

## James

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James 1:12-18

Vs. 12

- Persecution may have begun in Jerusalem, against the Jerusalem church, but persecution had spread as the church had spread. Generally, until the time of Nero, persecution had been localized and intermittent. As we see in Acts, at times persecution came from the Jews who sought help from the Roman authorities. Other times, as in Philippi and Ephesus, persecution came from the business community who controlled the local magistrates. The worship of pagan deities was big business. In Ephesus pagan worship meant as much to the economy as tourism does to Orlando. So when Paul pulled the curtain back on the Greek and Roman gods and showed them to be nothing but stone and wood, Paul and the church were bad for business.
- Given what we know about the timing of James martyrdom, it would appear the writing of his letter would be between 60-66 AD, right in the middle of Nero's reign as emperor. The great fire of Rome occurred in July, 64 AD. Nero immediately blamed the Christian church. It had only been 18 years since Paul's first missionary journey, but already the church had become a thorn in the side of the emperor. The persecution after the great fire was systematic across the whole empire. So if, as we believe, James is writing a broad letter to go to the whole church across the empire, an opening word about how to live in the time of persecution is exactly what we would expect to find.
- The one who perseveres under persecution will receive "the crown of life". The Greek word James uses for "crown" is "stephanos". To the Greeks this word carried four meanings or purposes. First, it was often a crown of flowers, something that might be worn at a wedding or a Spring festival. Whatever the occasion, it was a crown of JOY! Second, a stephanos was a crown of royalty. Often, this was a crown of pure gold. Third, such a crown was a crown of victory. Here it was a crown of laurel leaves given to the one who had finished the race and won the victory. Finally, this was a crown of honor given to the recipient. Proverbs 1:9 says that hearing and following the instructions of your parents will bring "a graceful wreath to your head" and Proverbs 4:9 says that Wisdom will "present you with a crown of beauty."

Vss. 13-15

- It may seem odd that James' very next statement has to do with temptation. But what James and his readers understood was that temptation comes in many forms, not the least of which is self-preservation. Indeed, was self-preservation not the first temptation Satan threw at Jesus there in the desert when he asked the Lord why not simply turn the rocks into bread if you are hungry (Luke 4)? Next the devil tempted Jesus with temporal power and after that the misuse of divine power for the sake of popularity. Here, James is dealing with people whose lives, and the lives of their children, are at stake and the temptation of self-preservation is very real.

- James immediately wants to give credit where credit is due. These temptations to sin are from Satan, not and never from God. Our God is not pernicious like the Greek gods in their myths. Our God does not sit on a cloud playing games with us, trying to trip us up. No, James says, God does not tempt anyone. The goal of temptation is for lust to be conceived. People lust after many things. Satan comes to us and seeks to foster that lust, so that lust “gives birth to sin”. The temptation itself is not the sin, but as temptation gives birth to lust and lust eventually grows legs and becomes action, then sin is the result, and “when sin is accomplished it brings forth death.”
- So James wants to be clear and he wants to be clear because this is certainly something he has already heard: God is NOT the author of sin. Too often God is blamed for some of Satan’s best work. When we succumb to sin, we have no one else to blame but ourselves. Satan may have tempted us, he tempted Jesus, but whether we give in to the temptation is up to us. There is a verse found in The Apocrypha (the Jewish books written between the testaments and found still in the Catholic Bible) that says “Adam is therefore not the cause, save only of his own soul. But each of us has been the Adam of his own soul”. This is very close to what Paul says in Romans 5:12. God is always just in His judgement of our salvation because we have chosen our own way, either the broad or narrow way. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), so as we have chosen sin, we thereby have chosen death, making salvation by faith through the grace of Christ our only hope for life.

Vss. 16-18

- “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above...” Everything from God is good. We may not understand why God gives us this or that, but we need to accept it and know that it came from the very center of His heart and His great love for us.
- What James is really saying is that God’s love for us is as unchangeable as God Himself is unchangeable. Here James uses two terms from Greek astronomy. Where he says that in God there is no “variation” or “shifting” the words he uses are the words an ancient star gazer would use to describe to constancy of the stars. They knew that on this date, at this hour, this star would be exactly in this place, just as it always had been and always will be until the end of all things. God is this way, James is saying, and He is especially this way in His love for us.
- Moreover, God shows His great love in that He “brought us forth”, gave us new life, “by the word of truth” which is the gospel of Jesus Christ. James, being the good Jew that he was, would know that the Old Testament only makes real sense when read through the lens of Christ. In this word of truth there is life and so when we are reborn as a result of the gospel of Jesus Christ taking hold of our lives, then we become a kind of “first fruit”, the kind of fruit that the Old Testament says belongs to God. Just as the first fruits of the harvest belong to God (since He is the one who gave the harvest), then we who are saved likewise belong to God. We are not our own. We are His.