DISCUSS TOGETHER

All of the material in this guide is provided for fostering healthy discussion in your group. Read through the prompts together and discuss the bolded questions out loud.

What is a piece of advice that someone has given you that always stuck with you? Who gave it to you? Why did it resonate with you?

The most useful pieces of advice that we can receive are the ones that affect the way we see the things in front of us: the way we see problems, other people, ourselves, stressful situations, or difficult decisions. For instance, if you grew up hearing, "work before you play--but make sure you play," you will probably be more likely to develop both a healthy work ethic and a healthy balance between work and rest.

As we've been studying James, we've encountered numerous pieces of advice he gave the early church. This week's passage deals with one of the heavier ones--since it addresses our priorities for the entire time we're alive. Read what he wrote in James 4:13-17:

13 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit.” 14 Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are like vapor that appears for a little while, then vanishes. 15 Instead, you should say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” 16 But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. 17 So it is sin to know the good and yet not do it.

What do you think was wrong with the attitude of the people in verse 13?

Is James saying it's wrong to prepare for the future? Why or why not?

The heart of James' issue with the people in verse 13 was in regards to their pride--they were so sure that they had everything under their complete control and had made no space for God to do His work through them. For most of us, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking we have more control than we actually do—and then putting our trust in our own control rather than God's.

James compared life to a vapor (v.14). Why is it sometimes difficult for us to remember how short life is?

How does remembering life's brevity make you feel?

According to this passage, how should it affect our actions?
As an illustration of how foolish the people in verse 13 were being when they thought they were good enough on their own, James delivers a powerful reminder to them: you don’t even know that you’ll *be* here tomorrow. There is nothing wrong with having a plan and investing in the future, but when that becomes the source of our power or comfort or strength, we are putting something ahead of the One who is actually in control, no matter how good we are at thinking we have it all together.

Read verse 16. What arrogance is James referring to? Why is this arrogance?

How do you see arrogance in people today?

Where do you see arrogance in yourself?

While James’ audience was arrogant mostly about their own plans rather than God’s plans, pride is a constant in our lives. We might see where we are in life and think that we don’t have time to act on God’s Word. We might look at our platform and decide it’s not worth looking like a fool to an unbelieving world for the sake of the gospel. We might look at our friends and believe that their opinion of us is more important than our obedience to God. We might assess the desires of our hearts and want them more than we want to measure up to God’s standard for living. Arrogance and pride come in all different shapes and sizes—and it looks different for each person.

Paul wrote to the Ephesian church about using our time wisely that echoes James’ words. Out loud, read Ephesians 5:15-17:

15 Pay careful attention, then, to how you live—not as unwise people but as wise— making the most of the time, because the days are evil. 16 So don’t be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

What do you think Paul (and James) would consider “making the most of the time” that we have?

How do you think you can know what the Lord’s will is?

Making the most of the time we have is an intentional action; it does not happen by accident. Here, Paul is telling the church at Ephesus to be aware of their surroundings and the situations they find themselves in, always being ready to leverage every moment for the sake of carrying out God's will: making His name great among the nations. As citizens of God's kingdom, our will should be the same as our Father’s.

On your own, take a few minutes to assess your own life:

Do you spend your time focusing on stuff that simply doesn't matter in the scheme of things?

Where do you see pride in your life that you can turn over to the Lord?

What is something you can do this week to live a life of wisdom—“making the most of the time, because the days are evil”?

After you spend time in individual reflection, take some time to pray for each other, uplifting each other as you seek the will of God.
Extra material:

Warren Wiersbe on the complexity and uncertainty of life:

Think of all that is involved in life: today, tomorrow, buying, selling, getting gain, losing, going here, going there. Life is made up of people and places, activities and goals, days and years; and each of us must make many crucial decisions day after day.

Apart from the will of God, life is a mystery. When you know Jesus Christ as your Saviour, and seek to do His will, then life starts to make sense. Even the physical world around you takes on new meaning. There is a simplicity and unity to your life that makes for poise and confidence. You are no longer living in a mysterious, threatening universe. You can sing, “This is my Father’s world!”

James’ statement in verse 14a is based on Proverbs 27:1—“Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.” These businessmen were making plans for a whole year when they could not even see ahead into one day! See how confident they were: “We will go. We will stay a year. We will buy and sell and make a profit.”

Their attitude reminds us of the farmer in the parable of Jesus in Luke 12:16–21. The man had a bumper crop; his barns were too small; so he decided to build bigger barns and have greater security for the future. “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry’ ” (Luke 12:19).

What was God’s reply to this man’s boasting? “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee” (Luke 12:20). Life is not uncertain to God, but it is uncertain to us. Only when we are in His will can we be confident of tomorrow, for we know that He is leading us.

The brevity of life is one of the repeated themes of Scripture. To us, life seems long and we measure it in years; but in comparison to eternity, life is but a vapor. James borrowed that figure from the Book of Job where you find many pictures of the brevity of life.

“My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle” (Job 7:6). “The cloud is consumed and vanisheth away” (Job 7:9). “Our days upon earth are a shadow” (Job 8:9). “Now my days are swifter than a post” (Job 9:25), referring to the royal couriers that hastened in their missions. “They are passed away as the swift ships: as the eagle that hasteth to the prey” (Job 9:26). “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not” (Job 14:1–2).

We count our years at each birthday, but God tells us to number our days (Ps. 90:12). After all, we live a day at a time, and those days rush by quickly the older we grow.

Since life is so brief, we cannot afford merely to “spend our lives”; and we certainly do not want to “waste our lives.” We must invest our lives in those things that are eternal.

God reveals His will in His Word, and yet most people ignore the Bible. In the Bible, God gives precepts, principles, and promises that can guide us in every area of life. Knowing and obeying the Word of God is the surest way to success (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:3).
Craig Bloomberg’s textual insights on "you do not know what tomorrow will bring":

James points out the folly of succumbing to the temptation to make plans without God. His indictment begins with the indefinite relative pronoun, which gives the qualitative sense of “people such as you.” He then uses the least common of the three main NT verbs for “knowing”, with the basic meaning of “understand,” but which does not necessarily indicate the intellectual or content-based knowledge that can attach to “know [that]” or the personal and often practical knowledge of “know [someone]/know how”. The verb James chooses is simpler in its range of meanings than the other two (just like its cognate “understanding” in comparison to “wise”).

There are two primary translations for the first half of the verse: “You do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life?” (cf. NRSV, ESV), or the one offered above (cf. HCSB: “You don’t even know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be!”). The one we have chosen follows the UBS committee’s decision on the various textual and punctuation variants. The debates, however, are finely balanced. Fortunately, the main point of the verse is clear on any of the main readings.

Daniel Doriani on the three things we forget when we trust on our own understanding of what is to come:

This way of thinking forgets three things. It forgets our ignorance. We think we can plan a year in advance and come and go as we please, but we do not even know what tomorrow will bring.

It forgets our frailty. James says: “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (4:14). We think we can master our destiny, but our lives are as insubstantial and fleeting as the morning mist, that appears and disappears in hours. Many of us have spent time at a lake in the summer. If the nights grow cool, there will always be a mist on the lake early in the morning, at sunrise. The beauty of sunrise on a lake is a treasure, but by mid-morning, the mist is always gone. The Lord says that by the standards of eternity our lives are as ephemeral as a mist.

Presumptuous planning also forgets our dependence on God. Our frailty and ignorance lead to the conclusion that we should say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that” (4:15 esv). We may still say, “We will do this or that,” but James says we must have a preface: “If the Lord wills.” Although Jesus had more clarity than we ever can have, he modeled this spirit in Gethsemane. Facing the cross he said, “Your will be done” (Matt. 26:42). Paul modeled the same thing when he journeyed to Jerusalem where he knew he might suffer harm. He went where he had to go and said, “The Lord’s will be done” (Acts 21:14; cf. 18:21).