fog – it's here a little while, then it's gone. 15 What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that." 16 Otherwise you will be boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil. 17 Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

The Study of the Text:¹

Context of our passage:

STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF TEXT Of James²

PRAESCRIPTIO BODY	1-194	1.1 1.2-5.20
Facing Trials	1-15	1.2-12
God and Temptation	16-24	1.13-18
The Word and Piety	25-37	1.19-27
Faith and Partiality	38-55	2.1-13
Faith and Works	56-72	2.14-26
Controlling the Tongue	73-93	3.1-12
True and False Wisdom	94-102	3.13-18
Solving Divisions	103-133	4.1-10
Criticism	134-140	4.11-12
Leaving God Out	141-146	4.13-17
Danger in Wealth	147-161	5.1-6
Persevering under Trial	162-171	5.7-11
Swearing	172-174	5.12
Reaching Out to God	175-193	5.13-18
Reclaiming the Wayward	194	5.19-20

¹With each study we will ask two basic questions. First, what was the most likely meaning that the first readers of this text understood? This is called the 'historical meaning' of the text. That must be determined, because it becomes the foundation for the second question, "What does the text mean to us today?" For any applicational meaning of the text for modern life to be valid it must grow out of the historical meaning of the text. Otherwise, the perceived meaning becomes false and easily leads to wrong belief.

²Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, *A Study Manual of James: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publications, Inc., 1988), 285. **Statements** indicate core thought expressions in the text as a basis for schematizing the rhetorical structure of the text. These are found in the Study Manual and also at the James Study internet site.

The literary setting of 4:13-17 follows the random pattern that we have seen thus far in our study of James. The one rather clearly defined link -- and it's an important one -- can be seen through the use of a classical Greek idiom of direct address in 4:13 that essentially matches the one in 5:1: "ἄγε νῦν..." Although difficult to translate into English, the NLT does a rather good job with its "Look here, you people who say..." The interpretive significance of this common pattern is to signal a shifting of focus in these two pericopes, 4:13-17 and 5:1-6. Careful analysis of the pattern of James' addressing his readers is consistently "brothers" (ἀδελφοί) up to 4:13 and a consistent return to it in 5:7. Most recent commentators realize this indicates that James has zeroed in on issues that lie beyond his initial readers and address concerns present in the surrounding world, especially the Diaspora Jewish world. The application to his Christian readers comes as "preventative medicine." That is, he seeks to head off some problems before they find their way into the communities of faith. Additionally, the two themes in 4:13-17 and 5:1-6 are especially common themes of the prophets in the Old Testament, and James employs considerable OT language in addressing the issues.

The historical setting behind 4:13-17 lay primarily in Diapora Judaism. From the time of the Babylonian captivity in the six century BCE, the Jewish people underwent profound social change. The center of Jewish society shifted from rural to urban and out of the Babylonian years came a traveling merchant middle class of Jews who migrated all over the eastern Mediterranean world to conduct business. Massive settlements developed in the northeastern Mediterranean world all the way westward to Rome. With this deep shift in social patterns that thrust Jews into a sea of Gentilism, many Jews let their religious heritage and values slip or complete vanish. In the pagan world of Gentilism they simply lived without active faith or participation in their Jewish religion. This was an issue addressed often by the late OT prophets and thus one that James saw as a potential problem for Jewish Christians living in that same Gentile dominated world.

Exegesis of the Text:

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

141 ^{4.13} **Come now,**
you who say,
Today
or
tomorrow we will go into this city
and
spend a year there
and
carry on business
and
earn a profit;
^{4.14} **you who do not understand about tomorrow,**
what your life may be.

142 For
you are a vapor,
which appears for a little while
then indeed
vanishes;

143 ^{4.15} **Instead, you ought to say,**
if the Lord wills
we will both live
and
-- ---- do this
or
that.

4.16 But
144 now you are boasting in your proud pretensions;
and
145 all such boasting is evil.

4.17 Therefore
to the one knowing to do good
and
not doing it,
146 to him it is sin.

Summary of the Rhetorical Structure:

In this pericope the rhetorical structure is fairly well defined. The first two statements set up an antithesis with the assertion of what is being said (statement 142) followed by an accusation that such a stance fails to understand the basic issue of life itself (statement 142). The correct stance is set forth in statement 143, using a well known axiom in the ancient world. Statements 144 and 145 return to the initial stance with a stinging condemnation of its wrongness. The passage concludes with an application of the preceding in statement 146.

At the heart of the issue is a stance taken (statement 141) which the author declares reflects a basic ignorance about the nature of life itself. Subsequently, the author condemns it as an evil expression of pride (statements 144 and 145). In the midst of this, he presents the alternative stance in statement 143. The passage reaches a climax with the use of a piece of early Christian tradition that has come to be known as the 'sin of omission' in statement 146. This applies the discussion by way of a back-handed warning to adopt the correct stance.

Key exegetical questions:

1) Compare the above translations of 4:14. What alternative readings of the Greek text are reflected by the variations in the translations?

A bit of explanation of ancient Greek text variations in readings. In the process of making copies of the NT documents during the first six to eight centuries after the apostolic era, variations of readings of these copies became a part of the Greek text tradition. Modern analysis seeks to evaluate all the five thousand plus ancient manuscripts known to exist today in order to determine which of the readings was most likely the original wording of the NT document. Since we do not have any of the original writings of the New Testament and the earliest full copies of the documents of the NT only reach back to within two hundred years of the original composition, this analysis is essential in order to have a starting point of the original language text upon which an English translation can be based. This verse in James has great diversity of readings among the ancient manuscripts. The following translates some of the primary ones:

(1) who do not know the (situation) of tomorrow. For what is your life? You are a vapor... (Codex Sinaiticus et als)

(2) who do not know the things of tomorrow. For what is your life? You will be a vapor... (Codex Alexandrinus et als)

(3) who do not know about tomorrow, that is, what your life is like. For you are a vapor... (Codex Vaticanus et als)

2) What does the Bible say about the nature of life? Compare statement 142 to Psalm 102:11, 103:15, Prov. 27:1, Job 7:7, 9.

<p>Jas. 4:14b (NRSV). What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes</p>	<p>Psalm 102:11 (NRSV). My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass.</p>	<p>Psalm 103:15-16 (NRSV). 15 As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; 16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more</p>
<p>Proverbs 27:1 (NRSV). Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.</p>	<p>Job 7:7, 9 (NRSV). 7 Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good. 8 The eye that beholds me will see me no more; while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone. 9 As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up; 10 they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more.</p>	

3) Compare statement 142 to other ancient perspectives.

<p>Jas. 4:14b (NRSV). What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.</p>	<p>Sirach 11:18-20 (NRSV). 18 One becomes rich through diligence and self-denial, and the reward allotted to him is this: 19 when he says, "I have found rest, and now I shall feast on my goods!" he does not know how long it will be until he leaves them to others and dies.</p>	<p>Pseudo-Phocylides 116-121. Nobody knows what will be after tomorrow or after an hour. Death is heedless of mortals, and the future is uncertain. Do not let evils dismay you nor therefore exult in success. Many times in life incredible calamity has come suddenly to the confident and release from evil to the vexed. Accommodate yourself to the circumstances, do not blow against the winds.</p>
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How does James' view compare to these other perspectives?

4) Compare Jas. 4:15 to Rom. 1:10, 1 Cor. 4:19, 16:7, Heb. 6:3, and Acts 18:21.

<p>Jas. 4:15 (NRSV). Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."</p>	<p>Rom. 1:10 (NRSV). 9 For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, 10 asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you.</p>	<p>1 Cor. 4:19 (NRSV). But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power.</p>
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1 Cor. 16:7 (NRSV). I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.	Heb. 6:3 (NRSV). And we will do this, if God permits.	Acts 18:21 (NRSV). 20 When they asked him to stay longer, he declined; 21 but on taking leave of them, he said, "I will return to you, if God wills." Then he set sail from Ephesus.
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5) Compare Jas 4:17 to 1 John 3:4.

James 4:17 (NRSV). 17 Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.	1 John 3:4 (NRSV). 4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.
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How is James both alike and different from John?

2. What does the text mean to us today?

1) How do you go about making plans for the future? Especially, business plans?

2) Describe the nature of life as you understand it.

3) What does God's will mean to you?

4) What is sin? Is it just something we do? Or, does it involve other things?