

Jan. 30- Feb. 3, 2023 Edition

Following
The Year(s) Of ^Jesus Part 56

James On The Power To Stand

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January 28/29, 2023



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession. James 1:16-18 (NLT)

Reflection: We are continuing in this series looking at the book of James and today we're to a kind of strange almost transitional section of in this book. He starts out talking about tough times and how to handle them, then he talks about the wisdom of God and how it can give us the ability to go through whatever tough times come our way if we're willing to look at them through God's eyes. He tells us if we handle these tough times the way God is asking us to the reward will be LIFE. He then explains how temptation works and warns us that if we fall for temptation's trap the result will ultimately be death. And now he says this:

Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens.

What is he talking about? Well, first let's talk about what James is NOT talking about. He's not talking about a life where everything goes our way and nothing bad ever happens to us and we get everything we want. Relationally, physically, financially... There's a lot of misinformation floating around especially on religious TV and FB. The message is, if you live life the right way you won't ever have physical problems, health problems, financial problems, relationship problems... everything will go your way and while you might have to wait for a bit to get everything you want... if you wait you WILL eventually get everything you want.

I see things like this all the time on FB: If God could close the mouth of the lions for Daniel, part the red seas for Moses, make the sun stand still for Joshua, open the prison for Peter, put a baby in the arms of Sarah, and raise Lazarus from the dead THEN He can certainly take care of you! Nothing you are facing today is too hard for Him to handle.

Now I want to be very clear here, ok... I believe God did and continues to do all those things. And every one of those "good gifts" came from Him. The danger here is that I might look at that and get the impression that nothing bad ever happened to Daniel or Moses or Joshua or Peter or Sarah or Lazarus. But it's just not true. Daniel was ripped from his homeland and carried away by a foreign invading army and forced to live as a virtual slave in a land that represented everything he had been taught was evil and vile. Moses' life was threatened as a baby and because of that his parents put him in a little wicker basket and sent him down a crocodile infested river in the hopes that something good might happen. The rest of his life wasn't a picnic either. Peter was rescued from prison the day after he was arrested with James. Oh, so James was rescued from prison too, huh? Nope. James was killed the day before. We're not sure why Peter was rescued but James was not. But Peter was rescued. However, he would lead the rest of his life in constant threat from those who wanted him dead and eventually was crucified upside down because of his faith.

So what am I saying? Just that God never promised us a trouble free life. He will do miraculous things in your life if you let Him, but your life will also have its share of trouble

and pain. It's just the way it is. Jesus said it, James said it, Peter said it, Paul said it, John said it... your life will be AMAZING but it will have its share of trouble and pain. Nobody will get out of this life unscathed. Nobody will live a life where everything goes perfectly with their health, finances, relationships and spirituality. The key for the writers of the New Testament (every single one of whom had tons of trouble and pain in their lives) is that Jesus is the only One Who can redeem our pain. Who can make something beautiful out of our future in spite of the pain and trouble that's come before.

For Paul and James and John and Peter it was the good things that came to them from "above" that made it possible to endure the crummy things that come from all around us and below us. God is still sending good gifts from above into our lives. What does that mean? We'll spend the next three days figuring that out.

Tuesday:

My dear brothers and sisters, do not be fooled about this. Every good action and every perfect gift is from God. These good gifts come down from the Creator of the sun, moon, and stars, who does not change like their shifting shadows. God decided to give us life through the word of truth so we might be the most important of all the things he made. James 1:16-18 (NCV)

Reflection: I figure James lists at least 3 kinds of gifts that God gives us in this passage. This week instead of a new scripture every day I'm going to put the same scripture in from different translations of the Bible so you can get a good picture of how different translators handle the exact same passage. Today's scripture is taken from the New Century Version of the Bible and is pretty similar to the translation we read yesterday from the New Living Translation. Ok... so the first of 3 gifts that James talks about:

I had to think really hard about how to phrase this point. I had a tough time finding just the right word for this first "gift" from above. What is James trying to get across to these people he's writing to who are going through extreme persecution and trials? Well first I think he's saying that every time you or I get something that makes us feel ALIVE or gives us a feeling of transcendence, that's a gift from God.

Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. James 1:17 (NLT)

Ok... but what does that mean? Does that mean that everything that's good comes from God? Nothing that's good happens to us apart from God's direct intervention? Maybe. But I think it's more likely that James is crediting God with being the source and of all good, therefore anything that gives us a feeling of transcendence or glory or leaves us feeling breathless is a hint of THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF GOOD. In the Sermon On The Mount Jesus puts it like this:

In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. Matthew 5:45 (NLT)

Even people who don't know God or who don't want anything to do with Him still benefit from the good gifts He rains down upon this earth. This week I've been watching as political

conservatives and political liberals have argued about how much responsibility the rich have to the poor in our country. I don't want to get into a political discussion here but I was fascinated by the argument. One side says a rich person built their fortune with hard work and ingenuity and that their money is their own. Another side says that the rich person used roads paid for by all of us, were able to build their business in safety because of a military, police force and fire departments that everybody paid for. The argument goes on and on and to be fair to both sides, they've both got pretty good arguments. Who decides how much the rich person should pay to give back (and there's the rub with politics, right? Everybody thinks they've got the right answer but nobody can agree on what the right answer is which is why as far as I can tell politics always divides us... but I digress).

All that to say this: why is it that I often see somebody doing well who doesn't seem to honor God in his/her life? Why, if God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, do some people who clearly (at least in my mind) don't deserve it have so much good stuff in their lives when I don't have as much as I think I should have? I've thought about this a lot over my life and I've finally come to the realization that I just don't always get it. I don't know. I'd think that if I was in charge of who got what then I'd give more to the people who honor me with their lives and less to the dirty so and sos who didn't. In my moments of clarity I think that God knows better than I do what will make me happy and doesn't give me what isn't good for me. Then there's the possibility (and I'm not saying this is how it is... just throwing it out there for consideration) that God isn't in direct control of what everybody gets or doesn't get. I'm not saying He doesn't have the power to control it... I'm just not sure that He always does. There are so many moving parts to this whole concept- the wisdom (or lack thereof) with which I direct my life (doing what God asks or not), the free will of other people upon whom my prosperity is dependent or at least linked, the power of the dark side to mess up the things God is doing in my life (just ask Job about that one). I'm not going to give you a bunch of answers today (which really, how often do I? Mainly because I don't often have a bunch of them handy). I hope only to get you to start thinking about this God from Whom every good and perfect gift comes... more on that tomorrow.

Wednesday:

So, my very dear friends, don't get thrown off course. Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures.

James 1:16-18 (MES)

Reflection: I think that this part of James' letter is sharing with us a sort of progression. This progression isn't as linear as the one we looked at last week with temptation, but I do find it interesting that James seems to contrast the way to death (falling for temptation's traps) with the way to LIFE. Like I said, it's not as linear or as easy to see as the progression from deception to springing the trap to eventual death but it seems to revolve around this concept of gift.

Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. James 1:17 (NLT)

Ok... but what does that mean? Does that mean that everything that's good comes from God? Nothing that's good happens to us apart from God's direct intervention? Maybe. But I think it's more likely that James is crediting God with being the source of all good, therefore anything that gives us a feeling of transcendence or glory or leaves us feeling breathless is a hint of THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF GOOD. In the Sermon On The Mount Jesus puts it like this:

In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.
Matthew 5:45 (NLT)

In other words... even for people who don't want anything to do with God there is good in this world. And that good is always a reflection or expression of God Himself. God is not just the Giver of all good things, He is good personified. That means that whenever you experience a "good gift" it is always an echo of God. I remember when my son, Jonathan was born. It was one of the greatest nights of my life. There's a picture in one of our scrap books with me holding him not long after he was born and I have one of those amazed/silly/stunned smiles on my face that only comes around every so often. I can remember that feeling of such a good, good gift that I was receiving. I believe that feeling was an echo of a good, good Father Who gives gifts like this all the time.

I remember thinking, "I could never not feel this way towards you!" But then we took him home. Then he started crying and there were times I couldn't get him to calm down or go to sleep. Back then Judy worked a regular 9-5 job and I was the one who got up with him in the night to change him or feed him. I can remember many moments where my feelings towards him were nothing like the feelings I had the night he was born. Why? Well, I think James would say it's because those feelings we have when presented with a "good gift"- the feelings that are an echo of God Himself- those feelings are sort of like shadows. James puts it like this:

He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. James 1:7 (NLT)

God never changes or casts a shifting shadow... but the feelings we get on those occasions when we are faced with one of those "gifts" from God- they shift. I've felt the same way about my wife, Judy from time to time as I felt about Jonathan on the night he was born... but I have to confess... those feelings sometimes shift. To be fair, I'm sure the same is true for Judy's feelings for me. In fact I know that's the case.

Once WAY back when we were first dating Judy went on a tour with her choir over spring break and I went and visited my aunt and uncle. When she got back she came over to my dungeon (I lived in my sister and brother-in-law's basement) and the first thing she asked me was, "did you miss me?" I generally like to play it pretty close to the vest so I told her that I had been pretty busy so not much time to miss her. She nodded and asked me for a glass of water. I went and got her a glass of water and handed it to her and she threw it in face and pointed her finger at me and said, "you NEVER tell a woman you didn't miss her!" I went and changed my shirt and came back and she took one look at me and said, "I liked the other shirt better..."

So yeah... her feelings towards me shift sometimes. The fact is we are never able to hold on to those moments of true goodness. Those moments of transcendence that make us feel alive somehow. Why is that? Because those feelings are just an echo, just a shadow of something far greater. He doesn't shift like our feelings do. And eventually that feeling that is so fleeting here will be ours forever with the Giver Himself.

And to me, part of the progression to LIFE is recognizing the Giver behind every one of those moments of transcendence. Is it the first step? Yes. No. Maybe? Like I said, it's hard to lay this progression out the way James lays out the progression towards death. I think the progression is going to look different in each of us but recognizing the Giver behind each gift is going to be an important part of it. Why? Because it's those moments, those gifts that inspire us and move us forward when nothing else will.

Thursday:

Don't be fooled, my dear friends. Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father who created all the lights in the heavens. He is always the same and never makes dark shadows by changing. He wanted us to be his own special people, and so he sent the true message to give us new birth. James 1:16-18 (CEV)

Reflection: The second part of this progression (see, I didn't call it a "step" because I think this progression is fluid and is expressed differently in all of us) involves the concept of "new birth". Growing up I was taught that God doesn't do a thing for us until we are "reborn". For us the rebirth took place at the moment of water baptism. For us water baptism was THE moment. You could make the decision to follow Jesus before you were baptized but the contract wasn't signed until you got dunked. Therefore, the progression of a follower of Jesus was VERY linear. The moment of rebirth could be identified and every step after that was considered to be pretty well laid out and cut and dried.

Over the years that linear progression has lost its logic for me. I see God's relationship with His children as ongoing, whether we recognize it or not. I think we have a relationship with the Giver of all good gifts long before we learn that He wants us to be baptized as a sign and an expression of our relationship. All that to say, what is the first step and what's second and so on isn't terribly interesting to me any longer. The result of life with Jesus is something the Bible calls "new birth" or being "born again". James says it like this:

And it was a happy day for him when he gave us our new lives through the truth of his Word. James 1:18 (NLT)

This new birth is a big part of the progression to LIFE that James talks so much about. It is a spiritual progression from infancy to maturity that is very much like the same progression in the physical world. I may or may not know you well but I know one thing about you- when you were born you were immature. You wouldn't do anything for yourself. You were SOOOO selfish that you threw a fit and cried until you got whatever it was you thought you needed. But your parents did their best to give you what you needed. They tried to recognize what you needed and then did their best to respond to that need. God does the same for you... although He doesn't have to guess what you need... He already knows. When we are reborn we are like spiritual babies. God has to basically do everything for us. But His hope is that as

we move forward with Him that eventually we will mature. As that happens a strange shift takes place in the lives of those who move forward with God into the LIFE He has in store for us. Look at what the apostle Paul says in Romans:

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. Romans 12:2 (MES)

I don't know if you've noticed or not but our culture these days seems to be all about what can be done for us. I don't know if it's worse or not... some people would say yes without hesitating... I know that even Socrates bemoaned the younger generation of his day and claimed that if something didn't change the human race was doomed. Does that mean that every generation is worse than the one before or just that every generation THINKS the younger generation is worse? I don't know but I know this... we want to know what others can do for us. Paul would say that's a sign of immaturity, at least in the spiritual realm. Paul says that in our spiritual lives the day needs to come when we fix our attention on God and do our best to "readily recognize" what He wants from us (instead of throwing a fit and crying until we get what we want) and then "quickly respond" to that desire He has for us. It's the only way to mature. It's the only way to get stronger. It's the only way to LIFE.

And as we change our focus from what God can do for us to what we can do for God (which as it turns out is the smartest thing we can do for ourselves as well so even if we're looking at this from a purely selfish point of view the smart play would be to change our priorities) a few things happen. One is that we get stronger and wiser. The Fruit of the Spirit will start blooming in our lives (love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control). As we mature the Giver's good gifts will continue to rain down from above and we will recognize the force behind the feelings that the good gifts generate. We won't be surprised when the feelings shift like shadows but will be grateful for the momentary reminder of what the future will feel like 24/7 (I don't know... can you use a concept like 24/7 to describe any part of eternity? The mind boggles, doesn't it?).

So how are you doing with this progression? God is continually dropping good gifts into your life no matter what your priority in life is. But maturity? Strength? That only comes if you are willing to change your focus from yourself to Him. Are you "readily recognizing" what He wants and then "quickly responding" to what He's asking?

Friday:

Do not be misled, my beloved brothers and sisters. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above; it comes down from the Father of lights [the Creator and Sustainer of the heavens], in whom there is no variation [no rising or setting] or shadow [a]cast by His turning [for He is perfect and never changes]. It was of His own will that He gave us birth [as His children] by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits of His creatures [a prime example of what He created to be set apart to Himself-sanctified, made holy for His divine purposes]. James 1:16-18 (AMP)

Reflection: The third part of the progression is divine resemblance. It is a direct result of recognizing the Giver and growing up after the new birth. Yes, God wants us to learn to be like His Son. Yes, there are a set of practices that we will have to build our lives around to accomplish that goal. Things like prayer, Bible reflection, practicing community, investing in others, practicing generosity and learning how get through pain and tough times in our lives... but all those things are a mean to an end.

The reason God wants you to pray is not so you'll get really good at praying and be able to pray for hours at a time without repeating a cliché. The reason for Bible reflection is not so you will be more knowledgeable than everybody else. The point of both of those practices is so that you will mature and learn to be like Jesus.

It's like playing the piano. Nobody practices the scales so they can play the scales really well. They practice the scales so that one day they will be free to play beautiful music. And to that end they practice, practice, practice. Same thing with prayer and every other spiritual practice. The goal is to become like the One we pray to. The goal is to become like the One the Bible is written about.

And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession. James 1:18 (NLT)

Did you know that you were God's "prized possession"? Did you know that the One Who made the mountains and the oceans and deserts and the prairies decided that the world wouldn't be complete without one of you in it? Did you know that His only Son, Jesus, decided to come to this earth and eventually die on a cross for you because He decided He'd rather go to Hell for you than spend eternity without you? How does that make you feel? But what's even better is that through this recognition of the Giver behind every good gift and through the new birth and then "growing up" as a follower of Jesus we actually become "like" Him!

The Father has loved us so much that we are called children of God... 1 John 3:1a (CEV)

We are His children! He longs for us to carry on the family traditions and bear the family resemblance. You are a child of the King born into His family by adoption and invited to develop a family resemblance. It's fascinating to me that we live in a world where people go crazy trying to prove, "I'm somebody. Look at me. Look at my job. Look at my car! Look at my clothes! Look look look look look!!!!" But if it's true that we are children of the King (and I believe it is... in fact I've experienced it first hand myself) then you don't have to shout. You don't have to prove yourself to anyone. You. Are. Someone. You are a child of God entitled to all the benefits that affords:

By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence. And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption. 2 Peter 1:3-4 (NLT)

Peter says we get everything we "need" how? By coming to "know" Him. And as we grow in that knowledge something miraculous happens- we share in His "divine nature".

Huh?!?!?!?!?

I share in the divine nature of God Himself? Absolutely. And not only that... that divine nature as it grows within us is what gives us the ability to escape the corruption of this world. Let's finish this week with something Jesus said in the Sermon On The Mount:

In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you. Matthew 5:48 (MES)

You are a subject of the Kingdom. As we live out that identity we become more and more like the King Himself. Not only do we do the things we are asked to do, those very things start to become a part of our very nature. We bear the resemblance of the King and it shows.

I heard a story once about a guy who was amazed at the nursing staff at the hospital his wife gave birth to their fourth child at. The nurses just seemed to be more caring as they went about their duties. He asked the nurse manager why that might be and the manager told him, "I tell my nurses all the time that they aren't just nurses, they're royalty. They are the standard bearers of the hospital no matter what job they might be performing. Sometimes the job they perform is a prestigious one that people admire. Sometimes the job they perform is not quite so lofty... like emptying bedpans. But I always tell my nurses... even if you're doing a messy job, you're still royalty so act like it. The next time you find yourself carrying a bedpan... carry it like a king or a queen!

I think that's what Jesus is saying here- if you are a follower of Jesus then you are royalty. You are child of God. You share in His divine nature. In this life as you follow Jesus you will find that some things you do will be amazing and impressive acts. Some... not so much. I think Jesus would say that if you find yourself carrying the metaphorical bedpans of this life then lift your chin and carry it like the royalty you are.

You are a child of the King- with all the benefits and responsibilities that affords. Never forget that. Tough times in this world? Yeah, that stinks... but you are a child of the King... you can handle it. Temptations coming at you from every side? Yeah, that's hard... but you are a child of the King. You are a child of the very one from whom every good thing you've ever felt comes from. You are a child of the One Who through a new birth has given you everything you need to handle whatever this life can throw your way. And you are being made into the very likeness of that King.

I think what James is saying is, I know this is hard... but if you could see REALITY from the spiritual world's perspective then you'd realize it's the trials and temptations and the evil forces that bring them your way that should be scared. You are royalty... let that impact the way you live your life.