

The Father of Lights

James 1:16-18

There is an easy way to understand the difference between God and men. Everything that is good comes from God, and everything that is bad comes from men. We studied that second part of that last week.

v.13-14

So now the first part, the contrasting nature of God,
v.17

There is a context for that verse, very plain and obvious. Those words are not written in a vacuum. “James is a pastor who fully understands the hearts of those who live scattered abroad far from home and former possessions. He knows that their lot is difficult, and that they have begun to direct their complaints to God.” (Hendricksen) So he addresses them as “dear brothers,” “beloved brethren.” He addresses their circumstances in,

I. A PASTORAL CONTEXT.

Specifically, he recognizes,

A. The reality of troubles.

He doesn't hide from that reality, but starts there! With emphasis. He takes the bull by the horns, and hits the main point of his letter right away. “Count it all joy when you fall into various trials.”

There is then an immediate realization that this book has direct and immediate applications for us today. For this subject of trials and troubles is a universal experience. Some have it more than others, to be sure. The whole of our lives are not usually characterized by troubles, every moment of every day. But still,

none of you escape. In some form or another, to some degree or another, you all have trials. Life is tough. And since we live in a fallen world, we have to face the trials of the curse of God inflicted upon all creation, so that our work is now laborious. There is pain and suffering, ultimately unto death. We have to face the ever-present temptation of Satan, whom Peter calls “your adversary” who “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” And as we studied last week, we have to deal with that enemy within--those desires of our own which draw us away and entice us to sin.

So that's where we start. That's where you need to start today. With the reality of your own troubles. And, unfortunately then, with the realization that within your own heart is,

B. The propensity to deception.

In other words, you and I are easily deceived. We are easily led astray. We easily fall into error and confusion. We easily misjudge the circumstances of our own lives, and we all too quickly forget about the truths of God. So James writes, to you,
v.16

Please don't pass over that verse, as if he is writing to someone else, perhaps those weaker brothers over there. Put away the thought that James is writing to anyone else but you, and humbly admit that the trials and struggles of your life easily cloud your own mind and ability to interpret and think correctly.

Sometimes there is the deception to pretend that those struggles don't exist. The deception to be self-reliant, as if by doing everything the way you are supposed to do it, the trials won't come. Or that they will go away. Or, the deception might come on the other extreme, becoming frustrated, confused or even angry at God. Because of the anxieties of life. Perhaps

maintaining an outward form of Christian faith, believing in the doctrines you might have been taught, but thinking to yourself with a measure of despondency or despair, “God isn’t listening to me or answering my prayers.” The promises of the Bible seem distant and far removed from your own personal experience.

Some might question God’s providence, they might be distressed by questions of why God would allow some terrible things to happen. Even to the point of ascribing some flaw in the perfect goodness of God. So don’t be deceived, beloved! Don’t be troubled by the reality of the troubles of your life. Don’t be shaken or unsettled by the uncertainties or contingencies of life.

Notice where does James turn to address that pastoral concern. Typically straightforward and easy to grasp, he points you to God, and particularly to,

II. THE NATURE OF GOD.

He tells us about God, with words especially important to people enduring suffering and trials.

v.17

It is not surprising that the first place he turns is...

A. The goodness of God.

“Every good gift is from above.” Every good thing given to you is from God. For God is the personification of good, the very essence and definition of good. So much so that when Jesus was asked, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”, he began his answer, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God.”

Thus we are to worship him for his goodness, we are to ascribe goodness to him, as we see in many of the Psalms. For

example,

Ps. 107:1 “Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.”

That Psalm continues then to specify many of the things which God has done for his people, and then ends with these words,

Ps. 107:43 “Whoever is wise will observe these things, And they will understand the lovingkindness of the LORD.”

That’s how you avoid deception. That’s how you avoid losing your perspective or being overwhelmed by the circumstances of life--especially the troubles. There must be this bedrock conviction, this belief that lies at the very foundation of your faith, that God is good.

And even further, “every perfect gift.” The Greek words have a little different implication there, namely that everything God gives is good. Or perfect. We could translate the verse, “all good giving and every perfect gift” is from God.

Ultimately, we must see that everything comes from God. Both those things we consider “hard” or “bad” as well as those things pleasant and delightful. It is all from God. Indeed, every gift is perfect, because every gift comes from the goodness of God. Perhaps the best expression of this found in the Bible is in,

Rom. 8:28 “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

We know it! We know it as an article of faith. A good God works all things together for good. And Paul had just made references to the struggles of this world, too.

Rom. 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be

revealed in us.”

So consider these verses as well, for the building up of your faith,

Mat. 7:11 “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

The hard part, of course, are those things which seem hard to us. Amos has a marvelous understanding,

Amos 3:6 “If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done it?”

Or, Is. 45:5 “I am the LORD, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, 6 That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; 7 I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things.”

When disaster strikes, the Lord does it, for he “works all things according to the counsel of His will.” Every perfect gift is from above. Everything is from above. Every good gift! Therefore, since God is good, EVERYTHING falls under that category, “every good gift.”

As you will read in the 16th century Belgic Confession, “We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God; and that he is [among other things] perfectly just, wise, good and the overflowing fountain of all good.”

That’s where you start. If you want to avoid being deceived by the struggles of your own life, you have to be convinced of these

things. Deeply convinced about the goodness of God. And equally convinced about the greatness of his glory,

B. The revealed glory of God.

Notice the expression, “the Father of lights.” God, the giver of all good gifts, is the Father of lights. The lights are, no doubt, the great heavenly bodies, the heavenly lights. The sun, moon and stars.

God has created every one of them. And God places every one of them in their exact orbit, exactly as he has ordered and determined. Go back to creation, and remember God’s words,

Gen. 1:1 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. 4 And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.”

Then on day four,

Gen. 1:14 Then God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years; 15 “and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth”; and it was so. 16 Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also. 17 God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth, 18 and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.”

The creator of lights--the creator of heaven and earth, reveals

and shows forth his glory with the image of light. In fact, we read this about God,

1 John 1:5 “This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.”

Light represents all that is good, all that is God. Darkness represents all that is evil and wicked. And in that sense we read about the new heaven and the new earth with these description,

Rev. 21:23 “The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. 24 And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it.”

So great is the glory of God, that the presence of Jesus, who calls himself the “light of the world” will render obsolete for all eternity the sun itself! Now, I realize this is all imagery. That’s the best I can do--that is how God has revealed it to us. But beloved, when we walk by sight--no longer merely by faith--we shall see him as he is. We shall see him in the full perfection of his glorious light.

So now, walking by faith, we look to him, the Father of lights, as the great source of strength and joy in the midst of the troubles of this world. With one more attribute of God presented to us for our encouragement,

C. The unchangeableness of God.

Or, in theological writings, his immutability. According to the promise of Scripture,

Mal. 3:6 “For I am the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.

And, 1 Sam. 15:29 “And also the Strength of Israel will not lie

nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.”

He does not “change his mind.” And the contrast with all mankind,

Ps. 102:26 “They will perish, but You will endure; Yes, they will all grow old like a garment; Like a cloak You will change them, And they will be changed.”

So we read in our text,
v.17

No variation or shadow of turning. The second half of that sentence defines the first half. The variation, which doesn’t exist with God, consists of the shadow of turning. Shadow of turning might best be understood as an eclipse. The shadowing out, or overshadowing, of the sun.

God’s unchangeable goodness “is like a light which cannot be extinguished, eclipsed, or “shadowed out” in any way at all. The light of the sun may be blocked...so as to cast a shadow: indeed, for a time in an eclipse, the direct light of the sun (or moon) may be shut off from the observer. Nothing like that can block God’s light, interrupt the flow of his goodness, or put us ‘in shadow,’ so that we are out of the reach of his ‘radiance.’” (Adamson)

God does not change, like shifting shadows. Of course, in our own experiences, the shadows of the sun change every day. This time of year, much to my chagrin, the days are getting shorter, as we put it. The sun is setting earlier. As the earth, sun, moon, and stars all move in their ordained courses, we can readily observe the regular and predicable changes from day to day. Indeed, though I am no astronomer, I know that the sky is never the same from day to day.

That is but a vivid example of the realization that the world in which we live is ever subject to change and variation. Not so with God! He is the father of the heavenly lights, and he himself is always light and never changes.

All of that is for one great purpose--to give us strength and stability not to be deceived or discouraged by the often overwhelming circumstances of our earthly existence.

Just think about it. Some people can identify it explicitly. The thing that causes the greatest stress for many people is simply change! Change itself is often the cause of intense and very real fear. And many live without any apparent escape from that fear.

So what is the answer, the only answer to grant them peace in their hearts? What is the only faithful answer to sustain you in the midst of the troublesome experiences of your life? This firm conviction as the foundation of your faith, that...

v.17

Then what? What does James turn to next for our encouragement? Another doctrine--another major heading the the study of theology--called soteriology. The study of salvation. The encouragement James gives to us is a marvelous exposition of,

III. GOD'S WORK OF SALVATION.

And let me emphasize it that way. GOD'S work of salvation. That really is the essential definition of what we might call the reformed faith, or the reformed doctrine of salvation. God does it. From first to last, for Jesus is "the author and finisher of our faith." "He saved us," Paul writes to Titus, "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy."

That work of salvation begins with what we rightly call his eternal decree. In Paul's words in,

Eph. 1:4 "...just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world."

Thus we read just a few verses later,

Eph. 1:11 "In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will."

That word counsel means the active application of his will--his own determination of what to do, when to do it, and how to bring it to pass. The counsel of his will. James uses the same Greek word as counsel here in our text. It refers to God's free, sovereign, creative will and decision. So we read in verse 18, "Of His own will He brought us forth."

In the Greek, that phrase comes first in the sentence, for emphasis. That's where the weight is place in this description of our salvation.

A. The origin of our salvation is in God's sovereign will.

To be brought forth, back in verse 17, means to be born. And I believe the context here shows us that the birth to which James refers is not the physical birth by which we enter the world of human beings, but rather the spiritual birth by which we enter the kingdom of heaven. Spiritual re-birth, I might add. Regeneration. Or, the concept Jesus speaks of as being born again or born from above.

Being born again is not something you can do! It is something God does! If you are a Christian, then God caused you to be born again, according to the counsel of his own eternal decree. And that understanding is what keeps you from becoming

deceived! That is what keeps you steady and stable in the midst of an ever changing world. That the unchanging God of eternity, the creator of heaven and earth, has raised you from the dead unto life.

Now, when you face trials in this life, think on these things! Regain your proper perspective and right orientation. “Of His own will He brought us forth.”

B. The work of our salvation is in God’s sovereign power.
He did it!

Titus 3:5 “...He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.”

He did it, all of it. The washing of regeneration is the washing of the Holy Spirit which God pours out. God does the washing, so you must always be on guard against the deception of somehow thinking that you did it. That you cleaned yourself up and came to God. That’s nonsense. Foolishness. And a deadly error. God brought us forth from death to life.

And how did he do it? By the word of his power! As James puts it, “by the word of truth.”

C. The means of our salvation is in God’s infallible word.

Now, what is the “word of truth?” Go back again to,

Eph. 1:13 “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.”

“The word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.” The word of

truth is the word of the gospel by which you must be saved. As Paul writes,

Rom. 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”

The means of our salvation is the word of the gospel, the powerful words of God found in his infallible word. The means of salvation is not the manipulative gyrations of an evangelist! Nor the emotional tugging of a familiar song, sung repeatedly over and over. Nor in the externalized ritual we often describe as an “altar call.” The means of salvation belong to God. We are used only to deliver those means--to preach the word of God. What Paul calls “foolishness.”

1 Cor. 1:18 “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

And, 1 Cor. 1:21 “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.”

And so Paul says of his own preaching something that could hardly be said by many preachers in our day who rely upon their own rhetoric for effectiveness,

1 Cor. 2:3 “I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

May it be so among us—that your faith would rest firmly in the power of God. The power of God that is evident in his infallible word.

So that's God's work of salvation. The origin is God. The work is God's. And the means by which it comes about is God's. And James has just one more thing to add in this verse for your encouragement. The result.

v.18 "...that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures."

What an honor! In the Old Testament, it was the firstfruits that belonged to God. They were holy and to be set apart for him--the firstfruits of all the crops. The firstfruits even of the womb. First not only in order, but first also in honor.

God's people Israel began to be described with those words, as we read in,

Jer. 2:3 "Israel was holiness to the LORD, The firstfruits of His increase."

And now, in the New Testament, Christians are God's firstfruits, counted among those 144,000, symbolizing the countless multitudes of all God's people today.

Rev. 14:3 "They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. 4 These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb."

You and I are in that number, beloved, all who trust in Christ and rest upon him alone for their salvation. And what a glorious position that is, the place of highest honor. So it is that,

D. The result of our salvation is the place of great honor.
The firstfruits of all God's creatures. We are his special,

treasured possession.

Now let me tie all this together--the doctrine of the nature of God and the doctrine of salvation. I read earlier,

Rom. 8:28 "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

Now let me read the very next verse,

Rom. 8:29 "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren."

That is we, beloved, we who love God and are called to salvation according to His own eternal purpose, we who were predestined. Paul applies all those things this way,

Rom. 8:31 "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

That's what keeps you from being deceived when you face troubles in life! "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Rom. 8:35 "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

NO. Or Paul's answer,

Rom. 8:37 "Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Therefore, to go right back to James 1

Jam. 1:2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.”

And, v.16 “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.”

God is good, and God is unchangeable. And if, by his own eternal counsel, he has saved you by the power of his own infallible word, then beloved, you belong to him as the firstfruits of all his creation. So take heart. “Be strong and of good courage.” For if you are his, then nothing, and I mean NOTHING, will ever separate you from his love “which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”