

Lord Willing and the Creek Don't Rise

James 4:13-17

09 20 2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

The end is NEAR! Well, it's actually five years and some odd million miles away. But IT will be HERE before you know it. On August 24, 2003, a United States' observatory in New Mexico discovered a new **asteroid** headed earth's way. Astronomers imaginatively named the cosmic rock 2003QQ47.

Q is nearly one mile across and traveling at twenty miles per second. The 2.6 billion-ton body will arrive in earth's vicinity on March 21, 2014. A collision with the earth would release energy equivalent to 350 billion TONS of TNT. One scientist said: *"In theory such an asteroid could cause devastation across an entire continent."*

However, astronomers see no cause for concern. QQ47 has been ranked a ONE on the **Torino Scale** which measures the probability and significance of a cosmic collision. ONE means *"impact is extremely unlikely but merits monitoring."* TEN means *"certain collision causing global climatic catastrophe."* Scientists estimate a 1/250,000 chance of Q hitting the earth.

I. The End is Near

I know little about killer asteroids; but I can confirm that the end IS near. I can also state with absolute certainty that one of two things will occur in our lifetime: the world will end OR we will die! And we don't know when. Either of these realities gives one pause for thought.

Two older men named Joe and Harry loved the game of **baseball**. They often discussed if America's pastime was played in heaven. So they made a pact: whoever died first would return with the news. Time passed and Joe died. Sure enough he returned a few days later.

Harry was amazed to see his friend and asked, "Joe, is there baseball in heaven?"

Joe answered, "Well, I've got good news and bad news. The GOOD news is there IS baseball in heaven. The BAD news is I saw tomorrow's lineup, and you are scheduled to pitch!"

I've got good news and bad news for you today. Well, bad news! Sooner or later, each of our names will appear on the lineup. I know you know this; but I don't know if we really know what we know. Know what I mean? We seldom consider our own mortality. The thought of dying frightens us to death. So we allow life's busyness to distract us from our common end.

There was a businessman who prided himself on **punctuality**. He followed a precise routine each morning. He awoke at 6:30. He rose briskly, shaved, showered, ate his breakfast, brushed his teeth, picked up his briefcase, got into his car, drove to the ferry landing, parked his car, rode the ferry downtown, got off the ferry, walked smartly to his building, marched to the elevator, rode to the seventeenth floor, hung up his coat, opened his briefcase, spread his papers on his desk, and sat down in his chair at precisely 8:00. Not 8:01, not 7:59. Always at 8:00 exactly. He followed this same routine without variation for eight years.

Then one morning he overslept. When he awoke, he was panic-stricken. He rushed through a shower, nicked himself shaving, gulped down breakfast, sort of brushed his teeth, grabbed his briefcase, jumped into the car, sped to the ferry landing, jumped out of his car, and looked for the ferry. The boat was a few feet away from the dock. He ran down the dock toward the ferry at full speed. Reaching the edge of the pier he leapt over the water and miraculously landed on the deck of the ferry. He gave a sign of relief and yelled, "I made it!"

The captain rushed down to make sure he was all right and said, "Man, that was a tremendous leap . . . but if you would have just waited another minute, we would have reached the dock, and you could have walked on!"

II. Tomorrow I Will

We get so caught up in the busyness of life that we don't know whether we are coming or going. We become so focused on making a living that we forget to get a life.

Although **James** wrote his letter to the Christian church 2,000 years ago, people have not changed. In the lesson today, James specifically addressed business people absorbed in their own plans for profit. He wrote: *"Look here, you people who say, 'Today or tomorrow we are going to such and such a town, stay there a year, and open up a profitable business.'" (James 4: 13)*

There is nothing wrong with planning for the **future**. It is only wise to make provision for tomorrow. We should make personal, financial, educational, and vocational plans. What James attacks, however, is an underlying spirit of arrogance and presumption that often accompany such plans. Then he keys in on three words, **"Tomorrow, we will . . ."** Even the most elaborate and well thought out plans are like sand castles built on the beach before a rising tide.

A. Tomorrow

The first false presumption is the assurance that **tomorrow** will always come. Proverbs 27:1 says, *"Don't boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth."*

We live with an illusion of a **"normal" life**. Does anyone here ever have normal days? In a Michael Crichton novel (Jurassic Park), one of the characters said: *"And that's how things are. A day is like a whole life. You start out doing one thing, but end up doing something else, plan to run an errand, but never get there . . . And at the end of your life, your whole existence has that same haphazard quality, too. Your whole life has the same shape as a single day."* (p. 171)

We might fool ourselves into thinking life is normal and today is like yesterday and tomorrow will be like today. In actuality, however, life is dynamic and unpredictable. No one knows what the next moment—much less the next day—will bring.

So many of us live with **"The Plan"** in our head. Capital T, capital P. We might think we can control the future, but we cannot even begin to imagine what it might bring. For years, **John Chancellor** anchored NBC news. Then he was diagnosed with life threatening illness. In an interview during his treatment, Chancellor smiled and said, *"If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans!"*

B. Transitory Nature of Life

James drove home his point with the question, "*What is your life?*" And he provided an answer, "*For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*" We are a dawn's fog burned away by the rising sun, a morning glory blooming brightly before being scorched by the noonday heat, dust disappearing in a blowing wind. Psalm 90 describes the brevity of life.

*"You turn us back to dust and say, 'Turn back you mortals.'
For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.
You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers."*

The writer of Ecclesiastes considered the passing days of humanity and all the accomplishments we take such pride in and concluded by saying, "*Vanity of vanity, all is vanity.*"

In his prayer journal entitled Windows, Roman Catholic author, Andrew Greeley, reflected upon his passing fame, "*From the point of view of eternity or even of a hundred years or even of ten years, to be a towering figure in the American Church is to be not very much at all . . . My life, my struggles, my hesitations and doubts, my fears and my gambles will be utterly forgotten. So I've accomplished a lot in my life, much of it unplanned and a lot of it unconscious, but even that lot is not very much, indeed trivial. From the point of view of time, to say nothing of eternity . . .*" (p. 114)

Several congregations I served had adjoining **cemeteries** with graves dating back to the 1800s. Over time, even names and dates graven in granite faded away. Bad news: going to die. Worse news: don't know when. Worst news: with passing of time, won't even be remembered!

III. Tomorrow

And just about now, you are thinking, "Isn't this a lovely and uplifting sermon. I could have stayed home and gotten depressed reading the Sunday paper!" I'm reminded of a cartoon showing a stressed man walking into the optometrist's office and saying, "*Doctor, I'd like to see a little less clearly!*"

James pulls no punches in his message here. He used shock treatment to jolt his listeners out of their self-complacent attitude. He forced them to view life as it really is. This is the first step in understanding the fragile, fleeting nature of life.

Once we see tomorrow is not promised and life is transitory, however, the next step is of critical importance. We can choose cynicism and despair that echo the words of Ecclesiastes which cry, "*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*"

Or we can hear the good news after the bad. James answer to the nature of life is to say, "*Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.'*" Southerners use a paraphrase of this verse when we make plans with the qualification, "Lord willing and the

creek don't rise!"

You see, James did not promote a morbid preoccupation with death and despair, but a realistic attitude toward a **future enabled by faith in God**. In the face of life's uncertainty, we trust in a God who is always certain. We know *"both human finiteness and divine sovereignty."*

William Barclay wrote this is not a cause for fear but a cause to recognize our complete dependence upon God. We are invited to commit our future and its plans to the Lord's keeping. As opposed to the merchant's practical atheism, James encourages a true faith that trusts God with all things.

Therefore, we commit tomorrow to God. Certainly we will continue to make plans and set goals, but all under the umbrella of understanding, **"God willing."** This is a tremendous release from the worry and anxiety we carry on our shoulders.

IV. Today

A second benefit from this sort of trust is it allows us to focus upon our lives today. Not yesterday or tomorrow, but today. We learn to value the present. Someone once asked Yoga Berra, "What time is it?" And the baseball player answered with a typical "Yogism:" "You mean right now?"

A little boy ran next door to show his birthday present to the next door neighbors. The adult couple made the appropriate oohs and ahs over the Mickey Mouse watch. Then the man said to the five year old, "What a neat watch! Does it tell you the time?" And the little boy answered quite seriously, "No, you gotta look at it first!"

We need to look at the time. Today is a precious gift given by our gracious Lord never to be repeated again. Psalm 39:4: *"Show me, O lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is."* Such an attitude feels us with a sense of urgency about life. Each day is a gift and not a given. Every second counts because there is no second try.

We are invited to act today without delay. Hear the call of God's word: *"NOW is the acceptable time."* *"TODAY, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."* *"We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work."* (2 Cor. 6:2, Heb. 3:15, John 9:4) We respond by recognizing both our responsibilities and blessings.

A. Responsibilities

Part of responding to God's presence in our lives is working for his kingdom today. Remember Scarlet O'Hara's favorite line, *"I'll think about it tomorrow."* Many Christians find their lives gone with the wind following such a philosophy.

When I was in school, two of the student organizations were the FFA (*Future Farmers of America*) and the FHA (*Future Homemakers of America*). But there is no such thing as *Future Christians of America*! Today is the only opportunity we have to live the Christian life.

It's a lesson that we must learn time and time again. A while back I was invited to speak at an organization consisting of senior citizens. I listened with equal parts appreciation and amusement during the invocation as a lady in her eighties prayed, *"And Lord, remind us that life*

is not a dress rehearsal!" We are never too young or old to be reminded of this simple truth.

A band named "Nickelback" recently released a song entitled *If Today was Your Last Day*. The chorus asks the haunting questions:

*If today was your last day, and tomorrow was too late
 Could you say goodbye to yesterday?
 Would you live each moment like your last?
 Leave old pictures in the past, donate every dime you have?
 Would you call old friends you never see?
 Reminisce old memories, would you forgive your enemies?
 Would you find that one you're dreamin' of?
 Swear up and down to God above that you finally fall in love?
 If today was your last day.*

B. Blessings

The other joy of living for today is rejoicing in the blessings God gives us. Are there any "crust first" sandwich eaters in the sanctuary today? You know what I'm talking about. When you eat a sandwich, you carefully nibble all of the crust off before enjoying the good stuff inside. But what if all you tasted of the sandwich was the crust. You've missed the best part!

God gives us these wonderful gifts in life, and we leave them piled in the corner promising ourselves we will enjoy them tomorrow. And we end up investing our lives in the mundane and ordinary. See the gifts of parents, spouse, children, friends,

Erma Bombeck was one of the most popular American authors of the past century. After she was diagnosed with cancer, she wrote one of her best known and loved columns entitled, *If I Had My Life to Live Over*:

I would have gone to bed when I was sick instead of pretending the earth would go into a holding pattern if I weren't there for the day.

I would have burned the pink candle sculpted like a rose before it melted in storage.

I would have talked less and listened more.

I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained, or the sofa faded.

I would have eaten the popcorn in the 'good' living room and worried much less about the dirt when someone wanted to light a fire in the fireplace.

I would have taken the time to listen to my grandfather ramble about his youth.

I would have shared more of the responsibility carried by my husband.

I would never have insisted the car windows be rolled up on a summer day because my hair had just been teased and sprayed.

I would have sat on the lawn with my grass stains.

I would have cried and laughed less while watching television and more while watching life.

I would never have bought anything just because it was practical, wouldn't show soil, or was guaranteed to last a lifetime.

Instead of wishing away nine months of pregnancy, I'd have cherished every moment and realized that the wonderment growing inside me was the only chance in life to assist God in a

miracle.

When my kids kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, “Later. Now go get washed up for dinner.”

There would have been more “I love you’s”; more “I’m sorry’s.”

But mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute... look at it and really see it ... live it and never give it back. STOP SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF!!!

Conclusion

I have got bad news for you today. The end is ALWAYS near. We don’t know when. And someday even the names and dates of our graves will erode away.

But I also have good news for you today. In Christ, near ends are transformed into new beginnings. The good news is God has given us this day of life. The better news is that the Lord gives us the gift of abundant life to love and serve in the here and now. The best news of all we receive eternal life from our Master and Lord.