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**The Letter of James**  
**VIII. Establish Your Hearts**  
**James 4:13 – 5:12**

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*“Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.”* You do know what tomorrow will bring – we know Brother James is right, but that doesn’t mean we like it. And that doesn’t mean that we are going to quit making plans for tomorrow and next year and when Christmas comes and when retirement arrives.

But I don’t think James is actually telling us to quit making plans for the future when he says to us, *“Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.”* I think he is just trying to remind us to take into consideration – with all our plans – something we don’t like to consider at all; something which terrifies us, if we’re going to be honest about it. Namely, James is reminding us that we are mortal. And that our lives are therefore always at risk of the very things which mark us as mortal: an inability to control our destiny, our vulnerability to things like illness and accident – and, ultimately, the fact that we will one day die, and that we cannot know when that day will come. *“Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.”*

*“Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring”* – it’s the very same thing the Psalmist is pondering when he asks God to *“teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom”* (Psalm 90):

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
in all generations.  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.  
You return man to dust  
and say, “Return, O children of man!” . . .  
You sweep them away as with a flood; 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 . . .  
So teach us to number our days  
that we may get a heart of wisdom.<sup>1</sup>*

*“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom”* – that is what James is saying to us when he cautions us to have a little humility, a little more awareness of our mortal

limitations – when he says to us, “*Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do that.’*” “*If the Lord wills*” – adding that phrase to our plans is just a small way of remembering that we cannot guarantee our future by our own strength, by our own determination, by our own precautions, by our own, well, anything really. “*If the Lord wills*” – a small reckoning with the truth that we are mortal and cannot guarantee our future or secure ourselves from all potential setbacks, harms, and alarms. “*If the Lord wills*” – a small reminder not to plan our lives, much less live our lives, for this world only. But, instead, always to keep in mind what Jesus said to us:

*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the world around us completely disagrees with all of this. The world hears, “*Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring,*” and shouts back “Wrong!” Answers back that all we need is the right resources in the right amounts, the right strategy, the right mindset, the right super maxxing diet and exercise regime – and we can indeed secure ourselves against any and all future setbacks, harms, and alarms. The world wants to pretend – and wants us to pretend – that indeed we have the power to do this. And I think that this pretending is what the next section in James’ letter – the part where James really comes down hard upon the rich – I think that’s what that section is dealing with. Of course, it stands alone as a critique of the exploitation of the weak by the strong, of the poor by the rich – and we certainly ought to hear that and take it to heart.

But within the context of what James has already said in the opening paragraph of our reading, as well as what he is about to say to us in the third and last paragraph, I think James is also making another point: that the world is wrong when it tempts us to believe that we can, on our own, secure ourselves in all our tomorrows, secure ourselves against all possible setbacks, harms, and alarms. He is reminding us that the world is lying to us when it says that we can control our future. He is reminding us that even if we do everything the world tells us to do be safe and secure and prosperous and well – still, even still, we cannot truly secure tomorrow, much less eternity. It is a lie the world is telling us, when it tells us that we can.

And so James, I think, is again reminding us of something Jesus said to us, something He taught us in one of His parables:

*Someone out of the crowd said, “Teacher, order my brother to give me a fair share of the family inheritance.” He replied, “Mister, what makes you think it’s any of my business to be a judge or mediator for you?” Speaking to the people, he went on, “Take care! Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.”*

*Then he told them this story: “The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. He talked to himself: ‘What am I to do? My barn isn’t big enough for this harvest.’ Then he said, ‘Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then*

*I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!*

*"Just then God showed up and said, 'Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?'*

*"That's what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God."<sup>3</sup>*

The world is lying to us about where our security can be found – that's what I think Brother James is trying to tell us when he warns he rich.

But where, then, do we find our security for tomorrow? If not within ourselves, if not from out of the world, where can we find any sort of fortress against the setbacks, harms, and alarms of our mortality? Where shall we find a fortress against the fact that one day we will die and we don't even know when. Where can we find our fortress against the future when we cannot even know what the rest of today, much less tomorrow, will bring?

Remember what James said we should say when making our plans – not, *"I'm going to do this or that tomorrow,"* but instead to say, *"If the Lord wills"*? Therein lies the answer to our question, the resolution to our mortal dilemma. Therein lies – the only place it can ever be found – therein lies our security against life's setbacks, harms, and alarms. Our security against even death. *"If the Lord wills."* *"If the Lord wills"* – because with those simple words, James is reminding us that beneath the frailty of our lives there indeed lies the greatness of God's sovereign will for His Creation – and for your life and for mine. *"If the Lord wills"* – beneath the powerlessness of our willing there lies the eternal will of God, which shall never fail, shall bring all that God intends to pass. *"If the Lord wills"* – meaning that beneath our insecurity and weakness and mortality, in and through all our feeble planning and striving, there is indeed this mighty Someone upholding this world, upholding all things in this world, upholding and shaping your life and mine, keeping and guarding us before the fact of our frailty, preserving us and loving us from today into tomorrow and even into all eternity:

*As for man, his days are like grass;  
he flourishes like a flower of the field;  
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more.  
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting  
on those who fear him . . .  
The Lord has established his throne in the heavens,  
and his kingdom rules over all.<sup>4</sup>*

And that is what James is telling us in that third paragraph of our reading, where he writes to us, *"Be patient, therefore, brothers [and sisters], until the coming of the Lord . . . Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."* We cannot ever know what tomorrow will bring, but what we can know with absolute certainty is that the will of God is active and all-powerful and even now bringing all things round to good, in accordance with the plan of salvation revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

And so what we can do to find our security, to find our fortress, to find our reassurance regardless of what setbacks, harms, and alarms – or even what joys, victories, and accomplishments might be awaiting us tomorrow – what we can do is “establish our hearts” in that great truth that God really does have the whole world in His hands. What we can do is “establish our hearts” in that great promise that He loves us and will never let go of us. What we can do is “establish our hearts” in that coming Kingdom in which there shall be for us a happily-ever-after beyond our imaging, in which there shall be no more bad things, only good things – all things redeemed and all forevermore.

*“Establish your hearts”* – or, as one Bible translator, J. B. Phillips, renders that verse: *“So you must be patient, resting your hearts on the ultimate certainty.”*<sup>5</sup> We cannot know what tomorrow will bring, but what we can do is rest our hearts in the One who is our ultimate certainty and our ultimate security. We cannot know what tomorrow will bring, but what we can do is establish our hearts in the One who does. We cannot control what tomorrow will bring, but we can establish our hearts in the One whose love for us will never fail us, whose presence will always preserve us, and whose grace shall always meet us in the midst of whatever tomorrow will bring.

*“Establish your hearts.”* For example, James Van Tholen, in a sermon preached not long before his death from cancer at the age of thirty-six, offered this testimony on how establishing our hearts in God, of confessing our dependence upon God, can dispel our fears about what tomorrow may bring:

*I have learned that when I am vulnerable – and not one of us in this world isn't, not really – I do not have to fear, because he is with me. And everything that I can lose, whether my job or house or life, none of it threatens my place with my God . . .*

*. . . Jesus Christ knows what it's like to be vulnerable. And he's the one preparing a place for us, a place that will not rust or wither. He's the one who makes us strong even when we are weak. He's the one who is with us; and even if the earth itself turns on us, we need not fear, for in him the Lord of hosts is with us, in him the God of Jacob is our refuge.*<sup>6</sup>

*“Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” “Rest your hearts on the ultimate certainty.”*

Or this. The famous nineteenth-century sculptor, Sir Hubert von Herkomer, persuaded his aged father to come live with him during the last years of his father's life. The father, who was also a sculptor, would ask for clay every morning, so that he might while away the time by modeling it, sculpting it. But failing eyes and feeble hands would cause the father to put aside his work each night almost in despair. He just could not make the clay come out as he wanted it to. The actuality of what he would make would be so distressingly below the vision; and he would go to bed each night miserably sad.

But each night, after the father had gone to bed, his son, Sir Hubert, would go and work secretly on the clay. And in the morning his father would look at his work of the previous evening, never suspecting what his son had been doing; and he would exclaim with delight that it was not nearly as bad as he had thought.<sup>7</sup>

So, then, is the will of God at work in us. To know that beneath our willing is God's will is to know that God is at work each day in us, shaping us – even without our knowledge – into an image of ever increasing beauty and goodness. The will of God beneath our living means not only that we are preserved before eternity, it means also that every day, in the midst of all our choices and plans, God is working and willing and even sculpting us to prepare us for eternity. Not just at the boundaries of life and death do we meet God's will, but every day, in every place, in every circumstance, in every corner of our being – the will of God bringing us slowly and steadily into the image of His own perfection, into the image of His own abundant life. We are clay in the Potter's hands,<sup>8</sup> and therein lies our security, therein lies our certainty, therein lies our future.

*“If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or do that.”* And the Lord our God, our ultimate certainty, our ultimate security, does indeed will that we should be His and that we shall be redeemed – that all things shall be redeemed – no matter what tomorrow shall bring. The Lord our God wills, and works for us, that everything in the end will turn out just fine, will turn out better than we could have than we could ever have planned for ourselves, or even imagined. Let us establish our hearts in Him.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 90:1-3, 5-6, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:19-21.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:13-21, Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1883.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 103:15-19.

<sup>5</sup> James 5:8, J. B. Phillips, The New Testament in Modern English (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 485.

<sup>6</sup> James R. Van Tholen, Where All Hope Lies (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), pp. 50-51.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie D. Weatherhead, “The Secret Ministries of God,” in The Significance of Silence (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 18:1-6, Isaiah 64:8.