

7. Praise God for His Grace

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.
(James 1:16-18)

Instead of Blaming God...

In the previous chapter, we learned that we may never blame the Lord for any temptation to sin. It would be a sign of great spiritual immaturity if we, in any way, would lay our guilt for sin on God. It is a common human reaction to blame others for our sins, and it may even come to the point that we blame God. He has led us into temptation, and allowed us to fall into grievous sins, and God is therefore implicated in our fall.

James makes it very clear that sin has nothing to do with God, but is something that has only one source: it comes up out of ourselves. God cannot be tempted and he does not tempt anyone. He does not want us to fall, but to stand. It would be a great hindrance on the way of faith and spiritual maturity if we have a wrong perspective on God in this respect. Instead of loving him, we would find ourselves hating him. He would become irrelevant and we would try to shut him out of our lives. Of what good is God if he makes us fall?

From there, it would not be hard to conclude that nothing good at all comes from God. God is not entirely good, but he has a dark side, a mean streak. He makes life difficult for us. All kinds of adversity and very little good come from his hand. When faced with trials, we would then ask ourselves the question, "What's the good of this? How can God be good if he brings so much evil into our lives?"

This kind of thinking had already affected the churches in James' time. James 1:16 begins with the words, "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers," but the verb tense is in the present imperative. James is exhorting the readers to

not *go on* being deceived. The thought that God is at the root of temptation is a terrible deception that leads people away from him. Instead of trusting him, they doubt him. Instead of loving him, they hate him. Questions about God become accusations against God. We become spiritual children who pout and speak against him.

In this passage, James shows us that reality is quite different. Our God is a God of amazing grace. He showers upon us innumerable gifts. Instead of blaming God for our sins, we must praise him for his grace. His grace is abundant, constant, and omnipotent.

Abundant Grace

When it comes to what God gives us, we must keep the proper perspective. To think negatively about God is very dangerous. Then we easily depart from the Scriptures and form our own ideas and opinions about him. We wind up with a “self-made god” to whom we can ascribe many evils but from whom we receive no real benefits. This is sin against the second commandment, creating an image of God based upon human assumption and not on divine revelation. The question must always be, “Is my picture of God *biblical*?”

If we think of God as being the source of anything, we must think only of good. God is an overflowing fountain of all good, and therefore he gives only what is good. Some explainers suggest that in 1:10, James writes poetically or uses a line from a poem: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” This is a beautiful line, one of praise and adoration.

James actually uses two words that the NIV translates with only one word, “gift”. Literally the text says that every good giving (the act of giving) and every perfect gift (the gift that is given) is from above. The first word may refer more to the motive of God: his giving is good, and he gives only out of goodness. This brings us to the word “grace”. Is not grace the unmerited goodness of God out of which flow all his gifts?

We know that God’s grace is abundant. In Psalm 81, we read, “Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it.” God gives a full measure. The rhymed version in our *Book of Praise* does not have the phrase “wide mouth”, but it does read that “with abundance [God] Israel would nourish.” God never intended to close the heavens and bring drought upon Israel. God did not want Israel’s land to be plundered by enemies. The Lord wanted only to impart his grace to his people, and in that grace to provide them generously with all that was necessary

for body and soul. So if there is drought and if enemies come, we may not blame God but ought to humble ourselves because of our sins.

God's goodness is over all his creatures. This is made very clear in Psalm 145 which speaks of abundant goodness: "The LORD is good to all" (verse 9) and he "[opens his] hand and [satisfies] the desires of every living thing" (verse 16). And this is especially true when it comes to his own people, his covenant nation. He pours out his blessings and gifts abundantly over them. There is no evil intent with God, nor does any evil thing come from him. From God comes only grace, abundant grace.

Father of the Heavenly Lights

In 1:17, James uses a rather unusual expression to describe God: "the Father of the heavenly lights." Why does he employ this particular name? In Psalm 136:7, God is called the one "who made the great lights", which are then listed in the following verses as the sun, moon, and stars.

The Bible often makes a connection between good and light, as it also lines up evil with darkness. Evil grows in the dark, deep inside people. It always seeks a cover, for it cannot stand the light of day. But God is only Light. We cannot fathom the depth of God, but we do know with certainty that there is no darkness in him, nor anything that needs to be hidden. When the Lord Jesus is introduced in the Gospel according to John, we read, "the light shines in the darkness" (John 1:5). Our Lord could therefore call himself the Light of the world. Perhaps the most succinct statement in this respect is found in I John 1:5: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." Light and life are inseparably connected. The world cannot live without light and warmth, just as it cannot exist without God.

But why does James here use the expression "the Father of the heavenly lights"? I think it beautifully fits the context. The origin of evil is in the darkness of our sinful hearts. Evil is found everywhere in this dark world. It is when we look up and see the great lights, the heavenly lights, that we are reminded of the greatness and goodness of God. The text says that every good and perfect gift is from above, not from below. They do not come from this world but from heaven, where God is.

The name "Father" refers to God not only in his capacity and power as Creator of all things, but also in his relationship to Christ and to us. He is *our* Father in Christ. God is not some impersonal being or power that may or may not act for our benefit, but he is the Father of lights, who is loving towards all he has made and gracious to all his children. He lives in a close

relationship with us, and in that relationship fills our lives with his abundance and goodness.

Our Lord Jesus Christ stressed this relationship very strongly. Let us turn to Matthew 7:9, where we read these words of Christ: “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?” This is unheard of! Anyone who treats his children in such a manner would not be considered a father, much less a good one. The result of such action would be the son’s death, either from hunger or poison.

The Lord Jesus continues, “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matt 1:11). We give good things to our children even though we are evil. If evil people can give good things, and if there is love between sinful parents and children, how many more good things will our heavenly Father not give us? Will he not provide abundantly for us in all our needs? Would that which is contemptible among humans, such as neglect of children, ever be found in God? Of course not! The Lord will graciously grant us what is needed in his service. We must ask, knock, and seek, and when we do, God’s gifts will be given.

Does God Ever Change Towards Us?

We confess God’s abundant grace. Some may say that there are times when God’s attitude towards us changes, when he is angry with us and withholds what we need. These are the just judgments, the required trials in life. Even though God is called “the Father of the heavenly lights”, these lights do change. The sun is at one time closer to our hemisphere than at other times, therefore we have summer and winter. Because the earth revolves around the sun, and from our perspective rises and sets, there are always shadows, ever-changing. Nothing stays the same but everything is in constant motion. So also the moon “changes” throughout one cycle and we have quarter-moon, half-moon, and full moon. Sometimes the changes are clearly seen, sometimes they are not.

There is always change and variation on earth, even concerning the heavenly bodies. Some insist that so, too, God constantly changes towards us. One day he is pleased with us, but the next day he is angered. One day he gives grace, but the next day he withholds it. We really cannot depend much on the Lord, for he is quite subject to change.

Perhaps the readers of James’ letter were struggling with the changes they were encountering. At first tolerated in the empire, they were now being persecuted.

They went from leading a peaceful and quiet life to one of trial and turmoil. Had God changed towards them?

This question becomes even more important when we connect it to the matter of the maturity of faith. Sometimes we fall into sin, even grievous sin. The common examples in the Bible are those of King David and the apostle Peter. Does God then change towards us? Is his grace towards us constant or do we fall in and out of grace? Do we stand one moment in the full light of God's grace, but a while later in the shadow of his curse? If we think that this is true, we can lose the certainty of faith and come to despair of God's mercy.

Many people —following the teaching of the seventeenth-century Dutch theologian Arminius— do believe that God is always changing in his attitude toward people. Now he blesses, then he takes the blessing away. God is rather fickle in their minds. The ancient Greeks and Romans believed that their gods constantly changed, had many rivalries among each other, and played cruel games with man. The gods were not really trustworthy.

How many of us sometimes think this way? “God used to love me, but not anymore. He may be there, but he has not helped me out lately.” The final result is that we express doubt about his very existence: “I think there is a God, but I cannot be sure. It's better to go with my own strength than to trust in the fickle nature of gods.”

Constant Grace

James, however, writes about the constancy of God's grace. He writes that God “does not change like shifting shadows” (1:17). James knows quite well that there is always change in this world. The sun rises and sets, but God does not change like shifting shadows. That means he is always the same and therefore his grace is also constant. The flow of his gifts, grace, and love never ends.

As we get older, we notice all the more how things *seem* to change. There is a common saying: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Essential change does not really occur. There is nothing new under the sun. This is true, yet we are always faced with change, with developments either good or bad, and we live in varying circumstances. Our situation can alter drastically from one moment to the next, and we always face sudden death.

We might question whether God changes towards people when they turn away from him. Think of Esau and King Saul. Sometimes it seems that God even lets people sin or causes them to sin even more. Did he not harden Pharaoh's heart, as we read in Exodus 10:20? David, fleeing from Absalom

and being cursed by Shimei, said to the man who wanted to kill Shimei, “If he is cursing because the LORD said to him, ‘Curse David,’ who can ask, ‘Why do you do this?’” (2 Sam 16:10).

Does God make people sin? No, he does not. Does he let them sin and sometimes harden them in their sins? Yes, he does. What this means is simple. Sometimes God lets us go upon sinful ways that we have chosen to take, and in so doing he shows forth his righteous wrath. Perhaps the consequences of such sins will lead us back to the LORD. Yet these are dangerous situations, and so the Lord Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.”

In this interaction, God does not change essentially. He is always the same. He is constant. And therefore we confess the constancy of his grace. His grace is always given to us, when we ask. We need never doubt the forgiveness of sins. It is important for us to know of the constancy of God’s grace in Christ. This does not mean that we may go ahead and lead a life of sin. We may not put God to the test for he may close off the way back. But when we return and repent by God’s guidance, we must know that his grace is constant. It was always there and it is still there. He does not change like shifting shadows.

Omnipotent Grace

God is not subject to or limited by our attitudes and actions. Again, that is an often-stated viewpoint. God can only do things if we let him. The final decision is up to us. But we read in 1:18 —as in other places— that “he chose to give us birth through the word of truth.” This clearly means rebirth, regeneration. This is the greatest gift of all, the ultimate proof of his amazing grace.

God’s grace is omnipotent and invincible, therefore it is also sovereign. God does whatever pleases him. James writes that “he *chose* to give us birth.” God chose. It was a decision he made in his council of redemption. We did not decide to be born again, but he chose to give us birth.

The word that is used here for “birth” means full-term birth, one that takes place at the proper time so that the child can live, grow, and function. We can look back to 1:15, where we read about sin being “full-grown”. A sinner comes to the fullness of his sins. A believer comes to the maturity of faith. God does not just give us many good things in this life, but he also gives us the greatest gift of all: regeneration, rebirth, new life. It is a life washed by Christ’s blood and renewed by his Spirit. This birth takes place in only one

manner: through the Word of truth. It is the true Word of God that makes us into new people. The truth sets us free indeed, and we grow to maturity.

This leaves us with one of two ways to go: either we mature in faith or we mature in unbelief. We grow in obedience or we grow in transgressions. Here, too, we must know our responsibility because everybody grows, one way or the other. God's grace is omnipotent and he gives it to whomever he wills, where it works powerfully. But then we must hear and study the Word of truth. Rebirth does not just happen, rather it is the fruit of the Word of truth.

To take away any thought of human merit, James adds, "that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created." Remember that the first fruits are always for God. These belong to him and must be given to him. God chooses us to a new birth so that we may be the first fruits of all he created. We are the new humanity that will dwell with God forever on the new earth, when everything will have reached its maturity, its purpose and goal. The first fruits are the guarantee of the entire harvest. The holy catholic church will be gathered in full.

Let us never blame God for our sins, but always praise him for his grace. Instead of complaining, we must praise. Instead of doubting, we must believe. Instead of sinning, we must obey. Instead of stagnating or regressing, we must mature in the faith and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is also called the "first fruits" (I Cor 15:23). Christ is risen, the first fruits of a new humanity, and we shall rise with him to a mature, perfect, and glorious life.