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Bread of Life Baptist Church
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James 1:13-18

Sovereign and Good: No Blame for the Bad, All Credit for the Good

Every Sunday morning, before our main worship service starts, we have an hour for “Sunday School” classes, starting at 10 o’clock. We have three Sunday School classes for children, but also a “Core Discipleship” class for adults. This Fall, Cliff and I have been co-teaching a class on the Doctrines of God - that is, we’ve been covering some core topics that the Bible teaches us about who God is. If you haven’t yet, I would encourage you to come for Core Discipleship and Sunday School classes - it’s an excellent way to continue to plug into the church community and to grow in your own Christian discipleship, to learn more about God and His Word.

Now you might be thinking, “Logan, we already had announcement time; why are you covering this when you’re supposed to be starting your sermon?” And the reason why is because this sermon text goes right along with our Core Discipleship lesson from this morning. So much so, in fact, that if you were in our class earlier, this sermon might feel like “part 2” of that lesson. Now, I can’t take credit for that - I’m not clever or creative enough to plan it to happen that way - it is, ironically and appropriately enough, simply by the providence of God that it’s worked out this way. Over the last 4 weeks, we’ve been covering the topic of God’s Providence - that is, God’s sovereignty over all things. We looked at scripture after scripture declaring that God is, indeed, sovereign over all things - that there’s not one aspect of the universe that happens outside of God’s foreknown, predestined, sovereign purposes. Scripture makes this clear over and over again. Here are a few examples; I’m just going to read through a smattering of scriptures from across the Bible, and I want you to listen to what they say about God and His active role over the world:

Psalms 135:6 - “Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the deeps.”

Colossians 1:16-17 - “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Hebrews 1:3 - “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

Job 37:6-13 – “For to the snow he says, ‘Fall on the earth,’ likewise to the downpour, his mighty downpour. . . . By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction or for his land or for love, he causes it to happen.”

Psalms 104:14 – “You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth.”

Psalms 104:21, 28 – “The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. . . . When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.”

Psalms 139:16 – “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.”

Proverbs 16:33 – “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

Psalms 22:28 – “For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.”

Proverbs 21:1 – “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”

Philippians 2:12-13 – “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Ephesians 1:11 – “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him *who works all things according to the counsel of his will.*”

These verses describe God actively creating, upholding, and sustaining all things in the entire universe, doing whatever He wants in all of space and time, in all of Creation. He reigns sovereign over the nations, turning the heart of the king like water in His hand! When lions hunt prey or birds find food, it’s because God is actively feeding them! He’s sovereign over nature, over rain and sunshine and thunderstorms, even hurricanes. If you flip a coin or roll some dice, God determines the outcome! He’s already planned your days! God’s sovereign grace is even the basis of our salvation! As Eph 1:11 nicely summed it up for us, God “*works all things according to the counsel of His will.*” This is how great, how big, how awesome, how glorious, how majestic and powerful and boundless and unstoppable our God is! He isn’t tame and domesticated; He isn’t helpless, His hands aren’t tied, He isn’t weak or passive; He isn’t worried that His plans aren’t going to work out; He isn’t surprised by anything. *Nothing* is outside of

God's hands. He sovereignly works together *all things* according to the counsel of *His will* alone. The Bible presents a very big view of God, doesn't it?

But as soon as we start to think about this, it naturally raises a whole lot of questions for us. For starters, if God is sovereign over all things, then does that mean that we don't make decisions, that we're robots? And secondly, if God is sovereign, what do we do with the reality of sin and evil? If you're interested in these questions, we covered them last week and this morning in our Core Discipleship class. We also record all of our lessons, so you can go to our church website, click on the "Lessons" button, find the Doctrines of God page, and listen to our previous lessons there. Last week in class, we saw how the Bible tells us two things are true: God is completely sovereign, but human beings are also morally responsible creatures - we make real decisions, we only do what we most want to do. This morning, we talked about God's sovereignty and the problem of evil. As we walked through biblical passages, what we saw is that God is sovereign over all things, but He is not responsible for sin, evil, and bad things - we are; as creatures, we are morally responsible beings, and we're responsible for the sin and evil we do. But God is still sovereign over it, and what creatures (like humans, and even Satan) intend for evil, God purposes and intends *for eternal good*. If you were in Sunday School earlier, you've already heard this quote today, but it bears repeating; D.A. Carson captures this idea very well by saying that God stands behind both good and evil, but he does so *asymmetrically*. He says, "The manner in which God stands behind evil and...behind good are not precisely identical; for He is to be praised for the good, but not blamed for the evil."¹ Now, this can be hard for us to wrap our minds around, but it's necessary to think through this in order to understand God, in order to put the Bible together, but it's also necessary for us to *trust God*, to trust that He is both *all-powerful* and *all-good*; that God is sovereign over everything in our lives, the good and the bad, and He is perfectly good and loving, so that we can trust Him to use it all for His perfectly good purposes for our lives.

And by the providence of God, it just so happens that we see exact same ideas at the forefront of our text this morning, James 1:13-18. Last week, as we began James

¹ D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, p. 212.

chapter 1, we saw that God is sovereign over the trials of our lives, that He promises to test and strengthen our faith, hold us fast, and sanctify us. But if that's true, then what about when God brings trials into our lives that are also *temptations for us to sin*? If God is sovereign over these trials, does that mean that God is the one tempting us, making us sin, or putting us in impossible situations? Or does this mean that we can blame God for everything that goes wrong in our lives, even blaming Him for our own sin? *No, of course not.* And this is why James now turns to explain the difference between these outward *trials* that God intends to test and strengthen our faith, and our inward *temptations* where our sinful hearts cultivate and give into sinful desires. James first shows us here that we can't blame God, because sin and evil don't come from Him - they come from us. Instead, *every good thing* that there is comes from God, because He is sovereignly, unchangeably good. This passage warns us away from the doubts and desires of our deceptive, sinful hearts by turning our eyes to the perfectly good character of our great and awesome God.

So first, we see why we can't blame God for the bad...

I. We are Morally Responsible - Sin and Temptation Come from Us, Not God (1:13-15)

James gives us another command in v13: "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." Again, this obviously *assumes* that God is sovereign over these trials and temptations that come. But lest we start to think that temptation, sin, evil, and all the bad things in the world are God's fault, James cuts us off and tells us not to blame God or accuse Him of wrongdoing. Yes, God brings trials into our lives - but He does so to *test and strengthen* our faith, not to tempt us to sin! God does not tempt us. To do so would be completely to God's character! God is perfectly good and sinless; He Himself cannot be tempted, because He cannot sin nor have evil desires! *Of course* He doesn't tempt us to sin or force us to do evil! Therefore, we cannot blame God for when things go wrong in our lives. We cannot blame God when a trial comes, we are tempted to sin, and give in. We can't say, "Well, it's not my fault! God is sovereign; He brought this trial into my life, even though He knew I would sin!" No, it doesn't work that way, we can't use this as an excuse for us failing the test. As 1 Cor. 10:13 tells us, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your

ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” God brings the trials for our good, to test and strengthen us. God does not tempt us or cause us to sin. We can’t accuse God of doing wrong; God doesn’t sin or do any evil. And this means we can’t get angry or bitter with God when he brings trials into our lives, or if we give into temptation and sin.

But still the question remains: if God is sovereign, but also good, so that all the bad and sin and evil doesn’t come from him, then *where does* temptation come from? It comes from *us*, from within our sinful hearts, from our depraved human nature. We see this in vv.14-15: “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” Temptation comes, and we’re “lured and enticed” by it just like a fish is lured in by bait on a hook, and then, right when he places that delicious looking food in his mouth, he’s pierced and trapped by a hook and drug out of the water to his doom. James is saying that this is exactly what happens to us when we’re tempted - but we’re each tempted *because of our own desire*. We desire the wrong things; and in our sinful desire, we give into temptation; our desire grows up and “conceives,” it gives birth, to sin - we’re tempted, our desires are warped, we want the wrong things, and in our sin we give in. This is the process of sin and temptation that we all know so well because we’re all sinful! And the end of it is *death* - spiritual death, the judgment and wrath of God in Hell that we all deserve! That is *exactly* where our sin leads us apart from repentance and faith in the atoning work of Christ, who died on the cross for our sins so that we can be redeemed and forgiven by His blood!

In other words, the reason we’re tempted to sin is because *our own hearts are sinful* and we have evil desires. Now, I need to unpack this a little bit. You may already be thinking about the fact that Jesus was tempted - and we know that Jesus was sinless, both in actions and desires! Jesus is fully man, but also fully God - and we just read in v.13 that God cannot be tempted! But I think what this means is that when temptation came Jesus’s way, when Satan tried to tempt Him to do evil or when opportunities came for Jesus to sin, *Jesus never gave in*. And this doesn’t *just mean* that Jesus never outwardly acted on the sin, but was secretly desiring to sin in His heart. No, of course not, because sinful desires are sin, too! Just think of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says that if we hate our brother in our heart, it’s as bad as murder, or if we lust in our

heart, it's considered adultery. So clearly, when temptation came for Jesus, the reason He never sinned is because *He never had sinful desires*.

So you might ask, "Well, is it sinful or not to be tempted?" And I think the answer is: it depends on what you mean. In one sense, no, since Jesus was tempted. No matter how godly you may be, we will always be tempted to sin. But sometimes when we say that we're tempted to do something, what we really mean is, "Man, I really, really want to do that sin!" And I think James wants us to see here is that *this kind of thinking and desiring is wrong and sinful to begin with*. When temptation comes, the reason we start to desire sin is because *our own hearts are sinful and broken*. They don't work right. We're all born with a *sin nature*. That means, we're all born sinful, messed up, broken and distorted. And that includes our emotions, desires, and affections. We don't always want and desire the right things. Our hearts get disordered. We're designed to rightly love GOD and love all good things, and despise what is evil! But because of the Fall, we're all born *bent out of shape*. Our hearts don't naturally work properly anymore. And so when temptation comes our way, the reason we give in and sin is because we first *want and desire* to give in and sin. And this desiring is sinful, too. We do this when we desire things that are contrary to who God is - like when we desire sexual immorality, or desire for bad things to happen to someone, or when we covet the lives of wicked and immoral people. We do this even when we want *good things* but for the wrong reasons, or when we desire to get them in the wrong way. This is why our fight has to start by *fighting and crushing wrong desires*. When temptation comes, we need to recognize that our hearts want the wrong things, and we need to cry out to God for the help, strength, and wisdom we need to endure the trial and not give in to temptation. We need to recognize and repent of our wrong desires, we need to crush the disordered affections of our hearts - that is, any desire or emotion or affection we have that is out of line with God's Word - by focusing on Christ, by focusing on the goodness and love of God, asking Him to reshape our hearts and minds to be in line with His own. Practically speaking, that means, for example, that if the things you're reading or watching or looking at are stirring up sinful desires in you, then you need to cut that off - fast from it - and instead feast on the good things that re-align your heart with the truth of God's Word and stir your love and affection for God.

And so, all of this makes it really clear that we are *morally responsible* for our actions. We do what we most want to do - and that means that when desire evil things, when we sin, this

is because *we are sinful* and we are responsible for it. This is why we will all have to stand before God in judgment one day, because we are responsible for sin and evil, not Him - He is perfectly good, just, righteous, and holy. Therefore, we need to So bad things don't come from God - instead, *everything that is good* comes from God.

Which leads us to our second and final point...

II. God is Unchangingly Sovereign and Good - Every Good Thing Comes from Him (1:16-18)

We see this in vv.16-17: "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." In other words, James is saying: when trials come, and you're tempted to blame God, to get angry or bitter, or to accuse Him of doing wrong and tempting you to sin, "Don't be deceived," don't be fooled about who God is! Don't buy into the lie that God is evil, that He is the source of evil, that He is responsible for evil/sin, or that He actively tempts us, trying to get us to sin and fall. Instead, remember that *God is perfectly good*, that He is the source of all good! No, God isn't responsible for sin and evil - we are. But *God is responsible* for every singly good thing that happens in the entire world! Look at v.17 again: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights." The reason why He calls God the "Father of lights" here is because he's referring to the fact that GOD is the Creator, the one who made the "lights" in the heavens - the Sun, the moon, the stars above! He created all things - and the very first thing He made was light; just think back to the very beginning of the Bible, on the first day of Creation, when God first said, "Let there be light!" That was the first act of creation - and therefore, the first good gift he gave to us. And so this means that *every good thing* God created is a good gift to us. And I think it goes beyond this; God didn't just create back then, but as we read earlier, God continues to uphold and govern His entire Creation - all the universe! - by the power of His Word. This verse is remind us that *every single good thing that there is* comes to us from above, from God Himself, because He is the source of all good, of every single good thing! IN our home, we make it a priority to eat dinner as a family, and I try to always teach the kids to do two thins: 1. To thank their mom for making us such good food; and 2. To thank God for giving us that food. Now, what if I prayed that, and then Ashley said, "Whoa, not so fast! Why are you thanking God for this food when I'm the one that made it?" Now, to be clear, my wife would *never* respond that way - because she is a godly

woman, and she'll be the first to tell you that the only reason we had any food in the first place, the only reason she even knows how to make food, or has the good desire to make food for our family, is by the gracious providence of God! As my wife lovingly prepares a meal for our family, it is *at the exact same time* God's gift to us.

So often we get hung up on the problem of evil. We think, "If God is real, and good, and all-powerful, then why is there evil in the world?" But we've already seen the answer to that question - that's because He allows us to exist, out of His mercy, and if we exist, it means sin and evil will, too, because sin and evil come out of our wicked human hearts. But the real question is, "Why is there anything good in this world at all?" AND the answer is, "BEcause God exists, because He's perfectly good, and He's all powerful!" Because God is sovereign over everything in your life *and perfectly good*, it means that every single good thing in your life is a gift to you, a gift given to you personally by God Himself, the Father of lights! The people you know and love, the good they've done to you - this is the sovereign grace of God! The fact that you have any money at all, any shelter at all, a job, clothing, comfortable things, safety and protection - any good thing you have is a gracious gift from God! This is why we pray and thank God for our food when we eat. Therefore, we should thank God and praise Him for every good thing that there is, for it comes from Him! He gets the credit for every good thing!

And this also means we can *trust Him*. We can trust God to continue to be sovereign and good over our lives because *God never changes*, for with God "there is no variation or shadow due to change." He is the same God today as He was in eternity past, as He was when the Bible was written, and as He will be 2 billion years from now! God is sovereign and good, and this will never change! He has promised to work out all things for our good - for the good of His people, for those who love Him! As we saw last week, back in vv.1-12, He promises even to use our trials for our good, to sanctify us, to strengthen and preserve our faith, to hold us fast so that we endure to the end and receive the blessed joy of eternal life in heaven with Him, where there is no bad but only good forever!

And this means that even our salvation is the work of God's sovereign grace - our salvation is God's greatest gift to us! And this is what James tells us in v.18: "Of his own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." Now, it's possible that this phrase could refer to the fact that He created us, and all things, by His Word (which is true). But that wouldn't make sense of the second half of the verse, "that we

should be a firstfruits of his creatures.” If he was talking about creatinine general, Adam and Eve would be firstfruits, not James’s own generation! Instead, it makes far more sense to refer specifically to *believers* - after all, he says “we” after first speaking to “my beloved brothers and sisters” - fellow believers. I think it’s far better to understand this as referring to the *new birth of the spirit* that we experience as believers. This refers to us being *born again*, to the new birth of the spirit that we experience upon becoming believers, when we first trust in Christ alone for salvation! Therefore, God “brought us forth by the word of truth” means that God is sovereign even over our salvation! That God brought us forth as new creations, to be born anew of the spirit, to be raised from spiritual death to spiritual life, *by His own sovereign grace*, “of His own will”! We don’t save ourselves - salvation is entirely the work of God, from beginning to end! All that comes from us is sin - all we deserve is death and condemnation, we could never be good enough to earn salvation and eternal life! But God, in His rich mercy, sovereignly worked out all things so that His Son, Jesus Christ, took on flesh, lived the perfect life that you and I have failed to live, being tempted and yet without sin! He went to the cross and died in our place, representing His people, bearing the wrath of God we deserve! And by the sovereign power of God, He rose again victorious on the third day! And by the sovereign grace of God, this gospel, this god news, God’s Word of Truth, has come into your life and mine, into our ears, so that we have heard it as God’s people have shared it with us over the years! And not only this, but by God’s sovereign grace, He has so worked in our lives and hearts *so that we have repented and believed, that we may be saved!* “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). If you’re trusting in Christ alone for salvation this morning, this is not your own doing - it is the gift of God! It is the work of God’s sovereign grace, who has worked the new birth of the spirit in your heart according to His own will, to reach down and save you, personally! God’s sovereignty in salvation is a comfort to us - it means we can have assurance of salvation!

And not just for us - but God promises to save many more! God will sovereignly save His people, all of His elect, all whom He has chosen before the foundations of the world! This is why, I think, he says we are “firstfruits of his creatures” - that is, of those who are a New Creation in Christ. This means God’s sovereignty in salvation is an encouragement for us in evangelism and missions. Sometimes people think that if predestination is true, then there’s no reason for us to share the gospel - but the exact opposite is true! As we’ve seen, God always

saves *through means* - they have to hear the gospel first, just like we did. And this encourages us because it means it's not up to us to save people, and they aren't left to their own devices to save themselves either! God is the one who changes hearts - God is the one who saves! This should encourage us to share the gospel boldly broadly without discrimination - no matter how sinful or worldly or hostile to God someone may seem, God is big enough to change *anyone's* heart and *save anyone* through the power of His gospel, through the Word of His Truth! So let us share the gospel all the more, for God's purposes of salvation will not be thwarted! And this should also encourage us even when we see more and more people fall away from Christ. We see it all over the country - we even see it here inside our church congregation sometimes. But don't despair. God's sovereign grace will not fail. Christ won't stop saving until He comes again.

Ultimately, we are the firstfruits of what is to come: the *New Creation, New Heavens, New Earth!* No matter what trials and temptations come our way, no matter what sin and evil seem to abound, we can trust that God has not changed, that He's still good, He's still sovereign and in control, and His good gifts and purposes are still at work - that He will indeed work out all things for our eternal good and salvation if we love Him, if we are resting in His love for us in Christ through faith alone! Therefore, let us trust the Lord, let us trust in our unchangingly good and sovereign God, from whom every good gift comes! Let us trust and praise God from whom all blessings flow!

And if you're not a believer, then I want to urge you to turn away from the sin and evil desires, for they only lead to your destruction and death; turn to the Father of lights, the source of every good thing, and receive the greatest gift of all: salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life, as a gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ! And He's also given us the gift of baptism, through which you can profess your faith publicly. If you have any questions about this, I'd love to speak with you. Let us pray.