

Freddy Fritz / General

New Year's Message / God the Father; Word of God; Goodness of God / Jas 1:16–18  
Every good we need in this life is in and from God.

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# Introduction

Today is January 1, 2023. It is also the Lord's Day. The last time January 1 landed on the Lord's Day was in 2017. And the next time January 1 will land on the Lord's Day is in 2033.

It is wonderful to start off the New Year on the Lord's Day. I planned for this day several months ago. In fact, I even found a sermon title for today's message that I really like and have used it for today's sermon: "New Year, Same God."

Last week, my Facebook posts showed one of the pages I follow. His page is called "The Unappreciated Pastor." I noticed that he posted a question on his page that asked for his followers to list "lame sermon titles for New Year's Day..." Several dozen were listed and I smiled as I scrolled through some of the following lame sermon titles for New Year's day:

- "It Can't Get Any Worse" [Apparently, this pastor had a really bad year!]
- "23 Ideas to Keep Your Pastor from Quitting in '23" [I don't think this was the same pastor, but he also is having a rough time!]
- "One Year Closer to the End Times" [That's true!]
- "I Hope Your Resolutions Last Longer Than This Sermon" [I hope mine do too!]
- "New Year's Day Sermon" [Now I am guessing that not a lot of thought went into that sermon title!]
- "I'm just glad I didn't find the title I'm using in the comments"
- "Years Change, But God Is Still the Same" [to which someone replied, "This will be someone's title"!] ]

That is of course very similar to the title I have for today's sermon. But I like the title for this sermon. And there is a very real truth in the title of the sermon, "New Year, Same God." Yes, it is a new year. And yes, we are still serving the same God, for [Hebrews 13:8](#) reminds us, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

As you look back on the past year, what did you encounter? COVID was still with us, and many people still got sick with COVID, although it did not seem quite so bad for the majority of people. Then there was the war in the Ukraine that is still continuing to this day. Perhaps because of the war, although there are almost certainly other factors involved as well, there was inflation. We all experienced sticker shock for food price increases, gas price increases, and so on. Some among us experienced difficulties with family and friends. And some also experienced unexpected illnesses and losses. Someone once said, "Life really isn't fair. You eat properly, exercise and take good care of yourself for sixty years—and what's your reward? Old age!"

James is the author of the New Testament letter that bears his name. His older brother was Jesus and his younger brothers were Joseph, Simon, and Judas (cf. [Matthew 13:55](#)). James came to believe that his older brother Jesus was indeed the Christ after the death and resurrection of Jesus. By the time of the First General Assembly of the Christian Church in Jerusalem in about 49 AD, James was considered to be one of the leaders of the Christian Church (cf. [Acts 15](#)).

In 44 AD, persecution against the Christians broke out in Judea. Many of them scattered from Jerusalem and Judea. It was shortly after this that James wrote his letter. He wrote this letter "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" ([James 1:1](#)). James' primary theme was how to live faithfully in a culture that was opposed to the gospel. He wrote to tell Christians how to be doers of the word and not merely hearers only.

James began his letter to the dispersed Christians who were facing trials and troubles and temptations with these words in [James 1:2-3](#), "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." The Christians to whom James was writing were struggling with God's role in their struggles. They were facing all kinds of trials and troubles and temptations, and they were even wondering whether God was sending all of this their way. However, James clearly states in [James](#)

[1:13](#), “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.” So, if God does not tempt anyone, where does it all come from? James tells us in verse 14, “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.”

In contrast to the trials and troubles and temptations people experience in life, James wanted to point people to God who gives only good gifts.

## Scripture

Let us read [James 1:16-18](#):

### **James 1:16–18** ESV

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

## Lesson

[James 1:16-18](#) teaches us that every good we need in this life is in and from God.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. God Gives Us Gifts (1:16-17a)
2. God Acts According to His Character (1:17b-c)
3. God Acts According to His Purpose (1:18)

### 1. God Gives Us Gifts (1:16-17a)

First, let us notice that God gives us gifts.

James begins by saying in verse 16, “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.” This verse serves as a transition that links verses 12-15 and verses 17-18. Some commentators believe that verse 16 is conclusion to the previous paragraph. However, most commentators and translators see verse 16 as a transition introducing a new argument.

By the way, before moving on I do want to note that the word for “deceived” in the Greek is an imperative. That is, it is a command. James is saying to his beloved people: “You must not be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters.” God does not tempt anyone with evil. Although God permits evil in this world, he does not inflict it upon his children.

The formula in verse 16, “Do not be deceived,” is a literary device that was sometimes used to introduce a quotation. We have an example of this in [1 Corinthians 15:33](#), “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals.’ ” Paul used this quotation from Menander’s comedy *Thais*.

Therefore, some commentators think that James is also introducing a quotation in verse 17a where he says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.” We don’t know the source of this quotation, but the saying is rhythmic, proverbial, and consists of a pair of similar expressions: “every good gift” and “every perfect gift.” There is some debate whether two ideas are expressed here or just one idea. Most commentators suggest that only one idea is expressed that is captured in the *New International Version* translation of verse 17a, “Every good and perfect gift.”

During the last century, Queen Victoria presented boxes of chocolates to all the men who had served as the Natal volunteers in England’s conflict with the Boers. Shortly after her death, a complaint was made by a number of the volunteers that, due to a shortage in supply, they had not received their chocolates!

The Natal authorities requested the English officials to complete the supply. They were told, however, that it would not be possible to supply any further boxes of chocolates as the autograph of Queen Victoria on the chocolate box was needed. The Queen was dead, and there was no way in which boxes of chocolates could be issued in her name.

Our God is not dead. He is alive and well. He is still sitting on his eternal throne. And we are assured that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.”

Let us learn more about our God who gives us gifts.

## 2. God Acts According to His Character (1:17b-c)

Second, we learn that God acts according to his character.

James teaches us that every good we need in this life is in and from God. James says in verse 17, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” We learn two truths from this verse.

## **A. God Acts as Creator (1:17b)**

First, God acts as creator.

James says in verse 17b that every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, “coming down from the Father of lights.” The God who gives good gifts is characterized as “the Father of lights.” This expression is unique in the Bible. It is found nowhere else. It is a reference to God as the creator of the heavenly bodies, such as the sun, moon, and stars. We read about this in [Genesis 1:14-19](#):

“And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.’ And it was so. And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.”

James wants Christians to know that their God created the entire universe. He was no local god that supposedly controlled just the weather or the harvest or their fertility. No, he is supreme over all things. As Cyril of Alexandria said, “The difference between Creator and created is incomparable.”

## **B. God Acts as One Who Is Immutable (1:17c)**

And second, God acts as one who is immutable.

James says of God in verse 17c, “...with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” This expression is unusual. However, as one commentator observes, rightly I believe:

“It is obvious, however, that the author is simply interested in using the constant changes in the heavenly bodies to point to, indeed highlight, the

unchangeable nature of the Creator God. He is the one who sends all good things; and since he is unchanging, he could never send anything evil, such as temptation to sin. And so, whatever goes wrong, God is not to be blamed.”

God is not fickle. He does not change. And because he does not—indeed, he cannot—change, we can be sure that God always acts in a way that is according to his character.

But why does God act as he does?

### 3. God Acts According to His Purpose (1:18)

It is because, third, God acts according to his purpose.

James says in [James 1:18](#), “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” Here James is speaking as a pastor to the people who are experiencing trials and troubles and temptations. What comfort is there for a Christian undergoing difficulties? It is by knowing God’s purpose.

James used birth as a picture of desire leading to sin and death. He said in [James 1:15](#), “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” That is the negative side. However, positively, James used birth as picture of what God does when he regenerates a person. Note several characteristics of this new birth.

*First, it is divine.* James said, “Of his own will...” This new birth is brought about God. We did not give ourselves the new birth. In [John 3](#), Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’” ([John 3:1-7](#)). Only God can create new spiritual life.

*Second, it is gracious.* James said, “...he brought us forth...” No Christian earns his salvation. No Christians deserves salvation. God gives new spiritual life because of his own mercy and grace, as he said of believers in [John 1:13](#), “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of

God.” As Warren Wiersbe said, “No one can be born again because of his relatives, his resolutions, or his religion.” The new birth is entirely the work of God.

*Third, it is through God’s word.* James said that God brought us forth “by the word of truth....” Warren Wiersbe says, “Just as human birth requires two parents, so divine birth has two parents: the Word of God and the Spirit of God.” Peter says in [1 Peter 1:23](#), “Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.” And John says in [John 3:6](#), “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The Spirit of God uses the word of God to bring about the miracle of the new birth.

*And fourth, it is the best birth possible.* James said, “...that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” When James wrote these words to the Christians in the Dispersion, they would have known exactly what James meant by this expression. The word “firstfruits” was meaningful to them. God’s people in ancient times brought the firstfruits of their harvest to the Lord as an expression of their devotion and obedience to him. They were to bring the very best to the Lord. [Proverbs 3:9](#) says, “Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce.” But here, in [James 1:18](#), James flips the expression. Believers are the firstfruits of God’s creation. Of all that God has produced in creation, born-again believers are the very best and finest. We share God’s nature. We share in his blessings.

Thus, believers are reminded that God’s gifts are always good and they are always perfect. And as Alexander Maclaren said, “We cannot get Christ’s gifts without himself.” That is the ultimate and best gift: Christ. Sadly, however, as Augustine of Hippo said, “It is easy to want things from the Lord and yet not want the Lord Himself; as though the gift could ever be preferable to the Giver.”

One pastor said,

There are many reasons God saves you: to bring glory to himself, to appease his justice, to demonstrate his sovereignty. But one of the sweetest reasons God saved you is because he is fond of you. He likes having you around. He thinks you are the best thing to come down the pike in quite a while.

If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, he'll listen. He can live anywhere in the universe, and he chose your heart. And the Christmas gift he sent you in Bethlehem? Face it, friend. He's crazy about you!

## Conclusion

Therefore, as we begin 2023, let us believe that all we need in this life is in and from God.

As we begin this new year, let us remember that we are still serving and worshiping the same God. He does not change. He is the creator of the entire universe. And he created you to demonstrate his love and grace to a watching world. So, no matter what trials or troubles or temptations you face, you can do so because you belong to God.

It is hard to shake off a mother's influence. John Newton's earliest memories were of his godly mother who, despite fragile health, devoted herself to nurturing his soul. At her knee he memorized Bible passages and hymns. Though she died when he was about seven, he later recalled her tearful prayers for him.

After her death, John alternated between boarding school and the high seas, wanting to live a good life but nonetheless falling deeper and deeper into sin. Pressed into service with the British Navy, he deserted, was captured, and after two days of suspense, was flogged. His subsequent thoughts vacillated between murder and suicide. "I was capable of anything," he recalled.

More voyages, dangers, toils, and snares followed. It was a life unrivaled in fiction. Then, on the night of March 9, 1748, John, age 23, was jolted awake by a brutal storm that descended too suddenly for the crew to foresee. The next day, in great peril, he cried to the Lord. He later wrote, "That tenth of March is a day much remembered by me; and I have never suffered it to pass unnoticed since the year 1748—the Lord came from on high and delivered me out of deep waters."



The next several years saw slow, halting spiritual growth in John, but in the end he became one of the most powerful evangelical preachers in British history, a powerful foe of slavery, and the author of hundreds of hymns.

John Newton's best-known hymn is "Amazing Grace." It is a favorite hymn of many people; and it is my all-time favorite hymn. Perhaps you'll be surprised to learn that "Amazing Grace" is a New Year's hymn. Two hundred and fifty years ago today, on Friday morning, January 1, 1773, John Newton, former slave trader and infidel, preached a New Year's message from [1 Chronicles 17:16-17](#) in his church at Olney, England. Newton opened his sermon, saying, "The Lord bestows many blessings upon His people, but unless He likewise gives them a thankful heart, they lose much of the comfort they might have." He told his church to look back at God's goodness, look around at God's promises, and look forward to future usefulness. In concluding, Newton introduced a poem he'd written for the occasion, the hymn "Amazing Grace." Here are some of the words of the song:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That sav'd a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,

And grace my fears reliev'd;

How precious did that grace appear,

The hour I first believ'd!

Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,

I have already come;

'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,  
The sun forbear to shine;  
But God, who call'd me here below,  
Will be forever mine.

As you start this New Year of 2023, if you are not yet a Christian, let me urge you to turn to Jesus. Believe that he is the Savior sent by God to save a sinner like you. You may think that your sin is too great or too different for Jesus to cover. But don't you believe that. Jesus paid the penalty for the most heinous of sins. So, turn to him and believe that he paid the penalty for all your sin. And then forsake your sins. Repent of all your sins. Have nothing more to do with them.

And if you are a Christian as you start this New Year, believe that all you need in this life is in and from God. He is the same yesterday and today and forever. He is the Creator of the Universe. He is Immutable and never changes. He has given you a new birth so that you are the firstfruits of all his creatures. Believe that God has everything under his control for his glory and your eternal good. Amen.