

JAMES 1:16-18 GOD WHO IS GOOD

“Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 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 firstfruits of his creatures.”¹

It appears to me that people are willingly deceived about the character of God. That precise contention is not only implied in our text, but I suggest that it is the consistent observation of students of anthropology. The Word of God is quite clear in presenting God as good. Likewise, the experience of all who know God as Father is as recipients of His goodness. Nevertheless, mankind often ascribes to God a character utterly devoid of reality.

Apparently, the suffering saints to whom James wrote were discouraged as a result of the extreme persecution they were experiencing. In their discouragement they seem to have begun to ascribe to God characterisations that were out of step with reality and at variance with their own experience. However, when an individual is beset by trials, that person has a tendency to become focused on his or her own situation to the exclusion of all else. Therefore, what James wrote concerning the nature of God will be valuable even to us as we prepare ourselves to worship and serve God who is good.

GOD GIVES GOOD GIFTS — “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” Our English term “God” shares the same root as our word “good.” It is tacit recognition throughout society during the period that the language took shape that God is good. In other words, underlying our understanding of God is the knowledge of His goodness.

There is an aspect of what James is saying that may be obscured by the English. When he speaks of “every good gift and every perfect gift,” it sounds almost redundant to our ears. A gift that is perfect is good; and a good gift approximates perfection in light of what James is saying. However, when I review the original language, I see that James is saying something even more powerful than making a mere rhetorical statement.

The NET Bible translates James’ affirmation, “All generous giving and every perfect gift is from above.”² The first phrase refers to the action of giving, and the second phrase refers to the gift. In other words, James is making a statement of God’s character, even as he reminds us that God delights to give good gifts.

Throughout the Word of God are statements pointing to the goodness of God. Jesus, speaking during the Sermon on the Mount, urged those who would follow Him to love those who were enemies and to pray for those who persecute His people. He urged this as a duty on His people because the Father is good. Jesus said that God “makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” [MATTHEW 5:45].

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² **The New English Translation (NET Bible)**, Biblical Studies Press, ©1996-2007

Did you absorb the import of Jesus words? God rules over the earth, and if you enjoy the goodness associated with this life, it is God who has provided what you enjoy. Speaking to pagan worshippers in Lystra, Paul pointed to God's goodness as evidence that He should be worshipped as the True and Living God. Of God, the Apostle said, "He did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" [ACTS 14:7]. God's creation is good, despite the fact that it gives evidence of man's fall and subsequent plunge of all creation into ruin. Despite the harshness revealed through this fallen condition, God has nevertheless shown man great goodness through giving us His bounty to enjoy and through showing us continued mercy.

The Psalmist declared of God:

"The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase"

[PSALM 85:12]

In other words, the bounty of the harvest is a gift from God. The increase we enjoy—both the increase of the fields and the growth of all that God has entrusted to us—serves as proof that God is good.

In another Psalm, we read the declaration:

"The LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favour and honour.
No good thing does he withhold
from those who walk uprightly."

[PSALM 84:11]

In a similar vein, the Psalmist declares that "those who seek the Lord lack no good thing" [PSALM 34:10]. God gives good gifts and man is the blessed recipient.

Writing the 136th PSALM, the Psalmist incorporates at the conclusion of each strophe of the Psalm the refrain, "His steadfast love endures forever." Throughout the Psalm, the evidence cited to demonstrate His steadfast love is that He alone does great wonders [VERSE 4], and that He brought into being all that man observes [VERSES 5-9]. Repeatedly, throughout history, God has delivered His people, and that is an evidence of His steadfast love [VERSES 10-22]. God's continual intervention to provide endurance, escape and provision for His people demonstrated His continual goodness [VERSES 23-25]. The "steadfast love" of which the Psalmist wrote is God's kindness—His covenant love revealing His essential character. Indeed, "God is love" [1 JOHN 4:8; 16].

Again, in the Sermon on the Mount, the Master taught that the basis for praying with confidence is our knowledge of the goodness of God. Perhaps you remember His teaching? "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are 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" [MATTHEW 7:7-11]!

Scope in on that final affirmation. “How much more will your Father who is in Heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” God gives what is good; and what is good is precisely what is most needed. We do not know what to ask for nor even how to ask, but the Father knows what we need and provides what we need. Therefore, because we know the character of the Father, we ask in confidence.

This truth is abundantly evident in the words of the author of the Hebrew Letter, when he writes, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” [HEBREWS 4:14-16].

I cannot begin to recount the goodness of God, but I know that it is only our fallen condition that prevents us from testifying to His goodness that is abundantly evident in every facet of our lives. We are such fallen creatures that when we begin to think of the goodness of God, our minds turn almost automatically to the material aspects of our being. However, though we should give thanks for the rich bounty we enjoy, we must not forget the truly important gifts that God has given.

I enjoy the great outdoors and especially the sports of hunting and fishing. However, it is the capacity to walk and to observe that make these sports so enjoyable. It is the strength to pursue these vigorous sports that make time afield enjoyable. The ability to see the vivid colours, to smell the wafting fragrances, to hear the wild sounds cause me to rejoice whenever I am in the field. God has given me strength and the abilities to witness the power of His handiwork. Therefore, I know that He is good.

I enjoy preaching the ineffable Word of the Lord, delighting to discover the truths God has set in place and to communicate those truths to all who are willing to receive them. It is God who gave me the ability to think, to ponder and to seek. Even the desire to know is a gift from the Master. My ability to reason and to communicate what I discover is evidence of God’s goodness. Therefore, I know that He is good.

I am blessed to have good friends, and the capacity to enjoy their company and to rejoice in their presence is a gift from God. The wife of my youth is a gift from God in that as we have grown older together we have discovered something about love that we could not have known as younger people. I do not deny the thrill that attended the physical attraction and the infatuation in the first blush of love, but as we have invested life together, God has taught me the joy of companionship as I reap the rewards of a life invested in one another. Love and the joy of shared lives is evidence of God’s goodness. Therefore, I know that He is good.

Throughout the years of my life I have been privileged to participate in moulding the lives of others. Among those so moulded were my children. As I see my children succeed at the various tasks God has entrusted to them, I derive great pleasure. The ability to rejoice and the ability to have shared during the formative years of their lives is a gift from God and an evidence of His goodness. Likewise, the productive service of various individuals whom God brought into my life and whom I was permitted to teach is a source of continuing joy for me. As I watch former students advance far beyond anything I have ever accomplished, I am filled with joy. I see this ability to rejoice in their success as an evidence of God’s goodness. Therefore, I know that He is good.

Our senses, the capacity to love and to be loved, the ability to learn, to reason and to think the thoughts of God after Him, are all gifts from God who is good. The ability to recall the goodness of years past and to forget the tarnishes on our imperfect lives, each is a gift from God who is good. The ability to marvel and to experience joy is a gift from God who is good.

God has given me the forgiveness of sin, freedom from condemnation and fullness of life. He is not stinting, but rather He has always proved Himself to be generous toward me in those things that are of eternal worth. I was a rebel to grace, and God freely forgave me, gave me new life and now calls me by His Name. I have immediate access into His presence, and the confidence that when I call He hears me. These are generous gifts that make life worth living.

James is refocusing the gaze of his readers because they were distressed by their experiences. He has just reminded them that God is permitting all that is happening for their good and for His glory. Though the suffering was not enjoyable, James reminded them that there was purpose in their trials. His words anticipate words the Peter would later write. “In [the knowledge of the outcome of your faith] you rejoice, though now for a little while ... you have been grieved by various trials” [1 PETER 1:6]. As he refocuses their attention, He reminds them that God is good.

I can endure all things, if only there is purpose in my trial. Likewise, you can endure any trial if only you believe there is purpose is what you are called to endure. Therefore, we need to hear what James is saying when he says that our times are in the hands of God who is good. I need to hear that God is ruling over my life and overruling the efforts of those who seek me harm. God is working out His purpose in my life. Trials and testing are permitted by God who is good.

In the realm of discipline, we would agree that “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant,” [HEBREWS 12:11a]; and in the realm of testing, which is related in a measure to the concept of discipline, by the nature of the testing if for no other reason, we would also declare that all testing seems painful rather than pleasant. Nevertheless, if discipline yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” [HEBREWS 12:11b], then trials produce steadfastness, ensuring that we are moving toward maturity in our faith and in our service [see JAMES 1:2-4].

GOD IS IMMUTABLE — “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.” James also instructs his readers that God is immutable—that God does not change. Jesus our Lord is “the same yesterday and today and forever” [HEBREWS 13:8]. Therefore, the goodness of God the Son is never ending. If He delights to shower us with kindness and mercies today, we may be confident that His kindness toward us will continue throughout eternity. God is good; and God cannot change.

In the Pentateuch, God spoke through Moses to address His unchanging nature.

God is not man, that he should lie,
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Has he said, and will he not do it?
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

[NUMBERS 23:19]

That affirmation is comforting in the extreme. Children of the Living God need not be concerned that He will somehow change His mind or alter His Person. What He is, He will ever be, and that gives us courage and encouragement.

In the last Book of the Old Covenant, God spoke through His prophet to declare, “I the LORD do not change” [MALACHI 3:6]. He spoke those words to remind His people that were He to change, they would be destroyed.

If love and mercy characterise God’s attitude toward His people now, then we may be assured that love and mercy will characterise His attitude throughout eternity. This is the basis for Paul’s delightful contention that

“What no eye has seen and no ear has heard,
and what has never come into a man’s heart,
is what God has prepared for those who love Him”

[1 CORINTHIANS 2:9, HCSB].³

Since the believers to whom James was writing were suffering because of their Faith, he might have written them to consider how they came to faith in the Son of God. Of course, they would speak of the mercies of the Lord, relating that they were saved by grace. This is the only way in which God saves man, and the only basis for salvation throughout the history of salvation.

Looking back to Abraham and appealing to what was written, Paul stated with great confidence, “What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” [ROMANS 4:1-5].

So Abraham believed God, and his faith secured salvation. The same is true for us, as multiple scripture verses attest. A well-known example is provided in the passage Paul included in the encyclical we have received in our Bible as Ephesians: “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” [EPHESIANS 2:4-10].

In the Gospel bearing his name, the Apostle John quotes the Master as promising, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” [JOHN 5:24]. The promise of God is that “whoever believes in [Jesus, the Son of Man will] have eternal life” [JOHN 3:16]. Without question, the promise of God is that “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” [JOHN 3:36].

³ **Holman Christian Standard Bible**, Holman Bible Publishers, 2002, 2003

James is reminding these suffering saints that they became children of the True and Living God through being born from above. They performed no work to make themselves acceptable to God, and therefore, there could be no labour sufficient to maintain their status as those who were born again. The free gift of God was for them, and is for us, eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord [see **ROMANS 6:23**]. Therefore, though they were now enduring severe persecution, they had experienced the goodness of God at the beginning of their new life, and there was no doubt that the Lord continued to be merciful and good toward them even in their anguish.

The Apostle Paul knew something about suffering, as did each of the Apostles. Writing to the Roman Christians, Paul encouraged them by urging them to take a long view of their painful experiences. He wrote, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” [**ROMANS 8:18**]. Would you really exchange what God has given you for momentary relief from your trials? Would you actually surrender the knowledge that He has accepted you in His Beloved Son for transient relief from persecution?

Dear people, think of how you came to the Son of God. Did you find God to be an austere, cruel and vindictive God seeking to strip joy from you? Or did you discover Him to be merciful and kind, accepting you even in your sin and though you were a rebel? Did not God show you kindness when He received you? And has He not continued to shower you with goodness throughout the days of your walk with Him? This God whom you have come to know will not change as does the wind. What you have known is what He shall be throughout all eternity.

GOD IS TRULY OUR FATHER —“Of his own will [God] brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” Even outsiders should acknowledge that God is good, and when they are not focused on their own transient existence, they do admit this obvious truth. Likewise, outsiders should recognise that God is immutable, and when they permit themselves to think, they are compelled to confess that He is holy and therefore opposed to sin.

Despite confessing God’s goodness and immutability, sinners usually harbour the hope that God will never permit anything to intrude into their lives to take away their happiness. In fact, a common complaint registered by sinners is to question God’s goodness because a loved one or a friend contracted some loathsome disease and did not survive, or they use the excuse of the suffering of children to question God’s goodness. Many sinners, perhaps most, harbour the hope that God will overlook their sin, despite knowing with certainty that He is righteous and holy and thus cannot overlook sin.

However, for the Christians to whom James wrote, enduring severe trials, the knowledge of God’s goodness and the certainty that He would not change would have been great comfort, and the more so because He is truly Father of those who have faith in the Son. We need to realise that we are children of the Living God, not through our own effort, but because of His will exercised in mercy and kindness toward us. Recall the words of John, written concerning the Son of God. “[Christ the Lord] was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” [**JOHN 1:10-13**].

All who receive Christ as Master “become children of God.” They are “born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” This refers to the New Birth of which Jesus spoke whilst conversing with Nicodemus [see **JOHN 3:1-15**]. Jesus was not speaking of a physical birth, but of a spiritual birth to new life. The consistent testimony of the Word of God is that we are born again through faith in the Son of God, and this faith comes through hearing the Word of God.

Consider just a couple of instances. To the Corinthian Christians, the Apostle Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” [**1 CORINTHIANS 5:17**]. As he began his first letter, the Apostle Peter blessed the Father because all who believe in the resurrected Christ are born again. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” [**1 PETER 1:3**]. Shortly, the Apostle will stress this truth when he writes, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” [**1 PETER 1:23**].

I have sometimes been accused of using too much Scripture in my messages. There exist theological lightweights within Christendom who present themselves as “mature Christians.” These intellectually impoverished luminaries imagine that they are well equipped for every contingency because they “feel good” about themselves. I have learned through long enrolment in the school of Christ the Lord that I have no wisdom of my own. My wisdom is restricted to that which is provided in the Book as applied to life by the indwelling Spirit of God. Therefore, I have come to realise that it is not native abilities that are important, but rather it is resort to the Word of God that changes lives.

When you come to church, I dare not attempt to provide you with a science lecture; during the years since I last laboured in a laboratory, science has changed dramatically. I cannot imagine that my economic musings will change anyone’s life. Though I enjoy reading history, history divorced from His Story is dry and incapable of transforming any life. When you come to the House of the Lord, you wonder if there is any word from God. There is a word from God, and as I appeal to what He has given us in the Book, you are receiving that Word.

Writing the Roman Christians, Paul attested that, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” [**ROMANS 10:17**]. What a strong commendation for expository preaching! It is not preaching to “felt needs” that transforms lives, but it is declaring the Word of the Lord that brings faith and builds Christians in this most holy Faith. You came to faith in the Risen Son of God through what has been written of Him as the Spirit of God energised what was preached. My thoughts about any issue are no better than the thoughts of any person. However, when I restrict myself to declaring this Word you are receiving the very words of God; and if you have disagreement with that Word, your disagreement is with the One who gave the Word and not with the preacher.

For the child of God, God is the Eternal Father. Often, large gatherings of people feel compelled to recite the Lord’s Prayer in unison. That model prayer begins by addressing God as, “Our Father in Heaven” [**MATTHEW 6:9**]. Almost always I dissent from participating in such efforts, because God does not present Himself as Father of all, but rather as Father of those who are born from above and into His Family through faith in Jesus His Son. I am cautious not to encourage those who have no heart for God to believe that they are honouring God through reciting that model prayer.

The Word of God presents a dichotomy between the lost and the saved. Listen to John as he deliberately identifies that division separating the saved from the lost.

“Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” [JOHN 3:18].

God differentiates between those who believe and those who do not believe. The former are not condemned, but the latter are “condemned already.” The one who does not believe is condemned “because he has not believed in the Name of the Only Son of God.”

Again, nearing the conclusion of this great chapter, John writes, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” [JOHN 3:36]. Believing the Son secures eternal life. Failure to believe, which is tantamount to disobeying what God calls all mankind to do, ensures that the individual will never see life. In fact, for the disobedient, “the wrath of God remains on him.”

So, God is our Father if we are born into His Family. Toward His children, He is good and immutable, always seeking the benefit of His child. On the other hand, for that one who has never been born from above, God presents Himself as an implacable foe opposed to them and standing athwart their illicit efforts to make themselves acceptable to Him. Moreover, outsiders must know that God is unchanging in His opposition to their godlessness. To the lost, God’s nature must assuredly and rightfully be terrifying. To His beloved child, God’s nature is comforting and encouraging. In the midst of trial, the child of God can draw comfort in the knowledge that God seeks his or her benefit in every situation. Children of God may draw encouragement from the knowledge that the Father has permitted only that which will result in glory to Him and goodness for them.

And that brings me to this vital point for the people of God. Are you now passing through a trial? Have you tasted bitter tears as you wondered whether you were forgotten by the Father? May I encourage you to remember that God is good, and that His goodness will never change. God will always seek your benefit. James encouraged his readers to seek wisdom and to permit God to work to bring them to maturation. Just so, you also can derive comfort in the knowledge that God will use your adversity for your good and for His glory.

Perhaps in the moment at which we have arrived in our worship, it is appropriate to invite each Christian to pray for His strength, to seek His goodness in a new way. Perhaps it is appropriate to encourage you to pray, asking that He grant you the ability to see clearly what He is doing through permitting your trial.

To those who are somehow outside the Faith, our encouragement is that you will receive the gift that God offers to all who receive His Son as Master of life. The Word of God is quite clear in calling all mankind to faith in Jesus the Lord. The Apostle Paul, writing the Roman Christians, reminds them, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The Apostle concludes that appeal by citing words written in the Old Covenant, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

And this is the appeal of this church to you; even as the message concludes in this hour, call on the Name of the Lord. As the service draws to a close, believe that Jesus died because of your sin and that He rose for your justification. Do it now. May God bless you as you receive the life He offers freely in Christ the Lord. Amen.