

## WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING GOD?—PART THREE

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

Paul Azinger began playing golf at age five. At age 21, he turned professional. In 1987 he won three Professional Golfers' Association tournaments and was named PGA Player of the Year. He spent almost 300 weeks in the top-10 of the World Golf Rankings. His greatest victory came in 1993 by defeating Greg Norman in a thrilling playoff to capture the PGA Championship. His earnings from 1987 through 1993 exceeded 5½ million dollars. Paul Azinger, happily married since 1982 and the father of two daughters, enjoyed wealth and success beyond most people's dreams! But in December 1993, he was diagnosed with lymphoma (cancer of the lymph nodes) at age 33. Lymph nodes provide the body with garrisons of immune cells that serve as filters or traps for foreign particles so they can be gang-tackled and destroyed. Some of his lymph nodes had joined the other side and threatened to end his life rather than preserve it.

In his autobiography, *Zinger* (1996), he revealed his initial reaction to the news of his lymphoma. He wrote, "A genuine feeling of fear came over me. I could die from cancer. Then another reality hit me even harder. I'm going to die eventually anyway, whether from cancer or something else. It's just a question of when." Paul Azinger was about to learn firsthand the truth of **James 1:1-8**. He'd become convinced years earlier of his need of a Savior. But, like many believers, his life still revolved around *his* interests. He thought if he honored God enough to prove he was on God's side, God would then be on *his* side to help him get what *he* most wanted: to achieve great things as a golfer. He'd given little thought to being saved from himself or of achieving great things for God. He now declared, "Everything I had accomplished in golf became meaningless to me. All I wanted to do was live." But he'd also suddenly been smacked in the face with the realization that if he had nothing to show for his life but personal achievements that counted for nothing beyond the grave, his life would also be meaningless. Then he remembered something that Larry Moody, the PGA Tour Chaplain, once said to him: "Zinger, we're not in the land of the living going to the land of the dying. We're in the land of the dying trying to get to the land of the living."

### 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 a God-centered view of our times of "trials" and "testing" commanded in **vss. 2-3**: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." The Greek word for "trial" here does not mean a "temptation" meant to ruin us but "a situation that tests us to prove or improve our abilities." Paul Azinger's lymphoma "proved" he was far more shallow and immature as a follower of **Jesus** than he believed and exposed his need to "improve" his trust in and commitment to the Lord.

James, **Jesus'** half-brother, was lead pastor to many of Israel's Messianic Jews before persecution drove them from their homeland. He longed with a pastor's heart to provide them comfort and guidance while they struggled to adapt to new surroundings and find suitable work and homes far from many they most relied upon and loved. He sought to remind his scattered former flock we can be *molded* by our trials to become better servants of our Lord if we are not *folded* by our trials. He switched in **vs. 3** to a Greek word for "testing" used for refining precious metals. This alerts us that just as the heat used to remove impurities

from precious metals is intense, testing to remove our impurities may seem as intense. But **James 1:3-4** assures us God is doing His best work in us during intense testing, if we cooperate with the Lord and do not contest His will [reread]. But our situation may seem so bleak at times that we can identify with the fellow who became so despondent over the tragic events in his life that he climbed out on a bridge, ready to jump. Passersby saw him and tried everything they knew to coax him off the bridge, but to no avail. Finally, one person suggested, "Get a psychiatrist. Maybe he can keep the man from jumping." They brought a psychiatrist to this scene. He walked partway out on the bridge, sat down, and listened to the man pour out his troubles for about an hour. Then the psychiatrist took the man's hand and they both jumped!

Paul Azinger felt for a time his life was nearly this bleak. Though lymphoma is often a highly treatable form of cancer, he suffered so horribly from six months of chemotherapy that he sometimes felt more dead than alive. But he cried out to God for the "wisdom" promised in **vs. 5** to make sense of his life-threatening illness. "Wisdom," as James learned from his Brother, **Jesus**, is "the ability to view life as God sees it and to live for God's purposes, rather than just for our purposes." Azinger then chose to cooperate with God rather than to contest His will. He was rewarded with experiencing the truth of **James 1:3-4**: 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 to persevere and accomplish His will in fair weather or foul, because our standards have become God's standards ("lacking in nothing").

Thus, in the midst of the darkest trial of his life, Paul Azinger began radiating with the most light of **Jesus Christ** of his life. Payne Stewart, a flamboyant professional golfer known for wearing knickers and Tam o' Shanter caps, and the winner of the 1989 PGA Championship, told Paul the faith that carried him through this crisis seemed "unbelievable." Already bald from the chemo, Paul even joked to Payne, "Hey bald is in. Just look at all those NBA basketball stars; they all have bald heads. As a matter of fact, as soon as I lost my hair, I went out to our basketball hoop in the backyard. Within seconds, I was dunking shots!" Paul's vibrant testimony to the reality of **Jesus** drew Payne Stewart to commit himself to Christ as his Lord and Savior. In 1998, Payne Stewart led the U.S. Open throughout the Tournament and had a four-shot lead going into the final round, only to lose to Lee Janzen by one stroke on the final hole. He then rebounded to win the U.S. Open in 1999. The equal grace with which he handled his U.S. Open loss and his win, visibly sustained by a peace and sense of purpose very unlike the Payne Stewart of old, testified to Lee Janzen of **Jesus'** transforming power. On October 25, 1999, Payne Stewart died tragically in an airplane crash at age 42. He's now forever alive in the presence of his Savior. His testimony continues to motivate Lee Janzen to live to achieve great things for **Jesus Christ**, instead of for himself, as he'd witnessed Payne Stewart do.

After 6 months of chemotherapy and 5 weeks of radiation, Paul Azinger recovered from lymphoma. He returned to the PGA tour. In 2000, he blew away the competition by winning a PGA tournament by seven strokes and was named PGA Tour Comeback Player of the Year. He is now the lead golf analyst for Fox Sports broadcasts. He often testifies his bout with cancer changed his life focus from being self-centered to Christ-centered. "I've made a lot of money since I've been on the tour," Azinger writes, "and I've won a lot of tournaments, but that happiness is always temporary. The only way you will ever have true contentment is in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ." He's learned that "faith," as James defined it in **vs.6**, is "a single-minded and a whole-hearted commitment to God that trusts in God." We don't have Biblical "faith," Azinger would tell us today, unless we're 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.

If we ask, "What on earth are You doing, God?" with faith's full loyalty, as Paul Azinger did, we will be willing to cooperate with the Lord as He deepens and purifies our relationship with **Jesus** by times of testing and trial. We will not be driven by doubt's divided loyalties to seek an excuse to turn from the Lord. Here are four things to keep in mind to help us make sense of God's workings in our lives:

## 1. PRIORITY

The most crucial thought to keep in mind when we are driven by 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. We can all probably laugh today over times our priorities were out of whack in the past. A couple going on a lengthy vacation were standing in line to check their bags at the airline counter. The husband said his wife, "I wish we'd brought the piano instead." Thinking her husband was griping over how many things she'd insisted on taking along, she replied, "Why, do you think it would be easier to check the piano instead of the 16 bags we are taking?" "No," said her husband with some remorse. "But our tickets are on the piano." French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-62) commented, "The last thing one knows is what to put first." **Romans 11:36** reminds us, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

## 2. PIETY

Piety can have the meaning of "dutiful respect or loyalty," as toward God, one's homeland, or a family member. This includes trusting their character and giving them the benefit of the doubt. We don't truly have Biblical "faith" (**vs.6**), according to James, 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 may seem to lead us.

**3. PURPOSE**—Believing God has a good purpose for allowing a stressful trial to happen to us can keep us from thinking we're merely victims of bad circumstances or Satanic assaults. **Ephesians 5:20** prescribes, "giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." This does not mean give thanks *for* a trial but to affirm God is still at work despite it. Persian legend tells of a king seeking a truly loyal servant. He hires two candidates at a fixed wage and tells them to fill a basket with water from a nearby well, saying he'd come in the evening to inspect their work. After dumping one or two buckets of water into the basket, one man says, "What is the good of doing this useless work? As soon as we pour the water in, it runs out the sides." The other answers, "But we have our wages. The 'uselessness' of our work is the master's business, not ours. He's a wise King. He must have his own purpose we do not understand." The complainer whines, "I'm not going to do such fool's work." He throws down his bucket, and quits. The other continues until he drains the well. Looking down into it, he sees something shining at the bottom, drops into the well, and discovers it's a diamond ring! Just then the king arrives. "Now I see the use of pouring water into the basket!" he tells the king excitedly! "If the bucket had brought up the ring before the well was dry, your ring would have been filtered out in the basket. You were looking for your lost diamond all the time. Our work was not useless." The king had found a truly faithful servant.

**4. PROFIT**—Ask God to teach us how we may best profit, or learn, from this trial. **Isaiah 48:17** (NASB): "Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, 'I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit ["to excel;" "to be useful"], who leads you in the way you should go.'" Four years ago, I awoke with my right side paralyzed. Despite doing many things recommended to prevent it, I still suffered a stroke. My prayer during the ambulance ride to the ER was, "Lord, teach me everything You want me to learn from this and may I be the witness for You that You want me to be." Satan promises something is the best for us, but he pays with what is the worst for us. He promises us honor but pays with disgrace. He promises pleasure and pays off with pain. He promises profit and pays us with loss. He promises us a richer life and pays us with a poorer death. God promises what appears to be the worst for us may prove to be the best for us. He promises temporary disgrace that may gain us lasting honor. He promises today's pain will be forgotten in Heaven's pleasure. He promises nothing is lost that is devoted to the Lord's profit. Best of all, God promises us life's true riches and eternal victory over death!

## CONCLUSION

A missionary in Africa experienced great difficulty in translating the Gospel of John into the local dialect. His greatest obstacle was finding a suitable word to communicate the Biblical idea of "believe" (as in **John 3:16**). His translation was forced to leave a blank space for that particular word. Then one day a runner came panting into the village. He'd traveled a great distance with an urgent message. After blurting out his story, he fell completely exhausted into a nearby hammock. He muttered a brief phrase that seemed to express both his great weariness and his contentment at finding such a needed and pleasant place of relaxation. The missionary, never having heard these words before, asked a native what the runner had said. "Oh, he is saying, "I'm at the end of myself, therefore I am resting all of my weight here!" The missionary exclaimed, "Praise God! That is the very expression I need for the word believe!" He then completed his translation.

"Believe" in **John 3:16** is the verb form of the Greek word translated "faith" in **James 1:5-6**: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith." "Faith" is yielding to God all desires to control our circumstances for our purposes; yielding our distrust over His handling of our lives; and placing full confidence in God by declaring to Him, "I'm at the end of myself, therefore I am resting all of my weight here upon You." Otherwise, we may refuse to hear or to follow God's answers to our prayers for His guidance. "[F]or the one who doubts . . . ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."