

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

There is this lurking suspicion that almost everyone has but it feels like it isn't talked about that much. It comes back and haunts us a bit but we just think that this is normal. There's this suspicion about God and we wonder – can he really be good?

I remember the enthusiasm I had as a young pastor. I started off in ministry in a small town, in a church that was struggling and hurting, that was full of people my grandparents' age, and I came in with all of the optimism and enthusiasm that you have in your 20s. God was good. I had dreamed about the day when I would be a pastor. And over time, what I saw was a congregation that grew and grew and grew. It was hard work, but I was deeply encouraged. I was thankful. God was good.

But time has a way of wearing away at your soul. Hardship comes. You pour out your heart, but you lose friendships. You try to do the right thing, but misunderstandings grow and resentment builds. People say things that you never thought people could say.

Over the years, there have been times – and more than I care to admit – where I've wondered – is God really good? I've had seasons of profound discouragement and wondered why the dark clouds wouldn't lift. I've had those moments where I've wanted to write my resignation letter and just give up.

It's a dangerous thing to share these things. I don't share these things to put the focus on myself, nor to ask for your pity. My experience is so common yet unspoken. We harbour this secret suspicion that God is not for us but against us. We wonder if God maybe has a mild case of resentment against us because we've messed up again. We feel the hardships of life and just wish we could catch a break. And if we are honest, most of us have had those moments where the faith has been so hard we feel like packing it in.

James writes to a church under persecution, scattered from their homes, jobs, and families. Some were probably wondering if God was really good. Is it worth it to face the shame and struggle of following Jesus? Why does God allow these hardships to come into my life?

These aren't new questions. They're the unspoken doubts that so many of us harbour. So what should we do when we question God's goodness? James writes to help us hold on to faith when these trials come and first he tells us to...

Resist Deception (v. 16)

James says it clearly in v. 16: "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers." When circumstances of life change, it is tempting to blame God and to think that he isn't good. It's tempting to fail the test and wonder if God is really for you. Financial pressures come. Health crises happen. A sudden death of a loved one. Great injustice occurs. And the two temptations that come are to

When God Doesn't Seem God – James 1:16-18

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question God as though he is tempting us, even though he cannot tempt, and to question if he is secretly against us, even though he is for us.

The temptation to question God is rooted in a deep lurking suspicion that we all have as humans. We suspect that this all-loving and all-powerful God might not be as good as we have been told. We suspect that he is withholding something from us that would make us happy. We won't put it into words, but this feeling is deep down inside of us: Is God really good?

If we let that thought linger, James says there is a temptation here. "Do not be deceived." James is warning us not to deceive ourselves and allow ourselves to be deceived. Why? Because deception is to be dragged away. It's like the child whose siblings pull them around by their feet.

The picture here, however, isn't being dragged against your will but allowing yourself to be dragged away. So the need to resist temptation is strong. Those dark, lurking suspicions of God are rooted all the way back in the garden when the serpent said, "Did God really say...?" In that question is the root of our suspicion: somehow God is withholding goodness from us. Somehow God isn't ultimately for me. Somehow God is out to get me.

In this warning, James writes to his beloved brothers. I think that James could be writing to the leaders of the church – these are the brothers to whom he is referring – but in a general sense, he is writing to us as believers, and he wants us to remember this truth: God loves you. You are beloved. Even when it doesn't feel like you are loved, God loves you with an everlasting love. God's love is so great that even when you question him, question his goodness, question his love, and are suspicious of him, that does not change his disposition towards you. He loves you. And James speaks with this pastoral love, this tender heart, knowing that the temptation to be suspicious of God requires the tender love and care of a compassionate pastor, not a detached, scholastic theologian. When you're questioning the goodness of God and you are going through hardship, you need to know that you're not alone, and you're in a community of loving people who are standing firm against these thoughts that could drag you away.

Instead of being dragged away, we need to stand firm and...

See God's Unchanging Goodness (v. 17)

What we have to recall is the nature of our God. James poetically says that the nature of our God is seen in his gifts: every good gift and every perfect gift. The language here connects us back to v. 5 – the nature of our God is a giving God. In v. 5, if we lacked wisdom, we were told to ask the giving God. And this is where we need to start in order to resist the temptation that questions God's goodness.

How? We remember his very nature. As I was reading these verses, I couldn't help but think of my grandfather. He was one of the most generous people I ever met. He was always wanting to give, give, give. We would visit him and he would want to give you something. The older he got,

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the more he wanted to give. Even at the care home, he would not so subtly nudge grandma to give him some money so that he could give some to the grandkids and great-grandkids. He was a firm, practical man. So when he got upset or angry about foolish behaviour, this wasn't him ceasing to be good and giving. It was that he wanted better for us as his grandchildren.

When James describes the nature of God's giving, he says that his gifts come down from above – and the language is of continual procession. It's the constant flow of gifts coming from him. Every moment of life and breath, every moment of peace, every morsel of food, every dollar earned, every ounce of strength and health – these are all good gifts that flow from him. These aren't just things that happen because the universe has been wound up to work like this – God's goodness continues to flow moment by moment, his creative goodness has not stopped.

And it is his creative goodness that James points us to: coming down from the Father of lights. His goodness is displayed in his creative love that continues to come to us. He is the One who fathered the lights. He is the One who spoke the goodness of light into the darkness. He is the One who out of his nature overflowed goodness and created the world.

He is so good he isn't like the shadows that shift. He can be described as the eternal noon, the constant light that warms and nourishes the earth. And this is what heaven will be like – no night, no shade, no darkness. Only constant sun, constant warmth, constant joy, like the sun shining down on your face forever with that glowing embrace that feels so good and warm and lovely. This is who God is. And we can see that now – he is unchanging in his goodness. He isn't fickle and one day give you blessings and the next day laugh as he gives you pain and hardship. He is only ever working for your good.

But what is God giving? Let's go back to see what our giving God is pouring out. James says two things: every good gift and every perfect gift. Yes, every moment of our existence is an expression of God's tender mercies and care. James wants us to see something else – the connection back to v. 5. In the face of trials and temptations, what is God giving? Wisdom to those who ask for it. The predominant gift that shows God's goodness to his children that he loves is this gift of wisdom that will make you mature and complete. James uses the same word – every perfect gift – to emphasize that the gift that he pours out to those who ask is wisdom so that we would be mature and complete. That word 'perfect' expresses not only the kind of gift that God gives – he doesn't give bad gifts – but also the goal of his gift – to help us to grow and endure the trials of this world.

When we question God's goodness, when trials come and we feel the temptation to be dragged away by those lingering doubts about God's character and nature, James says to remember the unchanging goodness of God in his creation, in his care for you moment by moment because he loves you. But James doesn't stop there. He also wants us to...

Recall God's Saving Goodness (v. 18)

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Verse 18 spells out how good God is. Do you want to know how much he loves you? James says we ought to remember the saving work of God to rescue us from sin, death, the devil, and hell by recalling his saving work. How does he do this?

First, he says that God saved us by his own will. God was not obligated to save us. We had rebelled against him. We hated him. We despised his word. And what did he do? Out of the overflow of his goodness, he wanted – no, he *willed* to save us. It was his determination, not ours, that resulted in salvation. It was his goodness and graciousness that called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

How did he do this? Literally, James says he birthed us by the word of truth. If temptation comes along and we give in to it, James says that births sin and death. But God comes and what does he birth in us? He births salvation. How?

By the word of truth. In contrast to sin that is birthed when we give in to temptation, salvation is birthed in us by God's will as we hear him speak and believe the gospel. The word of truth is used by Paul in Eph. 1:11 and Col. 1:5-6 to mean the gospel – and the gospel is the good news that Jesus was given to free us from sin and death by his own life, death, and resurrection. The giving nature of our God first begins with a creative word – he speaks all things into existence. And he speaks and creates life in the dead heart.

God's creative work has not stopped – he is still creating today. His goodness hasn't stopped at the end of creation. He is constantly giving, overflowing in goodness, speaking words of truth and life that overcome sin and death. The Father of lights now gives birth to us and brings us into his family when we hear his voice in the gospel message: Jesus loves you. Jesus died for your penalty. Jesus rose again to give you a new life and a new start. And Jesus now rules and reigns so that you can rule and reign with him one day.

To a struggling, discouraged, persecuted, alienated people who are wondering if following Jesus is worth all of the difficulty, James says, "Consider it pure joy! You're a kind of firstfruit!" To these Jewish readers who have left all to follow Jesus, he says, "You are the first produce of the harvest, with more to come! You're like that Old Testament offering that was offered as the best of the first of the harvest (see Exod. 23:19: 34:26). You're the ones that are the acknowledgement that there is more to come. So don't give up!

Do you feel discouraged? Do you feel forgotten? Do you wonder if God remembers you, is for you, and maybe question if he loves you? Resist those thoughts. See the goodness of God all around you. And consider how good and gracious he is to save you to himself.

When you have those thoughts, come before the Father of lights. Let the goodness of his light dispel those dark thoughts. Look to Jesus who made an end to all your sin. And stand firm. He loves you beloved!!!