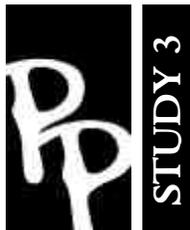


DON'T BLAME GOD,

FOR HE IS GOOD



James 1:13-18

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point 1: Indwelling sin
- 📁 Focus Point 2: Election
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

The subject in verses 2-12 has been the testing of our faith by painful things that happen to us, such as persecution, poverty, illnesses or tragedy. The subject now is testing that comes to us in the form of temptation to sin. Trials can be looked upon as sent by God to make a person stand. Temptations are sent by Satan to make a person fall. Whilst we can distinguish trials and temptations in this way, the two are closely linked because every painful experience can be used as an excuse to sin, perhaps to doubt God, or to lower our standards of godliness. These verses explain that when we yield to temptation, we are responsible for doing so. They also direct us to God, whose purpose is for us to live holy lives.

What these verses mean

Verse 13

When tempted, no-one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;

Our lives are in God's hands to direct and to oversee, so that we fulfil his purpose for us. But if, as a result of some painful experience, we yield to

some temptation, we must not say that God made us sin. God does try us, but not with evil intent. For example, God clearly directed the life of Joseph (Gen. 37-50). He was put in a pit and then sold as a slave by his brothers (Gen. 37:12-28). He became a lord in Egypt and his brothers came face to face with him in great fear, but Joseph said to them, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Satan can use every trial we face to weaken our resolve to please God, as he used Potiphar's wife to tempt Joseph to sleep with her (Gen. 39). God's intention is always for our good. Whatever problem we face, we should always begin our thinking with the truth about God. So, when we are asking ourselves, "Why do I yield to temptation?" we begin our answer with the certain truth that such temptation cannot be from God, because it is completely impossible to incline God to evil of any kind. Not only so, God hates evil and is therefore incapable of inclining anyone else to what he himself hates.

Verse 14

but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.

Men and women have always had a tendency to blame anyone or anything other than themselves when they yield to temptation. Some, as in verse 13, try to blame God: they argue either that God tested them too much, or that what they did was because of the way God made them. Others, like Eve and Adam, either put the blame on Satan or on other people (Gen. 3:6-13). In recent days there has been an increasing habit for people to blame their deprived circumstances for their wrongdoing. James will have none of this. He places the responsibility for wrongdoing on the wrongdoer and nowhere else. The picture he puts into our minds is of a fisherman trying to entice fish with the use of bait. A temptation put before us is like the bait which is cleverly selected to match known desires. We cannot be blamed for the presence of the temptation; as it is sometimes said, it is not sinful to be tempted. The bait is all around us! The problem begins when our hearts are drawn to what is put before us. Jesus taught that at this point we are already sinning (Matt.5:27-28).

Verse 15

Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

James sees sin in a believer's life, not as something to excuse, but to loathe and even fear. He changes the picture to the process of birth. The bait or temptation in the previous verse incites a desire in the heart. The enticed heart is the "conception" which results in a "child" called sin. At this point, a believer will be enabled to renounce the sin (Rom.8:13; Col.3:5), and will ask God for his pardon and cleansing (1 John1:9). If the process continues

and the sin is persisted with, we have to question if the person concerned is a true believer (1 John 3:9). If he is not, death follows with eternal condemnation.

Verse 16

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers.

In the light of these solemn truths, James bares his pastoral heart and pleads for his readers to be warned and alert. Part of Satan's strategy is to trick and falsify truth. The NIV translation we are using starts a new paragraph with this verse. So the warning of not being deceived is not just about temptation, but the truth that is expressed in 1:17-18. In other words James is saying that we must have the true assessment of the nature and character of God.¹

Verse 17

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights,

The link of verses 17 and 18 with what James has just said is not immediately obvious, but it is probable that James is turning his readers away from any tendency to complain against God because of their trials, or of blaming God for their weaknesses. In verse 17 burdened believers are reminded that God is unchanging in his willingness to give all they need "for life and godliness" (2 Pet.1:3). James describes God's provision for all our needs as his giving "every good and perfect gift .. from above". God's gifts come from heaven and are not tainted like earthly gifts. People give gifts, but their motive for giving may not always be pure, or the gift may not be really suitable. However, all that God gives is always sincere, sensible, suitable and sufficient.

who does not change like shifting shadows.

The picture is of God as the creator of the sun, moon and stars. As the earth rotates, trees and buildings cast constantly changing shadows as they come between us and the sun. James is saying that no matter how the situation of our lives may change, God's purpose for us remains constant. God is not like the earth constantly moving and casting shifting shadows. God does not change (Mal. 3:6).

Verse 18

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth,

Do we need any further assurance of the Father's loving purpose for our lives? Then remember that he chose us, he set his love upon us in eternity (Eph.1:3) and gave us new life. This gift of new birth (salvation) is the greatest heavenly gift (from above) that we can receive. The Word of God is

¹ John Blanchard, *Truth for Life* (Evangelical Press)

important in the process of our salvation. It is there that we see our need of Christ, and it is there that we see Christ as the only answer to our need. James is reinforcing the biblical teaching of God's acting first in our salvation. We are "born again" (we have new birth) because God so willed it by choosing us.² Will God now alter his purpose or give us up? (Rom.8:32). Surely not!

that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

When the people of Israel reaped their crops, they first gave a sample of the best of them to the Lord (Ex.23:16, 19:34, 22-26; Num.18:12). James told his readers that they were "a kind of firstfruits", meaning that they would be followed by a great harvest of believers. He also meant that God intended them to be godly and holy, the very best of all humankind. Because of James' emphasis on the practical aspects of the Christian life, some people have thought that he teaches salvation by works, but this verse shows that he is addressing people who are already Christians; he is not telling them how to become Christians. We must add that the kind of attitudes he is describing are only possible to those who are "born again", being the work of the Holy Spirit.



Summary

We see here two sides of the message addressed to Christian believers. There is the side of stern warning not to treat sin lightly or to presume on the mercy of God by a careless attitude to sin (1 Co.10:12). We must not blame anything or anyone else for our lapses into wrongdoing. On the other side, the message is reassuring. The God who has chosen us and given us new life will most certainly give us what we need, to persevere in every trial and to grow in strength and holiness. The Christian believer, whilst being the beneficiary of God's grace in his salvation, has the responsibility to cultivate a grateful heart and a godly life.

² See Focus Point 2 at the end of this study on the doctrine of Election.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: Dealing with sin in the Christian life

1. Unbelievers blame anything but themselves. They excuse wrongdoing by referring to –
 - a. Environment – poverty, housing, culture.
 - b. Parents – inherited faults, lack of learning, abuse.
 - c. God – he made me like this so I cannot help it.
2. Christians grapple with the old nature.
 - a. Even as “born again”, we still have the residue of the old nature within us.
 - b. We must beware of allowing wrong desires to take hold of our minds.
 - c. When we commit sin, we must not excuse it, but put it to death and renounce it – take sides with God against it.
3. Our relationship with God must be restored.
 - a. We must ask for his pardon on the basis of Christ’s death for us.
 - b. We must ask for the Spirit’s help in cleansing our minds and hearts of every evil desire.
 - c. We must ask for strength to fight against evil.



Focus Point 1: Indwelling sin

Sin began with the devil before Adam’s fall in the Garden of Eden. The human race became sinful when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden. Adam was the representative of the whole human race, which has been affected ever since from that time of testing in the Garden of Eden. God has looked upon every person as being guilty and consequently all suffer physical death as a direct result of sin.

People do not learn how to sin; it is part of their nature with which they are born. When David confessed his sin of adultery he said, “Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5). We have inherited this sinful nature (sometimes called “original sin”). We sin because we want to and not because somebody else forces us to. As sin stems from our nature and is not imposed from outside, we call it “indwelling sin”.

Sin is opposition to God. It shows that people prefer to follow the devil and please themselves rather than to obey God. Every part of our being is affected; our intellect, desires, emotions, goals and motives. This does not mean that an unbelieving person cannot do good or that a person will always do the worst possible thing. What it does mean is that an unbeliever cannot do any spiritual good or be good in a relationship with God. (See Ephesians 4:18.)

When we are born again and come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are given a new nature that enables us to resist evil and to seek spiritual good.³ But we continue to be ensnared by indwelling sin, and we are still liable to choose to do wrong. For this reason we need to seek daily pardon and cleansing, and to grow in grace enabling us to overcome. When our lives are finished on this earth and we reach the glory, the conflict will cease for ever (Phil.1:6).

See also Study 22 in Book 3 of Galatians Preachers' Study Papers and the comments on Galatians 3:17.



Focus Point 2: Election

Our salvation began in eternity when God chose us to be his holy people (Eph.1:4). This choice was entirely in the mind and heart of God and had no basis at all in anything we would become (Rom.9:10-16). Jesus Christ died for the chosen ones, and the Holy Spirit brings them to ultimate holiness. We are not chosen for heaven without conversion and godly living; therefore this teaching must not be used as an excuse for continuing in sinful conduct.

See also Preachers' Study Papers on Galatians (Book 2, pages 145-6) and Obadiah and Malachi (page 48).



Over to you

It is very important for us as preachers to match our warnings to Christian believers with assurances of God’s eternal, unflinching love. It is equally important for us to match our assurances of God’s saving love and keeping power with warnings against using God’s love as an excuse for carelessness about God’s commands. Is your ministry balanced like this?