

Healthy Attitude Toward Uncertainty • James 4:13-15

Our world deals daily with news of kidnappings and bombings. Terrorism is a global threat. The economy is sputtering. Interest rates are uncertain. Too many people are unable to find jobs. The Middle East is volatile. North Korea threatens. Religious fundamentalists compete for converts. We live in uncertain times.

Add your own uncertainties that will never make the newspapers: cancer, pain, heart, stroke, disability, marriage, divorce, infertility, pregnancy, children, parents, housing, lawsuits, school, neighbors, jobs. Life is full of uncertainties. It has been for most of history and is for most people in our world today.

While on a trip to India I talked with a physician at a rural India hospital. Dr. Abraham is a native of India who specialized in internal medicine and neurology in England where he practiced for many years. As we walked around the grounds of his very primitive hospital I asked him about medical emergencies. He said that most people in India are within six to eight hours of emergency medical care, so the first challenge is to survive until you can get help. The day we were at his hospital there were two patients brought in with snakebites.

Most people in history have lived with constant threats of war, earthquake, fire, assault, starvation, animal attack and a whole long list of ever-present dangers. Add to those risks the fear of evil spirits and the constant need to placate thousands of gods who are capricious and often angry. Most people live most of life under threat, fear and constant worry.

When Christians bring the gospel to these people the first question does not have to do with the credibility of the Bible, the style of worship or their denominational affiliation. The first question is whether the Christian God called Jesus is stronger than the evil spirits who make life so frightening and miserable.

In northern India there is a wonderful movement that we witnessed firsthand. In the past twenty-four months 8,000 houses of prayer have been established in one area. Many thousands of people have converted to become Christians. We visited a village of about 150 people where in the last year everyone has become a Christian—100%! It is the beginning of a movement that reads like the start of Christianity in the New Testament. Some are predicting millions and millions of new followers of Jesus Christ in northern India in the next eight years.

Here's how it works. New Christians are recruited to become full-time evangelists—often in the first year after conversion to Christianity. They are paid \$40 per month so they can support their families. Each evangelist is assigned ten

villages of about 150 people each. This evangelist prays for the village for a month without ever having direct contact with anyone there. After the initial prayer period the evangelist goes to the village leader and asks permission to enter the village to pray

for the people. If permission is denied the evangelist moves on to another village. However, 95% of village leaders say yes and welcome the evangelist.

For the next three months the evangelist walks around the village praying every day and offering to pray for any need of any resident. No preaching. No direct evangelizing. Prayers are offered for sick children, dying parents, chronic illnesses, financial needs, family problems and anything else. Suddenly the evangelist is in direct opposition to local gods, demons, temples and practitioners of traditional medicine. God hears and answers the evangelist's prayers until residents of the village realize the superior power of Jesus. Houses of prayer are then established, becoming house churches as Indians become Christians. What they learn is the transforming power of Jesus Christ in lives filled with uncer-

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tainty.

In America we have done everything possible to limit or eliminate uncertainty in our lives. We know what to do in an emergency—dial 911. We often don't even have to go to the telephone because we have a cell-phone in our pocket. We expect a response within minutes—police officers, firefighters, EMTs with an ambulance. We have insurance to pay for our medical care, fix the car after an accident, replace our house if there is a fire, pay our salaries if we are disabled and provided for our survivors when we die. We have pension programs and Social Security to reduce the uncertainty of retirement. We have counselors, lawyers, super markets and a thousand other resources to make our lives comfortable, safe and predictable. We pray less and think we need God less. Who needs God when we have everything under control?

But there is no such thing as life without uncertainties. No matter how hard we try and no matter how much money we have we cannot control all the risks. James 4:13-14 says:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

None of us knows what will happen tomorrow. Our lives are fragile and vulnerable. We have deceived ourselves into thinking we have everything under control. Frankly, we have a very special perspective in 21st century America. We have bought into a myth that life is supposed to be certain and predictable. As a result, recent events in our world have rattled us deeply.

Volatility in the stock market, attacks on public schools, terrorism in our cities, drug-resistant bacteria and other serious threats cause us to become frightened. Our fears show up at home, in our driving, in the way we treat our families and even in the life of the church. We try to get control of anything we can control because too much of life seems uncontrollable.

A healthy attitude toward uncertainty realizes

that uncertainty has always been and always will be a part of life. Life has always been and always will be significantly unpredictable. Blessed are those who accept the inevitability of uncertainty. Troubled are those who insist on getting everything under their control.

The good news is that God offers us certainty in uncertain times. However, God does not offer or guarantee everything. He offers us some certainties. He gives us the certainty of his love. In Jeremiah 31:3 he says, "*I have loved you with an everlasting love.*" We can be certain of God's love and of his forgiveness of sin. We read in I John 1:8-9, "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" We can be absolutely certain that God will forgive our sins if we confess. We can be absolutely certain about eternal life. We read in I John 5:13, "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know for certain that you have eternal life.*" As those who have eternal life we also have the certainty that God answers our prayers. According to I John 5:14-15:

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

And, through all the uncertainties of life, we can be certain of God's constant care. We find in Psalm 55:22, "*Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.*"

The list goes on. There are many absolute certainties God offers to those who are Christians. But, he does not offer all the certainties we might want. He does not tell us what tomorrow will bring, only that he will be there for us. He does not promise us that life will be easy, but he does assure us that he will give us the grace to deal with whatever our futures holds. He does not assure us we will get what we want, but he does tell us that he will love us and be there for us

even if we get what we don't want.

God offers to us the greater certainties and leaves us with the lesser certainties so that we will continue to trust him. We may not think war, job and health are lesser issues but they really are in the larger scale of eternity and what is really important.

Seldom do we have all the information and time we need to make important decisions. We often must make decisions with significant uncertainty. This leaves lots of room for trust. We make the best decision we can with the data and time we have and leave the rest up to God.

This leads us to the healthiest attitude of all toward uncertainty—trusting God for tomorrow. Let's go back to James 4:13-15:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

Here's how it works. We have uncertainty about something that is really important to us. We believe with certainty God wants the best for our lives. We pray and ask him for wisdom and direction. We tell God what we would like to happen. We plan for tomorrow. However, we totally trust God for the outcome even if it is different from what we wanted. In other words, the uncertainty is about the circumstances, but the certainty is about God.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were Jews in 6th century BC Babylon. They were ordered to bow down and worship a gold idol honoring the emperor Nebuchadnezzar. The idol was 90 feet high and 9 feet wide. Anyone who refused to worship the idol would face death by incineration in a blazing furnace. They refused. Daniel

3:13-18 tells what happened next:

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he

does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold that you have set up."

These three young men got it right! Faced with the uncertainty of life and death they were clear

on what they wanted. They wanted God to save them from a horrible death by fire. They were absolutely convinced God could save them. But they trusted God to do what was right and announced that they would do the right thing regardless of the outcome.

Let's put our names on their list. When we are uncertain about war, money, family, job, relationships, health and everything else we must seek God's wisdom, tell God what we want and believe that God can do anything. But, even if he does not give to us what we would choose the healthy attitude toward uncertainty says we will still trust God and we will do what is right.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did what was right even if it meant death. In their case

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God miraculously intervened and fireproofed them. He saved their lives. But the outcome was not their choice to make. We trust; God decides. And we do what is right no matter what the outcome.

Let's go back one more time to those words written by Jesus' brother James:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

We tend to worry about what is uncertain. Everything is certain with God because he knows the future before it happens. God has promised to take care of us. He wants and expects us to trust him and to do what is right in the midst of uncertainty. There are so many variables we cannot control. Instead of focusing our lives and energy on all the worries of uncertainties, God wants us to focus on doing what is right no matter what.

What does a healthy attitude toward uncertainty look like? A healthy *Christian* attitude sees that life is full of uncertainties, that God offers the greatest and most important certainties that we need and that we can trust him with all our uncertainties. So, we commit not only to trust him, we commit to do what is right regardless of the circumstances we face.

Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, CNN television anchor Aaron Brown opened an October newscast with this summary of the uncertainty of our lives:

Will someone I know get sick, and maybe die? I don't know. I don't know if the administration will make sense or create confusion. I don't know if anthrax will be replaced by something else. I don't know if more buildings will be attacked. I don't know if the terrorists have some other plan, something worse—I don't know And what's worse, I've come to believe that this is the way life is going to be. Not knowing is the new normal."

Uncertainty is the new normal. In certain ways this is very good news. It helps us see that life is not under our control. It gives us a wonderful opportunity to truly trust God. And that is very good news. Philippians 4:6-7 instructs us:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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