



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

James 1: 12-18

Summer 2021

"God's Open Hand"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Book of James. We're in James chapter 1, verses 12 through 18. Before the service, when we were gathered in the back and having prayer, Mark Newman described this as, "This great passage." It is a great passage. If you want to know who God is, the God you worship, James chapter 1, verses 12 through 18 gives us that.

I mentioned in the introduction to our study last week, that James is not known as a theological book. It's mainly a book of application. It's very much like the Proverbs. It is, in fact, 'the Book of Proverbs' in the New Testament.

But this is a theological passage. And you cannot speak about God, of course, without being theological. And he draws out the implications of God's greatness for us. So James 1, beginning with verse 12,

<sup>12</sup> Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which *the Lord* has promised to those who love Him. <sup>13</sup> Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. <sup>14</sup> But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. <sup>15</sup> Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. <sup>16</sup> Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. <sup>17</sup> Every good thing given and every perfect gift

is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. <sup>18</sup> In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

James 1: 12-18

May the LORD bless the reading of His Word and bless our time of studying it together.

*(Message)* Guy H. King tells a legend of an ancient kingdom whose king had died and whose ambassadors were sent to choose a successor from two twin infants. They couldn't see any difference and didn't know which to choose, until they noticed one had his tiny fist closed tight and the other had his little hand open. They chose the one with the open hand; and he grew up to be known as 'The King With The Open Hand' because of his selfless and gracious rule.

That's what God is. He is no closed fist deity, but the King who rules His world with an open hand. He's generous. His good gifts are a witness to His goodness. John wrote that God is love. James calls Him the "Father of lights", from whom every good gift comes. He is the source of all blessing—and it is His nature to give.

But that's often questioned by people. One of the greatest temptations in life is to think the opposite: To think 'that God is bad; that God is not good'; or at least to think, 'He's not good to me—He's stern and stingy.'

In fact, that was the first temptation in the garden when the serpent approached Eve and asked, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" He questioned God's Word. He added to it, you'll notice, "any tree." Well, no! God had not said from "any tree"—just from one. But from "any tree" of the garden?, 'A God like that—can't be good.'

And then he told Eve that if she ate she wouldn't die. 'Don't worry about that. God knew that her eyes would be opened. He knew that she would be enlightened, and

God did not want that. He wanted to prevent that.' What he's saying is, 'He wants to hold you back. He's not good.'

And often the circumstances of life raise that very doubt in our hearts. James corrects that; for that's the subject of our passage—God's goodness and a warning against every temptation against that—the very common temptation to doubt His goodness, His guidance, and His care for us.

But the passage doesn't begin with temptation—but with trials and testing. Verse 12 is a transition. It concludes the subject that James began in verse 2 and leads to the subject of temptation in verse 13. Verse 2, if you remember, in it James said we are to, "Consider it all joy" to have trials because they 'test our faith.' And the result of that is endurance. Trials are a means of producing maturity in believers.

Now, in verse 12, he concludes that subject by saying, 'that the person who perseveres through trials is blessed', Because when he or she "has been approved", (has stood the test), they will be rewarded, "...he will receive the crown of life which *the LORD* has promised to those who love Him."

This word *crown* has been used of a kingly crown; but it's more often used of the kind of crown that was given to a victorious athlete—a wreath of leaves that was often given at the Olympic games. And that fits the context because persevering through trials takes the stamina and the effort associated with an athletic contest.

That statement, "who perseveres", is a present tense, indicating that 'it goes on.' So it is a continual effort through a great ordeal. It doesn't mean that there's no failure through the ordeal or contest; there often is. The life of God's people is very often described as a walk. When a child is learning to walk, he or she, often falls and his or her father picks him or her up and puts them on their feet and they continue to learn to walk. They *persevere*.

And that's us—persevering to the end. We fail, we fall; but we repent, we reset our eyes on Christ, the author and perfecter of faith, and we continue on. That person is blessed, blessed even in the ordeal, the trial itself.

This word, *blessed*, can have the idea of *happy*. It's Old Testament equivalent is sometimes translated that way. Psalm 1 The Psalm begins, "Blessed is the man." It can be translated, 'Happy is the man who is obedient.' But *happy*, in our nomenclature, our vocabulary, is really too light of a word. What James is referring to is joy that transcends, that rises above the circumstances. That's the result of endurance. Trials produce maturity. And a mature response to trials, the right response, is to be faithful and confident in the LORD in spite of the circumstances, (because they so often seem to deny that we should be that and that He is good and caring.) We're to be faithful, knowing that He always is for us, doing something good in us. That's faith. Faith is not a life of sight. We believe God's Word in spite of the circumstances. But that's necessary. And it will result in great reward, "the crown of life", which is, 'Eternal Blessing'.

Life in this world is difficult. This is a fallen world. It's difficult for everyone. It's more difficult for some than others. Some people have heavy burdens laid on them—but not without purpose. And there is great reward for the man, woman, or the child who perseveres; runs the race well. All of this is intended to give us encouragement in the Christian life and to help us endure.

But I called verse 12 a transition because trials, while not temptations, (they're often simply the difficulties of life that we go through, as I said, in this fallen world), still, a trial can become a temptation. When trials are ongoing, just one thing after another, we begin to ask. "Why?", and begin to doubt that God has good intentions toward us. That's the tempter's purpose—to lead us into doubt toward our God. James understood that. So, he wrote, "Let no one say," ... and he says let no one say because this is often what people do say ... "Let no one say, when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God.'" (vs13). It's a weakness of human nature that we characteristically want to blame someone else for our failures or disappointments.

And often, it is God that we blame. It's been that way from the beginning. When God confronted Adam for his sin, Adam responded, "The woman whom You gave to be

with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate...And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me." (Gen 12-13). In other words, 'I did it—but it's really not my fault. It's not my fault at all.'

That's the excuse that's given, 'God was really the one to blame', they were saying. 'The woman You gave to be with me. It was God who made the serpent, after all, wasn't it?' They both believed Satan's lie. Eve was deceived, Adam wasn't, but he bit into that idea that God is not good and that His Word is not reliable and right. 'He is selfish', is what they were thinking. 'He wants to deprive us of the good things in life. He wants to prevent us from reaching our full potential and happiness. That's the way God is.'

Well, God did give the woman to the man to be a helper. And when He did, He gave to the man a perfect person who was perfectly fit to be his help, perfectly fit to be a blessing. And He did make the serpent, that's true, that He's made everything that there is. He's absolutely sovereign and creator of all things. But He didn't make them sin, or tempt them to sin, or put them at a disadvantage. Just the opposite. He gave them every advantage.

Think of it; He gave them life, created them out of dust and out of a rib. He gave them life without sin and with a perfect mind. He gave them a lush garden from which to eat the fruit of every tree, except one. He held one, (of all those trees), back from them—and there was only one prohibition given to them. So He gave them every advantage in the world. They sinned because they chose to; they wanted to. And whenever a person sins, it's because he or she chooses to do so.

'Every good thing comes from God', James says in verse 17. Testing is good. It makes us morally strong. God does that. But He doesn't test with evil intent—or for the purpose of tempting and drawing people into sin. Yet so often, when things don't go their way, when they lose and don't win, they, (we), we question the goodness of God.

In 1951, the New York Giants beat the Brooklyn Dodgers to win the pennant and go to the World Series. The Dodgers were winning in the bottom of the ninth inning. Ralph Bronca was pitching when Bobby Thomson came to the plate and hit a walk-off

home run. It was called the "Shot Heard 'Round the World". Bobby Thomson was a hero. He became a legend.

When Ralph Bronca left the polo grounds, he was met by his fiancé and his priest who said to him, "It could have happened to anyone." "Yes, Father, but why did it have to happen to me?" Well who can't sympathize with that? Who hasn't been in a circumstance where they felt, 'Why me?' And some of those 'Why me's?', are regarding some really tragic things in life. But behind it, is the idea of the unfairness of it all. Why me?

Well, we can't answer those questions always, and we can never really answer them with the kind of precision that we would like. But for the believer in Jesus Christ, God's providence is always good and we have to trust Him for that. And He'll prove it to us some day. In the meantime, as I said, we live by faith, not by sight. We trust His Word. He is always good and He never tempts us to evil.

In fact, in 1 Corinthians 10, in verse 13, Paul states that 'God doesn't permit a person to be tempted beyond his or her ability to endure. He always provides a way of escape.' That's the goodness of God; and that is His care for us. "He knows", as Psalm 103, verse 14, states, "that we are *but* dust." God doesn't tempt us to evil—but He does make a way of escape. He helps, not hinders.

James goes on to justify his objection to the claim that God is to blame for temptation. He says first that God "...cannot be tempted by evil" (vs13b). Now that's an important statement about the nature of God. God is perfect. He is unsusceptible to evil. It does not appeal to Him, it cannot appeal to Him, and He cannot sin. Now that's an explicit statement of Scripture. That's Titus chapter 1, verse 2. That's Hebrews chapter 6, verses 17 and 18. God doesn't sin. God cannot sin.

One of the commentators, Edmond Hiebert, commented that this fact that God is 'untemptable of evil' is the foundation of the Christian belief in a moral universe. He's absolutely good. What He reveals to be good and right, is true. He always hates evil, and

will never draw us into it or abuse us. That is absolute. The universe is governed by strict moral principles.

How unlike the heathen gods of the ancient world—they were capricious. They might be kind one day; and they would be cruel the next day. Everything in heathenism and paganism was arbitrary. There was no certainty. They were figments of man's imagination, (whose imagination cannot rise above themselves), and so, when they think up what the gods must be like, they invent gods like themselves that are feckless and faithless. As a result, that was reflected in life, that was reflected in their view of life and their experience. Everything was uncertain for the pagan.

But God is not like that. He cannot lie. He cannot be unfaithful. He is absolutely reliable. So life is certain for the Christian. The fact that God is pure and can never support evil or use it against us, is the assurance that His goodness is for us, and supports us, and we can trust in Him and rest in Him wholly and completely.

And secondly, the charge that God tempts us is not only contrary to God's nature, but it's contrary to God's actions. God "Himself", James writes, "does not tempt anyone." (vs13c). In his commentary on Genesis, Griffith Thomas wrote, "Satan tempts to bring out the bad. God tests to bring out the good." So we can't blame God when our trials become temptations. They are the product of our own sinful hearts.

That's how James explains temptation next, in verses 14 and 15. The source of it is not in God but in man. It is something of an anatomy of sin that he gives in these verses; an examination of how sin begins and ends and its origin and its cost:

Verse 14, "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust." You'll notice, 'not carried away and enticed by Satan, or by a seducer'. Well James believed in the evil influence of both of those. He could have multiplied the venues and agents of temptation, but here he's not concerned with any of that. But to put the blame where it really belongs altogether—and that is in the human heart. The idea is that man is carried away and enticed by his own desire, his own sinful passion.

His lust draws him out, carries him away toward that desired object. And his lust gives him an appetite for it.

The language here is taken from the realm of fishing and hunting. It suggests something like a fish swimming its course, and then being drawn off by this little object, this lure, this shiny moving thing. —It's the bait on a hook, and it bites.

Everything that James says assumes the fallenness, the depravity of the human heart. We sin because we're sinful. —Not because the devil made us do it. People succumb to the temptations from whatever source because they choose to do it. We are responsible for what we do. And what we do has consequences.

James gives the consequences of yielding to temptation in verse 15 by describing the language in terms of childbirth, "Then, when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." It's as though this birth occurs and this little baby is there—and what pleasure it brings. And yet it turns out that little baby is a murderer, and commits that murder.

So there is a sequence: Temptation excites desire, which demands action. And that action is, that one must either act on that temptation or act against it. Resist it or fall for it. When we indulge desire, a chain of events follows; sin occurs and death results.

There are all kinds of desires: natural desires, normal desires, good desires, desires that we've been created to have—that sin affects—that sin distorts. Maybe a strong appetite for food. There's nothing wrong with having an appetite. That's good. That's necessary. But it can become something other than that. Or lust for power or pleasure. Power is necessary in certain contexts, and pleasure's a good thing, but it can all be distorted by the human condition. When we yield to lust, lust conceives and gives birth to sin.—And always with destructive consequences to one's self; to one's soul; to one's body. In every aspect, it has its detrimental, destructive effect because sin kills. It gives birth to death.

Well that's the picture that Solomon gives in Proverbs 7, something you studied some months back with Mike. A young man is enticed by a woman. The young man's naïve and the lesson in part is about the danger of being naïve, of not having wisdom and knowledge. And so this is what he lacks. He lacks an understanding of the way the world works, the nature of things. He lacks wisdom, he is gullible. And the temptation is attractive. Pleasure without consequence. This woman has enticed him and given him great promises. And he yields and he goes into her house, Solomon says, "as an ox goes to the slaughter", (vs22), not knowing, as Solomon said, "it will cost him his life." That's what happens when the will consents to lust. Sin is born, and the result is death.

It's the opposite of the blessed life with God in verse 12. Perseverance under trial, which is hard, leads to the crown of life. Yielding to sin for pleasure is easy—but kills. Part of wisdom is knowing that: knowing that we are weak; knowing what our weaknesses will result in if we face temptation; and knowing that we must do everything we can to avoid temptation. It's dangerous, and none of us is sufficient for it. So avoid the temptations all that we can.

"Do not be deceived," James says in verse 16. Don't be deceived about the source and the consequence of sin. Temptation promises pleasure. It may promise profit—whatever. The result is, it delivers death. That's what sin does.

The source of sin is not God but man. The source of sin is the human heart. Blaming God for our failures casts suspicion on Him, casts suspicion on His character. It undermines confidence in Him. It is blasphemy.

God is good; that's what James is teaching us here. He is not the author of sin. And to reinforce that, James gives a double picture of God's benevolence in human affairs. In verse 17 he describes Him as the giver of all good gifts; material, temporal blessings. And then, in verse 18, he describes Him as the giver of all spiritual life, the source of regeneration. So in verse 17 it's basically the material things of life that He's the source of; and then verse 18, the spiritual things:

Verse 17, "Every good thing," or, "Every good gift given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." James takes pains here to emphasize his point: "Every good gift and every perfect gift." It's a sweeping statement to make clear that good, not evil, comes from God. And the blessings of God are extensive. Every good thing we have is from God. His gifts are good. His gifts are perfect. Both of which excludes the possibility of God being the source of evil, of evil coming from Him.

And all of that leads to the response of trust. It's intended to. It should. Trust and gratitude, to the exclusion of doubt and thanklessness. It indicates our complete dependence upon the LORD for everything. Do you have a good thing? Any good thing in life? Health? Possessions? Wealth? Friends? Success? It's all a gift of God. And you might say, "But I've worked hard for what I have, and where I am. And I've been honest in all of my dealings." And to that I say, "Good. That is praiseworthy. And that's a model for others." The Christian life is one of industry and responsibility. It's a life of hard work, discipline, and honesty. And so that ought to be one's profession. But if you're thinking you've earned it yourself; ask yourself, 'Why did all of this come to you? Why do you have the abilities that you have, and the circumstances that you have? Why do you have, for example, a clear mind, a sound mind, and a fit body?'

The mind is a delicate thing. It doesn't take much, it seems, to get it off just a bit. And the human body is a finely tuned thing, and it doesn't take much for it to be off. So why do you have that? Why do you have a sound mind? Why do you have all the opportunities that were afforded to you to be able to work and succeed? I think if one looks at his or her life, and understands it, then one will understand that it's all a gift of God. It ultimately all comes from God. Even the energy and the wisdom to be a disciplined person and to work hard; that comes from God. —All a gift.

Paul put the statement in the form of a question to the Corinthians who thought quite highly of themselves. And so he brought them down a bit in 1 Corinthians 4, verse 7. He wrote, "Who regards you as superior?" Well the answer to that was, 'Well, we do.' But Paul's asking this kind of rhetorical question, and then he says, "What do you have

that you not received?" Or 'If you're so special, name me one thing that you haven't received from the LORD God.' Well they might have started naming things—but the point of the question was: No, No! Nothing! —That's the point. So "why do you boast?"

We can't boast. And we can't consider ourselves anything but completely dependent on God. And His goodness is proved by His faithfulness to give good things to us. That's what God is like. In fact, His giving is constant. That's the force of the present participle, "coming down". (vs17). They are always "coming down." He never stops blessing the world. Every blessing is from Him. Every breath of life that we take is a gift of God to us, individually and universally. He's faithful to His creation. He's open handed. That's His common grace.

James calls Him "the Father of lights" (vs17b); the creator of the luminaries, the stars. He causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous alike— continually. But more importantly, "light" illustrates His character. 1 John 1, verse 5, "God is Light." He's the source of all spiritual illumination. John adds to, "God is Light"... "and in Him there is no darkness at all."

James' statement is similar. Having described God as "the Father of lights", he adds, "with whom there is no variation of shifting shadow." God is immutable—meaning God is unchangeable in His character. The sun and the moon vary in their light. The radiance of the sun changes from sun up to sun down. Through the month, the moon changes from full, to crescent, to new moon. There is summer and the winter solstice— solar and lunar eclipses. But God doesn't have variations; He never changes; He's absolutely dependable; His promises never fail.

That's different from the old heathen gods, as I said earlier, but that's also different from many ideas today. Materialists and environmentalists have such a reverence for the cosmos and nature, it's like worship. In fact, I think it is worship. But it's unreliable. Their god is completely unreliable. Nature turns on them all the time with tornadoes and hurricanes and earthquakes.

There's a theory of cosmic eschatology called "Vacuum Decay"—that the universe may rip apart at any moment. Well how unsettling—if you believe that. The life

of an unbeliever is unenviable. It's uncertain. It seems like they can invent some new theory to scare themselves all the time.

We live with certainty. God has told us how it will end. He's told us how it began, how it continues, and how it will conclude. —And His revelation is reliable. He keeps His promises and is faithful to His people—and more. He's generous with us. He's not only good to us, He's generous to us and consistent. He rules the world with an open hand, and good gifts are the witness of His goodness.

But the greatest witness to His goodness is the life that He gives in the new birth— spiritual life and blessing. He is the cause of regeneration, of being born again. Verse 18, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures." The new birth is not due to the goodness of the believer. It's not due to a sinner believing. It is all God's grace. James puts emphasis on God's will by putting it first in the sentence, at least in the Greek text; "Of His own will He brought us forth."

God willed not to let sin destroy His creation. He had every right to do that. He willed not to let sin destroy His creation and let us perish. He chose to save us—not because we deserve to be saved but because He desires it.

Now that refutes any claim that God tempts us to sin. All through the Book of James there are principles of conduct. This is a book about wisdom. And it instructs us on how to live a wise life; how to do the right thing. But conduct is the evidence of a new life. It's the evidence of a changed life. But the evidence of the life is not the cause of the life—God is the cause of the new birth, not our works, not our deeds. Before there is life it must be implanted spiritually in the dead soul—and only God can do that. The dead soul can't do that.

One of the commentators correctly quoted Ephesians 2, verses 4 through 10, to support what he called, "God is the sole originating and effecting cause of the new birth." In verses 1 through 3, (Eph) 2), Paul states, "You were dead," completely dead spiritually. And then, in verse 4 and 5 he gives the contrast. "But God made us alive."

Well now that settles the whole question, doesn't it? 'You're dead, but God made us alive.'

Unfortunately, the idea of free will dies hard in the hearts of men. That same writer wrote of two wills, "First, and foremost, and fundamentally, God's will and then our will." And that is true. —But then he adds, "God's says, 'I will, if you will.'" No! If that were the order and the condition, God would never say "I will" because He knows we're dead. —And He knows we will not respond; we never seek after God. That's what the Scriptures teach. Man is in complete, full rebellion against God. That's the nature of the human heart.

The real order is, "You will because I will." —Sovereign grace. The new birth is all of God. It is unconditional and free and effective, so that the new birth changes our will —brings it alive, to make us willing. The LORD does all of that of Himself and through His Word.

That's what James says. He indicates that in the statement, "He brought us forth by the word of truth."(vs18). The teaching and the preaching of the Gospel is the means that God uses to effect the new birth—to effect regeneration. And regeneration, the new birth, has the glorious goal that we will be the first fruits among His creatures.

This expression, "first fruits", is taken from the Old Testament. It is referring to the first part of the harvest that was offered to God before the rest of the harvest was used for its ordinary purposes. So, they give the first part to God, then they are welcome to have everything else for themselves. —But it was an expression that was especially meaningful to Jewish Christians. They were brought up with this. They understood the language and knew that they were the first part of the great harvest of souls.

And that harvest continues down through the ages and we're a part of that harvest. And we too, are the first fruits, because the first fruits is that which God receives—that God takes for Himself. And just think of that. He has chosen you as His

children for Himself. That's His love for you. He's made you His own. That's what God is like. He rules the world with an open hand; not a closed fist.

He gives good gifts to all people. —To all people. But especially, He blesses His elect with both temporal and eternal gifts; with our daily bread, faithfully—and eternal life, resurrection life, the kingdom to come, eternity to come. God is not a tempter; He is a Savior. God is good.

If you know Him personally, you know His goodness, because you have experienced it daily. You experience it so often and so freely that you often don't even think about it. Who gives a thought to the next breath that they're taking? Who's counted up the breaths of life that God has given to us? We don't even think about it, but it's so fundamental to living. And so it is with so many of His gifts. You've experienced it daily in every breath that you take, as I say, and every bite of food that you've had, and every good thing that you've had from the most basic to the greatest.

But if you don't know Him, if you've never trusted in Jesus Christ as Savior, well you, too, have experienced the good things of life at every moment as well. But you'll only experience those good things briefly—in this present life which ends very soon. We're “just a vapor”, as James says later on. But God, who gives you each breath you take—each day that you have, can take it away. And He will. And then you will know Him as judge.

Avoid that. Come to Christ. Believe in Him. He receives all who do. And then you'll really come to know who the LORD God is, and the fullness of Him, and the goodness of Him. And you'll experience Him all through your days. May God help you to do that, and help all of us to understand these great words of James.

LORD, what a great truth that is. You hold us fast. No one can pluck us from Your hand. Not the devil himself, not our faithlessness, not circumstances. You hold us through those difficult circumstances of life. We may not sense the whole as much as we should at certain times, but You are holding us. That's the promise. And You'll hold us until You bring us safely into Your glorious presence. We thank You for that.

Thank You for the great truths that we've considered; that You're faithful, and good, and able. So LORD, may we take that with us. May we remember that.

Now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. In Christ's name. Amen.

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