

## Firstfruits

### *Colossians 1:15-22; James 1:16-18*

One of the curiosities of this letter we have from James, whom we have said was the little brother of the Lord Jesus, is that the name of Jesus only appears twice in the five chapters of James' letter. And we saw last week that this greatly troubled Martin Luther, who had based his whole life on the premise that everything depended on Jesus, that none of us can please God, none of us will survive Judgment Day unless we trust and lean on Jesus, his goodness, the forgiveness he won on the cross, and the resurrection power he gave us when he sent the Spirit to live in our hearts.

The whole Bible, Luther liked to say, is about Jesus and so Luther was upset to have James admonishing us to do things and be things without naming Jesus as the center of what he wants us to do and be. And what I began to suggest last week is that the Lord Jesus does underlie all that James urges and teaches, but that James has left the name of Jesus unwritten, between the lines of what he writes. So last week we saw the "*lowly brother*" James wanted to "*boast in his exaltation*" was Jesus. Jesus was the one, Paul wrote, who from all eternity past "*existed in the form of God, yet he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but [Jesus] emptied himself.*"

So it follows that Jesus was also the "*rich brother*" James told us should "*boast... in his humiliation, for like the flower of the grass he shall pass away.*" And finally, most importantly, the "*blessed...man who endures temptation*" and who received "*the crown of life God has promised to those who love him*" was Jesus. It turns out that James doesn't teach his readers to do or be anything that Jesus hadn't already done and been for us in advance. Lowly brothers are exalted, rich brothers learn humility, all of us endure temptation by trusting and leaning on Jesus who was poor and found exaltation, who was rich and gave it all away, who was tempted and overcame.

And this morning James continues along the same vein, "*Don't be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters, every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change or shifting shadow.*" In other words, God is not the source of the confusion and injury and upset that arises from human needs and wants run amuck. That comes from the devil and the fallen world and our own stampeding desires.

But God has given us a gift that is only good, perfect in every way, and that gift is his Son. So for James the key to overcoming the temptations we face in a world that distorts and perverts goodness with all kinds of shimmering shadows is to trust in the goodness and purity of Jesus and to see behind Christ, above Christ, a Father whose word can be trusted, whose affections

don't wax and wane with every shift of the the wind. We know God is "*the Father of Lights, with whom there is no change or shifting shadow*" because he so perfectly cared for us by sending his Son to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

So it is not our wisdom, or goodness or strength that will see us through the world of temptation we all will face trying to hold to the straight and narrow in a fallen world. It is Christ who found exaltation in lowliness, humility in wealth, and who defeated Satan for us, it is Christ who will teach us the art of staying encouraged in poverty, staying humble in wealth, and enduring those lies that might take us down when Satan tempts us to doubt whether God is good or Christ is real.

We don't save ourselves, we don't change our hearts, we don't conquer the world, the flesh or the devil apart from believing God's word, trusting God's Son, and walking in his Spirit. James put it this way, he said, "*Of his own will, God brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a sort of first fruits among his creatures.*" The picture James paints for us is drawn from Jesus' Parable of the Sower in the 13th chapter of Matthew's gospel, where seed lands everywhere, some to wither for lack of root, or to be snatched from a busy path or to be choked by weeds.

But James pictures you and me and his readers as that seed that landed in good soil, the first sprouts of a crop that has been carefully nurtured and weeded so that we have popped out of the soil and soon will blossom into the fruit that God the farmer has cultivated us to bear. The point being that, in the Old Testament scheme of things, Good Friday was the day that lambs were slain and blood was spread on peoples' door frames as a sign that they would be forgiven because Someone, a Lamb had died in their place.

And the very next Sunday after, our Easter Sunday, was the Old Testament feast of first fruit, when the early sprouts of the spring harvest were taken into the temple and given to God as a sign that a new harvest was on the way. So Jesus rose from the grave, "*the firstborn from the dead*" on the very same morning that the "*first fruits*" were brought to God, as a way of saying, something new has arisen from the ground that will come to harvest in God's own timing.

Not wheat, not corn, but a new humanity freed from sin and alive to God and kingdom and heaven. And what James is saying is that, if we abide in Christ, if we lean on him so as to obey "*the word of truth*", our lives will become "*first fruits*" pointing toward heaven no less than Jesus' life pointed that way on the first resurrection Sunday. The question facing us this morning is: Do we believe God can do that within us, and are we willing to let his "*word of truth*" shape us so that we belong to him come the harvest?