

WHAT ABOUT GOD'S WILL AND MY STRESS?**JAMES 4:13-17**

"I sure would like to get out of wherever I am!" Maybe you heard the story about the homeless man who was sleeping in a dumpster. He was suddenly awakened with a jolt. He'd been scooped up along with the trash by a huge Indianapolis garbage truck. He was actually knocked unconscious for a period of time. But he came to inside the garbage truck. He was upside down and squeezed into an area where a human being just shouldn't fit. The truck picked up two more big dumpsters full of trash. When the driver stopped for a third load, he heard some hollering. He got out and looked around. The voice sounded far away and he couldn't see anyone. So he started the compactor on the garbage truck. That's when he heard some frantic banging from inside the truck itself. Thinking something mechanical was wrong, he stopped the compactor. It was then he heard a voice from inside his garbage truck say, "I sure would like to get out of wherever I am!" Fortunately and much to the homeless man's relief, the garbage truck driver saw to it that he did.

"I sure would like to get out of wherever I am!" Do you ever feel like that man caught up in a trash compactor? Do you ever feel as if life's responsibilities, concerns, and demands are about to exhaust your physical and emotional resources completely? Stress can be a like getting compacted in a garbage truck. Yes, there is such a thing as good or healthy stress. It's actually called "eustress." Starting a new job, getting in a demanding work out, and taking a trip to a new destination can all be examples of things that stress us a bit, yes, but they're actually good and healthy for us. But today I want you to focus with me on bad stress. These are the kind of negative experiences and emotions that break us down physically and cause health problems. Bad stress leaves you feeling chronically frustrated and depleted. Bad stress robs your life of any sense of joy or enthusiasm. Bad stress is like being locked up inside an emotional compactor. It results in the kind of pressure that pushes you toward a breaking point. You feel like you're getting crushed or squashed.

I want you to think with me about stress today because we're in the midst of a series of messages on knowing God and His will for our lives: *Knowing God: Is It Like GPS Or A Compass?* The quick answer to that question is a compass. As much as we might like God to give us explicit instructions about how to live our lives – "turn right here, turn left there, recalculating, you will reach you destination in" – He prefers instead to point us in a general direction that requires us to keep on trusting and obeying Him as we journey through our lives. What does God's will have to do with stress and vice-versa? The level of bad stress in your life and mine can be measured by the level of obedience to God's will. The more you discover and obey God's will for you, the less bad stress you will have. The less you obey God's will, the more bad stress you will experience. Therefore, knowing and doing God's will is the only effective remedy for bad stress – that sense our lives are being compacted, crushed, and squashed. Here's a Scripture that speaks to this issue. That passage reveals three approaches regarding God's will. Two out of three approaches increase bad stress and one of them actually reduces bad stress. So, first...

BAD STRESS IS A RESULT OF DISOBEYING GOD'S WILL.

Even followers of Jesus can willingly and knowingly disobey God's will in some aspect of our lives. Yes, that's a sin even though it might take us awhile to admit it's a sin. Disobeying God's will often happens when we assume God gives us suggestions rather than commands on how to live and conduct our lives. Like what? Here's a few examples. You may have convinced yourself telling little, white lies are acceptable as long as you avoid big, black lies. But God can never bless a lack of integrity. Honesty is a command not a suggestion. Dishonesty creates bad stress. You may have convinced yourself sex outside the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman is acceptable under certain conditions and in certain situations. But God says sex is His beautiful creation and His rules regarding it apply in all cases. They involve His commands not His suggestions. Sexual immorality creates bad stress. You may have convinced yourself that looking down on certain kinds of people – members of a different race or ethnicity than you, or a different socio-economic group, or a different political persuasion – can be tolerated. No big deal. But God's Word says we must treat every human being in ways that honor His image in them and respect the fact Jesus died and rose again for their salvation. How we should treat people is a matter of God's commands. They aren't suggestions. Prejudice and bigotry create bad stress.

How did James put it in his letter? "Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it." (Jam 4:17 NLT) God has already revealed His will about many things. He gives us commands not suggestions. When we know those commands and then deliberately disregard them, we're setting ourselves up for a date with the stress compactor. So, why do we disobey God's will? One answer is pride. When we make up our mind to dodge God's will, we're basically saying we know better than God and we should be able to do what we want to do regardless of what God wants. Why do we disobey God's will? Another answer is we all have a sinful nature that just loves to defy God and His will. Unfortunately, that bent doesn't just disappear when you become Jesus' follower. That's why the Bible still encourages Jesus' followers. "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. (1 Jo 2:15-17 NIV)

What happens when you deliberately reject the known will of God? Well, God will discipline you until you submit to His will. It's just like a good parent who disciplines a disobedient child out of love and concern for the kid's welfare. The Bible actually uses that example frequently. Here's one. "For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way." (Heb 12:10-11 NLT) Maybe bad stress is like getting spanked! Just like a faithful and loving mom or dad, God, our Heavenly Father, has the ability to allow enough pain to come into our lives – bad stress – to get our attention and encourage us to obey Him and His will again.

Do you know what else will happen when we disregard the known will of God? We will forfeit eternal rewards. The Bible makes it clear God's people will receive rewards in Heaven. It says, "For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body." (2 Cor 5:10 NLT) I don't have a clue what these heavenly rewards will be, but I know we will want to have them – all of them. You don't want to forfeit any of them. Yes, salvation and eternal life with God is the free gift of God's grace. It's a matter of placing your faith in Jesus – who He is and what He did for you on the cross and the empty tomb. But that doesn't mean the experience of Heaven itself is going to be exactly the same for every follower of Jesus. Some will have more rewards in Heaven than others. On what basis? The more you obeyed God and His will for you in this life, the more rewards you'll enjoy in Heaven. Isn't it reasonable to assume then that the more we disregard and reject God's will in this life the more likely it is we will forfeit some of those eternal rewards? Again, not eternal life itself, not salvation, not being with God forever, but instead something incredibly wonderful we could have received had we been diligent to do God's will. I believe that's the inescapable conclusion. A second approach toward God's will is revealed in our Scripture passage.

BAD STRESS IS A RESULT OF IGNORING GOD'S WILL.

So, what's the difference between disobeying God's will and ignoring it? When we clearly know what God wants us to do in a situation and we just flat out refuse to do it, that's disobeying God's will. But ignoring God's will assumes His will just doesn't even exist or doesn't really matter. It's a willingness to remain just blissfully ignorant of whatever God might want us to do regarding a specific situation, decision, or relationship we find ourselves involved in.

If this still seems a bit vague, let's look at the example James provided. He imagined a real life situation that could easily happen today. "Look here, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.'" (Jam 4:13 NLT) Some men were making business plans. It was as if they were saying to each other, "OK, Henry, you go to this new suburb in Rome tomorrow and open a regional office for us. Bill, you head for this new area around Corinth and set up shop so we have an outlet for our new product line. Both of you guys should be showing a healthy profit in about a year from now. After that, we'll get together again and target a couple of new locations." James imagined these men to be followers of Jesus, but there was something about the way they approached their plans that bothered him.

What was the big deal? What was the problem? Was James against making plans? No, indeed. He was objecting, however, to an attitude, an outlook, or a perspective that we human beings have more control over our lives than we really do. It's the assumption we can shape our own future with no or little reference to God and His will. Essentially, these men in James' example were putting God on the "back-burner" of their lives. They were presuming when they should have been praying. They were

oblivious to the need to ask God's guidance for everything in life. Whenever you and I get busy making plans before we ask for God's direction, we essentially ignore Him and His will. Whenever we assume God doesn't want to provide input or guidance on some decision, we're choosing to be ignorant of His will.

James alludes to at least three reasons why it's foolish to ignore God's will or choose to be ignorant of God's will. First, because life is uncertain. "How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow?" (Jam 4:14 NLT) That's so easy to forget, isn't it? In another place, the Bible says, "Don't brag about tomorrow, since you don't know what the day will bring." (Pro 27:1 NLT) No, life is never uncertain for God, but it's most certainly uncertain for any of us. Now, when we want God's will above everything else, when we desire to walk in His will at all times, and when we are eager to ask God to reveal His will we can approach tomorrow with confidence. But it's confidence in God not in tomorrow. It's confidence in God not our plans. It's confidence in God who alone knows what tomorrow will bring to our lives.

Second, James reminded us it's foolish to ignore God's will because life is short. "Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone." (Jam 4:14 NLT) On occasion, we start out a morning with a bit of fog, but it usually burns off before noon. James was saying when you compare the length of your life and mine to the endless expanse of eternity, this life is incredibly short. It's like a morning mist which is gone by noon. In another place, the Bible says, "How frail is humanity! How short is life, how full of trouble! We blossom like a flower and then wither. Like a passing shadow, we quickly disappear." (Job 14:1-2 NLT) Because life is so brief, all the more reason for you and me to seek out and find what God would have us do and do it.

Third, James suggested it's foolish to ignore God's will because we're so limited as human beings. You and I actually control so very little. We have only a limited understanding of anything and everything. We have neither the ability to see the future nor the power to control it. Whenever we assume we control more about our lives than we really do, we invite bad stress into our lives. When we refuse to invite God into our daily plans, our daily schedule, our daily decisions, the more we invite bad stress into our lives. If God is only relevant on Sunday mornings and irrelevant every other day, bad stress is your destiny. I agree with a statement by Patrick Morley, "Nothing wastes more time for the Christian than pursuing his own independent will." I might add nothing brings more bad stress into our lives either.

When you ignore God and His will, you're going to make choices that ultimately defeat you. You'll load up your life with tasks and responsibilities often prompted by your own insecurity, or greed, or pride rather than doing those things which are prompted by obedience to God's will. You'll fall victim to an overly demanding schedule and pressure from other people. You'll eventually burnout. You can never live close to the Lord and be ruled by bad stress. Instead, bad stress is evidence that you're not living close enough to the Lord. I like this observation, "God does not promise strength for uncommanded work." If you feel like your stuck in the emotional compactor of bad

stress, I suggest you spend some time alone with God and genuinely seek His will for your life. James did highlight the kind of approach that relieves bad stress.

BAD STRESS IS RELIEVED BY SEEKING OUT AND OBEYING GOD'S WILL.

James gave us an example of what that looks like in verse 15 (NLT), "What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.'" "If the Lord wants us to." "If the Lord wills." It sounds like a cliché, but it doesn't have to be. It can and ought to be our authentic approach to life. It can and ought to be the verbal expression of a sincere heart attitude. Here's moment by moment dependence on God right in the midst of everyday life. If I had to verbalize this approach to life, it might sound something like this, "Life is uncertain, Lord. It's short, too. And I'm very limited. But because I'm Your child, I'm not terrified of life. I know I must trust You all the more. You've given me the ability to make plans, so I will. But You want me to seek Your will first, discover Your plan for my life, and never leave You out. I want to invest my time and energy into those things You want me to do and do them."

The great Christian leader, Paul, gave us a snapshot of what daily submission to God's will looks like in the New Testament. When he was writing to the followers of Jesus in the city of Corinth, Paul said, "But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing." (1 Cor 4:19 NIV) And again in the same letter, he wrote, "This time I don't want to make just a short visit and then go right on. I want to come and stay awhile, if the Lord will let me." (1 Cor 16:7 NLT) Paul's words underlined a fundamental approach to life, "Yes, I will make my plans, but Jesus is Lord of my plans and can change them as He wants."

The fact is the Lord loves you and wants to guide your decisions and choices so you will accomplish His will as you move through life. He will not lead you into any decision, any relationship, any job, or any opportunity that creates bad stress. Sure, He will stretch you and challenge you sometimes, but that's something very different than the bad stress so many experience. When we surrender our will to Him and sincerely ask Him to guide our minds, He will help us understand who we are, what we should be doing, and where we should be doing it. God promises to reveal His will to those who sincerely seek it and who follow through by actually doing it.

I've never known a person to breakdown or burn out from bad stress by doing God's will. I've know some who thought they were doing God's will, but who found out the hard way they weren't. By the same token, I've encountered followers of Jesus living in the center of God's will and marveling at how much they accomplish and get done. Yes, they were busy, but they weren't stressed out. Instead, they were completely in the flow of God's Spirit as they responded to God's will for them. I think of Paul once again. He had a daily schedule that would have likely broken most of us. But he kept it all together because He was simply responding to God's unique will for his life.

How busy you are in life is never the true test of how much bad stress you endure. On the one hand, you can be lazy and be filled with bad stress. On the other hand, you can be ever so busy with a very full schedule and not be stressed out. The issue is never

about how much you're doing or how busy you are. No, the real issue is whether you're seeking out, discovering, and then obeying – or actually doing – God's will. 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.'" "If the Lord wills, I will do this or that." That's the right way to live. That's the right perspective. That's the right approach. When we live like that, we will escape the bad stress compactor and enjoy God's peace and grace fully each and every day.

Let me tell you what happened to a man by the name of Robert McFarlane. He was a well-known businessman in the Los Angeles area. He moved to California from Oklahoma in 1970. Within just a few days of his arrival—due to a disastrous misunderstanding with a close friend—he had to take control of an insurance agency. He didn't want it, but he had to make it succeed in order to save the large amount of money he had invested in it. By the spring of 1973, he was in the third straight year of constant strain and stress in the operation of the business. He had recently become a follower of Jesus in answer to the prayers of his wife and her many Christian friends.

One day the bad stress McFarlane was enduring came upon with him special force - the continual danger of financial defeat, endless hours of effort, and deep frustration at every turn. As he drove toward his office, he suddenly was filled with a frantic urge to turn left onto the road out of town and just disappear. Probably a panic attack. But into the midst of his inner turmoil there came a command: "Pull over to the curb." It was as if the words were written on his windshield. After he pulled over, there came to him, as if someone right there with him in the car said these words: "My Son had strains that you will never know, and when He had those strains, he turned to Me, and that's what you should do." It was a leading of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit speaking into Robert McFarlane's spirit. After hearing those words, he sat at the wheel for a long time, sobbing aloud and surrendering His life to God and His will afresh. He then drove on to his office, where he faced 22 major, outstanding, and overwhelming problems. All the most significant problems—company disagreements, clients deciding to remain with his agency or not, payments by clients for late premiums, or whatever—were substantially resolved by the end of that day.

"I sure would like to get out of wherever I am!" Have you been there? Are you there today? Some kinds of stress are good and helpful. But bad stress – the kind that threatens to crush you – is never God's will for your life. Don't disobey what you know God commands you to do. Don't ignore God's will and pretend it's not relevant to your life. Instead, seek God's will as you begin every day and do it.