

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

February 23, 2014

As we wrap up our series, “Great Expectations”, I want to ask you a simple question, “What do you expect from God?” Before we delve in, let’s look at the word *expect*. According to dictionary definitions, here is what *expect* means.

Expect. To believe that something probably or certainly will happen. To look forward to the occurrence of something with little or no reservation.

“What do you expect from God?” It’s a simple question, but one that is not answered so easily. Some people expect nothing from God. They have discarded the notion that God even exists. They depend completely on themselves to get through life. Others treat God like a “genie in a bottle”. When they want something or when life has gotten tough, they might offer up a prayer or two, but there is no real relationship with God. God is their “genie in a bottle”.

This morning, I want us to look at the book of James to help us answer the question. We’ll look at obstacles, how we can overcome those obstacles and lastly, outcomes.

James, as he opens his letter, tells us he is writing to “**Jewish Christians scattered among the nations.**” This is what he says in James 1:5-8.

“⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.” James 1:5-8

OBSTACLES – Doubt

I want begin with the latter portion of the passage. “**He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.**”

The word “double-minded” here is key to understanding what James means. The Greek word here literally means, *two spirited*. James is not implying that a person actually has two spirits, but that he functions as if he does. One mind thinking one set of thoughts, the other thinking different thoughts. One set of emotions pulling one direction, the other pulling in the opposite direction. What James is portraying here is indecision. The double-mindedness that James speaks of causes him to be “**unstable in all he does.**”

James describes it as “**a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.**” A couple of years ago, Lisa and I took a four-day cruise from Miami to Mexico. Unbeknownst to us, there was a hurricane moving through the Caribbean. On our way back from Cozumel we had a day at sea sailing through the Gulf of Mexico. By this point in time the hurricane had begun to move north up the East Coast of the U.S., but we had to sail through the outer bands of the winds. I looked out our cabin window and could see twenty foot swells with white caps being tossed about every which way by the wind. While our ship rocked and felt the effects of the wind and the waves, it could maintain its course and we were quite safe. How? Our ship had powerful engines, rudders and stabilizers that kept it on course. Without these, we would have been at the mercy of the wind and waves.

A double-minded man or woman is like a ship without an engine, rudders and stabilizers. They are at the mercy of the wind and waves. The indecision created by competing thoughts, emotions and desires tosses them about and knocks them off course.

This affects every area of our lives. James says that the “**double-minded man is unstable in all he does.**” The NLT puts it this way, “**They can’t make up their minds. They waver back and forth in everything they do.**” It affects our decision-making, our emotions, it affects our relationships and it affects our spiritual life.

We live in an age that some sociologists are calling the “Age of Anxiety”. I was reading an article online recently on indecision and came across this quote from a book by Barry Schwartz called *The Paradox of Choice*. “*But clinging tenaciously to all the choices available to us contributes to bad decisions, to anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction—even to clinical depression.*”

James tells us that this type of person, “**should not think he will receive anything from the Lord.**” James does not say that they will not receive anything from the Lord, let’s be clear on that. That is, after all, ultimately up to the Lord himself, but he says they should not expect to receive anything. Why should I expect to receive anything from the Lord if I “**waver back and forth in everything I do?**”

The reality is, there are times in each of our lives where we have periods of indecision; where our lives feel anything but stable. Sometimes indecision caused by too much choice. At other times, it is the result of wanting to make the best decision. Whatever its root cause, indecision – particularly when it becomes pervasive – is debilitating and affects every area of life.

Ultimately, doubt and indecision reveals a lack of spiritual maturity. When we are “**tossed about**” by the winds and waves of life, it reveals that we don’t have strong rudders and stabilizers to keep us on course. It reveals that we are unsure of what we can expect from God.

OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLE – Ask

So we’ve recognized the obstacle that James points out here. But what do we do to overcome the obstacle?

i. Acknowledge the need

Let’s look back at verse 5, “**5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.**” James says, “**If any of you lacks wisdom...**”

If you lack something, it means that there is a need. But, acknowledging that we lack something requires a certain degree of humility; humility which allows us to do some healthy self-examination. And, although this is a quality that we should have as Christians, it is often found to be in short supply.

James is speaking specifically about wisdom here. Who among us does not need God’s wisdom? There are some however who, because of pride, a lack of humility, or an unwillingness to do some self-examination won’t acknowledge that need in their lives and as a result do not mature in their faith and do not produce the fruit that God desires.

James is speaking about wisdom, but this could be applied to any need we have in life. If you want the need to met, you must first acknowledge the need.

ii. Ask God

Second step in overcoming the obstacle, ask God. Seems pretty simple, doesn’t it? Ask God. Let me ask you this, when you need wisdom or guidance in your life, is your first instinct to ask God? Is God who you instinctively turn to when you are in need? There was a great song recorded by Casting Crowns a few years back called *What If My People Prayed?* and in it a line that says this, “**what if the family turned to Jesus, stopped asking Oprah what to do?**” It’s a funny line, but far too many Christians rely more on what talk show hosts, supposed “experts” or self-help books have to say than what the Bible says or what God tells them.

James says, “**Ask God.**” Not Oprah, not a self-help book, not even a pastor. Ask God.

One of the greatest problems we face in the church and as individuals is that many of us just don't bother to ask God at all. Often when we are faced with obstacles or we're trying to make a decision, rather than asking God, we come up with a plan and then we go to God and ask him to bless it. And sometimes when we ask God, we are too impatient to wait for the answer and so we do our own thing.

I am one who believes that God has given us brains for a reason, to use them. But that doesn't mean that we should circumvent God. Our knowledge and intellect are nothing without God's wisdom. James says, "**Ask God.**" That should be our first instinct as Christians.

iii. **Expect an answer**

I love how the NLT phrases this, "**Ask God, but when you do be sure you really expect him to answer.**" You see, it's not enough simply to ask, you must expect an answer.

When you ask God for wisdom, direction, for anything for that matter, what do you expect? Do you expect an answer? Do you expect a response? The NIV translation says, "**When he asks he must believe and not doubt.**" You must expect an answer.

How many of you have ever had an experience where you have prayed but in the back of your mind you don't really believe that God is going to answer? Sadly, I think that is the reality for many Christ followers. Prayer becomes nothing more than a hope that God might respond, in the same we would say "I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow", rather than an expectation that he will answer.

In Matthew 21:21-22, Jesus says the following, "**I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. 22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.**" Some people will use verse 22 here to develop a "name it and claim it" theology. Just ask for it and God will give it to you. That's not what Jesus is trying to get across here.

The disciple's had just asked Jesus about the fig tree that he had cursed; they wondered how it had withered so quickly. The point of this passage is this, if you expect to receive anything from God you must have faith. Stephen spoke about this kind of faith last week. It was their unwavering faith that allowed Shadrach, Meschach and Abednigo to face the fiery furnace. When we ask God for anything we must ask with this same unwavering faith in God.

Hebrews 11:6 says, **“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone that comes to him must believe he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”** The key word here is must, you must believe that God exists. You must believe that God will answer you. What do you expect? When you ask, do you expect that God will answer you? Or do simply settle for faint hope?

OUTCOME – God’s provision and faithfulness

“⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” The NLT states this same verse this way, **“⁵ 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.”**

James reveals to us a simple truth here; God desires to bless his children. **“Ask God, who gives generously...” “Ask him, and he will gladly tell you.”** God is glad to share his wisdom with us; he derives joy from providing for us. Our God is a generous God, he gives to us far more than we deserve. Do you understand this about our God?

One of the challenges we sometimes face is that we believe that our need is too small or unimportant to bring to God. I know myself that there have been times where I’ve felt like I didn’t want to bother God with what was on my heart; it was not important enough. Nothing could be further from the truth! Jesus said, **“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”** Matthew 6:26 We are! We are **“created in God’s image”**, **“we are God’s workmanship”**. We have incredible value in God’s eyes and no need, no concern is too small.

In our relationships, whether with family, friends or at work, we often encounter another challenge; people who will give you something when you ask, but who seem resentful. They do it grudgingly, almost out of a sense of obligation. Sometimes we transfer what we have experienced over to God. We feel that God will be resentful if we ask. We mustn’t do that though as it gives us a skewed perspective of God’s character. **“He will not resent your asking”**, James reminds us.

CLOSING

There is a story in Scripture that is an incredibly powerful example of what we’ve been talking about today. It’s the story of Abraham and Isaac found in Genesis 22.

² “Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you.” ³ The next morning Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son, Isaac. Then he chopped wood for a fire for a burnt offering and set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day of their journey, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ “Stay here with the donkey,” Abraham told the servants. “The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back.” ⁶ So Abraham placed the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac’s shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them walked on together, ⁷ Isaac turned to Abraham and said, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “We have the fire and the wood,” the boy said, “but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” ⁸ “God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son,” Abraham answered. And they both walked on together. ⁹ When they arrived at the place where God had told him to go, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. Then he tied his son, Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. ¹⁰ And Abraham picked up the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. ¹¹ At that moment the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Yes,” Abraham replied. “Here I am!” ¹² “Don’t lay a hand on the boy!” the angel said. “Do not hurt him in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son.” ¹³ Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son. ¹⁴ Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means “the LORD will provide”).

Abraham was by no means perfect. He had struggled with doubt earlier on in his journey with God. He wrestled on occasion with indecision. His actions did not always reveal that he expected great things of God. In this story however we see a man who has matured in his faith; a man who has learned from his mistakes and who has learned from God. If we were to ask the question “What did Abraham expect from God?” I think our response would have to be, “Everything.”

The writer of Hebrews says this of Abraham and of this story in particular, “Abraham, who had received God’s promises, was ready to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, ¹⁸ though God had promised him ‘Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted.’ ¹⁹ Abraham assumed that if Isaac died, God was able to bring him back to life again. And in a sense, Abraham did receive his son back from the dead.” Hebrews 11:17-19

Abraham told his servants as he left them, “The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back.” He expected that both he and Isaac would return. When Isaac questioned him about

the whereabouts of the lamb for the sacrifice, Abraham responded, “**God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son.**” He expected that God would provide a sacrifice. His expectations of God were so high that he built the altar, tied Isaac up and was ready to sacrifice him for God. And God did provide the lamb; Isaac was spared.

“⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.” James 1:5-8

Let me begin exactly where we began this morning, with a question, “What do you expect from God?”