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AVOIDING DECEPTION IN TRIALS

James 1:16-18

By

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James Lesson 5

Avoiding Deception in Trials James 1:16-18

I have read that the second largest industry in Nigeria is that of the con artists who email gullible Americans, promising to send them millions of dollars if they will send them their bank account numbers. I received several of those offers this week.

Con artists abound in this evil world, not just in the financial realm, but also in the spiritual realm. Satan is the master deceiver, "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). His false prophets disguise themselves as angels of light (2 Cor. 11:13-15). They promise people answers to their deepest problems, but they actually lure them to spiritual destruction.

Believers going through trials are especially vulnerable to spiritual con artists. Satan's ministers of deception will say, "So, your God is good and powerful, huh? Then why did He allow you to go through this terrible tragedy? Either He is not very good, or He is not able to stop such trials." Usually, along with that line of thinking, they direct your attention to people in the world, who do not follow God, but whose lives are going very well. If you take the bait, you will not persevere in your trials.

As I was writing the above words, I got an email asking prayer for a pastor and his family in Idaho. Their 23-year-old daughter, son-in-law, and 5-week old granddaughter were killed last Saturday night when a repeat-offender drunk driver slammed into their car. The pastor wrote,

Both my wife and I firmly believe and convey that God is loving and merciful, fully faithful to His purpose and children. We are not angry, but are sad.

The reason that I share this with you is that many doors are opening and I need prayer to keep on message. This is a big deal in our area, front page news for several days, with all the associated television and radio interviews. God has been gracious to allow me to proclaim the Gospel truth repeatedly.

How do you avoid Satan's deception and endure such a trial with God's joy through your tears? James shows us:

To avoid being deceived when you go through trials, affirm by faith God's sovereign goodness.

In verse 12, James states, "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." He goes on to show (1:13-15) that God does not tempt us with evil. When we sin, it comes from our own lusts. But now he shows that when we're under trials, we're susceptible to deception. At such times, we must affirm by faith that God is good and only gives us good gifts (1:17). This is supremely illustrated in our salvation, which demonstrates His sovereign goodness (1:18).

We are constantly tempted to reverse the truths that James sets forth in verses 13-18. Rather than blaming evil on ourselves, we're tempted to blame it on God or on others: "I was just the victim!" Rather than attributing everything good in our lives to our loving heavenly Father, we're prone to take the credit ourselves: "The reason I'm so blessed is because I'm such a good person." James wants us to avoid these common pitfalls so that we will persevere under trials and receive the crown of life.

1. When you go through trials, you are especially vulnerable to deception (1:16).

James was not a cold-hearted theologian, dispensing a dose of doctrine and saying, "Call me if you're not better in a week!" He addresses his readers as "beloved brethren." James had a pastor's heart for these believers who were going through terrible trials. As a pastor, he knew that sound doctrine about God and His salvation is the most compassionate way to help people who are struggling through trials. God's truth gives us the rock we need to stand on in the flood.

"Do not be deceived" is literally, "Stop being deceived." Apparently, some of James' readers were already nibbling on Satan's bait: "If your God is good and loving, why is He letting you suffer? If He is omnipotent, He could stop it." James reminds them that God is both good and sovereign. He never sends anything evil into our lives. He only gives good gifts.

But, we need to define those “good gifts” from God’s eternal, all-wise perspective and plan, not from our own shortsighted, temporal point of view. God sends trials for His own sovereign, loving purposes. Amos (3:6b) the prophet, asks, “If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?” Although it was Satan that directly attacked the godly Job, clearly he did it with God’s full permission. When Job’s wife told him to curse God and die, Job wisely answered (Job 2:10), “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” The apostle Paul came to see that his thorn in the flesh was a cause for rejoicing, because it kept him in humble dependence on God (2 Cor. 12:7-10). So the “good gifts” that God sends may include extremely difficult trials.

Whenever the Bible says, “Do not be deceived,” we need to perk up and pay attention. This is an area where the enemy easily could fake you out. When we’ve traveled overseas, we’ve been warned about pickpockets, so we’re especially on guard. I never put my wallet or passport in a pocket where it could be easily stolen. Being alert is the key to not getting ripped off. So when you face a difficult trial, be alert! The enemy will try to deceive you.

2. To avoid deception in trials, affirm God’s goodness (1:17).

When Satan originally tempted and deceived Eve, he did it by getting her to doubt God’s goodness. He said (Gen. 3:1), “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” Of course, God had not said that, and Eve corrected Satan. But he persisted with his lie (3:4-5), “You shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The implication was, “God is holding back something good from you. Therefore, God Himself is not good.” She fell for this line of deception, and you know the terrible consequences.

So James affirms here (1:17), for people going through trials, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” James probably repeats himself as a matter of literary style, combining Hebrew parallelism with a Greek poetic form, the hexameter. There is no significant difference between the “good thing given” and the “perfect gift.” *Perfect* is one of James’ favorite words. It has the nuance of mature. He used it

twice in 1:4, "And let endurance have its *perfect* result, so that you may be *perfect* and complete, lacking in nothing." So verse 17 ties back to verses 2-4, with the idea that trials are one of God's perfect gifts, because when we persevere in them, He uses them to produce spiritual maturity in us.

James' point is that these good and perfect gifts, along with all of the many good things that God gives us to enjoy—the taste of good food, the love of our families, the beauty of His creation, and every wonderful experience in life—all of these good things come to us from a God whose very nature is good. As the Psalmist proclaims (Ps. 119:67-68), "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. You are good and do good; teach me Your statutes."

James states that all of the good things we experience come "down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." This is the only time that God is called, "the Father of lights." It refers to the fact that He created light and the heavenly bodies that give off light. Light stands for that which is good, in contrast to Satan's evil domain of darkness (Acts 26:18; Col. 1:12-13). "Father" points not only to God's creative power, but also to His tender care for His creatures.

When James says that with the Father of lights, "there is no variation or shifting shadow," he is drawing a comparison with the sun. Like the sun, God does not vary in His essential nature, which is light. He always steadily is light. He is always good. But, on earth we do not always experience the steady light of the sun. It varies on cloudy days, at night, and with the changing seasons. James means that when we experience what seem to be cloudy days or dark nights or wintry seasons, do not make the mistake of thinking that God has changed in His essential goodness towards us. His nature and His purpose towards His children are steady and unchanging. Therefore, we can trust Him at all times and in every difficult circumstance. This has two practical applications:

(1) *Understanding God's attributes as revealed in His Word is essential for your spiritual well being.* You must know God, not as you may conceive Him to be or wish Him to be, but as He has revealed Himself in the Bible. I've heard professing Christians say, "My God is not a God of judgment; He's a God of love." That's nice, but your God

is not the God of the Bible! He is a figment of your own imagination! The God of the Bible is *both* a God of judgment and of love.

Or, there are Christians who dodge a difficult chapter like Romans 9, where Paul says of God (9:18), "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." They don't want to conceive of God as having the sovereign right to save whom He chooses and to harden others in their sin. But to dodge what the Bible says about God is to make God in your own image, which is idolatry.

Two things will help you understand God's attributes. First, *read the Bible over and over*, asking as you read, "What does this teach me about You, God?" Second, *read some good books on the attributes of God*. J. I. Packer's classic, *Knowing God* [IVP] is a good place to start. A. W. Pink's *The Attributes of God* [Baker] is brief, but good. A. W. Tozer's *The Knowledge of the Holy* [Harper & Row] is a bit mystical, but worth reading. Stephen Charnock's *The Existence and Attributes of God* [Baker] is wordy, but a gold mine. He spends 146 pages on the goodness of God (2:209-355). Any good systematic theology (Charles Hodge, Louis Berkof, Wayne Grudem, Robert Reymond, etc.) will have a section on God's attributes. There are also some excellent easy-to-read books on various attributes of God, such as R. C. Sproul's *The Holiness of God* [Tyndale], A. W. Pink's *The Sovereignty of God* [Banner of Truth], or John MacArthur's *The Love of God* [Word]. Understanding God's attributes will give you a firm footing when you encounter trials.

(2) *Interpreting your circumstances in light of God's attributes is essential for your spiritual well being*. You must know God, but then when trials hit, you have to process what you know in light of your difficult situation. By faith, you have to rehearse for yourself what you know to be true, maybe a hundred times a day.

The psalms are full of this type of thing. The psalmist is in a huge crisis. He rehearses for himself what he knows about God's character and His covenant promises. By the end of the psalm his circumstances haven't changed, but his attitude and emotions have changed dramatically, because he has interpreted his circumstances in light of who God is. For example, in Psalms 42 and 43, there is a refrain, where the psalmist talks to himself. Three times he asks (43:5; see also, 42:5, 11), "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And

why are you disturbed within me?" He answers himself (43:5), "Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God."

When you're in the emotional throes of a major trial, you have to do this by faith in God's Word, not by your feelings. Your feelings will be all over the chart, but your faith must rest on the facts about God as declared in His Word of truth: He is good!

3. To avoid deception in trials, affirm God's sovereign goodness, especially as seen in your salvation (1:18).

When you go through trials, Satan hits you on these two attributes of God: Either He is not good, or He must not be sovereign. To stand firm, by faith you must cling to both His goodness and His absolute sovereignty. James affirms God's sovereignty in salvation as the bedrock truth to get you through your trials. If God is the source of your salvation, then He isn't going to abandon you later when you face trials. As Paul put it (Phil. 1:6), "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." (Paul argues the same in Romans 8:28-36.) James makes two points in verse 18:

A. Since salvation is totally from God's will and power, He will care for you through every trial.

"In the exercise of His will, He brought us forth by the word of truth..." (1:18a). Many believers would rewrite that verse to read, "In the exercise of *our free will*, He brought us forth..." They make our will the decisive factor in salvation. They say, "God has done everything that He can do for your salvation. The deciding vote is up to you. When you pull the lever of faith, all the goodies of salvation pour out the chute!"

But the emphasis throughout the Bible is *not* on *human* will in salvation, but rather on *God's* will in our salvation. When God went to Adam and Eve after they sinned, He didn't present them with the package and ask, "What do you think? Would you like for Me to clothe you with animal skins and to send a Savior by the seed of the woman, or not? You decide!" When God called Abram, He didn't present His plan and then ask Abram for his decision. God called Abram and told him what He (God) would do and what Abram should do in response.

When the Lord knocked Saul (Paul) to the ground and blinded him, He didn't say, "Would you like to decide for Jesus now?" He said, "Get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do" (Acts 9:6). God told Ananias, who was to go to Paul, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (9:15-16).

The Lord Jesus emphasized the same truth, that *God's will* is the decisive factor in our salvation. He said (Matt. 11:27), "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Sinners are spiritually blinded by Satan, "so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). It requires the sovereign will of God, who commanded light to shine out of darkness, "to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Those who argue against God's sovereignty in salvation say that God's command that we believe the gospel implies our ability to keep the command. Otherwise, He would be mocking us to tell us to believe when we can't believe. But immediately after Jesus said that no one could know the Father, except those to whom *the Son wills* to reveal Him, He said, "Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Would anyone dare to say that Jesus was mocking them?

With the command to believe, God imparts His life-giving, eye-opening power to all whom He has chosen. Jesus commanded a dead man named Lazarus to come forth from his tomb. Was He mocking him? No, because with the command, Jesus sent His life-giving power, so that Lazarus could hear the command and obey it. He didn't sit in the tomb debating, "Should I decide for Jesus or not?" Jesus commanded the man with the withered hand in the synagogue to stretch forth his hand (Luke 6:10). Was He mocking this man, to ask him in front of everyone to do what he was not able to do? No, because with the command, Jesus imparted His healing power to enable the man to obey.

So, yes, God calls on sinners to repent and believe the gospel. You cannot be saved unless you repent and believe. But when you

repent and believe, it is not at all due to your free will or ability. You were dead in your sins and loving it (Eph. 2:1-3; John 3:19-20). The only reason you responded in faith is that in the exercise of God's will, He brought you from death to life (James 1:15, 18) by the power of His word of truth, the gospel. You weren't the deciding factor in your salvation. *God was!* You were saved because "in the exercise of His will, [God] brought [you] forth by the word of truth." Because of that, you can trust Him to take care of you in times of severe trials.

B. Since God saves you for His purpose, He will care for you through every trial.

James 1:18b continues, "so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures." This goes back to the Old Testament requirement that Israel bring the first portion of their crop as a thank-offering to God. God also claimed the ownership of all first-born males, who had to be redeemed (Exod. 22:29; 23:16, 19). This has two practical implications for us, who are God's first fruits:

(1) *As God's first fruits, He owns you and He is free to use you as He chooses.* Since He saved you by bringing you from death to life in the exercise of His will, you are not your own. You have been bought with the blood of Christ. Therefore, you must present yourself and everything that you have to God as a thank-offering, to use as He chooses. Have you done that? Do you live that way?

(2) *As God's first fruits, you are to bear fruit for Him.* Offering the first fruits to God meant that there would be more to follow. Verse 18 reminds me of Jesus' words to His disciples (John 15:16), "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you." God saved you so that you would bear fruit by bringing others to know Him. If you're living for yourself, spending all of your time, money, and efforts to make life more comfortable for yourself, then you're serving yourself, not the Lord. James wants you to realize that if God has imparted new life to you, then you are His first fruits. Especially in trials, your aim should be to bear fruit for Him and to bring glory to His name.

Conclusion

Joseph is one of the best illustrations of someone in severe trials affirming both God's goodness and His sovereignty. His brothers were planning to murder him, but decided to sell him into slavery instead, so that they could make a profit by getting rid of him. As a slave in Egypt, he obeyed God by resisting the tempting advances of Potiphar's wife. It would have been easy to rationalize yielding to her seduction. He was lonely, single, and in a foreign country. What prospects did he ever have for marriage? So how did God "reward" him for his obedience? He got thrown into an Egyptian dungeon, where he stayed for several years.

He could have become a very bitter man. Instead, years later when he was second to Pharaoh and could have taken revenge on his brothers, he said to them (Gen. 50:20), "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." In his many trials, Joseph avoided spiritual deception by affirming God's sovereignty and His goodness. In whatever trials you go through, you can resist that spiritual con artist, Satan, by holding firmly to God's goodness and His sovereignty, especially as seen in your salvation.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some ways that Satan can deceive us when we go through trials? How can we be more alert to these ploys?
2. A critic asks, "How can a good God permit all of the terrible evil in this world?" Your answer?
3. What are some of the important *practical* ramifications of affirming God's sovereignty in our salvation?
4. *All* Christians are called to serve God as a way of life. Agree / disagree? Why?

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