

## How to Deal with Uncertainty *by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*



*"Butterfly – Tribute Jackson Pollock" by Juan Jose Garay*

### **Prayer of Illumination**

Guide us, O Lord, by your Word and Holy Spirit,  
that in your light we may see light,  
in your truth find freedom,  
and in your will discover peace  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Scripture: James 4:13-17 (NLT)**

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." How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that." Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil.

Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – How to Deal with Uncertainty

Ethicist John Kavanaugh tells of a time in his life when he went to Calcutta to work for three months at "[The House of the Dying](#)." Part of the reason he went was to find direction for the next steps in his life. The first morning there, he met Mother Teresa.

She asked, "And what can I do for you?"

Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him.

"What do you want me to pray for?"

I've travelled thousands of miles to find direction for my future: *Pray that I have clarity.*

Mother Theresa answered bluntly, "No, I won't do that."

You won't?

"Clarity is the last thing you're clinging to and you must let go of it."

"But you've always seemed to have such clarity."

She laughed and said, "I've never had clarity; what I've always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."

Like Kavanaugh, in the midst of disease, distancing, and sheltering, we too crave clarity, control, and certainty. There's a saying I recently heard:

"A reasonable probability is the only certainty."

But these days we don't even have that. One person described well planning in a pandemic:

*"Everything I enter into my calendar has an asterisk by it:*

*"Maybe it will happen, maybe it won't."*

Basically, our delusions of omnipotence have been dashed. Still, we want to know...

*When everything will go back to "normal?"*

*Will it go back to normal?*

*What will the "new normal" look like?*

*Will my business stay afloat?*

*When will school start back up?*

*When will church meet again in the sanctuary?*

*What do I do after the diagnosis?*

But expectations of crystal-clear answers and smooth sailing through life only sets us up for a world of hurt and frustration.

Psychologists have found that there seems to be one common factor for anxiety of any kind: *uncertainty*. Another word for anxiety is "*ambiguity aversion*." Anxiety is the inability or refusal to live with uncertainty. In our aversion to uncertainty and ambiguity we stress ourselves out and worry ourselves sick—over many things that won't ever happen or things we just can't control.

Mark Twain described it this way:

*"Worry is like making regular payments on a debt that isn't yours."*

Think about it—if every situation were cut and dried and every goal accomplished and checked off the list—there'd be no need for faith or trusting in God. We'd only trust in ourselves, our directions, or the GPS voice. We wouldn't have to lean upon God, moment by moment, day by day.

And so James brings us back to the brutal truth:

*"You have no idea what your life will be like tomorrow—so stay humble."*

Thomas Jefferson put it this way:

*"He who knows best, best knows how little he knows."*

Make plans—but include God in those plans. Let God inform all of your endeavors, in business, life, and faith. After that, still hold your plans lightly—because in all likelihood things will change, and you'll need to adapt and course-correct again.

When we lived in Egypt a number of years ago, whenever you spoke of the future in Arabic, you said, *Inshallah*. God willing. No matter how trivial or small the matter, *Inshallah*.

*Inshallah*—God willing—when I wake up tomorrow, I will make coffee.

*Inshallah*, we will visit family later in the year—God willing, we will be alive and able to travel.

This is a sane and wise way of viewing life. We still can dream. Step out in new ventures. Prepare and have a good game plan. Create contingency plans and build emergency funds. Get insurance. Do your due diligence. But hold your plans loosely and hold on to God tightly. Don't force things. Wait for the right moment. Give it your best shot and then leave the results in God's hands. God gives us assurance, but he doesn't guarantee certainty.

James is reminding us that our task is to trust God in the midst of frustrated plans and the not-knowing. Wisdom learns to live with the inevitable uncertainties of life. To stay open, flexible, and ready to follow God's lead. God promises to be with us through it all, no matter the outcome. It's God's presence that's promised.

Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius lived through a deadly pandemic that lasted fifteen years and had a mortality rate of 2-3%. His people panicked. His doctors couldn't find a vaccine or treatment. His advisors were at odds with how to respond. His economy tanked. Aurelius was scared and knew that danger lurked at every turn. But he didn't get rattled. He didn't freeze. He stayed steady, steadfast, and stouthearted. He got to work. In his journals he wrote,

*"If you are distressed by anything external,  
the pain is not due to the thing itself,  
but to your own estimate of it;  
and this you have the power  
to revoke at any moment."*

God has a challenge for us in our messy COVID-19 world:

In the power of the Holy Spirit:

Trust in God.

Befriend uncertainty and doubt—absorb it into your faith.

Keep perspective. Listen. Keep learning.

Admit that you could be wrong.

Don't do anything rash or foolish—

Even when others are losing their head.

There's only so much that you can do right now.

We're all in the same boat right now.

Things will unfold in due time.

Don't forget—God has seen you through

many, many uncertainties in your life in the past.

And then, with the light you have, do what's right.

Uncertainty is a gift—it reminds us of something important:

*We're not God.*

We can't know everything or control everything—we *never could*. And that's OK.

So, what if you saw your life as a mystery novel that you're right in the middle of.

You don't know how it will turn out—there are points you're confused or drawn incorrect conclusions—but still your interest is glued, and you keep following the clues.

Trust God, the Author of Life, as he reveals them little by little.

Be patient and don't rush the ending.

Enjoy the suspense and anticipation of the journey.

When you start getting panicky, impatient, or rash—slow things down. Breathe deep. Reflect.

Distance yourself from your fears. Analyze them.

Sift the irrational from rational, fact from fiction.

Focus on what matters, push aside the unimportant.

Bend those worries of yours upward into prayer.

Give thanks to God for what you have.

Be honest about the situation—don't sugar coat things.

Wait and see—don't jump the gun or pull the plug too soon. Observe and wait for more information. Seek counsel from others.

Then act in good faith.

Don't become paralyzed by perfectionism—there's a point where something "satisfices"—let it go.

- If something lousy happens say: *this too shall pass*.
- If something good happens say: *this too shall pass*.

This won't alleviate uncertainty, but it will most CERTAINLY help you to live with uncertainty in your life.

*Would you pray the Lord's Prayer with me?*

#### THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

#### Guided Prayer

In Confession, we fess up to the ways our lives have been on the rocks. The big ways and small ways we've hit rock bottom or bottomed out. In confession we also see how God is our Rock. We remember and return to our foundations—built on the bedrock, not the sand. We find our footing at the foot of the cross. On Christ the solid Rock I stand.

Take some time now to breathe deep and collect yourself. Slow down your thoughts. Push the pause button between the stimulus and your response.

As you trust in God your Rock, imagine through all that's going on now that you're a rock. Picture yourself like the rock that the waves keep crashing and washing over. In God, you stand unmoved—even though the sea rages around it. By God's grace, the sea falls still at the rock.

While being unmoved—know that God is also changing you. Doing a work in you.

Our lives are like rough-hewn rocks, full of sharp edges and imperfections. The waves and currents that wash over us, slowly polish and steadily smooth our rough edges.

Remember that God's at work in the uncertainties and the adversities we face—God is buffing our personalities. The troubled waters of change and uncertainty—brush us up and enhance our character.

I'm going to close this guided prayer session with the Serenity Prayer written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;  
enjoying one moment at a time;  
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
taking, as He did, this sinful world  
as it is, not as I would have it;  
trusting that He will make all things right  
if I surrender to His Will;  
that I may be reasonably happy in this life  
and supremely happy with Him  
forever in the next.

Amen.

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