LifeGroup Leader Guide

GOSPEL GOALS FOR THE NEW YEAR
BIG IDEA: There is no greater pursuit than to know God and make Him known.
DATE: Sunday, January 3, 2027
SCRIPTURE: James 4:13-17; 5:7-8; Philippians 3:7-14 (CSB)

OPENING QUESTION

ASK: How many of you stayed up until midnight to ring in the new year?

Outside of being a holiday, do you typically approach a new year with some measure of weight and importance, or do you treat it like just another day? Why?

ASK: Considering that new year resolutions are notorious for being broken, why do you think so many people continue to make them each year?

ASK: When you come to the end of this year, what is one thing you hope will have been true of you? Why?

Whether we carry out new goals or not, most of us give at least some measure of thought each new year to doing things differently. Goals to improve one's health, relationships, and finances are good commitments to make!

DISCUSS: Should the new year be different for those who trust in Christ? Have you ever thought about making a "gospel goal"? What would it look like to turn the page on a new year in a way that emphasizes gospel priorities?

THE SETTING

The book of James was probably written from Jerusalem, where James served as pastor. He wrote this letter to offer practical, pastoral advice to those Jewish believers who had been dispersed by persecution. James wanted these believers to stay on course with their mission. Today's reading focuses on submitting one's actions to God in faith. Philippians was one of four letters Paul penned while imprisoned in Rome. Paul had received a call to preach in Macedonia and Phillippi was one of its leading cities. In this section of his letter we see his zeal for an ever deepening relationship with Christ and how that is one of the highest goals we can have – to know God and make Him known.

SCRIPTURE

JAMES 4:13-17 (CSB)

[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.

JAMES 5:7-8 (CSB)
Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. [8]You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near.

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-14 (CSB)
[7]But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. [8]More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ [9]and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that I through faith in Christ – the righteousness from God based on faith. [10]My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, [11]assuimg that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead. [12]Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. [13]Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, [14]I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

BIBLE STUDY

OUR WILL AND GOD'S WILL
READ: JAMES 4:13-17

Some people read James 4 and take the extreme position that Christians should not make any long term plans. How do you think Christians should approach planning for the future?

What realities did James highlight in these verses?

How does James' warning here apply to the topic of New Year's Day or making resolutions?

Did James mean it's a sin to make resolutions? How does verse 17 help you put James' words in right perspective?

James urged us to add a key qualifier to our planning: "If the Lord wills." James did not simply want us to alter our words, as if saying, "If the Lord wills" at the end of every sentence could somehow make us righteous before God. Rather, James wanted a new perspective to sink deep into our hearts and inform every word we speak. James called believers not simply to contemplate their lack of knowledge of the future, but to assess the very nature of existence. When we understand who we are in Christ, the brevity of life on earth, and the reality of God's eternal kingdom, we will approach every day with a gospel-centered, God-honoring perspective.

What's the difference between inviting God into your plans and letting Him lead your life? Why does this matter?

WAITING FOR THE LORD
READ: JAMES 5:7-8

Do you tend to view waiting patiently as something that is active or inactive? Based on his chosen illustration of a farmer, did James view waiting patiently for the Lord as active or inactive?

What does the analogy of the farmer indicate about what the Lord wills for you in the new year?

How does the reality of verse 8 impact your plans and perspective?

James was writing to Christians who were likely externally oppressed and internally conflicted. His words of comfort addressed both situations. Whether or not it's persecution or extreme suffering, we will all struggle in the year ahead. James exhorted us to be patient and endure until the Lord comes. Though a farmer waits for the rain to produce his crops, he works while he waits, preparing the soil to the best of his ability. Like the farmer, believers must make the most of the time we are given, enduring and working diligently toward God's kingdom purposes. As we live obediently, God does what only He can do to produce the best possible results in our lives.

REACHING FORWARD TO GOD'S GOAL
READ: PHILIPPIANS 3:7-14

Prior to his conversion experience, how did Paul define success in life? How did he define it after knowing Christ?

What are some pursuits for the new year the world might view as gains that Paul would consider loss compared to knowing Christ?

Based on these verses, what would Paul say is a worthy new year's resolution for believers? Why?

Demonstrating the lack of importance of earthly things, Paul expressed what life truly meant to him. He desired resurrection from the dead, so he pursued the only way that promised resurrection. The Damascus road experience transformed him. He discovered that Judaism with its traditions, regulations, and rituals could not guarantee resurrection. Only the resurrected One could. This changed Paul's aim in life. He wanted to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. To know Christ meant much more than knowing about Him in his mind. Paul wanted the closest possible personal relationship with Christ. No matter how long you've known Christ, there is no greater goal or resolution than to know Him more.

APPLICATION

What is one "gospel goal" you can make this year – as an individual, a couple or a family? Pray about it and display it in your home to be reminded of it all year. Trust God with your plans in this coming year. Desire to know Him and make Him known.

PRAY: *Thank Jesus that He is returning and for the promise of eternal life. Ask Him to remind you daily how that truth ought to impact your plans and purposes. Invite Him to draw you closer than*

ever before as you seek to know Him and make Him known to those around you in the days ahead.

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COMMENTARY

JAMES 4:13-17

4:13-14. These verses rebuke our self-sufficient attitudes. Some interpreters feel James was describing non-Christian businessmen, who planned their lives without reference to God. Others point out that those rebuked could at least talk about the Lord's will and take this as a sign that those rebuked at least claimed to be Christians. Probably the original recipients were strong believers in the existence of God but lived as if he did not exist. They did not consider his will for their daily lives.

Verse 14 mentions two features about daily life we often ignore. First, we have no sure knowledge of the future. We do not know whether tomorrow will produce a catastrophe or a visitation of God's grace. Even though we do not know the future, we so often act as if we are secure. We forget that we may be here for a moment and then gone. By failing to accept this fact, we demonstrate arrogant self-sufficiency.

Second, we do not understand the nature of human life which is like a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Life is both uncertain and brief.

Many of us have busy schedules. It is easy to plan those schedules without considering the will of God. Many of us have visionary goals for our business, our job, our church, or our family. God wants us to work diligently in all of those areas, but we must consider his will first as we plan our goals.

4:15. Finally, we hear the proper attitude. We are to seek the will of God in all our plans. Doing the will of God demands an active listening for God's goals and plans. We must plan for the future, but we must plan with a deliberate seeking of the will of God.

As we discuss the will of God, we must not let his will become a strictly formal expression which lacks any spiritual meaning for us. We must remain spiritually alive to the necessity of building our plans around his desires. We must also avoid legalizing our own will under the disguise of seeking God's will.

4:16-17. These verses reveal our disobedient attitude and rebuke our proud, boastful spirit. They call us to a humble dependence on God rather than priding ourselves on our independence.

James accused his readers of boasting and bragging. Bragging describes the arrogant assumption they could handle the future as they wanted to do independently of God. Our boasting is to be in the Lord himself, in the blessings he gives us, and in the experiences which cause us to know him better. Paul boasted in his weaknesses that allowed the power of Christ to rest on him (2 Cor. 12:9). He gloried in the cross (Gal. 6:14) because it represented the action which brought the blessings of God's salvation to lost sinners.

Verse 17 states a specific principle applied to presumptuous planning about the future. It can also serve as a general principle applying to all areas of the Christian life: It is sin to know what is right and to fail to do it. These sins of omission refuse to make a right response to God. A sin of omission displeases God just as much as a sin of commission, that is, a blatant act against God's will. We know to make our plans in reliance on God's will. When we fail to follow this knowledge, we commit a sin of omission. God holds us accountable for more than merely knowing the right. He wants us to do the right.

God wants us to avoid acts of disobedience to his will. He also wants us to avoid the failure to live up to the truth he has given us. The response of the lazy servant which Jesus condemned involved burying his money and failing to increase it by hard work and effort (Matt. 25:14-30).

As Christians we must plan our lives in full commitment to the will and plans of God. We must also avoid omitting from our lives such important practices as prayer, Bible reading, helping the needy, and sharing our faith. To omit the latter is to commit a sin of omission. God wants our full and constant obedience.

JAMES 5:7-8

5:7. In light of God's ultimate justice, James exhorted his brothers to be patient. The Greek term rendered be patient means "to be long-suffering," "to endure." Rather than to seek revenge for wrongs, we are to live in anticipation of the Lord's coming—Christ's return. An illustration from farming presses James's point. The farmer plows his field and sows his seed. He eagerly expects a crop of precious fruit, which he holds dear because of his toil and his dependence on it for survival. The early and the late rains refer to the promised land's two rainy periods. The early rains began during October and lasted for a couple of months, and the late rains began in February or March and also lasted a couple of months. These rains usually came gradually. The farmer sowed his seed when the early rains came and softened the earth. Then he anticipated the late rains to cause the grain to grow to maturity. Farmers depended on these crucial rains for crop production. Without them, people could face famine.

5:8. Believers are to follow the farmer's example of perseverance. In light of Christ's imminent return, we are to strengthen our hearts. We are to persevere in faith and renew our courage and commitment. Our phrase "just around the corner" captures the sense of the words is near. Living in light of Christ's return should give believers staying power, because at His return believers will be vindicated and the wicked oppressors will be judged.

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-11

At one time, Paul considered the factors he listed in 3:5-6 to be religious assets or pluses (gains, profits). When he met Christ, however, he considered these elements as loss—minuses to be discarded as one package (v. 7). Paul stressed the finality of his turning away from a works-righteousness to salvation by grace (v. 8). Not only did he count his former religious credentials as minuses, but more than that he continued to consider everything a person could conceive of as religious pluses to be a loss. What Paul jettisoned was everything on which he had depended for self-generated goodness. He recognized that an intimate relationship with Christ was of supreme value. Paul used his full designation for Christ: Christ (Messiah) Jesus (Savior) my Lord (Deity). Paul had chosen to forfeit what he had counted as religious assets. In fact, he considered these to be filth (dung, refuse). He disposed of what he saw as worthless garbage to experience the greatest gain: an ever-deepening relationship with Christ.

Above everything else, Paul wanted to be found in Christ (v. 9). That is, at any point in his life, at death, or at Christ's return, he wanted to be judged as having a vital union with Christ. Dispensing with his pursuit of a works-righteousness, Paul would present a righteousness that came through faith in Christ. Such righteousness is from God based on faith. Righteousness is right standing with God that He gives by grace. Through Christ, God makes us right with Him and expects us to live rightly. Faith is not mere intellectual acceptance of facts about Christ; it is trust in and commitment to Christ. Only this response makes us right with God.

Paul wanted to know Christ in the sense of experiencing an ever-deepening relationship with Him (v. 10). In that intimate relationship, Paul wanted to have the power of His resurrection. He wanted his life and service infused with the same power that raised Christ from the dead. Resurrection power would enable him (and all believers) to be victorious over sin, to grow spiritually, and to minister effectively. In union with Christ, Paul wanted to experience the fellowship of His sufferings. Paul viewed his hardships as Christ's emissary to be an extension of Christ's sufferings; he readily shared those sufferings, albeit to a lesser degree than his Lord. Part of Paul's goal was to be conformed to Christ's death. As did Jesus (see 2:7), Paul wanted to pour himself out in service to others. Paul wanted the same kind of obedience, selflessness, and self-sacrifice Christ demonstrated. This attitude involved Paul's death to sin and self in order to live for God and others.

Paul was not expressing doubt that he would experience believers' resurrection from among the dead (v. 11). Rather, his words expressed humility. They also may have reflected his uncertainty about his trial's outcome. He might die, or he might be allowed to live. Either way, sooner or later, he would experience resurrection to eternal life. Continually developing our relationship with Christ reflects the reality of heaven and is one of the highest goals we can have. Thus deepening our relationship with Him is to be a daily priority.