

On the Way with Saint James, (Part 6): The Pause and the Plant James 1:19-21, 26; 3:1-12

1. Heaven's hope for your tongue
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I. Heaven's Hope for Your Tongue

If I called you a perfectionist, would you take it as a compliment? Perfectionism has a negative sound, doesn't it?

But it sure seems like James is a perfectionist.

Look at 1:4. Our translation says "let perseverance finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete." But James's Greek says "Let perseverance have its **perfect** result, so that you may be **perfect** and complete."

Look at 1:17. "Every good and **perfect** gift is from above."

Look at 1:25. We need to look into what kind of law? The **perfect** law.

So when we get to our passage, James says in 3:2: "Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect," we might say, "I'm not sure if I want a traveling companion on my pilgrimage who's a perfectionist!"

James's word is *telios*. It means that something has met its goal. It is mature, complete.

Last month, Matt Kägi and Stephan Heuberger made bookshelves for my study. What did I say when I saw them? "They are perfect!"

I didn't mean that they were sinless. I didn't mean they were mathematically exact. Stephan explained to me that real wood moves, changes, and bends. It's organic material, after all! I meant that they fit just right; the stain was just the right color. They hold my books.

Still, the project is complete. The shelves lack nothing. They are exactly what I had in mind, only better! They're perfect.

And Saint James says that our tongues were designed for a purpose. If you found a person (3:2) whose tongue was fulfilling its purpose, you'd find a whole person who was fulfilling their purpose.

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Show me a woman who says the right thing at the right time to the right person in the right way, and you'd have a woman who was mature, complete, just like she was meant to be.

Our tongues were made, James says in verse 9, to praise, to bless, our Lord and Father, and people who are made in God's likeness. So heaven's hope for your tongue is that what you say and how you say it would show creation that you are like God. Mature. Complete. Perfect. Able to do what we're meant to do: able to speak for God!

We were made by God's Word, to speak God's Word. God speaks: "Let there be light; let there be water, plants, animals, let us make humans in our image and likeness." Then Adam's first job in the Garden was to look at the animals and, like God, speak. "Let that one be called 'Giraffe,' and that one be called 'Sloth'."

As long as Adam and Eve imitated God by speaking blessing ... their tongues were perfect. Their lives were perfect. Their tongues were designed for that perfection. Their lives were meant for perfection.

If James is a perfectionist, it's only because he wants heaven's hope for your tongue to become reality.

II. Hell's Hack of Your Tongue

If that's heaven's hope, then, what has gone wrong??

James says that hell has hacked your tongue. Like a computer hacker who steals your identity. When hell hacks your tongue, it doesn't steal your identity to take your money. Hell hacks your tongue and steals your identity to turn your tongue from an instrument of blessing into a cursing machine.

Look at 3:6. The tongue is a fire. It sets whole lives on fire. How did it get caught on fire? Hell.

The word "hell" here is Gehenna, the name of Jerusalem's city garbage dump, which was often on fire. It was the place where some of Judah's old evil kings sacrificed their own children by fire to other gods (2 Chron 28, 33). It was the place where Jesus' own body might have been thrown after his death, if Joseph of Aramathea hadn't asked Pilate for his body. So Gehenna was an illustration of the place of cursing, ugliness, fire, and death.

And James says that, when evil wants to spread, its number one strategy is to set your tongue and mine on fire. If Gehenna can light our tiny tongues on fire with cursing and anger, with quickness to speak, with boasting, then wherever we go with these tongues of ours—

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If we go into Jerusalem, the “city of peace,” our tongues burn its peace to the ground. If we go to Spain or Switzerland or South America, or South Africa or South Korea or South Carolina, we’ll bring our tongues, our world of evil, with us, and we’ll set everything on fire with the fire of Gehenna. Instead of “going into all the world and speaking the good news to every creature,” hell has hacked our tongues so that we go into all the world and speak evil, poisoning every creature.

I have been to Thailand twice. Once while King Rama IX was still living, and again just after he died. Everywhere I went, from Bangkok and Chaing Mai to the countryside, there was an image of the king.

If a Thai soldier shouted “long live the king!” but then turned around and drew a moustache on a painting of the king, or set the king’s image on fire, you’d say, “This soldier is not loyal to the king. He is a rebel!”

James is saying, verses 9-10, “you can’t bless God with your tongue and then turn around and curse God’s image, because you are, in fact, cursing God.” Wouldn’t our lives dramatically change if, every time we were about to say something about, or to, someone that was not full of blessing and love, we stopped and asked ourselves, “am I really about to tell the Father of Lights, the giver of every good and perfect gift, to burn in hell?”

Nothing would sound better to the evil ears of hell than to hear you curse God by burning down his image with your toxic tongue.

Hell has hacked our tongues. And as we run our mouths in anger, thinking that we’re producing the righteousness of God, hell laughs.

III. Heaven’s Help for Your Tongue

If hell’s cursing has set our tongues, and our whole lives, and our whole world on fire... if we are the ones who are spreading hellfire everywhere we go with our words of cursing ... what on earth are we going to do about it?

We could keep our mouths shut, I guess. As your mom told you when you were a child, if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all. I’ve tried that before. As a kid. As an adult. But the fire has already spread, as James said, to my whole body (3:6). My body language speaks, and burns, and curses.

And we weren’t made to be silent, but *slow* to speak.

We could try to say nice things. But our tongues can be full of flattery. Deceit. We could honor people and God with our lips, even while our hearts are far from them.

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What on earth can we do about this? There isn't anything on earth that we can do about it. Not until we first cry "heaven help us!"

And Heaven *does* help us. What is heaven's help for our tongues?

James says that even where hell has spread its fire across the landscapes of our world, our family, our workplace, and our church, something from heaven can help us.

Chapter 1, verse 21. James says that if we will repent of all the hellfire we've spread with our unrighteous anger and quick words ...

When we humble ourselves ...

When we shut our mouths, and open our ears ...

our God is gracious to plant his Word in us. A word that seems as small as a seed, but has the power to save your life. Instead of our whole lives being scorched by the spread of hellfire by our tongues, God speaks. And he speaks by his Son. In fact, he *speaks* his Son, his Word.

And what do our ears, which are finally open, hear?

I think James was the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. At one time, James had no interest in following his older brother. He didn't have much good to say about Jesus.¹ Jesus embarrassed him, and he hoped Jesus would just shut up with all this "kingdom of heaven" stuff and just be a normal big brother.²

But James finally realized it. That God the Father had perfectly given Jesus, a seed from heaven. That he gave his Word to be planted in the midst of this burnt-over, hellish wasteland. That his big brother had grown up not to condemn the world, but to save it. That *he* had been foolishly and proudly resisting God's Word. That his own tongue was hacked by hell and desperately needed to be healed by heaven.

Then James quieted himself and humbly received his older brother Jesus, full of grace and truth. And James was saved. Body, soul, and tongue.

¹ See John 7:5 and Mark 3:21

² In Matthew 12, Jesus has been attacked by religious teachers and naysayers. In this context, his own mother and brothers come, trying to talk with him. The implication is that they were trying at minimum to silence him and keep him out of trouble, but they could have also perhaps had sharp rebukes and criticisms of him.

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And now, brother James was speaking that very Word of God, Jesus, that he had spoken against before.

And as that implanted Word, Jesus, grew larger and larger in his heart and began to control more and more of his speech, James was starting to sound a lot like Jesus. In fact, some scholars say that his letter sounds like it could have been something Jesus would have written.

And isn't it amazing that, when James begins his letter, he doesn't say "Listen, people, I'm the literal brother of this Jesus you're following, so you'd better listen to me." Instead, he simply says, "this is James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1).

How can he avoid name-dropping? How can he be so sure that we, who are people of unclean lips, and who live among people of unclean lips, can end up producing the righteousness that God desires? How can he possibly believe, that after all of our poisoned-tongued cursing, we could become people who are slow to speak, and quick to listen? People who are complete and mature, no longer burning relationships to the ground with our tongues? People with a peaceful, controlled tongues reserved exclusively for blessing God and our neighbor?

How can he have this hope for us? Because, by grace, James has *himself* received heaven's help. He's had the Word, Jesus, implanted in him. And by grace, James himself has been saved, and James himself has grown.

Conclusion

James is writing to the people of God, scattered among the nations. He's writing to us. And he's here to tell us: if we will quiet our mouths, and open our ears, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, will speak himself into our hearts and lives. God's Word will end up on our tongues, so that we become life-giving, people-blessing, heaven-helped, Word-proclaiming, truth-telling, grace-saying people. The people that the nations so desperately need. Bringing on our lips, and in our very lives, the Word that the nations so badly need to hear—the Word of the Father. Our Lord Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth.