



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

“God Is Great, God Is Good”

James 1:12-18

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Introduction

1. As we have studied James 1, we have focused on his theme of the unwavering, steadfast faith that is vital as we face inevitable trials. We begin with an example of unwavering faithfulness by three faithful servants who showed what it means to be steadfast.
2. You may not recognize their names: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.
 - a. When we meet them, they have been relocated to the capital city of Israel’s conquerors where they are being forced to serve a pagan King.
 - b. They pass an initial test of faithfulness, but are not free of danger; their devotion, and especially their worship, is noticed and some of the locals report it to the King; not only were they worshipping Yahweh, they were violating the King’s decree to do so.
 - c. He questions them and is enraged when they reply that the report is true and they intend to continue. He orders their execution, to be seven times worse than normal.
3. You may recognize these men by their Babylonian names. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into a furnace heated to seven times its normal temperature. King Nebuchadnezzar was amazed to see *four* men in the chamber, not three, walking about, unharmed. He released them and issued a decree: any who spoke against their God would be “torn limb from limb and their houses laid in ruins” (Dan. 3:29).
4. What was the secret to their steadfastness? We see it in their reply to the King in Daniel 3:16-18; notice especially what they say they know about God (v. 17).
5. James keeps stressing that we will be withstand trials if we trust in the God who delivers.
 - a. Because God is about *eternal* life which, at its most basic, is knowing God (John 17:3).
 - b. Because God is the one in whom our faith is placed.
 - c. Because God’s character is what Scripture ultimately reveals.
6. Notice some things that James 1 teaches us about God.

Body

- I. God is Completely Pure (1:13).
 - A. Even as he reminded his readers that they were responsible for their wavering faith and sin (1:6-8, 14-15), he also answered a charge that some made against God (v. 13).

1. Some apparently thought that the fact that God allowed testing made him blameworthy when the test lured them to illicit desire, sin, and death (cf. Gen. 3:12).¹
 2. James did not provide a detailed theory of the problem of evil, but is “clear that the processes of sin do not originate with God.”²
- B. James stands squarely in the tradition of the Scriptures his readers knew well.
1. Like the often repeated “Be holy for I am holy” in Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7.
 2. Or Isaiah’s response when he saw the vision of God’s holiness (Isaiah 6:1-5).
 3. Or the statement in Habakkuk 1:13, made at the time the more evil Babylonians were allowed to defeat the wicked nation of Judah.
- C. God is completely pure, never seeks evil, and therefore must always seek good.
1. James assumes what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:13.
 2. Early Christian writers said, God will test for virtue, but will not tempt to evil (Johnson, 204).
 3. This is vital: God wants us to endure and we can do so without giving in to sin.
- II. God is Generous without Fault (1:5, 17a, 18a).
- A. James surrounds the assurance of v. 13 with reminders of God’s goodness.
1. Do we need wisdom to cope with trials? God gives it without hesitation (v. 5).
 2. Can we be sure of God’s goodness? He has always acted to bring about good (v. 17).
 3. We also find assurance in the fact that his goal is for his people to be “a kind of first fruits among His creatures” (v. 18; cf. 3-4).
- B. James succinctly reminds us of God’s sustained goodness and ability to help.
1. Every “good giving” (Johnson, 192, 195) and “perfect gift” keep “coming down.”³
 2. God is the creator of the lights,⁴ yet stands apart from them in both existence and nature: they change; he never does.
 3. Because he wanted to, he revealed, without restraint: himself, his will (“by the word of truth”), and his goal for us (v. 18; cf. vv 3-4).⁵

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson helpfully discusses this point, noting how “it exposes a fundamental problem – or mystery – at the heart of covenantal theology.” Especially helpful is his observation that the patristic writers “were more alert to the problems posed by his assertion ‘God does not tempt anyone,’ ... It was not James’ teaching on faith and works [2:14-26] that appeared most problematic to them, but this passage.” Their solution was “that God does not ‘tempt’ to evil but does ‘test’ for virtue.” If that does not completely resolve the question, “at least it has the virtue of taking the problem (and the text) seriously” (*The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, 203-204).

² Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 106.

³ Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 73.

⁴ “James, therefore, cites God’s creation of the heavenly bodies as evidence of his power and continuing care for the world. The OT frequently makes a similar point (cf. Job 38:4-15, 19-21, 31-33; Ps. 136:4-9; Isa. 40:22, 26; note also Sir. 43:1-12)” (Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentaries, 78)

⁵ Some see a historical connection between the creation gifts in v. 17 and redemption in v. 18. Jewish morning prayers thanked God for the faithfulness that was “evidenced anew every morning.” (Donald J. Versepunt, “James 1:17 and the Jewish Morning Prayers,” *Novum Testamentum* 39 [1997]: 190; as in Blomberg and Kamell, 74. “New every morning” recalls Lam. 3:23, as taught in the song, “The Steadfast Love of the Lord.”) The reference in James then would serve to recall “the preserving mercy of God” (Versepunt, 191), setting the stage for v. 18’s focus on “God as redeemer of his people.” (See Moo, 79.)

C. So, we can trust his promises about the value of trials and our ability to withstand them.

III. God is Dependable (1:12, 17b, 18).

- A. In stressing God's unchangeableness, verse 17 also reminded them that, given the instability of their world, "the solidity and reliability of the wisdom of God was important" (McCartney, 109) (see Malachi 3:6). Our world is no less unstable.
- B. God's dependability is especially suggested in James's emphasis on his word.
 - 1. Verse 18 merely introduces James's focus on the word; vv. 19-25 will go on to show the necessity of steadfast faith for taking the word to heart.
 - 2. In light of v. 16, the word is the means by which we avoid being deceived.
 - 3. As in the NT as a whole, the word "both conveys the knowledge of God and ultimate reality (2 Cor. 6:7; Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:15) and transforms its recipient (John 8:32; 17:19; 1 Pet. 1:23-25)" (McCartney, 110).
 - 4. Using this gift is vital for withstanding trials with steadfast faith
- C. The reference to the word makes v. 12 even more reassuring.
 - 1. When we stand the test, we *will* receive the crown of life, having been blessed.
 - 2. How can we be sure? We've shown our love. And God promised.

Conclusion

1. On January 7, 1855, at the age of 20, Charles Spurgeon began his sermon by declaring that the proper study for God's people is God. He called such study "the mightiest philosophy which can ever engage the attention of a child of God" and noted that it both humbles the mind and expands it. He also said that in the deepening of our knowledge of God is found the greatest consolation.

Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.⁶

2. Periodically, I pull out that quote and read it again. I need to be reminded that I have not been abandoned in this world with all its distractions and challenges; that, while I will be tested, I need not fail; that the One who knows all has plotted an escape route and will give me the wisdom to find it if I will but trust him and look.
3. I also need to be reminded that the life called for in his word, the blessings of community, and the hope of paradise are only by-products of what matters most, what Jesus said is the essence of eternal life: to know God. Do you know him?

April 3, 2011; updated May 20, 2016
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⁶ Cited in James I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 14.