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Lent 1 • James 1:12–18 • February 22, 2015

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“Blessed is the man (Μακαριος ἀνηρ; see, e.g., Ps 1:1, מְשִׁיחַ הַיְיָ) who remains steadfast under trial” (Jas 1:12, ESV). Preparing this homiletical help in September makes it difficult not to think about Christians in Iraq and in several areas of Africa, who are pursued, persecuted, kidnapped, and murdered because they are Christians. The stomach churns, the heart aches, the eyes burn. O Lord, come to the aid of your people!

Exegetical Notes

1. We need to let James be James. We ought not try to make him sound like Paul, or John, or Peter, or anyone else.

2. One of the struggles in this text and in its preceding context is how to handle *πειραζω*, *πειρασμος*, and *ἀπειραστος*. Are we actually doing the right thing when we hopscotch between tempt, test, trial, and temptation?

3. We need to pay attention to the “little” particles as much as to the “big” verbs and nouns. For example, “tempted by God” (ESV) is, in Greek, *ἀπο θεου πειραζομαι* (v. 13). *απο* plus the genitive usually indicates source more than agency (*ὑπο*, which might favor agency, is a variant reading but less well attested), thus “let no one say ‘I am tempted from God.’” Also in v. 13, notice the construction *ὁ γαρ θεος ἀπειραστος ἐστιν κακῶν*: “for God is untempted of evil”—the adjective makes “untemptedness” an ingredient of God’s character, not of his experience. But in v. 14 it is made clear that “each [of us] is tempted by (*ὑπο*) his own desire” (*ἐπιθυμια*; in the Pauline letters, ESV often translates *epithymia* as passion; it isn’t a good thing; as a result, I’m not enthralled by the phrase “passion for ministry”).

4. Verse 16 is the swing verse. In NA27 and NA28, it introduces a new paragraph, but it also is the concluding warning for the preceding argument.

5. What is the significance of using *dosij* and *dwrean* (ESV renders both as “gift”)? If I may hazard an exegetical guess, *dosij* tilts toward the giving and *dwrean* toward the thing given. So, God gives well (“good”) and what he gives is perfect (*τελος*, also “complete”). If you’ve ever asked a little child to hold out his or her hand, so that you can put something in it, but then had to take the child’s hand in yours, in order to place the thing in it—well, God is fully prepared to give us his gifts, but he also has to take our hands in his. We don’t even do receiving well, without assistance. Faith receives God’s grace, but faith too is his gift (Eph 2:8).

6. *παρ’ ᾧ ουκ ἐνι παραλλαγη ἢ τροπης ἀποσκιασμα* (v. 17): This is a great clause. A cognate of *παραλλαγη* is “parallax,” the apparent shift of an object when, for example, we close one eye then the other (the old dominant eye game). In actuality, the object does not move; it is where it is, but our eyes are just far enough apart to suggest (since, after all, we are standing still) that the object does move. The point here is that God does not “shift” (we think we see/perceive him doing so, but in actuality he does not; the problem is with our seeing/perceiving).

Our word “trope” may derive more from *τροπος* than *τροπη*, but they are connected (in fact, it looks like *τροπος* has more to do with the resulting image, as in “turn

of phrase,” and τροπή with the turning). The shadow an object casts changes as it turns in the light, but not God. Again, if there is a problem, it is with our perception of God, and not with God himself.

7. God’s work is good, perfect; that’s a good thing and worth relishing. But verse 18 puts its own stamp on this message with its opening word: βουληθεις. ESV uses a nominal phrase, “of his own will,” and that’s okay. But it obscures the activity that seems entailed in the participle. God gave birth (ἔπεκυθησεν) to us, has done so, *because he wanted to*. Sin gives birth to death (ἀποκυει, v. 15); God gives birth to us by the word of truth (none else but Christ). In sin is death; in God (alone) is life. And he gives birth to us for a purpose (εἰς plus the infinitive is different from, say, ἵνα plus the subjunctive); the work is his, not ours; it’s not about something “we *should* be.”

Application

The Lent 1 (B) Gospel is Mark’s temptation narrative (1:12–13), the most sparse among the evangelists. Matthew and Luke say that Satan goes away, if only until “an opportune time” (Lk 4:13). Mark does not say that; Satan does not go away. Jesus’s whole ministry in “this world’s bleak wilderness” is a time of testing, trial, and temptation. And his disciples are not above their master. Testing, trial, and temptation are all around us too, and will go on until the end. They do not make us “happy” (one of the unfortunate renderings of μακαριος), nor are they “blessings.” But “the man” of God endures them—and resists them—with patience, contentment, and even joy (Jas 1:3).

In this reading James gives us only one direction: not to be deceived. Everything else is description, the way things are: the bad way of the fallen world, the good and perfect way of the God who makes us new, in Christ, who is the word of truth.