
Prayers

To God

I praise You, Jesus Christ, for the victory over sin You have won for me;
I praise You, Jesus Christ, for the peace You have created within me;
I praise You, Jesus Christ, for the fellowship of the church throughout the world;
I praise You, Jesus Christ, for the coming of Your Kingdom, which we expect;
I praise You, Jesus Christ, for being You, Saviour, Counsellor and Friend!

AMEN

For myself

Pray in thanksgiving for the love that has been shown to you, by God, by others and by neighbours. Thank God for the power of forgiveness, and pray to forgive any who have hurt you.

For others

Weekly theme: the environment

Pray for government agencies responsible for managing environmental projects in your country; there will be many of them, preserving species and landscapes, as well as working to reduce carbon footprint, and more. Pray that as people do these things they will learn more about how we can best live in and use our planet for the future.

Meditation

Accept Christ's love, receive the Spirit;
Release forever the devil's grip upon your earthly life.

Turn a corner, make a move;
Redirect your life towards a heavenly goal.

Open your eyes, see the light;
That shines forever brightly in this gloomy world.

Listen to His voice, seek the Word;
Hear and do the will of God throughout your life.

Seek real peace, abandon strife;
Embrace the harmony God brings to all His creation.

Speak the truth, do not avoid it;
Declare what God delights to put upon your heart.

Keep alert, stay open all hours;
The Lord your God is with you all the time.

Bible Passage

James 1:17-18

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift comes from above, coming down from the Father of Lights, with whom there is no change or shifting shadows. ¹⁸ It was His purpose to give us birth by the word of truth, so that we might become a kind of first fruits of all His creation.

Review

As a whole, the letter of James is closely connected with the teachings of Jesus. Whilst studying the first chapter, we have already seen strong parallels between the themes of the letter and the parables and stories of Jesus' life. Here in these two verses, however, the connections are not so obvious. James speaks of God's '*perfect gift ... from above*' (1:17), and addresses God as the '*Father of Lights*' (1:17), and we will not find such phrases elsewhere in the Bible. In the next verse, he speaks of God's eternal purposes and the '*word of truth*' and he describes the gift of salvation as like '*the first fruits of all His Creation*' (1:18). All this is more familiar, but what is James saying here?

Altogether, these two verses take us deeper into James' 'theology', that is, his understanding both of God and the nature of salvation. The word 'theology' is anathema to some, because of the deviancy of some modern theology, especially as taught at some universities; but the word mean simply 'words about God', and has been used for centuries to describe generally what it means to think about God. We will certainly be doing some 'theology' as we try to explore these verses to find their true riches.

James is speaking in this reading about God's gift of salvation, which is the single thing that binds all Christians together. Each one has a different story of life's trials (1:2-4), each one strives to do what is right before God (1:5f.) and each one must deal with the power of the Tempter (1:12-16). But the '*perfect gift*' of God can only mean one thing, that is, the salvation that draws each sinner close to the Father through the death of Jesus Christ. This is obviously what James is speaking of in the next verse (1:18).

Verse 17 is a powerful sentence, describing salvation in words unlike any others in the Bible. James presents us with a picture of God as supremely generous, and giving what is '*good and perfect*'. This stands in contrast to the various pictures of God we often live with, perhaps fearing His judgement or wrath, or holding Him at a distance because we do not want Him seeing into our lives. James insists that God is fundamentally good, and his description of salvation as a '*good and perfect gift*' reminds us of the supreme value of what God has done for us. But the phrase that comes next is probably the most revealing.

By describing God as the '*Father of Lights, with whom there is no change and no shifting shadows*', James invites us to think about God in a particular way. However, the phrase '*Father of Lights*' will be completely unfamiliar to us. It is not found elsewhere in Scripture, but we can still work this out from other Scriptural references, and our knowledge of the life and times of Jewish people in the first century.

The people of James' day would be familiar with the 'Festival of Lights', or 'Hanukkah' that took place annually in Jerusalem. Hanukkah celebrated events that occurred in the second century BC, when the Temple was liberated from Roman occupation and the statue of Zeus removed from its holy place. A service of rededication was held to make the sacred Temple Holy again, which took eight days, but it is what happened with the Temple light, the Menorah, that cemented this in Jewish memory. A new Menorah was made for the great rededication, but there was only enough oil for it to remain alight for one day. Miraculously, the light shone in the Temple for eight days, and the miracle was seen as evidence of God's renewed presence in the rededicated Temple!

So in Jesus' day, the Festival of lights was a joyous celebration of God's holy presence with His people, but it also contained a strong hint of rebellion against whatever overlord oppressed the Jewish people. So when Jesus said '*I am the Light of the World*' or something similar (as reported by John 8:12, 9:5, 11:9 f.12:35f.), all these things came into people's minds. They remembered the happy celebrations with lights flickering in the streets of Jerusalem, and joy at God's presence with His people. James delights in this sense of happiness at the saving and redeeming acts of God, but he changes the theme in one subtle and significant way. Alluding to the flickering of lights in a festival procession, he says of God that in Him '*there is no change and no shifting shadows*'. In this way, he invites his readers to acknowledge the permanence and consistency of God, whose gracious saving work does not change. The light is now fixed and shining, and salvation will always be available to those who have faith in his brother, Jesus.

Verse 18 then continues to glory in this saving power of God. James contends that salvation is not offered on a whim, for this has been God's plan since the beginning of time, and he describes this as like '*birth*'. There are a few places in Scripture where the idea of birth is explicitly equated with salvation. For example, Jesus chastises Nicodemus when he does not understand that one who seeks to be close to God must be '*born again*' (John 3:7), and similarly, Peter describes salvation like this, '*by His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope*' (1 Peter 1:3). But the undercurrents of this theme are strong. Whenever Israel was in trouble, God gave them a new leader, 'born' for that purpose; for example, Moses (Exodus 1:1), Samuel (1 Samuel 1,2), and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5f.). Biblical stories of 'birth' are strongly linked to its theme of the salvation of humanity, and is put nowhere more forcefully than in the story of Jesus' birth. Mary's song, the Magnificat, is a powerful statement of God's saving purposes through the birth of coming Son (Luke 1:46-55).

After this, James has a further reason for rejoicing. He, and other early Christians were acutely aware of the wondrous privilege of being the first people saved by the general grace of God through Jesus Christ, and they expressed this by describing themselves as the '*first fruits*' of God's saving work. In the Old Testament, the term '*first fruits*' describe the first proceeds of harvest offered to God in worship, and the first Christians saw themselves as being like this first offering from the harvest of Christ's ministry.

But early Christians such as James were not so blind as to ignore those who would come later. The language of harvest is used throughout the New Testament to describe the work of God in the new age created by Christ's resurrection and ascension. It is in this sense that all who are saved today may also be called the '*first fruits*' of God's saving work.

The glory of this passage is the power of its words and description of the saving love of God. There is always much more to come, but we should note, for now, the powerful way that James describes God as the author and 'Light' of salvation.

Discipleship

Application

The great gift of salvation

There are many descriptions of salvation in the Bible, and we use most of them to enrich our understanding of God's graciousness towards us. It is perhaps natural that people should have favourites, for example, in Jesus' famous discussion with Nicodemus (John 3), or Paul's famous analysis on Romans 3 or Galatians 2 and 3. James' words here are helpful because they do not alter the basic theology of salvation, they highlight the perfection of salvation as a gift of God, and the Biblical theme of 'new birth' through which God works in the world.

James also provides us with a new way of understanding God as 'Light', that is, not the flickering light of a candlelight procession but a powerful and unchanging light shining like a beacon into a dark world.

Flickering shadows

I sometimes find that living as a Christian today is rather like living with moving shadows. The life of the church has become complicated, and I become confused when something which should be good and godly turns out to be the opposite. Some who preach in our pulpits, for example (and I speak as a preacher) do not read the Bible or use it to preach from, and I find this bewildering.

Nevertheless, Scripture here calls us all to be unequivocal about salvation. It is vital that Christian people be clear about their salvation and their call.

Ideas for what to do

- *When you feel down, how do you respond to God? Think about this seriously and work out whether you need to be more honest with yourself. It is far too easy to leave important spiritual issues to one side and forget to deal with them properly before God.*
- *Pray about the life of the church today, and offer to Him those parts of it that seem to you to be difficult or not quite right. What does the Lord require of You if things are to be changed for the better?*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does knowing about God's eternal plan to save you help you when it comes to facing the perils of this life, or does it seem like 'pie in the sky'.
2. If you have a Bible dictionary or concordance, look up some references to 'light' in the New Testament, and try to learn as much as you can about Jesus, the 'Light of the World'.

3. What earthly troubles have diverted your attention from your faith? Share this in a group if you can, and pray for all who have shared.

Final Prayer

Lead us Lord God; guide us in our pathways, tell us when to speak Your Word, lighten the darkness of this world, and ease the heavy loads we bear. We do not ask for an easy life, but for Your presence by which we know we are not alone, but loved and helped along our way. Thank You Lord God: AMEN