

# Fragile: Handle with Care

sermon digest

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James 4:13-15

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When I visit the maternity unit of our local hospital, I am always amazed at the way birth is managed in a modern hospital. The rooms are more like home than a hospital, with a rocking chair for the newborn and easy chairs for the family. Barring a problem with delivery, the mother's room is also the birthing room. Fathers are not only allowed but encouraged to be present and to assist. When my children were born in the 1960's, fathers were left at the door of a waiting room. We were allowed to view our babies through a glass window, but fathers were not allowed in the same room with the infant until the baby was released from the hospital. I remember with chills that afternoon when the nurse thrust the baby into my arms to help her mother into the car. For the first time I was entrusted with my child. I understood; the issue was sanitation. I sort of accepted as fact that fathers must be naturally tainted. However, I could never quite grasp the significance in sanitation that two days made between the delivery room and home. Yet I accepted without challenge the unwritten message that came with the newborn child: *Fragile: Handle with Care*.

That message is stamped all over the Epistle of James. Ironically, James makes no direct reference to the death or resurrection of Jesus and only mentions the "Lord Jesus Christ" twice in the entire treatise. The book is identified with James the brother of Jesus, who was martyred around 62 CE. The time of writing is somewhat uncertain. It was either written by James shortly before his death or by an unknown imitator of James as late as 150. The letter is addressed to Jewish Christians, "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," to brothers and sisters scattered around the Roman Empire. The message is Christian ethics, centering on the rule of God and the behavior of Christians. It is filled with quotations associated with but not attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Obviously the teachings of Jesus are at the center, but the central point of reference is to the authority of God. Luke Timothy Johnson sees a connection to Jewish wisdom literature. William Tillman calls James "a New Testament Amos," more in character with the Prophets (*Review and Expositor*, 97, 2, p 155ff. and 108, No. 3, p 417ff.) . The book is in harmony with Judaism, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes or the prophecy of Amos.

One might legitimately ask, what are we doing during the Easter season in a New Testament book that makes no reference to Easter? My response is more personal than theological. In my own brush with death, I found that the reverberations of grief sounding through my life were more in tune with James than with any other biblical message. As I came up for air out of the waters of chaos, I became fixed on the question of James, "What is your life?" I discovered that early Christians were asking the same questions about the absence of Jesus that rested at the center of my own struggle. The most shocking discovery we can make about the gift of life is the short supply. Life ends, always too soon.

**Life is fragile.** James raised the question, "What is your life?" and offered a warning, for many of us a revelation: "For you are a mist that appears for a while and then vanishes." It is a matter of perspective. When you are young, life stretches out ahead of you on what appears to be an endless journey full of mystery and adventure. We are full of what Wordsworth called, "intimations of immortality," a sense that life will never end. Then you turn forty and awaken to the shocking realization that you have just passed the midway point; your life may be half over. If life has a beginning and a middle, it must also have an end. What happened to youth, your dreams, your hair? The mid-life perspective is shocking and often leads to depression or worse. The familiar experience of mid-life crisis is often marked by serial stupidity in which the aging male suddenly decides to sell out his future in exchange for one last fling. Reinhold Niebuhr observed the threat of death as a major factor in bad behavior. Fear of death drives much of the evil in our world, grasping for immortality, for success, often for straws.

As we grow older, the passing of peers, spouse, and siblings brings into clear view the end of life. Natural immortality is a delusion of youth which time gradually devours. Intimations of immortality may be common to youth, but not so much with seniors. With Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra" you may well affirm that this is, "the last of life for which the first was made." Yet, wisdom leads to caution. As we grow older, we tend to become less presumptuous about tomorrow. Many of us know too well that the best planned life gets interrupted. James offers a bit of acid in warning that planning business as usual is subject to interruption by reality. What we want to do and what we plan to do, is usually interrupted by what we can do and is always adjusted by what we actually do. James calls us to acknowledge that we live our lives under the watchful eye of a transcendent God. Do you have plan B and plan C in sight? We have actually dealt with the reality of planning for the end in the "Good to Go" conversation led by Linda Doyle and Lee

Morris in our church, appropriately conducted during Lent. As Lee Morris noted, our spiritual preparation does not preclude material preparation for the end of life. Your trust in the eternal God who raised Christ from the dead does not negate the importance of tending to your responsibilities for loved ones here and now.

Eddie learned the limits through the crisis of a disabling heart attack at age forty-nine that changed everything he had planned in life. The years that he thought would be his peak were eclipsed by medication, pain, and fear that the slightest exertion would bring the end. But Eddie learned to live a productive life. What he accomplished as a model Christian and a loving father and husband far exceeded anything that he might have done in the world of business. In the last months of his life, he became more confined to home. After Eddie missed worship one Sunday, I checked on him and let him know that he was missed. He responded: "I plan every week to be in church on Sunday. When Sunday comes, and I cannot get out, I change my plans." Eddie had learned something that his young pastor needed: to live with the end in sight.

According to the success gurus, we are supposed to know what we want and go for it. You are not to be distracted by your marriage, your children, your friends, or your faith. Keep your eye on the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. What a crock! The pot of gold is not at the end. It is all along the way, and sometimes the best turns in life are surprises which we could never plan. As someone has said, "Life is what happens while you are planning something else." Harry Emerson Fosdick got my attention as a young seminary student in a sermon on dealing with failure, accepting life's second choices. He spoke of Paul's vision in Troas of a call into Macedonia. His first choice was to stay where he was, but his response to the second choice was the beginning of the Christian world mission to Europe. Fosdick's point was well taken. We don't always get what we want; we seldom reach our goals in life; sometimes second place is better.

**Values come from limitations.** A friend in Chattanooga, June McEwen looked over her shoulder at the decisions and choices which she had made in life in a published article, "Wisdom, Wishing and Women; Counsel from an Older Lady." The article was a punch list of affirmations, regrets, and second guesses under the headings: "What have I learned?," "What would I do differently?," and "What would I do the same?" When Carolyn expressed appreciation to June for the article, June launched into further reflection on early ministry experiences with her minister husband Jack. She recalled their devotion to Fundamentalist pastor J. Frank Norris and the curriculum at his Bible college; refusing her husband's invitation to speak one Wednesday evening because she did not believe that women should be teaching men; an early pastorate in Hillsboro, Texas, visiting for the church in hat and gloves in the summer heat; and the landmark personal decision to leave the Norris theology behind and start over again at Baylor University. In a somewhat pensive tone, June reflected on the speed at which life passes. I heard almost identical words from my aging mother as she reflected on nearly a century of time, "Life goes by so fast."

All of this can sound terribly depressing. Although discovering the limits of life can lead to a cynical attitude like, "Eat, drink and be merry; for tomorrow you may die," the discovery that life has a beginning and an end does not have to be a call to terminal depression or hostile rejection. If gold were as common as sand and limestone as rare as diamonds, we would all be hoarding limestone and driving on gold streets. Life is cheapened by the illusion that the supply is unlimited. The discovery of the brevity of life can be the basis for setting a new value on life given daily by your Creator. The message of Easter is often distorted as a denial of the reality of death and a call to a presumptuous lifestyle. That is exactly the presumptuous attitude that James challenges. James hits the nail: "you do not even know what tomorrow will bring."

In my lifetime, the automobile has become the instrument which expresses and measures one's value of life and perhaps the level of maturity. I say this with full recognition that ministers tend to be the world's worst drivers. In an attempt to get across to young drivers the pain and loss of life which can be caused by the automobile, classes involving graphic photographs of mangled and dead bodies in auto accidents are used by the courts to get the attention of people arrested for speeding or D.U.I. Yet, it is characteristic of youth to think that it cannot happen to me. Death happens in the movies, to old people, and in someone else's family, but not to me or to mine. Even youth need to learn that life is "a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

One stark reality of life did not change with Easter morning. Death did not die. Early Christians continued to struggle with the reality of death for Jesus and their grief in the death of friends and family.

James asked the right question, "What is your life?" It was another way of asking, how shall we live the limited lives that we are given? Whatever else life may be, it is not the business of business. Making a mint, winning the lottery, reaching the top of the mountain of success does nothing to alleviate the sting of death. As someone has so aptly stated, "There is no U-Haul behind the hearse," i.e., "you can't take it with you." But you can leave something for the people you love. And, more important, you can leave something for the people whom God loves, for whom Christ came and lived and died.

The message of Easter has another link. *Life is fragile: handle with care.*