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James 1:5-8

Second Message

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SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey recalls an incident he witnessed while he was riding the New York City subway. It was early Sunday morning, and the few passengers aboard were reading newspapers or dozing. During a quiet ride through the bowels of the city, Covey was engrossed in reading. At a stop, a man accompanied by several small children boarded the train. In less than a minute, bedlam erupted. The children began run up and down the aisle, shouting and screaming and wrestling on the floor. The father made no attempt to intervene. A couple of elderly passengers became nervous. Soon, stress gave way to distress. Covey waited patiently. Surely the father would do something to restore order: a gentle word of correction, a stern command, an expression of paternal authority. But none was forthcoming. After an unduly generous pause, Covey turned to the father and said, in a kindly voice, "Sir, perhaps you could restore order by telling your children to sit down." "I know I should do something," the man replied. "We just came from the hospital. Their mother died an hour ago. I just don't know what to do."

Sudden trials have a way of pulling us up short. An unexpected crisis shocks us, and we feel utterly inadequate to respond. Like the father in the subway, we don't know what to do. Desperate for answers, knowing we should do something, we don't even know where to begin.

Last week, in our opening study of the book of James, we saw that suffering is the theme of this New Testament letter. James does not mince words. Quickly warming to his subject, following a one-verse opening salutation, the writer opens his discourse by saying, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various kinds of trials, knowing that the testing of you faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

Trials are unavoidable circumstances that God uses to test our faith and develop our character. But, if we allow them to run their course, they have the ability to change us and mold us into the likeness of God. In his opening command, James tells how we should respond to trials: "Consider it all joy." We must remain under the heat and let the trials do their work.

In our text today, James will say that the most important thing we can do when we are desperately searching for answers to the trials that befall us, is to pray. This is where we must begin. Verse 5 of chapter 1:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5-8 NASB)

Trials tend to make us confused. When someone close to us dies, when we are abandoned by our spouse, oppressed at work, slander is directed at us, financial difficulties hound us, our natural reaction is panic, fear and feelings of insecurity. We are uncertain as to how to respond. But the antidote that James gives is clear: "If any one of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God." Prayer is not the most natural response when we are under stress, but it is by far the most helpful. A more immediate response that comes to mind is to turn our energies to solving, eliminating, alleviating or escaping the trial, even to seek revenge. The energy and effort we extend, however, would be put to better use by simply praying.

In these verses, James gives three very helpful suggestions concerning prayer: what we should ask for when we pray, the basis for asking, and the one qualification that is necessary.

First, what to ask for. When we are under pressure, according to James, the request we should make to God is for wisdom. The writer is not speaking of the kind of wisdom required to make career decisions, the type of house to buy, or whom we should marry. The wisdom he is referring to has to do with character, the kind that he defines in these words from chapter 3: "The wisdom from above is first, pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy."

Wisdom has much more to do with being something than doing something. If he were writing this text today, James would probably say something along these lines: "If anyone lacks the depth of character and integrity to be able to deal with a situation, let him ask of God; if anyone doesn't know how to be inside his heart, let him ask of God." Eventually, we will have to make choices. But the first thing we must do is become aware of what is going on in our hearts, so that when we do act, when we must make choices, we will do so with the right kind of heart and the right kind of character.

Supposing someone close to you hurt you deeply, without justification, and you responded by feeling angry and hurt. You felt sick inside. You either wanted to hurt your friend in turn, or ignore him for the rest of your life. James would say that you lacked wisdom. The most important thing is your own heart condition, your own sense of peace and purity; not what to do in response to the hurt done to you, but how to respond in a godly way.

Recently, I found myself in just such a situation. I felt confused and hurt, and at a loss to know what to do. I called a friend and asked for advice, and he told me that he would pray. A few days later, while studying the book of Joshua, I read that God told Joshua that he would always be with him, that he would not "fail him or abandon him." I looked up the word "fail" and found that it means, "to not drop or let go." I had my answer. I had the wisdom I needed. If God is so committed to me that he would never let me go, no matter what I do or how much I hurt him, then I must act the same way toward others. I called the one who had hurt me and told him

that I had been very angry, but that I would always love him and I would never let go.

Wisdom is the most important requirement we need to face the pressures and sufferings of life. Solomon regarded wisdom as being more valuable than health or wealth. Moses prayed in Psalm 90: “So teach us to number our days, that we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom” (verse 12). This kind of wisdom, this kind of character, can only come from God, through prayer.

The second thing that James refers to concerning prayer is the basis upon which we can ask. Why we can come to God so boldly and confidently to claim this wisdom that we desperately need? We approach God on the basis of his character, not our own. At times we have a problem with asking God for anything, let alone wisdom. Usually this is due to our own pride and stubbornness. Another reason is our faulty view of God and the basis of our relationship with him. We may even think that God is angry with us, that he is too busy for us or that he doesn't want to bother with us. The result is that we are reluctant, timid and unsure. But James says that we can come to God because he gives not just to some men, but to all men “generously and without reproach.”

God is a generous giver. He is a loving Father who wants to grace his children abundantly. Remember the words of Jesus: “Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:11-13).

God is a generous Father.

And God is an approachable Father. As his children, we can come to him in the midst of pressure and suffering and he will not reproach us or accuse us. He never turns us away or scolds us for asking trivial questions. He does not call us ignorant or stupid for not knowing the right answers. Remember the promise of Jesus to his disciples, “If you ask Me anything in my Name, I will do it” (John 14:14).

James writes these things so that we will know how simple a thing it is to come to God and ask for wisdom when we lack it. God is a generous and approachable Father. If we would come to him in times of trial, then it is imperative that we see him for who he is.

I love my children very dearly. I want to do things for them, especially when they have a problem. Even when they step outside the boundaries that their mother and I have put in place, I have limitless love for them. However, it took a long time for me to learn that God feels the same way about me as I do about my children, to know him as a generous and approachable Heavenly Father. I knew this intellectually, but my experience of this truth was lacking. I saw how generous and approachable God was toward others, but I felt I did not have that kind of relationship with him.

Eventually, the trials of life forced me to return home like the prodigal son and sit at my Father's feet. I heard his voice call me his beloved son; I felt his hand touch me. It was then that I learned just how generous and approachable my God really is. Now, when I feel pressured, I know that I can come to him and can ask him anything. He doesn't get mad at me. He doesn't put me on hold. He doesn't have call waiting. He loves me and wants to help me.

When we face pressure and suffering, we can come to God based on who he is, not who we are.

Now the third point. James includes one qualification on our asking God for wisdom: He says that we must ask in faith. Notice once again the importance of having faith in the midst of trials. Not only are trials circumstances that test or prove out our faith, they call upon us to pray in faith.

Faith demands that when we come to God, and when we hear his voice, we are completely sold out to the answer we receive from him. We must believe it and obey it, even if it means we have to give up our rights, even if we don't get the answer we were seeking. The opposite of faith is doubting, being at odds with ourselves, wavering, listening to what others tell us to do, trying to figure things out after we have already heard from God.

The result of living in doubt rather than faith is that we will not receive wisdom. We will not receive from God the kind of character we need to endure the storms of life. Rather, when we doubt, we become like the surf of the sea that is driven and tossed about by the wind. Our soul is anchorless in the midst of the deep. When the storm approaches and the wind blows, we find ourselves adrift, tossed to and fro, carried away with the currents. We become restless, fickle, unsettled. Our souls are divided. A civil war wages within us. We vacillate. We lose our sense of peace and rest. Internal division is one of the sure signs that we are not listening to God, because God's answers will give us peace. The enemy, on the other hand, is always trying to create disorder in our hearts and minds.

I find myself doubting God's answers at times. Years ago, I did a stint in law school. I quit after a time because of various pressures I was experiencing. For several months, I wondered if I had made the right decision. I wavered back and forth. I was being tossed to and fro; I was unstable. It was because I had not asked in faith. I was not living in faith, and thus I did not have the sense of wisdom and peace that I wanted so badly.

But James says we are to ask in faith. If we do, the promise is that we will receive wisdom. James does not say that the circumstances will change, that the pain and sorrow will subside, that life will become rosy. What he does say is that we will know how to respond. Our hearts will be whole, our character will be deepened, our relationship with God will be changed and our souls will be at peace in the midst of pressure. We will be decisive, not changeable, confident, not tentative. We will know that God is in control, not ourselves. We will initiate God's actions instead of letting others determine what we do. These are the results of the prayer of faith.

This is what Jesus himself promised his disciples: “Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it shall happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive” (Matt 21:21-22). Writing about Abraham, the apostle Paul said, “with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom 4:20).

Hannah is a great Old Testament example of a woman of faith. Hannah's barrenness was a severe trial which tested her faith. It greatly distressed and depressed her. Her husband could not comfort her. His other wife, Hannah's rival, needled her incessantly for her inability to conceive. Then Hannah went up to the temple in Shiloh to pray. Eli, the priest, unaccustomed to seeing someone in prayer, thought she was drunk. When she went out from the temple, her face was no longer sad. She had prayed the prayer of faith. Her heart had already been changed, even though her circumstances had not;

she had to wait for that. But she received the wisdom she had been seeking.

Life presents us with all kinds of difficult situations. We should not be surprised when we encounter trials, or confused as to how to respond to them. Oftentimes, it is in our brokenness that we are healed. As someone has said, "Often, breakdowns lead to breakthroughs." These are the times when we learn how to pray, and we encounter the living God.

Life is not about getting perfect grades, being successful, having perfect children. Life is not about solving, but believing. Life is not about us; it is about God and us, in communion, "deep calling to deep." It is through suffering, pain and trials that we are forced to our knees. James himself was very familiar with prayer. Legend has it that his nickname was "Old Camel Knees."

Praying is hard work. We need discipline if we are to move from praying on the run to committing quality time to come before the Father in silence. Lately, I have been impressed by the writings of men who make it a habit to take silent retreats where they devote considerable time to praying.

I do a number of things with my children and for them, but what I treasure most are the times when we listen to one another, those occasions when there is real dialogue and sharing between us. This is what God wants with us—communion and oneness. Prayer in the midst of suffering is not just talking at God and telling him what we want him to do for us. True prayer is listening to God and hearing what we need to hear.

A number of years ago, we were involved in a dispute that ended up in court. On the day of the hearing, my son's elementary school teacher asked the class if anyone had anything to share. My son raised his hand and said, "I would like prayer for my mom and dad who are in court today." The teacher was referring to a time of "show and tell," but my son thought she was asking for prayer requests. He imagined being in school was like being in church, and any talk about sharing led naturally to prayer.

Would that we were so bold as to think that every sphere of life is an occasion for talking with God, every occasion, even suffering, an opportunity for sharing with him, every breath a possibility for prayer.

At the end of the Civil War, this prayer, written by an unknown Confederate soldier, was found in house in South Carolina:

I asked God for strength that I might achieve,
 I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
 I asked for health that I might do greater things,
 I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
 I asked for riches, that I might be happy,
 I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
 I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men,
 I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
 I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life,
 I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
 I got nothing that I asked for,
 But everything that I had hoped for.
 Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
 I am among all men, most richly blessed.

May God grant that when we pray, we may do as James directs, asking "in faith, without any doubting."

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