

James 1:13-18 Do Not Be Deceived – Truths About Trials, Temptation, Sin and the Character of God: The New Birth (part 4)

Rom. 6:23 says, **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** Sin brings death. Christ brings life. In v. 18, James is using the picture of birth. Sin gives birth to death (v. 15). But, God gives birth to life (v. 18). Now, it is true that God gives physical birth to his creation and to mankind. But, I believe here, James is speaking in reference to spiritual birth as a spiritually dead sinner is brought to life. This is none other than the new birth. Think about it. What did Jesus tell Nicodemus when asked about eternal life? Jesus says, **“You must be born again,”** or more directly, **“born from above.”** Look at v. 17: **“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights . . .”** (John 3). In v. 18 we find three truths about the new birth.

1) The New Birth Begins with the Purpose of God. The first part of v. 18 says, **“Of his own will he brought us forth . . .”** I believe James is contrasting our will, which leads to death, with the will of God, which leads to life. This means God is the source of the new birth, spiritual life. This word is passive, which means we are not the source, God is! But, the context isn’t so much WHAT God does right now, in order to bring about the new birth (we will see that in a moment), but what He has done in eternity. God’s desire, God’s purpose, God’s will . . . to save a sinful people is not a knee-jerk reaction, as if to think that when Adam and Eve sinned, that God all of a sudden thought, *“Hmmm, what should I do? Now that they have messed up my plan.”* NO! Though this is a profound mystery, the plan to save a people for their sins has existed from eternity. God is eternal!

When Paul considers great blessings of God in Christ, this seems to be a clear emphasis. Please turn to Eph. 1:3-11: **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 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 . . .”**

John 1:11-13: **“He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”** **“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”** (1 John 4:10). Speaking of God’s eternal purpose as He works through Jacob instead of Esau, we read in Rom. 9: 9-12: **“For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose**

of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” Now, James does not speak of God’s “calling” or God’s “election” of a people. These things come prior to the new birth. There is so much mystery here, but the point is clear: The new birth comes from an Eternal, Unchanging, Good God. Some applications.

Application: This means God is free! **“Of his OWN WILL He brought us forth . . .”** He did not have to give us spiritual life. He could have left Adam and Eve alone as their own willful choices brought forth death. God was not coerced to make such a decision from eternity.

Application: All boasting for any good gift, particularly the gift of eternal life is excluded. All glory, honor, praise, and worship belong to God for his great mercy and grace in the new birth. This word “will” can be translated as “purpose” or “desire.” It is a passive word, meaning this act is not something we can do. It is brought about completely outside of our control. Which of us had a choice in our birth? We were simply born. This means that as far as the new birth is concerned, God does it all. God does not descend 99 flights of stairs and wait for us to climb the last one. We have not fallen overboard, drowning in the sea, as God throws us a life preserver that we must swim to and take hold of. When we fell, we didn’t fall up. We fell down, to death. Spiritually, we are corpses. **“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus . . .”** (Eph. 2:4-6). What a beautiful plan!

Application: Our will leads to death, but God’s will results in life, which is a gift; a gift from God, who is good (v. 17). Therefore, we should never question the unchanging goodness of God to bring life into our lives.

2) The New Birth Happens through the Gospel. James refers to this as the “Word of Truth.” It is the “seed” or the “sperm” that enters the womb. V. 18: **“He brought us forth by the Word of Truth.”** What stands in the eternal mind of God comes to us in the Gospel of Christ. Paul calls this “word of truth” the gospel. In Eph. 1:13 he says, **“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation . . .”** God does not work his plans in this world without the use of means. I would get no beets, no spinach, no radishes, if I had not planted these particular types of seeds in my garden this week. And I planted what I hope to be “good” seeds, seeds that will produce fruit. In the same way, the Word is not just any word, but the “word of truth,” which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In Col. 1:3-7 notice the same truth. Paul is praising God for the work of the Gospel in their lives. He says, **“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth . . .”**

Brothers and sisters, when Paul begins his letter to the Romans, his goal is to present the “Word of Truth,” the “gospel.” In 1:16 he says, “**For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . .**” The reason we speak about the gospel is because it is the power of God. James’ emphasis in v. 18 is it’s POWER to bring life. If the seed does not fall upon the ground, there will be no fruit. If the seed does not enter the womb, it cannot unite with the egg. There will be no life.

This is why Paul says in Rom. 10: “**How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”** (Rom. 10:14-15). Our application is to preach the gospel; to sow the seed broadly. For without it, there will be no fruit!

Now, I’ve said a lot about the preaching of the Gospel, the Word of Truth, but I haven’t gotten specific about the content of the Word of Truth. This is bound up with preaching the “good seed.” The more I speak with pastors and interact with Christians in different churches, there is a lot of preaching going on, and even a lot of preaching about the “gospel.” But, I think often the gospel is assumed. And people are invited to come and be a part of what God is doing “in the gospel.” But, if we do not actually preach the Gospel, there is no power to bring about life. Gospel means “good news.” The good news about the gospel is that it brings life. And what is it about the gospel that brings life? It is Jesus Christ, the Lord! Go back to Eph. 1: “***In Christ, He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing . . .***” We are “***chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world . . .***” We are “***adopted as sons through Jesus Christ . . .***” In Christ we have “***redemption through his blood . . .***” Our “***sins are forgiven in Christ . . .***” The mystery of God’s will has come down to us “***in Christ.***” “***In Christ our inheritance is found.***” This BOOK is the Word of Truth about Christ! This means that when we preach the gospel, we do not assume. We preach Christ. We preach his incarnation. We preach the cross. We preach the resurrection, which by the way, is the stamp of God’s promise to bring life. “**Faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of Christ**” (Rom. 10:17).

3) The New Birth Results in Sanctification. Look at v. 18 again. “**Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.**” The new birth finds its source in God. It comes to us through the means of the Gospel, the word of truth. And the result is sanctification. To be sanctified means to be “set apart.” Now, I know that sanctification has a depth of meaning in the Bible. It happens when we are justified. It continues in the process of godliness in this life. And, one day, sanctification will be complete. But, I want to emphasize the fact that we are set apart, “sanctified” with a purpose in this world. In other words, because of the new birth, we are set apart in this world. We are distinct; and our distinction is designed to display the glory of God in this world.

James’ illustration is very good. He says, we are a “***kind of firstfruits of his creatures.***” So what is a firstfruit? After God brought the people out of Egypt, and as they looked forward to the promised land, God told them to take some of the very first, finest fruits of their harvest and bring it to the priests, in order to be set apart as devoted to God. These “first fruits” were considered to be God’s special possession. In Exod. 23:19 we read: “**The best of the firstfruits**

of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.” (There are other examples of first fruits as well; firstborn sons, animals; even Israel itself is called God’s “firstborn.”) I think of my own first fruits of my garden, especially the tomatoes. I love to pick the first few tomatoes. They are beautiful. They are colorful. They are juicy. They are delicious. Some of them I eat, some of them I give away as I want to show them off. They are special, set apart as my special possession.

In the same kind of way, because of the new birth, we are set apart as God’s special possession. This means we display the glory of God in this world in a special way. How? We do this by the way we live. The first fruits are the best. Jesus says, **“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden”** (Matt. 5:14). **“You will know a tree by its fruit”** (Matt. 12:33). **“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”** (Matt. 5:16). As firstfruits we reflect the glory of God to the world. (This is our mandate from Gen. 1:26-28.) This may be one reason why James is distressed by those who claim to have faith but do not show this character.

And, something else about firstfruits. They are set apart as a picture that more tomatoes are coming. In the OT, the firstfruits are said to “sanctify the whole harvest.” In this verse James connects being set apart in the new birth with the rest of creation. I do not believe this means that all people will be saved. But, the new birth, displayed in our lives now as Christians, is a picture of God’s promise to make all things new one day. Brothers and sisters, as Christians, we are the firstfruits of God.

We display the beauty of Christ in our lives as new creatures, in such a way that the world will say, *“Wow, what a God you serve.”* The holiness that is displayed in our lives now is merely a first fruit of the new heavens and the new earth! In the Corona Virus, the world is groaning. Panic and fear abound. Death is prevalent. But for the Christian, for the one upon whom new birth has come, we are peaceful. We don’t panic. We don’t live in fear. Why? Because death does not reign in us. We are born again! **“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”** (Gal. 2:20). **“If any man be in Christ he is a new creation”** (2 Cor. 5:17).

This truth is amazing. WE are the firstfruits. God’s working in us is evidence that God is good, that God does not change, that God does not give birth to sin, but to life. This truth is displayed in life, not death; and not only life, but what happens in us because of the will of God, working through his Word, by the Spirit who gives life. This means that when we act, think, live differently, we really are the light of the world. We are truly a city set on a hill. Our lives are the evidence of God’s working in this sinful world to make all things new. We are the first fruits! We are the foretaste for what all of creation will experience one day. We are the proof that God will bring his will to pass in the consummation. Life that comes our way through the Spirit is what the rest of creation will enjoy one day when he makes all things new. And this happens because of Christ. Death comes through Adam, but life comes through Christ. And, we know this because Christ is risen. And did you know that the resurrection of Christ is also a firstfruit. He is the first to rise to conquer death on his own power. And since He is risen, so will we! We are the down payment of God’s goodness to the world in Christ. This is why in the context of James, we count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds. This is why we remain steadfast

as we wait for the crown of life at the end of this race. It is because we are born again! It is the purpose of God. It comes to us through the gospel of Christ. And as those who have this life, we are set apart as God's special possession and as a picture of what is to come.

Let me end with some verses to remember as we leave this morning.

“For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4).

“But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls” (Heb. 10:39).

“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1).

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Cor. 4:7-10).