

Ask God in Faith: James 1:5-8
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In my college years I played on the football team, and it was this time of year (during the spring semester) that we would have our most grueling team workouts. The coach used the off-season to prepare us for our games that would begin in the fall. There were a lot of different things we did in the off-season. We were on a very rigid weight training program. There were specific sprinting and agility exercises we were required to do with a teammate. But what I remember most vividly about the off-season were the 6:00am team workouts that we had a couple mornings a week. In these workouts we were at the mercy of our coach. We entered those workouts with fear and trepidation. As we walked into the gym on those mornings we didn't know exactly how long we would be there. We never knew how hard he was going to push us, but it always seemed that he pushed us beyond what we thought we were capable of.

As I look back on those grueling off-season workouts which I so dreaded at the time, I can see many benefits they brought to me and to our team. In the midst of these workouts, I felt like quitting. I felt like throwing in the towel. I felt like complaining. I may have disliked the coach for putting us through such pain. But over those four years I came to appreciate the benefits of our off-season training. It prepared us to compete. It made us faster and stronger, and gave us endurance. It also created an amazing sense of community and camaraderie among the team.

The trials that all of us face in our lives, which are so much more intense than an off-season workout, are things that we would not choose for ourselves. We dread trials, and we complain about them. And we may even become angry with God for putting us through trials. But God causes us to go through these trials in order to refine us and make us stronger and give us endurance and draw us closer to Himself and closer to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This is what we were looking at last week in James 1:2-4, and the same theme continues in the following verses which we'll be studying this morning. God tests our faith. He puts us through the fire. He brings trials into our lives, which we would never ask for, and then He uses those trials to produce fruit in us that we never thought possible. God is up to something wonderful every time we face a trial. Therefore, we can count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds. That's the message of verses 2-4.

Our passage this morning, in verses 5-8, continues that theme by telling us how to (and how *not* to) relate to God in the midst of trials. As we go through these verses I first of all want to talk about the main command in these verses, which is, "*Ask God!*" Then I want to spend some time thinking about *The God who Gives*. And finally, in verses 6-8, *Faith and Doubt*.

As James begins verse 5 he still has in mind the trials he wrote of in verses 2-4. This is the context of these instructions. When we're in a trial, and we want to count it all joy, and we want to persevere, here's what we need to do.

ASK GOD

We need to ask God. That's the main exhortation of this passage. Ask God! Notice the connection between verses 4-5. Verse 4 ends with the phrase "*lacking in*

nothing.” That’s the goal of our steadfastness, that we may be mature Christians, perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. And then verse 5 begins, “If any of you *lacks* wisdom, let him ask God . . .” You see, we are on this journey called the Christian life and we are striving for maturity, completion, wholeness, and yet we come up lacking. And God’s Word is now telling us what we should do in our times of trial when we see how we are lacking. We should ask God.

This is a conditional statement in verse 5, as you can see with the word “if” at the beginning. But there are different kinds of conditional sentences in the New Testament, and what we have in this verse is what grammarians call a first class condition (it’s assumed to be true for the sake of argument). So we shouldn’t respond to this verse by pondering whether or not we actually lack wisdom. That’s not the point of the “if.” James isn’t saying, Some of you lack wisdom and others don’t. If you happen to be in the category of those who lack wisdom, then you should ask God for it. That’s not what he’s saying. He’s saying, If any of you lacks wisdom (and I’m assuming all of you *do* lack wisdom), then ask God for it! This verse is for all of us, because we all lack wisdom.

The wisdom spoken of here is not intellectual knowledge. There are individuals who may have amazing minds and are utterly unwise. Biblical wisdom is about how you live your life. It’s about righteousness. It’s about holiness. It’s about obedience and submission to the Lord. James writes more about wisdom in chapter 3:13-18.

This “wisdom from above” is what we lack and what we must ask God for. It’s much more than head knowledge. It’s a righteousness and holiness that will be evident in the way we live our lives. We need this, and in the midst of trials God will make us even more aware of our need for this.

In the well-known words of Proverbs 3, we’re told, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil” (3:5-7). Proverbs also tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (9:10), and also that it is the Lord who gives wisdom (2:6). And this is all related to what James is writing, because during trials (and at all times) we need to see that our understanding is not sufficient. We can’t be wise in our own eyes. We have to turn to God and have a reverence for Him and look to Him for the wisdom we need.

God uses trials to bring us to the end of ourselves, so that we won’t lean on our own understanding, so that we won’t be wise in our own eyes. Instead we need to ask Him for wisdom. I remember as a young boy my dad explaining to me Proverbs 3:5, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.” I was probably 6-7 at the time, and I still remember this so vividly. There was a thin mattress that was leaning up against the wall in my bedroom, and my dad said, “Ben, this is what it’s like to lean on your own understanding.” And then he leaned his weight on the side of that mattress, and he and the mattress crashed to the floor. I thought it was hilarious. I asked him to do it again and again. And the illustration has stuck in my mind ever since.

If you lean on your own understanding, on your own wisdom, if you’re wise in your own eyes, there’s nothing there. There’s no foundation. It will all come crashing down. Our “wisdom” will not get us anywhere. We need to come to the end of ourselves

and humble ourselves and ask God for wisdom. I was listening to a sermon this week by Paul Tripp, and it was on the same passage of Scripture that I'm preaching on this morning (James 1:5-8). And he made a very insightful comment. He said it's a very short distance between *not* coming to the end of yourself and being full of yourself. It's very important for us to realize this. We must come to the end of ourselves and realize that we are desperately needy and dependent and helpless. We must cry out for help. We must ask God for wisdom. If we think we don't need to ask for wisdom, then we're simply full of ourselves. We pridefully think that we can make it on our own. We have to humble ourselves and ask for help. This is what I want us to see in this command to "ask God." There's a humility that's required here and an acknowledgement that we are needy.

Ask God. We must ask God for help in the midst of our trials. We must ask Him to give us wisdom and teach us the lessons He wants us to learn in this particular trial. Matthew Henry said, "We should not pray so much for the removal of an affliction as for wisdom to make a right use of it" (*The Matthew Henry Commentary*, James 1). It is certainly not wrong to pray for the removal of an affliction. In fact, James 5 tells us to pray for those who are sick. And God can demonstrate His power by lifting us out of various trials. But He also demonstrates His power by allowing the trial to continue and by giving us wisdom in the midst of it.

So when you find yourself in a trial, and you sense your desperate need for wisdom, humble yourself before God and cry out to Him for help. Ask God! And do you see the promise at the end of verse 5? It says, "and it will be given him." This is a wonderful promise. When we cry out for this wisdom, God will grant it. He will give it to us. He will sustain us through the trial, and He will give us the wisdom to make the right use of that trial.

THE GOD WHO GIVES

Now let's look more closely at the phrase in the middle of verse 5 which describes *The God who Gives*. The verse says that God "gives generously to all without reproach." Isn't it a blessing that we serve a generous God! He is not stingy. He does not require us to earn anything from Him. He gives generously and lavishly and freely. And He gives without reproach. The NIV says, "without finding fault." This is also a tremendous blessing, because it's not as though we come asking for wisdom and God says, "Weren't you just asking for this yesterday? And look at all the stupid things you've already done today! Yeah, I'll give you what you're asking for, but I sure hope you make better use of it this time." That's not how God responds to our requests. He gives without reproach, without finding fault. It's like the father who received back his prodigal son. He didn't receive him back grudgingly. He didn't hold his sins against him. No, it says that he "felt compassion, and ran and embraced [his son] and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). And he lavished gifts upon him and celebrated. This is how God responds to our requests for wisdom. He gives generously and without reproach.

This verse in James also tells us that He "gives generously *to all* without reproach." In the context I take this to mean, "all who ask for it / all who seek it / all who desire it." And we know from Scripture that those who desire God are those whom God is calling to Himself. In our sin, none of us have the desire to ask God for this wisdom. But God gives us the desire to ask, and then He generously responds to those requests. It's all from Him and through Him and to Him. He gets all the glory in this.

The clear instruction for us is that we must realize that we lack wisdom, and that only God can give us what we need. And we need to ask him, trusting that He will give generously and without reproach to all who ask. And we have the comfort of this promise that it *will* be given to us.

Before we move on to the next verses, I want to ask a very important question about God's generous gifts. I want to ask, How is it that God can give us these gifts? How is that He can give generously and without reproach? It's so easy to take this for granted. We might think, "Well, that's just what God does." He's the kind grandfather in the sky who loves to give us what we ask for. And if we're real honest with ourselves, we might admit to feeling like God is *obligated* to give us what we want. That's why He exists, right? He's loving and kind and generous, and when we ask for things, He should give them to us. Let me tell you, friend, that when we think that way, we are out of touch with reality. Because the only thing we deserve from God is punishment. We don't deserve any good thing from God. We have sinned against Him. We have disobeyed His commands. We have turned away from Him to pursue worldly pleasures. And we deserve to be punished for our sins. This is why this question is so important. How can God give generously and without reproach? This is not to be taken for granted. God cannot just ignore our sins, and ignore the punishment we deserve.

The only reason God can give generously and without reproach is because 2,000 years ago Jesus Christ bled and died on rugged wooden cross. He suffered under the punishment that we deserve. He was blameless, sinless, perfect. Unlike us, Jesus didn't deserve punishment. He deserved God's good gifts. But He died in our place. And for those who love Christ, our punishment is already paid, and in Christ we can receive these many blessings from God. Not because we deserve them, but because Jesus Christ deserves them. Therefore when you think of God's gifts, think of the cross. Because without the cross, we would receive no good thing from God. Only punishment.

If you are an unbeliever here this morning, consider the cross of Jesus Christ. Consider this God who gives generously to all without reproach. I pray that God will give you a desire for Him, and a desire for His wisdom. Acknowledge your desperate need for Him. And cry out to Him to forgive your sins through the blood of Jesus Christ. Don't be wise in your own eyes. Don't lean on your own understanding. All of this is going to crumble. But those who are in Jesus Christ will have hope in this life and will enjoy the pleasures of heaven forevermore. Come to Jesus! Don't delude yourself with the fantasy that God is obligated to forgive you. You're looking at the world upside-down if you think that. God is obligated, not to forgive you, but to punish you. His justice requires it. But in Jesus Christ, and in Him alone, that punishment is paid for, and God will give generously and without reproach.

So I say to you, unbeliever, Ask God. However small your desire may be, ask God to increase that desire. Ask God for wisdom. Ask Him for understanding. Ask Him for forgiveness. God will answer these requests for those who humbly ask Him.

FAITH AND DOUBT

Finally this morning, I want to talk about *Faith and Doubt* in verses 6-8. Verse 6 qualifies the command in verse 5. In verse 5 the command is simply, "ask God." Verse 6 gives a further explanation of this. You must ask God, but you must "ask in faith." And then this is contrasted with doubting, and there's a description of the one who doubts. It says that "the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed

by the wind.” Picture a glass bottle in the middle of the ocean during a tumultuous storm. That bottle would rise and fall and move this way and that way as the stormy gusts of wind drive the waves. This is a picture of the one who doubts. There’s no anchor. No rudder. Nothing to keep this person on course. He or she is driven and tossed by outside forces. If the wind blows this way, the person goes this way. If the winds of culture blow in a certain direction, the person is swept away in it. If the person faces a stormy trial, the trial wreaks havoc in their life. This is what happens in the life of the doubter. There’s a lack of an internal moral compass. And without that, the doubter is susceptible to every wind and wave.

This verse is not talking about intellectual doubts that a person might have concerning the claims of Christianity. The problem here is a moral one. It’s an issue of trusting that God will do what He has promised to do. And it’s an issue of obeying what God has commanded us to do. So, like wisdom, this is not a matter of the intellect. It’s a matter of faith and obedience. The one who asks God for wisdom in the midst of a trial, and asks in faith, will be given the faith and perseverance to grow through that trial. But the one who doubts will be driven and tossed by the wind, and he shouldn’t suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.

We could think of verses 6-8 in contrast to verse 4. They’re like two sides of the same coin. Verse 4 is stated positively, the command to be steadfast. And then in verses 6-8 there’s a warning against doubting, which is the opposite of faithful steadfastness. James describes this in a unique way in verse 8, “he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” This is a word that James probably coined himself. It’s only found in one other place, and that’s in James 4:8, “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” This word that James created is literally “double-souled.” It’s the picture of having two souls, and being divided between them. And I think this is explained pretty clearly in the rebuke of chapter 4:4, where James writes, “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” This is the double-souled person. The double-minded doubter. The one who wants to be a friend of the world and a friend of God.

There is a double-mindedness that exists within every one of us. We need to fight against it. We need to let steadfastness have its full effect, and as we ask for wisdom we must ask for it in faith. This is a struggle that we all face. Therefore this warning should be an incentive to all of us in the fight of faith.

At the same time I think there is also a very stern warning here for those who are fundamentally divided between their allegiance to God and their allegiance to the things of this world. Have you wondered why God doesn’t answer any of your prayers? Have you wondered why your relationship with the Lord seems so stagnant? It could be that you are the double-minded doubter who is driven and tossed by the wind. And if you are in that condition, this text says, you must not suppose that you will receive anything from the Lord.

Wherever you find yourself this morning, I conclude by emphasizing again the main exhortation of these verses: “Ask God!” Ask Him in faith. Ask for a greater passion for Him. Ask for forgiveness. Ask for wisdom in the midst of trials. Ask for steadfastness. Ask to be delivered from double-mindedness. Ask for stability in your

Christian walk. And the God who gives generously to all without reproach will grant these requests.