

Lack Wisdom? Ask!

James 1:5-8
ABC 1/27/18

John Piper writes in his book, *The Hidden Smile of God*, how the various trials of John Bunyan in jail gave us *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The inner troubles of William Cowper gave us *There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood & God Moves in a Mysterious Way*. & the afflictions of David Brainerd gave us a diary that has mobilized more missionaries than any similar work. The furnace of suffering brought forth the gold of guidance & inspiration for living the Christian life, worshiping the Christian God, & spreading the Christian gospel. There's a certain irony to the fruit of these various trials. Bunyan's confinement taught him the pilgrim path of Christian freedom. Cowper's mental illness yielded sweet music of the mind for troubled souls. Brainerd's smoldering misery of isolation & disease exploded in global missions beyond all imagination. Irony & disproportion are all God's way. He keeps us off balance with His unpredictable ways.

- Barren Sarah gives birth to the child of promise.
- Gideon's 300 men defeat 100,000 Midianites.
- A slingshot in the hand of a shepherd boy brings the giant down.
- A virgin bears the Son of God.
- A boy's 5 loaves feed thousands.
- A breach of justice, political expediency, & torture & death on a cross become the foundation of the salvation of the world to all who believe.

This is God's way, to take all boasting off of man & put it on God. Suffering fits into God's design in ways that sometimes baffle us & test us to the limit. This testing is part of God's design.¹ God-centered thinking in trials is important because how we choose to think in tough times is key.

Notice the emphasis on thinking in the beginning of James:

- vs 2 **consider** it all joy (decision of the mind)
- vs 3 **knowing** that...
- vs 5 if any of you **lacks wisdom**
- vs 7 doubters should not **expect** or **think** that he will receive anything from the Lord
- vs 8 being a double-**minded** man
- vs 9-11 tells the poor & rich how to *think*

God through James wants us to change how we think which results in the way we live. **1-8** PRAY

¹ pp 19-20

James knew it's relatively easy to live as a Christian when things are calm. But it's a much more difficult prospect when the storms of life hit. At such times, it's easy to get off course & shipwreck your faith. His readers were facing various trials. They were dispersed (1:1) due to persecution. They'd suffered all kinds of losses. James wanted them to know how to navigate through these trials so they could not only endure, but joyfully endure (1:2). As we saw last time, James exhorts them (& us) to adopt a radical attitude when we encounter various trials: **Consider it all joy** (2). We can do this if we understand the reassuring truth, **that the testing of your faith produces endurance** (3). But it's necessary to submit to the refining process: **let endurance have its perfect result** (4). But there's a further ingredient we need to endure trials joyfully so as to bring glory to God. What is it? God's wisdom. So James tells us how to obtain wisdom from God. This is linked to what we saw last week. James says when you suffer, it can make you mature & complete. But what does he say in vs 5? **If any of you lacks wisdom...** Do you see what the point is? This isn't talking about wisdom or prayer in general. It's not talking about faith & doubt in general. It's talking about when you get into suffering & trials, the main thing you need is **wisdom**. How do we gain that? That's what this is about. It isn't a change of topic. We're still talking about trials & having joy in them & that God will take us where we haven't intended to go in order to produce in us what we couldn't achieve on our own. Trials are meant to release us from the bondage of self-reliance because we all think we're wiser than we actually are. & it's not our weakness that keeps us from our Lord, our delusions of strength do! Because the gospel is for the weak & unable, it welcomes people who say, *I can't*, but who run to a Redeemer who can. That's the gospel. & when you read the phrase that says, **If any of you lack wisdom**, you should raise your hand & say, *That's me*. Don't think of the person next to you; don't think of that person whom you think made a stupid decision; don't think of your spouse, friend, neighbor, co-worker, or child; think *me*.

1. A Prayerful Dependence 5

Again, this wisdom isn't merely guidance for wise decisions; it's wisdom for the **various trials** of vs 2. When believers face times of testing, whether physical, emotional, moral, or spiritual, they have special need of God's **wisdom**. When troubles arrive at our door, what does God want us to do?

Pray & ask Him for wisdom. There's a link at the end of vs 4 where it says the end or aim of trials is that we may be **lacking in nothing**. Then vs 5 continues with the logical as well as theological reality that we all do **lack** something, namely **wisdom**. In fact, the grammar of this says, *If any of you lack, & you do, or since you lack wisdom, ask God*. It implies we all lack wisdom when facing trials. But we don't always see our need for God's wisdom. When we read vs 5 we all should instantly think of ourselves, not anyone else. James is talking about me! All of us should picture ourselves here. If you don't, you need to ask that God would give you enough wisdom to see your own lack of wisdom! What is wisdom? It's being able to look at life from God's perspective. Why can we have joy even in my trials? Because as believers, we don't believe that wisdom is theology, a set of answers, or book knowledge. Wisdom is a person & His name is *Jesus*. When you're brought into relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, you're brought into personal communion with the One who is the ultimate source & definition of everything that's knowledgeable, true, insightful, & wise. Ultimately, wisdom isn't known by research or experience; wisdom is known by a relationship to God through Jesus Christ. If you're His child you've already benefited from the wisdom that can only be found in the personal work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our strength & wisdom. We need to remember that. Could it be we fail in trials, not because of weakness, but because we think we're strong? Grace is for the needy. James writes in 4:6, **But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble."** & in 5:13, **Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray...** Suffering & trials should cause us to humbly ask for God's grace, wisdom, & help for what we don't have & cannot do. & if there's anything we can't do without God, it's to **consider it all joy** when we're in **various trials!** If there's anything we lack, it's the wisdom to see our suffering through a God-centered, joy-considering perspective. Of course, we can ask God for wisdom in any matter in life, but in the context it's focused on asking God for the wisdom we need to endure trials joyfully. The important questions to ask when trials hit are, *How can I understand this trial from God's perspective? How can I navigate through this storm in such a way as to bring glory to God? How can this trial help me grow in maturity?*

Warren Wiersbe tells about a secretary of his who was going through difficult times. She'd had a stroke, her husband had gone blind, & then he had to be taken to the hospital where, as far as

they knew, he would die. Wiersbe saw this woman in church on Sunday & assured her that he was praying for her. She startled him by asking, *What are you asking God to do?* He replied, *I'm asking God to help you & strengthen you.*

I appreciate that, she said, but pray about one more thing. Pray that I'll have the wisdom not to waste all of this!" Wiersbe observed, *She knew the meaning of James 1:5.*²

I'm thankful James not only tells us what to do, but how to get there. I'm glad that James not only challenges us, but he's aware of the weaknesses in us & he knows we won't be able to **consider it all joy in various trials** without God-centered thinking & God-given wisdom to know how to apply this when we naturally can't. What is the command here? **Ask**. It's a present tense command, meaning this should be a repeated, habitual, & continual act of prayerful dependence. To ask God for **wisdom** implies that He can deliver. The Bible plainly states, **For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge & understanding** (Prov 2:6). It's a simple command, **Let him ask**. There's no magic formula or special incantation you need to mutter while jumping through some spiritual hoops. He doesn't say, *Let him work for or earn or buy wisdom*. It's not for sale; it's a gift. Just ask. James isn't giving personal advice but a divine command. Therefore, our calling on the Lord for wisdom isn't an option. It's mandatory. Although God has wisdom in abundance (Rom 11:33) & is infinitely more willing to impart His wisdom than we are to ask for it, He nevertheless expects us to ask Him for it!

& the next phrase shows the continual characteristic of God: **ask of God who gives**. The Greek word order is *ask of the giving God*. The emphasis is on God's very nature & character. God loves to give wisdom. He loves to rescue people from foolishness. He loves to protect you by His grace. He loves to guide you by His truth. He finds pleasure in generously, liberally, lovingly, & faithfully giving you the wisdom you need. & He does that **generously**, which carries the idea of singleness of heart, of doing something unconditionally, without bargaining, simply, or without reservation.³ The only condition is that we **ask**. When we ask, God immediately & single-mindedly gives it to us **generously**. God is a Giver, who generously & graciously loves giving to His children. He also does this without **reproach**. He doesn't mock us for our need of wisdom. He doesn't throw our failures in

² *Be Mature*, p 29

³ Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, pp 72-73

our face. He doesn't keep track of the amount of times we've had to come to Him for wisdom. He says these sweet words, *You need? You come. I love to give wisdom.*

When vs 5 says that God **gives to all**, you need to define **all** by the context (as always). God doesn't give wisdom to everyone in the world, but rather to every believer in Christ who asks in faith. But James emphasizes that the manner in which God gives is **generously & without reproach**. He gives because He delights to give to His children. Because He's generous, you & I have hope. Our God loves to meet our needs. He delights in meeting our needs, & He'll never throw our neediness in our face. He wraps arms of grace around us & says, *Don't be afraid to be needy, you keep coming, I love you.* What a wonderful God! He'll never cast even the mildest reproach on a child of His who comes seeking wisdom in time of trouble & testing. He won't remind us of how undeserving & unworthy we are, obvious as that might be. Nor will He chide us for not asking sooner, fully understanding that **the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak** (Mk 14:38). Without hesitation, reluctance, or reservation, His divine wisdom will be given to us in generous abundance.

Peter tells us that God's **divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life & godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory & excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious & magnificent promises...** (2 Pt 1:3-4a). Paul assures us that in Christ **we have boldness & confident access through faith in Him** (Eph 3:12). When you need wisdom to endure a trial in a manner pleasing to God, go directly to God in prayer. Ask Him to direct you to the wisdom in His Word that you need. He promises to give it generously!

Some Christians make the mistake of saying, *But I'm not worthy for God to grant my request. I've sinned too many times. I've failed Him so often. So I can't go to Him & ask for wisdom.* But that's an excuse for disobedience & unbelief. Every Christian has sinned. All of us have failed. Every Christian is unworthy. We don't come to God based on our worthiness. We come to God on the merit of Jesus & His shed blood. Since God commands us to ask Him for **wisdom**, we're disobedient & unbelieving if we don't do so. One commentator says, *It is characteristic of the unbeliever to see*

God with a clenched fist; it is characteristic of the believer to see Him with an open hand...

Thankfully, *God's generosity is measured by what He designs, not what we deserve.*⁴ Prov 2 says,

My son, if you will receive my words & treasure my commandments within you, Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; If you seek her as silver & search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will discern the fear of the LORD & discover the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge & understanding (1-6).

RC Sproul writes:

James's words can be misinterpreted to mean that all we have to do is ask & we shall receive instant wisdom. James assumes we know about scriptural wisdom, especially the book of Proverbs. That book repeatedly exhorts us to study to know wisdom, to seek it diligently, to take every opportunity to learn it, & to desire it above all else. James is saying that God will give wisdom to those who prayerfully & diligently seek it.

*Wisdom comes from two sources. The first is careful study of God's Word ... The second is knowledge gained from the experience of putting God's ways into practice. Often this involves tribulation. Wisdom grows with trials, if in the midst of trials we lean on God's Word.*⁵

John MacArthur adds:

The kind of wisdom James is referring to is not a detached academic knowledge or some philosophical speculation... Wisdom is the practical understanding of how to live life in obedience to the will & Word of God & for His glory (Prov 3:5-7; 4:11; 8:12; 10:8; 14:8).

*In the context of suffering, therefore, we need to ask God for wisdom to help us persevere scripturally. We need His help to see sovereignty & providence working in our situation, to have a joyful attitude, & to respond submissively. This need for help dovetails marvelously with one of the overall purposes God has in allowing sufferings & trials: to make us more dependent on Him. Such dependency is synonymous with prayer, which is implied in the phrase **let him ask of God.***⁶

I like that definition: *wisdom is the practical understanding of how to live in obedience to the will & Word of God & for His glory.* By those terms, one of the wisest & greatest preachers of the last century was James Montgomery Boice. At the age of 29 he was called to be the senior pastor of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in downtown Philadelphia in 1968, succeeding Donald Grey Barnhouse. In 1969 he began teaching on *The Bible Study Hour* radio program. He started the *Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology* in 1970 & founded the *International Council on Biblical Inerrancy* in 1977, among many other things. He was a theologian who put into practice much of what the book of James teaches, including concern for poor & prejudice. He not only taught

⁴ D. Edmund Hiebert, *James*, pp 70-71

⁵ *Before the Face of God*, Book 4, p 372

⁶ *The Power of Suffering*, p 148

sound theology from the pulpit, but the church became ethnically diverse under his leadership, with inner-city ministries to youth, women with crisis pregnancies, the homeless, & on & on. Above all, he was a faithful preacher of God's Word. He's a pastor who ministers to me, though I'll never meet him till heaven. While in the prime of his ministry, James Boice walked to his pulpit for the last time on Sunday, May 7, 2000. He announced to his stunned congregation that he was rapidly dying of cancer of the liver. He said to them:

Should you pray for a miracle? Well, you're free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to perform miracles – & He certainly can – is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place. So although miracles do happen, they're rare by definition. A miracle has to be an unusual thing....

Above all, I would say pray for the glory of God. If you think of God glorifying Himself in history & you say, 'Where in all of history has God most glorified Himself?' the answer is that He did it at the cross of Jesus Christ, & it wasn't by delivering Jesus from the cross, though he could have... & yet that's where God is most glorified.⁷

He had a big view of God, a God big enough to glorify Himself even when He doesn't take the trial away or give us the outcome we might desire. God's purposes are bigger than our health & desires, & He wants us to pray not just for what we want, but to ask for wisdom to know what God wants & how we can glorify & enjoy Him in our various trials. Jesus says in Jn 14:13, **Ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.** & in Jn 16:24, **Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask & you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.** It's not just the chief purpose of man to glorify God & enjoy Him, but the chief purpose of man's prayer is that we might glorify God & enjoy Him more. Asking God for wisdom is a conduit of grace that enables us to consider it all joy in trials if God's glory is our focus. God doesn't need us & could accomplish His purposes without us, but in His kindness & grace He chooses to give to us when we ask, **wisdom**, bringing Himself glory & us joy. We must ask, but are there conditions?

2. Wholehearted Trust 6-8

God isn't a vending machine that we put our prayer into & out comes whatever button we pushed. This is no *name it & claim it* heresy, where whatever we ask for we get as long as we have enough faith. The **whatever you ask** is clearly qualified by Scripture elsewhere to include only what God

⁷ <https://thelogcollege.wordpress.com/2015/06/15/should-you-pray-for-a-miracle-by-james-montgomery-boice/>

has promised to give His people. But when we pray with biblically informed faith in the Lord & in His name, that is, consistent with His character & for His glory, the Lord does give what He promises. Therefore, our asking must coincide with the way in which God gives, with singleness of intent. James isn't claiming that prayers will never be answered where any degree of doubt exists because some degree of doubt is probably inevitable in our present state of weakness. He wants us to understand that God responds to us only when our lives reflect a basic consistency of purpose & intent, a spiritual integrity. This isn't an unqualified statement that everything we ask for will be given to us, but that we'll receive the practical knowledge & understanding we need to endure out trials when we ask the God whom we know gives without hesitation. A good cross-reference is Rom 4:20, where it says Abraham **with respect to the promise of God ... did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.** Same terminology as Js 1:6; **in faith**, & even the same Greek word for **doubting**, which is translated **did not waver**. This is a wholehearted trust, unwavering faith. Our faith is for God's glory, our prayer is for God's glory, & our joy is for God's glory. Jesus said, **Abraham rejoiced to see my day, & he saw it was glad** (Jn 8:56). He glorified God & had joy in God. Faith is essential in approaching God, because as Heb 11:6 says, **Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is & that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.** It would be silly to ask something of a Being you weren't sure existed. Or, if He did exist, you weren't sure if He cared about your request or if He had the power to grant it! So to ask from God, you must believe that He exists, that He personally cares for you, & is able to give you the wisdom that you need to endure your trial with His joy. Again, this isn't saying the moment you doubt, God turns His back on you & walks away. That's not what it's teaching. When James writes in vs 6 we must ask **in faith, without any doubting**, he may be recalling when his ½-brother Jesus also used the phrase **faith with no doubting** in Mt 21:21 in the context of prayer, with the point that the humanly impossible will be done, which certainly includes Js 1:2. This word for **doubting** is the same Greek word Jude uses where it's translated as **disputing** or **contending** (9). In Acts 11:2, it's translated as **taking issue with**. So it can have the connotation of *taking issue with* or *disputing with* God. The doubter, not having an **anchor for the soul** (Heb 6:19), doesn't pray to

God with a consistency & sincerity of purpose. Drifting with the shifting winds of motive & desire, he wants wisdom from God one day & the wisdom of the world the next.

James doesn't demand that a believer never question what God gives them, lest their faith prove null & void. Rather, given the context, he maintains we shouldn't doubt the character of God as One who gives unflinchingly. When we ask for wisdom, we need to have faith, trusting that how God answers is best. The word for **doubt** is the same word that's used in 2:4 for the distinctions that believers are making between the poor & the rich. They're making this choice to ignore the poor who come to worship & to show favoritism to the rich. That word *doubt* isn't about intellectual struggle; it's about being torn between 2 choices. When we go through a trial, do we turn to human resources rather than singularly trusting the Lord for answers & for help? Do we become bitter & resentful & seek no help at all? We don't renounce God, but sometimes we act as if He doesn't exist, doesn't care, or isn't capable of sustaining us with joy through our trials. John Bunyan, in his *Pilgrim's Progress*, calls such a man *Mister Facing Both Ways*, which is just as impossible spiritually as it is physically. If you doubt God's existence or His ability to give you wisdom for your need, James says you're **like the surf of the sea, driven & tossed by the wind** (6). The surf has no inner power or principle to direct itself. It's totally at the will of outside forces. It's unstable & chaotic. &, it can be a destructive force as it batters a boat or drives it against the rocks. That's a picture of the person who lacks faith in God. At the root of this unbelief is being double-minded. The person who doubts God isn't committed to obey God no matter what. His heart isn't fully surrendered to do God's will. He's curious about God's wisdom, to find out if he agrees with it, but he's not committed to do it if it involves suffering or inconvenience. That person, James says, **ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord** (1:7). So the 1st thing in obtaining wisdom from God is to surrender your heart to Him. Remember, we are His slave. We exist to do His will & work. We are to wholeheartedly trust & follow Him. Whereas the **unstable** man wobbles around like a spiritual bobble-head doll, his head & heart going in all different directions. The text calls him **double-minded**. Literally, it's a word James made up meaning *double-souled*. It refers to a man whose heart is divided between allegiance to God & the allurements of the world. He's not sure he

wants to know God's wisdom because he isn't fully committed to submitting to it. He'd like to know what God's wisdom is but before he commits to obeying it. He wants to find out if he likes it 1st. In other words, he's shopping for answers that fit what he wants to do. If God's wisdom sounds good, he'll follow it. But if worldly wisdom sounds better, he'll follow that. James says that such a person won't receive wisdom from God. This isn't a mere mental confusion or uncertainty, this is a moral problem. James 4:8 is the only other place in Scripture that uses this term **double-minded** & it's synonymous with a sinner there. These are people who're unwilling to let go of the world & follow Jesus. They're torn between sin & obedience, reluctant to let go of the pleasures of the world. It describes those who refuse to let God interfere with their daily lives & goals. There's a dishonesty here that James warns against. God doesn't bless us when we ask for help with one open hand while our other hand is behind our back holding onto the world (cf Ps 66:18). James is saying there's, in all of us, a conflicting set of desires. We really do want the wisdom of God but at the same time, we sort of want our own way. We love us & we have a wonderful plan for our lives we don't want Him to mess with. Why? Because wisdom runs on the rails of submission & obedience. But the double-minded man is an unstable man, like the waves of the sea; he's tossed about because he lacks the loyalty of faith. He's driven by every wind of desire, emotion, temptation, & envy. His life is unstable.

Maybe the instability of your life has to do with the disloyalty of your heart. Maybe it's time, once again, to bow before your Lord & say,

I want to be loyal, but I'm not. I want to love Your kingdom more than I love mine, but I don't. I want to be submissive & obedient, but so often I go my own way. Thank you that You are completely loyal. Thank you that You were willing to suffer & die in acts of obedience so that I do not need to be afraid to bring my failure, my foolishness, & my disloyalty to You. I can know You are glorious in generosity because You are a God of glorious grace.

In your struggle, don't hide from your Lord. Don't run from Him, run to Him & find the rescue that can only be found & Him. Maybe someone here has never truly come to the Lord. It's not too late. Don't cherish your sin, clutching it in your hands. Don't bring to God your own righteousness or any trust in your own works or efforts either. Come to Jesus on the cross & trust Him & Him alone.

& as you live for & rely on Him you can consider it all joy in various trials. If you need God's wisdom for how to endure any trial with joy, ask Him in faith & He will give it to you.

Jesus' death solves the problem of suffering in general. It just doesn't solve the problem of your particular suffering. Christians often say, *It's not fair. Here I am, a Christian, doing these great things for God, & I'm suffering. It's not fair.* If I say, *Jesus suffered unjustly. He suffered tremendous pain & tremendous injustice. So why are you better than Him? What makes you think a servant should be above his Master?* Do you know what people usually say? They say, *I understand why He suffered. He was providing for my salvation.* That makes it clear that the problem we have isn't the trial, it's that we don't have the wisdom to understand our trials. Jesus Christ looks at us & says, *I stood my ground & suffered, obeying my Father, & because I suffered obediently, you've been redeemed. Now since I suffered for you, I'm asking for you to suffer to become like me. I'm asking you to go through this suffering joyfully depending on Me.* It's through trials that we grow & become more humble, more obedient, & more faithful. It's through trials that our rough edges are being scraped smooth. We're becoming more complete & perfect. We're becoming more like Jesus. Isn't that what we all want? May God give us the wisdom to know that He wants the very best for us & sometimes the best is found through trials.