

# God Is Good When Life Is Not



**James 1:16-18**

Here we are again. It feels a little like March. If you were like me, you tuned in to see what the governor would say, what the new regulations were, what has to stop or shut down, and what it means for churches. All of us have been thinking for family, for Thanksgiving, for our lives. It seems eerie and familiarly like March. I've talked to countless people this week trying to pray through what this means for church. One of the things I've repeatedly heard from almost everybody is 'I am just over this. I am weary. I am tired. I just can't wait until things get back to normal.' What I've tried to do during this whole season is think about what God is teaching me and what He is teaching us. One of the things I have discovered in my own soul is I believe normal is good. What I mean by that is I really believe the world should be good; that's what normal should be. I think for all of us, we should collectively believe the world should really be good. When things are normal, we don't wear masks, we don't worry about disease, we don't worry about being six feet apart from each other. When things are normal, then everything should be good. I want to press on that just a little bit and ask why we assume normal should be good. Why do we expect normal should be good? Why do we expect normal to

be a place without disease? Why do we expect normal to be a place without masks? I think it is for one obvious reason. It is because we have a long memory of a distant garden, a garden where everything was actually good. It was perfectly good. There was no disease, no sickness; no one had to stay six feet apart. It was a good, perfect place where we dwelt under a good and perfect God in perfect relation with Him. That's a long distant memory of the world should be good, but we also have a very short memory because we don't remember what happened in that garden. In the garden, we stepped away from God. We rebelled. We went our own separate way, and we introduced sin into the world. Now, what we experience is not goodness; we experience a curse. We need to really understand that in this place, east of the garden, outside of perfection, in a fallen world, this is actually normal. Normal is disease, death, suffering; normal is actually bad. That's what we deserve. That's what we brought on. So, what is abnormal? Abnormal is good. When good happens, we're not experiencing normal; we're experiencing something other, something other worldly. When good happens, we're experiencing grace. We feel right now that this can't be normal, but no, this is the weight of normalcy in the fall. What is abnormal is getting to walk around and not worry about disease and death. What is abnormal is when God shines His goodness on us and we get to take our masks off. That is moments of grace. Our temptation is to think this has to be bad in some way. This has to be abnormal, so maybe God is doing something. Maybe God is bad because we're experiencing bad. No, experiencing bad is actually normal and experiencing good, that's God.

James will tell us that all good, all perfect things come from God because God is good. James is writing to a people who are going through trials, temptations, suffering, and persecution. Their temptation is to think something must be wrong because I'm experiencing a bad world, and perhaps that means God is bad because the world is bad. James is going to say don't be deceived because the reality is that God is good when the world is bad. Not only that, but God is good, and good is actually grace. What we hopefully see this morning is that every good thing in our life is not normal; that's actually grace, God's grace, and God's goodness. We, of all people, should be the ones who praise Him for all the good we have.

We're going to pick up on James' train of thought dealing with trials and temptations. Those are those things that aren't necessarily good in your life. James has told us a couple of things. One is trials have a benefit; they strengthen our faith. They flex that faith muscle, make us steadfast, and make us perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing. So we can rejoice when trials come. Secondly, he is teaching that temptations are not from God. God is not tempting you with sin because He can't; it's against His nature. Your temptations come from your own desires. When you get a trial, you can see the benefit. When you get a temptation, you can know this is my own desire, it isn't from the Lord, so I can war against that. In the midst of our temptations and our trials, we are very likely to be deceived, so James is going to command us not to be deceived when they come.

## Scripture

***"Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 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. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."***

James gives us a command, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers." My beloved brothers, my friends, the ones I love, I want to give you a word, and here is the word: do not be deceived. Why, in the midst of trials and temptations, would James have to tell us not to be deceived? I think it's because he knows that when trials come, when temptation comes, there is a heightened awareness where we are more prone to being deceived. When things aren't going good, we're more easily apt to be deceived that somehow God is not good.

We had to spend some time in quarantine. It's very easy to say where is God. How could God have let me be around that person for that long? I

don't even feel bad, but God must not love me because now I'm in quarantine. What about when you have a desire, when you really, really want to do something, but the Word of God forbids it? That must mean God is not good because He doesn't want me to be happy. Temptation will tell you, it will trick you to say God is not good. What about when you're praying over and over for something and that something doesn't happen. You're easily deceived to think God is not listening or God does not care. What about when you obey, when you walk the walk you're supposed to and your neighbor, who doesn't follow any of the commandments of the Bible, drives a brand new car and your car doesn't even run. How can this be fair? I am doing what I should; God must not be good.

See, we're tempted to think wrongly about God during trials and temptations because during these times we see God through our circumstances rather than our circumstances through God. We think I'm going through something bad, so God must be bad. I'm feeling lonely, so God must not care about me. We view God through our trial, through our temptation and we can be deceived into thinking God is actually out to harm us. God doesn't want you to be happy and fulfilled; He wants harm for you. This is the fall of our first parents. God is holding out on you, just grab the fruit and you'll be happy! They did and it led them to death. Our temptation, the lie is the world is bad, my situation is bad, so God must somehow be bad. That's what we're tempted to think, so we mistrust Him, we don't cling to Him, we don't run to Him because somehow He is to blame. Our thought is we're all good, the world should be good, so if the world is not good and my life is not good, somehow God is messing with things. Normal is good and I should be experiencing good, so what is God up to, because things aren't good. We look at God during our trials and temptation, but then when life is going good, we forget about God. We ignore God. We don't even pray to God because everything is going great, and we assume good is just normal, when in reality we're going to see good is actually grace. Good should cause us to love Him and worship Him because He is the giver of good. Here's the truth, God is good even when the world is not. Even when your circumstance is not, God is still good.

Not only is God good, He gives us good gifts. Notice what James says, I love this little text, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above..." Did you hear that? Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above. We tend to think all of our goodness and all the good things are just normal. They're this world; I did it, I get it, so all of my good stuff is really because of me and what I did. James is reminding them that goodness is actually other worldly. Goodness is actually grace because all good gifts and all perfect gifts come from above. They're not originating here on this world. They're coming down; they're coming from above.

This is the gift buying season. We enter into a week of Thanksgiving, but for a lot of us, it's a week of making out lists, checking Amazon for discounts, it's Black Friday, Cyber Monday, and some of us will travel to places to get things. We're trying to think who we need to buy for and what the perfect gift is to give to all of those people. As a dad, I've got four kids to buy for, so I'm trying to think of their individual wants, needs, and how I can get each of them a really great gift. I can remember when Crider was five and he first got into Star Wars. I wanted his five year Christmas to be the best Star Wars Christmas he could ever have. So late at night, I would get on Ebay and try to find out when the bids would end for the original Ewok Village, the 1983 version, the original one. I wanted one in a box, intact, in mint condition. Most of them were about five to six hundred dollars. I didn't want to spend that much, so I tried to stay up late at night and try to find someone selling them that nobody found out about. I wanted to get him a perfect gift so that when he opened it, as a five year old, he would realize this is not a Walmart Star Wars toy. This is the original, and maybe he wouldn't even want to play with it, he would just put it up on a shelf and just look at it because it's in a mint box. I was a dad who wanted to give my son a good gift, even a perfect gift. I'm still the same way today. I want the gift to be perfect when my kids open that gift on Christmas. I want it to be just what they want so when they open it they will know this is a gift that was well thought out.

If that is me as an earthly dad, how much more does our heavenly Father think about the gifts He gives out to us? Those spiritual gifts that come to

us by way of the cross and make us more like Christ, how much does our heavenly Father love us and how much does He give us good and perfect gifts? James is trying to get you to see that all the goodness in your life, all the good things you have and experience, their source is from above. They're other worldly. See, normal is curse, normal is bad; good is grace, good is from God. Don't be deceived. When you go through bad, that's normal life because we're under a curse. When you experience goodness, that's other worldly, that's grace. That should cause you to thank the Lord for all the good and perfect gifts in your life.

So, it's from above, and James goes on and says, "...coming down from the Father of lights..." It's a little bit repetitive. It's from above, and now, it's coming down. James is really trying to heighten the point that these good and perfect gifts are not of this world. They're things you're experiencing from the grace of God. They're from above, and they're coming down from above from the Father of lights. That's an interesting expression, 'Father of lights.' I looked it up and it's nowhere else in Scripture. Nowhere else is God called the Father of lights. I dug around in scholars and commentaries to see where this comes from. Most scholars assume this would have been a Jewish phrase that would have spoken as a title of God; the Father of lights, meaning most likely that God is Creator. He's Creator of the sun, moon, and stars. He created the lights that we see. I think James is pulling on that expression, but I think he's also using it in a deeper way to say that not only is He the Creator of sun, moon, and stars, but He is light, meaning, He is good. In 1 John, John says God is light, and in Him, there is no darkness at all. God is light; God is the Father of lights. James wants us to know that not only do we get good gifts from God, but God, Himself, is good. Not only is He good, He's perfectly good, He's always good, and He will be good tomorrow just like He was good today.

We see that as James keeps explaining this idea of God as the Father of lights who is completely good, and then he says this about God, "...with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." That is a good promise. That is a wonderful truth that in God, there is no variation. In God, there is no shadow due to change. See, we have God, the Father of lights, think about the sun, moon, and stars. All of those light sources give

off perfect light, but they also give off shady light, partial light, and not always the full beam of light. This has been hunting week, so I've taken my sons hunting most mornings. Right at about 6 o'clock, 6:15, when the sun is just barely coming up, just a little bit of light, everything looks like a deer. My boys are like, "Dad, deer!" I look through the binoculars, and it's a stump. "Dad, there's a deer!" "No, that's a rock." Everything looks like a deer and it looks like a giant deer. What you see is the light is not showing things clearly; it's just partial light, barely lit up. All of the light sources we have there is change and variance all throughout them. The sun is high, the sun sets, the moon wanes, there are just all these different partials of light.

One commentary said that with God, it is always noon. It is always bright, no variation due to change. God is a God who doesn't change. Think about why that is important. In Malachi chapter 3, God actually tells His people I do not change, which in context means I'm not going to destroy all of you because I don't change, so bank on being safe with Me. In Hebrews chapter 13, it says that Jesus Christ is the same today, tomorrow, and forever, which is a great verse about the deity of Christ. If Christ is immutable, only is immutable, only God cannot change. So Jesus, who cannot change, is God. So here, we have James saying you can bank on God being good and He's always going to be good because there is no variation in Him. He doesn't vary. He doesn't change. That's very good because we change often.

I can just promise you, some days you're going to run into me and get a version of Kory, and another time you will get a little different variation of Kory. My kids know this very well. Sometimes they get dad who is patient, kind, gentle, under the Spirit, and self-controlled, but sometimes they get dad who is a little cranky, a little sleepy, a little irritable, and my tone and reaction to them changes based on how I feel because I change. Whether dad has a Sunday nap or not can determine how Sunday night dad is. I'm changing. I have variations of my personality on how I feel, and what I ate or haven't eaten. You're the same way. When you meet people, sometimes you meet different versions of them. Sometimes you meet good versions, and sometimes you meet the version to stay away from. You are the same

way. Sometimes you are that person at work where everybody just needs to steer clear of you that day. Why? Because you change. You're not always good. Sometimes you are, sometimes you're not. The wonderful truth about God is He doesn't change. He doesn't get moody. When you go to pray to God, you don't have to butter Him up. Have you ever had to butter somebody up? You want something from them, so you think I'll butter them up and say something to get them in a good mood because if they're in a good mood they will say yes. There's no buttering God up because He's not fickle in His moods. He doesn't change based on the circumstance, if He's sleepy or hungry. God is always good and always perfectly good. There's no variation; you always get the same God. One of the coolest things about God is God can't get better. God can't improve because He's perfect. He's perfect today and He's going to be perfect twenty billion years from now. He is whole and He is complete.

Not only does God not change, but notice James says that there is "no shadow due to change." God is not shady. Have you ever met a person who is shady? You know what that means...I can trust you a little bit, but I can't trust you a whole lot because you're a little shady; I think what you're saying is not the whole truth. God is not shady. There are no shadows in Him. He's not telling you something, but will really do something else because of ulterior motives. God is fully Himself, fully good all of the time. There is no shadow, nothing hidden and dark in God that you haven't experience yet because if you could find that, God would be bad. There is no darkness at all, no shadow due to change. God is good, and He is always good, and all good is grace. He's a good God who gives good gifts.

Now James is going to talk about the best gift. The best gift that God gives is the gift of salvation. The next line in verse 18 says, "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth..." the reality is God gives the absolute best gift to us, and that is the gift of salvation. Notice how James speaks of salvation. He says it's from His own will that God gives salvation. He's going to bring forth. The imagery there is to give birth. God, by His own will, is going to give birth to us as firstborns of a new creation. God is going to do that by the word of truth. What is James trying to say? Salvation is from God. Salvation is the gift of God from God. It originated



with God, it was planned by God, and it was God's idea. I just want us to put a toothpick in this verse because James gets a bad rap with a lot of people. The assumption is James is the man centered salvation guy. James believes it's by works, not by grace alone; Paul believes it's by grace alone. So James and Paul have a different view of salvation. James believes it's man's will that produces salvation, while Paul believes it's God's will. The idea is that if James and Paul sat down for coffee, they would fight with each other on who is in control of salvation. Paul would be like, 'it's all of God.' James would be like, 'no, it's all of man. We've got to do works. We've got to keep this thing; it's a man centered salvation.' Paul is like, 'no, it's God centered salvation.' That's absolutely not true. If James and Paul sat down for coffee, do you know what they would talk about? They would talk about God centered salvation. James says salvation is God's own will. It's His idea. It comes from God. God initiates our salvation. It's His gift to us. We don't suddenly discover and happen to join up with this thing called salvation; no, it's from God's will. It's what God does in you and for you. We're going to see in James chapter 2 that James will say if you are saved, you will have works, but it's not going to contradict salvation by faith alone. We're going to see that played out, but I just want to toothpick this verse to say James is on the same level of salvation as God. It is grace alone through faith alone. We're going to show how James believes that exact same thing.

Notice that James said by God's will, 'He brought us forth.' It's that same language that we've seen already in the text when it says sin brings forth death. Sin gives birth to death; God gives birth to life. That's how different God is than sin. Sin kills you; God gives life to you. He births you. It's that new born experience that Jesus talks about in John chapter 3 when He says you must be born again. It's that God, by His will gives spiritual birth to us. How does He give birth to us? How do we become spiritually alive? He says, "...by the word of truth." What does he mean? That's a common phrase in the New Testament. In one sense, it means by the Bible. By the Word of God, God gives life to us. It's the whole Word of God, but primarily, it is meaning the gospel. It's meaning that message found in the Bible of what Christ has done for us. That's how Paul would talk about it with Timothy when he said all Scripture is breathed out by God. Right

before that, he said you were acquainted with the scriptures. That's the Old Testament, and they made you wise to salvation in Christ Jesus. The Old Testament made you wise to see you need a Messiah, the Messiah is Christ, and you believed in Christ. In Ephesians chapter 1, Paul would use this phrase 'the word of truth,' and then he would say it's the gospel of your salvation. The word of truth is the gospel. So God, by His own will, gave spiritual birth to us by the word of truth, by the gospel, by the message of who Christ is and what Christ has done for us. That's how we gain new life in Him. It's by the Word of God and the Spirit of God that we were born as sons and daughters of God.

What is that word of truth? What is that gospel? It's the news of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, that Jesus is God who became a man, and He is the Messiah. He is the promised one. He's the King who is bringing the Kingdom of God. Here's what we know about what Jesus did. He first lived the life that you could not. Jesus obeyed the commandments. Jesus said yes always and every time to His Father's will. You have not. I have not. I've broken a lot of commandments. I have lived my own will a whole lot. So Jesus lived the perfect obedient life that you and I couldn't. He was righteous, the only righteous one, the only one who deserves goodness, the only one who deserves heaven with His Father forever. Secondly, Jesus died the death we all deserve. We've sinned, and the Bible is clear that the wages of sin is death. We deserve to die. That's what we deserve and Jesus deserves life, but Jesus died the death we deserve. He died for us. That's the gospel. Christ died in your place for your sins. He shouldn't have died. You should have. I should have. But Christ died in our place for our sins so that (John chapter 3) whoever believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. Whoever believes in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus would have life.

Here's what James is saying. Not only is God good, not only does He give good gifts, but He gives the best gift, your salvation. Your salvation was His idea, His will, and He gave spiritual birth to you by the Word of God, by the message of Christ, by the gospel that Jesus died in your place for your sins. When you believed, you became a new creation. You gained life.

Not only does God give the good gift of salvation, but He then gives us as good gifts to the world so the world can see the good world that's coming. Notice what James says as he ends his line of thought, "...that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." Here's the reason God saved us. He saved us so that, for this purpose, we could be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. What is James trying to get us to understand? To a Jewish audience, they know what firstfruits means because they've read their older testament. It's the very first of your grain, the first of your livestock, and the first of your kids. You bring those things to God as holy and set apart. When you start to harvest, the very first day you harvest a little bit, bring the firstfruits to God, and say this is holy unto You. In one way, James is saying that we, as God's kids, are holy unto God. We are set apart as firstfruits for Him and to Him. Secondly, the firstfruits were a little taste of what is to come. James is trying to tell us that God has given us to the world as firstfruits, as a little taste of what is to come, as a little taste of goodness to tell what the world will be like when the full Kingdom is realized.

When we start harvest in the fall, my dad will be in the combine. The very first field is really critical. He goes really slow and wants to get everything set just right on the combine because he wants to know how many bushels the corn is producing. We call B at the co-op and he brings the weigh wagon out. The weigh wagon pulls beside the combine, we pick a little bit, we see what the monitor says, and then we empty that grain onto the weigh wagon. The weigh wagon is a precise scientific estimation of exactly how many bushels the corn is producing. We look at the weigh wagon and try to set the monitor so we can know exactly how many bushels the corn is producing. What my dad knows is that is the first fruit. That is the first field, the very beginning of harvest. Dad knows if the monitor and the weigh wagon say the corn is bad, then it's probably going to be a really bad harvest. But, if the weigh wagon and the monitor say the corn is good then Dad gets a big smile because he can't wait to get to the next field, and the next field. He knows this is going to be a good harvest.

James is saying God is giving you as firstfruits to those around you so they can see what the Kingdom is like and what the Kingdom is going to be like.

Yes, the world is bad and it's full of all sorts of wrongs, but you are a first fruit of a new crop of creation that has been made good, and that is pointing to good, and you're a good gift to those around you to show them the good world that's going to come. That's what God is doing. In this season, we think about what we can buy for those people we love so that they would be so happy when they open the gift. We want to give good gifts. I think James would say, have you ever thought about what kind of gift are you to those people around you? See, God has given you as a first fruit to the people you work with, the family you go to sleep with, and the people you rub shoulders with. You are a first fruit if you're a believer. You are a person who belongs to the Kingdom to come, not the kingdom of this world. The idea is when people get around you, they should see in you, and through you, what the future will be like. See, normal is the way we normally react, and that's why he's going to go into a whole section about how our lives must mirror the Word of God. We must be slow to speak and quick to listen. We can't be angry and full of malice because that's normal, that's how people usually react, but for us, we're firstfruits. We're different. When people squeeze us and bump into us, they get goodness out of us. They see something they haven't experienced. They don't experience normal; they experience good. The good shows them of the good to come, and the good is from God. God saved you to be a first fruit. God saved you to be a gift to the world so the world would see the good world to come.

I just want to ask how you are doing as a first fruit. When people bump into you, when they spend time with you, what are they seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting about God? You're a first fruit. You're showing them what the world is going to be like when all things have been made right. How are you doing? Are you showing Him correctly? Are you showing the people around you the goodness of God By the way you're interacting and reacting with people? James is telling this group not to be deceived. It's really easy to be deceived when we go through trials and temptations because we often think normal should be good, and things aren't good, so it must be God's fault. What is God up to, because I'm not happy, not fulfilled. Things aren't going well, this must be God's fault because good is normal. Good is what I should experience because I am a good person. James is saying don't be deceived. God is good even when the world is

not. God is good, and good is actually grace. When you experience trials and temptation, you experience normalcy under the fall. So endure, trust, pray, and cling to God because God is good even when the world is not. When you experience good, you're experiencing something that is otherworldly. You're experiencing something that you should not experience. You're experiencing the goodness and kindness of God. You are experiencing grace. It changes our perception. When bad befalls us, we trust in the Lord. When good befalls us, we praise His name because we know only good things come from the Lord.

I'm just like you. I am weary. I am tired. I am over all of this. I just want things to get back to normal. Here is what I want for all of us. When things do get back to normal, and we pray they do quickly, we realize in that moment that we're not standing on ground that is normal. Instead, we are standing on the very grace of God. The truth is God is good, and good is grace.