

BORN OF THE TRUTH

SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN



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James 1:12-18
3rd Message
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I began to follow Christ when I was fifteen-years-old, being led to faith through the ministry of Young Life. I was given a copy of J.B. Phillips translation of the New Testament and read it enthusiastically. Some of the gospel stories were familiar, but almost everything else was new. At only one point, however, was I brought up short, fully aware that my own experience was being described. It was Romans 7, Paul's account of struggling with the power of sin.

Romans 7:15-24:

My own behavior baffles me. For I find myself not doing what I really want to do but doing what I really loathe . . . I often find that I have the will to do good, but not the power. That is, I don't accomplish the good I set out to do, and the evil I don't really want to do, I find I am always doing . . . It is an agonizing situation, and who on earth can set me free from the clutches of my own sinful nature?¹

I knew the struggle of wanting to do what was right and being unable to do so. It was encouraging to me to discover that I was not the only one and that there was a reason to hope.

Review

We are in the midst of a sermon series on the book of James, which begins with a call to receive trials with joy. In verses 2-4 we noted that difficulties are sent by God so that faith will grow resulting in Christ-like character. The theme is picked up again in verse 12.

James 1:12:

¹²Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised

to those who love him.

Verse 12 adds a wonderful image—the crown of life—to the previous discussion of perseverance. This crown is a victor's wreath honoring those who love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. They are recipients of life (vitality) in abundance. Faith grows when tested and perseverance in trial declares something about us: that we have been captured by God's love and love him in return.

The passage that follows describes an opposite pattern in which temptation leads to sin resulting in death, "who on earth can set me free from the clutches of my own sinful nature."

Don't be Deceived

James 1:13-16:

¹³When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶Don't be deceived, my dear brothers.

Verse 16 is an important conclusion to this paragraph. James is writing to those he calls his "dear brothers." He is not a lecturer from some distant place spouting theory—he is a brother who warns his friends of their vulnerability—do not be deceived.

Returning to verse 13, we meet the familiar human inclination to avoid responsibility and blame another, "It's not my fault." When we give in to temptation, avoid responsibility, or fail a test: we instinctively look for someone to blame. We might begin by decrying bad luck,

a faulty education, inadequate parents, the government, or the media—but in the final analysis we will claim that God is to blame for our sin and failure.

Recall the searching questions God posed to Adam and Eve after they disobeyed him. Eve blamed the serpent. Adam began to assign blame with a finger pointed to Eve, but added the important phrase—“the woman YOU gave me” (Genesis 3:12). We will never ask the Lord for help as long as we avoid responsibility for our choices (and their consequences), placing blame on him.

Verse 13 is clear: “When tempted no one should say ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” Moral failure is our own fault. This was Paul’s sorrowful discovery, described in Romans, “who will save me from myself.”

A second act of foolishness (after blaming God) is to imagine we can manage the downward spiral in our own strength. In fact, our appetites (‘evil desires,’ v.14) are too much for us. James uses two verbs to make this case. At times we are ‘dragged away’—forcefully impelled, knocked off balance. Sometimes we are ‘enticed’—like a fish that is fooled by attractive bait. Then the will is engaged—desire has conceived, and it gives birth to sin. Sin, spreading like cancer, results in death (an ironic phrase—gives birth to death).

The imagery of conception and birth indicates a time lag, a gestation period. Since choices and consequences are often separated in time we can fool ourselves, as if lies can be kept hidden or lust can be indulged in secret. However, consequences cannot be put off forever. Eventually sin gives birth to death.

In the Bible, death, not surprisingly, is understood as the absence of life. It includes the body’s final expiration and for the lost, eternal separation from God. But lifelessness can be present before we draw our final breath. Self-pity, bitterness, soul twisting anger are all expressions of death caused by sin. Death does its work in the present and points to eternity.

The first account in the Bible of temptation leading to sin and death is the story of Cain killing Abel. Jealousy

claimed Cain’s heart, fomenting hatred and resulting in murder.

Jealousy, self righteousness, and a desire for revenge are insidious. I have painful memories of hurtful diatribes that have poured out of my mouth—speeches made with sharp edges, honed over time. These have been delivered as slander (of a person not present) or as direct denunciation. In either case, looking back, I realize that I nursed a grudge and played the speech over and over in my mind without any clear intention of ever actually saying anything out loud. But desire gives birth to sin and the angry words poured out. Some of these events occurred many years ago and I still recall them with shame. I am Cain who killed his brother. How did I end up here—in the clutches of my own sinful nature?

The Father of Lights

James 1:17-18:

¹⁷Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

The downward spiral of temptation leading to death is the opposite pattern of trials, building faith resulting in completeness. No one should claim that God is a tempter. He is, rather the Father lights whose gifts are perfect. Sin gives birth to death. God gives birth to us through the word of truth.

The message of the gospel of God’s grace, “the word of truth,” gives us hope and results in new birth. The imagery of “first fruits” is a celebratory one (like the victor’s wreath in verse 12). A bountiful harvest, a new creation, has begun and all should celebrate.

Let me conclude with two important reminders. First, don’t be deceived (v.16). We are not strong enough to overcome ‘evil desires’ in our own strength and our choices to sin will eventually result in death. The fact that

consequences are sometimes delayed says nothing about their inevitability. We will reap what we sow. Don't dabble with tempting notions with the intention of setting them aside 'after a little while.'

Second, the Father of lights is a gift giver. He bestows the crown of life (v.12) on those who love him. Perseverance under trial is not mere self discipline. It is evidence that we are certain that God loves us and that we love him in return.

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And the next verse is this:

"I thank God, there is a way out through Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen

NOTES

¹J.B. Phillips, *J.B. Phillips Translation of the New Testament*, <http://www.ccel.org/bible/phillips/JBPNT.html> (July 2006).

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