

DON'T BLAME GOD

James 1:13-18

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When I was a young boy I was often tempted by the freshly baked biscuits mum had made. After taking them from the oven, she would leave the biscuits on the sink to cool. I can still remember the aroma that wafted through the house. You know how it went. I couldn't resist those biscuits. The hunger, the desire really got to me. I just had to have one (or two). When confronted by mum, the crumbs still on my chin and clothes, I would respond 'It's your fault mum for leaving the biscuits out when I was hungry.' This is a bit of a light-hearted illustration that shows the basic makeup of our human nature. Already built in when we are young is the capacity to blame our wrong on someone else. Politicians have it down to a fine art blaming the other political party for all the woes. Even religious people can subtly blame God. We have not changed much from the beginning. Remember what Adam said when God confronted him in the garden, after he and Eve had eaten the fruit from the tree? (Genesis 3:12) "The woman you put here with me- she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it." See how Adam, not only passed the buck onto Eve, but was saying it was God's fault: 'You put the woman here'. Since Eden we have kept that tendency to blame God for things. We face financial difficulties and are tempted to distrust God will provide. Someone we love suffers and we question God's love.

It is the same sort of issue that James tackles in our text (James 1:13) "When tempted no one should say 'God is tempting me'." James is writing to Jewish Christians who had been scattered because of their persecution in Jerusalem. They had been forced out of their homes. They had lost all their property and status. They were refugees, strangers in foreign places. James writes to encourage them. He does it by helping them to see that their trials are used by God to help them grow spiritually. (James 1:2) "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Our growth in faith comes by our attitude towards our difficult situations. If we respond with trust and God's wisdom we will persevere and eventually mature. But if we respond with unbelief then the trial becomes a temptation that causes us to stumble in our faith. I think we might know people who have stopped coming to church, even walked away from the faith, because of a tragedy they endured. In that situation the 'trial', testing

the faith, became a 'temptation' to walk away from the faith. You should be aware that in the Greek the word for 'trial' in verse 2 is the same word as for 'temptation' in verse 13. So, whether a given situation is a 'trial' or 'temptation' depends on how we respond to it. Every circumstance we come across requires a decision. It could be a sickness, accident, job loss, marriage difficulty, moral challenge. We can go on trusting God and persevere in our faith. Or we can lose trust in God and give up on our faith.

Who is to blame when we are tempted to give up on God? Well, there is a devious way of looking at it. James teaches that it is God who uses the trials for testing our faith. And we also know the Bible teaches God is in control of everything. So, it is not much of a step to go from there to blame God for tempting us. When we look at the issues James writes about later in his letter, we can understand what he is dealing with. In chapter 2 we see James challenge the exiled Christians for showing favoritism to the rich. You can imagine them saying 'OK, sure, we are trying to get in sweet with the rich. What do you expect when we are left with nothing? It wasn't our idea to leave everything behind.' In chapter 3 James deals with the need to tame the destructive tongue. In chapter 4 he deals with the problem of quarrelling amongst the Christians. Again, you can picture them saying, 'Well what do you expect when we are all under the stress of being refugees. Of course, we are going to quarrel and speak harshly. We didn't come here by choice!' You could sense the subtle blame shifting going on. 'It wasn't our choice.' Robert Burns, the famous Scottish poet wrote, 'Thou knowest thou hast formed me with passions wild and strong and listening to their witching voice has often lead me wrong.' You hear what he is saying? 'God you made me like this. That's why I do wrong.'

James knows how easily we go into that way of thinking. But he doesn't agree with it. (James 1:13) "When tempted no one should say 'God is tempting me.'" You cannot blame God if you sin in those situations. "For God cannot be tempted by evil..." God has no capacity for evil. He has no vulnerability to evil. It repulses him. Everything in him resists it. We must not think of God in our terms. God is holiness. He is goodness itself. He cannot be enticed to harm us. God is all and has all in himself. He doesn't need anything. There is nothing to tempt him. A homeless person might be tempted to take the ten dollars on the footpath. But a billionaire wouldn't bother. So, what could possibly tempt God to do evil? All God's purposes are for good. It is impossible for God to place a temptation to cause someone to do wrong. As we said last week God uses the situations, or 'trials', we face or that we cause, to 'test' us. But with the trial God is not trying to trip us up. He wants us to pass the test and gain the blessing. "Don't be deceived..." says James (1:16). That is, 'Don't let our sinful nature try shifting the blame onto God'. The Bible commentator John MacArthur points out something interesting. It

gives us the clue to what James is concerned about. It has to do with the little word 'by' when James writes "Let no one say... I am being tempted by God'. In the Greek there are two words we translate as 'by': 'apo' and 'upo'. 'Apo' means something that is remote, it is distant, it is an indirect relationship, someone in the background. 'Upo' means nearby, it refers to the one directly doing something. E.g. 'This was done by Fred'. James here uses 'apo'. So, he is not worried that his readers are thinking that God is directly tempting them. No one would say that. But they are thinking in the background, remotely God is the real cause of this problem. Ultimately it must be God's fault, because he is the one who created me this way. He created my circumstances. He caused all these things to happen. So, he is ultimately responsible. Most people won't go as far as to see God as the direct tempter. But they do feel God is indirectly to blame because he 'permitted' the situation to occur. To this attitude James is saying 'Don't blame God. Don't ever look at yourself as a poor victim of God's providence or God's allowance of something to take place.'

Where is the blame then? (James 1:14) "... but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed." 'Enticed' or 'lured' reminds me of fishing. How do you catch a fish? You dangle a line with bait, something attractive to the fish. But all the best bait in the world will not automatically mean we will catch fish. I have gone out fishing on numerous occasions and caught nothing. Even when I have thrown in the burley and added the temptation. The fish must be hungry. There must be a desire. Desire is what makes the bait look attractive. Desire is what gets the fish caught. So, it is with us. It is our 'desire' that makes us fall. It is our own self, our own desire that is the real enticement. As the cartoon Pogo said 'We have met the enemy and the enemy is us'. That's right. That's profound. We are our own worst enemy. It's our own desires that are to blame. I think back again to when I was a boy. When I was sick mum could leave freshly baked biscuits anywhere and I would not touch one. When I was sick I lost my desire for biscuits.

Now you notice James does not blame the devil for our sin. There is a tendency by some to blame it all on the devil. But James lays the blame squarely with us. Satan may dangle the bait and tempt us. That's his specialty. But he plays on our desires. When we fall for a temptation it is our desire that attracts us and drags us away. Remember Eve and her fall into sin? (Genesis 3:16) Eve saw the fruit "...was pleasing to the eye and desirable for gaining wisdom." Adam and Eve fell into sin because they entertained their desire. As James writes (James 1:15) "...after desire has conceived it gives birth to sin and sin when it is fully grown gives birth to death." James, here in a nutshell, shows where sin comes from and what it leads to. He uses the idea of new life. A baby's life does not begin at birth. It commences at conception. So, sin is not just what we say or

do. It has its beginning deep within us, in our desires. There is an automatic follow on between desire and sin. Just like birth follows conception. Once the sequence starts it keeps going. So, the fault for human sin lies not in the temptation. It's not in the outward circumstance but in the inner desire of the human heart. And there we strike the heart of the problem (pardon the pun), the human heart. As God said in Genesis 8:21 "... every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood." And Jesus said "...out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." It is because of our own nature and its desires that we are sinners. And that sin has led to our break with God. That is what James is referring to when he says "...sin when it is full grown gives birth to death." It is like God said to Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:17) "The day you eat of the fruit of the tree you will die." Their sin caused spiritual death. Which led to physical death and it leads eventually to eternal death. That's the summary of the human nature and the human condition. James sets up the two sequences here. In one sequence, he says God uses 'trials', circumstances to test us, which leads to endurance, perseverance and maturity. In the other sequence, because of the wrong attitude, the trial becomes a temptation. And as we follow our desires they lead to sin and death. James pulls no punches. 'If you fail it is your fault. Don't blame God' (James 1:16) "Do not be deceived..."

So, here's the situation. The way forward in life is to have the right attitude to life's trials so we can persevere and mature. But our desires often lure us and drag us away in view of the temptation. So how do we deal with this? James gives the answer. Basically, he says, 'God gives us what we need'. (James 1:17) "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." God gives that which is 'good and perfect'. In other words, he gives exactly what we need. And God gives generously, He gives "every good and perfect gift." God will not change in that giving. "The father of the heavenly lights does not change like shifting shadows." James is saying 'God is the great creator of everything. The heavenly lights, the sun and moon and stars are his handy work. In contrast to them he does not change. We experience their light changing depending on the time of day it is. Watch the shadow cast by a tree and see over the morning how it moves as the sun shifts in the sky. But God does not shift. He does not change. When we come to him he is always willing, and wanting, to give to us. And what does he give? (James 1:18) "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created". The desires of our heart give birth to sin and death. But God gives a new heart and gives birth to obedience and life. We are born again. Now there is grace for you! While we were spiritually dead, and our desires lead us away from God, he "chose to give us birth". The Word of God speaks of the death and resurrection of Jesus. By our faith in Jesus, God recreates us to live for him. So now we

can choose for God. We have the capacity to live for him in life, even in the trials. But if our desires do cause us to fall to temptation, then let us not take up the old excuse of blaming God. Let us be real and honest and admit we messed up. Because when we admit our guilt, God removes our guilt through Jesus' work on the cross. We do not have to hide from God, pretending we are good, or shifting the blame onto him. We are his children, no matter if we fail him. God chose us, well aware we would sin. God does not change his mind. We are always his. The wonder of God's grace is that if we confess our fall to temptation, God can use that as a trial to test our faith and help us persevere and mature. James' advice can be summed up: in your trials, be trusting of God. In your temptations, be truthful to God. In either case he will bless you.