

## 4. Asking for Wisdom from God

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*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. 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.*

*(James 1:5-8)*

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### Asking for Wisdom

We have seen thus far how the Lord encourages us through the words of James to persevere in trials. These trials are not meant to break us down, but to build us up and lead us to the spiritual maturity which every Christian needs. We must come to a state of completeness or wholeness, wherein nothing is lacking. In this way, we are fully prepared to meet the Lord and to live with him forever, through all that happens in this life

It is extremely difficult to come to the point where nothing is lacking. There is always something that is not quite right. If asked directly what we lacked, what would be our answer? We could probably name all kinds of things, many of which are the passing things of this world.

James does not ask the question, “What do you lack?” Instead, he writes that if any of us lacks *wisdom*, he should ask God. The word “wisdom” makes me think here of Solomon. He was prompted by the LORD to ask for whatever he wanted, and he responded, “So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong” (1 Kgs 3:9). Wisdom is a matter of the heart, a discerning heart.

Entire Bible books are devoted to the matter of wisdom: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Esther. With respect to the New Testament, we may think of the “Sermon on the Mount”, where the Lord Jesus explains and applies the law of God in its depth. What we need in this life above all other things is wisdom. We can only come through the trials of life and receive the spiritual maturity that is the goal of our lives when we have wisdom. The Lord

commands us in our trials to ask for wisdom from God. We will look at the importance of wisdom, the imparting of wisdom, and the impeding of wisdom

## **What is Wisdom?**

We should ask why James mentions wisdom as something that we might lack and yet really need. Are there not other virtues that are more important than or equally as necessary as wisdom? What about faith, hope, and love? Indeed, is not love the greatest of all God's gifts? What then is the importance of this wisdom so that it must be foremost in our prayers?

James does not mean wisdom in a general sense here. He is not referring to intellectual knowledge that we gain by studying under the greatest philosophers or academics. Our text is closely related to the preceding verses that speak about facing trials of many kinds. Through trials, we must become mature and complete, not lacking in anything. The word "lacking" is the link to our text. James writes in 1:5, "If any of you lacks wisdom..." To persevere in our trials, we require wisdom that may sometimes be lacking and for which we must ask God.

This becomes even more pressing when we note that James does not give us some kind of advice, which we can take or leave, but writes in the imperative mode: "he should ask God," that is, he *must* ask God. It is not an option, but a command: ask God for wisdom. We may never come to the Lord later with the excuse that we had no wisdom, for he will say in response that we should have asked.

What exactly is this wisdom? I have already indicated that it is not solely intellectual knowledge. Wisdom certainly includes having specific knowledge, for we must know our Bible to become wise. But wisdom must also include *how* we put that knowledge to work. Wisdom is very practical, and it means finding the proper way to act and react in the given circumstances of life. Wisdom means having understanding of things, being able to discern their meaning, and dealing with problems, having the ability to resolve them. Wisdom also means having a good grip on life, a keen insight, and a proper mindset. Instead of causing or aggravating difficult problems or tense situations, a person of wisdom is able to show the proper way to go.

Wisdom means that we are able to look deeper and farther, to find the cause of and solution for a trial. One of Job's contentions was that his "friends" *lacked* wisdom. Job insisted that he had not grievously sinned and

had kept his integrity, but his friends did not believe him. They wondered how a man like Job could be righteous before God.

As we read in Job 28, Job admitted that wisdom is not easily found. He describes in detail how men dig deeply into the ground to look for metals and precious stones, where birds and beasts dare not go. We lay bare the roots of the mountains. We drop mine shafts miles beneath the surface of the earth. We build endless tunnels, even a Chunnel under the English Channel. We go to the source of rivers, and we bring hidden things to light. The technology of mankind is astounding. In Job's lifetime, men could not accomplish a fraction of what we can today, and yet he spoke already then about the amazing abilities of humankind.

### **Where Does Wisdom Come From?**

But no matter how deeply we dig, we cannot find wisdom. The deep and the sea say that it is not within them. We cannot buy wisdom, for its price is beyond that of rubies. It cannot even be bought with pure gold. In Job 28:20, Job asks, "Where then does wisdom come from?" People do not have it, nor can they find it themselves. Look at Job 28:23 where we read that *God* understands the way to wisdom, and he alone knows where it dwells.

It is important to note from Job 28:27 that when God looked at wisdom and appraised it, he confirmed and tested it. The LORD God sees what wisdom really is and how important and valuable it is, more so than gold and precious stones. And the LORD even looks right into the depth of wisdom to see exactly what it is. Look at Job 28:28, where we read that the fear of the LORD is wisdom and shunning evil is understanding.

Most of us are familiar with the saying, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov 1:7). We find similar texts throughout the Bible: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps 111:10); "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl 12:13). Wisdom is gained in only one way, and that is through the fear of the LORD. Whoever fears the LORD is wise and grows in wisdom. Whoever does not fear the LORD is a fool, and will go down to shame and death.

This brings us to the importance of the phrase, "the fear of the LORD". The fear of the LORD is wisdom. This means standing in awe of the LORD, taking him very seriously, serving him with full dedication, being humble before him at all times, and listening to him. The word "fear" in this context

also includes loving the LORD as a father, a love blended with respect that our God is a consuming fire.

And we need to take one more step here. Wisdom is fearing God. This means keeping his commandments. We must do what God commands, knowing that he only asks what is good and imparts peace. Those who have wisdom always go back to the covenant of love that God makes with believers and their seed, and to the law of this covenant.

## **Christ is Our Wisdom**

So wisdom is, at bottom, living in close fellowship with God and keeping his commandments, also in times of great trial. That is the context of James 1. Sometimes when we are in need or when trials and temptations become very strong, we are inclined to bend the rules. The world encourages us in this, and tells us that laws are made to be broken. So we do not attend church diligently because we are too tired, or we undermine authority at home, at work, in church, or in society. We engage in illicit affairs because our current relationship is not satisfying. We take more than we ought to because we feel entitled, and we lie and cheat because that is what is needed to get ahead. We condemn and we covet, for we have to stay afloat in our society and community. After all, “it’s a dog eat dog world”.

We break the law. We compromise our fear of God. We refuse to listen to his word. And our wisdom sinks away like a ship with a cracked hull. We get caught up in sin, one sin bringing forth another. And, as James writes later, full-grown sin brings forth death.

It is hard to abide by God’s law when we face many trials and temptations. We are inclined to crack under pressure. We lack wisdom, we do not see things anymore as they really are, and we lose our focus on the Lord and his Word. When wisdom is lost, the most important thing is lost: our sense of direction and purpose. We can do the most foolish things that we may deeply regret later.

In times of trial, let us not rebel. In times of need, let us not break the law of God. When pressed and hurt, perhaps by brothers and sisters, let us not hit back. When reviled, let us not revile in return. We must live our life humbly with the LORD, carry out our task, mind our business, and our wisdom — given to us by God — will prevail.

Today we may go especially to our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:30 that Jesus Christ “has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.” He is our wisdom. He

has shown us how to handle life. He has shown us what it means to be faithful in all trials and temptations. Christ never hit back and never reviled in return, but always trusted in God who judges justly. He never strayed from the commandments of his God. And he has shown us the Father. He has poured out the Holy Spirit. Through Christ, we have access to the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We may always go to this God in our struggles and trials. In him and through him, we may receive the help of Father, Son, and Spirit. Paul writes, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:19-20). Jesus declared in the night he was betrayed, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). The wisdom of God finds its fullest expression and revelation in Jesus Christ.

Our Lord Jesus Christ never abolished any of God’s commandments, but he did fulfill them. He therefore says to repentant sinners that their sins are forgiven, and they are to go and sin no more. That is wisdom. And we have to learn it time and again, day after day, until we reach the maturity and completeness of which James writes.

### **Ask, and We Shall Receive**

We might wonder how to get such wisdom. James writes in 1:5, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God.” There is no other source and there is no other way. We must ask. Our Lord Jesus promised, “Ask and it will be given to you...For everyone who asks receives” (Matt 7:7-8).

We are not told to ask and then to wait and see whether it will happen. Some people ask for something, but they are very skeptical ahead of time. They believe there is no harm in asking, but it probably will not happen. Sometimes there may be another reason for not asking or for asking without confidence: we have asked so many times already, but time and again we fall into the same sins.

Do you sometimes wonder about the Lord’s patience? We often commit the same sins over and over. Our sinful nature has specific weaknesses that sooner or later again come to the fore. We might even despair that we will never reach the maturity about which James writes. We may feel that God must be tired of our constant failures and sins. How many times can we expect him to forgive and start anew with us? Christ’s disciples asked him a similar

question, and his answer was amazing: “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:22).

James writes that when we ask God for wisdom, we must know the nature of God in this respect: he “gives generously to all without finding fault” (1:5). This is a very important part of the text. God gives generously. His gift of wisdom is straightforward and complete. He does not give it in bits and pieces, but he gives it (as the original indicates) at one time, an ample amount. He gives us what we need, and then some.

Note also that he gives to *all*, that is, to all who ask. The Lord God does not show any partiality, for when someone asks, he will receive. It does not matter who we are, where we come from, or what our status is in the church or society. When we go to God and ask, he gives to us because he gives to *all* who ask. We can therefore never use the cop-out that we need not ask for we are such sinners that God will never listen to us. Yes, we are terrible sinners and we have blown it completely, not once but repeatedly, and yet we read here to our joy that God gives to all who ask! Wisdom is imparted always in grace, and never on the basis of merit. As Job said, wisdom cannot be dug up, discovered, excavated, bought, or traded on the stock market — it can only be given by God.

### **Without Finding Fault**

James also writes that God gives “without finding fault.” Former translations read “without reproach.” Sometimes we are afraid to go to a helper because we know we will be reprovved and hear, “What? You again? Oh, when will you ever learn?” All we get is a sermon, and we are turned away in shame. A verb is used in the text that literally means “to throw into someone’s face”. We come for help, but our evil is thrown back in our face, and we are told, “Sorry, not this time. I have reached the limit with you.” With God, however, there is no fault-finding. We all know who is at fault. We know what went wrong. If we are ashamed already, God will not put us further to shame.

Certainly, the Lord Jesus sometimes reproached his disciples. When they did things they should not have done, based on their knowledge, and when they hesitated to worship him after his resurrection, the Bible tells us that he upbraided them and reproached them. But God’s reproach is not to cast us off or send us away empty-handed. He teaches us in his wisdom, enfolds us in his love, and tells us to go and sin no more. He gives to us what we need.

That is why I discussed earlier the imparting of wisdom. The word “imparting” is found also in the Reformed *Baptism Form*: “The Holy Spirit

*imparts* to us what we have in Christ...” Whenever the verb “to impart” is used, we stress two things: we have no personal right to what is being given, but we receive what is given on the basis of a promise. To have something imparted also means that we all receive our portion from the same source. God gives to everyone his part, that which he needs to stand in the face of trials. This is again the wisdom of God. He gives us what we need according to our individual need so that everyone can stand and grow to maturity.

### **The Demand of Faith**

There is, however, one *caveat* here. James tells us that we must believe and not doubt (1:6-7). If we do not believe, we will not receive. Wisdom is impeded by unbelief. Unbelief is more serious than having a weak faith. A weak faith must be tested and refined in order to become mature, but unbelief must be unmasked and rejected.

If we do not believe in God yet believe that he hears a pleasing prayer, then we will receive nothing. He gives out of grace, yes, but *by faith*. We do not receive God’s gifts automatically because of some indelible status, rather, we receive them only through a living faith. This faith may sometimes be weak, but it must always be alive!

The demand of faith is never dropped anywhere in Scripture, including the letter of James. If we do not believe, we impede and we hinder the flow of God’s gifts to us. The description of such a person is rather graphic. James tells us that the person “who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind” (1:6). Perhaps such a man is also like debris that floats on the surface of the water and comes in with the waves. I once watched a piece of driftwood as it was pushed between the dock and the beach, constantly moved back and forth, never once staying in the same place and yet never progressing. It had no stability, no resistance, no will or mind of its own. It was just an object tossed to and fro by the wind and the waves. That is the classic picture of an unbeliever, is it not?

Sometimes people like this manage to fool themselves. They are not altogether ignorant of God’s Word. If there is a God, they believe he should judge in their favor. But James writes, “That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord” (1:7). To expect something from the Lord when we

do not believe is not only illogical but also unscriptural. The worst deception is self-deception. God may test us, but we may never put him to the test.

### **A Double-Minded, Unstable Man**

James also calls the doubter “a double-minded man.” Literally, the text reads, “a man with two souls.” One may be inclined towards the Lord, for whatever reason, but the other is directed to the world. Being double-minded also means being unable to make a definite commitment. Yet whoever does not commit himself fully to the Lord will find himself more and more pulled into the kingdom of Satan.

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, called one of his characters “Mr.-Facing-Both-Ways,” based on this verse in James. Does this name sound familiar? We look to God and to his church because they could be important some day, and yet look to the world and its pleasure because they are important today. We cannot have it both ways, however. We must remember the wife of Lot and look only one way, to where the Lord guides us by his Word.

The word “unstable” which follows in the text is quite telling. It is sometimes used of a person who is drunk. He lurches and weaves, but he cannot follow a straight path. He does not know where he is or what is going on around him.

We might make a comparison here to a person standing in the undertow at a beach. The undertow cannot be seen, yet it is often deadly. The top waves come crashing into the shore and then retreat into the lake, as in a circular motion. The pull of the retreating current is extremely strong, and can sweep proven swimmers off their feet, suck them under, and push them far into the lake.

The unstable man cannot stand. He is swept under and washed away by the trials and temptations of life. He has no wisdom. He does not observe where the dangerous water is. He does not ask for wisdom. He fails to investigate the danger of his surroundings.

God is generous, but he is also demanding. God will not find fault if we come with sincerity. The Lord is gracious, but we must be committed to him, one hundred percent. We should not walk out into the undertow and think that we can stand.

We need much wisdom in life. We need to discern, to understand, and to know the way we are going and the direction we must follow. Sometimes the going can get very tough. That is okay. If we lack wisdom and do not know how to lead a Christian life and to persevere in trials, we should ask God.

He will be evermore beside us, also within the communion of saints, for we belong to one another in the struggle of faith. Let us together truly fear the Lord, for this is the beginning of wisdom. That beginning will grow until we reach maturity and completeness, and one day receive perfection on the new earth.