

WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING GOD?—PART TWO  
James 1:1-8

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

## INTRODUCTION

In the Greek text of **James 1:5**, "If any of you lacks wisdom " is a first-class conditional statement that *assumes* the truth of what is being said, as when Satan said to **Jesus** during His wilderness temptations, "'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread'" (**Matthew 4:3**). Satan knew very well who **Jesus** was. God is giving us advance warning He knows very well we will sometimes face situations as Christians that leave us so deeply puzzled we will cry out to God for "wisdom" for the insights we need to trust His will. God knows that trials we face may seem so contrary to what God would usually do or allow that questions about His will may bewilder us, for a time. "Bewilder" is an Old English word referring to being misled and having no clear idea how to proceed, as when we're lost in a wilderness. When was the last time you felt bewildered? A university student was seen with a large "K" printed on his T-shirt. When someone asked him what the "K" stood for, he said, "Confused." "But," the questioner replied, "you don't spell 'confused' with a 'K.'" The student answered, "You don't know how confused I am."

We may also be puzzled if we don't like the obvious answer to a crucial question, so we desperately hope there might be another answer. One man wrote to Dear Abby asking, "I joined the Navy to see the world. I've seen it. Now how do I get out?" God's replies to our puzzling questions may not always be what we want to hear. But He promises to help us make sense of our struggles if we will trust His answers.

James, **Jesus'** half-brother, wrote this letter. **Jesus'** Resurrection and His special appearance to James finally overcame James' reluctance to believe his older brother was actually the Son of God come to earth to be our Savior (**Acts 1:13-14; I Corinthians 15:3-7**). James then rapidly rose to become lead pastor over Jerusalem's house churches. In Christianity's early days, 99% of Judean believers remained observant Jews after they placed their faith in **Jesus** as the Messiah (the Christ). They continued synagogue and Temple worship and desired to remain in their familiar home surroundings in fellowship with thousands of other believers. This all changed when "a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem" three years after **Jesus'** Crucifixion (**Acts 8:1**). This persecution forced these Messianic Jews from their comfort zones. As they "scattered" across the Roman Empire for safety, **Acts 8:4** and **11:19-21** reveal they proclaimed the good news of **Jesus Christ** wherever they went. This gave millions of people the opportunity to accept God's offer of eternal salvation through **Jesus** much sooner than would have otherwise happened.

Yet, though God used the persecution of these Messianic Jews to advance His purposes, James knew these early followers of Christ still struggled to adapt to their new surroundings in foreign towns and to find suitable work and homes far away from people they most relied upon and loved. James longed with his pastor's heart to provide these believers, many of whom were new Christians, with the comfort and guidance they needed to make sense of God's workings in their lives. None of the Gospels had yet been written. This letter, issued 15-17 after **Jesus'** Resurrection, is probably the earliest New Testament document.

Who provides believers a better source for knowing how **Jesus** wants His followers to live than James? Scholars estimate James refers to **Jesus'** teachings 35 times (in one-in-three verses), especially the Sermon

on the Mount. Thirty years of observing how **Jesus** handled nearly every day-to-day situation gave James great godly wisdom. Regardless of the struggles in Joseph and Mary's family, their community, or their country, James learned from **Jesus** how to seek our Heavenly Father's wisdom. "Wisdom," James learned from his Brother, is "the ability to view life as God sees it and to live for God's purposes, rather than just for our purposes." James also learned by firsthand experience with **Jesus** that sometimes the last thing we think would be true ("Who do you think You are Jesus, God?"), or the last thing we think would be God's will ("The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day"—**Luke 9:22**) is exactly what God wants us to accept and believe.

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

The connection between **James 1:1-4** and **1:5-8** is that "wisdom" is needed to gain the God-centered view of our times of "trials" and "testing" commanded in **vs. 2-3**: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." Pastor James sought to remind his scattered former flock we can be *molded* by our trials to become better servants of Christ if we are not *folded* by our trials. This Greek word for "trial" does not mean a "temptation" meant to ruin us but "a situation that tests us to prove or to improve our abilities."

If I've let myself get seriously out of shape by neglecting proper exercise, how does my body react when I start working out again? Like I'm trying to kill it! Aches and sprains become magnified and my body does everything it can to conduct a sit-down protest to make me stop abusing it. My body conspires with my brain to present a host of reasons why exercise is not a good idea today: "I'm too tired, it's too hot or cold, I need more sleep, it's too windy, I might be getting sick," etc. But I'm not *battering* my body by exercising; I'm *bettering* it. I'm gaining endurance. If I don't fold and halt the workouts, I soon mold myself into someone with better strength and health. Moving toward this goal, and achieving this goal, gives me "joy." We often know when we are not in the best physical shape and can be our own trainer in choosing what we need to do to improve. But God is often the only one who truly knows what we need to do to get us in better spiritual shape. He's asking that we trust Him to be our spiritual Trainer. We may not find much to rejoice in, at first, when God designs life tests for us to improve us our spiritual stamina. Our attitude may ache like our body aches, as though this "trial" is meant to ruin us. If we pray for the wisdom to see our lives as God sees them and to appreciate the blessedness of living for God's purposes instead of merely to please ourselves, we'll trust the Lord knows best how to train us to be spiritual champions!

**James 1:3** switches from viewing God-ordained trials as "being put to the test to prove or improve us," as in **vs. 2**, to the "testing" used for refining precious metals to remove their impurities. This testing is often intense, as the heat used to refine precious metals is intense. We may scream bloody murder asking God to let us out of the purifying furnace. **James 1:3-4** assures us God is doing His best work in us during our most intense periods of testing [reread]. The more that purifying trials remove what's un-Christlike about us, we become more shaped by God to become spiritual champions ("perfect"), faults and sinful impulses that might disqualify us from God's service are removed or subdued ("complete"), and God can count upon us because our standards have become God's standards ("lacking in nothing"). In other words, God can rely upon us to persevere and accomplish His will in fair weather or foul.

This brings us back to **James 1:5-8** and where we left off last week [reread]. These verses make two emphatic points. First, God does not resent it when we ask, "What on earth are You doing, God?" James rejoiced that he could count upon the Lord to answer his prayers "without reproach" (without holding anything against him, like his probably resentful, envious mistreatment of **Jesus** while they grew up as brothers). But James also counted upon the Lord answering his prayers for guidance and help *without reservation*. The root meaning of the Greek word translated "generously" means God will heed our prayers to help us make sense of our lives with His "undivided, unwavering attention." God is fully loyal to us! This stands in stark contrast to the "double-minded" reservations with which doubters approach God.

This brings us to James' second emphatic point: God knows we will be confronted at times with this disturbing question: "What on earth are You doing, God?" He does not resent it *when* we question Him about what's going on in our lives, but *how* we question God affects the answers we should "expect" from Him. There are a number of matters to keep in mind as we seek answers to this crucial question. The first, as mentioned last week, is the matter of:

## 1. PRIORITY

When we are driven by struggles or trying times to ask, "What on earth are You doing, God?" 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. 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.

## 2. PIETY

Piety can have the meaning of "dutiful respect or loyalty," as toward God, one's homeland, or a family member. Such loyalty is based upon deep ties of love and gratitude for the blessings we've received from others and the duty we have to love and honor them. This includes trusting others, giving them the benefit of the doubt, and having confidence in their character. Until I met Loretta, my sister was the dearest person in all the world to me. Not only do I owe her a lot personally, but I have seen the selflessness and giving nature of her heart demonstrated a thousand times over. About 20 years ago, my sister was accused by some family members of serious financial misdeeds toward our parents. So called "evidence" of her guilt was presented to me. I responded, "I don't believe it. I know her heart. She's incapable of doing such wrong." About two years later, another family member proved to be guilty of these misdeeds, not my sister. I never wavered in my trust and loyalty toward her. Does the Lord deserve such unswerving trust?

The root idea of "doubting" (**vs. 6**) is the "judging" we do when torn by "divided loyalties." A man named Jake once asked Dear Abby, "Is it possible for a man to be in love with two women at the same time?" She replied, "Yes, and also hazardous." James warns it's hazardous to divide the loyalty we owe fully to God between Him and the world, ourselves, or anyone else. This warning becomes more explicit in **vs. 8**. James probably coined the Greek term for "double-minded" because this is the earliest known instance of its use. It literally means a "double-souled" individual. It's based upon the Hebrew idiom of describing someone of "divided loyalty" as a person with "a heart and a heart" (or, "a double heart"). During the days when evil King Saul sought to kill David, **I Chronicles 12:33** praised the soldiers who pledged undivided loyalty to David's by declaring these troops "were not of double heart."

"Faith" (**vs.6**) for James is "a single-minded and wholehearted commitment that trusts in God as God." We don't have Biblical "faith" unless we are willing to *commit* ourselves—our lives, our well-being, and the lives of those we most love—in trust to our Heavenly Father, regardless of how or where His will leads us. A train sped one night through a very violent rainstorm. Lightning flashed nearly blindingly; deafening rain pounded upon the windows; strong, gusty winds rocked the train from side to side. Rising water along the tracks, highlighted by the lightning, created even more terror in the passengers' minds. But some noticed a little girl seemed to be at perfect peace through all the rain, noise, lightning, and wind. Finally, one adult passenger asked her, "How is that you can be so calm when all the rest of us are so worried about what might or could happen?" The little girl smiled and said, "My father is the engineer."

## CONCLUSION

A man named Bob was pleased when he was named "manager" at the start of his career in banking. Then he realized just about everyone in this branch held this title. It helped to keep flak away from the real branch manager when people believed they'd aired their gripes to a "manager." Still, Bob was determined to advance as far as possible as a banker. One day the real manager took ill and could not attend the grand

"Institute of Banking" dinner. The under manager was on holiday and the under-under manager was otherwise engaged. Bob was told to attend this very important dinner to represent the branch. He found himself seated next to the President of the bank, his Big Boss. The President said to him, "So, you're going to be one of my managers." Bob replied that was his plan. When the President asked him, "What is the most important attribute that a manager can have?" Bob saw his chance to impress the Boss. "The ability to forecast the markets," he said. The President answered, "No." Bob offered a number of other thoughtful suggestions: "Spotting good investment opportunities," "Striving for the best customer service," "Being good with figures." But each time his Boss answered, "No." This went on all night until Bob finally gave in and told the President he must not know the most important attribute that a manager can have. When he asked the President to enlighten him, he told Bob, "Loyalty."

As Christians, we will never advance farther in our relationship *with* the Lord God than the level of our loyalty *to* the Lord. Times of testing and trial designed by God to turn us into proven and reliable servants of the Lord will turn us away from God if we are people of divided loyalties. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."