

Sunday 20 July 2014

Otumoetai Baptist

Asking God for wisdom in tough times

James 1:5-8

Two truths and one lie:

I used to sell Insurance for a living.

I have swum with sharks.

I delivered one of my children at home.

Last week we started a new series

on the book of James called 'Faith in Action'.

James is such an awesome book

filled with great practical advice for the Christian life.

It's also my wife's favourite book of the Bible!

I've enjoyed reading through it the past few weeks

and if you haven't already, I encourage you to do so too.

One recurring theme that James talks about

is the trials that we go through in life.

Brian spoke last Sunday

on what God is saying to us through trials.

(SLIDE 1)

For those who weren't here,

this is what God is saying to us about trials.

Number one, we are going to have trials.

That's a given, right?

They say that death and taxes

are the two certainties in life,

well I think we can add trials as the third certainty.

Number two, trials are a test and opportunity.

This can be often hard to grasp,

especially when you are in the midst of a difficult trial.

And number three, we will have trials of many kinds.

Brian mentioned the likes of financial trials,

emotional trials, physical trials, spiritual trials,

mental trials, relational trials, and vocational trials.

So last week was about what God is saying to us about trials,

today's focus is how we can respond to trials in our lives.

(SLIDE 2)

I was up the top of the mount during the week –

first time I've been there in a while –

and I was struck by the scenery around me.

It really is such an amazing outlook onto the beach,

the high rises, the harbour, the bridge,

the busy downtown Mount.

Looking out into the ocean,

it's like all your problems seem to melt away.

There was a family up there
who were playing hide and seek with each other.

The dad would tell his little girl to count to ten
and then he and the rest of the family would go hide.

After counting to six,
the little girl would go look for her family
with a massive smile on her face.

Now there aren't many hiding places
up at the top of the mount
but they still managed to keep the game going for a while.

And again I thought,
just for a brief moment,
that for them there was not a care in the world.
All their problems faded away.

But this is not how life is for most of us.

(SLIDE 3)

We face trials on a weekly, sometimes even daily basis.

Someone close to us is ill.

Our job is not working out how we want it to.

We are having difficulties in our marriage.

We are not sure how to pay that latest winter power bill.

Our child is having a hard time at school.

Or we might be feeling a little depressed about life,
struggling in our circumstances.

If you relate to any of this then you're in good company,
because this is the type of audience
that James is writing to in his letter.

He is writing to the twelve tribes
who have been dispersed
or separated from each other.

He is addressing the people of God
who have been scattered due to persecution.
It's safe to say that life has not been easy for them,
no doubt some, in fact many,
have likely been questioning their faith
and why God has allowed the hard times in their lives.

They are likely asking the big questions
that we often ask today,
like why do bad things happen to good people?
And where is God in the suffering?

So James has a captive audience
and as we found out last week,
he starts his letter by telling them
to consider it a sheer gift
whenever they face trials of many kinds.

I'm sure this must have got a reaction at the time ...
And I think it's because the message hits home,

in that life is often difficult
and the hard times we go through
do have a major impact on us and those around us.

James' audience are facing
monumental trials in their lives,
which he acknowledges and tells them
that this is ultimately for their good.

Gee, thanks James.

Just what they want to hear, I bet.

Then, in the same context of facing trials,
this is what he tells them in verses 5-8:

(SLIDE 4)

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

There's a lot in these four verses,
and when I preached on this last year at Ponsonby Baptist,
I focused on faith and doubt,

but this time round I am focusing on the theme
of asking for wisdom.

James starts this passage by saying
"if any of you lacks wisdom".

It is interesting to note that
the end of the verse before this says
that by letting trials refine us
we will be mature and complete,
lacking in nothing.

Then in the very next verse James says
if you are lacking in wisdom.

So he's saying that when we are facing trials
we can lack wisdom.

What do we do then?

(SLIDE 5)

I think from the text

we can see three suggestions that James makes,
so let's have a look at them now:

(SLIDE 6)

1) ASK God

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

James is quick to point us upwards.

It is God who should be our first point of call.

When trials come our way

the tendency can be to try work them out on our own
or go to the world for wisdom and advice.

In our world there are a lot of things
geared towards self-help.

(SLIDE 7)

You only have to go to the local bookshop
and see all the books about
making you a better you,
or seven ways to improve your life.

Similarly, you just need to turn on daytime TV
and find people like Oprah, Jeremy Kyle or Dr Phil
who can solve all your problems.

Now I'm not saying that there isn't a place for these things,
some can be helpful,
but I'm saying that when we face trials
our first response should be to ask God.

After all, he knows everything
and He knows us better than we know ourselves.

As a parent, my role is to provide for my children,
to look after them,

and help them to make good choices in their lives.

Equipping them with what they need to deal
with the storms that life throws their way.

If they are going through a trial
I want them to come to me.

Now at the moment

it may only be small things like fixing their toys
– although to be honest, Roxy is better at this than me –
or keeping Noah safe from the penguins at Kelly Tarltons.

But as they grow,
the trials they face will become bigger
and I hope that after going to ask God
they will come to me when in these.

It's the same with God for us.

He is waiting for us to come to him to ask for His wisdom.

(SLIDE 8)

James says,
“if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God,
who gives generously to all without finding fault,
and it will be given to you.”

God is generous and gives to us extravagantly!

I know this in my own life.
Especially when it comes to my wife.

My wife has sassiness.
She is God's gift to me.
I couldn't have picked someone more suited,
who complements me,
and who is my soul mate.

Now the interesting thing is
that I asked God for exactly this.

Someone to journey through life with,
someone to weather the ups and downs with,
someone to have fun with,
someone who would bring the best out of me.

And God knew what He was doing.

If you're facing a trial right now
and don't know where to turn to,
let me encourage you to look up
and ask God for the wisdom you need to walk through it.

So James' first suggestion is to ASK God. The next is ...

(SLIDE 9)

2) ASK in faith.

James says that asking God is the right way to start,
and then he adds "But when you ask, you must believe."

(SLIDE 10)

In other words,
when you ask God for something,
have faith that He will provide what you need.
That He is and will be there for you.

I faced a trial at the end of last year.

I was in the final year of my pastoral leadership course
at Carey Baptist College in Auckland
and was getting ready to go into pastoral ministry.

I won't go into the specifics but it seemed like the door had shut
on me going into ministry.

I was pretty devastated.

This is what I'd trained for,
had my heart set on,
and moved my family from Tauranga up to Auckland for.

The plan in my head
was that Roxy and I would end up pastoring
a group of people in a small country church.
Well, this was not going to happen.

So we moved back to Tauranga
and started coming along to OBC,
feeling embraced by our new church family.

I remember sitting down with Roxy
and together praying and asking God for wisdom
and guidance in what to do next,
because things didn't look too flash.

I was unemployed,
we were living with my parents,
we had very little money,
two little boys to support - life wasn't very fun.

We kept asking God for help.
And I still managed to hold on to the faith
that He would come through for us.

I started applying for jobs
and kept receiving those lovely responses,
"Thank you for your application.
All our applicants were of a high calibre
and we regret to inform you
that your application was unsuccessful."

Feeling a bit discouraged,
I kept praying and asking God in faith.

Then came an opportunity.
A ministry opportunity even!
A youth pastor's position would you believe it?

God has a real sense of humour,
because all throughout my studies at Carey,

youth ministry was not on my radar at all.

And that's how I know it was a total God thing,
because when everything seemed to be down
and against me going into ministry,
God provided a way that no human could have orchestrated.

I asked him for wisdom and he provided it.
Along with the youth pastor's position here,
He also provided me with a job at Idea Services
supporting people with intellectual disabilities.

God's wisdom and ways are totally different
to human wisdom and ways.

You know those Tui billboards,
well if you'd have told me a year ago
that I'd be a youth pastor
I would have thought "Yeah right".

But I'm loving where God has me.

(SLIDE 11)

Sure there are challenges and hurdles
but I am learning to tackle these,
asking God in faith for the wisdom
to handle trials when they come my way.

Now I know that this is often easier said than done.
And not all situations work out like ours did.

For those of us that have been through
something like depression or a mental health issue,
the death of a close loved one,
the loss of income and not knowing
how the bills are going to be paid,
the present reality of an uncertain future,
it's often a huge struggle to ask and believe in faith.

I've been here. And maybe this is where you are now.

And you know,

I think that God has a lot of grace for us in this area.

He knows our hearts,

he knows our needs,

and despite how things might look

He is watching over us and our circumstances.

Let me encourage you if this is where you are at
and tell you that you are not alone.

That we do have a God who cares for us.

We can have faith in Him to provide for us.

Returning to the text, James writes:

(SLIDE 12)

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

*That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.
Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.*

The final thing James suggests to us when faced with trials is
(SLIDE 13)

3) Ask don't doubt

Now doubts are a human thing to have

and James is **not** saying

that we can't have doubts as Christians.

What he's saying is that when we ask God for His wisdom
we don't doubt that He can and will provide it for us.

James uses the illustration of a wave of the sea,
blown and tossed by the wind.

Have you watched the waves at the beach
on a wild and windy day?

(SLIDE 14)

They are tossed about like they are nothing
and are all over the show.

It's the same in our lives when we doubt
that God is with us
or will provide us with what we need in our situation.

Doubt in God robs us.

See, when we face trials God wants us to come to him,
to come in faith, and not to doubt Him.

When we come in doubt we can't expect to receive anything,
but when we come in faith,
we can expect to receive from God.

As I finish let me share a short story on faith,
God's faith for us and in us.

A pastor describes a time
when his five-year old daughter came to him
and asked for a doll house.

(SLIDE 15)

The pastor promptly nodded
and promised to build her one,
then he went back to reading his book.

Soon he glanced out the study window
and saw her arms filled with dishes, toys, and dolls,
making trip after trip
until she had a great pile of playthings in the yard.

He asked his wife what his little daughter was doing.

"Oh you promised to build her a doll house,
and she believes you.
She's just getting ready for it."

"You would have thought I'd been hit by an atom bomb",
the pastor later said.

"I threw aside that book,
raced to the lumber yard for supplies,
and quickly built my little girl a doll house.

Now why did I respond?

Because I wanted to? No.

Because she deserved it? No.

Because her daddy had given his word,
and she believed it and acted upon it.

When I saw her faith,
nothing could keep me from carrying out my word."

The same is true of us today.

God has given us His word as a gift,
a gift full of wonderful promises,
such as the one we have read today in James:

(SLIDE 16)

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

You know in life we don't know what's around the corner.

Just last week a family friend of ours in his fifties
went out for the evening,
came home, had a glass of wine with his wife,
went to sleep for the night
and he didn't wake up the next morning.

Unfortunately that's the kind of world we live in
and God never promised us an easy ride,
but we are promised in this passage
that no matter what trial we are going through,
we can ask God for wisdom to help us through it.

(SLIDE 17)

So, maybe you're in the midst of a trial now,
or maybe you'll find yourself in one this week.
Can I encourage you to ask God for His wisdom,
ask in faith,
and ask don't doubt that He **will** provide what you need.

Let me pray to finish.

God, you know what each of us is facing at the moment.
Help us to turn to you, ask for wisdom and believe that you will
respond.
Help us with our doubts and please provide us with what we
need for our situations.

In Jesus' name, Amen.