

A Person of Faith

James 1:2-8

I have a fairly easy assignment as we begin this morning: bring to mind a trial or challenge or difficulty that you faced this past week. What was it that occupied your mind when you weren't busy? What kept you awake at night? Your trial could be a simple frustration (like a car repair that requires more time and money than you have); it could be a conflict with someone you hoped would be more supportive; it could be a medical setback; it could be a temptation that just won't go away; it could be uncertainty over your future.

I'd like you to identify that trial so that today's message is more than a hypothetical exercise in listening. I'd like you to process your trial in light of what we will study in James 1:2-8. James gives a perspective on trial and then tells us to pray, asking God for wisdom in handling those trials.

Last week we began a seven-week sermon series on the topic of intercession, making requests of God. We are taking the first four weeks of this series to discuss the type of person who prays well/biblically. We're trusting God to raise up a movement of prayer here at Faith and in the body of Christ in Manhattan that we might see Him do an extraordinary thing in our day. We want to get to the place where praying makes a LOT more sense than not praying, where prayer is not an obligation but a joy, not an afterthought but our passion.

Last week we saw from John 15 that ***a person of prayer is a person of the word***. Jesus told His disciples, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." If we saturate our lives with God's word until we want what He wants and we think the way He thinks, we can have confidence that God will give what we ask. This will require that we live as disciples so that our desires align with God's.

Today we are going to see in James 1 that ***A person of prayer is a person of faith*** (*James 1:2-8*). James begins by giving a perspective on trials/difficulties that enter our lives. We read this in verses 2 through 4:

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The basic idea here is that "God never wastes a perfectly good trial." God uses every difficulty we experience to expose how solid our faith really is. This past week when you experienced your trial, what was in your heart was exposed by what you thought and said and did. God's desire isn't to trip you up and expose you as a fraud; He uses trials to refine us and deepen our faith so that we will have more resilience. But we have to participate in this process.

Our normal response isn't, "Oh joy! God is about to refine me and produce endurance in my life so I will be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing!" We tend to think, "Oh great. . .this is the last thing I need right now. Why can't I catch a break? Why does everybody try to block my brilliant ideas?"

But if we practice what we discussed last week from John 15 - abiding in Christ and letting His words abide in us - we will respond very differently. We will be clued in to the way God thinks and works to the point where we welcome His refining work. Even though it won't be easy, there is a sense of satisfaction (joy) that God is at work. We will look at our trials very differently. Instead of thinking about how everyone and everything inconveniences me, we will look for ways that God is producing endurance in our lives.

The concept is pretty simple: God wants to refine us through the trials we experience. But participating in this refining work is often **very** complex: Is this a situation in which I confront the other person and speak the truth in love or a situation where I overlook the offense (because love covers a multitude of sins)? Do I ask another person for help or do I make my request known to God alone? And what do I do with my frustration and anxiety and anger between now and when this situation gets resolved?

The complexity of our trials suggests that we need wisdom - genuine wisdom from above. We don't need to live our lives by trial and error, hoping for the best. That is a dangerous way to live our lives. Instead, we need wisdom so that we will live our lives in ways that have a solid track record of leading to life and wholeness. Jeremiah called this the "ancient path"; Jesus called it the narrow way; it is the path of wisdom. Not surprisingly James tells his readers in verse 5:

5 But 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.

At its core, wisdom involves "skillful living." If you have wisdom, you have skill in living your life. The book of Proverbs explains that a wise person is skillful in relationships, in avoiding temptation, in handling your money, in speech, in responding to difficult people, in food and drink, etc.

James makes a verbal link in verses 4 and 5. In verse 4 he speaks of trials making us "mature and complete, **lacking** in nothing." In verse 5 he writes, "If any of you **lacks** wisdom. . ." Chances are that last week in the midst of your trial you didn't know exactly what to do (and not do), or what to say (or not say). You weren't quite "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." You lacked wisdom.

James' advice: ". . .let him ask of God, who gives generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." There's a novel idea: we should pray, asking God to give us the wisdom we lack. In the OT this is often called "inquiring of the Lord" - asking His opinion/will on situations. The only reason we **wouldn't** ask God for wisdom would be if we didn't believe that He is willing and able to give it to us.

And so James assures us that God “gives generously and without reproach.” The adverb translated generously is found only here in the NT. When this term is used as a noun it can mean either generosity (Romans 12:8 - NASB “liberality”) or sincerity (Eph. 6:5). Either translation is appropriate and true in light of other Scriptures, but I think that the context slightly favors the idea that God gives to all “sincerely” (or even singlemindedly) and “without reproach.” The idea is that God gives gifts with sincerity; He doesn’t give gifts in a grudging, insulting way: “I’m going to do this for you just this once, but I’m not one bit happy about it. . . you ungrateful, spoiled brat!” No, God genuinely wants us to have what we need to please Him. [By the way, I think one of the reasons Paul writes that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7) is because God Himself is a cheerful giver.] Understanding the true character of God is essential for effective praying.

Of course we need to hear this command to ask for wisdom in light of everything else we’re told in Scripture about gaining wisdom. Specifically, the book of Proverbs tells us to seek after wisdom like it’s a hidden treasure; we should have that much intensity and anticipation. Proverbs 2:2-6 makes clear that we are responsible to seek wisdom but that God is the One who gives it.

2 Make your ear attentive to wisdom,
Incline your heart to understanding;
3 For if you cry for discernment,
Lift your voice for understanding;
4 If you seek her as silver
And search for her as for hidden treasures;
5 Then you will discern the fear of the Lord
And discover the knowledge of God.
6 For the Lord gives wisdom;
From His mouth come knowledge and understanding.

This is compatible with what we saw in John 15: it is your responsibility to let the “words of Christ abide in you”; nobody can do that for you. You do that through meditating on Scripture, receiving teaching, and conversations with others in the body of Christ. As you let the word of Christ dwell within you, you can have confidence in asking God to give you wisdom.

Beginning in verse 6 James stresses the condition of asking in faith:

6 But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, 8 being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

As we mentioned last week, prayer is very conditional in the Bible. Certain conditions must be met if we expect to receive what we’ve asked from God. Instead of being arbitrary, these conditions were very reasonable in light of who God is and in light of what He is doing in this world. Last week we asked why it was reasonable for Jesus to

say, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish. . .”? The short answer was because they were disciples; they had a heartfelt commitment to the death to follow Jesus. Abiding in Him and letting His word abide in them was life to them.

Today we need to explore why it was reasonable for James to write that we must “ask in faith without any doubting.” Why must a person of prayer be a person of faith? Because God cares what we think and believe about Him. We are in a covenant relationship with God, therefore our relationship must be based on reality (what He is really like). Specifically, He cares whether or not we believe that He is as good as He claims to be. Repeatedly in Scripture God tells us that He is a God who hears the prayers of His people. Deuteronomy 4:7 is one of my favorite prayer verses in the entire Bible:

7 “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him?”

The greatness of Israel was not their size/numbers. Israel’s greatness lay in the fact that her God was near and heard when they called on Him! The gods of the nations were impotent to answer their cries for help, but Israel’s God was eager to respond when they called to Him. Jesus called His disciples to believe the same thing when He told them to ask, seek, and knock because “God is a Father who knows how to give good gifts to His children” (Matthew 7:11-14).

In a similar way, James is urging us to ask God for wisdom *in faith*, believing that He is a God who single-mindedly, gladly gives us wisdom. And He does so without following it up with insults.

6 But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, 8 being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

James adds the negative corollary, “without any doubting.” To doubt is to have an internal conflict over whether or not God is able and willing to give us wisdom. To doubt is to question His power and His motives. Since God cares what we really think about Him and wants our hearts to be fully His, it is appropriate that ***a person of prayer is a person of faith***. If we want to pray well, we need a rock solid confidence that our prayers are being heard by a heavenly Father who loves to answer our prayers.

James likens a doubting person to the “surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.” He is describing an unstable person whose attitude toward God changes day by day. Instead of single-minded confidence in God, that person is “double-minded and unstable in all his ways.” James is saying that the way we ask should mirror the way God gives. Since God is singleminded and intent on giving us wisdom and other good gifts, we should be singleminded in asking Him for those gifts.

But what do you do if you do have doubts? Do you give up and conclude, “I guess praying just isn’t for me”? No, you try to get to a place where you don’t have doubts. In our culture, doubts are sometime elevated to the level of a virtue (as if it’s noble to live with doubt and suspicion); but in the Bible doubting is the opposite of faith. The reality that a person of prayer is a person of faith should motivate us to address our doubts. There are different kinds of doubts.

If you have ***doubts about God and His character***, this is a call to humble yourself in the presence of God. Instead of letting your doubts turn to unbelief, enter into the presence of God and admit to Him that you have doubts: “God, I am sorry but I am not sure that you are willing and able to answer my prayers.” I would also encourage you to go back to the Word and back to the cross and be convinced all over again that God really is more generous than we can fathom. By giving His one and only Son to die for our sin, we see His single-minded intention to give us what we need in this world and in the next. When you doubt whether or not God is “for” you, fix your eyes on Jesus and see what God allowed Him to endure for your sake. Allow God’s word to fuel your faith.

If you have ***doubts whether or not you’re praying according to God’s will***, I would say something similar. Talk with people who know the Scriptures so that your thinking and praying is refined. In 1 John 5:14 we are told that we can have confidence in praying if we pray according to God’s will.

Sometimes those pray the most and who take the most risks in prayer (bringing specific requests before God) find themselves disappointed with God. [If you don’t pray for anything specific, you might be disappointed with life, but you probably won’t be disappointed with God.] What do we do when we are convinced that we’ve been praying according to God’s will and are praying in faith, but we don’t receive from God what we’ve asked? When/if that happens, instead of throwing up our hands and concluding that “prayer doesn’t work,” we should press deeper into the will of God and into prayers of faith. As with every area of the Christian life, we shouldn’t give up if we’re not batting 1,000 (that’s a baseball reference). We are flawed, imperfect, sinful people. We should persevere, realizing that our life of prayer is a work in progress. There’s too much at stake to say, “Unless I can eliminate any mystery from a life of prayer, I’m not going to risk it.”

I would encourage you to begin praying for wisdom in your everyday trials. Make this type of praying a reflex response to the trials you face. If we do so, you and I will see a steady stream of answered prayer as we pray for wisdom day after day. This will give us confidence to branch out and pray in faith for other things.

The children of Israel were supposed to grow in their faith after seeing God do miracle after miracle in Egypt and in the wilderness; Jesus’ disciples were supposed to learn from His miracles that He could be trusted in every situation; in the same way, we should notice God’s track record in our lives and should have a growing confidence that God is a God who gives what we ask when we pray according to His will in faith.

James 1 tells us to ask for wisdom in faith. But many other Scriptures tell us to bring all of our requests to God in faith. Here are just a few Scriptures that emphasize how ***a person of prayer is a person of faith***. These Scriptures confirm that in every situation God responds to our faith. In James 5:14–15 James gave this simple teaching concerning prayer for the sick:

14 Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; 15 and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

In Matthew 9:22 Jesus responded to the woman who took a huge risk and reached out to touch the hem of Jesus' robe:

22 But Jesus turning and seeing her said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." At once the woman was made well.

In Mark 11:24 Jesus told His disciples this:

24 "Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.

Even though we don't understand exactly how prayer "works," Scripture makes very clear that we should take God at His word and pray in faith. As we abide in Christ and let His word abide in us, we can pray in faith without any doubting so that His kingdom comes and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. This week, let's purpose in our hearts to be doers of the word when it comes to praying in faith, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. This will require generous amounts of grace - something that God is very willing to supply.