

**James 1:16-18**  
*The Goodness of God*

**Main idea:** God is the source of all good things.

I read a story about a guy named James who bumped into his old high school friend named Harry. Harry was always the optimistic one, and James was always the pessimistic one, like Eor from Winnie the Pooh. James says to Harry, "Harry, how've you been?" "Not so good. First, I went bankrupt and didn't know how I would feed my family." "Could have been worse," James replies calmly. "Could have been worse." "Next," says Harry. "our house burned down, and we had nowhere to live." "Could have been worse," says James, "Could have been worse." "It did get worse! After all that, my wife and kids left me!" And again, James replies, "Could've been worse." This time, Harry grabs James by the shoulders. "You keep saying that! How could it have been any worse?"

And James says with a gloomy expression, "Could have been worse. Could have happened to me."

Why do bad things happen to good people? That's a common question that a lot of people have. And the common answer we give is that there are no good people. We've all sinned.<sup>1</sup> And it's true. The Bible is clear that not one of us is righteous,<sup>2</sup> and that only God is good.<sup>3</sup> And I think that's a fine answer to the question. I've given that answer to many people, and even in many sermons. But I want to try to answer the question this morning in a slightly different way.

My daughter Raelynn, who is quadriplegic, and has seizures, and can't walk or talk or do anything that we think a typical 8 year old should be able to do, she didn't do anything to deserve the condition she's in. Maybe it's because of the sins of others, or because of the general presence of sin in the world. But either way, she didn't bring this on herself.

John 9 records this story.

As [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:1-3)

So why do bad things happen to good people? Many people use this question to imply that God doesn't exist, because a good God wouldn't allow such things. But I think that's a poor way to look at the question because that assumes that God causes or at least allows bad things to happen to good people for no reason. But I think the Bible is clear that God does have reasons.

Isaiah 55:8-9 says:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

God has reasons for doing what He does that we can't even comprehend. And God is always better than we can imagine. We often wonder what God's up to, and why God allows what He allows, and why God does what

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 3:23

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 14:1-3

<sup>3</sup> Luke 18:19

He does. And sometimes we get a glimpse of His plan, but God's thoughts and ways are so much higher than ours that I wonder if the best thing we can do about God's plan is to wonder.

Abby and I knew a woman once, let's call her Betty, who was so incredibly excited to start taking piano lessons. She said that she had always wanted to learn to play the piano, and that God had worked it out so that she was going to get these lessons and be able to play the piano. She said it was a "God thing." But then a month later, when we asked Betty how the lessons were going, she said that she had stopped taking them. The lessons were too hard, and she didn't have time. So, was it from God?

In the book of Genesis, God promised Abraham that he would have a son.<sup>4</sup> And Abraham's wife Sarah had a son when they were old.<sup>5</sup> Awesome. But then God told Abraham to sacrifice his son as a test of faith.<sup>6</sup> But just before Abraham sacrificed his son, God provided a ram to sacrifice instead of his son.<sup>7</sup> So, was it from God?

How can you know if something is from God?

The test to see whether a prophet is from God is to wait and see if what they says comes to pass.<sup>8</sup> If what they declare happens, then you know that they are from God. But if it does not happen, they are shown to be a false prophet, and they are not from God. Which means, by the way, that after the events of just about every election, there are a whole bunch of people that are shown to be false prophets. But we don't really talk about that.

But what if you're not testing a prophecy or a prophet, but just testing life itself? How can you know whether something in life is from God?

It seems that the only things that people agree are from God are bad things, like tornadoes, hail storms, and earthquakes. We call them acts of God. We declare things to be acts of God when they're so devastating to humanity that we don't know what else to call them. We label these huge bad things as from God, but I hope even more so, you know that every good thing is from God as well.

James 1:16-18.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 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. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.  
(James 1:16-18)

*Father, thank You for every good and perfect gift that You give us. Help us to embrace You this morning, because we know that You are truly good. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

Verse 16 says, "Don't be deceived," and it's the perfect bridge between last week's message and this week's. Last week, we talked about how we can't blame God for our temptations and sins. God's not to blame. We are. Each one of us is guilty before God for our own sins.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 18:10

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 21:2

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 22:2

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 22:12-13

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 18:20-22

<sup>9</sup> James 1:13-15

But it's tempting to blame God either subtly or directly for what we call bad things. We know that God is sovereign. He's in control. But that doesn't mean that God tempts you or desires for you to sin, because that's completely contrary to His character.<sup>10</sup> So, as it says in verse 16, don't be deceived. God doesn't tempt us, and He doesn't give us bad things.

Therefore, the logical conclusion to this line of thought is where our passage takes us this morning. Verse 17 says:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights (James 1:17a)

So you can see if something is from God by testing to see whether it's good. God is the giver of good and perfect gifts. If something is truly good and perfect, then it ultimately comes from God.

Think about all the good things you've received over the course of your life. Even if you feel like life has been miserable lately, certainly there have been a few blessings here and there. Have you thanked God for them? Have you thanked God for your bed, or your toothbrush, or your shower? And I'm not just talking about physical things, but any blessings, great or small. Have you thanked God for your mind, or your friends, or your church family? Someone once asked the question, and I think it's a good one: "What would you have if you woke up tomorrow and only had the things you've thanked God for yesterday?" Or even in the last year?

James reminds us in this passage that God is the source of all good things, and is not the source of any bad thing. Therefore, thank God for every good thing in your life.

But sometimes we get confused about whether something is truly good or bad. Sometimes things can seem good, only to find out later that they were bad, and vice versa. Or maybe sometimes something starts out good, but then turns bad, or starts out bad, but then turns good. Life is so complex, so how can we know if any of it is really from God?

I think sometimes we can't know, at least in the short term. Like with prophecy, sometimes we just need to wait to see what comes of things. It's interesting to me how older people often say that they wouldn't change a thing about their lives, because they see how everything worked together for good.

And if something turns out to be truly good, then we know that it's a blessing straight from God.

There's a story about a woman who found a skunk late at night and thought it was a cat, so she brought it home with her. During the night, the skunk got startled and sprayed her. When she woke up the next day, she immediately declared, "This room stinks!" He then walked out of her bedroom and said, "This whole house stinks!" So she ran out of the house, but carried the smell with her because it was all over her clothes, so she shouted to God, "This whole world stinks! Except for that cute cat I found last night."

Many people want to blame God for all that's evil in the world, and yet glorify themselves for all that's good in the world. We have the tendency to blame God for the bad, while exalting ourselves for the good. So James writes, "Don't be deceived! Every good and perfect gift is from above."

After losing everything he had, Job declared, "Shall we not accept good from the Lord as well as evil?" And it says that Job didn't sin in saying this.<sup>11</sup> But Job didn't mean it in the sense that God does evil, only that when

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Chronicles 16:34

<sup>11</sup> Job 2:10

God allows evil, or allows what seems to us to be evil because of our limited understanding, it's for a purpose. And we can trust His purpose, because God's purpose is always for good.<sup>12</sup>

How can we be sure of this? How can we know that God won't change His mind about us and give us something bad? Look at the end of verse 17. It says all these gifts come from above,

coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (James 1:17b).

What makes it possible to see a shadow? Light. And yet, light itself, cannot possibly contain a shadow.

In photography, there's something called a lightbox.

#### **[Picture of a lightbox]**



Basically, the box is made to have white walls or a white backdrop, which allows the light to just bounce all around what you want to take a picture of, so that you can effectively eliminate all shadows.

I'm sure James wasn't thinking about a lightbox when he wrote verse 17. But the concept is basically the same.

James is saying that the brightness of God's glory is so great that it's impossible for there to be any shadows or change in His presence. It's impossible for Him to lie because He's so perfectly full of the truth.<sup>13</sup> It's impossible for Him to be tempted by evil, or even tempt us to do evil, or because He's so perfectly full of goodness.

Therefore, what follows is even more amazing. Verse 18.

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (James 1:18)

Think about what James is saying here. He's saying that God can only give good gifts, because God is only good. He doesn't change, and He won't change His mind, so when He chose to make us and save us, it was good, and it was for good. James is saying that to God, we are His good and perfect gift.

Calling us the firstfruits is the Bible's way of calling us perfect. The Old Testament commanded the Jews to give their firstfruits as offerings to God.<sup>14</sup> This was to be their best portion. Without spot or blemish. And God uses that concept to tell us how precious we are to Him.

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah 29:11

<sup>13</sup> John 14:6, Hebrews 6:18

<sup>14</sup> Leviticus 23:9-14

The Church is God's prized possession.<sup>15</sup> He loves us.<sup>16</sup> He fills us with His Spirit, gives us His peace, and gives us a new purpose.<sup>17</sup> Out of all the people of the world, He calls us to proclaim the gospel, which is good news of great joy that shall be for all the people.<sup>18</sup>

And this is amazing, too. James writes that it was of God's own will. We think that when we receive Jesus, it's our choice. And humanly speaking, it is. But Jesus also said in John 15:16:

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit. (John 15:16a)

And James says that we're the firstfruits of God's creatures. We're the firstfruits who are called by God's will to go and bear fruit.

Jesus told His disciples that He had sheep that they knew not of.<sup>19</sup> He was talking about us. I'm sure, at the time, that Jesus's Jewish disciples in the Middle East had no idea that the gospel would go so far as to reach us Gentiles in the West. And we have no idea who God would use us to reach with the gospel if we would only be faithful to share it.

So God calls us His good and perfect gift. And it's true. But it's only true because of what Jesus did for us. When Jesus died on the cross, He washed away all our sin.<sup>20</sup>

The gospel is simply that there's one good and perfect gift that is far greater than any other. Jesus. Jesus is the perfect gift given to us by God. He is the word of truth. He said:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

And He also famously said in John 3:16:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Jesus is the good and perfect gift, given to us so that we would have eternal life. And I think every other thing that God gives us is meant to point us back to Jesus.

God told Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son so that Abraham would feel how heart-wrenching it would be for God Himself to do so. And God provided a ram as a substitute so that Abraham would know the blessing of having a Substitute to die in your place. So yes, it was God's will for Abraham to go through those things, not because of Abraham, so that we would see how all of it pointed to Jesus.

Jesus, only the Son of God, was offered as a substitute sacrifice for our sins.<sup>21</sup>

And maybe Betty did experience a "God thing" when she thought she was going to learn to play the piano. It's entirely possible that she eventually will learn to play the piano, but she just has to trust God's timing. Or

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<sup>15</sup> Deuteronomy 26:18, 1 Peter 2:9

<sup>16</sup> John 3:16

<sup>17</sup> Romans 15:13

<sup>18</sup> Luke 2:10

<sup>19</sup> John 10:16

<sup>20</sup> Acts 2:38, Acts 22:6

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 53:5

maybe she learned through the process that our plans aren't always God's plans, that God's plans are higher and better, and that God does have something good in store for us if we trust Him.<sup>22</sup>

And I think Raelynn is the way she is so that we can have constant reminders that life is not about what we can do, but about what God has done. And even as we take care of Raelynn, we can see how God constantly takes care of us. And we can rejoice in the sure hope that in the end, God will make all things new, and that Raelynn will be completely healed in the life to come.<sup>23</sup>

So why do bad things happen to good people? So that we can rejoice when we see the glorious works of God.<sup>24</sup>

Maybe you've endured things in your past that you've blamed God for. But maybe God allowed you to go through those things so that now, or at some point in the future, you can praise Him for what He's done in your life.

But you might say to me, "Pastor Chris, you don't know what I've gone through! How can you say that God has a plan even for that?" And you're right, I don't know what you've gone through. But it seems to me that whatever it was, it brought you here, to this moment, so that you would hear that God is good, and that He loves you so much that Jesus died for your sins, experiencing the pain that you yourself feel, so that you can finally receive comfort and forgiveness in Him.

By grace through faith in Jesus, there's hope and joy even when life seems hopeless.<sup>25</sup>

So believe in Him.

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<sup>22</sup> Proverbs 3:4-5

<sup>23</sup> Revelation 21:1-4

<sup>24</sup> John 9:3

<sup>25</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9