

'Boasting about tomorrow'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

The Lord has established his throne for judgement. He it is who will judge the world with justice, who will try the cause of peoples with equity. – Ps.9,7-8

Collect:

Almighty and everlasting God, it is your will to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, our Lord and King. Grant that the peoples of the earth, now divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his gentle and loving rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and for ever. Amen

Above all

1 Above all powers, above all kings,
above all nature and all created things;
above all wisdom and all the ways of man,
You were here before the world began.

2 Above all kingdoms, above all thrones,
above all wonders the world has ever known;
above all wealth and treasures of the earth,
there's no way to measure what You're worth.

*Crucified, laid behind the stone;
You lived to die, rejected and alone;
like a rose trampled on the ground,
You took the fall and thought of me, above all.*

Words and music by Lenny LeBlanc

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Reading: James 4, 13-17

Dear friends

Faith is a work in progress. It is something that needs working at. Authentic faith is conscious of the disparities that exist between faith and life, aware of the ways in which one's life (actions, desires, words) testifies to a lack of faith, to a weakness of faith, in some or in many regards. In fact, a real and authentic faith will betray its presence (at one point, anyway) by a willingness to question any sense that one has arrived, that faith has nothing more to learn, doesn't have to progress, has no need to grow.

James' letter to the church clearly works on the assumption, which he shares with other writings of the NT, that faith is a work in progress. He highlights various areas where faith comes in for being worked at, where it needs to mature. He is in his approach a bit like a father who, having just read his child's school-report, says little about all the good stuff, but zooms in fairly directly and in the main on the comments at the end of each subject which identify and specify the areas that need working on. What James is doing, in a way, is apply the findings of a report looking into the church's faith, with the aim of directing the faithful (=believers) to work at their faith (- through prayer and an attentive searching of the Word! -) so that this faith may improve its yield for God in good works.

The issue here which James sees a need for faith to be concerned with is over something which on the surface of it seems rather minor, in the sense that we find ourselves struggling to understand how it should be so problematic. It appears in people saying: *"Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money."* What is the problem with this for faith? We have all said something similar, perhaps do so even now. Is James saying that it is wrong and godless to plan and look ahead? But if it is not, surely it is legitimate to assume you have some time ahead? Or is it the focus on business as such and on making money that is the issue? But that is not the case either, because James doesn't refer to it again. Nor is it unethical, biblically speaking, for someone to need to secure an income or do so by running a business.

This being so we might be tempted to think that the people James has in view are a certain type who just need to learn to adopt a bit of modesty and moderation in the assumptions they are making – something we might already be doing! But if so, we fail to see what is going on below the surface, as it were.

Modesty and moderation are good attitudes and it is surely right to encourage them. But James is not speaking of a lack of modesty and moderation. Because what he says about such talk is that it reveals people who boast in *their arrogant schemes* and whose *boasting is* nothing short of *evil* (v.16). Now you don't refer to a matter that is easily dealt with, a light "problem", in such serious terms. When he uses the expression '*arrogant schemes*' he is, I believe, consciously referring to the story of the tower of Babel, and the term '*evil*' is used for something profoundly wrong and sinful. So let's ask again: What is it in such thinking that is deeply at odds with faith and reveals the need for faith to work at overcoming it so that faith is not itself overcome by the evil of it?

The problem of such boasting lies in the fact that those who make it commit a twofold evil: (1) they deny God the recognition (acknowledgment!) of his God-head, that He is God, and (2) they credit themselves with what they deny God and what is his. This is the point James is making when he says: *"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.” Both of these things are corrosive to faith: The refusal to acknowledge God’s sovereign power and his knowledge of all things, even the end from the beginning, and attributing mastery over time and knowledge to man himself. Because if faith goes along with this, what happens is that it will cut itself from God’s providential care and from God’s guidance: there cannot, for obvious reasons, be a full-blooded trust in God’s providential care, nor will there be a real seeking of his will and guidance, no counting on the Lord who sees and knows and cares, and no reckoning with his will, might and wisdom.

It is on faith, therefore, to work at overcoming this kind of thinking, this frame of mind which is so pretentious and moves in a world of wrong (godless) assumptions, and not yield to it. As James advises: *“Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this and that.’”* Which means faith’s attitude and thinking, for it to be faith, ought to be this: To yield oneself to God’s providential care and to his guidance by trusting in his word and obeying his will – Prov.3,5: *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your path straight.”* And to trust God and obey him in the midst of life as it is – limited, vulnerable, fleeting, prone to many a misery, coming one day at a time, each filled with its own set of troubles, but ready to yield to the will of him who knows what his children need, what they suffer and how to help.

Such trusting and obeying does not preclude all planning or forbid a person to seek an income or to use his reason to decide what to do and where to go. But it means that that’s not done apart from faith, under misconceived assumptions, but that it’s done out of faith, from within faith, and therefore seeking to be in agreement with God’s providential care and guidance.

Dear friends, James says that such trusting and obeying, when we prove it is not in our power to do as we ought, proves us to be sinners, it means we sin. He is not saying this because he wants to separate those who can do it from those who can’t, those who do from those who don’t. The word ‘sin’ is there to guide our hearts to the forgiveness of sins as the way in which the heart learns to trust and obey – that is, to Jesus Christ, who died for our sins so that we may live for God – may begin to trust and may begin to obey through the power of grace at work where Christ is received.

AMEN

Lord God, in whom the lost find a saviour and the dead find life, maker of heaven and earth in whom is our help, to your name alone be all praise and glory. In adoration we bow before you, and joining all who confess your name we acknowledge that you are God, that all our time stands in your hand, that there is not a word we utter that you do not already know and not a thing in the world that is not what you know it to be, that we cannot place ourselves or be placed where you do not see and nothing is hidden from you, that you set limits that cannot be exceeded. Yes, you are God and nothing you will can in any way remain unrealised. In all, and infinitely so, you are good and just and true.

Trusting you and obeying your will should come ever so naturally to us and be our glory and crown, yet we have fallen far short of this glory. Lord God, forgive us our sin of ascribing to ourselves the power and wisdom, belonging to you alone, which enables us to walk in the path that leads to life. Forgive us for Jesus’ sake who is your power and wisdom and lives to be the strength of our trusting and obeying. In his name we pray.

- time of prayer / intercession – [what concerns we have on our heart we pour out before God and seek in thanksgiving the gifts of His blessings;]
we ask to discern His judgments and for a spirit of understanding and repentance, for mercy and an end to the spiritual ignorance whereby we fail to reject and abhor sin and wickedness;
we plead for the lost, the broken, the lonely, the abandoned, the persecuted, the suffering...;
we pray for a resolution to the migrant crisis in Belarus, for a mitigation of the tensions rising between the nations, for diplomatic efforts to bring peace to areas of conflict, for the victims of famine and of war;
we pray for our friends, brothers and sisters in Siliguri;
we think of the victims and the ongoing trouble of the pandemic in our country and around the world and pray for those who care for the ill and for those tasked with keeping the people safe and for faith and courage...;
we pray for the authorities and those in leadership, for our communities;
we thank God for His guiding and keeping, for all the ways in which we discern his helping hand;
we pray:]

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN
