James 1:16-18
God's Good Gifts

INTRODUCTION

Dear People of God, How many of you have ever had something bad happen to you? Every one of us, right? Have you ever thought that the reason this bad thing is happening is because God is angry with you? Or that God is punishing you?

Despite these inclinations to question God's love, James challenges us to view our sufferings through a different lens.

RESPONDING TO HARDSHIP

Remember the newborn church had suffered persecution at the hands of Saul and had been "dispersed" after the martyrdom of Stephen (1:1; Acts 8:1-3). Many Christians were thrown in prison, beaten, driven from their homes, and even killed during this time.

The church responded to their suffering in three ways:

The first was to respond with anger toward their persecutors, which resulted in physical altercations, and even murder.

The second was to show partiality to their rich persecutors hoping they would be left alone as a result.

And the third was to despair and to doubt God's love for them.

And this third response is what James addresses in our passage today. James asserts that our trials and sufferings are actually manifestations of God's goodness, and are to be received as His good and perfect gifts.

COUNT IT ALL JOY?

Thus James begins his letter saying that we are to *count it all joy when we fall into trials,* for God is testing our faith to mature us, and to make us like Jesus.

But let's be honest. How many of you count it <u>all</u> joy when life is bad? How joyful are you when you or a family member or a friend is suffering, going through a health struggle, marriage problems, life and death situations, or serious financial problems, or something else?

What we are most prone to do when we fall into these sorts of trials is to question whether God loves us, or if He is mad at us.

Is God punishing me for some sin I have committed? Is God bringing some generational curse back upon me and my children because of some sin my mother or grand father committed? Is God is sadistic – deriving pleasure from our pain and misery?

But the answer to all these questions is most certainly, NO!

For the simple truth of the matter is that all these hardships and trials and sufferings which we experience, are good gifts given to you from the hand of your loving Heavenly Father.

DO NOT BE DECEIVED

This is why James says in v. 16 **"Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers."** Do not be deceived and led astray from your faith in God by wrongly thinking that these trials of suffering and hardships that are upon you, are proofs and examples of how God doesn't love you.

That is what sin would have you believe. That is what the devil and evil spirits would have you believe. But these are deceptions and lies, which are meant to lead you astray from faith in your loving Heavenly Father.

Thus James reassures us of God's love by calling us **"beloved brothers."** You are beloved of God. God has no desire or need to punish you, or to harm you. God loves you. You are beloved. And so we must believe that God's design in these trials of various kinds is to a good end. God is making us perfect and mature, like Jesus Christ.

And so James continues, "**Every good gift and every perfect gift** (or, every maturing gift) **is from above."** These good gifts of suffering and trials do not come from below, from the pits of hell. Nor do they merely originate from the natural consequences of one's actions in this world.

Ultimately, these are good and perfect gifts given to you by an infinitely wise God who is working all things together for your good.

FATHER OF LIGHTS

James advances down this trail of thought even further when he describes God as the Father of Lights. [16] **Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.** [17] **Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.**

The lights which God is the Father of refers to the Sun, Moon, and Stars. These are created lights in the world, given to be rulers

over the day and the night. They are symbolic representations of God's sovereignty in the world.

But God being the *Father* of lights, means He is the uncreated light of the world, He is the true source of Light, and He does not change like the created lights of the Sun, Moon, and Stars.

It was once said that the sun never set on the British Empire. Well, the Sun of God's goodness never sets on you.

Neither is the Sun of God's goodness ever eclipsed by the Moon of His anger. We should utterly abhor the idea that God's goodness is manifested to us only part of the time, while at other times He leaves us in the dark, and is angry or indifferent toward us.

God's is the overflowing fountain of all goodness, and His goodness always shines upon us and does not wax and wane like the phases of the moon. This is what James means when he says that in God there is no variation or shadow of turning. God always shines upon us to bless us with good gifts.

GOOD GIFTS

But these good gifts are not just the ones we consider to be good. Certainly water, bread, and wine are good gifts from God. Truly God's good gifts include the laughter of children, a moving melody, and a soothing symphony. God's good and perfect gifts are a good hearth fire, indoor plumbing, a stocked pantry, and a room full of family and friends, a job which pays the bills, along with our daily food and drink.

But God's good and perfect gifts, which come down from Him, also include things like frost, hail, and flood; Earthquake, tornado, and fire; sickness, poverty, and death.

For it is in these things above all others that God is making known to you just how much you need Him. Many of us had to come to that realization through precisely these methods.

Sometimes God whispers and we respond. But for some of us, God has to get our attention through very difficult trials and much pain, and crying, and sadness.

But God is so good that even the hard dark lines, and the deep shadows of His providence, are actually good gifts which come down to us from the Father of Lights, with whom there is no darkness, nor variation or shadow due to change.

Or, as the saying goes - God is good all the time. And all the time God is good. And so God always desires to do good to you, and to do good for you, even in those dark times of difficult trials.

BY HIS OWN WILL

Now, in order to help us understand more personally that sufferings and trials of various kinds are God's good gifts to us, James reminds us of our salvation.

James says, "[18] **Of His own will He brought us forth (made us born again) by the word of truth…"**

James reminds us that we have been born again by the will of God. God is your Heavenly Father because He willed it to be so. God chose to create you, and God chose to save you, and God chose to freely bestow His love upon you from before the creation of the world.

Before you had existed, before you had done anything good or evil, of His own free will God chose to set His love on you and to eternally save you, for no other reason than that it pleased Him to do so.

He wanted you to be His child, ever before you called upon Him as Father. And because God has unchangingly decreed to love you, nothing can ever snatch you from His hand. Nothing can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

No amount of suffering, trials, pain, or hardships can ever separate you from God's loving care. Nor should any of these things ever be interpreted as God not loving you and abandoning you and leaving you as an orphan. He has promised, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

Eph. 1 reminds of God's will to save us when it says:

[3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4] even as <u>he chose</u> us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love [5] he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of <u>his will</u>, [6] to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

[7] In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, [8] which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight [9] making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set

forth in Christ [10] as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

[11] In him we have obtained an inheritance, <u>having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,</u> [12] so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

[13] 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, [14] who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

God chose, of His own free will to do all this for you.

Does this then sound like the actions of a God who is angry with you? Does any of this sound like the actions of a God who wants to destroy you? Does this sound like the actions of a God who is sending difficult trials into your life because He takes pleasure in your pain and suffering?

God loves you. You are Beloved of God. And His good and perfect gifts, all of them, especially the bad things that happen, are to be received with nothing less than a thankful heart.

For if we respond to God's providence in our lives with anything other than thankfulness, we not only show great contempt for God, but we are in great danger of shipwrecking our faith.

As Paul warns in Rom. 1 saying, *"For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and the foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be*

wise, they became fools." Thus we must not be deceived about the purposes of God's dark providences in our life, and we must respond rightly, with thankful hearts for God loves us.

FIRSTFRUITS

James concludes this section telling us the purpose for which God chose us to be born again. And he says, so that we would be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

By first fruits, James is referring to the custom of the law of God of bringing the first fruits of the harvest near to God and placing them at the altar in hopes of more to come.

Jesus is thus called the first fruits of the resurrection. He is the first of many more to be resurrected from the dead. His resurrection is evidence that God is going to resurrect many more from the dead, include you, and me, and all our loved ones who are in Christ.

Now, in calling this new suffering church a kind of first fruits, James is saying, on the one hand, that God is going to bring more Christians into the world through them. This first generation Church is the evidence of many more Christians to come.

But on the other hand, James is also referring to the pattern of behavior that these Christians are supposed to set for the rest of the Christians to follow. And so if these Christians are the first fruits, established by God to provide an example of how one ought to live as a Christian, then they had better get this suffering with gladness thing down. They need to really focus their hearts on counting it all joy when they fall into various trials.

Why? Because this is the pattern set by Jesus Christ for his church, and this is the pattern which this first fruits church is setting for the following generations.

EXAMPLE

Therefore I want you, people of God, to be aware of how you respond to the various trials in your life, because other Christians are watching. Your children are watching. Younger Christians are watching. Older Christians are watching. You are setting an example of how to suffer well, and not sin or deny God in the process.

But even more so, you can provide a positive example of how to glorify God in your suffering and trials, by receiving them all as good gifts given to you from the hand of loving Heavenly Father.

How does the knowledge that God is working all things together for your good help you? The Heidelberg Catechism says:

*"We can be **patient** when things go against us, **thankful** when things go well, and for the future, we can have **good confidence** in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from His love. All creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they can neither move nor be moved."*

CONCLUSION

When things go against you – God is giving you a good gift so as to teach you patience. And remember, James says that **the testing of your faith produces patience. And let patience have its maturing effect, that you may be perfect, mature and complete lacking nothing.** This is God's plan for you in Jesus Christ.

The catechism like wise says that when things go well, we can be thankful. And this is the easy part.

And finally, as we consider the future we can therefore have good confidence in our faithful God and Father. Nothing can happen to you apart from the loving will and purpose of Your Heavenly Father. Nothing at all.

So do not be deceived, people of God. But **give thanks to God in all circumstances, for this is the will of God for you, in Christ Jesus. Amen.**