

The Trial of Faith and the Goodness of God

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[0 : 00] 18 James chapter 1 at verse 16. Do not be deceived, my beloved brother.! Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,! coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creature. And so on.

We are coming to the end of this first section of this chapter of this letter of James. And we have noticed that in these verses down to version number 18 that we've been looking at the pursuit of spiritual wholeness.

And we have seen the different threads through these verses. There is the thread of trials and temptations. There is the thread of how we respond to these.

And there is the thread of the dangers of doubting God and the dangers of coming to wrong conclusions as we journey on through life in these trials and in these temptations.

[1 : 08] And we saw the last time we look at these verses of this chapter, the way in which the people are reminded or James is reminding the people that when they are tempted, they are not tempted by God, which is a mistake that they were obviously making at the time.

We come to these verses at the end of the section. And of course, the strands follow us into these verses. And the very words at the beginning of verse 16 remind us, I think, of two things.

There was a danger of being deceived by coming to the conclusion that when they were tempted to sin, that they were being tempted by God. But the second area of possible deceit and deception was that there was the message around them, which suggested to them that if they were suffering, it was because God had left them.

It's not something new. We read it through different sections of the Old Testament. And perhaps we are guilty ourselves of concluding that very same thing. So in order to address these two areas of possible deception, James wants to address the issues in verses 17 to 18.

And I want to focus attention this evening on these two verses. And to do so under the heading, the trial of faith and the goodness of God.

[2 : 32] I want to see, first of all, the goodness of God and the facts. Facts are important. If we don't have our facts right, then we are in serious trouble.

And the facts are brought before us here where James says in verse 17, Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above. He is referring to gifts.

And when you read the whole of the New Testament story about salvation, salvation, it is very much based on God giving. God giving his son.

God giving us grace. God giving us faith. God giving us his Holy Spirit. The whole work of salvation is on the basis of God's giving.

When we look at the context here, we have to ask the question, what gifts is James referring to? And I'm suggesting to you that the gifts that he is referring to are the very trials and testings and afflictions they are going through.

[3 : 43] And that may surprise us. But because of the possible areas of being deceived, James wants them to see that whatever they're going through, that they are gifts from God.

And that's why James is saying that every good gift and every perfect gift is from above. The source is a heavenly one. Jesus says to the folks around him, you are from below, I am from above.

He is the one who came down from heaven. He is from above. Paul asks the people in Colossae for them to set their minds on the things above where Christ is.

The gifts are from above. Our testing in life, which is there in order to prove the genuineness of our faith, they are gifts from God.

And when James wants to draw attention to that, he describes these gifts as gifts that are good and gifts that are perfect.

[4 : 56] And perhaps goes without saying that, that when James is referring to good gifts, he is not referring to things that make us feel good at the time. He is not suggesting in any way that, that what happens to us or what comes down in our providence from God in our lives.

He is not suggesting in any way that we understand all of these things as things that are really good. But what he wants them to understand is that they are good because they are designed by God.

And they are fit for the purpose for which they are designed. And they come into our lives in order for the purpose of God to be fulfilled and advanced in our experience. That's what makes them good.

God created the world. And we see at the end of chapter one in Genesis, he saw all that he had made. It was all very good. It was working according to design, according to his purpose.

Good testings, good afflictions, because they are fit for purpose. And they are also perfect in the sense that they fulfill or complete the purpose of God.

[6 : 09] They are perfect, of course, in that they are sent from God and that there is no imperfection in them. But they are perfect, especially because they bring the work of God on in the lives of his people until at last they are exactly in accordance with the way in which God has purposed them to be in his saving intention.

The facts about our testings and our afflictions. There's an advert currently on TV. I can't remember which motor racing organization it is, but it goes something like this.

And looking at the opposition and the advert says, we want to beat them on the track. But then the pressure speaking on behalf of the organization says, but first of all, we have to beat them in the workshop.

And that kind of puts a picture for us for what James is doing here. The good gifts that God sends in order to test the genuineness of faith, they are designed behind the scenes.

They are designed with a race through life and view. The things that we are going to meet with and the kind of people that we are. And the good God, who is good in all that he does, in his goodness, he is preparing, designing something good, something perfect.

[7 : 40] And we in this world who are running the race track of faith and are challenged every day that as we do so, the testing comes right there.

And because it is well designed and because it is designed by God and because it's fit for the purpose of changing you and changing me.

And what may be fit for the purpose of changing you may not be what's fit for the purpose of changing me. But nevertheless, they are there because of God's design and God's purpose.

The facts. And I think it's important for us to to keep a hold of that. We heard at the communion time of the way in which Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tested.

It was a testing that was in God's design. It was a testing that was for the purpose of God. It was good. Jesus stood the test and went on to to serve God and to be our savior.

[8 : 42] It was God's purpose. He was led by the spirit there. And every detail of the temptation was designed by God to prove the genuineness of of the son of God in his heart and in his life and his commitment to do the will of God.

The facts about our testings. And we know that when God comes to test us, perhaps the last thing we see is is good.

We see things as bad. We see things as as why as this happened to me? Where is this come upon me? And perhaps just like they were concluding, it's because God has left me.

But we're alerted tonight by the word of God not to think like that. But to understand that no matter how mysterious the situation is, that it is there because of God's design and God's purpose.

And there is that humor or song called the tapestry poem, our life is but a weaving and it kind of kind of captures the very thing that James has here.

[9 : 52] And he's in that poem is looking forward to to the time of our entrance into glory. And then he says, not to the loom is silent and the shuttle cease to fly.

Will God and roll the canvas and reveal the reasons why the dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skillful hand as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern he has planned.

We're not we're not asked to understand everything. We're not asked to embrace what God is doing. We're asked to stand in the face of of the testing of our faith to remember that this has come from heaven where Christ is.

And it is designed by God for good. The goodness of God and the facts. Secondly, we have the goodness of God and the faithfulness.

They needed to know as we need to know that there will be no exceptions to this rule. And that's what James drives home in that same verse.

[11 : 04] Coming down from the father of lights with him, there is no variation or shadow to change. Once more, we were in the arena of these things coming down from above.

And on this occasion, they're coming down from the father of lights. And it may seem strange that James is referring to God as the father of lights.

But he is using God as the father of lights in a way that the Jewish people would, who would understand God as their creator.

And to also see God as the father of the universe. So the father of lights is very close to God as the creator. And they come down from him as the one who is the father of lights.

Psalms 136. To whom he made the great lights in verse seven. The sun to rule by day, the moon, the stars by night.

[12 : 08] He is the creator God. He is the father of lights. He has made everything, including the planets and every way in which they move around.

And he is using that image and that picture for a particular reason. With whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

When James thinks of the planets and of the solar system and of all the stars. When he thinks of all of these things, he thinks of movement.

He thinks of change. He thinks of shadows as the sun rises in the morning until it sets in the evening. He thinks of shadows. He thinks of movements.

And the father of lights, the God who has created, he has created the universe according to his design perfectly. With all of the whole of the solar system moving as it does.

[13 : 11] And moving as it does in order to sustain itself according to his rules. And God speaks in the Old Testament with regard to the way in which he has made a covenant.

With the sun and the moon and the stars. And if my covenant, he says, with the sun and the moon is broken, then my covenant with David is broken.

In other words, it cannot happen. This is the way I've made the universe. This is its design and it is moving as I have designed it.

It is change. It is shadows. It is movements. But then he says, there is no variation or shadow due to change with the father of lights.

There is consistency. There is constancy. There is an unchangeableness about the way in which God gives these gifts to us in order to change us and in order to transform us.

[14 : 20] There is never a time when he sends something that's not for a good. Paul is able to say in Romans eight, all things work together for good to them who love God, who are called in accordance with us purpose.

There is certainty of the goodness of God. And in some 100 worried that the Lord is good and that is steadfast love and Jewish forever.

Our experience will change. Our providence will change. Our circumstance will change. But God is unchangeable. He always gives to us what is for our good, for our transformation, for our change into the likeness of his son.

And sometimes we see exceptions ourselves. There were exceptions here where certain situations, if that happens to you, then it's because God has left you or God doesn't love you anymore.

And there may be exceptions in our own lives when because of a particular situation or circumstance that we begin to think just like that, the way the world thinks and the way those who are separate from God think.

[15 : 47] But God wants us tonight to remember that as surely as his gifts are good and perfect, they are always good and perfect.

And as we go on in life along this race course of our faith, at every stage of life, I know that the Lord is good.

He is good but God only, said Jesus to the rich young man who came to him. The goodness of God never fails. His steadfast love endures forever.

Everything flows down from him because of his loving commitment and because of his goodness toward us. There are no variables.

It is the constant goodness of God that sends to us these good and perfect gifts. And finally, there is the goodness of God and the focus.

[16 : 48] Where does he want to take them? Where does God want to take you and me this evening as we try and find a real context for everything we go through in life?

That's what we have in verse number 18. Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth. That's the baseline of his own will.

His own decision, his own purpose. Not particularly his purpose in sending a particular gift, but his purpose to save according to his will.

It's the movement of his heart. It's the inner disposition of God and the very way in which he is moved in his love towards the saving of his people.

The older theologians would think of God's covenant as being the womb of the covenant from which everything else is born. And that's something of what we have here. It is the will of God.

[17 : 56] It is the eternal covenant of God. It is the context in which we are to understand everything. And in accordance with this will, behind the scenes in God's design, in accordance with his purpose and will, he brought us forth.

It's the new birth. It's the new creation. He created the sun and the moon and the stars. He is the father of lights.

But more importantly, he is the father of all of his children. The context for understanding the testing of our faith is always the fact that God is our father and that we are his children.

And in order to remind his readers and to remind ourselves, he brought us forth by the word of truth. We read in Titus, this didn't happen because of works of writers which you had done.

Here is where we find a resting place. We land in the place where God has chosen and God has purposed. And in the will of God, he brings us alive to himself.

[19 : 13] And he does that solely and completely by the power of his Holy Spirit. We are here tonight as the children of God, simply because, not because it's simple, but simply because and absolutely because God's gave us spirit and God sent the spirit.

And the spirit came to bring us alive. Unless, says Jesus, you're born of the spirit or born from above, you cannot enter or see the kingdom of God.

And Peter speaks about the way in which we are born again, not of corruptible seed. But we are born again by the imperishable, by the living and abiding word of God.

This is a powerful instrument. Perhaps to a shame, we read it so often and we don't connect with the power that belongs to this word.

But as this word alone, through the work of the Holy Spirit alone, that brings us alive. And we will listen to our prayers to the need to be revived and to be renewed and to be reformed.

[20 : 30] It's the same Holy Spirit with the same word that's going to do that. But the baseline, the context for the whole of our lives is the will and the purpose of God.

But what is that purpose? It is that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Literally, it's being a first fruit of his creations in the plural. And it speaks to us of the work that God will do through the whole of the existence of this world.

And when James refers to the idea of first fruits, it comes from the Old Testament. It's borrowed from the sacrificial system of the Old Testament and the service at the tabernacle.

And the people of God were to bring the first fruits of the harvest and give them to God. And the first fruits were part of the whole.

[21 : 39] They were connected to the whole and they were given to God in a sacrifice of thanksgiving. And the key thing was the organic link between the first fruits and the whole of the harvest.

This means that. This is part of that. And here that we should be the first fruits of his creations.

And the very creations or the creation that James is referring to speaks to us of the new heavens and the new earth that we have in Isaiah 65, that we have in 2 Peter and that we have in Revelation 21.

What do these passages tell us about the purpose of God? It is that there is such a place that is in new heavens and the new earth.

That there is such a place that towards that new Jerusalem, God will gather all who are the offspring of Abraham, who may have purpose to save each and every one of them.

[22 : 48] The whole lot. Not just the single ones like you and me. But as being here this evening, as those who are the first fruits of his creatures, we are here only as part of the whole of the church of Jesus Christ, from the very beginning of scripture until the end of time.

And James wants them to understand the big picture. To understand that the day will come, as we read in Revelation 21, that the new Jerusalem will come like a bride prepared for her husband. The whole church appearing with God. God dwelling amongst them. God being their God. God being his people. The people being his people. That sense at last of the marriage of Christ and his church.

And if they are and if we this evening put our whole lives into the context, the whole testings in life into the context of the of being the first fruits of his creatures.

[24 : 05] God. What a context that is. What joy will that bring. We saw something like that in Jeremiah 31. And there was that anticipation of joy because God had promised that he would bring his people from afar.

That he would guard them once more in Jerusalem. And that he would unite them together. And that with his goodness, he would fill them up. And tonight as we close and as we think of the facts about the gift of God in our testing.

As you think of the faithfulness of God and ensuring that always the testing is good and for our good. Let us carry with us the focus, not just for our testing, but for the whole of our lives.

Let us pray that we do not forget whose we are, where we are going. And that we do not forget that in accordance with the promise given to Abraham.

That his seed would be like the sand on the seashore. Let us not forget that we are part of the great church of Christ which he is building.

[25 : 18] And as they were first fruits representing the whole, so tonight we represent the whole harvest. And all of the people of God that will be saved in our own time.

In a future generation until the end of time. And all that will be gathered around the throne of Christ. And may God then help us as Ene to rejoice in that.

And to know that what happens in life is God's prescription designed for his own purpose. To transform us into the likeness of his son.

Until at last we are in glory with him. And may God encourage us in thinking of all of these things.

And may we be strengthened together to live as the whole people of God.

Encouraging and supporting each other as we journey on in the highway of faith. And the race that is set before us in the word of God.

[26 : 18] May God bless these thoughts to us. We are now going to conclude by singing and sing psalms in Psalm number 5.