

The Compelling Case for the Goodness of God

Epistle of James
By Ty Blackburn

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Providence Church
2146 Buford Hwy
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

Website: www.providenceduluth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch

The first chapter of James, the epistle of James. The title of the message this morning is "The Compelling Case for the Goodness of God." The compelling case for the goodness of God. We see in James really 1:13-18, is his concern, his pastoral, loving, shepherding concern for these believers who, as we talked about, James writes to a scattered body of believers that are Jewish Christians. They are the Jews in the first century that accepted that Jesus was the Messiah and that were centered there in Jerusalem and Judea and then when persecution broke out were scattered abroad as he says in verse 1, he writes to those of the 12 tribes who have been scattered through the persecution. And he's writing with a shepherd's heart to them to help them bear up under difficult times and in verses 13 to 18, he wants to make emphatically and perfectly clear that they can trust God. He knows that they are going through difficulties and he knows that in trials that we are tempted to doubt God's goodness, in trials and tribulations and temptations, it is in those moments that it is most critical that we are certain of his goodness but it is in those moments that it is most difficult to trust in his goodness, and so James is concerned to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt, not just to prove beyond any reasonable doubt but to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is the Father of lights, the giver of every good thing, and that you can trust him.

So the compelling case for the goodness of God. I want to read verses 13 to 18 to get the full context here. Let's actually start reading in verse 12. So we'll read verse 12 to verse 18.

12 Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. 13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. 17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. 18 In the exercise of

His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

Let's pray together.

Father, we come to you this morning bringing our hearts to you, the one who knows every secret of every heart. Our hearts are laid bare before you, the one with whom we have to do. You know those here that have not repented and placed their faith in Christ but you know those who have and you know the secret doubts that linger, the unbelief. We pray that you might speak by your word and by your Spirit, you might show us your glory, show us who you truly are and grant repentance and faith and love. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The compelling case for the goodness of God. James is dealing with the problem of evil. When we look at the world that we live in and we look at the particulars of things around us, there is a tendency to want to, naturally we are made to be reasonable creatures, reasoning creatures, we infer from the data that we see and we make conclusions about life and in a fallen world, the data is mixed, and when we look at certain things, we look at them and the problem we also have is that not only are we reasoning creatures but we are fallen creatures, according to the Scriptures, so that our mind is now darkened by sin, our will is alienated from God, our affections are alienated from God, so that when we look at the data, we naturally reason to bad inferences. We draw conclusions that are not consistent with reality and so the word of God comes in to correct us and to set us on the right understanding of what we see, because when we look at the world... I was reading, again, the first section of the book by C. S. Lewis, "The Problem of Pain." It's a pretty helpful book. Most of Lewis's books are helpful. I mean, you've got to pick through like anything else, some not so good, some fantastic stuff in there. But in "The Problem of Pain" he begins introducing it by saying as a believer writing in 1940 apparently originally, the world war has started, he writes and he says: I would still be an atheist. When I was an atheist, this is how I used to think. I used to look at the world and see all of the evil in the world, all of the problems in the world, all of the pain in the world, and not just around me in my present day but as a student of history, you see that throughout history there have been just catastrophe after catastrophe, war after war, evil around us. And when I look at the universe, I see this vastness of dark space with this tiny realm of light, the stars, but then earth, being such a small thing, and I concluded that there must not be a good purpose behind it all. And there is a certain sense in which as we look at things like that and we look at the apparent meaninglessness of suffering, wickedness, how it seems to triumph so many times in so many places, we wonder: is God really in charge and is he really working all things for good? Is he then really good?

Now, Lewis goes on to say, of course, that he realized that he was not seeing as he ought to see; that the real astounding thing, this is what he says, "It hit me like a force when I realized why is it that throughout history in a world like this with all of this data that seems to say the opposite, why is it that men continually cling to the belief that there is a God who is ordering things?" He says that shouldn't have originated. Now, of course, he's got a point there but that's not the whole truth. The whole truth is that God put eternity in

our hearts, that we know there is a God and that when you look at things you cannot see anything but design in creation and his infinite wisdom, his eternal power are clearly seen as Romans 1 says, through what has been made. The whole creation cries out day after day. But Lewis was testifying that the unbeliever who is, as we read earlier in Ephesians 2, the passage Jess read, dead in trespasses and sins, unable to see what is right before him.

But James knows that for the believers who have been made alive, there still linger these doubts and he wants to make the compelling case for the goodness of God. The question is God good? How can I be sure that he's good? He understands that in the times of tribulation, in times of trial when we feel sin pulling at us, when we feel the discouragement of trials, prolonged pain pulling at us, we feel like we could fall into sin, we feel like we could fall away from God, in those moments, can we doubt or should we doubt that God actually wants us to persevere in holding onto him? That is, a doubt lingers, is God pushing me away? Is God rejecting me? Do my circumstances not tell me that he's pushing me away? James says emphatically, "No! God does not will evil. He's not the author of evil himself. He is the author of everything that is good."

So the question that we want to consider is: how can I be sure that God is good? This is really a focus of what he does in verses 17 and 18, or you could say 16 to 18. The question, the problem of evil which is does not evil come from God if he's sovereign? If God reigns and rules over everything and evil exists, does it not follow that evil comes from God? James says emphatically, no. God is sovereign over evil but he is not in any way the author of evil.

Evil at all times without exception has its genesis, its origin, in some place else other than God. That's what he says in verses 13 to 15, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Lust when it has conceived, brings forth sin; and sin it has conceived, brings forth death." So that all the death and destruction and evil and calamity that exists in the universe have originated not in God, in his will, in his intention, but in man and his evil heart. That's what the Scriptures say. But is God sovereign over it? Yes he is, and it's a mystery how it all fits together but it fits together perfectly and wondrously and when we get to heaven we are going to see it even more gloriously, but I want to take a moment and show you how when evil happens God is sovereign over it but he's not in any way encouraging it or prodding it along or helping it. He's not ever aiding and abetting the enemy. He's not ever assisting the enemy yet he is somehow sovereignly ruling over all that is enemy to us.

Turn with me for a moment from James, we are going to get right back here quickly, but I want you to turn back to Acts and I want to show you some things in Acts 2 and 4, actually let's just go to Acts 4:27 and 28. This is the people of God, the new believers in Jerusalem, the persecution hasn't broken out widespread that is going to break out shortly but they are beginning to see some persecution. Peter and John had been arrested and now released and so the people are celebrating the fact that they had been released and

they pray and they pray this as part of their prayer in verses 27 and 28, this is the people, the new believers in Jerusalem praying, "For truly in this city," verse 27, Acts 4:27, "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur." Now, right before that he quoted from Psalm 2 where "the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise vain things." He's saying that, and so they quote Psalm 2:25 and 26 right before this, "Why did the Gentiles rage, the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed. For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel." He's saying, "Look, in this city they were gathered against the one you anointed, King Jesus, all the Gentiles and the Jews, Pilate and Herod in fulfillment of Psalm 2. They were raging against you. They were doing that which is evil." The message of God is, "Stop doing evil. Worship my King. Worship the anointed one." And yet in doing this, God pulling back his hand and allowing them to do the wickedness of their own hearts, they followed the passions of their own hearts with no encouragement from God, with no help from God. They do all of the evil that they want to do in hating God and yet he governs it so that it accomplishes the amazing purpose of everything he predestined to occur, which was the death of his Son that would bring about the salvation of all who would believe in him. They did only what your hand and your purpose predestined to occur but God did not author any of their evil.

The greatest evil that has ever been done, the greatest injustice that has ever been done in the history of mankind was when the most wonderful, the one who was truly good, the only man who has ever been truly good since Adam fell, Jesus of Nazareth, when he the one who had lived a perfectly righteous life, who loved God with all of his heart, with all of his soul, with all of his might, when evil unveiled itself and hurled itself against him, that was the greatest evil that has ever been done, and what he's saying in the heart of the Father, in the heart of Christ, in the heart of the Spirit, there was at the same time a revulsion and a hatred of that evil. There was not a willing of that evil actively in their hearts, not a participation in it. The evil was completely outside of God and yet in God's wondrous perfect wisdom, that evil accomplished the most wonderful outcome because God willed it and allowed it to that purpose. The sovereignty of God and the holiness and goodness of God exists in perfect harmony.

This is what James is saying in James 1:13 to 15, "Let no one say when he is tempted by God, 'God is tempting me.'" No, God is not tempting you. God is not trying you and pushing you away. No, he cannot do it. He doesn't even think that way. He will not do it. If you are falling away from God, you're falling away because of the wickedness of your own heart. Repent and turn back to him. And the pastoral concern is if you really believe that God is not good, in adversity you're not going to run to him. But if you believe he is the fountain of goodness, even though the data in your life is conflicted because we live in a fallen world and we see evil around us, you will know the one place I must run is to my good and gracious Father. That's what James is trying to bring about in the hearts of the people to whom he writes and to us today.

Now, is God good? How can I know? How can I be sure that he is good? Back to James 1. His point in verses 16 to 18, he said, "Listen, God never does evil at any time," verses 13 to 15. In verses 16 to 18 he says, "God only does good all the time." He in a sense says, "How can you know God is good?" This is basically the theme of the message today, "You can know God is good by his works." You can know God is good by his works. Look at what he has done, look at what he is doing and you will know his goodness. Interesting, he said that we are supposed to know one another by our works, aren't we? That you know the true believer by his works that he really has been born again, there will be evidence of it. He will begin to walk in holiness and righteousness more and more and more. The battle of sin continues, yes, but over time there is a progression toward holiness in the life of the believer. You know them by their works.

Well, James is saying know God's goodness by his works and so there are two main points this morning that I want us to gather the rest of our thoughts around. We are asking the question: how can I be sure that God is good? And we're answering it with: you can know him by his works first of all, first point: know that God is good by looking at his works of creation. Know that God is good by looking at his works of creation. This is what he says in verse 17, "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." We began to unpack this some last time so we are not going to re-cover all of that ground except to say that James is saying, "You're doubting God's goodness," he essentially says, "look around you. Look around you with discerning teachable eyes. Look at all of the good things that are here."

I remember reading some time ago in Sherlock Holmes, I think it was someone citing Sherlock Holmes because I don't think I was reading this particular novel. But Holmes is talking to Watson at one point and Holmes doesn't strike anyone as any kind of spiritual light to anyone, right? But he says to Watson, he says to Watson at one point, you know, he's studying, he's thinking and he says, "Do you know, Watson, we have much to hope for from the flowers." He says, "You know, there seems to be," unpacking what he was getting at, he was saying, "there seems to be extraneous unnecessary beauty in the world that doesn't have a function, a necessity, and if we see things like that that seem to be evidences of goodness, where do they come from?" And the atheist knows in his heart there is a God and if he would but open his eyes, ask God to help him see, he would see all around him evidences of God's goodness. And James says to those of us who have been born again who now have eyes to see and ears to hear, look around you when you doubt. And we have a tendency to look at the problems in our life. We can see the dark clouds and we never see the silver lining. There could be a bright cloud and we see the dark lining. And he says stop looking at the negative and look at the goodness of God. Look at all the ways that he shows his goodness.

The Scriptures exhort us to do this again and again. One of my favorite verses is Psalm 34:8, "taste and see that the LORD is good." Taste and see that the Lord is good. You know, God, I mentioned briefly last time, he made the food with all the different spices. Think about that. Just reflect on that. When you are eating something really good soon,

maybe it will be awhile before you get something really good. You know, sometimes, but anyway, the next time you eat something and you're like, "Man, this is incredible!" that is a token of God's goodness. He made, he is the one who invented all of these spices that can be brought together in so many amazing ways and we just kind of keep discovering things. It feels like it anyway, we keep discovering things. I mean, who had had salted caramel before 10 or 15 years ago? Huh? And we're in America, for crying out loud. We have the blessing of all the different cultures, you know? The Italians and the French and the English. Well, the English didn't contribute much food wise, but the Italians and the French did. The English gave us more important stuff actually, like ideas about government and things like that. But anyway, I digress. Salted caramel, who would have thought it? The way the palate works, the Lord has given us 10,000 taste buds. I don't need that many taste buds to want to eat but God graciously gives that. So taste and see that the Lord is good.

Look at the beauty of the creation. Like we said, the flowers. The beauty of the changing seasons. Each season has something extraordinary about it, doesn't it? You may prefer one over the other but all of them have, you're just saying, "Fairest Lord Jesus. Fair are the meadows. Fairer still the woodlands." Think about that, where in Montana and your comments, Jess talks to me about where there are no trees. Well, obviously you're wrong. Can't argue from a hymn, I don't guess, but anyway. The beauty of the seasons, I mean, the wonder of spring, the beauty of fall, the wonder of snow falling. The beauty of it. The quietness when you walk out and snow is on the ground. It's amazing just the quiet pristine beauty. These are all evidences of God's goodness.

Then go beyond that and start looking at just the way that the complexity of animals and ecosystems and how, you know, I remember hearing Dr. Jobe Martin, one of our missionaries was here and he ministers in the realm of creation science and he was talking about how they had tried to relocate some bees from this place in South America that has really good honey and they gathered up the bees and they brought them north to make the honey and they found out, well, the bees couldn't make the honey because they needed a certain kind of flower down there. Then it turned out they just didn't need a certain kind of flower, they needed a certain kind of tree because they brought the flowers but they didn't have the tree. It was just like one thing after another after another. They had to have all of these ingredients. The ultimate thing was they couldn't re-create the ecosystem God had made. The precision of God, the beauty of God is all around us.

Then look at his highest work, man, the beauty of human life. Yes, it can have ugliness and it does, but even with the marred, damaged, cracked mirror, as it were, that we look at humanity in, you still see amazing beauty and amazing capacity for good things. And the ability to create and invent things and to harness things. I mean, man, it's so crazy how the world thinks today man is the problem. No, man is the answer to the earth. Just let man go and watch what happens. But humanity and relationships, teamwork. When you watch a great ball team and they make a great comeback and you see different skill sets working together on a baseball team or a football team or whatever sport and you say there is something amazing about that. And go beyond that to you reading about history

and how someone was used in such an amazing way in a war to accomplish such great good to defeat enemies of peace and justice.

Bring that around to the family, the beauty of the family, what beauty there can be in family relationships. Holding a newborn baby. The wonder of just spending time together and laughing together. It's amazing how you can have incredible times and one thing that I've noticed is that when you tell a story, like, say you hear a comedian tell a joke and you tell it with a group of people who love you or somebody else tells it and you're in a group of people that you love, you hear the joke, you laugh, you celebrate it together and then you go back and you watch a video of the guy telling the joke and it's not as funny. I mean, maybe there are some exceptions. Some of us don't tell jokes that well but generally when you've had somebody tell a joke well, fairly well, you go back and there is something about it, it just wasn't as good watching it there. What is it? It's the people. It's the connection that consummates it. God has made us to be a reflection of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and so humanity in a shadow form, he's the substance but we even in our fallenness, even fallen people capture something of this and they experience it. The goodness of God. Then the beauty of relationships that are right, we see it. The marriage relationship, when it is right, a beautiful thing. All of these things James says, "Look at the Father of lights, look at the heavens," as we said last time, "look at the order and the beauty of the universe, look at all of these things and see these all come from the Father who begets these things, who creates these things and infer back what he's like."

Listen to what Jonathan Edwards says, great preacher of the eighteenth century. "God is the highest good of the reasonable creature. The enjoyment of him is our proper end and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven fully to enjoy God is infinitely," listen, "to go to heaven fully to enjoy God is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here, better than fathers and mothers, husbands and wives or children, or the company of any or all earthly friends. These are but shadows, the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams but God is the sun. These are but streams but God is the fountain. These are but drops but God is the ocean. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And besides thee I desire nothing on earth."

That's what he's saying in verse 17. You doubt God's goodness in the dark circumstances in which you find yourself, look around you, know that he is good by looking at his works of creation. The second point, verse 18, you doubt that God is good, the second point is: know that he is good by looking at his works of new creation. Looking at his works of new creation. That's what he's talking about in verse 18, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures." He is saying that the believer who has been born again, regenerated, is a first fruit of God's new creation. We are the beginning of that which he's going to make all things new, we are the beginning. So look at the wonder of what he's done in this first fruits and know that he only does good things.

Look at his new creation. He's talking about regeneration. The key phrase is, "He brought us forth by the word of God. In the exercise of His will He brought us forth." What is it

that God brings forth? He brings forth new life. He takes those who, remember from Ephesians 2 earlier that Jess read, those who were dead in their trespasses and sins, those who were enslaved by lust, controlled by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the body, the lust of the mind, and were by nature objects of wrath even as the rest. You who were like that, God, you were dead, God made you alive. That's the New Testament doctrine of regeneration. This is what Jesus was talking about when he told Nicodemus, "You must be born again or you cannot see the kingdom of God." You cannot see it and you will not enter it unless you are born again. You must be born from above, born by the Spirit. God must do a sovereign work that changes your heart and James says, "Look at the sovereign work that God has done in changing your heart, ponder that, celebrate that and infer from that what must God be like."

That's what he's saying. He brought us forth. Interesting, note the contrast. Most of the translations do a good job of translating this verb where it resonates when he says, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth." Look back at verse 15 after he says each one is carried away and enticed by his own lust in verse 14, "Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." The same verb, "brings forth death, brought us forth by the word of truth." James is making a contrast by using that same word. He's saying, "Where does evil come from? All evil originated in the lust in the human heart. Every single evil thing that has ever happened originated in the lust of someone's wicked heart and that wicked heart gives birth to sin, and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." Evil is destruction. Evil is to tear things down, to make things less than they are. Evil is conceived in its highest reality in death. So where does death come from? It's given birth to by sin, which is given birth to by lust.

So where does evil come from? It comes from us. Where does good come from? Good is brought forth by God. We were brought forth, the new life that we have was birthed in us by God. In fact it's interesting too that he used the word "Father" in verse 17, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." So many different ways of saying that God is the God of light. He could have said coming down from the God of lights, coming down from the Lord of lights. This is a phrase that is only used this one time in the whole Bible like this. But he said, "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow," and then he says, "While I'm talking about the Father of lights, let me tell you what he did in bringing forth, in fathering you." That's the connection. "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of God."

So he is laying out for us as we look at his works of new creation, I want to deal with some preliminary observations about regeneration and then we're going to come to three real subpoints. Okay, you follow me? I'm not to my subpoints. This is just extra stuff at the beginning.

The fact of the new birth is clearly on display here. I've been talking about that basically. He brought us forth by the word of truth. The reason that you are following Jesus, he says to these professing Christians, is that you were brought forth. You were birthed. You

were born again. Then he talks about the instrumental cause of the new birth, that we could say the cause but the instrumental cause is the phrase "by the word of truth." How are you born again? Well, God is the one who brings you, causes you to be born again, but the instrument that he uses to birth people into his family is the word of truth. You are born again by the word of truth so if you want to follow Christ and you're not sure you are born again, what do you need to do? Immerse yourself in the word of truth. Keep clinging to the word of truth. Keep being under the hearing of the word of God. Keep reading the Bible and praying, asking God to cause you to be born again because it's the word of truth that brings you forth.

1 Peter 1:23, you turn over a page or two in your Bible toward the back and you've got 1 Peter. Verse 23, "for you have been born again," Peter writing to believers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. He says, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God." Regeneration happens through the word of God. God uses his word. He doesn't just make somebody new like magically out of nowhere. He sends forth his word, the word of God, the word of Christ.

So the instrumental cause is the word of Christ. The fact of the new birth, the instrumental cause of the new birth is the word of Christ. The ultimate cause, though, back to James 1. I said the instrumental cause is the word of truth, but what is the ultimate cause? James is quite emphatic in the way that he says this. It's in the opening clause, "In the exercise of His will." The ultimate cause, why are you born again if you know Christ and you are born again today, why are you born again? Because God willed it. That's what he's saying. You could translate this, "After having decided, He brought us forth." Some of the translations say, "He chose us," a reasonable translation of this concept.

The word "the exercise of His will" is a word which speaks of deliberation; thought; counsel; and a decision. Interesting, God is animated by this. What are we animated by apart from him? Lust. Unreasoning brutish lust is what animates the unbeliever. I mean, they have a mind but it's still the lusts are driving, that's what Ephesians 2 said. But God, in the exercise of his will, he is determining though all people are invited to be saved as we said last time clearly and emphatically, yet those who are being saved are those whom he brings forth. It's not that as we said last time, he passes over. It's not his fault for passing over people. He invites all to be saved. The reality is that if he did not, he invites everyone to be saved and if that were all he did was invite everyone to be saved and give Christ who is sufficient for an infinite universe of worlds of sinners. His blood isn't, you know, isn't just enough barely to get us into heaven. His blood, the sacrifice of the eternal Son of God, could save an infinitude of worlds of sinners. Sufficient for all. If he invited and said, "I lifted up Christ. Here he is. Believe on him." The reality is there would not be one person in heaven because there is no one who seeks God, none who understands. As Ephesians 2 said, we were dead in trespasses and sins. We were the enemies of God, animated by lust of the mind, lust of the flesh. By nature objects of wrath, hating God. What happens? God in his grace reaches down and gives new birth to someone through his word, the preaching of his word. He causes someone to be born again.

This is why Jesus when you read through the Gospels, he's constantly saying this phrase, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Do you remember hearing that phrase throughout the Gospels? What's he saying? "Some of you have ears to hear. That is, I know that I'm preaching and proclaiming, I'm offering myself to all, those who will come are those who have ears to hear." Or as he says in John 6, "Those whom the Father gives to Me will come to Me." James is saying when we doubt the goodness of God, it is a comfort to those who believe to understand that you believe not by your own will but by his will. The very fact that you love Christ, that you are trying to hold onto him in adversity is testimony to the goodness of God. There but for the grace of God, go I.

So now let's move to the three main points now, the three subpoints, I mean. If you doubt God's goodness we said you are to look at his works of creation, that was our first point. And if you doubt God's goodness, the second main point is James says look at his works of new creation and the works of new creation that we see in the world are redeemed sinners who now love Christ. That's all the works that are being done right now. The whole world is going to be made new but right now the first fruits is lives of sinners like you and me who now love Christ. James says look at that.

Now, what I think what he wants us to do, the three subpoints, first of all, if you doubt his goodness, look at yourself. Look at yourself. Where were you before Jesus found you? Each of us who loves Christ has a testimony. Some of us grew up in Christian homes, maybe it wasn't as far of a distance, it didn't appear to be as far of a distance but in reality, it was an infinite distance for even the person who grew up in a Christian home to be brought to life because people who grow up in Christian homes who aren't born again tend to be self-righteous, religious, but not changed. So think about where you were and where you are now and marvel at the goodness of God.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, he's talking to the Corinthians, they had lots of problems he was dealing with and he says to them in verse 9, he's encouraging them to holiness and he says, now these are professing Christians, he says, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God." He is saying that those who will inherit the kingdom of God are those who had been born again who are changed.

He goes on to say, though, so he said, "Do you not know that none of these whose lives continue in these patterns of sin and aren't making progress out of that, changed out of that by the word of God, understand they are not going to inherit the kingdom of God." But look at verse 11, "Such were some of you." Paul says, "Some of you were fornicators. Some of you were idolaters. Some of you were adulterers. Some of you were effeminate. Some of you were homosexual. Some of you were thieves. Some of you were covetous. Some of you were drunkards. Some of you were revilers. Some of you were swindlers. Such were some of you; but you were washed, you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. Look at

where you were and where you are now and know that the only way that you can be where you are now is because of the goodness and the amazing benevolent kindness of a merciful God." You are a testimony to his goodness. He only does good things. Look where you were and where you are now. Wow.

I think he also encourages us not just to look at yourself but look at the individual believers around you. Isn't it wonderful to hear the testimonies of other believers? And we are supposed to be one-anothering enough that we know more about each other and we know where we were when he found us and we know how we're growing more and more and sometimes we know, you've known someone for 20 years and you know that 10 years ago they were a lot more surly than they are now. They've come a long way. That's true about all of us. If you think I'm bad now, if I know Christ, you should've seen me five years ago.

He says look at the individual believers around you who were dead in trespasses and sins, who were like that, the verses we just read from 1 Corinthians 6 and look at the beauty, look at the amazing goodness of God, look at the wisdom. A believer comes to you and shares and speaks to you and encourages you and you are built up and you say, "What was this person like before Christ found them?" They were foolish. They were ignorant. Do you know what they were like? Look at the world. Sometimes it's really discouraging to look at the world, isn't it? It's getting darker and darker, it seems like. Such were some of you but you were washed and you were sanctified.

So James says look at what God has done in your heart, look at what God has done in the hearts of those around you and realize this is the work of a loving and good God. And it's amazing to take something, it's amazing to make something good in the first place, right, out of nothing? Amazing. I mean, I get amazed at the creations that we make as men. You know, how does somebody think to make this work? It's phenomenal. But that is just a shadow of the substance that is God. That is a distant, dim shadow. That's nothing compared to what he is, right?

But think about what it is to take that which is dead and to make it alive. Think about the distance to take those who are enemies of God, haters of God, lovers of self, lovers of pleasure, haters of God, haters of all that is good, and suddenly make them people who love God and love other people. Isn't that just incredible? That's what God has done and every time we gather together, part of what we are supposed to draw from this as believers is the encouragement of seeing God's handiwork being made known. He is still making us into the image of Christ. So when you feel you are discouraged on how it's going in your life, you look at somebody else and you say, "Wow, look what he's doing. Oh yes, he's still at work." And then they look at you and they say, "You don't realize it's not as bad as you think it is. I knew you five years ago. You're more like Christ today."

This is the beauty of what God is doing so he says look at yourself, look at the individual believers around you, look at the church as a whole. Each local church, look at what God is doing in this body. Look at the beauty of this body. Interesting in God's providence, Todd Guthrie, one of our elders was teaching our Sunday morning Bible study class this

morning on Dr. Wayne Mack's book on "The Pilgrim's Progress" called "Christian Life Issues," which is really a very helpful study we have going on on Sunday mornings at 9:45. James Rouse. and Todd Guthrie are teaching, team teaching it, and today he was talking about Palace Beautiful, one of the images that Bunyan uses in Pilgrim's Progress is that Pilgrim at one point along the way is trying to make his way into Palace Beautiful and Palace Beautiful is an image for how the new believer sees the church. As he has come out of darkness into God's marvelous light, he sees the beauty of what God is doing in the church. Now later it becomes the Delectable Mountains, these different images that Bunyan uses to show the progress in the Christian life and how precious the people of God are supposed to be to us.

But Palace Beautiful, and that Psalm that Ted read at the beginning of the service, Psalm 48, turn with me to Psalm 48 for a moment. Old Testament Jerusalem, Zion, another name for Jerusalem, the mountain of God that Jerusalem was built on, was to be a picture, a type of the New Testament Zion which is the people of God, the church. You are Jerusalem. You are Zion if you are a part of the family of God by faith in Christ. So each little community is like a little Zion. He says, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, In the city of our God, His holy mountain," and the Psalmist says, "Look at Jerusalem, Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion in the far north." That if people could see what God sees, they would see that the most beautiful thing in the world is what is in this room. This is the most beautiful sight in the world, the assembled people of God bought with the blood of Christ who used to be slaves of sin who are now pursuing Christ, growing in holiness. This is the most beautiful thing on the face of the earth. Far more wonderful and glorious than the Grand Canyon. Far more beautiful than the night sky. Those things are beautiful, no question about it, breathtaking. I saw the Grand Canyon, literally took my breath away. If I could see the church as God sees the church, it would blow me away.

That's what he's saying. This is the good work that God is doing, the believers around you and we are a part of this good work. God says this is the beauty of the joy of the whole earth. The whole earth ought to be delighted in seeing what God is doing. Why is it the joy of the whole earth? Because this is the first fruits of God's new creation. All that is wrong, I mentioned the problem of evil, all that's a mess in the world, all of the conflict, all of the murder, all of the horrible lusts that rule so many, all of that is a reflection that God needs to remake everything, to make it new, and the people of God are his first fruits, the beginning of that process.

He says, verse 11, "Let Mount Zion be glad, Let the daughters of Judah rejoice Because of Your judgments, O God." That's what James is saying. Let Mount Zion be glad. You guys need to be joyful. You need to count it all joy when you encounter various trials because God is doing good things in them. Let Mount Zion be glad.

I love what he says in verse 12, "Walk about Zion," Psalm 48:12, "and go around her; Count her towers; Consider her ramparts; Go through her palaces, That you may tell it to the next generation." What he's saying is, the application of that is get to know one another. Examine others lives, not in a persnickety snooty way, but in an interested way

to see the handiwork of God. Get to know one another. Count. He says use your mind. Consider. Look at the handiwork.

Then I love verse 14, "For this is God." You look at the works that God is doing and conclude, "This is what God is like." You doubt his goodness? James is saying if you could see, there is no way you could doubt his goodness. If we could see what is real. Do you remember the story of Elisha and his servant in Dothan when the king of Syria sent soldiers down to kill the prophet Elisha in Israel in Dothan? And Elisha is just kind of waking up. I guess his servant is putting the coffee on. They are on top of the roof. A lot of times they slept on roofs. I wouldn't want to sleep on a roof today but they did back then, a flat roof obviously, not a roof like that. And his servant looks out as the dawn is breaking and he discerns that all around the city of Dothan the Syrian army has surrounded it, thousands and thousands of soldiers. Dothan, a small town. "Elisha, we are done!" And he says, "My Lord, wake up! Wake up! We're surrounded! The kings of the Aramaeans, the Syrians have sent after us and we're dead!" I'm adding a little bit. That's essentially what he said. And Elisha says, "Greater are those who are with us than those who are with him." And the servant says, "Look at this little town of Dothan. I mean, there is no way. What are you talking about? He's lost his mind." Then Elisha says, "Lord, open his eyes that he may see." Dothan was a town nestled in the hills of Israel and suddenly the servant can see that the little town of Dothan is surrounded by the Assyrian army, not the Assyrian, the Aramaean army, the Syrian army, but the Syrian army is surrounded by a multitude of angels. Suddenly he can see what is really there is the armies of God have surrounded the Syrian army. It's not that we are surrounded, they are surrounded. That's what Elisha says. You see, Elisha had eyes to see. If we could see what is really true, we would see that the church and that the work that he's doing in our lives is the most beautiful and glorious thing and we would be able to say with the psalmist, "Beautiful in elevation is Zion, the mountain of our God."

James says if you understand that, these are the first fruits. He's only going to keep, this is only going to get better. That's what that means, the first fruits, these are the first things that he has done that are part of the bigger harvest that he is bringing about. If it's this wonderful now, what is it going to be like? And that's one of the refrains that you hear in the New Testament, John saying, "What will it be like when we see Jesus? We don't know what we're going to be like but we know that we will be like him."

1 Corinthians 2:8-9, I want to end there. We doubt God, we doubt his goodness when we see evil apparently reigning. When evil comes in like a flood, we think that he's not in control but the Scripture is showing us he's not the author of evil but he's sovereign over evil and he's doing something good at every single moment. 1 Corinthians 2:8-9 basically says this, "the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." He's talking about the wisdom of God which is greater than the wisdom of men and the wisdom of God so far surpasses any other wisdom. When he talks about the rulers of today, I think it's a double entendre. He means Pilate and he means Herod, the rulers who were gathered together against Jesus, had they understood God's wisdom, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory, but I think he goes beyond that and he means not only Pilate and Herod, he

means Satan and all of the demons that were gathered together there against God's Son as well. That had Satan understood the wisdom of God, he would not have crucified the Lord of glory because in crucifying the Lord of glory, he dealt a death blow to himself.

So what Paul is saying is the wisdom of God is so far beyond our ability to conceive that he is doing things and the apparent, as I said earlier, the greatest evil that has ever been expressed at one moment in history was what happened on the cross but in the wisdom of God that was the greatest blessing. An unimaginable good thing came out of that because of the perfect wisdom of God.

Then he goes on to say in verse 9, "for just as it is written, 'Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.'" When your life is a mess, when you think evil is coming in like a flood, keep trusting in his goodness and know that the God who has brought good out of evil over and over again is going to do it again. He's just got something so wonderful for you that you can't even imagine it. God is good and he's not to be doubted, and when we begin to doubt, we need to help each other, encourage each other to keep looking at Christ and to keep looking at his word.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we thank you for the wonder of who you are, that you are more wonderful than our minds could ever have imagined or conceived. You are good and you doeth good. Lord, help us not to be doubters. Help us to repent of our unbelief. We know that as long as we are in this body we will have to fight against unbelief, but help us to keep putting it to death by the power of your word so that we can live lives that are more worthy of you. You are good and you are worthy to be trusted, and not only to be trusted but to be loved and treasured. We see your goodness supremely in the gift of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, for if you did not spare him but delivered him up for us all, how will you not together with him freely give us all things? We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.