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James 1:16-18, ESV.

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters. ¹⁷Every 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. ¹⁸Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

The woman with one thumb.

A while back, I got to know a patient who was in the hospital for quite some time. She was very young and was an avid rock climber. She got stranded in the mountains in a storm that was predicted to be mild but turned out to be a full-blown blizzard. As always, I am changing details of her story to protect her privacy. She ended up with severe frostbite. She was helicoptered to the hospital, and they were able to save her life – but she lost all of her toes and fingers, except for one thumb. I first visited her, at the request of her mother, when she was in the ICU, awaiting surgery. They were waiting several days, trying to save as much of her feet and hands as possible. The doctors were hoping that some of her fingers and toes would spring back to life and that they wouldn't have to amputate all of them. When I saw her, her fingers and toes were black. I visited her many times, as she went through multiple surgeries and while she recovered enough to go home. The

first time I went in, I had expected her to be distraught, but she was too much in shock and had not yet fully processed what had happened to her. She was on pain killers and not fully coherent; I simply chatted with her, and when she said that she was a Christian asked me to say a prayer, I offered a prayer of healing and of a long, joyful life. But a week later, when I went into her room for the second time, she was fully awake and fully aware that she was going to lose her fingers and the front half of each foot. What struck me was that she was not distraught. She was looking out her window at a green field and at a line of cottonwoods in the distance at the end of the field. She spoke before I said anything. She had heard me walk into the room and without seeing me, recognized my footsteps. She said that climbing had been a great gift from God. She had loved spending the morning going up a steep, rocky hillside and then spending part of the afternoon at the top, enjoying the view. She would pray at the top, imagining nothing between her and God. She always took safety seriously, using ropes and wearing a helmet. Her main worry was her parents: she did not want to hurt them by being hurt. Once, she broke an arm and almost hid it from them. Then she turned and looked at me. I told her that I had talked to her mother, and that her mother would be okay. She was relieved that her daughter would live. I told this patient that I could tell how deeply her mother loved her. Then we talked a long time about loss and grieving. She said

that she would never climb again, but she would still be able to look out at the world that God gave her as a home. She asked me to end with a prayer.

During one of my last visits with her, after the bandages had been taken off her hands and feet, but before the stitches were removed, she said that she was feeling antsy and needed something to pass the time. I offered her books and said that I would ask the physical and occupational therapists to set her up with whatever she need to read them. She asked me if I had any art supplies. I said that I had adult coloring books and colored markers. I brought those to her. She specifically asked me to not talk to the therapists, that she wanted to see what she could do on her own, without any assistive devices. Then, near the end of her stay at the hospital, I visited her again. She had been coloring in the complex patterns in the adult coloring book. She handed me one of them, something that she had drawn with her single remaining thumb, the tip of which, by the way, had been cut off. It was a flower pattern and she had filled it in with reds and yellows. She told me that she appreciated my visits and wished she had something better to give me. I told her that this was a perfect gift, and that although she had given it to me, it had originated with God. Wendy later had it framed and put under glass, and it hangs on the wall of my office at home. This patient did, of course, recognize my Bible reference. She knew the Bible extremely well. I was referring to our quote

today: James 1:16-18. *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.*

The Book of James is a letter that is thought to have been written by the brother of Jesus or perhaps by a follower of James. In the latter case, this person chose to dedicate the letter to James by naming it after him; this was a common practice at the time and not an attempt to trick anyone. If the letter was written by the true brother of Jesus, we should note that he did lead the church in Jerusalem, and so it would make sense that he was the author. Recent academic studies have suggested that the letter is indeed real, in that it represents the oral teachings of Jesus' younger brother, as written down by a disciple of his; it was then circulated as a letter. The letter is written in very polished Greek by a gifted writer who was quite literate – something that would not describe a member of Jesus' relatively poor and uneducated family. Analysis of the letter indicates that the author was unaware of events that occurred in the year 70 A.D. and after. This strongly suggests that it is a contemporary letter, written during the life of the brother of Jesus. It is also not structured like a true letter of the time, since it does not have a prayer-wish at the beginning, a personal greeting at the end, or any mention of to whom the letter is written. It is probably authentic, written by someone fluent in Greek and who was being instructed directly by the brother of

Jesus. This letter is also one of the few surviving documents that we have that represent something that was thriving in the decades after the life of Jesus – Jews who identified as still being Jewish, but also as being followers of Christ. The movement died out, but in his day, James was one of the leaders of this movement. For us to fully appreciate the meaning of the passage I want to look at, we do need to keep in mind that this was written by a Jewish Christian to other Jewish Christians. Let's look more closely at our passage:

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters. ¹⁷Every 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. ¹⁸Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

This passage tells us two things. First, our worldly perspective is all wrong; we should not be centered on the things of this world and on what earthly joys they can give us. Rather, James is saying that starting with the gift of this world as our temporary home and our creation in the image of God, to the gift of Jesus coming to offer us peace, forgiveness, and love for all people, all gifts that have any true value do come directly from God. Second, God creates us so that we by our nature have the ability to become believers, and that we are product of pure truth. The part that says, "*with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change,*" has been a focus of a lot of conjecture over the centuries. It's something that we pass

over quickly, but in truth has a deep meaning. On one level it simply says that God doesn't change, that we can count on God always being the God of gifts, that God is the source of all that has value.

But what caused James to use these exact words, "*with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change,*"? It's believed that this refers to the changing of the length of shadows cast by the sun, depending on the time of year. The people of James' day knew that the things of this world couldn't be counted on, that they were constantly changing – and that they changed in a way they couldn't understand – not at the time. They didn't know why shadows changed from season to season, as they believed that the Earth was a static, stable object. They didn't have the knowledge of astronomy that we have. It was a great mystery that shadows changed in their length. So, in a very fundamental, physical way, they knew that God was indeed their only constant. Imagine if they were told that the reason shadows varied in their length was because the Earth was this tilted sphere constantly in motion – that would have convinced them all the more that the gifts from God were all that gave them constancy, all that rooted them in the cosmos.

There is more to the line "*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*" James, the kid brother of Jesus the Christ is saying that when we accept the truth, when we embrace God

and decide to live the way God wants us to live, and when we take the next step and follow the teachings of Christ – we are indeed like new births. Remember that James and his people were Jews. They lived by the Old Covenant and were very new to the New Covenant. They understood that under the Old Covenant God would give them three things: 1) God’s blessing, 2) land that was their own so that they would no longer be wanderers, and 3) progeny. This tradition was largely rooted in the fact that there was disagreement among Jews as to whether there was an afterlife. For those who did not believe that we lived after death, progeny and land for their descendants to live on was a sort of afterlife. Children were their spiritual and literal future. It was a strong statement of James’ to draw a parallel between the promise of progeny and the transformation of becoming a new person under Christ. For the Jewish believers, those Jews who lived mostly in and around Jerusalem – but who were also scattered lightly around their greater known-world – and who were followers of Christ, this was a link between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. We, as followers of Jesus, are the new progeny, the promise of an eternal future. We no longer need physical children to have an eternal future.

I’d like to get back to the woman who gave me the gift of a colored-in page from an adult coloring book. I don’t know what became of her after she left the hospital. She never finished high school. She told me though that she was going

to finish school and then go to college. She said that she would be older than other students and it would make her feel uncomfortable. I of course encouraged her, telling her that she had many decades ahead of her. I also said that I started at the seminary at the age of 59. On our last visit, she grew a little teary and said that she was afraid of going back to school with younger kids and being the old student who had to walk with a cane and who couldn't type properly on a notebook computer. I reminded her of what she had done with her single, damaged thumb. I told her that her coloring was on the wall of my office. She laughed and said that it was just something from a coloring book, that it had no business on anyone's wall. I told her that she drew it with one thumb and that it was incredible, and I reminded her that it was God who gave it to me. I hope she did indeed go back to school and that she has the courage to see it through. She could do a lot for the world.

This woman who was left with one thumb but would not allow her faith or her optimism to be killed offered up a gift in two ways. First, she gave me something that I will always treasure, something that I will look at on my wall every single day – and remember the way she chose to trust God. Second, she is a gift to all of us. Every believer, every person who chooses to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, is a piece of that new future, the one promised under the New Covenant, brought to us by Jesus. The New Covenant is God's promise that sin can be

forgiven, that we can be regenerated, and that we can walk in the Kingdom of God now and for all of eternity. We do not live like the Chosen People of the Old Testament, relying on prophets to be our connection to God. We have a direct connection. Each of us has God's grace within us. Each of us has the fire of the Holy Spirit within us. And each of us can walk with God every day. We can walk with God forever. The woman with one thumb will always symbolize for me the New Covenant. She is a gift from above. She is a first fruit, and for me, she is an amazing example of a first fruit, one that puts me to shame. I have not suffered the trials that she has, and I certainly faced nothing like her pain, her fear, her disability when I was that young. I don't know if my faith would have held up. That colored-in drawing on my wall, matted with a white frame, tells me every single day that God indeed gives us the greatest gifts. Please pray with me.

God, let us never forget that all of the gifts that we receive, all of the ones that have any true value, originate with you. And perhaps the biggest gift we have is the ability to know you and follow you - and to walk in your Kingdom forever.

Amen.