

JAMES - SOUNDNESS OF SOUL FROM THE INSIDE OUT - Part four

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GOD, WISDOM, AND YOUR PROBLEMS

James 1:13-17 - "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. [14] But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. [15] Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. [16] Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. [17] 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."

These verses follow naturally from James' grand statement in **verse 12** - "**Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.**"

There's a positive and a negative side to this great text from James. *Steadfastness* brings "*blessing*" and a "*crown of life*". That's God's plan. But steadfastness isn't the only response to trials. People can despair. They can become angry. They can take their bitterness out on God or on others. They can give up on life. And someone about to give in or give up under the weight of a particular trial doesn't want the blame for doing so. That's why, in our passage today, James takes more time than we'd like showing us the birth place - the *obstetrics* - of bad responses to trials and temptations. He tells us what we should **do** and what we must **know**:

1) **LIVE EACH DAY WITH A PURE HEART AND UNQUESTIONING CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S LOVE**

James 1:13 - "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one."

Whatever else happens, nobody should allow the trials of life to make his heart go sour against God. That kind of bitterness is the incubator for all sorts of spiritual ruin. "*Let no one say....*" These words describe very accurately the kind of conversation trials can produce in the human psyche. Of course, we don't usually say such a thing out loud. James is talking most about the things you and I tell our own heart.

Or, perhaps even more accurately, he's talking about the kind of conversations we don't quickly *silence* or *ensor* in our minds - "*You know, God has been pretty rough on me. I don't know how He expects me to live for Him with the cards He's given me to play in life!*"

Those kinds of thoughts **do** come, and they come to spiritual people.

I've had many times when some man has come to my office, perhaps 30 to 35 years of age. He's bleeding because his wife has left him for someone else, but he's just *separated*, not yet *divorced*. As always, I tell the man he needs to be very careful to stay sexually pure and alone because, in this difficult time, he's still a *married* man and can't act like a *single* man.

Years of pastoring have taught me to know the next words out of his mouth. "*Does God expect me to live like some sort of monk the rest of my life? What can He expect me to do?*" And there it is - the complaint. "*God's not playing fair with my life. He's putting me in a spot where nothing good can come to me.*" And, many times, in a kind of underground resentment, this man will use that kind of inner soul talk to justify moral compromise in his life-style.

Then there's the wife with an unsaved husband. "*How can God expect anyone to serve Him with this kind of millstone around the neck? It's not even fair to the children.*" I'm sure it can't be God's will for me to stay in this unfair mess. I'm getting out. I mean, I've prayed and prayed and God isn't doing anything about my situation."

These kinds of trials make it easy for all of us to live huge slices of our lives *without* "*keeping our heart with all diligence.*" It's all about how we respond when God isn't doling out His grace on our terms or our schedule. When that happens it is so easy to excuse a hardness of heart which, in better times, we would have dealt with in a moment.

Matthew 25:24-25 - "He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, [25] so I was afraid, and I went and hid

your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

It is no accident that it is the one who received **one** talent, rather than three, or five, or ten, who said the master was a **"hard man"** to serve. Guard against the kind of heart that says, "God, You're not very reasonable and **that's** why I'm in this jam, and **that's** why I'm forced to do what I'm doing!"

I've taken quite a bit of time to develop this because it's so important. When you fall in temptation, don't turn a **painful trial** into a **permanent disability**. It is so easy to do and it all starts with the words you say in your own heart.

2) **REMEMBER BOTH THE FAITHFULNESS AND THE PURITY OF GOD ARE CONSISTENT AND UNCHANGING**

James 1:13 - "... for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one."

People are in constant inner motion. We move up and down, from strength to weakness and back. Pick the person you admire most. If you could see inside him at his worst you'd never believe it.

But says James, God is not like that at all. He never changes. And James says that means two very important things in our dealings with Him.

- a) First, you can't **tempt** God. This is very strange sounding in our ears. When we think of temptation we think of **Satan** doing the tempting and **we** being the tempted ones. But James isn't using any of those familiar patterns at all. He's talking about **God** as the One **tempted** and **you and I** as the ones doing the **tempting**. What can this mean?

Remember, James is still writing about our **response to trials**. He's talking about **what we do** when we face, what seem to us, **unfair** trials. And what we frequently do is try to **make deals with God**. This is our last attempt before inward bitterness or despair. **"God, you owe me this!"** Or, **"God, I can't trust you anymore unless you deal with this right now!"**

There are a million different forms these arguments can take, but James reminds us **God can't be tempted**. You will never make any deals with Him or pray Him into your own schemes or escape plans. He will never be manipulated by any rationalizations or excuses. You can never temp Him to buy in to what's being rationalized in your own heart.

- b) Second, James reminds us God never tempts anyone else either. Settle it firmly in your mind right now - **God is not out to hurt you or anybody else**. He's not out to bend the rest of your life in a bad direction, no matter what your emotional state is screaming to you right now.

That **doesn't** mean you can always know His ways. There are many occasions calling for steadfast trust, even when the way is dark. But know this. Your real enemy isn't God. There are **other** sources to our deepest problems. And you'll never become **"perfect, complete and lacking nothing"** (1:4) until you face them. That is what James writes about next:

3) **OUR TRIAL MAY BE EXTERNAL , BUT THE BATTLE FOR PERFECTION IS INTERNAL**

James 1:14 - "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire."

If you look closely you can see what James is doing in this passage. As it all unfolds, he's trying to make sure we don't allow our trial to make us think **God** is our adversary. James knows nothing good can happen in my life once I have the wrong view of God. Satan uses trials to sow **distrust** rather than **good will** toward Father God.

Does that approach sound at all familiar to you? It should:

Genesis 3:1-5 - "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, **"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"** [2] And the woman said to the serpent, **"We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree**

that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.' " [4] But the serpent said to the woman, "**You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.**"

If you don't think what James is writing about is all that relevant or important consider this. The Fall of mankind would never have taken place had Eve continued to believe in the **goodness of God** in her time of temptation. This entire planet became distorted and broken by this one woman's distrust in the goodness of God.

The two verbs James uses in **verse 14** are instructive. He says we are "**lured**" and "**enticed**." These two verbs describe two ways in which our desires can trip us up spiritually:

- a) "**lured**" - The word literally implies a kind of **overpowering** - a **dragging away**. Only James isn't talking about an **external assault** on our will. He's talking about desires that run full steam ahead and drag the rest of you along behind. Your Biblical knowledge, your good sense, your upbringing - all of these things are bound up and pulled along behind the pull of the overwhelming desire to adjudicate your difficult situation on your own terms of happiness rather than God's.

There's a real lesson here. Look out for inclinations and longings that feel **immediately compelling**. Beware of compulsions that can't wait for the examination of **quiet meditation and slow, deep, prayerful thought**. Watch out for thrusts of will that won't **bow to the advice** of friends and fellow-members in the Body of Christ.

Beware of attitudes toward God that **diminish the inclination to pray** and seek His face. Beware of choices that make you want to **flee church** to find something else to do. Learn to be suspicious when the gathered presence of other Christians is upsetting, irritating, or boring to you. Don't allow the best and wisest parts of your being to be **dragged away** by unchecked inward compulsions.

There are great texts to help us understand James' words:

2 Peter 1:5-6 - "For this very reason, make every effort to **supplement your faith** with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, [6] and knowledge with **self-control, and self-control with steadfastness....**"

"For this very reason." The reason is the very same reason James is processing - **trials**. You are a believer, says Peter. You have **faith**. That's good. But it won't last long or amount to much unless you add to it. In this fallen world you will always have to **supplement** faith. Peter says you will always have to add in **"self-control,"** and mix in a lot of **"steadfastness"** as well. That's what James is talking about.

I said there were **two** verbs used by James in **verse 14**. The first was **"lured"**. Now on to the second:

- b) "**enticed**" - The word means to **delude** with a false appearance, to **beguile** with deception. It's quite commonly used as a fishing term to describe the concealing of the hook with bait. The idea is you don't see what it is you are actually getting into until you're hooked. Then, what you get isn't what you **thought** you'd get.

Remember, James is talking about where our deepest troubles come from. His surprising conclusion is they are **inborn**. They come, not from the **external trial** or **other people** but from your own **internal response** to the trial.

Well, **why do we do this?** We do it because, like the hook hidden by the bait, we don't **perceive** the problem as lying in our own selves. We don't **feel** wicked and we don't feel **deceived** when we rage against God in our trial, or when we grow bitter and angry at the one who has wronged us, or feel sorry for ourselves that our life is more difficult than we deserve. We don't feel wicked in **any** of these responses. We feel **justified** in them.

This, says James, is how we poison the well we must drink out of. "Don't do it," says James.

4) **KNOW TO WHAT THE TRIALS OF YOUR LIFE ARE GIVING BIRTH**

James 1:15 - "Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

There is no way of missing James' illustration of the motions of desires and sin with the process of physical birth. Here's the take-home-from-church lesson from this text - **difficult circumstances always birth something beyond just themselves**. For better or for worse, trials always **produce something into the rest of your life**. James is obvious in his attempt to show how both processes work from the **inside out**. This is in keeping with his teaching that the problem isn't **God**, and the problem isn't your **trial**. The problem is **inside**, and the trial is merely showing what is **"lacking"** in your own soul, as we saw in **verse 4**.

Here are some great life lessons from James on the birth process of distorted living:

- a) ***If you really want to see where you are headed spiritually watch the inclinations and desires of your heart when life is hard.*** These desires will tell you where you are heading long before you actually get there. Learn this lesson well. Before faith is compromised **outwardly**, it is compromised **inwardly**.

Also, it is the worst self-deception to think you can entertain inward anger and bitterness and **not** have it manifest itself outwardly eventually. Perhaps this is where James' birth comparison is most accurate. What is **conceived** will come out of the womb. You can't inwardly **conceive** sinful attitudes and **not** have them birth something in the rest of your life.

Wise people have always made this a matter of prayer:

Psalm 19:12-14 - "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. [13] keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. [14] let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, o lord, my rock and my redeemer."

"Who can discern his errors?" The inward stance of the mind when trials come doesn't **feel** wicked at all. It **feels** totally justifiable. We're not good at diagnosing where our emotions will end up. We don't see the potential for spiritual damage or spiritual growth.

Hence David's prayer: **"Help me to be alert to inward deviations!"** When looked at in this unfolding light we learn what a foolish thing it is to justify any compromise of heart just because it seems small, common, and, so far, undetected by others. This, says James, is the worst kind of denial - like saying you're just a little bit pregnant.

- b) ***Sin, when it is finished, gives birth to death.*** James is not making some kind of idle threat. This is no silly scare tactic. Just like his brother Jesus and the Apostle Paul, he speaks out of a heart of tender concern and pastoral love. **No sin ends with itself.** It always takes you somewhere farther than you really wanted to go.

5) **IF YOU WANT THE CROWN OF LIFE, AVOID THE PITFALLS OF SELF DECEPTION**

James 1:16 - "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers."

Those words are placed repeatedly at the front end of so many big, important reminders in the Scriptures:

1 Corinthians 15:33 - "Do not be deceived: "bad company ruins good morals."

Galatians 6:7 - "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."

The Apostles pound those words into the beginning of commands that don't seem essential. We usually don't **see** the connection between the outcome of our **own** lives and the kind of people with whom we spend the most time. We think our life is ours and theirs is theirs. **"Don't be deceived about that"** the Spirit of God says. **"That's not at all the way it works."**

So the writers place these words in important sentences, hoping their use will make the reader pay closer attention to what follows so lives aren't ruined by sheer carelessness. That is what James is doing here. **"Don't get confused about the subject of sin. Know how it works. Don't overestimate yourself. Stop the process early or you won't stop it at all."** Jesus said it was worth cutting off the hand or plucking out the eye that led to sin.

6) **TO KEEP YOUR LIFE STEADFAST AND COMPLETE IN THE MIDST OF TRIALS, TRACE ALL GOOD GIFTS BACK TO THEIR PROPER SOURCE**

Learn to do the math.

James 1:17 - "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."

I said we need to **trace** gifts back to Father God. We need this reminder about tracing everything good back to Father God because most of God's gifts are **mediated** gifts. We get them as they pass from Him, but through other secondary hands and stages.

Because of that, we tend not to trace them back far enough. Food comes from Longo's. Rain comes from clouds. Money comes from work. None of those sentences is wrong, but every one of them is tragically incomplete.

Who makes the food grow in the soil? What a miracle **soil** is. You just put stuff in it and it grows. It's just dirt and it feeds the world. Who causes the moisture to form into clouds and fall? Who gives you life, sight, and health to work? Everything comes from God. The Bible writers and characters understood this very clearly. And it wasn't because they were ignorant about how nature worked.

Read the book of Ecclesiastes. The writer knew how the streams flowed into the rivers, the rivers into the seas, the seas form oceans, the water ascends into the clouds and falls to the earth in rain. He understood how it worked, but **preferred** to say "**God sends the rain.**"

The people of Jesus' day knew how things grew in the soil. They were rooted in an agriculturally based economy. But Jesus still **preferred** to say "**God clothes the lilies of the field.**"

Why? Because that's how you build the right understanding of the heart of God. A proper view of the goodness of God doesn't just **happen**. You **keep these truths in your mind**. God is the "**Father (creator) of the heavenly lights.**" When you're tempted to doubt, or worse, blame God, look up at the sun and the moon.

When you don't know if He cares remember He does not change in His love and creative goodness - **verse 17** - "**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.**"

In the greatest times of turmoil and unrest learn to see Him as constantly good and consistently faithful.

Psalm 102:25-27 - "Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. [26] they 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."

Here's what we learn from these words today. God has been running this universe for a very long time. He is good at what He does. Circumstances change. Everything in this world wears out like old sneakers. But you can bank on Father God. When you don't understand what's going on, add some steadfastness to your faith.

Don't make hasty judgements. Here's the best thing I can tell you today - **The will of God is something all of us would always choose for ourselves if we had all the facts.** Stay steadfast and pure in your time of trial. Trust and obey. Don't sell out for the fleeting pleasures of a hot-headed, sinful response. God is perfecting your life.