

## Planning Your New Year - God's Way

James 4:13-17

*Ivan Kostka*

Christmas is done and New Year's around the corner. Do you still make New Year resolutions? Do you review this past year's before you make new ones? Or, like me, you may have given up on making New Year resolutions. Or you never ever started doing so ... still **we all make plans**. Young and old we all make our plans – however formally or informally - about some important stuff and other not so important stuff. Usually these plans are to do better, to improve upon our past performance.

The Bible from Old to New Testaments encourages us to plan, gives us wisdom for planning and holds up examples of both those who plan wisely and not so wisely. Today we want to quick survey both so that we can go into this coming new year making plans that honour God and that He blesses.

Before we begin in the epistle of James, let us humble ourselves before God's word: *Heavenly Father, we your children, young and old, want to hear what you have to say to us this day. Anoint your servant to speak only what you would want us to hear, open the eyes of our understanding that we may readily embrace these truths and apply them in our lives, even from today. In the name of Jesus we ask.*

James throughout his letter to followers of Jesus, emphasizes **humility**. In chapter 4 from verses 13 through 17 he addresses it specifically in the context of making plans.

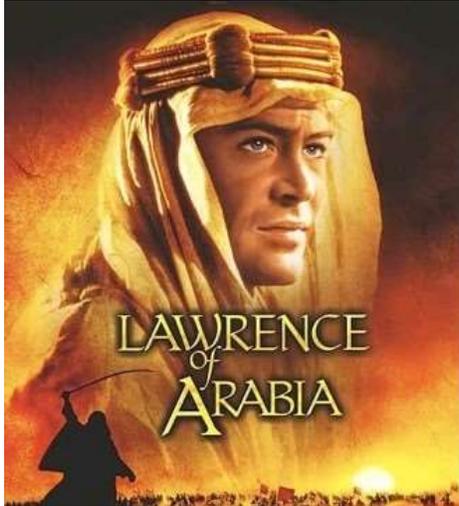
***Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.***

James does not use the word "plans" but in effect he is addressing those who make plans, not just businessmen as in this specific case. After all we have here all the ingredients of a plan:

- Timing (When, how long) – "Today or tomorrow"; "spend a year"
- Destination (Where) – ""this or that city"
- Activity (What) – "carry on business"; "trade" in some translations
- Objective (Why) – "make money"

**So what's missing? In one word – humility. What's wrong? In one word - Attitude!**

James' antidote/prescription: Say instead, "If the Lord wills ...". In Arabic the expression is "*inshallah*". Most Muslims tend to pepper their plans with this expression – "Inshallah we shall do this or, inshallah, we shall do that".



*Lawrence of Arabia* <https://youtu.be/l2cDJwxS50I>

**Prince Feisal:** Gasim's time has come, Lawrence. It is written.

**T.E. Lawrence:** Nothing is written.

**Sherif Ali:** You will not be at Aqaba, English! Go back, blasphemer... but you will not be at Aqaba!

**T.E. Lawrence:** I shall be at Aqaba. That, IS written [*pointing to forehead*] in here.

**Sherif Ali:** Truly, for some men nothing is written unless THEY write it.

Up here you can read a dialogue from the multiple Oscar-winning 1962 epic film *Lawrence of Arabia*, one of my all-time favorites. In this scene the Englishman, TE Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) leading a small Arab contingent under Ali (Omar Sharif)

have just emerged from an overnight trek through the desert at dawn. They have just discovered that one of the Arab servants (Ghasim) has fallen off his camel in the desert. Lawrence heroically insists he will go back into the desert to rescue Ghasim. Ali strongly disagrees, pointing out the folly of such a venture. His earlier conversation has been full of "inshallahs" in contrast to Lawrence's confident "I can, I will, I shall".

However, when we look more closely, we realize that Ali's "inshallahs" are fatalistic – suggesting that man has no control at all, therefore should not make ambitious plans. Ali truly believes that God has already written the script; we only need to act it out. Lawrence, on the other hand, believes each man can write his own script.

### **What is the godly way to plan – Ali's or Lawrence's?**

#### **1. SURRENDER your life to God**

Neither extreme view is correct from God's perspective. Why would God give us rational minds, emotions and a will that can choose between what we think and feel? Not to be puppets in the hands of a master Puppeteer! At the same time God has created us to be in relationship with Him. This begins with surrendering our lives to Him.

Interestingly, the Arabic word *Islam* means surrender. However, Muslims themselves acknowledge that the concept comes from both the Old and New Testaments.

**Surrender your heart to God**, turn to him in prayer, and give up your sins ... **Job 11:13-14** (CEV)

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "**If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.** For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but **whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.**" -**Matt 16:24-25**

The "**boastful pride of life**" (1 John 2:15) refers to the arrogant self-sufficiency of humans apart from God.

In **Daniel 4:30** we see this attitude in the powerful Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. While walking on the roof of his royal palace, he said (probably to himself), "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself

have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?” Daniel 4:31-32 continues,

‘While the word was in the king’s mouth, a voice came from heaven saying, “King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.” We see the arrogant Nebuchadnezzar’s fate as painted by the great English poet William Blake.

However, it ends well. Nebuchadnezzar finally writes, “I raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. ... everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And **those who walk in pride he is able to humble.**”

The apostle Paul writing to the church at Rome appeals to them, for their own good, to surrender their lives at God’s altar. The problem with living sacrifices as we know is the moment the flame is lit we try to crawl away! But Paul tells us this is the very sacrifice God desires of us – the death of our self-centredness, selfish ambitions, conformity to the world’s values and ways.

It is only then that we will be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

It is only then that we will be able to discern what God’s perfect will for our lives is.

It is only then that we will be able to plan in a godly way.

This all comes from humbling ourselves before God. As James writes earlier in chapter **4:6 – He gives more grace to those who humble themselves.**

## **2.     SUBMIT your plans to His sovereignty**

James confronts the attitude of such planners when he mocks them as “You – who do not even know what will happen tomorrow”. In other words, we all need to start with an attitude of humility, recognizing our limits – from the length of our lives to the circumstances that are way beyond our control. This recognition should lead us to humble ourselves before God who is the only one who knows it all – the end from the beginning – and is in control of it all.

We need to realize – as Nebuchadnezzar was made to – that God alone is God and we are not God. He is sovereign – He rules and over-rules.

To not do so is pure arrogance and pride. The plans that emerge from such an attitude are pure boasting. James calls it evil.

What do you think when I say the War of 1812? The Canadian part immortalizing Laura Secord (the brave young lady, not the chocolates that bear her name!)?

If you think of Leo Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace* or Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture* opening with cannon shot, you’re thinking of the right war, involving **Napoleon’s invasion of Russia.**

In a sermon entitled ‘God’s Providence’, **C. H. Spurgeon** said, “Napoleon once heard it said, that man proposes and God disposes. ‘Ah,’ said Napoleon, ‘but I propose and dispose too.’ How do you think he

proposed and disposed? He proposed to go and take Russia; he proposed to make all Europe his. He proposed to destroy that power, and how did he come back again? How had he disposed it? He came back solitary and alone, his mighty army perished and wasted, having well-nigh eaten and devoured one another through hunger. Man proposes and God disposes.”

Napoleon Bonaparte was a military genius, but his pride led to his downfall. God will not suffer a creature with impunity to usurp His prerogative. Napoleon’s invasion of Russia was the beginning of his downfall.

The phrase “Man proposes but God disposes” is supposed to have come from the popular Christian disciplines manual, **The Imitation of Christ**. Thomas a Kempis was merely summarizing the ancient wisdom of **Proverbs 16:9** – “**We can make our plans but the Lord determines our steps**”. Even Shakespeare’s Hamlet acknowledges as much.

The great expository Bible teacher **John Piper** put it this way: “Humility agrees and is glad that God governs the beating of our hearts and our safe arrival at every destination. If we get there, God got us there. And if we don’t get there, God willed that we not get there. Humility gets down under this sovereign providence and nestles there gladly.”

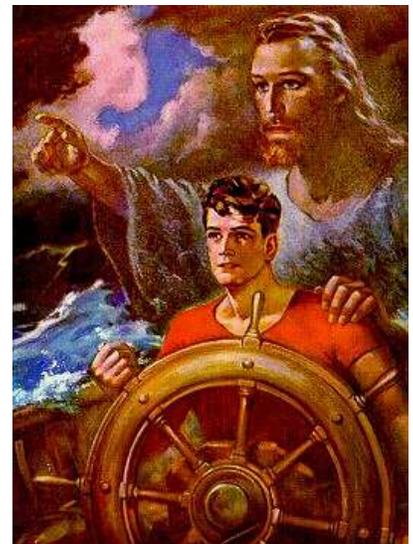
***You believe that there is one God? Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. – James 2:19***

Do we make our plans recognizing that the Lord will determine our steps? We may not be ego maniacs like a Nebuchadnezzar or a Napoleon but, yes, even believers can be “practical atheists”. That means that though we pay lip-service to God even using the words “God-willing”, **in practice** we go about our plans as if God had no say in them. Pause and consider: Are you a “practical atheist” when it comes to planning and implementing your plans?

### **3. STEER your course by the wind of the Spirit, the light of the Word**

Let’s assume you have surrendered you life to God and submitted your plans to Him, acknowledging His sovereignty over your life and plans. Do you just go ahead on cruise control (on automatic pilot)? Can you sleep at the wheel, assuming you are at the wheel?

I don’t know about you but, growing up in Catholic schools, I had seen and got a copy of the picture of the boy at the helm of a ship with Jesus right behind him. Note that Jesus has one hand on his shoulder (for assurance) while the other points out the direction he should steer through and out of the storm. That gives us a pretty accurate picture of how God expects us to navigate through life – we at the helm, alert but also sensitive to the Lord’s direction and guidance. The latter mainly comes through the Holy Spirit and His word.



Neither will contradict each other. Both require us to be attentive and sensitive. We need to tune in to the “still small voice” of the Holy Spirit. **We need to be daily in His word if it is to be a “a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path.”. – Psalm 119:105**



"If" - the motto of the humble, submitting their plans to God's sovereignty.

Paul makes both long- and short-term plans. He does not always preface his plans with "God-willing" but the attitude is always one of humble submission to God's sovereign will. However, when he does make a strong resolve he does temper it with a God-willing (as in I Cor 4:18-19 – "But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power" ).

Synonyms for "God-willing": "By the will of God" (Rom. 1:10; 15:32; "if the Lord permits" (I Cor 16:7). In the end, most of Paul's plans came to pass (Acts 18:21; 1 Tim 1:3), reinforcing the importance of wise planning (Prov. 24:6) and the effectiveness of God's sovereign will (Rom 1:10; 15:32).

God's sovereignty does not exclude the need for planning; it does require humble submission to His will.

Paul made plans but was sensitive to the wind of the Spirit and signs from God like the vision of the man from Macedonia. Had Paul not been so, the Gospel may have been delayed from moving rapidly from Asia to Europe. Sometimes the advance of the Kingdom of God depends on our obedience and sensitivity to the Spirit.

The way God leads and directs the paths of those who surrender their lives to Him and submit their plans to Him, continues today. Many of you know of the "**Africa Andrades**" – our son Dan, his wife Lindsay and their three daughters – Sophia (5), Bella (4) and Elyana (2). As you know they were serving the Lord in Africa and around three Christmases ago had to leave suddenly. After the birth of their third daughter they were preparing to return to Africa when Bella was diagnosed with childhood blood cancer. Praise God it was the kind that has a 90% cure rate and the best of chemo treatment was available at McMaster. Earlier this month the whole extended family gathered to celebrate Bella's fourth birthday and completion of 16 of her 25 months treatment. As they praised God for His good hand upon them all as a family, through tears, Dan said he would not trade the intimacy with Jesus that has been his experience through this trial. They still have plans to return to Africa but have humbly submitted them to the Lord and their godly leaders.

As Lindsay wrote in their blog: "Unlike orders from Amazon, life doesn't always come in neatly wrapped packages. Gifts don't arrive on our time-line, and often they're not at all what we ordered: jobs are lost, illnesses knock us off our feet, resources run dry, hearts are broken, dreams get crushed. ..."

All those of us who have surrendered our lives to Jesus and submitted our plans to Him are described as "God's masterpiece - ... created anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do **the good things he planned for us long ago**. – Ephesians 2:10 (NLT)

At the end of the day it is not even about us or our plans but **His plans for us** – the sovereign Lord who has saved us by His grace through faith – not by our own works (lest we should boast!) – has planned well in advance the good things we are to do.

As we approach this New Year, let us instead ask the Lord to show us what are these “good works” He has planned for us to do in the coming year. Let us make those our priority and you can be sure He will bless your other plans - according to His will and good pleasure.

**May we all plan to have such a blessed New Year!**