

Wisdom

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[0 : 00] Turn with me to the book of James and chapter 1. James chapter 1 verses 5 through 8. If any of you should lack wisdom, if any of you lacks wisdom rather, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

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, that man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord.

He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. Wisdom is not common.

The wise man is really very rare. Cleverness is in no short supply, but wisdom, that's another matter. Has the world gone completely mad, the wise man asks, and then answers himself, it may have done, but it's certainly a very foolish world.

We spend our lives pursuing endless qualifications and striving for perfect careers, and yet to be wise is better than being clever or successful.

[1 : 20] In the Bible, Jesus himself is called the wisdom of God, and there are many Bible books which speak about wisdom, including Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

The book of James is now considered to be the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Both are concerned with the theme of wisdom or faith at work.

One of the reasons that many Christians love the book of James is because of its emphasis on wise living. We know how rare wisdom is, and according to verse 4, a lack of wisdom keeps us from becoming mature and complete as Christians.

And it's that word lack at the end of verse 4, beginning of verse 5, which connects James' teaching, rather, on the place of trials in the Christian life in verses 2-4, with our need of wisdom in the Christian life in verses 5-8.

Growing in maturity as a Christian means growing in wisdom as a Christian. But it's a wisdom, James makes clear, which comes from God.

[2 : 42] And perhaps this, more than anything else, is what makes it so very rare. Do you want to grow as a Christian? Then you need wisdom from God.

In James chapter 1, verses 5-8, we learn three things about the wisdom which is faith at work. First, wisdom and trials, where we'll discover that we need wisdom to understand and cope with the various trials we encounter in life as Christians.

Secondly, wisdom and God, where we're going to learn about God's generosity and graciously giving us wisdom for the asking. And then thirdly, wisdom and faith, where we'll discover the connection between trusting in God and growing in wisdom.

So first of all then, wisdom and trials. Wisdom and trials. As I said, verses 5-8 are connected to verses 2-4 by the word lack.

At the end of verse 4, we read not lacking anything. And at verse 5, it begins, if any of you lacks. So the pursuit of wisdom is therefore connected with the Christian experience of various trials.

[4 : 05] And the process the Christian goes through to become mature and complete in his or her faith. Remember, James is writing to first century Jewish Christians who, on account of their faith in Jesus, are being persecuted.

Many of them are suffering great poverty and have been exiled from their home city of Jerusalem. Therefore, in this connection, the wisdom we lack and the wisdom therefore we ask from God is wisdom connected with the trials we experience on account of our Christian faith.

Now, you and I know that we quote these words, if anyone lacks wisdom, you should ask it of God, especially when we're looking for guidance in life.

I've probably prayed them more than most because I lack wisdom, but I probably pray them most at the beginning of meetings, which I know are going to be controversial or difficult.

Actually, even though it's right to pray for wisdom and guidance to help us in meetings or in other areas of life, this is not the wisdom James is calling upon us to pray for in this verse.

[5 : 21] Rather, this wisdom is connected with the trials we experience on account of our faith. Those trials which are purifying us and perfecting us as Christians.

And that's okay. In fact, for these early Jewish Christians to whom James was writing, it wasn't just okay, it was great. Because for them, wisdom was in desperately short supply.

They didn't know what was happening to them. They didn't know why it was happening to them. And they didn't know how to persevere and endure the sufferings they were experiencing at the time.

And to them, James says, if any of you should lack wisdom, you should ask it of God. He offers them that which at present they lack, namely wisdom from God.

Wisdom to cover two areas of their lives. Both connected with the trials they're experiencing as Christians. Wisdom to know what's going on.

[6 : 25] And wisdom to know how to get through. Wisdom to know what's going on. And wisdom to know how to get through. Wisdom, first of all, to know what's going on. What's going on.

The word wisdom is thought to mean true knowledge applied in a practical way. True knowledge applied in a practical way. Personally, I prefer the definition faith at work.

Because those who are the wisest don't always know the most. It's those who believe the best. When it comes to our experience of trials as Christians, we desperately need wisdom.

One of the Bible commentators I studied for this sermon wrote, A Christian may well feel himself in the dark in the midst of trials.

A good degree of wisdom is required to see the good in trials. I hope we heard that and believe it to be true. A good degree of wisdom is required to see the good in trials.

[7 : 36] That's where we need the wisdom. To see the good in the trials we experience. Remember, these early Jewish Christians had suffered the loss of all their possessions.

They were exiled from their homes. They needed wisdom to understand what was going on and why it was happening to them. The same Bible commentator I quoted there draws the attention of his readers to Psalm 73.

You'll know the psalm. The godly man whose feet had almost slipped when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. He couldn't understand why he was struggling with economic, social and health issues.

While the unriched, when the unriched were healthy and they were rich and they were popular. And the psalmist says, surely I have kept my heart pure in vain.

I have washed my hands in innocence in vain. It's only later on in the psalm when the writer sees the bigger picture of what God was doing in his life and why all this was happening to him.

[8 : 51] Another Bible commentator defines this kind of wisdom as, In other words, to be wise in this way is to see things the way God sees them.

From God's perspective, his viewpoint. To see these trials as opportunities for purity and perfection in the Christian life. And what we're saying here goes far deeper than asking for guidance in life or for God to help us to arrange the agenda correctly in a difficult meeting.

We're asking for God's wisdom to help us to see the circumstances of our lives and particularly the trials we are enduring from God's perspective.

To see them as opportunities for growth and not as obstacles to faith. That doesn't come naturally to us as human beings.

Because often when we're suffering, our fingers point accusingly at God. Rather than our arms opening and embracing his greater purpose for our lives.

[10 : 18] The Christian who develops clinical depression might fairly ask the question, Why is this happening to me?

And to that Christian, James says in verse 5, If any lacks the wisdom to know that these trials you are enduring are for your purification and your perfection, he should ask God for it.

So, wisdom is to know what's going on. But secondly, it's to understand how to get through.

How to get through. Not only does the wisdom we ask God to give us help us to see these trials from God's perspective, it's also wisdom to help us to cope and to win through the trials, to overcome them.

Wisdom is faith at work in the darkness when one is struggling to see light at the end of the tunnel. Another Bible commentator defines wisdom as, The means by which the godly can both discern and carry out the will of God.

[11 : 33] The means by which the godly can both discern and carry out the will of God. In other words, wisdom does not merely help us to see our trials from God's perspective, as experiences that he sent into our lives for our purity and perfection.

But wisdom is necessary if we are to embrace these trials and use them for the purpose God has sent them into our lives. Wisdom is the means by which we carry out the will of God.

Let me give you an example. Earlier on we noticed that in the Bible Christ himself is often called the wisdom of God. But in what sense is he the wisdom of God?

Is it in his strength? No, it's in his weakness. Is it in his superiority? No, it's in his suffering.

The gospel of his grace is that which points directly to the wisdom of God in providing for us a suffering savior who on the cross triumphs over all the authorities and power of this age.

[12 : 48] Ah, says the Christian to himself, I shouldn't be suffering under all these trials. I thought that becoming a Christian immunized me against the sufferings of this life.

To which the godly wisdom of James says, But the path to Christlikeness is the path of suffering. The path of trial is the path to purity and perfection.

So in Psalm 73, the psalmist, he's got through all the trials he's facing. But he's doing so by fixing his eyes not on the unrighteous world in which he lives, but upon the future, and upon the Lord who is the strength and desire of his heart.

How to get through the trials consists in the transformation of our viewpoint, seeing it not from the perspective of the world around us, but from the perspective of what God is doing in us and for us.

He is purifying us through these trials. He is burning away the dross so that we might be mature and perfect as Christians, lacking in no good thing.

[14 : 12] So wisdom, you see, is faith at work, especially faith at work in the darkness. That's a great phrase, faith at work in the darkness. And the kind of wisdom that James is calling upon us to ask God for is that which views trials from God's perspective as opportunities for our faith in him to grow.

And which transforms our viewpoint so that we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For the things seen are temporary, but the things unseen are eternal.

Is that the way you're viewing the trials you are experiencing in your life right now? Perhaps wisdom is rarer than we think if it can be that when we're suffering, our first reaction is to point our fingers at God accusingly rather than open our arms to embrace him willingly.

Wisdom is an opportunity to grow in our faith. So let's ask God for it. Secondly, wisdom and God.

Wisdom and God. It would seem from our text that what James is saying is that wisdom is God's to give and ours to receive.

[15 : 30] Wisdom doesn't come natural to us as human beings. It's not natural for us to embrace the trials of the Christian life and grow in them in dependence upon God.

Rather, this is a wisdom that comes only from God, which is perhaps why it's so rare because so few of us ask him for it. But it's there for the asking. Listen to what James says.

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. So it's God to whom we go to get the wisdom we need to see the trials from his perspective and profit from them to the max in our lives.

It's God to whom we go to give us the wisdom which is faith at work in the darkness. And we ask it from him, the God who delights to give good gifts to his children.

We ask, and our Father gives. And he doesn't give with any reservations or any reproach, as if to accuse us, saying, why are you so foolish?

[16 : 47] Rather, he gives in plenty and in simplicity. He doesn't engage in the means testing of our faith before he gives us wisdom. Rather, without insulting us or reproaching us or being mean to us, he gives liberally and delightedly because this is the gift of a loving father to his needy, confused, suffering children.

Wisdom comes from God. He has it in infinite measure. And when we ask him for it, he freely gives. That's the nature of our Father.

He's a giver. He's not a taker. The Father who delights to give good gifts to his children, as we'll see in a couple of weeks. And he does not give by measure.

He gives generously. When we ask for wisdom, our cup runs over. He just keeps filling us. He doesn't insult us or belittle us or patronize us or question us.

He just gives. Let's make a couple of observations. at this point. First of all, as one commentator says, wisdom does not come down out of the sky.

[18 : 10] God's spirit instructs, enlightens, makes us wise by means of his word. God's spirit instructs, enlightens, makes us wise by means of his word.

Remember the words of Psalm 19 verse 7? We sung them just five minutes ago. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

In other words, the correct posture in which we are to pray for the wisdom of God is with an open Bible in front of us. It's as we read passages like Psalm 73 or the gospels in which God's wisdom and the weakness of Christ is held out to us, we become wise.

God grants our prayer for wisdom through his word. I can't tell you how many times I've been kind of confused in life and wondering why certain things are happening the way they are to me and I prayed for wisdom and in my daily readings or in the preaching of the word, God has answered my prayer and helped me to see things from his perspective as trials given as opportunities to grow in my faith.

But then secondly here, I want us to look very carefully again as this morning at the words, the grammar of verse five. If any one of you lacks wisdom, present active verb, he should ask God, present active verb.

[19 : 44] The lacking and the asking are present verbs which indicate to us that as long as we live in this world, we're always going to need to ask for wisdom. We will never outgrow our need for more wisdom.

So I know many older Christians here and they're a lot wiser than I am, but they're not the finished article. And they have as much need of God's wisdom as I do. We never stop needing more and more wisdom to understand what God is doing with us and why.

No one has all the answers. No one, which is why perhaps the older we get and the more complicated life becomes for us, the more we end up praying for God's wisdom.

So you see, wisdom to deal with the trials of life doesn't come from inside us, it comes from God. Why it's so rare, why it's in such short supply is a mystery.

After all, God gives so generously. It must be because we ourselves are not asking for it. That we're not asking for what God wants to give us.

[20 : 57] Or we're not putting ourselves in the way of receiving that wisdom through his word. Foolishness is a vicious cycle. The Christian who is suffering points his finger at God and turns away from him.

He no longer reads his Bible through which God promises to make him wise. He continues to grow in his foolishness and all because he won't break the cycle by praying for God's wisdom and by opening his Bible to receive an answer.

I've seen it more times than I care to count. I've even seen it in myself. God has infinite wisdom available to all of us to help all of us in all our trials.

And it's there for the asking. Wisdom and trials wisdom and God and then lastly wisdom and faith.

Wisdom and faith. There are a few passages in James which have caused as much confusion confusion as verses 6-8 because it seems at face value to indicate that God will only give us wisdom if we have enough faith in Alaska.

[22 : 17] So it seems on face value to fall right into the hands of faith healers and other charlatans who if their methods won't work blame it upon a lack of faith in their healers.

Someone goes to them for healing and the healer prays but that person's not healed and the healer says well it's your fault if you just believed more you'd be healed.

If you just were less double minded you'd be healed. The reason you're still lame, the reason you're still sick is because your faith isn't strong enough. Well no, no, and no again that's not what James is saying.

The faith in which James calls us to ask God isn't faith to believe that God will hear our prayer. Far less is it faith to believe that having prayed to God he will take away these painful trials we are experiencing.

That's what it might look like at face value but that's very far from the mind of James. A lack of wisdom on our part is not because we don't have enough faith to believe that God will answer our prayers for after all look what he says in verse 5 God gives generously to all without finding fault.

- [23 : 40] The answer is in verse 6. Notice the detail at the beginning. When he asks he must believe or as other translations rendered it let him ask in faith.

In this context I don't think the NIV translation is particularly helpful. I'd rather us understand these words let him ask in faith.

Let him ask in faith. The wisdom God will give us is directly connected with our faith. What James is saying here is that we are to view the trials of the Christian life from the viewpoint of faith.

Of what God is doing in our lives to grow our faith so that we may become pure, perfect and mature. Let me explain this in context.

Remember the early Christians to whom James was writing had on account of their faith in Christ become very poor. They'd been exiled from their homeland in Jerusalem.

- [24 : 51] They were really suffering for their faith. It would have been natural for them to have hankered back, to have prized their possessions, to regard their safety as primary, and so to pray for God's wisdom, not because they wanted particularly to grow in their faith, but because they wanted to get their possessions back.

They wanted to get their homes back in Jerusalem. They wanted to be back home in Palestine. In other words, it would be natural for them to pray for God's wisdom for material reasons, non-faith reasons, that their greatest desire was not to grow in their faith toward purity and perfection, but to be materially prosperous and to be secure in this world.

And what James is saying here is that when a Christian is experiencing trials in their life, their primary concern must be what impact these trials are having upon their faith.

If growing in faith means we must endure various kinds of trial, then it's important that we embrace these trials rather than running away from them.

If becoming perfect and pure and mature as Christians is more important to us than our money and our pleasure and our security, then God will give us the wisdom we need to see these trials from his perspective and the strength we need to overcome them.

- [26 : 29] To put our worldly comforts ahead of our growth in grace is to be double minded. It's to be like a wave of the sea that's blown and tossed about by the wind.

But to ask for wisdom in faith, let him ask, in faith is to place our relationship with God and our growth in grace above our worldly possessions and our earthly security.

That we think it's more important to live in the pleasure of our heavenly father, though it may mean various kinds of painful trials, than to live in the pleasure of this world's societies.

I hope we can understand this because it really is a most crucial sense. That in a sense here, James is saying exactly the same as his brother Jesus did in Matthew chapter 6.

Jesus said, don't worry, saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear. The pagans run after all these things and your heavenly father knows you need them.

- [27 : 38] Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well. Yes, that's what James is saying here in verses 6 through 8.

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. That's what it means to pray in faith for the wisdom of God. That these trials are not obstacles to our growth in grace.

They are opportunities for renewed growth and strengthening of our faith in Christ. Christ. So, there may be some of us here today who because we are Christians feel rather isolated from our friends in school, university, home, the workplace.

We resent being excluded. We resent not feeling as if we can join with everybody, even with our family and our friends in all the things they're doing.

We like even less to be laughed at for our faith in Jesus. And of course, it's natural that we want the isolation to stop. We want to feel as if we belong.

[28 : 49] We all do. But if being accepted by the world comes at the price of a growing faith in Jesus, then it's a price that's too high for us to pay.

We will never grow in our faith as Christians as long as we place our worldly comforts and our earthly security higher in our priority list than following Jesus and experiencing the love and wisdom of our heavenly father.

It's praying, Lord, I want to be pure more than I want to be accepted by my friends. Lord, I want to experience your grace more than I want to be part of a group.

You know, to be sure, wisdom is very rare indeed. It is extremely rare in women. It's almost non-existent in men.

And for that reason, it's very precious. But there it is for the asking. Let him ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault. You know, James today is offering a new horizon on the trials that we may face as believers.

[30 : 09] And strangely enough, though it might not be strange at all, the holiest, the purest, the most loving, joyful, and peaceful Christians I know are those who have suffered the most.

but through their suffering have learned to depend upon God's grace and continue to seek after his wisdom. There's a lesson for all of us here this evening if we will but have the faith to learn it.

Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for the directness of James, that he's not pulling his punches. he's telling us that without your wisdom we are foolish.

We thank and praise you, Lord, that your wisdom isn't something that we have to go searching for in some great mysterious pilgrimage. It's a wisdom which is there for the asking.

Lord, we pray for any this evening who are going through various kinds of trial and are at risk of pointing their finger accusingly at you.

[31 : 24] Lord, we ask and pray that you would give them a fresh vision and a fresh perspective on what they're enduring, that these are opportunities for growth in the Christian life, not obstacles to growth.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.