

THE COMPASS

**GETTING THROUGH THE DAY: Practical Wisdom from JAMES**

Part 6:

## Take Your Time, Time's Up!

Doug Brendel

If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, would you still bother with the South Beach diet today?

I have a certain number of years to live, I don't know how many exactly. Wouldn't it be weird to know?

King Hezekiah in the Old Testament got deathly ill and prayed for God to spare his life, and God told him OK, I'll let you live — for exactly 15 more years.

So for the final 15 years of his life, Hezekiah knew the date of his death.

How would I live differently today if I knew I was going to die tomorrow?

How would I live differently today if I knew I'm not going to die till I'm 95?

In John Irving's novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the title character gets a prophetic vision of his own tombstone — and for the rest of his life, he knows the exact date on which he's going to die.

He just doesn't know how or where.

Some years ago, a celebrity learned that he had a terminal disease.

A reporter came to interview him, and delicately asked him how long he had left to live. The celebrity replied, Well let me put it this way: I'm not flossing anymore.

Would you skip the unpleasant stuff if you knew this was your last week on earth?

If I only have 6 weeks to live, do I really care about getting even with that guy at work who cut me out of my commission on that certain account?

You know, I really want a bigger house. With a 3-car garage, and a guesthouse out back.

And a new Jaguar, that would be cool.

And a flat-screen TV. A really huge one.

And maid service every day.

I would have to have a great big fight with my wife to make any of these purchases, but I think she would probably get over it; she probably would not divorce me.

For me to pursue any of these goals would be relationship-trashing, but not necessarily relationship-ending. I think there's a chance the marriage could survive, in spite of the pain.

But if I somehow got word that it would all be over for me next Tuesday, suddenly the stuff I covet doesn't matter as much — and the moments I have left with the person I love become all the more precious to me.

As we wrap up our study of the book of James, we see James looking at his friends and looking at his watch and saying, Hey, time's almost up. Every Day Matters. What are you doing with your life?

The way you're spending your time and energy, it's as if you think you'll be around forever.

Like you've got plenty of time to spend in conflict with each other. And like the stuff you're experiencing all your conflict about is really worth it.

James says, This earthly life is a limited-time offer. You're coming up on the expiration date, and look how you're squandering your coupons.

Here's how he puts it:

#### **James 4:**

##### **1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?**

I have all this conflict in my life. I think I have problems because of other people. But the origin of my conflict isn't them — it's me.

Inside of me, I have desires. I want stuff. I want possessions, I want you to agree with me, I want things my way.

##### **2 You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.**

I don't ask God about most of this stuff because I don't think of this stuff as coming from him. I don't think of him as really being in control.

The way I think is, I need to figure out a way to get what I want. I need to manipulate the situation to achieve the outcome I desire.

I can undercut my colleague on the job with a few well placed words, and my situation at work will be way better.

I can plunk down my credit card and get the plasma TV I've been craving, and worry about the payments later.

How does God figure in? He's a religious figure. He's the ethereal being we focus on at The Compass once a week.

When I have a need or a desire or a problem in my life, I don't actually talk to him about it first — do I?

Wow. What would happen if I said, "God, this issue with McMahon in the next cubicle at work is getting me down. Will you give me some help here? Some guidance? Some wisdom? Will you do whatever it is you do to get me through this? Give me strength at least! Whatever!"

If I actually approach the problem with McMahon in the next cubicle this way — by asking God about it — I might actually experience peace in the face of that conflict.

Imagine that. Peace!

What would happen if I said, "God, a plasma TV is so right for me. Can't you just see it,

right here on this wall? Awesome.”

If I actually approach my craving for a plasma TV this way — by asking God about it — I might actually find that God adjusts my tracking ... gives me a new perspective ... helps me see whether this is really important and worth going into debt for, or ... not really.

If I ask God about this purchase, I might actually experience peace in place of my turmoil.

Imagine that! Peace!

But I don't ask him about it. I may plead with him to give me what I want, but I don't generally inquire as to his opinion about my opinion.

James goes on to say:

**3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.**

The word *pleasures* is the word from which we get the term *hedonism* — it's not just casual pleasure, it's a self-indulgent devotion to pleasure, to comfort, to instant gratification.

My friend Jaxn Hill says “The problem with instant gratification is that it takes too long.” She's only half-kidding. She grew up like most of us, in prosperous, plug-and-play, remote control America, with every comfort at our fingertips.

Designers spend millions of dollars to craft our world for maximum comfort:

Somebody is devoted to the issue of how the door handle in your car feels when you grasp it, and is it in the ideal position? God forbid you should have to lean a bit, or reach too far!

Does the seat wrap around your butt just so? Can you operate the radio without your hands ever leaving the steering wheel?

It's no surprise that the entire South Beach Diet is organized around a strategy for getting over your body's craving for sugar. Food manufacturers have played to our sweet tooth for years!

James is saying, Doug, you're so tuned in to your own comfort, your own preferences, your own desires — no wonder you're always in conflict.

You're not designed to spend your life on this. You're designed to love God and love people. That's an outward focus. You're consumed with the inward issues, and you don't even realize it.

You've got all these cravings, all this stuff you want to acquire — power, possessions, pleasure — and they're eating you alive.

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What is it that drives us to pleasure? What is it that's really driving me to buy, or to overeat, or to abuse my body, or abuse sex?

What is that longing inside us that is never fulfilled, or only temporarily satiated?

David G. Brown, the founder of The Compass Fellowship, has said that the answer to this question can be summed up in a single word: *heaven*.

Does that seem strange? Here's what he means:

We somehow know, instinctively, that things are not right. We're not complete.

We feel we should be happier, more contented, more fulfilled.

There's a nagging emptiness about everything in this world.  
We can scratch the itch momentarily with pleasure — but the same scratching that feels great in the beginning soon begins to hurt.

Different writers in the Bible have put a different spin on the same concept.  
In **Ephesians 5:5** the apostle Paul calls it “idolatry” when we try to fill our need with things, with possessions.

James uses the metaphor of adultery to talk about trying to fill our need with pleasure.  
In the very next line of his letter, he says:

**4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.**

I'm a “friend of the world” when the focus of my life becomes my own pleasure.  
Pleasure itself isn't evil — but when I'm trying to use pleasure to fill the longings of my heart, I'm traveling away from God, not toward him — I'm acting as if I'm his enemy, not his friend and follower.

I can't get happiness by pursuing happiness.  
I can't get contentment by pursuing contentment.  
Real contentment comes as a by-product of living life God's way.  
If I pursue contentment, it eludes me.  
Why? Because it was never meant to be the focus of my life.  
God designed me differently.  
He designed me not for inward focus but for outward focus.  
To love God and love others.  
When I live that kind of life, I find the happiness and contentment I was looking for.  
I'm finally at peace.  
That mysterious, deep-down itch is finally getting really, truly scratched.  
This is part of what Jesus was talking about in **Matthew 10:39** when he said, **“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”**

It's not a perfect system — we won't experience total, true joy until we get to heaven.  
But the more we forget ourselves and focus on loving others, the closer we get to heaven on earth.

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But I'm happy to report that James doesn't just wag his finger in my face and chastise me and then leave me to stew.  
He offers some hope. He offers some help.  
James says in verses 5 and 6 (**James 4:5,6**), even though there's a spirit in us that **“envies intensely,”** God **“gives us more grace.”**  
I keep taking unimportant stuff and treating it as if it's hugely important, but God doesn't hate me for it. He gives me grace.  
I get addicted to an idea — some new product I want to own, some new system I want to see set up at work, some new privilege I want to be given — and I'm frustrated because I can't get it ... but James says, God will give me enough grace to cover the frustration, to survive it, to get past it.

How do I get it? How do I access this grace and achieve this peace, when I'm in the depths of conflict, or dealing with some serious craving?  
I have to tell myself the truth.

Here's how James puts it:

**6 ...Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."**

(He's quoting **Proverbs 3:34**.)

**7 Submit yourselves, then, to God....**

Literally, it says God "stiff arms" the proud — he holds them at a distance.

But he gives grace — unmerited favor — to me if I tell myself the truth about who God is and who I ain't.

I need to tell myself the truth about God's superior intelligence.

I have to acknowledge consciously that God has a better idea for me than I have. That he has a wiser plan. That he deserves to be in control of my life. That my life will be better if I defer to his judgment.

I am still free to go my own way anytime I want, but when I do, God holds me back — at a distance — keeping me from finding what I'm really craving.

My only alternative — the only way I can ultimately satisfy the craving in my spirit, is to bow my heart, admit my weakness, my need for God, and accept the gift of his grace.

Next, James says:

**7 ...Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.**

**8 Come near to God and he will come near to you....**

In other words, I have to tell myself the truth about the world I'm living in.

The reality is, I have an enemy, and he is going to present every possible opportunity for conflict, every possible opportunity for craving, every possible distraction from God's plan.

I have to be conscious that there are forces working against me, and consciously hand myself over to God again and again.

When I find myself calculating how to clobber somebody ... when I find myself craving your cool new car ... when I'm walking through Costco! ... I need to be talking to God. Hearing from God. I need to be consciously guided by his Spirit. I can't afford to go on auto-pilot.

But if I do this, I will win. There is no question. If I resist the work of the enemy in my heart and mind, *he will flee from me*. It is a done deal. It is guaranteed.

Now — is this easy? No. James knows in many cases, this is going to hurt at first. He acknowledges this:

**9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.**

But this isn't the end of the story.

**10 Humble yourselves before the Lord [he goes on to say], and he will lift you up.**

If I can bring myself to trust my life to God ... if I can somehow handle the reality that God is God and I'm not ... if I can turn my conflicts and my cravings over to him

... he will lift me up.

He will bring me to a place of peace, where I can enjoy life. Where I can celebrate.  
Where I can feel like a million bucks, even if I don't have a million bucks to spend.

Life is too short to squander it in conflict and craving.

We're totally in God's hands. Our conflicts and cravings, our manipulation of people and situations to gain pleasure or advantage are subject to God's calendar anyway.

This life will come to an end. Probably sooner than I want it to. I'm **destined to die once, Hebrews 9:27 says, and after that to face judgment.**

I'll be done with life on earth. I'll face God.

Getting that raise from my boss won't seem very important.

Owning that boat won't matter too much.

That sexual experience I was so fixated on will be beside the point.

The pounds I lost and gained and lost again? Forget about it.

My many conflicts will fade. My lifetime of earthly cravings will evaporate. I'll be living post-Palm-Pilot, post-Atkins.

The issues on that day will be Thing 1 and Thing 2.

Did I love God well? Did I love people well?

In spite of conflicts and cravings and everything else I suffered, did I persevere in the two most important things?

These are the activities I was designed for.

If I focus on those two things today, and tomorrow, and every day, God will bring me through.

David Wilcox sings a song called *Start With the Ending*.

By looking at the ending first, we can see what's truly important.

It puts everything into perspective.

A little bit later in his letter, James says:

**James 5:**

**10 Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.**

**11 As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered.**

The ones who held on, who confronted their conflicts and their cravings and relentlessly returned to God, are the ones we now recognize as having lived worthwhile lives.

**You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.**

Yes, it was hard along the way. But ultimately, God's way paid off.

**The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.**

I am counting on that compassion. I am counting on his mercy.

I can't really do it on my own.

I've proven that over and over.

But I am willing to keep training.

I am willing to keep reminding myself, every day, that God loves me, that he is caring for me, that he is providing everything I really need.