

“Lord Willing . . .”

Most of us have heard someone tell future plans preceded by or followed by the expression, “Lord willing....”

What do they mean? Why would someone say, “Lord willing” before telling about vacation plans, meeting up with friends, or even referring to the next worship service. Surely these things are not *opposed* to God’s will. In fact, we would all agree that God would be pleased for us to participate in the next worship service.

Neither you nor I can read minds, so we cannot know with certainty the intended meaning when they use this phrase, but it is rooted in scripture.

Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.”
(James 4:15, NASB)

Does this passage teach that we must always attach the phrase, “If the Lord wills” to our future plans as a formula for acceptable speech? Or is the point that we need to acknowledge that we can really do nothing unless God ‘wills’ it? Or does it teach something else?

We remember how Jesus rebuked the hypocritical Pharisee for mere external forms of religion. God desires a response from the heart. So, there is no merit in saying the words, “If the Lord wills” unless we do so with understanding. Otherwise they are meaningless words.

Consider the context of the verse quoted above.

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.”¹⁴ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.”¹⁶ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.
(James 4:13-16)

On the surface the plans described in verse 13 seem rather simple and unassuming. But James describes the statement as boastful and evil.

Why?

The key to understanding verse 13 is found in the preceding verse where James explains the brevity of life.

James explains that no one really knows what tomorrow will bring. More specifically, no one really knows whether they will live tomorrow. To make future plans without acknowledging this uncertainty is arrogant. A failure to acknowledge the uncertainty of life is a failure to acknowledge our Creator who gives the breath of life. James correctly calls such arrogance *evil*.

Note well, the plans themselves are not boastful. God allows us to make choices in all areas of life. James is not teaching that it is arrogant to choose to move to another city, engage in business, choose a career, choose a college, etc. These choices are not the issue as long as sin is not involved. However, we must realize that we must live in order to carry out our plans; and God is in control of life. He is the one who gives breath.

These verses are not about our future plans as much as they are about our acknowledgement of the One who gives life.

So, the real meaning of the statement is: “If the Lord wills, we shall live.” Then, if we have been given life by our Creator, “we will also do this or that.”

Acknowledging God’s supremacy over creation will keep us from the evil of boasting about things that are in His control.

Our lives are in His hands.