

FAITH TRACKS

JAMES 4:13-17

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Several years ago an article appeared in the AJC. The report was titled: "A Tale for Posterity". The subtitle read, "Squirrel somehow makes way into commode, scratches Gwinnett woman's behind." It sounds serious! Let me read you the article, "It was sort of like that campfire story about a snake, or... about the strange things that happen in some old house. But it really happened to Kim Richardson on Tuesday. Really! 'I went to the bathroom and lifted the lid and sat down,' the Lawrenceville woman said. 'That's when I felt something scratching my behind.' Kim's hurried investigation revealed a squirrel.

The swimming rodent somehow navigated the... plumbing, eventually making port at the toilet bowl... Mrs. Richardson has the scratches to prove it. The article quotes Kim, 'I almost died! I slammed the toilet down and called my husband at work and told him that he had to come home...' By the time he... rushed in from his job, the animal had drowned. An animal Control Officer commented, 'We get calls about squirrels in the house but never in the commode.' When Mrs. Richardson finally steeled herself to return to the bathroom, she used another commode. 'I used the guest bathroom,' she said. 'This could only happen to me.'

I don't know about you, but there are moments and places, that for me, are sacred. In a family with four kids there were times when the only way I could get any solitude and serenity was to lock myself in the bathroom. There I could sit down with a newspaper in hand and relax... The bathroom is the one place you know you won't get interrupted. Or will you? Are you really alone? Is a bathroom a safe place after all? After reading about Kim's surprise, I now check to see if I've got company!

But Kim's story is not unlike the cold, harsh, brutal realities of life! Just when you think you've escaped the rat race - you're finally alone - you're feeling safe - you can drop your guard and relax - you're enjoying some peace and quiet... Just when you've regained some semblance of control in your otherwise hectic life... OUCH! Without warning - from the blindside - out of nowhere - life reaches up and bites you on the bottom. Life is not always as commodious as we would like for it to be. At times life can get downright flushtrating. Life can even bowl you over! You're never quite sure what you'll find when you raise the lid on life.

One of the features of married and family life that has had a profound impact on me is the ambiguity and uncertainty that comes with a house full of individual personalities. When it was just me, the only three people I worried about were me, myself, and I. Life was simple and uncomplicated. For the most part, my life was planned out. It was predictable. I did what I wanted to do, and avoided what I wanted to avoid. I had a lid on my life!

But when I got married there was now a second person in the mix. What does she want? What's she doing? Where is she at? Now I had two sets of circumstances to cope with - two sets of dangers to avoid. Life got more complicated. Now I had two lives to plan for and think about... Then along came four kids... that's now six people to worry about - six sets of circumstances to cope with - six sets of dangers to avoid... Then the kids got married... Today, my life is totally off the chain and out of my control. It's now impossible for me to cover everybody's tracks.

When my first child was little I could hold his hand... with two kids I still had two hands - one child in one hand, and the other child in the other hand... But the third child created a problem. I was out of hands! But I did have a leftover foot. I could herd the oldest child around, while I hopped. But with four kids it was impossible to keep a hand on them all...

Family life has been a constant reminder of life's uncertainties!

Single or married, I think you'll find life to be unpredictable and erratic. We live in a fallen world. Life gets the hiccups. God's perfect order gets subjected to a degree of ambiguity. In every life there's some volatility. Rarely do projects go off without a hitch. I hope you can hit a curve - for life loves to throw curveballs. It's been said, "[Life is the continual process of getting use to things we never expected.](#)" Every life is full of surprises.

How do you respond to life's uncertainties... when life goes haywire... when the squirrel winds up in the toilet and bites you on the bottom?

Do you slam the lid and call your husband?

What if your problems don't drown?

What if you don't have a husband?

What if you are the husband?

How do you react when your serenity is interrupted and your security is threatened... and disappointment reaches up and bites you on the bottom?

I've met people who've grown angry and bitter. Other folks become apathetic - they cave in to feelings of despair. Other people live in constant fear - they're always on pins and needles. Still other folks barricade themselves behind protective walls. They keep engagement with life to a minimum, and waltz around situations they can't control. They never embrace life wholeheartedly for fear of what might be hid beneath the lid. How do you handle life's unexpected scratches?

In the last five verses of James 4, we're given five principles for coping with life's uncertainties. Here are five ways to handle bites on the bottom. And I've got five words you need to jot down. To help you remember them in a pinch, all are a single syllables, and they all begin with the letter "S"... [stoop, stake, stretch, stop, stress.](#)

Here's how you handle life's bites on the bottom...

First, [stoop](#). Humble yourself before God.

Second, [stake](#) your life on God's faithfulness -
make your plans contingent on His plans.

Third, [stretch](#), learn to adapt to the situations God allows.

Fourth, **stop** taking yourself so seriously.
And fifth, **stress** living your life one day at a time!

First we need to **stoop** down, and humble ourselves. Let's submit our will and plans and ambitions... to the will and plans and ambitions of God James is thinking of a Christian businessman in his congregation This fellow supports his church. He's moral and responsible. He carefully thinks ahead. He's a planner. But he's made some bodacious, outrageous claims. He's mapped out his life - for at least a whole year - without ever stopping to consider God in the formation of his plans.

Here's a formal believer who's living a practical atheism. He's arranged every detail of his life without the first consideration of God's plan or will for him. Look closely at his bold and brash assumptions. First, in verse 13 he says, "**today or tomorrow**" - that's anticipation. But does he really know when he'll begin his journey? A lot can happen to delay him... been to an airport lately? Interruptions are possible. There are all kinds of hitches and glitches in life. How quickly plans can unravel. Then he says, "**we will go**" - that's participation. He might've made up his mind to go, but how does he know "**we**" will go. What if his partner gets sick, or backs out at the last second? He even says, "**to such and such a city**" - that's destination. What if the road is closed, or he can't secure a visa or a business license to operate in that particular city - how does he really know? Then he mentions, "**spend a year there**" - that's duration. Is he sure! A year is a long time - 365 days - 8,760 hours - a little over half-a-million minutes. An awfully lot can happen in that length of time. He even says "**buy and sell**" - that's occupation. How do this businessman know that the supplies will hold up and the recession will hold off... How does he know he'll be able to buy and sell? Finally his boast takes him way out on a limb, "**make a profit**" - that's expectation. In a tight economy can anyone be sure they'll make money?

What if overhead spikes, or they raise taxes, or a competitor moves in?

The businessman James describes is guilty of unbridled anticipation, participation, destination, duration, occupation, and expectation... These are all big plans for someone who can't even predict tomorrow's weather. As an old and wise King Solomon observed in Proverbs 27:1, "**Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.**"

It always amazing to me how quickly God can shut down our fair city and alter the etched-in-stone plans of millions of busy, hurried people. Just dump a few inches of snow and ice on Atlanta, GA - and all the activity comes to a screeching halt! Powerful politicians and high-finance executives - people with a smart phone full of "can't miss" appointments - are suddenly stranded at home, trying to stay warm by the fireplace. I love the sudden southern snowstorms - they teach vital spiritual truths. You have places to be, things to do, promises to keep - activities that absolutely demand your attention - commitments you can't possibly break - then one day you wake up and you can't get your car out of the driveway.

We get so caught up in our plans - live as if we're in control - then God stops us in our tracks. The SNOW says NO. Suddenly my agenda is not so critical after all. God reminds me I'm not in control! He's the one who calls the shots! Thomas A Kempis put it, "**Man purposes, but God disposes!**" To complain about my circumstances is my pride angry with God for upsetting my plans! That's why to cope with life's uncertainties the first step is down. We need to stoop, and humble ourselves before the Lord. Remember James 4:10, "**Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up**" To brag about our plans is foolish. In fact, James is sterner in his evaluation. He says in verse 16, "**All such boasting is evil.**"

First, we need to stoop and humble ourselves - but second, we need to **stake** our lives on God's will - and trust our lives to His faithfulness. It's one thing to stoop before Almighty God. In fact, we'll all stoop sooner or later... but it's a different matter to stake... to hinge, rely, attach my life to God's will... to say, "**Lord, I've stooped, now lead my steps.**"

The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar was the most absolute despot history has ever seen. He conquered and ruled the whole known world. And God cared about this king. He did miracles within his court... When God gave Daniel wisdom to know and interpret the king's dream, Nebuchadnezzar responded, "**Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets...**" He bowed to the God of Israel. When God delivered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar issued a decree that no one should speak against their God... because, as he put it, "**there is no other God who can deliver like this.**" Again, he was stooping, but he's not staking... not yet!

King Nebuchadnezzar stooped when he had to - when forced by the weight of the evidence he humbled himself before God. But to stoop is not to stake. To say God is over me doesn't necessarily mean I'm under God. The king never staked his life on God's will - not until God took drastic action... Daniel 4 tells us how God drove Nebuchadnezzar mad. For seven years he acted like a goat. He walked on all fours and chewed grass. You could probably say, "**God, got his goat!**" This world leader was led around like an animal. The Almighty God showed him his littleness. When Nebuchadnezzar finally regains his sanity he's a changed man. He says of God, "**(The Most High) does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand... Now I... praise and extol and honor the king of heaven...**" Finally, the king does more than stoop, he stakes - he submits and surrenders his life to God. He yields to God's will, and seeks out His ways.

According to James we need to stake all our plans on God. Both our short-range and long-range plans should be contingent on God's OK. James tells us in verse 15 how to preface our plans. We should always be willing to say, "**if the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that...**" Understand, it's okay to plan. Other passages encourage us to think ahead and prepare for life. We should plan - just don't presume. On every plan we devise we should always attach the stipulation, "**if the Lord wills.**"

The Puritans were fond of James' expression, "**if the Lord wills.**" They had a Latin equivalent, "**Deo Volente.**" It means "**God willing.**" They always preceded their plans with the caveat, "**God willing, we'll do this or that...**" The early Methodists followed the same practice. In fact, when they signed their letters they usually added the initials **D.V.** for "**Deo Volente.**" On the circulars they handed out to advertise their upcoming events they'd even include the initials **D.V.** They wanted you to read the fine print.

In every believer's mind our plans should be contingent on God's plans.

The book of James shows us what faith looks like in a believer's life. And real faith will always give God permission to interrupt my plans. Not that God needs my permission - I need to give it... My permission has no effect on God's actions, but it has a profound effect on my attitude! Faith leaves tracks. Am I willing to pray, "**Lord, I not only stoop before You, but I'm willing to stake my life on Your will! Do as YOU please in my life! Deo Volente**"? We should never be resentful when God wants to interrupt and realign our plans. Let me ask you, "**What are you committed to today that God is not free to disturb?**" Your answer reveals your heart.

Well, how do you handle life's bites on the bottom? You stoop, and stake, and third, you **stretch, and** learn to be flexible. You understand that God is always making course corrections, and you embrace His alterations. When God recalibrates you adjust accordingly. I love the saying, "A bend in the road is not the end of the road, if you're willing to make the turn." When life surprises, you've got to be flexible.

It was a stormy night at sea as the battleship plowed through the thick fog. The captain on the bridge saw a strange light in the distance - just off the port bow. The light appeared to be closing in on the mighty ship. The captain ordered the signalman to flash a message, "Alter your course 10 degrees south." But the reply came back, "Alter your course 10 degrees north." The captain was angry. He sent another message, "Alter your course 10 degrees - I'm a Captain" But again the answer upset him, "Alter your course 10 degrees - I'm a Seaman Third Class." Now he was furious! He grabbed the light himself, and fired off the message, "Alter your course - I'm a battleship." But the reply stunned him, "Alter your course - I'm a lighthouse." Many a person has crashed on the rocks because they were too stubborn, too rigid to change their course!

As Pastor Chuck often says, "Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be broken." Our lives need elasticity to survive the pulling and tugging of a pressure-packed world. Get stubborn and rigid and you'll eventually snap.

Pretend you're planning a vacation to Hawaii. You've got your shorts, flip-flops, a snorkel, a surfboard packed away. You're ready to go. It's a nice flight, but when you exit the plane you discover you're not in Hawaii... You're in the Swiss Alps. At first, you'd be upset. You'd demand a refund, and the next plane to Hawaii. But by the time you land in Honolulu your vacation would be over! That's why you need to think this through... The Swiss Alps are not a bad place to vacation, but it'll take some flexibility and adjustment on your part. You need to buy some warm clothes and trade in your surfboard for some snow skis... but if you can adjust you can have a truly enjoyable vacation. This is how the real world works... I like the adage, "When life gives you a lemon, make lemonade."

Life is full of serendipitous twists and unexpected turns. It's said, "Life is like a live drama; it rarely follows the script." That's why successful actors do a lot of ad-libbing and improvising. Just because the sets always change doesn't mean the drama is destined to flop. In fact, a life can be quite entertaining if the actors are flexible and adaptable. A person who has faith learns to improvise, and go with the flow. I've heard it put, "A make-shift hut is better than a mansion that never got built." God sends the breeze. We can't alter or change its direction it blows. All we can do is lift our sails, and cooperate with the prevailing winds!

We need to stoop, stake, stretch... And there's a fourth ingredient for handling life's bites on the bottom... **stop** taking yourself so seriously. Most of us rush through life as if the sun rises or sets on our personal plans. Have you every been bummed out because something unexpected happened, and you didn't get the grocery shopping done on your grocery day? Or an emergency arose and kept you from getting your lawn mowed? We establish self-imposed deadlines - and act like the world is going to collapse if we don't meet them. Quite frankly, I hate the word "deadline." I've missed many deadlines in my life, and I've yet to die as a result! I have very few responsibilities that deserve the title "deadline."

Truth be known, much of what I consider crucial and critical - God probably considers trivial. Too often I value an activity based on some temporary measurement, rather than eternal and spiritual standards... It's amazing how much of what was once important to the world is now

a forgotten memory. Issues that were considered major accomplishments at the time, have now been reduced to an answer to a trivia question...

For example: "Name the first American to walk in space? You'd think that would be an impressive distinction, but do you recall, "Ed White?" What about the most decorated soldier in World War II? Surely, we all remember a war hero? But did the name, Audie Murphy, come to mind? Can you recall Gerald Ford's Vice President? It was Nelson Rockefeller. I'll bet most of you can't even name the NFL's 2010 MVP? How about Tom Brady? How quickly significant accomplishments turn into fleeting memories... This is why we need to stop thinking the world hinges on our every action. I'll bet the sun comes up tomorrow even if you take a day off.

James reminds us our lives are "a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away". We're like a puff of hot breath on a cold morning. Job said of himself in 7:6, "my days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle." Author Mike Mason writes, "Our lives are like curlicues of fire cut briefly in the dark with a glowing stick." Your life is like a bottle rocket in the night. Think of yourself as a sparkler. You light up for a moment – you dance and sizzle in the dark for a few seconds - then you fizzle out - you're gone!

Centuries ago the Eastern Emperor of Christendom – crowned in the city of Constantinople - received an interesting gift at his coronation. He was presented with four marble slabs and was told to choose one for his tombstone. At the moment of his greatest elevation he was reminded of his mortality. He might be king a few years, but not forever.

In light of life's brevity, Psalm 90:12 declares, "so teach us to number our days..." Life is short, but that's not to suggest it's unimportant. The life we live matters much, just not for the reasons we often attach to it! In the end the value of your life will not be measured in terms of purses but people - not in terms of accomplishments but relationships - not in terms of how much you've gotten done, but in who you've grown to be. I'll cope with life's uncertainties when I remember that in God's view what I do and where I go is not nearly as crucial as who I am and who I'm with! What excites God about our lives is a character not a career. On the final day my relationship with God and with others is what will matter most!

This is why we need to stoop, stake, stretch, stop taking ourselves so seriously... And finally, we need to stress living life one day at a time! It's so true, "Yard by yard life is hard, but inch by inch life's a cinch." Eternal life starts today - not tomorrow, or when I die! The Christian life is not life on hold. Rest, love, joy, and boldness is for today! Christianity is more than a dream for a better tomorrow! It's a dynamic for a better today.

When I first studied James 4 I had a difficult time fitting verse 17 into the context, "to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin..." What does obedience to God have to do with life's uncertainties? Then it hit me, it's the uncertainties of life that cripple my strength to obey God. When I worry about the future, I tend to ignore the present. I can get so preoccupied in what might happen, I will forget what I've been called to do today. Worries tend to crowd out duties. Worry is exhausting.

It's been said, "You can't change the past, but you can ruin a perfectly good present, by worrying about the future." Tomorrow's trouble saps us of the strength we need to fight today's battles. Energy and resources are wasted on worry, rather than applied to challenges and opportunities. Interestingly, the word "worry" originates from a German word "würgen" which means "to strangle or choke." Which exactly what

worry does. It puts us in a choke hold. It keeps us from enjoying today for fear of tomorrow. While you have the opportunity... do good and obey God.

Once a man was cleaning out his desk and found a claim ticket for a pair of shoes he'd sent to be repaired 10 years earlier. That afternoon he had some time to kill, so he dropped by the shop and turned in his ticket. The repairman went to the backroom to search for the shoes. When he returned the customer said, "Well, I guess you couldn't find my shoes?" The repairman shook his head, "No, I found them alright, but they won't be ready until next Friday." We fail to get things done not because we have too little time, but because we think we have plenty of time left!

God doesn't promise us tomorrow... He calls us to do what needs to be done today! Procrastination is more than just a bad habit... it's a sin. Those who know to do good, and put it off, are not pleasing God! We'll do a better job of handling the uncertainties of life – the unexpected bites on the bottom... if we live one day at a time. This is what Jesus tells us, Matthew 6:34, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

Let's sum up what we've learned in five words...

Stoop, humble yourself before God.

Stake, trust God enough to make your plans contingent on Him.

Stretch, and learn to be flexible when God changes things up.

Stop, taking yourself so seriously.

And **stress**, living life one day at a time.

I wish I could assure you you'll never get scratched - that there's nothing sinister lurking beneath the lid of your life - but I can't. Painful surprises are unavoidable. Yet follow the truths in James 4 and you'll be an overcomer... Situations will scratch your flank, but they don't have to damage your faith! Real faith leaves tracks. It impacts how we handle life's uncertainties.