

WHEN GOOD THINGS HAPPEN TO BAD PEOPLE

James 1:17-18

INTRODUCTION

God commands us to evangelize. Often a common complaint or question that people ask is “why do bad things happen to good people?” For example earthquakes, deaths, 9/11....

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner wrote a best-selling book – *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. In the book, he attempts to answer this question. As Christians, we know the answer. They don't! Bad things don't happen to good people because there are no good people. **James 1:13-16**. We live in a fallen world. We are all sinners. From God's perspective, our sin is our responsibility. As Christians, God sanctifies our thinking and changes our worldview so we ask:

“Why do good things happen to bad people?”

Read James 1:17-18

Proposition:

Three Perfections of God:

1. God's **Unbounded Generosity**
2. God's **Unchanging Nature**
3. God's **Unmerited Favor**

So That: When you are struggling with sin, there is no better solution, no better weapon, no greater resource than to turn your eyes away from yourself, your situation, and your trial and fix them on God, the Father of Lights.

How to defeat temptation

1:16 – transition verse, points back to man and sin (**13-16**) and forward to God and grace (**17-18**)

1:13-15 Source and result of **sin**

1:17-18 Source and result of **salvation**

1st Perfection of God ...

I. God's Unbounded Generosity

1:17a

Point – God is NEVER the source of evil.

He is ALWAYS the source of good.

- exhaustive/comprehensive/unbounded generosity/goodness
- Perfection of omnibenevolence

Proof –

James 1:17a – “Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights”

The Giving

There is no good in the universe of which God is not the source...

- sun
- rain
- the laughter of a child
- vaccine for Polio....and so on....

generosity – **common mercy** (better than “common grace”)

The repeated word “**every**” stresses the exhaustiveness of God’s goodness.

The Given

James uses 2 nouns here - “**good thing**” and “**gift**” - both from the same root

- the first focuses on the act of giving
- the second focuses on what is given

“**good**” - the giving is useful and beneficial

“**perfect**” - the gift is “complete”

Application: His giving is good for you. What He gives is enough for you.

The Giver

James moves to next pair – “**from above**” and “**coming down**”

- the first - the gracious act of giving (Source) is from above
- the good things do not come from below where evil resides
- they do not come from creation
- the grammar (present active participle) points out these gifts are coming down in a continuous stream

Illustration:– like you are standing under a never-ceasing shower of blessing cascading over you

“**the Father of lights**” – unique in Scripture – this is the only passage in OT or NT where God is referred to as the Father of Lights

- kind of language he is using here refers to heavenly bodies (sun, moon, stars)
- throughout scripture, we are reminded constantly that God is the Creator of the universe
- one of the background understandings of the writing of Scripture is that man worships the things God has created
- from **Genesis** forward, God is Creator of the things and sinful man then worships them

God’s generosity is unbounded. James is reminding us that God, who spoke every star, moon, cluster and the entire vast universe into existence, it is He who personally gives things to you and me.

Illustration: The story is told that one day a beggar by the roadside asked for alms from Alexander the Great as he passed by. The man was poor and wretched and had no claim upon the ruler, no right even to lift a begging hand. Yet, the Emperor threw him several gold coins. A courtier who was with Alexander the Great was astonished at his generosity and commented, “Sir, copper coins would adequately meet a beggar’s need. Why give him gold?” Alexander responded, “Copper coins would suit the beggar’s need, but gold coins suit Alexander’s giving.”

In the same way ...we are reminded that we deserve death. God does not give as our nature deserves, but He gives according to His nature, as the abundantly generous Lord.

Application: When we look at the gap between what we deserve and where we are at - what we receive from God - that produces

- contentment
- thanksgiving
- a right heart

When our eyes are drawn back to where they ultimately must rest – to the Creator of the universe – that produces praise. That enables us to pray without ceasing.

2nd Perfection of God ...

II. God's Unchanging Nature **1:17b**

Point – → Doctrine of **Immutability**

Proof – **James 1:17b** – “**with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.**”

Uses astronomical terminology to bring out the theological doctrine of **Immutability**.

The next pair of words:

- “**variation**” - as in the phases of the moon; eclipses
- “**shifting shadow**” - the sundial

Point – there is never any dimming of the light of God's holiness, no eclipses.

- from our perspective, the sun, moon, and stars all move, disappear, change in shape, or vary in intensity—their benefit to us comes and goes.
- with God there is **NO** variation or shifting

His goodness of character knows **no change**

- unending
- unceasing
- unchanging

Definition of Immutability: God is unchangeable in his essence, perfections, attributes, consciousness, and will.

Westminster Shorter Catechism – “*God is a spirit, whose being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth are infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.*”

Charles Hodge: “. . .*God is absolutely immutable in his essence and attributes. He can neither increase nor decrease. He is subject to no process of development, or of self-evolution. His knowledge and power can never be greater or less. He can never be wiser or holier, or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been and ever must be*” (Systematic Theology, I, 390).

What does this doctrine mean to us?

Is this great theological truth of God that we merely apprehend and are then in awe of Him? Yes, God is the main thing. But, when we look at scripture, God reveals himself in these contexts so that we would apprehend and be in awe of Him **AND** that we would be encouraged as His children.

Psalms 102 - Prayer of the Afflicted (see superscription)

vv. 1-3 – that could come from the lips of a godly woman struck with bone cancer, from a broken hearted man whose wife has deserted the faith, of a parent of a wayward child. . .

vv. 12, 19-20, 25-27 - Immutable nature tied to role as Creator – his unchanging goodness and the foundation of His promises to us

Malachi 3:6 – “**For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.**”

- even as new creatures in Christ, we still sin
- because God does not change, He doesn't cast us into hell after our conversion when we sin and it is tied into His very nature.

The immediate context is to Israel, and this even ties into a right understanding of end times, and a right understanding of God's purpose for Israel. God is not done with Israel because He has given promises to Israel that He will fulfill when, in the future, the nation of Israel will repent as a majority whole and will mourn for Him as for a pierced son (**Zechariah 12:10**)

All of God's promises, by right application as believers, provide us hope and are based on God's immutability.

Illustration: Think of all the past 100 years and how much change we have observed—in the fields of transportation, medicine, and communication.

What about changes in speed? For the first 6000 years of existence, the top speed was 30 miles per hour by horseback. The train came along and it jumped to 100 miles per hour. When the passenger jet came along in 1952, it flew through the sky at over 300 miles per hour. By 1979 that speed had doubled to 600 to 700 miles per hour. Then the manned rockets came along and they speed through space at about 20,000 miles per hour!

Communication? From written letters to telegraph to telephone to e-mail to texting to Twitter to IM'ing to Facetime to ... what next???

Application: Promise of God – Malachi 3:6 – God's unchanging nature

...Gods' **Unending Generosity**, God's **Unchanging Nature**...

3rd Perfection of God ...

III. God's Unmerited Favor **1:18**

He moves from the shower of general blessings on all of mankind at the beginning of **v.17** to the specific blessing of God's effectual saving grace on His adopted children

Point – God's favor is undeserved – it is unearned

- God's effectual grace
- God's saving grace – His Sovereignty - specific blessing of new birth/conversion/new creation in Christ
- When good things happen to bad people!

Proof – James 1:18a – “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth”

Salvation is by:

- The **Will** of God
- The **Work** of God
- The **Word** of God

Salvation comes from above – it is not found in trees, whales or human discovery.

Salvation is ...

A. by the will of God – “In the exercise of His will”

It is NOT by the goodness of the receiver, but the will of the Giver

- if depended on goodness, we would all end up in hell

Chrysostom – *“not for any achievements of mine, nor from my toils and labors, did I receive this dignity. It was wholly the effect of His goodness who entrusted me.”*

Rom 9:16 – “So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.”

No child has ever been born into the world by its own will or plan. It had to do with the will of the mother and father. Its conception and birth are completely out of its consciousness and control. It is merely the passive recipient of the will and action of its parents. Just as certainly, no person wills, much less creates, a new spiritual nature within himself.

Our new birth is exactly like that. Whereas sin produces death, God produces life. God produces the new birth, the second birth that Christ told Nicodemus, in **John 3:7**, that no one can enter into heaven without. It is not a human act. It is by the will of God.

Application:

God's sovereign will does not shut the door of salvation, but opens that door for all those who come to Christ.

John 6:37, 44, 63, 65; 10:9; 14:6.

God's sovereign will for salvation is not a hindrance to gospel preaching, but it encourages evangelism and assures the gospel of success. God told Paul early in his ministry in Corinth

Acts 18:10 "...I have many people in this city".

Charles Spurgeon - on Jesus calling Lazarus – "*Lazarus "freely" rotted, but at the word of Christ he "freely" came forth. So do the elect of God.*"

God's sovereign will does not destroy man's so-called "*free will.*" The will of man is his desire, wish or choice. His choice is sin.

John 3:19, 20; 5:40; 3:11; 2:2, 3; 4:17-19; Jer. 17-9; 13:23; etc.

- Man "*freely*" chooses sin and by God's grace the elect freely choose Christ --**Ps. 65:4; 110:3; John 6:44, 65; Acts 13:48.**

Lazarus "*freely*" rotted, but at the word of Christ he "*freely*" came forth (**John 11**). So do the elect of God.

Salvation is ...

B. by the Work of God – "He brought us forth"

"brought us forth" - same word as **1:15** – "brings forth"

- again, sin gives birth to death
- God (His will, work, Word) gives birth to life
- It is creation *ex nihilo* – creation out of nothing
- God gives us life where there was no life before – **Rom 4**

God's work of saving lost sinners does not discourage convicted sinners, but welcomes them to Christ.

- His blessing of a great number of unworthy sinners with salvation is no injustice to the rest of the unworthy sinners. If a governor pardons one convict, is it injustice to the rest?

God's work of saving lost sinners does not discourage prayer. To the contrary, it drives us to God, for He alone can save.

Election is not the cause of anyone going to hell, for election is unto salvation. Sin is what sends men to hell, and all men are sinners by nature and practice.

Salvation is ...

C. by The Word of God – “by the word of truth.”

“word of truth”

- strong contrast with the self-deception, evil desire, double-minded thinking

John 17:17 - it is the source of our sanctification

Rom 10:17 - it is the source of our justification

1 Pet 1:23 – “**you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and abiding word of God.**”

Bottom Line → Salvation is a gift from the Lord by His will, His work and His Word.

- The Author of Life cannot be the Author of Death (**1:13**)

IV. The Result of Grace 1:18b

Point – **James 1:13-16** - Source and Result of Sin = Death

James 1:17-18 - Source and Result of Salvation = Life

Proof – **James 1:18b** – “**so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures**”

“so that” → purpose statement of God

“first fruits” (20)

- James uses vivid imagery – especially vivid to the Jewish Christians of the Diaspora (**1:1**) to whom James is writing
- this term has a rich Old Testament history.

- **Lev 23:9-11** – seven feasts

The third feast of seven:

Before the Israelites harvested their crops they were to bring a representative sample, called the first fruits, to the priests as an offering to the Lord.

The **first fruits** were the first and best of the crops that were harvested and were usually an indicator of what the rest of the crop would be like.

A farmer might be tempted to take that early harvest and store it away in case the rest was lost to drought, locusts, or other calamities. But the Lord required that it was to be that first and best which was offered to Him – an offering of faith

It would:

- **precede** the harvest
- **consecrate** the harvest and
- **guarantee** a future full harvest

All of creation is moaning and groaning under the sin of man. The culmination of God's creation is man. Because of man's sin, death entered into God's creation.

- Creatures –the vast multitude of believers who will be brought to saving faith AND to entire creation (specific back to general)
- Believers are the first installment on God's new creation that is to come – that is part of God's first fruits – of God's redemption (cf. **Rom 8:20-22; 2 Pet. 3:10–13**)

CONCLUSION

Illustration: Augustine, a great theologian, lived an incredibly, immoral life prior to His conversion. After Augustine was converted, a woman he formerly lived with called to him as he walked down the street, but he did not answer. She persisted and

called out to him again. Still there was no response. Finally, she ran up to him and said, “Augustine, it is I.” To which he replied, “Yes, I know, but it is no longer I.”

Because he was a new creature in Christ Jesus, he had laid aside the filthy garments of his old way of life. He was continually, day by day, putting on the new ways of thinking and behaving as part of his new life in Christ Jesus.

That is what happens when good things happen to bad people.