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James 1:5-8

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Asking God for Wisdom to Make Sense of the Seemingly Senseless

James 1:5-8

Last week in our inaugural study in the book of James I briefly suggested that the primary theme of this epistle is that ***Christianity is not just a body of doctrines to believe but also a life to be pursued in the power of a living faith.*** In other words, James, perhaps more so than any other NT book, calls on us to put into practice on a daily basis what we profess to believe. In fact, James will go so far as to say that ***a work-less faith is a worth-less faith.*** In true, genuine Christianity, that experience of the soul that we call “faith” is alive and energetic and fruitful and productive. When we get to chapter two James will argue that whereas faith alone justifies us in the sight of God, such faith is never alone. It is always accompanied by or issues in the fruit of the Holy Spirit or obedience.

Now, we also saw last week that ***the greatest threat to the vibrancy and sincerity of our faith is suffering.*** Nothing will cause us more quickly to question the goodness of God, indeed, the very existence of God, than will pain. The non-Christian world doesn’t experience this sort of disconnect. For those who deny the existence of God, pain and hardship and tragedy and disappointment are ultimately meaningless. They are pointless. But for the Christian, who believes that God created all that exists and that he providentially governs everything that happens, pain and adversity and various trials and challenges often cause us to wonder: “God, are you there? God, do you care? God, can I trust you with my life?”

Back in v. 2 James told us how to respond to adversity: count it all joy! Well, as we all know, that’s often easier said than done. Sometimes it feels downright impossible. And James knows that as well as anyone. That’s what I appreciate about him. If he’s anything, he’s a realist. This man is no pie-in-the-sky-ivory-tower-theologian who sits detached from the harsh realities of life in a fallen world dropping pious nuggets of abstract theory down upon the heads of suffering men and women. Not for a moment!

James knows from his own experience that to respond to pain and suffering with joy is perhaps the greatest challenge we face as Christians. He knows that this doesn't come naturally to us. He knows that when the human heart is engulfed and surrounded by dark clouds of tragedy and disillusionment, the experience of joy can seem a million miles away. People who have suffered greatly often describe it as something of a dense fog that blinds them to anything but the immediate experience of fear and anger. They can't see through the fog to anything that remotely approaches a good God or a beneficial purpose or anything that feels redemptive.

We all know from personal experience that the ability to look on trials and tribulations as an occasion for joy, rather than bitterness, is God-given. It is not something we instinctively embrace. It is without question a divine gift. And here is the good news in all this: ***it's ours for the asking!*** That is James' point in vv. 5-8.

By the way, if you are wondering if there is any connection between vv. 1-4 that we looked at last week and vv. 5-8 that we are looking at today, the answer is a great big Yes! ***As we'll see, if you are among the countless Christians who struggle to see your suffering and heartache from God's perspective, if you are among those who see no purpose or value in the countless obstacles you confront each day, if you are among those who live in constant confusion about what God might be up to in your life, ask him for help! Ask him for insight! Ask him for wisdom! Ask him to supply you with spiritual eyes to see what he's trying to accomplish in your life.***

Let's be honest with each other. ***There are times in all our lives when in spite of what James says in v. 2 we simply can't "count it all joy" because the trials we encounter are so random, so seemingly senseless, and worst of all, so undeserved, that we find it virtually impossible to "know" what James says in v. 3 we should know.*** In other words, James clearly indicates that the key to enduring trials with joy is our ability to "know" or "understand" that God's purpose in them is to transform us to look more like Jesus. But some trials are so overwhelming and persistent that we simply can't see anything other than the trial itself. Its force blinds us to anything God might be up to.

What are we to do when that happens? Is our case hopeless? Does God just cut us loose in frustration and turn his attention to those Christians who are able to understand what he's up to in their lives? No! ***You aren't hopeless. Your situation is not beyond God's ability and willingness to redeem.*** Here is what James says you are to do:

“If any of you lacks wisdom [specifically, the wisdom that enables you to “know” that your trials are being orchestrated by God to bring you to greater spiritual maturity], let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:5-8).

God-Given Wisdom (v. 5a)

Before we look at what James actually does say, I know precisely what you *wish* he had said. I know, because I wish that he had said it too. Would that James had said: “Hey folks, if you can’t quite comprehend God’s purpose in your trials, don’t worry; *just ask him to remove them*. Come on, God, push delete on those painful circumstances. Make them disappear. You can do it. Come on, come on, I know you can!” Alas, that is not what James says. So what does he say? Let’s look.

First of all, the “wisdom” that God promises to give us is *the insight we need to make sense of what otherwise appears to be senseless suffering*. We can’t wrench this promise from its context and apply it to every other problem we face. So, be careful before you appeal to this text to find assurance that God will always tell you which of several people you should marry, or that God will always tell you which of three job opportunities you should select, or that God will tell you which stock is worthy of your financial investment.

The promise is for wisdom to “know” that your trials are not without meaning or value but that God can use them for your ultimate welfare. And once you “know” that you will find the strength to “count it all joy” when those trials come your way.

Now, don’t be misled. I’m not saying you shouldn’t pray for discernment and guidance when it comes to finding a spouse or a job or a worthy investment for your money or any such decision you face. But that’s not what this text is about. Later, in James 4:2 we are told to pray about everything, and that the reason we so often go without is because we simply fail to ask. In James 5 he will tell us to pray for healing when we are sick. Paul in Philippians 4:6 exhorts us to let our “requests be made known to God” and there are no restrictions on what we should or shouldn’t pray for. But here in James 1 the context must be observed.

Second, the promise of wisdom to discern God's plan and purpose and reason for our trials does not mean he will always grant us perfect understanding of why things happen the way they do. Rarely do we have exhaustive and comprehensive knowledge of why tragedies occur or how all the pieces of life's jigsaw puzzle fall into place. What God promises is sufficient wisdom to help us know and rest confidently in the fact that trials do indeed serve a greater purpose in our lives.

In relation to this let me say one more thing. *Exhaustive or comprehensive knowledge isn't the cure-all that many think it is.* When you experience sudden and undeserved tragedy, knowing where it came from and what purpose it serves doesn't always diminish the pain you feel. I've spoken to and prayed with a lot of people who suffered the loss of a loved one in a car accident or from cancer, or people who have lost their jobs for no justifiable reason. I've asked them, "If you were given perfect and comprehensive insight into why this happened and what benefits will come to you from having endured it, would it make it any less painful and distressing?" Nine times out of ten they say, No.

So, what precisely does he mean by the word "wisdom"? Some define it as the ability to select worthy ends and the most effective means of achieving them. J. I. Packer has said that wisdom is "the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it" (80). Someone else said that whereas "knowledge" is the ability to take things apart, wisdom is the ability to put them together again.

For James, "wisdom" is both intelligence and insight, both understanding and application, both theory and practical moral discernment. Here in 1:5 it is that perception or insight or discernment or quality of mind that enables the Christian to confront and submit to life's hardships with attitudes and actions consistent with God's will. *It is the God-given ability to take the scattered, chaotic, and seemingly senseless trials and afflictions of life and understand them as God's way of producing Christian maturity.*

I once read about a woman who worked for Warren Wiersbe, former pastor of Moody Bible Church in Chicago. She suffered a stroke and her husband went blind. He told her: "I'm praying for you." She said: "What are you praying for?" He responded: "I'm praying for God to help sustain and strengthen you." She said: "Good, but pray also that I'll have the wisdom not to waste all this." That's what James is talking about.

Don't overlook the fact that God doesn't give wisdom willy-nilly or randomly or irrespective of whether or not we ask him for it. If you need and want wisdom, you have to ask for it! Thomas Manton once said, "God will have everything fetched out by prayer" (25). Simply put, ***we must never assume that God will give us apart from prayer what he has promised to give us only through prayer.***

Don't ever make the mistake of thinking: "Well, of course God will help me understand this mess I'm in. He's God. That's what he's in business for. So I'll get on to more important matters and not waste my time asking him for something that he's sure to give me anyway."

The Giving God (v. 5c)

The wisdom we need comes only from God. This isn't the wisdom that one gains from pursuing a Ph.D. or reading a book on management and leadership skills. As Proverbs 2:6 indicates, it is "the Lord [who] gives wisdom." Of course, God may choose to utilize any number of means to impart wisdom to us, but we must never lose sight of the fact that wisdom is a gift of God.

So, notice ***three things about God*** in this verse. **First**, he gives "generously." However, perhaps "generosity" isn't the best rendering of this word. It may mean something more like "single-minded" or "sincere" or "undivided" or "wholehearted". In other words, ***God isn't conflicted about whether or not to give. He gives with singular intentionality.***

The assurance spoken of here, that God will most assuredly give us what we ask, echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:7 – "ask and it will be given to you." Jesus grounds that promise in the character of God: if we being evil happily give good gifts to our children, how much more will God, who is incomparably good, give good things when his children ask (Matt. 7:11). So too James grounds his assurance to us in the generosity and goodness of God.

Second, he gives indiscriminately, which is the point of the word "all" in v. 5. He doesn't just give to tall people or red-headed little girls or people with good-paying jobs or people whose suffering is far worse than most others. Whatever the nature of your affliction, regardless of your station in life, God gives.

Third, he does this "without reproach" (v. 5c). What an interesting choice of words? What does it mean? I think several things are in mind.

It means that God will not mock us for asking. He won't scold us or make fun of us or throw it back in our faces that we had the audacity to ask him for wisdom. God will never respond to our request for wisdom by saying: "What's the matter with you? Can't you figure this out on your own? You dummy! You idiot! How much longer do I have to put up with you? Oh, all right, since you've asked, I'll answer and provide you with the wisdom you need. But you ought to be ashamed of yourself for not having made sense of life on your own."

Neither does God say or think to himself, when you come to him in prayer: "Good grief. Not you again! Haven't I already done enough in your life?" In other words, wrapped up in this word "without reproach" is the idea that God will not berate us by constantly reminding us in the days ahead of what he did in times past. So don't come to God in prayer fearful that if he answers you he will constantly remind you of it for the rest of your life and make you feel guilty for having the audacity to have asked in the first place.

One thing that James doesn't address is the *means* God might employ to impart this wisdom. We have to look elsewhere in Scripture for that. Perhaps the principal means he uses is the Scriptures. He expects us to immerse ourselves in the revelation of his Word. Our minds ought to be shaped by the values and principles and truths of God's Word before we ever pray for wisdom. And then God can say: "Don't you recall what I said about this in Romans 5? Do you remember what Solomon said to you in Proverbs as he wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? Surely you learned some lessons from studying the life of David in the Old Testament." In this way God awakens wisdom in us for the challenge of facing our trials. Here is how the psalmist put it:

"I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. . . . Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way" (Ps. 119:99-100, 104).

God also uses the insights and maturity of other Christians to impart wisdom to us. Sometimes the only way we can gain wisdom is by trial and error, by facing down our trials and persevering through them.

The Characteristics of Fruitful Prayer (vv. 6-8)

Vv. 6-8 remind us that God is not an unthinking automaton, a heavenly vending machine who delivers provided the right amount of spiritual coinage is inserted. *The promise of answered prayer is premised on the proper attitude in those who ask.*

James focuses our attention on two things: the necessity of faith and the absence of doubt. Let's look at both.

The necessity of faith (v. 6a).

This "faith" that must characterize our prayers is not faith in general or even faith in Christ. It is contrasted with "doubt" and thus refers to our confidence in God's ability and willingness to answer those prayers that are in harmony with his nature and his purpose for our lives. So "faith" means the sort of confidence or trust that says, "I know in my heart that **God is able to do this for me**. I know in my heart that **he's the kind of God who absolutely loves** to do things like this for his children."

There's nothing here to suggest that by "faith" James means that we presumptuously claim in advance that God will always do what we ask him to do. This is no name-it-and-claim-it "faith".

Well, if that's the case, what then does he mean when he says we should pray "with no doubting"?

The absence of doubt (vv. 6b-8).

The word basically means to "differentiate" or "judge" or "dispute," but here has the sense of "dispute with oneself." He has in mind those times when we find ourselves debating with ourselves. There's a division in our hearts: on the one hand, we believe God is good and generous, but on the other hand, maybe he's not as good or generous as we've been led to think. Maybe God fulfills his promises, but then again maybe he doesn't.

Notice in v. 8 he refers to this sort of person as "double-minded" (v. 8a). The word for "double-minded" is literally "**double-souled**". This particular word has never appeared in Greek literature until now. James probably coined the word himself. There is a sense in which he is describing what might be called *spiritual schizophrenia*! Such a man is the pattern for Bunyan's "Mr.

Facing-both-ways” in Pilgrim’s Progress. He is like the mythological horseman who mounted his horse and promptly rode off in both directions!

The doubt he has in view is compared to the waves of the sea swelling up and subsiding, never having the same shape or size, but varying from moment to moment both in direction and strength.

It’s as if one day we are full of confidence in the importance and necessity of wisdom from God, and the next day we are seduced by the world around us into thinking that we can figure it out all on our own. One day we are consciously dependent on God alone only to wake up the day after with a determination to look to the ways and wisdom of the world and its secular values to help us thrive.

But the Bible blesses the person who pursues God with a single-minded sincerity, a heart undivided and undistracted. As the psalmist says, “Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart” (Ps. 119:2).

Of course, *he doesn’t mean we will never experience any degree of doubt*. No one is capable of banishing all doubt from their minds. We are, after all, weak and fallen people and life has a way of questioning pretty much everything. Rather the idea is of a *sustained consistency over time*. Even when doubt occasionally intrudes into our thinking, by God’s grace we maintain our *overall confidence* in who he is and what he enjoys doing.

Some of you, perhaps many, live in constant fear that the slightest tinge of doubt may inadvertently creep into your thought process and ruin everything! You struggle and strain to squeeze every last vestige of doubt from your brain, like wrenching water from a sponge. When you finally feel confident that you’ve arrived, a wayward thought suddenly erupts in the back of your mind or a question arises in your heart. “Darn it! Just when I thought I had this thing under control and boom, doubt reappears. Not a big doubt, but a doubt. I’ve spoiled everything. God obviously won’t hear my prayers now.”

Think of your mind or heart as if it were a house. You’ve been diligent to shut every window and seal it tightly. You closed every door and locked it securely. Nothing can get in. Then suddenly you discover that doubts are sneaking in through some tiny air vent in the attic and you’ve failed yet again!

And to make matters worse, you know yourself well enough to know you'll never be any different tomorrow. No matter how confident you may grow, ***doubts will always appear like those pesky weeds in your front yard that you thought you'd pulled up by their roots.*** Nothing you do will make them disappear forever.

No! That is not what James is saying. There never has been a human being nor ever will be one who can live without experiencing those sorts of battles with doubt. God knows that and is gracious and patient and kind and remains generous and always ready to give us the wisdom we need.

So I don't believe James is denouncing honest intellectual doubts. ***He has in mind the person who wavers between God and the world, shifting allegiance and loyalty, at one moment looking to God for guidance and the next reading the National Enquirer for information about what to do.*** Asking God questions about why something happened or why something else didn't isn't necessarily a bad form of doubt. Saying to him, "I don't understand" is ok. He knows you don't and can see straight through the false spiritual façade you create when you pretend to know what you don't know. To say, "God, I'm really confused right now. Your ways make no sense to me," is not sinful doubting.

The sort of "doubt" that is unavoidable and not inconsistent with "faith" is found in the so-called "Psalms of Lament." A good example is how David cried out to God in Psalm 13:1 – "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" Are you there? Do you care? Psalms of lament essentially contain three parts: "(1) I'm hurting. (2) My enemies are winning. And (3) God, you don't care!" And yet in virtually every one of these psalms the psalmist ends by reaffirming his confidence in God. He calls to mind everything God has done in the past. He anticipates joyfully worshiping with God's people again in the future.

The bottom line is that there are two extremes to avoid when we face trials; what David Nystrom calls "irrational optimism and worldly pessimism" (66).

Conclusion

Several things can be said in summary of vv. 2-8.

First, we won't get very far in the Christian life until such time as we recognize that trials and afflictions and hardships are absolutely necessary for Christian growth. A life of perpetual, unbroken ease and comfort and prosperity may sound appealing, but it will produce only spiritual midgets.

Second, we must also embrace the truth that these trials are designed by God to produce in us a spirit or attitude of perseverance; a disposition never to quit. And this in turn initiates the believer into a process of growth and character development that will consummate in a mature, wholly developed individual who looks and talks and thinks and acts like Jesus!

Third, knowing this is what makes possible our ability to "count" as "all joy" what we might otherwise resent and resist.

Fourth, if you still don't get it; if none of this makes sense; if you can't see or understand how any of this fits together in a coherent whole, don't give up hope! Don't despair! Instead, come to God in prayer, confident that he is a good and generous God and loves nothing more than to answer the heart-felt, faithful prayers of his children, and ask!