The Space Between Stimulus and Response

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The Foolish Things to Confound the Wise

The epistle of James has been working on me. For a long time I treated it as a series of nice phrases: the Proverbs of the New Testament, more or less. But the more I have dwelt in it, the more I have come to see that James is dealing with a very serious matter. And I have come to recognize that, through my own lack of understanding, I had been unwittingly a participant in the very failures James was calling people out of.

As I was thinking about this, the words came to me: Jesus is the wisdom of God. Paul says it directly in 1 Corinthians 1:

> Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. (1 Corinthians 1:26–27)

There is an elevation of people who are of no count. The more we gravitate to worldly values, and the more we think that being taught in the way of the Egyptian will give us the words we need to speak, the more misguided we become. Continue down into Exodus chapters 3 and 4, and you will see that when God appeared to Moses out of the burning bush, Moses claimed none of the wisdom of the Egyptians. Forty years earlier he had all the answers. Now he claims none.

He claims no ability to speak. He is not mighty in word or deed. He says, “Lord, send somebody else. I’m a man slow of speech.”

My God, hasn’t the modern age given us each at least one malady? Every one of us has a malady we are trying to overcome that we did not even define for ourselves. We were happy before they told us. Then we showed up, and we said, “Well, that answers so many questions. I’m just a failure. It’s my genes. I’ve got heart disease because my daddy had heart disease,” or whatever it is. Let’s get over it. Because God has chosen the foolish and weak things to confound the wise.

James, the New Jacob

James’s name in Hebrew is Jacob, and Jacob was the father of the twelve tribes, from Simeon all the way down to Benjamin. Twelve men came out of the one man Jacob. So it is striking that James, the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem after his brother’s death, writes to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1). Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 that the risen Jesus made a specific appearance to his brother James, which mattered, because the Gospels are clear that James and Judas and Joseph, the three brothers named there, did not initially believe Jesus was the Messiah.

When Jesus was meeting with people in a house, his brothers went out with his mother to take hold of him, because they thought he was beside himself, out of his mind. “Let’s go get him out and protect him.” His brothers were not all in on the Jesus train. When you watch somebody grow up, you typically do not assume he is the Messiah of Israel, the Son of the living God, the one spoken immaculately into your mother’s womb. It is, frankly, hard to believe. But Jesus appears to James, and James becomes the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He calls himself a bondservant of God and of our Lord King Jesus. And he writes to the twelve tribes scattered

abroad. Here is the new Jacob, almost a father in Israel, speaking to the twelve tribes of Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah.

A Real Trial, Then and Now

The pressure was on. You want to talk about trial and test? This was a trial of their faith. They had broken away from the one faith that had been grandfathered into the paganism of Rome. Judaism, as a religion, had legal protection within the empire. But these messianic Jews were being edged out of the synagogue, and with that they lost their cover. In that society it was not, “Well, if you won’t hire me, I’ll just go down the street and find another job.” It was all about who you knew. It was about family connections, an intricate matrix of who was in and who was out. Once you were out, it was hard to find anyone to take mercy on you. That meant a free fall in economic stability, and once economic stability is gone, personal safety begins to slip too.

Most of us in America have a hard time imagining true deprivation. But the truth is that a significant share of any given congregation is living from month to month, getting by. If we lost our job and could not find another within six to eight weeks, things would unravel quickly. I see this from a particular angle: I work for a large retailer, and our company tracks the aggregate credit card data from the seventy million people a week who come through our stores. Sixty-five percent of them swipe a card, and we can see that debt is rising. People are putting consumable basics (bread, milk, eggs) on credit. So despite our ability to keep the plates spinning and maintain some semblance of economic stability, the predominance of people in this country are living month to month with no safety net. If something bad were to occur, the bottom would drop out.

Still, most of us would not classify ourselves as people with no connections, no ability to find work, and no income at all. But the recipients of James's letter were. They were scattered abroad. And James opens with this:

"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing" (James 1:2–4).

Why Hindsight Is Always 20/20

Count it all joy seems such a paradox. There is something valuable that can come out of the trial, patience, but when you are in the middle of it, it is hard to see past the corner. Most of the time, when I look back over a trial I have been through, I think, "I wish I had not lost my cool. I wish I had not lost my temper. If I hadn't behaved that way and wrung my hands and complained to everybody about what I was going through, maybe I would have something to declare some victory over in my ability to trust God." Hindsight is always 20/20. I can look back and say, "What if I had just trusted God, instead of all the hand-wringing and going to him as the last option?"

What if you lack patience? What if the trial you are going through is causing you fear, and you do not know what to do? James says, "Let patience have its perfect work." We have talked a lot in this assembly about perfection and the full measure of the stature of Christ. But it comes through trial. It does not come through coasting through life on autopilot. It comes when there is a real threat to life.

You might say, "Rob, we are not facing the things the scattered messianic believers of the first century faced." But are we not? How many of you, moment by moment, are bombarded by disasters around the world: trouble, fear, uncertainty, even AI-generated fear and uncertainty that

has no basis in reality? From the moment we wake up until we lay our heads down, we are bombarded with fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Then we have to watch our children get bombarded with it. We watch their little lives begin to spin out of control, and we don't know how to help them. Words fail us. We don't know how to constrain them, and then we see that constraint only causes more chaos. We open the windows and doors and let them run free, and we see that isn't an answer either. What do you do? How do we solve these problems?

Worldly Wisdom Is Survival Wisdom

Worldly wisdom is based, almost entirely, on the basic manifestations of fear. Human survival is the engine. And when you are operating in survival mode, you cycle through four defaults: fight, flight, freeze, fawn.

Sometimes you do not know what to do, so you are paralyzed: freeze. Or you fawn: "You're so great. Whatever you say, boss." I've done a lot of fawning across my career. Or you fight: "Okay, we're ratcheting it up. We're going to fight." Or you flee. Fight, flight, freeze, fawn, all of it is rooted in fear of survival.

So when you go through a trial, why does James say you need patience? Why does he say you need to endure? Because there is an intense pull to run for the hills, to fight, to gravitate toward worldly values and worldly means of solving problems. But that is not what God calls us to. In an upside-down world, where weakness is strength and strength is actually weakness, none of those default worldly responses will do. They will only get you as far as worldly wisdom can carry you.

And worldly wisdom is bounded. Everything we know can be contained. There is a limit to what every one of us in this room knows, a bounded set of information. Pool all of our knowledge together; there is still a limit. Take every man, woman, and child on the planet; there

is still a limit. We are bounded by experience, by genetics; there are things you cannot know because you are genetically incapable of knowing them. My brain cannot conceive of theoretical physics. I just can't. And we are bounded by nurture. Is it nature or nurture? Yes. It is both. How your parents raised you, or didn't, becomes a limitation on what you can possibly know.

Outside Our Bounded Set

When we face a trial, my default move is: here is how I am going to solve the problem. I am a problem solver. If a mic goes out here and I don't think anyone has noticed, I am going to find one and bring it up. I do the same thing at work. I am constantly in problem-solving mode. Sometimes it is not my problem to solve. Sometimes I just need to chill, to take a breath. But when you are wired that way, God is almost always the last one you ask. "This one's probably outside my bounded set of knowledge," you think, after you've exhausted the inside.

If everything you know is bounded, then every solution to every trial is, at most, only as good as what is in your set. But outside of what you know is an infinite set of knowledge. There is an infinite set of answers to problems that exists out there. We just don't know where they are. We are limited.

So how do we pierce through our limitations as human beings and tap into something beyond us? James says,

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering" (James 1:5–6).

There is a wisdom. Jesus is the wisdom of God. When we find ourselves there, when we start to tap into that wisdom, when we will ask and pray, James says: ask in faith. Now, this verse has been used for all sorts of things. "You want a new car? You want a house on the hill?

Ask in faith." That is not what James is talking about. He is saying: You are going through a trial, and you lack the wisdom to navigate that trial. Ask God. Everybody is going through trials. That is how we grow in wisdom and maturity. Nobody is escaping this world without trials and tests. That is a given. But how we go through them is not. And it is done through this wisdom.

Do not doubt that God is good, that God is faithful, that God will come to your aid and give you the wisdom to navigate the trials you are going through, or the trials you have already gone through that you are still navigating. Do you have wounds from the past you cannot seem to get past? God wants to get you from there to here, and that is only done through wisdom. It is only done through Christ.

The Double-Minded Man

> Because the one who does not ask in faith,
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> . . . is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways. (James 1:6–8)

I cannot tell you the instability I feel. Monday-morning faith does not seem to match my Sunday-afternoon faith. It almost never matches. I leave the assembly going, "Man, I am going to do this thing. I am going in Monday, and I am going to be the guy God has called me to be." And then (boom, bam, smack, crash, bang) by Wednesday night I am dragging myself in here. Somehow I leave going, "That was more than I could have hoped." By Friday night Julie says, "What do you want to do tonight?" Absolutely nothing. I'm broken. I'm mangled.

Why? Because I am a double-minded man. I am a man who has conviction that there is a God in heaven who loves me and means the best for me, but I am also convinced that there are worldly values worth gravitating to, because that is what we see. We cannot see what we cannot

see. The unseen is the domain of God. So we immediately gravitate to worldly values and worldly methods for solving worldly problems.

That Greek word for double-minded literally means two souls: dipsychos. Two minds. If you are living that way, you have a mind toward God and a mind that gravitates to worldly values. If you've got divided allegiances, then Monday-morning faith is not going to be what it needs to be to get you through the week. Ask me how I know. I rinse and repeat this on a regular basis.

James goes on:

"Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: but the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away" (James 1:9–10).

The wisdom of this world, the values of this world, are like the flower that fades. The rich man, with all that he trusts in, will fade away. No sooner has the sun risen than trials arise, and the burning heat withers the grass and the flower falls and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man will also fade away in his pursuits.

This is not, finally, an indictment of rich men only. You can be a poor man and gravitate to worldly values. There are a lot of poor people who are poor because they gravitate to worldly values, just as there are rich people who are rich because they gravitate to worldly values. The point is not your position. The point is the direction of your trust. If you are going after temporary things, the flower fades.

Jesus said this same thing in Matthew 13. If the Word lands on stony soil, it springs up, but when the sun comes and beats on it, it has no root, and it withers. If it lands in soil with weeds, the cares of this life, they choke the Word. But let the Word fall into good ground.

Trial Is Not Temptation

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him" (James 1:12).

Our songs sometimes lump trials and temptations together, "have you trials and temptations? Is there trouble all around?" But they are not the same. Trials are those things that come to everybody. Temptation is the tendency we have as human beings to begin to believe, in the middle of a trial, that God is not good, that perhaps God is the one bringing this on us.

> Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. (James 1:13–15)

This is the path that leads to death. Temptation comes from inside us, drawn away of our own desires. We have a phrase for it: "Don't get in your own head." Ever heard that? Ever gotten in your own head? My dipsychos, my split brain: sometimes I am sitting somewhere the whole time saying, "Rob. You know this is not the way they feel. This is not true. This is just an emotional response. This is just fear. Don't go there. Don't do this." And then I get in my head, and finally it all comes out of my mouth, or it comes out in some action. Have you ever had a mind that said, "This is the will of God," while the whole time you were fighting this fire in your belly that said, "Yes, but no, I have to say this, I have to do this thing"? And then when you are done you say, "Why did I do that? I knew what the right thing was. How did I go down that path?"

Desires conceive. They give birth to sin. And sin, when it fully grows up, brings forth death. So we can either let the trials of our lives drive us to call on God and trust him, and let

those trials produce in us patience and maturity and completeness, or we can let them drive us into temptation: not believing God is good, gravitating to our own ideas and ways of solving problems. Those things lead to death.

Every Good Gift Comes Down

> Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (James 1:16–18)

Listen: you and I are shadows. All our lives are variation and turning. We have almost no clarity or stability. But when we put our confidence and trust in a God who is light, in whom there is no instability, we may not know exactly what he wants for our life, but we can hold on. There used to be a song we sang: “I’ll trust him when the dark shadows gather, / I’ll trust him when the sun doesn’t shine, / I’ll trust him when the storms are raging, / I’ll trust him till the end of time.” That is when we can’t see clearly for our next step, but we know that beyond this veil of tears, and beyond our limited bounded set of knowledge, there is a God who has unlimited answers and unlimited potential for our lives. Whatever your genetics, whatever your past, whatever your developmental path: God has the answers, if we will trust him.

Of his own will he has brought us forth by the word of truth. This is Genesis 1 all over again. As men and women we conceive based on desires, based on basic stimulus and response that drive us into action, the whole architecture of worldly values. We see that conceive something, develop something, and grow up into a full-blown center that leads to death. But God is doing something else in us. He has brought us forth, like birth, by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. We are a new creature. We have been born again.

When we come to faith in Christ, we get to start all over. We get a new mind: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” We are given a new beginning.

Swift to Hear, Slow to Speak

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (James 1:19–20).

Because we are this new creature, let every one of us be swift to hear. Be swift to hear the Word, because that is where wisdom comes from. The Word of God is the wisdom of God. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. When that Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, when the Word moved into our neighborhood, he began to teach us what it was to live outside this bounded set of ideas and traditions. This bounded world we live in is a prison of our own minds, if we are not careful. And God wants to crack it open through the One he sent, through his Word.

So: swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath. Patience through trial is wisdom. The wisdom of Christ is a patient response. How many times have I sent an email or responded to a loved one or tried to discipline my children five minutes too quick? Have you ever sent that email and thought, “I wish I could have gotten that one back”? Or that text message that went the wrong way? Or disciplined a child in a moment that almost always, when you trace it back, was driven by fear? My kid isn’t going to turn out, so I’m going to. My kid is bothering somebody, so I’m going to. You have your version. I have mine. But we all know what that fear is.

Wisdom is being slow. That patience from above is slow to speak and slow to wrath. The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Being quick to respond, becoming angry; that is not where it is at. This is one that lies in wait for me. The wrath of man. And it is sold to us as worldly wisdom. Do you know what they teach us at work? Boldness. We are

reading a book at work right now, and it is all about having courageous conversations, straightforward speech, which, in practice, often becomes a veiled way of saying you can be direct and rude, and if your feelings get hurt, you're not really the right stuff. So you read those books and you say, "If I don't show up in that meeting and bring my boldness . . ." And when you are a Type A like I am, it is easy to bring boldness to any conversation. Then you walk out going, "Was that the wisdom from above? Who was I in that?" The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Receive the Implanted Word

So we have good anthropology now: man is made up of desires that lead to sin that lead to death. And we have good theology: God is made up of faithfulness and good gifts and love for his children. But how do I take a step tomorrow to be the person God wants me to be? How do I make my Monday faith align with the faith I feel right now?

"Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21).

The Word has already been implanted. It is already an engrafted Word. Just receive it. Be the person you know God wants you to be. Have confidence that, despite being slow to speak, slow like Moses, having a slow tongue, not feeling qualified, thinking you are weak in worldly ways, worldly wisdom, worldly values, "I'm no count, I'm not the guy, I'm not the gal," lay all of that aside. Clear it out. Create a clean space in here for the Word of God to take plant in. Remove the weeds and the rocks, as Jesus's parable says. Remove the cares of this life. Be good ground. Receive with meekness the implanted Word, which is able to save your souls.

And be doers of the Word, and not hearers only.

The Mirror and the Royal Law

> For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. (James 1:23–25)

Hearers are like a man or woman who looks at himself in the mirror. In that mirror we see the moral and covenantal obligations we have as humans. We recognize them in the good lives of others. Who is going to step up and take the mantle of those who have gone on before us? How do we see the faithfulness of our mothers and fathers, our grandfathers and grandmothers, and step into that faith and be who they have been? And as we ourselves become grandfathers and grandmothers, how do we not lose faith when, as Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 12, the evil days come upon us, when doubt and fear and uncertainty come our way? Because doubt and fear are just as much a temptation in the last season as in the first.

The trial never ends. I'm sorry: bad news. I am always saying, "I see the light at the end of the tunnel. Just one more hill to climb." And I get to the top of the hill and I see Mount Everest. "Okay, that's not exactly how I thought it was going to go." I have not met anyone over 75 who has no trials, who tells me it is just coming up roses, body and mind all working, retirement plan flush, no kids or grandkids needing anything, heart on rhythm, brain on all cylinders. There is always a trial. There is always an opportunity to be tempted to doubt that God has your back, that he has an answer even in the very last days of your life. He has an answer for how to get through the very last breath you take. And in that fear, God is with you, holding your hand. He is with you from cradle to grave.

When we look at that mirror, when we hear the royal law, love your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, on which two commandments hang all the law and the prophets, and we say, “I’m going to do it. I’m going to be that kind of man. I’m going to be that kind of mother, that kind of father, that kind of employee, that kind of son or daughter, that kind of parent,” and then Monday morning hits. How do we hold on to faith and cry out to God through our prayers, and believe, even when our eyes do not see it in the first few moments of Monday morning, that God is going to come on the scene with an answer?

Give It Five: A Bigger Space Between Stimulus and Response

If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, well, give it five. Let the fight, the flight, the fawning, the freezing; let all that settle. Just give it five minutes. Let the amygdala quiet down. Let the chemicals stop flowing.

In the moment between stimulus and response, we have a space. For some of us it is a wide space. For people like me, you can hardly get a piece of paper between stimulus and response. But if we will just pause, and the only word out of our mouth is, “Jesus” (if that is all we can muster in faith, just Jesus) we are creating a bigger space for the wisdom of God to come in and help us navigate the trial.

I want to be that person. I want to be that person who has developed that kind of character and maturity and stability, where people say, “He’s unflappable. I’ve watched him go through things, and he is unmovable. He trusts God.” I have watched people receive the worst news a parent can receive about a child, and rather than collapsing into worldly responses, they hit their knees in their front yard and began to cry out to the God who was able to save them. That is the kind of faith that has meaning, when you are going through a trial, or someone else is,

and we don't try to fix it. We fall to our knees in faith and we reach out and say, "Jesus." And we watch the only One who can give us wisdom outside our own understanding come and keep our hearts.

> If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world. (James 1:26–27)

Notice: He is telling this to impoverished people, people who are being persecuted from city to city. Yet despite the threats against them, they are to find time to touch the lives of an orphan, to touch the lives of a widow in her trouble, and to keep themselves unspotted from the world.

A Pillar and a Lighthouse

If we are not careful, we can get in our own heads, and our own trouble becomes all we can see. We can see only our own fear, uncertainty, and doubt. But in our trial, true faith cries out to God and then immediately goes into action to help others in trouble. There is a miracle that goes into effect when you reach into the lives of people in worse shape than you, or, frankly, when you just begin to serve others, no matter their shape. Your own trouble becomes dim. Serve others through love. That is the royal law. Look into that perfect law of liberty.

Go out Monday morning. The person at work who is a thorn in your flesh: serve them. Love them. Recognize that maybe their actions are the result of a broken heart, of a split brain. If a Christian can be dipsychos, two-souled, how many psychoses are there for someone who has not been brought into Christ? They cannot connect with the eternal wisdom of God, so they are fragmented, tossed with every wind of doctrine and sleight of man, with all the cunning

craftiness of those who lie in wait to deceive (Ephesians 4:14), now with the help of AI algorithms.

What we need is a grounded faith that makes us stand when the winds are running hard, when the trials are coming hard against us. We are like a pillar a thousand miles deep into the earth, reaching all the way up to heaven. We are like a lighthouse that has no more concern for the waves beating against its foundation. It just stands there. It continues to shine its light. That is what we are called to be Monday morning.

Let us have that kind of faith. I am going to commit to it this week. I am going to try to find a little bigger space from stimulus to response, from fear to action. I am going to open the door a little more to Jesus. Jesus at the center of my brain, pulling all the parts together, to make me whole and strong and stable and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, and that work is to serve others in love.