

GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME!

James 1:16-18

In his book, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, R. KENT HUGHES tells of a dark night of the soul that he went through and how the Lord brought him out. Kent Hughes had been groomed for success. It was no surprise that he was chosen to plant a new church. Expectations were so high that there were whispers that his new church would soon outgrow the mother church. But several years later, there were very few signs of life, growth, or fruit. In a moment of weakness, Kent said to his wife Barbara, "God has called me to do something he hasn't given me the gifts to accomplish. Therefore, God is not good." Barbara assured her him that she still believed in the goodness of God. She encouraged him to hold on to her faith for the night. She had enough faith to believe for the both of them. What do you hold on to when life causes you to question the goodness of God? Let me encourage you to hold fast to the words of James 1:17: "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."

The recipients of this letter from James were undergoing trials of various kinds. They needed wisdom to understand their trials and respond to them appropriately. Indeed, both misunderstanding and mishandling trials were both problems for James' readers. They needed to know that God uses trials test the genuineness of our faith and to nurture our faith to maturity. Because they did not understand this, they were failing these tests of faith. Their trials were becoming temptations to sin. Some were even accusing God of a divine conspiracy in which God was using their trials to set them up to sin. In James 1:13-18, James addresses this matter of God and a case of mistaken identity. In verses 13-15, James argues that God is a holy God that never sends temptation or sin into our lives. Then in verses 16-18, James argues that God is a good God that only sends good and perfect gifts. In clear, graphic, and powerful terms, James makes the point here that God is good all the time. In fact, the English title, "God," is derived from the German word for "good." God's nature and character and ways are all good. WILLIAM TYNDALE said it well: "God's goodness is the root of all goodness; and our goodness, if we have any, springs out of his goodness." God is good all the time. James 1:16-18 defends, declares, and demonstrates the goodness of God.

I. THE GOODNESS OF GOD DEFENDED

Verse 16 issues a stern warning: "Do not be deceived, by beloved brothers." This verse is a bridge between what James says about the nature of temptation in verses 13-15 and the character of God in verses 17-18. Both ideas are closely connected. There is an insidious connection between misunderstanding God's

ways and indicting God's character. So James issues a word of admonition with a word of affection.

A. A WORD OF ADMONITION

James commands, *"Do not be deceived."* Do not err. Do not be misled. This Greek verb means to stray or wander away from truth, safety, or virtue. It is the picture of one who is on a journey that is led astray, so that he does not reach his destination. It is the picture of a sheep that wanders off from the shepherd and the flock and becomes lost. It is the picture of a ship that drifts off course and becomes lost at sea. James uses it here to admonish his readers who hold to wrong views about God's character, purpose, and ways. His concern is more than a simple failure of judgment. It is a deviation from the truth. So James commands, *"Do not be deceived."* This command is in a grammatical emphasis that forbids something that is already in progress. Literally, James says, *"Stop being deceived."* Genesis 3:13 records God's confrontation of Eve after her and Adam sinned: *"Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'" This is the ongoing work of the enemy of our souls. He seeks to deceive us. But in John 8:31-32, Jesus says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

B. A WORD OF AFFECTION

Verse 16 says, *"Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers."* Notice how James blends both sharpness and tenderness as he issues this warning with love, addressing his readers as *"my beloved brothers."* In verse 2, James addresses his readers as *"my brothers."* As a means of address, *"brothers"* it is a gender-neutral term that acknowledges his readers to be his brothers and sisters in Christ. But here James fills this phrase out, calling his readers *"my beloved brothers."*

This term of endearment tells us something about the recipients of this letter. They were Christians. They were saved, redeemed, born again. They were fellow-members of the family of God. They were brothers and sisters in Christ. They believed in the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Yet they were susceptible to deception about God. So are you. The peril of the unredeemed sinners is unbelief. The peril of the redeemed sinner is misbelief. In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. LEWIS writes, *"The thing I feared is not that I'll stop believing in God, but that I might begin believing dreadful things about him. Not that I'll say, 'There is no God.'" But that I'll say, 'So what's what God is really like.'" That can happen to you. So beware that you are not deceived about God, because your view of God is everything. Jeremiah 9:23-24 says, "Thus says the Lord: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his*

might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."

This term of endearment also tells us something about the author of this letter. James was clearly concerned about the truth of God being upheld. But he was also concerned about the people who were affected by error. James reminds us that our concern for what is right does not give us license to treat people wrong. You can win an argument and lose a soul. So we must speak the truth in love. James 5:19-20 says, *"My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."*

II. THE GOODNESS OF GOD DECLARED

Verse 17 says, *"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."* This verse highlights three attributes of God in which you can place your confident trust at all times.

A. GOD IS GOOD.

Verse 17a says, *"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above."* Where do good and perfect things come from? They do not come from below or within or around. They come from above. That is, they come from the one who is above. They come from God. God is the source of all that is good. James says, *"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above."* The word *"every"* is emphatic. Everything that is good and perfect is from God. Nothing that is not good and perfect is from God. There are actually two different Greek words in this verse that are both translated *gift*. The terms are basically used synonymously here. But the nuances of these two terms teach us that the goodness of God is seen in his act of giving and in the nature of his gifts.

THE GOODNESS OF GOD IS SEEN IN HIS ACT OF GIVING. When verse 17 speaks of *"every good gift,"* it focuses on the act of giving. Indeed, the gifts of God are good. But the very act of giving by God is good. This may be an obvious point. But it is not to be overlooked. Not every act of giving is good. According to 2 Corinthians 9:7, one may give grudgingly or of necessity, rather than giving cheerfully. It happens during Christmas all the time. You may give someone a gift as an expression of your love for him. Or you may give someone a gift because they got you one or will be offended if you do not. Matthew 7:11 says, *"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 gifts to those who ask him?"*

THE GOODNESS OF GOD IS SEEN IN THE NATURE OF HIS GIFTS. Verse 17 says that the gifts of God are both good and perfect. This is the second time James

uses the word “perfect” in this letter. Verse 4 says, “*And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*” This word “perfect” refers to spiritual maturity, not sinless perfection. It is the picture of a fully developed person who has passed from adolescence to adulthood. The trials of life are designed to nurture our faith to maturity. As the recipients of this letter underwent various trials, some accused God of tempting them to sin. James refutes this error by asserting that God only gives perfect gifts. That is, the gifts of God are always given to build us up, never to knock us down. This does not mean that every gift of God is desirable, comfortable, or pleasurable. But Romans 8:28 says, “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*”

A certain king placed a heavy stone in the road and hid to see who would remove it. The people simply worked their way around it, some loudly blaming the king for not keeping the highways clear. Finally a poor peasant, on his way to town with his burden of vegetables for sale, came upon the stone, laid down his load, and rolled it out of the way. Then, he saw a purse that had lain right under the stone. He opened it and found it full of gold pieces with a note from the king, saying it was for the one who should remove the stone.

B. GOD IS SOVEREIGN.

Verse 17 states the sovereign source of all goodness: “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.*” Then it states the sovereign process by which we receive these good and perfect gifts: “*coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*” The verb translated “coming down” is a present participle that describes a continual, never-ending flow of God’s beneficence to his children. Every good and perfect gift is from God above who pours them down in a constant stream that never ceases to flow. Lamentations 3:22-23 says, “*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” Herein is wise counsel for how to respond to tests, trials, and temptations: Look up! Don’t judge God by what you see around you. Look up! Your outlook is determined by your up-look. Psalm 121:1-2 says, “*I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*”

Verse 17 says that every good and perfect gift comes down from “*the Father of lights.*” This title, “*the Father of lights,*” is a typical Jewish circumlocution that speaks of God without directly mentioning his name. Yet this reverent ascription says so much about God. The “*lights*” mentioned here refer to the heavenly lights – the sun, moon, stars, planets, and other heavenly bodies. To say that God is the “*Father*” of these lights is to say that God created these heavenly bodies. Genesis 1:1 says, “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” And Psalm 19:1 says, “*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*” God the Father created the heavenly lights. When

scripture affirms God as the creator, there is always an imbedded theological assumption: The one who creates a thing is greater than and thus controls the thing he creates.

When James calls God "*the Father of lights*," he is saying that God reigns over these heavenly bodies with sovereign authority. In Joshua 10, Joshua and the fighting men of Israel went to battle against the Kings of the Amorites. God was with them and they routed their enemies. As the enemy fled in defeated, Joshua commanded the sun to stand still. And God caused the sun to stand still until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. I cannot tell you how the sun stood still for Joshua. But I can tell you who brought this supernatural phenomenon to past: "*The Father of lights*." King Hezekiah was low-sick. Isaiah the Prophet told him that he would die and not live. But Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to God. God heard him and promised to give him fifteen more years of life. Isaiah told Hezekiah to pick what would be a sign that God would heal him: Did he want Ahaz's sundial to go forward ten steps or backwards ten steps. Hezekiah said it is easy for the shadow to go forward. So the shadow of the sun went backwards ten degrees. I do not know how that happened. But I know who did it: "*the Father of lights*."

C. GOD IS IMMUTABLE.

Lloyd C. Douglas, author of *The Robe* and other novels, lived in a boarding house during college. A retired music teacher lived on the first row, with whom he had a daily ritual. Douglas would ask, "What's the good news today?" The old man would take his tuning fork and strike the side of his wheelchair and said, "That is Middle C. It was Middle C yesterday, and it will be Middle C a thousand years from now. The soprano upstairs sings off-key, and the piano across the hall is out of tune. But this is Middle C."

THE GOODNESS OF GOD NEVER CHANGES. Verse 17 says, "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation...*" The word "*variation*," used only here in the New Testament, denotes the constant change of heavenly bodies. The sun, moon, and stars seem to be absolutely stable from our perspective. But there are actually mutations taking place among them all the time. Variations of different kinds are constantly taking place in the heavens. Not so with God. There is no variation in God. God is immutable. Our God never changes. Malachi 3:6 says, "*For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.*" The reason why we have not been utterly wiped out is because God is a good God who does not change on us when we change on him. Hebrews 13:8 says, "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*"

THE GOODNESS OF GOD CANNOT BE BLOCKED BY ANYTHING THAT CHANGES. God is immutable. God never changes. God is good all the time. But the phrase "*shadow due to change*" further asserts that nothing that does change can block,

hinder, obscure, or eclipse the goodness of God. In other words, life may be hard. But God is still good. The difficulties of life do not cancel out the goodness of God. If you stand in the sun long enough, the shadows around will move. From your perspective, it seems that the sun has moved. But in reality, the planet is moving, but the sun stays right where it is. You moved; the sun didn't. It is the same way with God. An old couple was riding together, reminiscing about the early days of their relationship. The wife said to her husband, do you remember when we used to sit so close that people couldn't tell which one of us was driving? Why aren't we close like that anymore? Her husband replied, "I don't know. But I haven't moved." If God seems far away, guess who moved? It was not God. God is good all the times.

GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS, O GOD, MY FATHER
THERE IS NO SHADOW OF TURNING WITH THEE
THY CHANGEST NOT, THY COMPASSIONS THEY FAIL NOT
AS THOU HAST BEEN THOU FOREVER WILL BE

III. THE GOODNESS OF GOD DEMONSTRATED

A certain couple bought their young son a new bicycle for his birthday. It was everything a boy could ask for in a bike. They could not wait to see his reaction. On his birthday, they presented the gift, opened the box, and wheeled out the bike. To their dismay, the little boy looked at it, smiled, and began to play with the box! It took them a while to convince him that the bike, not the box, was the real gift.

James did not want his readers to be so preoccupied with outer wrappings that they miss sight of God's true gifts. So he specifies the ultimate gift God bestows. Verse 18 says, "*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*" The phrase, "*he brought us forth,*" states the doctrine of regeneration. Regeneration is the sovereign and gracious act by which God gives new life to those who are dead in sins and trespasses. In John 3:6-8, Jesus explains, "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" This is what God has done for us in Christ: *He brought us forth.* This verb is the same word used in verse 15 where James says: "*and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*" Sin brings forth death. But God brings us forth to new life. In verse 18, the verb "*brought forth*" is in a grammatical emphasis that speaks of something that has happened once and for all. That is, you are not born again and again and again. God has brought us forth into new life once and for all. The statement emphasizes three wonderful facts about the new birth.

A. THE NEW BIRTH TAKES PLACE BY GOD'S WILL

Verse 18 says, *"Of his own will he brought us forth."* The phrase, "of his own will," means that God saves us by a deliberate and influenced act of his sovereign grace. This statement of the source of regeneration occupies the place of emphasis in this verse. Before mentioning the fact or means or goal of regeneration, James states the motivation behind it: *"Of his own will he brought us forth."* God chose to give us new life. In John 15:16, Jesus said to his disciples, *"You did not chose me, but I chose you..."* Being dead in trespasses and sin, unbelievers do not have the will or the ability to choose God. A sinner cannot choose God any more than a dead man can choose to walk. God chooses us. And God did not choose us merely because he knew beforehand that we would choose him. God brought us forth by his own will. John 1:11 records a sad indictment against the people of God: *"He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."* But there is good news. John 1:12-13 says, *"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."*

B. THE NEW BIRTH TAKES PLACE THROUGH GOD'S WORD

According to verse 18, the means by which God gives new life is *"by the word of truth."* Ephesians 1:13 says, *"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit."* God saves sinners who hear and believe the word of truth. Romans 10:13 is a wonderful promise: *"For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" Then verses 14-15 raise several dilemmas that prevent sinners from calling on the Lord for salvation: "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?"* God brings us forth to new life by the word of truth. This affirms the primacy of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ in the life and work of the church. A local congregation is a true church only to the degree it is exposed to and permits its life together to be shaped by the word of God. Likewise, this phrase also reminds us of the great privilege and awesome responsibility given to those who teach and preach the word of God. James 3:1 says, *"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."* Those who teach the truth must make sure that we tell the truth on the truth.

C. THE NEW BIRTH TAKES PLACE FOR GOD'S GLORY

Verse 18 says, *“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”* When the harvest would come, the people of the God were to give the firstfruits – the first and best of the harvest – to God. It was to be consecrated to God to acknowledge that God was the source of the harvest and to express confidence in God’s future provisions. Proverbs 3:9-10 says, *“Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”* You cannot beat God’s giving. And the proof of your confidence in the beneficence of God is to offer God your firstfruits. Here, James uses this familiar image to say that we who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ are the firstfruits of God’s creatures. God’s redemption of rebellious sinners both affirms what he has done through Jesus Christ and what he will to redeem all creation. Romans 8:19 says, *“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”* This reference to the firstfruits emphasizes the fact that salvation is for us, but is not about us. God saves us for his glory.

DOWN AT THE CROSS WHERE MY SAVIOR DIED
DOWN WHERE FROM CLEANSING FROM SIN I CRIED
THERE TO MY HEART WAS THE BLOOD APPLIED
GLORY TO HIS NAME