

Introduction

What we call the solar system consists of our sun which is orbited by 8 planets. Our galaxy, called the Milky Way, consists of a host of stars, particles, gases, and planetary systems. NASA says that within our galaxy, there are more than 3,200 stars like our sun with planets orbiting them. The stars in our galaxy total around 100 billion – a HUNDRED BILLION. Now, consider that the known universe contains 2 trillion galaxies. Estimates are that there are 200 billion trillion stars in the known universe. That's far more stars even than the number of dollars in the national debt of the United States. It is incomprehensible. Yet Psalm 147:4 says that the Lord, "determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure." A gaze up in the sky on a cloudless night sets before us a visible display of the wonder of God. No doubt James gazed upward from time to time and was overtaken with awe. Speaking of how to think about God in the midst of our trials, he drew upon that awe to set forth why we should trust God fully and be at peace. So we turn our attention this morning to what he said.

[Read Text and Pray]

We said last time that temptation generally accompanies the experience of trials. This combination raises certain questions about God. If God does indeed put us to the test, can we say that He is truly good? Can we be sure that he really desires and seeks what is good for us—especially if trials are an occasion of temptation? What must we think of God as we contemplate trials? It is incredibly important. James urges us to think rightly about him lest we be deceived.

James has two answers to these questions. First, he demonstrates that although God puts us to the test for our good, he will never tempt us to sin. We considered last time why we cannot blame God for our temptation. Second, James explains that the character of God is such that he does no evil but only what is good and perfect for his children. As a result trials should not be allowed to dim our view of the greatness of God even in the tiniest of ways.

When we speak of God's relation to creation in general, there are two realities about which we should speak. They are seemingly opposite but both are true. These two realities are transcendence and immanence. On the one hand God transcends the creation. He supercedes his creation. He is set apart from it. He is God. And there are aspects of his being which will never be communicable to his creatures, because we are creatures and not God. He will always be beyond us. At the same time, however, we must assert that God is immanent, that is he is near. He is not so far out that we cannot know him or that he is unable to interact with his creation. He does not just observe from a distance; he is here and he interacts with us. These are two very important aspects of God that a faithful handling of the scriptures must hold together. As surely as God transcends our being and understanding, he also enters into the most minute of matters, the seemingly insignificant of matters of life.

There is a danger if we ever emphasize one of these aspects to the reduction of the other. If we over-emphasize transcendence, we move toward the god of deism who is aloof and distant and uninvolved. If we over-emphasize immanence, we denigrate the God-hood of God and see him as subject to his creation instead of Lord over it. As James deals with how we ought to think of God in consideration of trials in our lives, without using the words, he points to aspects of God's immanence

and transcendence. God is immanently involved in our lives, giving gifts. On the other hand, his gifts from the perspective of transcendence, are always good because unlike creation, he never changes. This is the wonder of God. The central though unspoken point James is making is that God is ALWAYS good. He points to the constant goodness of God in five ways.

I. The Love of God.

A. James subtly points to the love of God when he refers to his audience as, "my beloved brothers." They are his brothers who are beloved. Who loves them? Well, I suppose it is possible James is saying they are beloved by him, but the context seems to me to communicate most importantly here that they are loved by God. It is not primarily James's love which will see brothers through trials but their knowing God's love of them. And if we love each other anyway, it is because God first loved us.

B. We can know and must remind ourselves in times of trouble and perhaps doubt, when deception is threatening, that if we are the children of God through faith in Christ that God loves us. John says, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God." Later he testifies that "God is love. In this the love of God was manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

If we are loved of God to that extent, we must believe and we must hope in him that if he loves in that way, his disposition is to do us good. As Paul says, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" If God loved us this way, why would he allow trials and testings to come upon us if they were not for our good? We must respond to our down cast hearts because of the love of God to Hope in God.

II. The Gifts of God.

A. In the English Standard, James says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above." Underscore the word EVERY. Not some. Not a few. Not many. Not most. But EVERY. There is not a good and perfect gift that comes from anywhere except above, from the Lord. Ultimately, these gifts come from outside you. They are brought into your life. It is not about what you do for yourself. You and I are dependent creatures. Our very lives are a gift. Our abilities are gifts. Gifts may come through the creation and through God's creatures, but they all come FROM above. God is good, and only good flows from God, and only what GOD GIVES is good. If it comes from God, it is good. If it is good, it comes from God. But sometimes what is good and comes from God as good may not LOOK so good. That is why we need to be assured even if not by what we see but by what we know, that is the way it is.

B. Something interesting here will escape the notice of those who do not have the Greek text before them. You see, and commentators are careful to point this out, the structure here if translated directly would come across this way: "every good giving and every perfect gift" are from above. It seems to me that James is focused both on God's act of giving as well as the gifts he gives. Every act of God's giving to his people is good. And the gifts themselves have the purpose of doing what is good for his people. Psalm 84:11 tells us that "NO good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly." So he gives what is good, what benefits, and only what benefits, and he withholds nothing that benefits his people. You need to know that this is who God is. He is immanently involved in your life if you are his child. He knows what you need and he is oriented to give with a good purpose what is perfectly suited to your needs.

C. We need to be a thankful people unmarked by pride and self-sufficiency but marked by a humble realization of dependency and trust that evidences itself in an overflow of thanksgiving. That is exactly what is implied by the act of another who gives to us good and perfect gifts. They are unearned. They are ill-deserved. In fact we deserve anything but God's gifts. We deserve God's wrath because of our sins.

But know this. God is not way off out there in the distance. He did not merely set things in motion and go off to take a vacation. He gives gifts. He is integrally involved in your life. He is near. He is involved. He is attentive. He is intentional and purposeful. And by the way his good purpose is to make you more like Christ.

III. The Fatherhood of God.

The gifts which come from above come from a personal source. To say they are from above points to the fact that they come from without and that they come from God. But now James hones in on the fact that these gifts come from God who is in fact our Father.

A. Understanding God as our Father should be to us an overwhelming, jaw-dropping, staggering, and yet infinitely comforting reality. Jesus taught his disciples to pray this way: "Our Father." He reasoned that his people should not be anxious about daily necessities because the God who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the grass of the field is YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER. And you are of far more value than they! Jesus asserted, "Your heavenly Father knows what you need." He said, "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" For James to say that good giving and perfect gifts come from the Father is to remind us he has not only a technical plan to do good, but also the heart to do so.

B. James modifies the Father's title in an intriguing way. He calls him the "Father of Lights." What are we to make of this title? I agree with those commentators who would take us back to the beginning of creation. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Into the formless void God spoke. He said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And on the fourth day God made lights. He made LIGHTS in the heavens and the greater LIGHT to rule the day and the lesser LIGHT to rule the night and the stars.

When I think of space and its enormity, my mind is truly boggled. Its immensity is something I cannot fathom. The distance from where we are to the nearest star is just unfathomable and yet the stars are innumerable. And scripture says, "Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power not one is missing." As the "Father of Lights" he has the heart of a father but also the POWER of the creator. Not only is he driven to do his children good, but he is able by the possession omnipotence to bring about the very thing he has the heart to do.

C. Now, the perfect gifts of the Father of Lights are always coming down upon his children. The language "COMING DOWN" stresses not only direction but also continuous action. God does not give now and then. He gives all the time. His good giving and his perfects gifts are like a steady-stream always flowing, always in motion from the Father to his children. James it seems is picking back up on what he said in verse 5 about God's single-mindedness. When we were there several weeks ago, I indicated that the word GENEROUSLY in verse 5 actually means single-minded. He is not back-and-forth like the double-minded man. No, God in his giving is a constantly-flowing supplier. Like a river he moves in one direction toward his children. He ceaselessly moves in the direction of generosity

and provision. Just think. You are held up every single day by his power and mercy. Even the strength we sometimes exert to disobey is strength that comes from God. His mercies are new every morning. We just aren't mindful of it.

So we have seen the love of God, the gifting of God, and the fatherhood of God. There is another aspect of his character that James places before us to be without doubt of God's constant goodness even in the midst of trials and temptations . . .

IV. The Immutability of God.

Yes, James teaches us that God is immutable. You know the word "mutation." A mutation is the act of change or alteration. When something mutates, it changes. Scientists speak of mutations as a positive thing, an adaptive thing. But the necessity for mutation indicates a negative thing. It indicates a lack which demands change or alteration. The thing is not sufficient as it is, it must alter. God is not like that. He is never insufficient. He never must alter in his being. And he does not mutate. He is immutable.

This understanding is expressed by James in these words. When it comes to the Father of Lights, "there is no variation or shadow due to change." With his mind turned to the lights God created, James is definitely conscious of the power of God demonstrated in his creation of these mighty and majestic sources of light that fill the sky. But he is also aware of the changes that go on among them. The sun comes up and sets. Shadows change size and direction with the movement. The moon itself changes. Sometimes it is full and sometimes it is black. Because of planetary movement, the same stars appear in different places in the sky. We know comets and asteroids and such are traveling a course. And they are burning out. As mighty and as amazing as are the lights in the sky, there is variation and shadow due to change. They are part of God's good creation. They are not perfect, not like God. Creation is marked by mutation and change. But not God.

Hear this passage from Psalm 102. It is verses 25-27.

²⁵Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

²⁶They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment.
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,

²⁷ but you are the same, and your years have no end.

There is nothing else so seemingly permanent in day to day experience as the lights in the sky. But they depend upon God. They will perish. But God depends on no one. He is self-sufficient, and he is eternal. He is unchanging in respect to time. His years have no end. That means as far into the future as we can imagine, God is there. And he is the same then as he is now.

When God called Moses to go to the Israelites and lead them out of Egypt, Moses desired some clarity as to the person of God. He asked the Lord by what name God should be known to them. And God said, "I AM who I am." The Jews asked Jesus if he was greater than Abraham. He answered, "Before Abraham was I am." The eternally self-existent God is who he is. He cannot be other than he is. He would be known as the One who does not change and who is unaltered by the passage of time. Hebrews 13:8 declares, "Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever." Through Malachi the Lord communicates his immutability. Chapter 3:6 records these his words, "I the LORD do not change."

What James presents as a reason to hold fast to the assurance of the goodness of God is a prevalent theme throughout the scripture. We do not have to worry that what God once thought to be good somehow turned out with the passage of time to be a less than perfect gift in other situations. We can be solidly assured that God's morals and ethics will always be what they are. We can be sure that if he has provided the perfect and only way of salvation, he will not discover another way at some future time. We can also be sure that his plans and purposes will never change. As he spoke through Isaiah (46:9-11), "I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all my purpose.'" "...I have spoken and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed and I will do it."

God is holy, perfect, and pure. His immutability reinforces these aspects of his being. He cannot change for the better because he is perfect. He cannot change for the worse because he is perfect. God does not improve. He does not learn. He does not grow. He does not increase or decrease. His purposes come to pass. His plans do not undergo reassessment. Forever, he knows what is good; does what is good; and gives what is good. If God gives it, it is good and perfect. If it is good and perfect, it is from God.

Is this not good news for God's people? It is incredible news for God's people! First, it is astounding in the sense of the greatness of God. Every time we seek to know God better, our minds get stretched. We realize something more of what is meant by the word TRANSCENDENT. God is incomprehensible. He is infinite. And his immutability coupled with his entrance into genuine and dynamic relationships with us his creatures is astonishing. It calls us to worship, to stand amazed, to prize him, to bless his name, to seek him, to seek his face, and to follow him.

Second, this is good news because it grants to us complete confidence in trusting God. He truly is a rock—always there and unchanging. We can be sure of his faithfulness because of his immutability. He will keep his word. His word expresses his unchanging will. The eternal welfare of his elect is his purpose and plan. So we can sing:

Great is Thy faithfulness O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with Thee. Thou changest not. Thy compassions they fail not. As Thou hast been, Thou forever, shalt be.

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest, sun, moon, and stars in their courses above, join with all nature in manifold witness to Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

Great is Thy Faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed Thy hand has provided. Great is Thy faithfulness Lord unto ME!

IV. The Grace of God.

The fifth way James points us to the constant goodness of God is by pointing us to his grace. This is verse 18. It is God who gives us the new birth. It is God who causes dead sinners to come to life by his grace. The dead cannot raise themselves. They cannot even desire to be raised. They certainly do not deserve to be raised. BUT GOD. And if God in absolute grace raised you to life so that you might live, do not think he allows trials into your life to bring your ultimate death.

That's all I am going to say about the new birth today. We will explore this in detail next time. But it seems that this is an appropriate place to remind us all of the necessity of the new birth. You must be born again if you would see the kingdom of God. You must be born again if you would have eyes

to see the darkness of your sin and to perceive the glory of the fact that God by his immutable plan has given his Son over to death so sinners might be forgiven and reconciled to him. If you have not been born again, seek God for it. I call you to repent of sin and turn to Christ as your only hope and provision for forgiveness.

Conclusion

Every day some further element of our society is mutating and not for the better. I do not see evolution but devolution. Creation is doomed because of sin. The change in this world is constantly taking it down. We are all changing as well. I turned 59 this year. I am starting to see more wrinkles and detect other signs of aging. The body, it is a-changing. And it is not for the better. It is decaying. All around us we see it. The only way to hope and to cope and to overcome the constant change all around us is to be anchored in Him who alone is the unchanging God. He is always good.