

Wiseguy

Studies in the Book of James

Text

James 1:13-18

Topic

James encourages us to overcome temptation because we are the first-fruits of the harvest who go forward with the Gospel

Title

"Put Your Best Fruit Forward"

Introduction

It seems like every-other movie being released is a superhero film.

Dr. Strange is in theaters now. At least eight more Marvel superhero movies are planned between now and 2019.

DC Comics plans to release two movies per year between now and 2020.

Every time a superhero is introduced, we get his or her origin story:

- Young Bruce Wayne's parents were killed before his eyes, providing his motivation for Batman to patrol the streets of Gotham City.
- When Krypton was imploding, Kal El's parents launched him to earth where he would be Superman.

- Bruce Banner hulks-out because of his accident with gamma radiation.

Of course, every superhero has his or her own arch villains - who require their own origin stories.

I got to thinking about this because of something James mentions in verse eighteen of chapter one in his letter. He calls his audience the "first-fruits of [God's] creatures."

It's more than a metaphor. **It's an origins story.**

"First-fruits" is connected to the Jewish feasts of First-fruits, and of Pentecost.

Jesus rose from the dead on the Feast of First-fruits. About ten days after He ascended into Heaven; His disciples were waiting in an upper room on the Day of Pentecost. The promise of the Holy Spirit came upon them like a mighty, rushing wind. Tongues of fire rested upon them. They were all filled with the Spirit, and began praising God in languages they had never learned, but which the crowds gathered in the Temple understood in their various native tongues.

The church was born. By calling them the "first-fruits," James reminded them of their origin as the church.

Why remind them? In the context of these verses, remembering their origin would accomplish two things:

1. First, remembering their origin would put the temptations they were struggling with into perspective.
2. Second, remembering their origin would remind them of their mission to share their testimony.

There is a sense in which every Christian of the church age is part of "the first-fruits of [God's] creatures." What was written to them is written to us.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You're The First-fruits Of His Creatures Who Understand The Source Of Your Temptation, and #2 You're The First-fruits Of His Creatures Who Undertake The Sharing Of Your Testimony.

#1 You're The First-fruits Of His Creatures Who Understand The Source Of Your Temptation

(v13-16)

Superhero associations have really cool names: The Avengers... The Justice League... The X-Men... The Fantastic Four... Guardians of the Galaxy.

I have to admit, "The First-fruits of God's Creatures" isn't all that exciting a name. But what it means is spiritually powerful.

James won't mention "first-fruits" until verse eighteen, but it's so important in this section that we need to discuss it before anything else.

"First-fruits" means very little to us on first-reading, because we are Gentile Christians. Remember, though, that James was writing to "the twelve tribes scattered abroad." He was writing to the first generation of Christians - who were all Jews by birth.

Furthermore, James was writing only about ten to fifteen years after the birth of the church.

Use the word "first-fruits" writing to Messianic Jews about ten years old in the Lord, and you evoked thoughts of the feasts of First-fruits and Pentecost.

Jesus rose from the dead on the Feast of First-fruits. He also gave the Father His proper first-fruits offering: a few graves were opened and dead people rose and were seen after His resurrection in Jerusalem (Matthew 27:53). Our Lord gratefully brought before the Father a few early "crops" of what would be an ongoing harvest throughout the church age.

The Feast of Pentecost occurs fifty days after First-fruits. It represents the summer harvest - larger than the first, but still not the final ingathering.

On the Day of Pentecost, when the church was born, three thousand people were saved as a result of Peter's preaching of the Gospel. Along with the one hundred twenty believers in the upper room, they became the first-fruits of a greater harvest of souls to come.

Every person saved throughout church history is a kind of first-fruits of the greater, final harvest at the end of the ages, when God's people will be complete.

That's what "first-fruits" would have meant to James' original audience.

What about this word, "creatures" - "first-fruits of His creatures?" It means we are new *creations* in Jesus Christ. It means we have God the Holy Spirit living in us, as the promise that one day the work God has begun in us will be completed. We will be raised, or raptured, in a glorious, eternal body, incapable of sin.

On top of all that, we are commissioned to go tell others, so that they can receive the Lord. It's incredible.

But it's also difficult. While we wait for the Lord's appearing, we have many trials. James dealt with our trials in the opening verses, telling us to "count it all joy," and to "endure," our trials.

Now James turns his attention from external trials to internal temptations.

Jas 1:13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.

It seems an abrupt statement, coming out of nowhere. Were Messianic Jews really saying this? Were they blameshifting to God?

The classic biblical example of blameshifting is Adam and Eve. And since it involved the first sin, it sets a precedent.

God gave our first parents one prohibition: Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Eve ate, and gave to her husband, Adam, and he ate. The rest is, as they say, history: sin and death began to reign in a now fallen creation.

When God asked Adam about it, he blamed Eve. When God asked Eve, she blamed the devil. That's blameshifting.

But Adam did more than blame Eve. Adam said to God, "The woman *whom you gave to be with me*, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." (Genesis 3:12).

He implied that he would have remained innocent if God hadn't put Eve in the garden with him.

Likewise Eve blamed the serpent - thereby blaming God for creating him, and for allowing him to tempt her.

*Thus we see that all blameshifting, ultimately, **is** blaming God.*

If you are not taking personal responsibility for your sin, you are blameshifting - **to God**.

All of a sudden this is totally applicable to each of us, everyday.

James points out the folly of blaming God. "God cannot be tempted by evil." It means that God is so wonderful that He couldn't think of a way to tempt you to sin if He wanted to!

Since it is not in His nature to be able to tempt you, you can always be certain that God tempts no one.

In mythology, the gods are always flawed, and they frequently wreak havoc on mankind. They are temptable, and they tempt.

We create gods that are temptable, and who tempt, because WE are flawed in those ways. We tend to project this on God in our temptations.

As first-fruits of His creatures, having been born-again, and having received God the Holy Spirit, we understand that God is incapable of such things.

[Jas 1:14](#) But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.

Most commentators see this as a fishing analogy, because "enticed" carries the idea of being *lured*.

The world of fishing lures is impressive. They've got some crazy names: the Storm Kickin Goby, the Zara Spook, the Original Gitzit, the Gibbs Pencil Popper, and (my favorite) the Swedish Pimple.

Some spin; some make noise; some give off a scent. But they are all designed to attract fish, to get them to bite.

They appeal to some "desire" in the fish, namely, to eat.

We don't want to push this analogy too far, and here's why. We can't really blame the fish for wanting to eat. We are fooling him, making him think the lure is his food when, in fact, the fish is going to become *our* food.

In our case, **we know the "lure" is evil**. We are not fooled by it, unless we deceive ourselves about it.

It isn't our normal, natural "desires" that James is highlighting, but, rather, our desire to gratify our appetites in excessive ways, or in ways that we know to be wrong or evil or sinful.

When that spam e-mail arrives, mentioning "Russian brides," I can be pretty certain that if I click on it, to open it, I'm going to see something that appeals to my basest desires. It's a lure to my lusts.

I'm not being fooled; I'm deciding to be a fool.

You are born-again, with the Holy Spirit residing in you.

You are guaranteed by Him that you will one day be complete. In the mean time, you find the flesh still hanging on, seeking to fulfill its appetites in sinful ways.

It's not God tempting you. The problem is within you.

Notice, too, that James uses the words, "his **own** desires." Not everyone has the same desires. A failure to recognize this tends to make us less compassionate.

For example I have no desire to gamble. Maybe it's because I'm so bad at most games. I still don't know how to play Hearts - even though Pam has taught me a million times. She can 'shoot the moon' and I have no idea what she's up to.

I'll play a card, and she'll say, "Why did you do that?"

Some people have a real gambling problem. A few years ago I was involved with a fellow, trying to help him, who had rung-up over \$20,000.00 in credit card debt patronizing our various local casinos.

We need to be considerate of the struggles that others have, if we are going to be able to help them, and not stumble them.

I should refuse to yield to these desires; and I *can*, thanks to Pentecost and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

If instead I indulge myself, there are going to be consequences.

Jas 1:15 Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

It may sound crude, but if you have intercourse, you just might conceive a baby.

If you yield to lust, it **will** conceive, and a hideous baby named "sin" will be born.

"Full grown" is a scary term. It can mean that sin comes to full maturity as a settled habit of my life. You might call it a life-dominating sin.

A small indulgence can become so dominating that it ruins your life, and the lives of those you love.

It "brings forth death." That can't be good. We need reminding that sin kills things.

In the Garden of Eden, Satan told Eve that eating the forbidden fruit would be a good thing, to bring her and Adam into a greater knowledge of life.

She thought her quality of life would improve. It's a grass-is-greener thing. I convince myself that what God calls sin is really good for me, better for me. That it will improve my life.

Did eating the forbidden fruit improve Eve's quality of life? Quite the opposite. It brought death. Adam and Eve died spiritually, they began to die physically - and ultimately they did die.

Worse, they brought down the whole creation, and passed-on a sin nature to their offspring.

Every sickness, every suffering, every hurt, every evil that you see in the world, is part of the death from that original sin.

Many of you have experienced death as a result of your sin; or as a result of the sin of another person in a relationship with you. Sin killed a marriage, a family, a career, a church.

In some cases, sin literally kills someone, e.g., drunken driving.

Sin can only kill. It may not kill at first, or all at once. But death on some level will be the result.

Jas 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

As I said earlier, we are not being fooled into sinning. We are deceiving ourselves.

If you've fished, you've probably hooked yourself with a lure. Not on purpose, of course.

What James is saying is that sin is like a fisherman knowingly swallowing a lure, but thinking it's OK because you're hungry and it looks so good.

Let's get serious. Some of us might be in one of these stages right now: desire... conception... birth.

I read one commentator who referred to this progression as the *source*, the *course*, and the *force*:

- Desire describes the source of sin. No matter that you have been born-again, you still find within you the flesh as a source that gravitates towards sin.
- Conception describes the course of sin. You entertain your desires, letting them run their course, going way beyond the boundaries God has set for their normal range.

- Birth describes the force of sin. Once conceived, it becomes a force in your life, draining energy and strength as it grows.

Believe James, that it can only lead to sin and death. Take responsibility and repent before something precious dies.

Quit all blameshifting; take personal responsibility for your attitudes and actions.

Here is the beauty of it: Because you are in this exclusive association, as one of the "First-fruits of His Creatures," you absolutely *can* take responsibility, and refuse to yield to your lusts, no matter the lure.

#2 You're The First-fruits Of His Creatures Who Undertake The Sharing Of Your Testimony

(v17-18)

Super heroes usually rise to some enemy. The Avengers were assembled when Loki was bargaining with an alien race to take over the earth as its emperor.

What is the enemy that the First-fruits of His Creatures has risen to overcome?

Nothing less than the Gates of Hell.

The phrase the "gates of Hell" is found only once in the entire Scriptures, in Matthew 16:18; but it is pertinent to our discussion, because it involves the church and our mission. In this passage, Jesus was referring to the building of His church: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it."

In ancient times, the cities were surrounded by walls with gates, and in battles the gates of these cities would usually be the first place their enemies assaulted. This was because the protection of the city was determined by the strength or power of its gates.

The gates of Hell cannot prevail against the First-fruits of His Creatures. We will accomplish our mission, from generation to generation, until Jesus comes for us.

Jas 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

In context, once you read verse eighteen, you can argue that the "good and perfect gift... from above" that came "down" was the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

That is, I think, what one of these scattered Messianic Jews would get from James mentioning "first-fruits." The words "Father" and "gift" are reminiscent of things Jesus said about the Holy Spirit:

- Jesus called the coming of the Holy Spirit upon His disciples "the promise of the **Father**" (Acts 1:4).
- Jesus once said, "If you then... know how to give **good gifts** to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:13).

James uses the word "good" in that same way - to describe the act of giving. It is supremely "good" of God to give us the Holy Spirit.

"Perfect" describes the gift itself. It can mean that the gift is complete, having everything you could ever require.

Jesus said that, after He went to Heaven, the Holy Spirit would come to be with us, and be just as perfect and helpful to us as Himself.

Being born-again, and having the Holy Spirit, is, then, just like having Jesus 24/7.

"Father of lights" is most likely a Jewish expression for God as the Creator, taken from the Genesis account of creation.

It makes sense that James would mention God as Creator because we are His **new** creations, the first-fruits that promise one day God will create a new earth and new heavens.

God's original creation was marred, but He has redeemed it, and will recreate it.

The apostle Paul wrote,

Rom 8:19 For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God...

Rom 8:21 ... because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Rom 8:22 For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

Rom 8:23 Not only that, but we also who have the **first-fruits** of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

There is a cosmic drama of redemption being played-out on the earth as men and women are saved. We are headed toward the consummation of God's plan to save us, and enjoy fellowship with us as new creatures in His new creation.

"With whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." The lights God created - the sun and the stars - may be stunning, but they all have variations, and they cast shadows (or cause them to be cast).

I think this, too, looks forward to the new creation. In the Revelation of Jesus Christ, we read,

Rev 21:23 The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.

Rev 22:5 There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.

No more springing ahead and falling behind. No more sun at all - just the pure light emanating from the Lord.

Verse seventeen, then, tells us what we have now on the earth, the Holy Spirit, as we are looking forward to the consummation of the age, and the new creation.

Jas 1:18 Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures.

"Brought us forth" is the new birth. It is being born-again. It is regeneration.

"Of His own will" doesn't just mean it was the act of God operating by grace upon us. **It means that regeneration is the will of God for mankind.**

It's in harmony with Peter saying that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all would come to eternal life.

Of course, not everyone will be saved. Jesus is the Savior of all men - especially those who believe. You must believe in Him to be saved.

"By the word of truth"; well that's a reference to the Gospel. God uses His Word to free the will of sinners so they can receive or reject Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Put yourself in this verse. If you were saved later in life, someone shared the Gospel with you, and you understood you were a sinner in need of salvation.

You understood that it was God's will you be saved, rather than perish eternally.

You received Jesus by grace, with no works of righteousness on your part.

And you received the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit - the good and perfect gift of the Father.

You became one of the "First-fruits of His Creatures."

What do first-fruits do? They share their testimony with lost sinners, to bring them into the harvest of souls that cannot be stopped in the church age in which we live.

Let me tell you a little more about the Feast of Pentecost.

Or, rather, let's listen to Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum:

In the Old Testament, two loaves of bread were to be offered on a single sheet and waved before the Lord. The Feast of Pentecost was fulfilled by the birthday of the Church, which is composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers united into one Body. One loaf represents the Jews, one loaf represents the Gentiles, and the single sheet represents the fact that Jewish and Gentile believers are united into one Body.

Another thing learned from the Old Testament observance of this feast is that these loaves were to be leavened (Leviticus 23:17). Leaven, when used symbolically in Scripture, is a symbol of sin. It is Jewish and Gentile sinners who are saved by grace through faith and are brought into this one Body, the Church.

Furthermore, these loaves were to be made of wheat. Wheat and harvest are common symbols of evangelism and salvation in the Gospels. In Matthew 3:11-12, the concepts of wheat and harvest are also connected with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which began on the Feast of Pentecost, thereby bringing the Church into existence.

If we see all these connections, the way a scattered, Messianic Jew would have, then James' comments are incredibly encouraging.

They help us to defeat sin; and in our declaring of the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ.