

God does not change. In a world that is constantly changing, God is the sure and eternal One to whom we may cling and know that what He has promised, He will accomplish, and what He intends for good and His glory, He will bring to pass. He is the unchanging constant upon Whom His children can always depend. Therefore, we may know and affirm for certain that He will always be with us and for us, giving us all that is needed, for He is the giver of all good things and every perfect gift.

This passage teaches us, that we ought to be so affected by God's innumerable blessings, which we daily receive from His hand, as to think of nothing but of His glory; and that we should abhor whatever comes to our mind, or is suggested by others, which is not compatible with His praise.¹

18 In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

Now James gives the final and all conclusive proof that God, who does not change and Who is not like the heavenly lights that move and vary in brightness, also does not give "gifts" which are subject to variation or trickery. In human society, it is not uncommon to see that a person may give "gifts" or "rewards," not purely to bless the one to whom they are given, but in order to obligate or entice that person to do what they otherwise would not. God is not like that, and the proof is that He gave the gift of His own dear Son, Yeshua, to undergo death ("be obedient to death," cf. Phil 2:8) in order to pay the penalty of sin due unto those He would save.

Our verse opens with an aorist participle, βουληθεῖς (<βούλομαι, *boulomai*) translated "In the exercise of His will" (NASB). The ESV translates "Of his own will he brought us forth..." and the NIV has "He chose to give us birth..." This speaks to God's eternal election of all who would come to saving faith and would thereby be eternally adopted as children in God's family. The primary emphasis that James gives us here is that the salvation of every believer begins, not with man choosing God, but with God choosing each and every one who would be His.

God performs a special kind of work in the life of human beings according to His divine plan. Believers have faith because God gave them spiritual birth. Of His perfect gifts, the new life He engenders is consummate. God does not cause

1 Calvin, *James*, p. 291.

temptation; He engenders life.¹

Moreover, James' words here make it clear that God's election or choosing of those He would save was of His own will, not something by which He was obligated or drawn to by the will or actions of mankind. God's sovereign election of all whom He would save was the fruit of His own desire and choice, not something determined by the redeemed persons themselves. He "exercised His will" means that it was God's own dear pleasure to set His love upon those whom He would save. What is more, the language James uses here indicates that God was not obligated to save anyone. Indeed, His desire and plan to save sinners was totally something He chose to do. As Manton notes,

He chose. Because He wanted to, or being willing. The word is given here (1) to deny compulsion or necessity—God did not need to save anyone; and (2) to exclude merit—we could not force God to do it—it was merely His good pleasure.²

That God is the initiator of salvation and not man, is clear from the metaphor of "birth" and is explicitly taught elsewhere in the Scriptures.

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. (Jn 15:16)

...just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Yeshua Messiah to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Eph 1:4–6)

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. (2Thess 2:13)

1 Richardson, *James in The New American Commentary*, p. 87.

2 Thomas Manton, *James*, p. 114–115.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Messiah Yeshua from all eternity, (2Tim 1:8–9)

What a glorious truth, that the all-powerful, infinitely holy God, would, from all eternity, set His love upon each individual He would save! Surely this is the greatest expression of God's love, that He would give His own Son to redeem all whom He has chosen.

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1Jn 4:10)

Surely the application of James' opening words in our verse is that if we have come to know the love of God for each and everyone one He has chosen to salvation, then if in fact we have exercised saving faith in the Messiah Yeshua, we know that we are the very object of God's eternal and all-powerful love. Having saved us from eternal damnation, surely we are intent upon serving Him, doing all in the power He provides to honor and glorify Him, and to be witnesses to a watching world of His grace and power to save sinners.

He brought us forth by the word of truth... – The verb translated “brought us forth” (ἀπεκύησεν < ἀποκυέω, *apokueō*) was used in v. 15 as well, meaning “to give birth,” “to bear young.”¹ In fact, these are the only two times the verb is found in the Apostolic Scriptures. We find it used only once in the Lxx, in the apocryphal book of 4Macc 15:17.

Some have suggested that James' use of the metaphor of “birth” presupposes a female counterpart in the process, since the Greek verb used here is very often found in the context of a woman “giving birth.” They have therefore suggested that James is using Gnostic ideology which, in some versions of that errant philosophy, postulated female deities.² But this is, of course, contrary to all that the Scriptures teach. That v. 17 of our text refers to God as the “Father of lights” would surely indicate that the concept of “Father” is that of One Who brings into being that which did not previously exist. John uses similar language to describe God as the “progenitor” of mankind.

1 BDAG, “ἀποκυέω,” p. 114.

2 See Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Tyndale Press, 1973), pp 146-47, and the Gnostic view of *Sophia* as a “heavenly Redeemer figure.”

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (Jn 1:12–13)

We see the same metaphor of spiritual “birth” also accredited to the Ruach HaKodesh:

Yeshua answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (Jn 3:5–6)

John likewise accredits this same metaphor of spiritual birth to God.

If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him. (1Jn 2:29)

No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. (1Jn 3:9)

Some have further suggested viewing God as “Father” is a purely “New Testament” phenomenon, but this is not true. The Tanach clearly refers to the God of Israel as “father” and the One who brought His children to life.

You are the sons of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead. (Deut 14:1)

Do you thus repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is not He your Father who has bought you? He has made you and established you. (Deut 32:6)

For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not recognize us. You, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Your name. (Is 63:16)

But now, O LORD, You are our Father, we are the clay, and you our potter; and all of us are the work of Your hand. (Is 64:8)

When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son. (Hos 11:1)

...by the word of truth – Note also that the means by which the sinner is “brought forth,” or “born again to a new life,” is “by the word of truth” (λόγῳ ἀληθείας, *logō alētheias*). For when God gives the gift of repentance and faith, He opens the mind and heart of the elect through the gospel message as it is set forth in the Scriptures, used by the Ruach to bring the elect to saving faith. This is, in fact, the “perfect gift” which James speaks of in the previous verse (v. 17), for it is the gift of eternity, dwelling forever in the very presence of God, beholding Yeshua, where sin and sorrow is banished, and we will forever be with the Lord.

It is understandable, then, why the enemy of God, Satan the deceiver, seeks to undermine the Scriptures in every way. If the sharp sword of the Scriptures can be removed, then the so-called “gospel” which is proclaimed is not the “good news” at all, but the invention of men. Such a “false gospel” may entrap many to believe its errant message, keeping them in the dark and trusting something that has no power to save. But the enemy cannot hide the Bible’s message of the true Gospel to those whom God calls to Himself. Moreover, the Scriptures are the very treasure trove of spiritual food for all who are believers in Yeshua and the spiritual nourishment which, by the work of the Ruach, is essential for spiritual growth and strength to persevere in the faith.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

...so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. – Here we see James referring to the messianic community as the “first fruits.” In using the label “messianic community,” I mean the believing remnant of Israel, that part of Israel in every generation made up of those who believed God’s promise of a Redeemer and placed their faith in Him for forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. Further, in accordance with the Abrahamic covenant, which encapsulated the Gospel (cf. Gal 3:8), those from the nations who are brought to faith by God’s sovereign grace and power, are grafted into the believing remnant. Thus, the term “messianic community” is used to emphasize the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that “in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

What are the “first fruits” as the Scriptures use that term? The first fruits are the first of the harvest and God commanded that an offering from the first fruits of the harvest should be offered at the Tabernacle or

Temple during the Feast of Shavuot (Weeks).¹ The lesson to be learned by the offering of the first fruits was that God is the one Who brings all good things, as James has taught us, and that therefore, in acknowledgment of this truth, giving the first fruits of the harvest to Him was a tangible action proclaiming that the rest of the harvest was likewise the result of God's grace and sustaining hand. This offering therefore sanctified the whole harvest as the gift of God to His people.

James' use of this "first fruits" metaphor emphasizes that God chose the nation of Israel, the descendants of Jacob, to be His chosen ones who would serve Him to bring about the Abrahamic promise. Since the first fruits belonged to God (and are given as an offering to Him), He would use them (Israel) to take the Gospel message to the nations.

You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth;
Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. (Amos 3:2)

I am the LORD, I have called You in righteousness,
I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You,
And I will appoint You as a covenant to the people,
As a light to the nations, to open blind eyes,
To bring out prisoners from the dungeon
And those who dwell in darkness from the prison. (Is 42:6-7)

And we see that this is what happened, for all of the Apostolic Scriptures were written by the Apostles of Yeshua or those who were close companions with them, and the Apostles of Yeshua were all Jews.

Thus, when James writes that "so that we would be a kind of first fruits," he is undoubtedly referring to the messianic community of the 1st Century CE by which the Gospel would be taken to the nations, and this is seen historically to have been the case.

Further, while the "harvest of the nations" inevitably includes people from every nation, family-group, or language group,² James writes that the messianic community would be the "first fruits among His creatures." Note carefully that the "harvest" is comprised of souls who are clearly those who belong to God. The NASB translation of the final clause, "among His creatures" (τῶν αὐτοῦ κτισμάτων) could also have the meaning "those of His creation." This emphasizes that even as the believing remnant of Israel belonged to Him before they were ever

1 Ex 23:16; 34:22; Num 28:26.

2 Cf. Rev 5:9 - "... and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation."

constituted as a nation, so all who are chosen from the nations unto salvation likewise are His chosen ones. He is the Owner of the harvest, and the first fruits sanctify the remainder of the harvest to its Owner.

19-20 *This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.*

The opening phrase of the NASB, “*This you know*,” is actually only one word in the Greek, ἴστε (*iste*), which can be either an imperative (a command) or indicative (descriptive). The NASB has taken it as an indicative verb, thus adding the word “*This you know, my beloved brethren*.” The ESV takes it as an imperative, “*Know this, my beloved brethren*.” Given the context, it seems most likely that we are to understand the word “*know*” to be an imperative or a command.

But a second question confronts us as well, and this is whether this opening word as a command “*to know*” refers to the previous verses or to what follows. Most often, when an imperative is used in regard to the instructions which follow it, there is clear continuity.

Consider the way James uses the imperative or command in 1:16-17 and 2:5 which also incorporate “*beloved brethren*.”

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. 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 1:16–17)

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (James 2:5)

But in our verse, the imperative is followed by the Greek δέ (*de*) which carries the sense of “*and*” or “*but*” and thus seems out of place if the imperative is understood to be related to what follows it. Therefore, it seems best to take the opening phrase with the ESV as “*Know this, my beloved brethren*.” And what is it that James enjoins us to know? It is that “*the word of truth*,” that is, the inspired word of God contained in the Scriptures, is to be the means by which the harvest of souls is to be brought in and will ultimately comprise the full number of God’s chosen people. How diligent we must be, then, to know the word of God and to always be ready to use the “*word of truth*” to show others the

light of the gospel.

but sanctify Messiah as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; (1Pet 3:15)

...but everyone must be quick to hear – These words of James sound very much like a proverb, and in fact are closely aligned texts from the wisdom literature of the Tanach.

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Prov 15:1)

Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. (Ecc 5:1–2)

Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools. (Ecc 7:9)

Note first of all that James' injunction is addressed to "everyone" (*πᾶς ἀνθρώπος*), literally "all people." This is important for everyone who claims the Name of Yeshua, regardless of station in life or ministry within the messianic community.

James' first exhortation is to be "quick to hear" (*ταχὺς εἰς τὸ ἀκοῦσαι*). This is directly tied back to the previous verse in which the means by which we have been brought to faith in Yeshua is "the word of truth." Remember that "to hear" in the Hebrew context means "to obey." James is not simply giving good advice for living but rather he has something specific in mind. He means to remember the fundamental truth that "hearing the word of truth" means "to obey what the Scriptures teach." Thus, "being quick to hear" means "eager and ready to obey" what God has revealed to us in His "word of truth." Thus, being eager and ready to obey will result in slowness to speak and slowness to respond in anger.

...slow to speak – An important ingredient to success within the believing community is both the desire and ability to listen well. Being quick to speak will often mean that one has not fully understood what

has been said. Further, “slow to speak” may well emphasize the need to consider, contemplate, and seek God for wisdom (v. 5) before giving a response, especially at times when there is controversy.

When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable,
but he who restrains his lips is wise. (Prov 10:19)

...*slow to anger* – Words spoken quickly are often generated from anger and rather than helping the situation only make it worse. Righteous anger is that which is controlled by knowledge and by a full and right assessment of the situation. As Kistemaker notes,

Careless words often accompany an angry mood. Of course, there is a place for righteous anger, but the psalmist tells us to know the limit of righteous anger: “In your anger do not sin” (Ps. 4:4). James pleads for restraint in respect to anger.¹

Note as well these verses:

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. (Matt 5:22)

BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, (Eph. 4:26)

...*for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.* – The first important thing to contemplate is how we are to understand what James means by “the righteousness of God.” The phrase itself could mean “the righteousness that God gives,” that is, the imputed righteousness of Yeshua given to every believer. Or, it could mean “the righteousness that God requires,” i.e., the growth in sanctification which is the true mark of every believer. A third option is that the phrase describes

the righteous character of God, that is, “bringing about God’s justice, that is, the accomplishment of that which is justice in God’s eyes, a ‘setting of things to right.’²

1 Kistemaker, *James*, p. 57.

2 McCartney, *James*, p. 115.

The point that James is making here is vital to building and maintaining harmony and longevity for the community of faith, for even though at times being angry about injustice or wrong doing within the community may seem justified, if the manner in which justice is pursued is not in accordance with God's righteous ways, such actions may overcome the current injustice but will almost inevitably do little more than substitute a new of kind of injustice for that which was overcome. James says it succinctly: seeking to dispel unrighteous activities by using unrighteous means simply does not achieve the righteousness of God.

...the righteousness of God is the righteousness that God requires, approves, brings about. In this sense in Scripture things are said to be of God or of Christ when they are effected by his power or commanded in his Word. Thus faith is said to be the work of God (see John 6:29). It is clear that James is using a figure of speech here by which more is intended than said. The apostle means that human anger is so far from working righteousness that it brings all kinds of evil.¹

1 Manton, *James*, p. 138.