

Roy's Sermon for February 12, 2023.

## James 1:17b-18 'Shifting Shadows. New Birth, Truth, And The Firstfruits!

Last time in James we looked at v13-17a of chapter one in a sermon I called 'Sin: its Root, and Its Five stages'. I suggested that after encouraging his scattered persecuted brethren to rejoice in their current trials, (three times in the first 12 verses) James then writes from that worldly perspective of blaming God, even for those parts that we play in our own troubles in which we often find ourselves! Since God made man the way he is, able to sin, and since God created Satan the father of lies, the father of all deception and evil, it stands to reason then that the root of all sin lies within God Himself. But as we looked at Genesis 3, and the origin of sin, we saw sin actually stems from a lustful, ungrateful, pride filled heart! Genesis 3:5 Satan says to the woman, "You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good and evil."

And yet the only one who is like God is of course God Himself. And that was their desire, to be the masters of their own destiny. Since this is not only the original but also the template of sin, when called to account, Adam blames God for his actions. His wife is no longer "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," the most wonderful blessing that God could have ever given to him. She is "the woman that you put here with me." Yes, since God had given her to Adam, it was of course all God's fault!

But James counters such a position by saying in v13, "When tempted no one should say God is tempting me." I explained that the word *Peirasmos* can mean both test and tempt. As I suggested that like the tree in the garden of Eden, all things can be both a "test" and a temptation. Yes, they are tests from God, but with the whispers Satan and in the list of mankind, they become temptations. But they do not come from God. Because for temptation to exist, evil must first be present. But from 1 John 1:5: "In God there is only light and no darkness at all." V14 "But each one is tempted, when by his own evil desires he is dragged away."

Satan "entices," he dangles the bait of sin, which he knows is our weakness, whatever that thing may be! He is that roaring lion on the prowl for men's souls. And he is enraged against the saints, since Christ has won the victory at the cross. And he knows "his time is short."

Temptation, lust, conception, sin's birth and eternal death, are the five stages of sin. V16 "don't be deceived, temptation does not have its root in God. V17: "God's gifts are good." Indeed they are perfect. They achieve all for which they are given. Of course expressed perfectly in Jesus.

And so we pick up the text in James 1:17b-8:18 'Shifting shadows. Birth. Truth. And the Firstfruits!' After Speaking of God as the "Father of the heavenly lights," friends, I couldn't help myself, I had to briefly visit this again. God is "the Father" of the sun, the moon, the stars. The planets, the galaxies, all of those celestial bodies that until very recently, many of which have been hidden from the eyes of man. All doing what they have been preordained to do and put in place by God to do! Psalm 19:16: "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night tonight the full stop there is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voices go out to all the earth, their voice to the end of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and circuit to the other, nothing is hidden from its heat."

Can you see what the psalmist is saying? Which James would have us understand? They are mostly unseen by the eyes of humanity for thousands of years, these heavenly celestial bodies have been declaring the glory and praise of God. Yes planets and galaxies and stars like our sun which is actually dwarfed by some of them, reflecting the glory and majesty of their Creator. Praise God! The psalmist says that they "Pour forth speech Yes these things in effect speak, of the majesty and glory of God. Even throughout the entire universe, not just here on earth! No there is no place throughout the whole universe where the glory and majesty of God is not proclaimed, heard and acknowledged. Indeed, God is the Creator of all light! Yes after conveying such glorious things to us, James now says in the second half of V17, "who does not change like shifting shadows." And what it means, is that God is not in the process of changing or becoming, as it were.

James does this by using two words which have similar meanings to emphasise this immutability, yes this unchangingness of God! '*Parallager*' and '*tropers*.' And they mean to change, to mutate, to morph into something, to move in some way from being that which something already is. Well James says God doesn't do that. The NIV puts it really well here: God is not "like shifting shadows." God doesn't change like a shadow when the sun passes over its subject. Indeed God doesn't cast a shadow. The hymn writer put it this way: '*Great is thy faithfulness O God my Father there is no shadow of turning with Thee, Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not, as Thou hast been Thou forever will be!*'

No God doesn't change "like shifting shadows;" indeed God doesn't cast a shadow. No He is "the Father of the heavenly lights." And those things are constant, although our perception of them does change. What I mean is, (as the commentator explains) on a cloudy night or day the light of those things, the sun, the moon, the stars etc, can be obscured, yes sometimes what we see of them is less than at other times. But they haven't changed, they are constant. It's our perception of them that has changed. In the same way that those things are constant but our view of them can change, they can appear to be different, so to speak. Well this is even more true with God. James' goal here is to lift the vision of assurance that we have in God of His unchangeable goodness to us. You see, as when there is an eclipse and the moon passes between the earth and the sun, and we are placed in momentary darkness as the brilliance of the light of the sun is obscured. Well so too, because of our current trials, and the state of our heart because of those trials, and also the state of our hearts because of sin as we listened to Satan's whispers in the midst of those things, our perception of God's love and goodness can become obscured and twisted.

That is why dear friends it is so important for us not to be governed by our changing circumstances and emotions. But by the unchanging Word of God's Truth. Because God's love toward His people is also constant. Even born from within His eternal mind's eye, if I can put it that way. Malachi 3:6 "For I the Lord do not change. So you are descendants of Jacob are not destroyed." Yes if God were changeable even as we are. Then we would all perish!

And the final thing which Blanchard explains, is that though God's Light does not change because it is constant as is His love (no He doesn't change like shifting shadows) but the shadow that we cast because of His light, can change! If we were to stand directly under a streetlight we would not cast a shadow because we'd be receiving the full effects of that light, so to speak. But if we were to wander away from that light, we would indeed cast a shadow, and the effects of the light would become less and less. And the further we wander away the longer the shadow grows. Until eventually we will again have no shadow at all, but this time, it would be because we have escaped the effects of the light, and we are now walking in darkness!

Beloved this is Satan's great desire. This is what his whisperings are all about. To drag us away, through circumstance and sin from the light, and its source, Which is God! 1 John 1:7 "But if we walk in the light, even as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son, purifies us from all sin."

So Beloved we need to pray, yes we need to ask God, that we would not be, "shifting shadows" ourselves. But that we would always seek to stand directly in His Light, the Light of His Word! V18 "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." Now Brethren, we could read through this verse quite quickly and miss the astounding statement that James makes here to his struggling parishioners. In V5 we saw when asking for wisdom and understanding in the eye of the storms of life, James says "God gives generously without finding fault." In V17, we learned that all of God's gifts are "good and perfect" meaning that they cannot be improved upon. And also as we have just seen, God and His Love are constant. He does not change "like shifting shadows."

Well now James points us toward God's greatest gift of all. "He chose to give us birth." But this is no ordinary birth, the mere physical birth of a child from its mother, no. This is the "birth," that comes to us through the "Word of Truth." 1 Peter 1:3 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Brothers and sisters, how is any person saved? Now yes as we all know, by the Blood of Jesus upon that cross and his rising from the grave. But what is the avenue or means by which we are saved, for want of a better description? Well it is the preaching of the gospel, of the Lord Jesus Christ! Romans 10:14 "How, then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear, without someone preaching to them?" Yes we are given "birth," new birth, from God the Holy Spirit, by us hearing the preaching and teaching of "the Word of Truth," The Bible!

In the NIV study Bible the concordance has Jesus using the word "truth" 107 times. He often said, "I tell you the truth." And the word that He uses for "truth" in Greek, is "Amen" and it means truly, or so shall it be. And may I suggest the reason He did so, was because "truth" in His time, (even sadly as it is still so today) was greatly lacking. Today, when speaking of "truth," people don't speak of absolutes. They even speak of their own truth. Which is quite strange really. Because surely something is either true, or it is not true. In any given situation, I can't have my "truth" and you have your "truth," we have got to have the "truth." No, as Christians, we must grasp the notion of absolutes. We could I guess even apply the Greek word which we have been seeing "*teleion*" which means "perfect" here. Something which cannot be taken any further. It is at its zenith. It is absolute. And in regard to "truth," absolutely true. It is beyond question, and there is no doubt to this thing, whatever it may be. And when in regard to the Bible, the true believer clings to the whole council of God, to be absolutely true. Without error, both Old and New testaments.

We do not do, (as many are in the habit of doing today) decide for ourselves that this part is true and that part is true, while some other places of the Bible we put into the maybe basket, or the questionable and doubtful pile. The problem that we run headlong into if we do this, is determining which parts are, and which parts are not God's Word. His "Truth." And if we go down that road, who do we turn to? Who do we trust? Yes into Whose hands are we prepared to put our salvation? I've always encouraged you not to solely rely upon me. I am certainly not infallible. I consult two or three commentaries every time I seek to bring God's Word to you. I always seek to do my best to remain faithful to God's "truth," and yet I'm almost certain that I've made mistakes in 30 odd years of preaching. I'm continually learning myself. "Test every spirit," the scriptures tell us. And this means the spirit behind the teaching, and the veracity of what is being said for ourselves!

But yes, surely something is true or it is not true. Well you would think so. But that is not the case in Australia today. You can be talking to a man or a woman, but on that day they have decided that they are not a man or a woman. We can be listening to a politician making some bold promise or statement, and then the very next day they say, 'Oh no, that's not what I said.' Even though we have them on tape. 'O, no, no, no they have twisted my words. I didn't hear the question properly.' Even though it didn't seem that way to us. It was actually very clear, what they said. 'Oh no, no.'

Jesus said in John 14:6 "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." In chapter 8:31-32 "To the Jews who had believed him Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching you really are my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.'" In John 17:7, in His amazing prayer for his disciples Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them, (meaning set them apart for this holy work) by the truth. Thy word is truth." And finally in John 18:37-38a we read as Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate, "You are a king then?" Said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying that I am a king. In fact for this very reason I was born, and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth, listens to me." "What is truth?" Pilate asked."

It is the spirit of our modern age, isn't it? What is truth? Is there really such a thing as truth? In our modern world where things are constantly changing, and there appears to be no right or wrong anymore. And indeed, what is wrong today may well be right tomorrow. And everybody has their own "truth." How can we then determine what truth is? There are even many who call themselves ministers and pastors of Christianity, wanting to deceive us. Well Jesus said, "thy Word is truth." No it does not only contain "truth" which we need to bring our fine intellects and understanding to, to dig out and determine which parts are and which parts are not "truth" as I mentioned earlier, no. "Sanctify them by the truth, thy word is truth." Yes, all of your Word O God is Truth! Yes it is "truth." It is absolute, beyond reproach! Even as You Yourself are unchanging, faithful and true, so too is Your Word O God!

Again, James 1:18 "He chose to give us birth, (new birth 1 Peter 1:3) through the word of truth." Now brothers and sisters, I know that we have dealt with this difficult issue before, but we must acknowledge that this "new birth" comes to us from God. And if this "birth," yes this "new birth" is essential for salvation as Jesus Himself said in John 3:3. Then prior to this "new birth" we must acknowledge that we were in fact "dead in our trespasses and sins." Ephesians 2:1. But again, how does this "new birth" come about? What is the means that God uses, for want of a better description? Well 1 Peter 1:23 "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." Yes the preaching and teaching of God's "truth," "that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."

So we were created by God, and then through His "word of truth" by the power of God the Holy Spirit, we have been recreated, "born again." But it comes not from ourselves, even as our first birth had nothing to do with our efforts or abilities, no. It is all of God. '*Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling*', we sing. "So that we be a kind of firstfruits." And yet what does James mean? "That we might be a kind of firstfruits?" Well interestingly, we find the beginning of these things in Genesis 4:2b-5, as we read: "Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the first born of his flock. The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast."

Now is it that God is a meat eater, and that's why He acceptive Abel's offering? Well no. It is because Abel brought of the "first born of his flock." It was a reflection of his heart and faith. He

acknowledged, *'Lord, from you I have received. So I return a portion of my "firstfruits" to You, trusting, having faith, that the harvest which follows will be plentiful from Your Hand!'* Hebrews 11:4 "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings." And then in Leviticus 23:9-12 we read: "The Lord said to Moses, 'speak to the Israelites and say to them, when you enter the land I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the Lord so it will be accepted on your behalf, the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath. On the day you wave the sheaf, you must sacrifice as a burnt offering to the Lord a lamb a year old without defect." So the first fruit of the harvest, was brought to the priest as an acknowledgment, that those things had come from God's Hand, and with the expectation that there would be an even greater harvest to follow! Symbolised by that burnt offering of a lamb without defect the day after the Sabbath. The first day of the week.

Which points us directly to Jesus! You see, He is that ultimate firstfruits, that was to come. And Paul takes up these very things in his first letter to the Corinthians. As he speaks of Jesus being "the firstfruits," of which a mind blowing harvest will follow. As he speaks against the notion that there is no resurrection, using Jesus as his example! 1 Corinthians 15:16-19 "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we ought to be pitied more than all men."

Beloved, can you see what Paul is saying? There is a tremendous harvest which is to follow. We read of it in Revelation 7:9-10 "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb." Yes Jesus is the "firstfruits" of the resurrection of the dead, and "there is a great multitude that no one could count" that will follow Him! Of which James explains to his parishioners, "we are a kind."

Beloved, Jesus was the "firstfruits" which pointed, to God's harvest of souls for salvation. Of which James says that he and his parishioners are "a kind of," and all believers who follow them, are the great harvest! That all of those things from Abel, to Jesus, to James and his scattered church, did point! Friends, how amazing to know, as we sit here this morning, that we are part of the great harvest, to which all of these things have pointed. Praise God!

So brothers and sisters as I close this morning, let us rejoice in knowing, that our God and His Love are not "like shifting shadows." Although our view of Him can become distorted and obscured, by our sin and trials, (like the light of the sun, the moon and the stars, by clouds and storms) He and His love are constant, unchanging, no they do not shift or change! But we need to ensure that we continue to remain standing in the Light of His Word. That "Word of truth" the gospel, through which we have been given "new birth." Trusting, that even as God and His Love to His people are unchanging, so too is His "Word of truth," the whole of the Bible! It is absolutely true and without error or falsehood. Yes "let God be true, and every man a liar" the scripture says. And finally, we are the ongoing harvest of which Jesus is "the firstfruits." And as the old hymn goes, *'through His people, and the gospel, He is bringing in the sheaves. Yes we will come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.'*

Amen! Let's pray!