

JAMES 1:5-8
WHERE WISDOM IS FOUND

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”¹

Wisdom is an increasingly rare commodity in modern experience. Though many people can be described as cunning, crafty and even clever, wisdom, especially godly wisdom, is so rare as to be exceptional when it is witnessed. James speaks frequently of wisdom in this brief letter, but what he describes would not necessarily be recognised as wisdom by many in our modern world.

The wisdom in view in our text would appear to be wisdom equipping an individual to respond in a godly manner to the trials of life. You will recall that James had spoken of responding with joy in knowledge of what God would permit when we enter into trials, and joy in the knowledge that God is at work as we pass through times of testing. You will recall that he especially encourages us to remember the goal of testing—perfection and wholeness.

Reacting wisely in times of trial is difficult—so difficult, that none of us will be able to so respond without godly wisdom. When trials come, as trials must come, you will need wisdom. Where will you find wisdom? James directs our attention to God.

GOD, WHO GIVES GENEROUSLY TO ALL — “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” James assumes that his readers will know where to find wisdom in the storm, but he is careful to state the ultimate source of all wisdom—God. This is clearly stated in the **NET BIBLE**. “But if anyone is deficient in wisdom, he should ask God.” **VERSE FIVE** is part of the same paragraph as **VERSE TWO**, so the first thought is continued and expanded.

When you enter a storm, when trials batter you and threaten your peace, ask God for wisdom. When you ask, you come to a God who is good, giving generously to all without reproach. James is quite definite in stating that wisdom “will be given” to the one asking. This is a promise that stands for all who seek the face of God.

There is an aspect of asking that may be overlooked. “Ask” is present tense, which conveys the thought that we are to keep on asking. The same thought is conveyed powerfully in **MATTHEW 7:7, 8**. The intensity of Jesus words is captured especially well in the International Standard Version of the Bible. “Keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep searching, and you will find. Keep knocking, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who keeps asking will receive, and the person who keeps searching will find, and the person who keeps knocking will have the door opened.” Prayer is to be persistent. Faith always gives a double rap at heaven’s door.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

You will no doubt recall that Jesus continued this line of instruction by asking, “Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?” Then, He concluded with this pointed observation of the character of the Father. “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him” [MATTHEW 7:9-11]. God is focused on revealing goodness to His child!

Notice, especially, God’s character that James’ expressed in the opening verses of this letter. James attests that God is generous. He asserts that God does not reproach us when we confess our lack. Moreover, he avows that God will give what we ask. These three aspects of God’s character merit further careful consideration for us in this message today. Focus on the character of God as revealed in the verses immediately before us.

God is generous. James reminds us that God gives generously. The word “gives” is a participle, which would mean that James was identifying God as “the Giver,” of “the Giving God.” God continually gives, and He especially delights to give wisdom to those who ask. English translations historically have rendered the word used here, “generously.” This is an unfortunate translation.

Considering James’ choice of words, take note that the word that is translated “generously,” is what linguists identify as a *hapax legomenon*, that is, a word that is unique, occurring only once in a text (the New Testament, in this case). The Greek word involved comes from a root whose basic meaning is “single” or “simple.” Paul’s use of a cognate of this word clearly expresses this idea. In EPHESIANS 6:5, Paul has written, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters ... with *a sincere* heart.” He is not urging slaves to be generous, but to serve sincerely in a way that honours the Lord. 2 CORINTHIANS 11:3 displays a similar usage of this word, with the Apostle expressing his fear that the Corinthians’ minds might be led astray from their “*sincere* and pure devotion to Christ.”

Douglas Moo suggests that James has “taken an Old Testament term denoting ‘integrity’ and applied it to God ... The evidence suggests that James is not so much highlighting God’s generosity in giving as his single, undivided intent to give us those gifts we need to please him.”² The impact of James’ statement concerning God’s character is that the child of God can anticipate God’s full attention when he or she asks. God not only hears the request of His child, but He also delights to answer.

God does not reproach us when we confess our deficit. Not only does James inform us that God gives us what we ask, but He will never berate us for asking. God will respond and grant wisdom when it is requested by His child. He will never heap insults upon the one seeking because he asked; He will not remind the petitioner about His past answers to previous petitions. He will not reply, “What have you done with what I have already given you?” He does not comply only to humiliate the receiver.

God will give what His child asks. James concludes with a powerful affirmation: “it will be given him.” God hears and answers prayer. Have you ever noticed the multiplicity of promises concerning God providing answer to prayer? Think of but a few of the instances of such promises found in the Word of God. Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord God promises His people, “You will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you” [JEREMIAH 29:12]. In JEREMIAH 33:3, God solicits prayer when He says, “Call to Me and I will answer you.”

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James, The Pillar New Testament commentary*, 57 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2000) 57

Among the precious promises of Jesus is this one recorded in Matthew's Gospel. "Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" [MATTHEW 21:22]. It is akin to the promise recorded by John. "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" [JOHN 14:13].

That promise is iterated by the Master when He encouraged His disciples to remain in Him. "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" [JOHN 15:17]. John apparently learned this lesson quite well, for in his old age, he penned this promise of encouragement for believers for all time. "This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him" [1 JOHN 5:14, 15].

Understand, then, that God is generous, He is focused on His child, and He will answer us when we call. We live in a world that has forgotten this truth. Consequently, we unconsciously attempt to manipulate God, coercing Him into doing our will. When we face a need requiring godly wisdom, what do we do? We almost always enlist everyone we can imagine to pray with us. Though we would never say so, we tacitly believe that the more people repeating our requests, the more likely we are to receive a favourable answer. Consequently, modern Christians often fall under the condemnation Jesus pronounced in His Sermon on the Mount. "When you pray, do not babble repetitiously like the Gentiles, because they think that by their many words they will be heard. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" [MATTHEW 6:7, 8, NET BIBLE].

Although I have spoken in a general sense, James is quite specific in detailing that God supplies wisdom to those who ask. Later in this letter, James forcefully confronts the more usual situation prevailing in the life of the professed people of God. "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" [JAMES 4:1-3].

God gives wisdom to each of His children who ask; He has no favourites. Each of His children is invited to ask, knowing that He will give what is sought. When God gives the wisdom we are seeking, there will be no strings attached. God has no ulterior motives in giving. Moreover, God will never reproach those who ask for wisdom. He is no reluctant, critical giver. Rather, He will give wisdom to His people when they ask.

When God reveals Himself, He reveals Himself as the God who is intent on fulfilling every promise, and the promises of God are given for the good of His child and for His own glory. Did you notice the intensity of James' affirmation? When we ask the Father for wisdom, "it will be given." With God, we may be certain that we will not only be heard, but that we will also receive what we ask of Him. In just a few, short verses, James will say of God that with Him "there is no variation or shadow due to change" [JAMES 1:17]. Indeed, we are confident that "all the promises of God find their yes" in Christ Jesus the Lord [2 CORINTHIANS 1:20].

Child of God, among the precious promises that God is pledged to fulfil is this one which assures us that we will have wisdom if we but ask. As we enter the storms of life, God is with us to give us the benefit of His glorious wisdom. Let us, therefore, resolve to ask, knowing that we shall receive what He has promised. Amen!

James is not berating his readers. The first readers were experiencing great difficulties, as we saw previously. They were no doubt experiencing guilt, confusion, fear, anger—they were suffering and reacting much as we react to trials. James is simply trying to ground them in eternal truth by redirecting their attention to what they know is true. Just so, I am endeavouring to encourage you before you enter into trials, or remind you of what you know to be true if you are now in the midst of a trial.

ASKING IN FAITH, WITH NO DOUBTING — “Let him ask in faith, with no doubting.” Undoubtedly, we know to ask God for deliverance when we have difficulties. It has been said, and it is no doubt true, that there are no atheists in a foxhole. When life is threatened, the most natural response in human experience is to cry out, “Oh, God, Help me!” Christians are to be more specific still, applying the promises God has given.

James encourages us to pray in faith. This is truly no different from what Jesus has said, as we have already seen. In Matthew’s Gospel, we saw that Jesus said, “Whatever you ask in prayer, *you will receive*, if you have faith” [MATTHEW 21:22]. Again, Jesus has promised, “Whatever you ask in my name, *this I will do*, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” [JOHN 14:13]. Yet, again, the Master encouraged His disciples to anticipate answered prayer when He said, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and *it will be done for you*” [JOHN 15:17].

The difficulty arises when we try to manufacture belief. Faith simply grasps the promises God has already given and moves forward in confidence. Faith comes from abiding in the Son of God and permitting His words to abide in us. In short, we doubt when we live in sin and when we are aware that we are sinning. We doubt because we are ignorant of the promises God has given in His Word. We doubt whenever we attempt to secure our own desires, imposing them on the Son of God. Let’s explore where to find faith so that we will be able to ask without doubting.

Understand that saving faith is a gift. You cannot believe simply because you “decide” to believe. Listen to the Apostle in a rather extended portion of the Word. “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” [EPHESIANS 2:1-10].

Those who are dead cannot respond to the normal stimuli of life. Likewise, when we were “dead in the trespasses and sins” identified with this fallen world, we could not respond to God’s gracious call. We were made alive together with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. Therefore, the Word declares, “By grace you have been saved through faith.” The faith that saves, however, is a gift from God who gives life.

Paul declares to Timothy that God “saved us and called us ... for His own purpose and grace ... before the ages began” [2 TIMOTHY 1:9]. God prepared for our salvation even before He created time. Our salvation is no afterthought, but it was planned and the sacrifice was prepared before time began. How can we dare say that we found faith within our own being? God prepared the sacrifice and called us and even gave us the faith in which we now stand. The hero of our salvation is God, not us!

If saving faith is a gift, then what of the faith of which James writes? Can I believe hard enough to avoid doubt? The faith in view is not the faith that saves, but it is the faith that arises from having been saved. Let me restate that truth forcefully. The faith of which James writes is nothing less than certainty that God will do what He has promised. If I return to the text, examining it in the original language, I note that the word “ask” in both VERSES FIVE AND SIX is a present tense imperative. We would not be remiss to translate the injunction to “keep on asking,” and the attitude exhibiting faith is “with no doubting.” “Doubting” speaks of internal indecision that arises because of uncertainty either of the One whom we ask or because of uncertainty concerning His willingness to give what we ask.

There are some grave distortions of the faith James encourages believers to have. One such warped caricature of faith is witnessed in what has become known as the “Name it and Claim it” movement. In this belief system, followers are taught that they should name whatever they want and in faith claim that it is theirs. In effect, this doctrine is idolatry as those attempting to implement this faith actually promote faith in their faith. James is teaching us to have faith in God and in His grace, knowing that He will fulfil every promise. James is not giving cover to greed, nor is he urging us to believe harder. James is directing us to look to God who is good. James is teaching us that because we know the character of God, we can have faith even in the midst of trials.

Neither is James urging us to suppress mental doubts. We are not trying to manipulate God through our own power of positive thinking. George Stulac is undoubtedly correct when he writes, “The error [of thinking that we can suppress doubts] has left many in bondage to fear, afraid of their own thoughts and afraid of the God who might hold their doubts against them and therefore not grant the wisdom needed. The result is a crippling of people’s faith and a perversion of the very truth James is teaching: that God gives freely, without finding fault.”³

Well, how shall we have such faith that does not doubt? What is this gift that God is promising? First, turn again in your mind to the words of Jesus concerning answered prayer. Indeed, Jesus tied the certainty of answered prayer to the faith of the petitioner [MATTHEW 21:22]. Expanding on His instruction, I remind you that Jesus also qualified the promise to answer prayer to abiding in Him and permitting His Word to abide in you [JOHN 15:17]. This condition may be restated to urge us to seek the glory of the Father through honouring the Son [JOHN 14:13]. In short, Jesus is looking for spiritual integrity.

Faith that honours God is nothing less than confidence in the promises of God. The child of God, seeing a promise, seizes that promise in certainty that God will give what he asks. That faith grows in an environment of a life determined to discover the will of the Father and boldly live to honour Him. This, then, is the spiritual integrity that James seeks—knowledge of the Word and commitment to do all that God commands.

³ George M. Stulac, James: IVP New Testament Commentary (InterVarsity, Downers Grove, IL 1993), Logos Electronic Edition

In the context of James' words, faith is committing oneself to doing all that God commands. Listen to what James says in the following chapter. "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

"But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder" [JAMES 2:14-20]!

I iterate—faith is knowing the promises of God and doing the will of God. Faith is imminently practical. The faith we are to exercise is no "leap in the dark," but it is rather an expression of the believer's knowledge of the character of God and confidence that God will do all He has promised. This, then, is my concern. If the fulfilment of the promise is dependent upon knowing the will of God, and if the will of God is clearly revealed through the Word of God, then when we substitute our own imaginations for the revealed will of God, how can we expect to receive anything from God?

How James' pointed application of this failure must have stung people in that day. Such forthright speech surely stings people in this day! "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us'" [JAMES 4:4, 5]?

Pray in faith. Pray, knowing the will of God and acting on the promises of God. Pray, when you do not have a specific promise from God, knowing His power and praying in the confidence that He is too good to permit you to enter into any situation that will not work to your good and to His glory. Pray, knowing the wisdom of the Father is always at the disposal of His child. "Pray without ceasing" [1 THESSALONIANS 5:17].

STABILITY? OR INSTABILITY? "The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." How you pray, the confidence and persistence that mark your prayer life, reveal far more about you than you might imagine.

James writes about the "two-souled" person, for that is the literal meaning of the word translated "double minded." He asks for wisdom, but he has no confidence that he will receive what he asks. He puts his hand to the plough, but he is always looking back. His furrows are not straight and the land is left in worse shape than when he began to work it. This person is inconsistent and fickle in all that he does. He cannot be trusted to accomplish any great thing for the cause of Christ. Unlike the steadfast individual, this one will never be perfect and complete, always lacking in wisdom [cf. JAMES 1:4].

Specifically, James states that such an individual is unstable in all his ways. The life of a double-souled individual resembles a cork bobbing on the sea. Nearing land, the waves rise and fall, and the cork is utterly at the mercy of the elements. In a similar manner, the two-souled individual is at the mercy of the moment. One moment she is praising God and the next she is cursing her bad luck. Such people are not able to fix their eye on a particular goal, but they are always shifting their attention.

The double-souled person is a hypocrite, saying that they believe God even while doubting Him. They are described by the Psalmist who writes:

“Everyone utters lies to his neighbour;
with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.

[PSALM 12:2]

The term “double heart” accurately translates the Hebrew. More literally, the phrase reads, “with a heart and a heart they speak.”

Double souled people are unstable in their allegiance. They would be at home with the people that resettled Samaria following the Assyrian conquest. We read of those people, “They ... feared the LORD and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. So they feared the LORD but also served their own gods” [1 KINGS 17:32, 33].

The double souled among the people of God commit themselves to a course of action, but when things grow difficult, or perhaps because they are disappointed in their aspirations, they quit. They cannot stay fixed on a goal, but they are always changing the goalposts to suit their momentary fancy. In short, much as Paul said of the Corinthians, such people are unspiritual, fleshly [see 1 CORINTHIANS 2:14, 15].

Do not assume that double souled people are lost because they are ungodly; James would not be addressing them if such were the case. They are believers, but they are not moving toward maturity. The goal of James writing is to move the people of God toward maturity, using the adversarial winds of trial to propel them forward.

There are people who contend that God can only work if there is sufficient faith in the heart. Whether or not faith is present, Jesus is quite capable of doing as He pleases. How much faith did Lazarus have when Jesus raised him from the dead [JOHN 11:43]? What faith did Jairus’ daughter have when Jesus raised her from the dead [LUKE 8:54, 55]? We need to come to grips with the disconcerting truth that miracles do not cause faith.

Much of my life, I have not believed God; and I suspect that such is the case for many of you, as well. I do not mean that I do not trust Christ for my salvation. I know that Christ died for my sins and that He was raised for my justification. That issue was settled long years ago. Neither do I mean that I believe, looking back over the years of my service, that God has not led me. Together with Abraham’s servant, I can testify that “The Lord has led me” [GENESIS 24:27] throughout the years of my pilgrimage.

What I mean is that though I followed the Lord, I spent considerable energy worrying that I needed to take care of myself. Though I memorised the verses, I did not know the truth of Jesus’ instruction that I was to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” [MATTHEW 6:33] in order for all the necessities of life to be provided by a Father too wise to make a mistake and too good to needlessly hurt His child.

I was impressed as I watched Sean preparing to leave his labours here in Dawson Creek so he could attend seminary. Convinced that God was leading, he anticipated that the Master would provide all that was needed. I reflected on that as I recalled my own call to leave my home and journey to Canada. With insufficient funding, with no support network in this new country, and with scant hope of success other than a conviction that God was leading, Lynda and I left Dallas to travel to Vancouver. God provided, and though paying the bills was sometimes challenging, God was faithful.

Later, when I struck out on my own to start a church without denominational support, there were many fears. There was severe opposition from many people. However, I and those who gathered in our home on that first Sunday had a conviction that God was leading and we persevered. God did provide all that was needed, and a congregation was established where there had not been one before.

Now, after more than a quarter century of planting churches and ministering to broken congregations throughout western Canada, I can testify that God has continually worked. One truth I have learned, though I am called to pass through a refresher course more frequently than I would like, is that God will supply wisdom when we ask for it. Not only will God supply wisdom, but where He appoints His people to go, He Himself will lead. Not only does He lead, but He provides all that is necessary for success.

This congregation is embarking on a new journey with the Lord. We are passing through trials, and we cannot imagine what trials we will face in the future. I am confident of this, however, that God stands prepared to supply wisdom for us as we pass through every trial. I know Him who is leading, and I know that He is omniscient and omnipotent. Therefore, I urge the people to God to seek His wisdom in every trial. Knowing that God is in control, we will honour Him and succeed in every endeavour.

Of course, such confidence does not come with ease of life. I only ask that those who profess knowledge of the Lord act in accordance with that profession. If God is in control, then let us follow His lead. When trials come, as trials must, then let us know that they are permitted by a Father who seeks only our benefit. Passing through the trials, we may be confident that He will be glorified as we exhibit the wisdom that He supplies.

Challenges I have issued in the past were offensive to some who apparently were not up to accepting the challenge. Nevertheless, if God is not leading us, then you need to seek out a congregation where God is leading—this is not the place for you. However, if God is in control, then why would you hesitate to unite with this people? If you cannot believe that God is directing in the appointment of leadership, then you need to find a congregation whose leaders you can trust, or you need to start a church where you can exercise leadership yourself. However, if God is working through those whom He has appointed, then why should you hesitate to submit to their rule over this congregation?

Of course, all these words suppose that you know Jesus the Master. If you do not know Him, or rather if you are not known to Him, then your first and great need is to be born from above and into the Kingdom of God. That New Birth is the gift of God to all who will receive Jesus as Master of life. The Word of God is quite clear in stating, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That promise concludes by remind us that, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]

Are you saved? Are you a child of the True and Living God? Do you know Him? Where are you in your walk with the Saviour? Have you been obedient to His call to obedience in baptism? Where is your membership? Which congregation are you blessing with the gifts He entrusted to you? This day is a day of new beginnings. This day can be the day you confess Christ as Master over your life, or perhaps seek to obey His command to follow Him in baptism, or unite in the fellowship of this congregation. Whatever decision He is leading you to make, let this be the day you submit to His reign. Come, join us as together we follow the Lord Jesus. Amen.