



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

“God is Great, God is Good”

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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 (Spurgeon, in Packer 1973, 14).

Based on his letter, and especially what he wrote in James 1.13–18, James apparently had a similar view of the importance of knowing God deeply (see my previous article that included discussion of James’s emphasis, [here](#)). From chapter 1, especially verses 13–18, we can identify three important traits of God that James emphasizes.

God is Pure (1.13)

Even as James told his readers that they were responsible for whether their faith remained firm or wavered (Jas 1.6–8, 14–15), he responded to the possibility that some would say their

temptations were God's fault (v. 13). As noted [previously](#), the practice of blaming God for one's sins began with Adam (Gen 3.12). It is of interest that, unlike post-Reformation discussions of James, when debate about his treatment of faith and works took precedence, the patristic writers were more concerned about God's blameworthiness for temptation and sin. According to Luke Timothy Johnson, they concluded "that God does not 'tempt' to evil but does 'test' for virtue." Johnson goes on to say that if that does not completely resolve the question, "at least it has the virtue of taking the question (and the text) seriously" (Johnson 1995, 203-204). James did not elaborate the kind of detailed theodicy we might like to see developed, but he was clear about the primary question in such debates: "the processes of sin do not originate with God" (McCartney 2009, 106).

In saying this, James remained true to the tradition of the Scriptures his readers knew well. That teaching included the refrain in Leviticus, "be holy for I am holy" (Lev 11.44–45; 19.2; 20.7). It included Isaiah's depiction of God as the quintessence of holiness, the point of the threefold repetition, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Willis 1980, 140); God did not participate in sin, but would graciously cleanse those tainted by its uncleanness (Isa 6.1–5). And it assumed Habakkuk's statement as he tried to make sense of the revelation that the Chaldeans, who were far more depraved than the wicked nation of Judah had become, would be the instruments of judgment on God's people:

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (Hab 1.13 NIV).

James's view was that God never seeks or participates in evil and therefore will always seek good. In saying this, he assumed the point Paul made in 1 Corinthians 10.13, that "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." The patristic writers were right: God will not tempt us to participate in sin, but he will test us for virtue.

God is Generous without Fault (1.5, 17a, 18a)

James precedes and follows his assurance about God's purity with reminders of God's goodness. Do we need wisdom to cope with our trials? James assures us that God gives it generously and without hesitation or reservation (v. 5; see the discussion of the adverb ἀπλῶς [*haplōs*] [here](#), and of doubt and double-mindedness [here](#)). Can we be sure of God's goodness? Yes, for "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" (v. 17). And should we need additional assurance, he declares that his goal is for his people to be "a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (v. 18).

As we dig deeper into these verses, we see, first, that James uses two related words for “gift” or “giving” (δίδομι, *didōmi*; and δῶρημα, *dōrēma*) (see Louw & Nida, 57.71, 85; pp. 566-567); the first is modified by “good” (ἀγαθός, *agathos*) and the second by “perfect” (τέλειος, *teleios*). It is also noteworthy that he uses a present participle form of the verb, “coming down” (καταβαίνω, *katabainō*) with the present tense form of “to be” (ἔστιν, *estin*), a grammatical construction that serves to emphasize God’s consistently active provision for his people.

He also says that God is “the Father of lights,” a phrase that points to both the origin of the heavenly bodies and to his personal involvement and care in creating and sustaining them (Moo 2000, 78). At the same time, the phrase tells us that God stands apart from the lights in terms of existence and nature: they were created by and are subservient to him; they change, but he never does. Once again, we see evidence that James had internalized the teaching that originated in the Old Testament and continued to be emphasized in the literature of Second Temple Judaism (see Job 38.4–15, 19–21, 31–33; Ps 136.4–9; Isa 40.22, 26; also Sirach 43.1–12).

Verse 18 emphasizes that God’s unrestrained benevolence and revelation in “the word of truth” were given “of his own will,” that is, just because he wanted to do so. His goal was to provide for our ultimate benefit, an idea included in the phrase, “a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”

Within the context begun in verse 2, these affirmations about God’s benevolent nature and actions reassure us that we can trust his promises about the value of trials, our ability to endure them, and the confidence that, when we endure, we will receive the blessings promised to all who persevere.

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

In stressing God’s unchanging nature in verse 17, James also reminds us that “the solidity and reliability of the wisdom of God [are] important” (McCartney 2009, 109). In view of the unstable nature of the world, it is essential for us to recall God’s assurance to Malachi: “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal 3.6).

Vital for seeing God’s dependability is James’s emphasis on his word. Verse 18 merely introduces this theme; he will go on to stress it more in verses 19–25 where he says that in order to sustain steadfast faith, we must willingly take the word to heart. This theme forms a natural and necessary contrast with verse 16’s warning to not be deceived. As in the New Testament as a whole, the word is that which “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 2009, 110).

For James the gift of the word is necessary for endurance and for utilizing the experience of trials to grow with steadfast faith. His emphasis makes the promise in verse 12 even more forceful.

When we endure the tests with which our trials present us, we *will* receive the blessing of the crown of life. We can be sure of this because God says so.

Conclusion

According to a notation made when I purchased Packer's book, I first read the Spurgeon quotation cited above in 1979. Periodically, I take the book from the shelf and read it again. I need to be reminded of the importance of being primarily focused on God and knowing him (cf. John 17.3; see a short treatment of this theme [here](#)). I also need to recall that he will not abandon me in a world filled with distractions and challenges. Finally, I need the reassurance that, even as I am being tested by trials, God who knows all and has provided "every good gift and perfect gift" will supply the wisdom I need to faithfully persevere for as long as I put my trust in him and seek it.

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