

Dover Baptist Church

10/1/21

James 1:9-18

We are continuing to read through the letter that James sent to the Christians of the early Church. Previously we have considered the persecutions that the believers of his day were experiencing, and this continues through this passage.

But at the beginning of our reading he highlights the difference between the rich and poor of his day.

I think one thing that I have noticed during the covid months is the way that our Government has put its hand in its pockets to help out many who are struggling. I know you can argue they should have done more of this, or less of that, but, on the whole, they have tried to help. I'm thinking of the financial support to businesses and self-employed especially.

But even without this we have had a benefits system in place for many years. Again, it can be argued that it isn't enough, and that by some it is abused. But, on the whole, the country seems, to the best of its ability, to look after its own.

But, as far as I'm aware, this was not the case around the world in the early decades of the Church. The rich were rich; the poor were very poor.

We look back to the very early days of the Church and see the leaders there appointing Deacons so that the poor amongst them could be provided for (Acts 6:1).

James encourages the poor to be positive. But for the rich there's a reminder that all will be taken away. I remember a speaker, concerning wealth, once say, "You can't take it with you; but you can send it on ahead!" Use what you have wisely, be generous, bless others. That's what he meant by sending it on ahead.

The passage finishes with gifts being received from above (verse 17). God is the One who put the stars in their place, the heavenly lights, as referred to here. And He does not change! One of our harvest hymns has these lines within it:

All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;  
So thank the Lord, oh thank the lord, for all His love.

James says whatever you have, see it as a gift from God. This, I would suggest, applies to material things, as well as what James highlights for us, spiritual things.

He chose to give us birth...that we might be a kind of firstfruits... (James 1:18).

Elsewhere Jesus speaks about being 'born again', and 'born from above' (John 3), and James reminds his readers of this fact. A new birth has taken place, and this is a gift from the Father who does not change.

And this is something that applies to all believers. Not just some, not just the rich, but everybody. The poor person can look at a bag that contains the sum total of all they own. Their material 'gifts' from God can indeed be minimal, but, as believers, even they have been given new birth, a promise of something that awaits them in heaven.

You could ask why God doesn't provide for them, as we might always try to provide for our own children, but that story from the early Church clearly answers that. Quite often God provides for our needs through other believers, and even unbelievers. Hence the need for deacons.

William Booth, the Salvation Army preacher was addressing a crowd one day. A drunk man in the crowd of listeners, holding a few coins in his hand, shouted, "Do you want this money?" William Booth replied, "Yes, I'll have it; the devil's had it long enough!"

All the good and perfect gifts in our lives may not have come directly from God, but we should see them as gifts from God. And they are ours, as stewards, to look after wisely, to spend wisely, and to give away wisely. As God's children we are responsible for God's money!

But, mainly, I would like us to consider the middle few verses of our reading. The NIV uses three words that all begin with a T: trial, test and tempt - verses 12 and 13.

We have all been on this planet long enough to know that trials will come our way.

We could even go back to the beginning of our Bibles and read about Adam and Eve. After what we call the 'Fall' had happened God finds Adam hiding behind a tree. During the conversation that follows he is told that he, and then Eve, will find life more difficult than it had been before. Hard work farming for him; childbirth especially mentioned for Eve. There will be trials.

Now, we could say, therefore, that it is God who brings about trials in our life, but I don't see that as His preference, even for Adam. Adam's trials were self-inflicted.

But some hold to the view that it is God who inflicts us with trials, but, as I have said before, for me there is a massive difference between God introducing the trials into our lives, and God not stopping them happening.

The New Testament talks about the perseverance of Job, and who, you may ask, wrote about Job? Yes, it's in James, chapter 5.

In the book of Job we have a very clear picture of where trials come from. They are not directly from God; rather, they are allowed by God.

Even this raises problems, questions. If God loves us as much as the Bible says that He does, why doesn't He wrap us all in cotton wool so that nothing and nobody can get to us?

This is a good question, but, unfortunately, there isn't a good answer.

The problem is that there is probably a Bible verse to support any and every idea. As I have mentioned previously, there was one Church I was doing a Bible course at. Two pastors there were having a light-hearted disagreement about our future home - whether after the resurrection we will be on earth or in heaven. They would pass 'proof' texts to each other, supporting their stance. Neither would change, and maybe the debate still rumbles on?

For me, on that, just being where God is will do!

But when it comes to trials, I think Jesus and the many people of God, both Old Testament and New, are the examples that we are called to follow. Many of them are listed in Hebrews 11, but there are many others. And to find one without a trial is a challenge!

And maybe the key to this whole trial case is the new birth. There is something more to follow!

Job, as we know, was re-blessed at the end of his life. He had lost his children, but he then had more. I don't see this as a replacement, rather a sign of a new blessing. His story had a happy ending, and it therefore lends itself to being quoted when somebody is going through a real trial.

But, we know, not all stories have a happy ending. For Job, yes; for a lot of the Disney films, yes; but for you, for me, for others we know or know about, it's not always yes.

In James' mind God was not the one who sent the trials, even though there will be certain trials that believers went through just because of God, or their faith in God.

God did not send the trials. Also, God does not test us. And God does not tempt us.

But God knows what we have to endure.

And along with other New Testament writers James offers a reward!

In the letters to the Churches, as found in the book of Revelation chapters 2 and 3, Jesus promises a reward to those who 'overcome' or stand firm to the end. Elsewhere the Apostle Paul, picking up on the local Games and the wreaths won by winners of sports, highlights the crown:

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.  
They do it to get a crown that will not last,  
but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

1 Corinthians 9:25

So too, here, James writes about receiving 'the crown of life' (verse 12).

Within the book, or more correctly, the letter, to Hebrews we have an interesting picture described for us. The list of the heroes of faith, as found in chapter 11, is followed by the idea that they surround us:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,  
let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.  
And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us

Hebrews 12:1

It's as though we are on the track at an athletics meeting with all the Old Testament people in the stands watching us compete. This may not be exactly how it is, but the idea of others looking on to see how we are doing is not so far from the mark.

We are being watched, to see how we do, and there is a crown being got ready for us.

It is being prepared for those who love God.

There are trials, whether thrown at us by the world on purpose or by accident. We live in bodies that, at points during our lives, will go wrong.

Then there are other people in our lives. Family, friends, neighbours. We think especially of Mark and Elaine Smith, and Julia, Mark's daughter.

Real people, with real trials, and we pray for them. We want God, and we ask God, to take away the trials that are faced.

He is watching on, probably with tears streaming down His cheeks, as we go through these trials. He knows, He cares, and He promises crowns. Just, however difficult, carry on loving God. That's what James says.

Through trials, through times of testing, through temptations, hold on to God.