“THE FATHER OF LIGHTS”

Kevin Cauley

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INTRODUCTION

If you have ever been camping at night, then you are familiar with a flashlight. One strange thing about flashlights is that the beam always contains a shadow. Some of the newer flashlights have a focus mechanism. One may intensify the light, but can still always see a few veins of shadow running through it. This always puzzled me as a boy, because I expected the light coming out of my flashlight to be perfect, containing no shadow. However, imperfections in the light source cast these shadows in the beam, and result in an imperfect beam.

To my knowledge, James, the half-brother of Jesus, never held a flashlight. However, he would have been familiar with the various lamps of his time. These included the clay pots which held and burned olive oil by means of a wick that protruded through a hole in the end. James may also have been familiar with the Menorah. This was a lamp used during the festival of lights (Hanukkah). Hanukkah commemorated the cleansing of the temple after its defilement by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and is referenced in John 10:22. Such a lamp would have cast shadows on the floor as the lights were lit one at a time each day of the festival. His familiarity with these kinds of lights would have occasioned him to witness a “shadow that is cast by turning” (Jas. 1:17, ASV).

In contrast to such shadows, James writes, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning” (Jas. 1:17, ASV). In the context, James is rebuking those who would suggest that God tempts men with wickedness (Jas. 1:13-15).
God’s tempting men with wickedness would make God the source of wickedness, which He is not. In contrast, only good things can come from God, because God is Good; He is the Divine Source of virtue to which no other can lay claim (Lk. 18:19). Moreover, God is a good giver, and the gifts He gives are also good. Temptation, however, is a bad giver and gives bad gifts, the gifts of sin and death (Jas. 1:15). Such cannot come from the “Father of lights.”

What do we learn about the “Father of lights” from James 1:17? What we learn may be summarized in three statements: 1) The Father of Lights Gives Good Gifts, 2) The Father of Lights Grounds Good Gifts, and 3) The Father of Lights Guarantees Good Gifts. Looking at these three points will help us to focus upon the text and its spiritual application. Studying through this material, one overarching principle must be kept in mind: God is Good; goodness is essential to Who God is. Each one should contemplate God’s infinite goodness as he goes about the business of being an imitator of God in his character (Eph. 5:1).

“THE FATHER OF LIGHTS”

Many commentators construe the expression “Father of lights” to refer to the heavenly bodies. This understanding of the passage, they argue, is rooted in the ancient Hellenistic belief that the heavenly bodies (the stars and planets) were gods. Ferguson attributes these beliefs to Babylonian religion, but also assigns some responsibility to Plato and Aristotle.2 The influence of such beliefs upon first century Judaism reflected “an openness to astrological symbols in some circles, if only to the extent of affirming the subordination of the stars and the natural order to God and his law.”3 Stress should be placed upon “some circles” here. It is true that the hosts of heaven are depicted as God’s creation (Neh. 9:6), but the Old Testament strongly condemns astrology (Deut. 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kgs. 17:7; 23:5).

Early Christians showed no religious respect for astrology. Stephen harshly criticizes the ancient Jews for worshipping the host of heaven (Acts 7:42). Jude, also, uses “wandering stars” to refer to false teachers “to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever” (Ju. 13). Paul speaks degradingly concerning “principalities” (arche) in Ephesians 3:10; 6:12 and Colossians 1:16; 2:15. In the context of these passages, these “principalities” are hostile to God and Christ.4 It is against such wicked spiritual beings that Christians wage spiritual warfare (Eph.
6:12). If these “lights” of James 1:17 are associated with Hellenistic astrology, it is wholly incongruous with the genius of the New Testament, which would, at best, make them out to be wicked spirits. The point of James 1:17 is precisely opposite, namely, that God, the Father of Lights, is the author of all goodness, not, per se, the Father of wicked spirits. One might make the case that these “lights” were created good, and that may be so. However, James’ intention is not to convey that they went bad after their creation. He clearly means “lights” in a positive sense. It follows that this understanding of James 1:17, as referring to the heavenly bodies/spirits, must be rejected, however academically popular it may be, because it is simply inconsistent with James’ main point: God is not the author of wickedness, He is the “Father of lights” and “lights” are good things.

What meaning, then, can be assigned to the expression “Father of lights”? The answer to this question may be found in the Jewish historical context. Many scholars believe the book to have been written early in the history of Christianity, perhaps in the A.D. 40s, before the conversion of Gentiles. The work addresses a Jewish Christian audience. This is, in part, indicated by the use of the Greek word sunagoge and translated “assembly” in James 2:2. Perhaps also James wrote in a cooler season as suggested by the expression “be ye warmed and filled” (Jas. 2:16), and his reference to the time of harvest (Jas. 5:7). All of this suggests that the “lights” of which God is the Father, is related to the festival of dedication, or Hanukkah (Jn. 10:22).

This festival was instituted during the time of Judas Maccabes to commemorate the rededication of the temple after its defilement by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and was held each year starting on the 25th of Kislev (late autumn). Josephus refers to this festival in his Antiquities, saying: “... and from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival.” Inasmuch as “lights” is a Jewish metaphor of liberty, Josephus says, this accords with James’ use of that theme (Jas. 1:25; 2:12). It is more consistent with the context of James to suggest that he speaks of the “Father of lights” in this spirit: the light of truth and liberty of which God is the consummate Father. It may well be that James had the festival of Hanukkah specifically in mind. This is not conclusive, but is reasonable, and a better alternative than the tradi-
tional understanding of the “lights” being the heavenly hosts. This study will proceed with this premise in mind.

THE FATHER OF LIGHTS GIVES GOOD GIFTS

In Greek poetic language (hexameter), James declares: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (Jas. 1:17). This is a universal statement. There is not one single gift that is good that does not come from above. Moreover, if it is not from God, then it is not a good gift. The force of the passage in its context is exclusive. All good gifts come from God, and only good gifts come from God. In other words, something is a good gift, if and only if it comes from God. Reflecting upon this principle, James writes in 3:17, “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.” James’ words also echo Jesus’ statement in Matthew 7:17-18—“Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.” Paul employs the same principle, saying: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting” (Gal. 6:7-8). Regarding men, Jesus says: “A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things” (Mt. 12:35). God is good (Lk. 18:19), so only good fruits can come forth from Him. Hence, all God’s gifts are good, and only good gifts come from God.

Two different Greek words for “gift” are used in James 1:17. The first Greek word is *dosis*. The emphasis of this word is placed on the giving of a gift. The word *dosis* is used primarily for physical things. In the Septuagint, one may find it in Genesis 47:22 referring to food given by Pharoah to his priests. Proverbs 21:14 speaks of the “gift in secret,” implying something monetary. Paul uses the word *dosis* in Philippians 4:15 to refer to the monetary giving the church at Philippi was doing to support his work. A *dosis* was considered less valuable than a *dorema*, the second word for “gift” in James 1:17. A *dorema* literally means, “what is given,” and so the emphasis is upon the gift, not the gaver. The higher value associated with a *dorema* is reflected in Jesus as God’s gift (Rom. 5:16). In using these two words, James’ point
is—whether the gift is great or small, physical or spiritual, whether the focus is upon the giver, or the gift given, God is the source of all, provided that the gift is good.

The adjectives “good” and “perfect” in this verse are predicative: the gift that is good, the gift that is perfect. The Greek word for “good” is *agathos*. It is the typical word used for moral goodness, but is not necessarily limited to morality. The word for “perfect” is *teleios*. It contains the notion of completeness from the standpoint of a thing’s purpose. From these two words we can conclude that God’s gifts are morally pure, and that they fulfill the purpose(s) for which they are being given. These good and perfect gifts, then, reflect upon their Giver, God. God also is morally pure, and fulfills His moral purposes in dispensing His gifts to the world.

As mentioned previously, James’ statement in verse 17 is contrasted with the notion that God tempts man with evil (Jas. 1:13). To the contrary, James argues that God is wholly good and does not tempt with evil. This is primarily seen in His administration of good gifts to the world, both physical and spiritual. God’s physical gifts are provided for all without discrimination according to Matthew 5:45: “… for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” Regarding the physical gifts, a beautiful thought along those lines is found in Acts 14:17, which states: “Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” The seasons, sunshine, rain, food, and temporal mirth associated therewith, are all blessings God bestows upon His creation. Paul said to the Athenians that God “giveth to all life, and breath, and all things” (Acts 17:25). It is God’s great providence that is responsible for these “good gifts” and for such things we ought to be thankful, “For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:4).

God’s spiritual blessings upon man, however, far surpass the physical. The apostle Paul lists some of these blessings in Ephesians 1:3-14. He begins his benediction with the words: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” Among these blessings are: holiness, blamelessness, predestination, sonship, acceptance, redemption, forgiveness of sins, wisdom, knowledge, inheritance, salvation. Truly, we can say with the Psalmist: “Blessed be the Lord,
who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation” (Ps. 68:19). The apostle Peter wrote:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you (1 Pet. 1:3-4).

One would do well to reflect daily upon the great blessings, both physical and spiritual, that God has given. Piermont summed up such blessings when he penned:

For each perfect gift of Thine,
To our race so freely given,
Graces human and divine,
Flowers of earth and buds of Heaven.
Lord of all, to Thee we raise,
This our hymn of grateful praise.8

Truly the Lord, our God, is good, as saith the Psalmist, “The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works” (Ps. 145:9).

THE FATHER OF LIGHTS GROUNDS GOOD GIFTS

James’ words continue: “... and cometh down from the Father of lights” (Jas. 1:17). The word “father” has within it the concept of source, or origination. These good and perfect gifts from above originate with God because He Himself is both good and perfect. God’s very character is described as good by Jesus in Mark 10:18—“... there is none good but one, that is, God.” Psalm 119:68 declares: “Thou art good, and doest good; teach me thy statutes,” and the apostle John wrote: “And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him” (1 Jn. 4:16). Part of the essence of what it means to be God, therefore, is goodness. Stated another way, God cannot be God and be anything other than good.

This concept of God avoids the classic Platonic dilemma as set forth in the Euthyphro—Is that which is good, good because God wills it, or does God will it because it is already good? Suggesting that goodness is simply what God wills, implies that God is arbitrary and capricious. Suggesting that God wills good because it is already good, implies that there is some standard above God. The Bible’s conception of God as the source/origin of goodness passes through the horns of the dilemma by pointing out that there is a third alternative, i.e., God is
intrinsic nature. Neither is the good something higher to which God appeals for His goodness, because goodness intrinsic to God’s character cannot be above God. In this regard, God is the ultimate ground of that which is good.

God’s goodness is often contested by the atheist and skeptic. Their primary argument against God is the existence of evil in the world. They reason that if a good and omnipotent God exists, He would desire to eliminate evil completely, and that He would be powerful enough to eliminate evil completely. Since He does not eliminate evil completely, they conclude, a God that is both good and omnipotent must not exist. They will also cite passages such as Isaiah 45:7 (“I ... create evil”) to show that the God of the Bible is actually directly responsible for moral evil.9 Briefly, one may respond in the following way.

In order for absolute and objective evil to exist in the world, an absolute and objective source of good (God) must exist in order to judge evil to be what it is. For the skeptic and the atheist, the question of the existence of evil in the world is ultimately self-defeating, because it requires that they acknowledge either: 1) the existence of God as the ultimate standard for right and wrong, or 2) that good and evil simply do not ultimately exist, which some contemporary atheists have frankly admitted.10 All bases for criticizing God depend upon the existence of some absolute and objective evil. To suggest that evil exists in some lesser form implies that it really is no evil at all, and therefore not a source of evidence for incompatibility with God. This ultimately means that if absolute and objective acts of evil exist, then they are wholly compatible with God’s existence as an absolutely and objectively good Being. God is not the source of evil, but without God’s existence evil could not be possible. God, therefore, becomes the ground of all good things. He must be the ground of all good things.

THE FATHER OF LIGHTS GUARANTEES GOOD GIFTS

James 1:17 concludes: “... with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” Whether, as we discussed earlier, James has in mind the heavenly lights, or earthly lights, their light is limited. Both heavenly and earthly lights cast shadows, which imply their imperfection. Their light can be blocked, impeded, absorbed, and dissolved. The source of their light is also temporal, and subject to entropy; it flickers
and dies. Even the stars, per theory, have an end and go out. No such things can be said for the “Father of lights.” Unlike physical light, God’s “light” is intrinsic to His being. Unlike everything created, which needs an explanation for itself that is outside of itself, God is the sufficient explanation for Himself; He explains Himself by Himself. Paul states: “[God] only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen” (1 Tim. 6:16). We ought not to think of Paul’s assertion, “to whom be honour and power everlasting,” as an ascription, but as a statement of being. The words “to whom,” which are in Greek simply a single character, ὅ, may be construed in the fullest sense of the form including dative, locative, and instrumental notions: to whom, by whom, and in whom is honor and power everlasting. The apostle John reflects this state of being when he writes: “This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5).

God’s light is the light of truth and liberty. Jesus said: “But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God” (Jn. 3:21). He further states: “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). Truth and liberty have a relationship. Belief and practice of the one result in the other. God’s truth penetrates into the deepest recesses of the hearts and minds of men. John wrote that Jesus “was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (Jn. 1:9). Every man then has a choice as to what to do with this light, for he cannot escape it. That light will shine deep within him, and reveal the secrets of his own heart (1 Cor. 14:25). If he is honest with this heavenly beam, he will seek to walk in the light of life (Jn. 8:12). If he loves evil, the light will be abhorrent to him; “For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved” (Jn. 3:20). Regardless, Jesus penetrates into and knows the thoughts of every man’s heart (Acts 1:24; Rev. 2:23).

God’s light is capable of such things because God, as its source, is immutable, unchanging. In Malachi 3:6, God says: “For I am the Lord, I change not.” God’s essential nature is such that it cannot be altered. This is another one of God’s attributes. For God’s nature to change would imply that God is not God. In such a case, He would be no
different than a man, but God is not man that He should change. “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?” (Num. 23:19). Hebrews 6:17, as well, declares that God’s counsel is immutable. In Romans 11:29, a passage closely parallel to James 1:17, the apostle Paul writes: “For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.” God does not go back on His word; He keeps His promises; He does not lie (Tit. 1:2). Once again, this is because of Who God is, and what it means for God to be God.

Philosophically, this remains unchallenged. Something that changes becomes something other than what it was. Hence, at time “T1,” if we characterize something as essentially “X” (that is, “X” is necessary to its being what it is), and “X” changes, then at time “T2” (after “X” has changed), it must be not “X.” Applying this to the essential nature of God, if such nature were to change, then God would, necessarily, cease to be God. God’s essential nature must remain the same. However, for His essential nature to remain the same, His being/existence must remain the same, for that which is essential to God cannot be essential without an essential and necessary existential ground for such a nature. It follows, then, that God’s existence is also essential to His nature and that God, as was declared to Moses so long ago, is the great I AM. “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Ex. 3:14).

God, as the ground of ultimate being, is thus also the ground of ultimate truth, and right action, or morality. The Ground of all things that exist cannot entail contradiction to those things, neither can the Ground of all things oppose the purpose of all things. In seeking to fulfill the ultimate purpose of a thing, which thing is grounded in God (ultimately) it may be said that one does good. It follows that God is ultimately good, and that His essential nature of goodness cannot be altered. He who is the Father of Lights, cannot vary, and does not cast shadows. He penetrates through all existing things by virtue of His being their ultimate ground of being. His light knows no barrier. It cannot be blocked, impeded, absorbed, or dissolved. It is not temporal, not subject to entropy, and never flickers, or dies. Those who seek to impede it are consumed by it (Num. 16:26). Only those who walk in it may dwell with it. Such is the nature of God’s being and the “light” that proceeds forth from Him.
CONCLUSION

In the proceedings of the U.S. Naval institute is a story of two battleship training squadrons conducting maneuvers off the California coast. Becoming lost in a fog, the lookout reported a light on the starboard bow. The Captain inquired as to whether it was steady or moving. “Steady” came the reply, which meant the squadron was on a collision course. The captain of the squadron ordered the signalman, “Signal that ship that we are on a collision course and have them change course twenty degrees.” The signal came back, “You change course twenty degrees.” The captain ordered the reply, “I am the senior captain, change your course twenty degrees.” The reply was: “I am a seaman second class. Change your course twenty degrees.” The captain became angry and signaled, “We are a battleship squadron! Change your course immediately!” The return signal was simply: “I am a lighthouse.” The squadron changed course.

While amusing, this story illustrates a great truth. The “Father of lights” does not change course. He is the one who is steady and true, and to His will, all must conform. When He replies, “Change course,” man must alter his direction lest He be cast upon the rocks, and be lost. His message is good because He is good, and so seeks to fulfill our highest purposes. The gifts He bestows steer to the safe course, and ultimately bring one to a safe harbor. His light cannot wrongly guide, if heeded. May each one so live as to heed the course proceeding from that Great Light.

ENDNOTES

1 All Scripture references are taken from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

2 Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 2003), 239.

3 Ibid., 241.


6 Kittel, 2:166.

7 The ASV reads, “Blessed be the Lord, who daily beareth our burden, Even the God who is our salvation.”
8 Folliet Piermont, *For the Beauty of the Earth* (1864).

9 For a complete discussion of this issue, see “Is God the Source of Evil” in the 2010 Schertz Lectures *The Book of Isaiah*.

Father of Lights - Jesus Culture From the album "Awakening Live from Chicago". Intro: Bm G D A. Verse 1: Bm D A Like a flame, love burned in Your eyes. Bm D A Driving You to pay the greatest price. Bm D A You bought my life, so I could be a light. Bm D A Reflecting You, reflecting love. Pre-chorus: Em D A Everything good comes from You, Father of Lights.Â Verse 2: Bm D A You bore the weight, of death upon Your heart. Bm D A And Your last breath tore the veil apart. Bm D A You made a way, for me to walk in grace. Bm D A So I could love You, face to face. Bridge: D/F# Bm I will never be the same. A D Love has called my name D Bm A From the ashes, I rise to proclaim Bm G Your love is undefeated D A Bm Forever You will reign G D A Justice has won again. X. Share this Rating. Title: Father of Lights (2012). 8.1/10. Want to share IMDb's rating on your own site?Â Featuring a veritable who's who of Christian leaders from across the globe, and witch doctors, gang leaders, Hindu gurus, and Muslims alike encountering the God of the Bible, you will never view the Father quite the same again. Prepare to meet your Maker, as Darren and his team cut through religious misconceptions in an effort to find the true nature, heart, and character of God. Written by Darren Wilson. Plot Summary | Add Synopsis. Father of Lights. A documentary about God's character and heart, with some of the most amazing supernatural encounters ever caught on film. Created by Darren Wilson.Â All the above, as well as a copy of the Father of Lights regular edition DVD, delivered to your door at the beginning of the Tour (a full 4 months before the official October release!). Less. Estimated delivery Jul 2012.