

WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING GOD?—PART ONE

James 1:1-8

(ESV) "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. ² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ 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. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

INTRODUCTION

Charles Eliot (1834-1926) became President of Harvard in 1869, when our country struggled to regroup after the Civil War. He transformed the curriculum to train the modern leaders that a rapidly industrializing America required. Harvard became the nation's premier research university and one of the world's finest institutions of higher learning. But as a boy, Charles Eliot felt terribly bitter about an ugly, inconceivable birth-mark, a liver-colored welt giving a crushed and vivid disfigurement to most of the right side of his face down to his mouth. He believed he'd be laughed at and taunted as a freak all his life. But one day his mother gave him advice that changed his life: "My son, we've consulted the best surgeons. They say it is not possible for you to get rid of this handicap! But it *is* possible, with God's help, to grow a mind and soul so big that people will forget to look at your face!" Charles Eliot boldly achieved this goal!

An 8-year-old girl blinded shortly after birth proclaimed she'd never allow her handicap to make her bitter: "O what a happy soul am I / Although I cannot see. / I am resolved that in this World, / Contented I will be! / How many blessings I enjoy / That other people don't! / To weep and sigh because I'm blind, / I cannot, and I won't!" This young poet, Frances Jane "Fanny" Crosby (1820-1915), received nurture in the Christian faith from infancy. At age 10, she began memorizing five Bible *chapters* weekly to gain the comfort and guidance of God's Word she couldn't read. By age 15, she could recite the four gospels, the Pentateuch, Proverbs, and many Psalms. This explains why her songs are saturated with God's wisdom.

Her hymn, *All the Way My Savior Leads Me* (1875) is especially autobiographical. "All the way my Savior leads me; What have I to ask beside? Can I doubt His tender mercy, Who through life has been my guide? Heavenly peace, divinest comfort, Here by faith in Him to dwell; For I know whate'er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well." Fanny Crosby became a household name in 19th-century America, inspiring millions. She composed 8,000 songs to our Lord's glory; 100 million copies are printed. She composed 1,000 poems and 60 folk songs. She once said, "It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been dis-tracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me." On her 90th birthday she confided to friends, "If before birth I had been able to make one request, it would have been that I should be born blind! Because when I get to Heaven the first face that shall ever gladden my sight, will be that of my Saviour, Jesus!"

Charles Eliot and Fanny Crosby determined early in life to not just be *battered* by their disabilities but to be *bettered* by them. When confronted with the disturbing question, "What on earth are you doing, God?" they answered it well. James, our Lord's half-brother and lead pastor of Jerusalem's house churches, knew believers driven from their homeland by persecution would confront this same question. James wanted his 1st-century readers to answer this question well. In our times of intense frustration or confusion in the 21st century, how we approach the Lord with this question, "What on earth are you doing, God?" and how we respond to the answers God gives us, will determine if we are merely *battered* by our times of painful struggle, or if we are *bettered* by them; if we react strongly as Christians, or if we react wrongly.

HOW WE SHOULD ASK THE QUESTION, "WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING, GOD?"

Some people view Christianity as a Heavenly insurance policy. If they pay the premiums of attending church, giving to God's work, and trying to please God, they think this guarantees God will protect them against any major harm happening to them. Neither **Jesus** nor the Apostles ever proclaimed that if we have enough faith, God will protect us from all harm or deep sorrow. They promised we can be strengthened by hardships to live as faithful Christian despite fearsome trials. During the Cold War prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, several fully armed Russian soldiers broke into a home one night during a secret meeting of a house church. With weapons drawn, they told anyone unwilling to die for their faith in **Jesus Christ** to leave immediately. About half promptly fled. The soldiers then pulled Bibles from their coats and asked to be allowed to worship with the quite relieved believers who remained! They were not willing to risk disclosing they were Christians until they weeded out anyone who might be present mainly for self-serving reasons, who might turn them in to the Communist authorities for the reward they could receive.

The Greek word James used for "trial" in **vs. 2** does not mean a "temptation" meant to ruin us, but "a situation that tests us to prove or to improve our abilities." If we choose to become bitter due to the trials our Heavenly Father selects to train us in order to prove or improve our abilities, we choose to become losers. When Vince Lombardi became the Green Bay Packers' Head Coach in 1959, the team had not had a winning record in 11 years. They won one game in 1958. Lombardi transformed the Packers into the most successful NFL franchise of the 1960's, leading them to five NFL Championships and victories in Super Bowls I and II. By the end of each of his nine seasons with the Packers, many of the team's 40 players would gladly have died for their beloved Coach. But he conducted grueling training camps. He demanded absolute dedication and a no-excuse effort from his players. In the early part of each season, many players hated Vince Lombardi; some probably wished him dead. Those who quit or were cut by the Packers were happier, at first, until they realized they'd chosen to be losers. God can train us to be spiritual champions, or we can choose what makes us immediately happy, even if this means we choose to be losers.

The Greek word for "testing" in **James 1:3** is the word used for refining precious metals to remove their impurities. The "endurance" or "perseverance" God seeks to produce in us is the stable character that will keep us from bailing out of serving the Lord when troubles arise. We can become God's most trusted and valued servants, whom He can count upon to persevere and accomplish His will in fair weather or foul.

Myra Brooks Welch, author of the poem, *The Touch of the Master's Hand*, did not discover her ability to write life-changing poetry until she asked how God's purposes could be served when arthritis confined her to a wheelchair at age 35. In a *Gospel Messenger* article of December 28, 1935, Myra stated that the secret behind her fruitful ministry and happiness, after becoming an invalid, was "turning disappointments into His-appointments." Severe arthritis robbed her of her music career but did not rob her of her faith in God. Instead of allowing this trial to *batter* her with the bitter thought God had treated her unfairly, she trusted God was wondrously at work in her affliction to *better* her relationship with and witness for her Savior. Her granddaughter stated Myra didn't dwell on her disability. Her daily life remained so busy with caring about others and her heart remained so full of the Heavenly joy **Jesus** gave her that she hardly seemed to be an invalid to the many who visited her to be uplifted by *her* company.

Myra demonstrated the promise of **James 1:3-4**: The "steadfastness" ("endurance"-NASB) we gain from trials can bless us with a threefold "effect." First, we become more "perfect" (perfected); more shaped by God to become spiritual champions. Secondly, we become "complete." Faults and sinful impulses that might disqualify us from God's service are removed or subdued. Thirdly, we are "lacking in nothing." God can count upon us more because our standards have become God's standards. We all long to be among God's most trusted and successful servants. But our loving Lord makes it clear to us in **James** we can only gain the pleasant result of proven Christian character by enduring what is often a most unpleasant trial.

This brings us to **James 1:5-8**. Does God resent it when we question Him about what's going on in our lives? No. It's *how* we question Him that matters to our Lord. Good questions can draw us to Him; bad questions can drive us from Him. Isidor I. Rabi, a New York Jew born in 1898, won a Nobel prize in physics in 1944 for his discovery of nuclear magnetic resonance, which is used in magnetic resonance imaging. We may have him to thank if we've benefited from an MRI exam. His research also contributed to the development of radar and microwave ovens. When a friend once asked him how he became a scientist, Rabi replied that every day after school his mother would talk to him about his school day. She wasn't so much interested in what he had learned that day, but she always inquired, "Did you ask a good question today?" "Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me become a [good] scientist."

Our Heavenly Father knows that asking Him good questions can help us become good Christians. He urges us to seek the wisdom we need to cooperate with our Lord during times of testing and trial. This insures we are *bettered* by them as God intends and not just *battered* by them. God knows we will be confronted at times with this disturbing question: "What on earth are You doing, God?" There are a number of things we can do to guide us as we seek answers to this question.

1. PRIORITY

The most crucial thought to keep in mind when we are driven by struggles or trying times to ask, "What on earth are You doing, God?" is that we may never learn the answers to our questions, or, more importantly, we may never be satisfied with the answers God gives us, if we live as though our own will should have the priority in God's universe instead of God's will. "If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask Him, and he will gladly tell you. He will not resent your asking." This is the NLT of **James 1:5**. But God's answers will often make little sense to us if our understanding of what is the "right" or "wrong" answer to our questions is distorted by our self-centeredness. We will resume our study of this subject next week. For today, I will close with this illustration.

CONCLUSION

Many of you have read the book, *Heaven Is for Real*, seen the movie, or both. By November 2002, a young man began to be called "Pastor Job" by his fellow Nebraska pastors. Todd Burpo had suffered a broken leg and lost much income due to his inability to conduct his garage door business. He'd also suffered through kidney stones and two surgeries due to a cancer scare. All these factors combined to drain the family's savings. Then, in late February, 2003, Todd's son Colton, not quite four, began suffering from appendicitis. Due to a series of misdiagnoses and treatments for other conditions, Colton suddenly lay at death's door. Five years earlier, Colton's mother Sonja had been carrying the family's second child when the child was lost in the second month of pregnancy. When the blond-haired, blue-eyed fireball named Colton was born 40 weeks after their second child's death, Colton seemed to be the Heavenly Father's healing love-gift to the Burpo family. Colton became Sonja's shadow.

Colton's pending death now confronted Todd and Sonja Burpo with the question, "What on earth are you doing, God?" Sonja reacted with both fear and anger, challenging God with the question, "Are You going to take this child too?" Todd, being a pastor, believed he didn't have the luxury of losing it in public, so he ducked into a closet in an isolated part of the hospital and, in his own words, "began raging at God." "Where are You?" he gasped, being so overcome with "desperation, anger, and frustration" that he could hardly breathe. Todd cried out, "Is this how You treat Your pastors?! Is it even worth it to serve You?"

Colton survived his emergency, to the great surprise of the medical staff. By then, poisons had been filling his abdomen for five days due to a ruptured appendix. But over the next few months, Colton startled his parents time and again with bits of information that revealed he'd died briefly during this surgery. Todd and Sonja gradually learned that in the very moments they were the most upset with the Lord over losing Colton, **Jesus** had personally taken Colton onto His lap. Among other things, **Jesus** told Colton,

"He died on a cross so we could go see His Dad." John the Baptist, the angel Gabriel, a grandfather who'd died before Colton was born, all came by to welcome Colton to Heaven. His sister who'd died in the second month of their Mom's pregnancy and about whom Colton had never heard also came by to visit her baby brother. Colton marveled over the places and people he saw in Heaven. In the very moments his parents felt most abandoned by God because Colton was dying, **Jesus** and the citizens of Heaven were embracing their son with the tenderest love and care he'd ever known. But then, as Colton later told his Dad, "Jesus came to get me. He said I had to go back because He was answering your prayer."

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶But 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. ⁷For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." Our Heavenly Father and Savior **Jesus Christ** welcome our questions when confusing or discouraging circumstances make it difficult to understand their plans for us. If we find ourselves crying out to God with more distrust than with trust, as did Todd Burpo, it's because our testing has exposed we are "double-minded" and "unstable" in our loyalty to the Lord we profess to love and follow. Yet, **Lamentations 3:22-23** can comfort us with the assurance we often receive the best mercies from the Lord even when we are at our worst toward Him: "Because of the Lord's faithful love we do not perish, for His mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness!"