

Bethel Fellowship Church, Minneota, MN
Todd Mitchell
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Introduction¹

How has your week gone? Have you faced any trials? Did you rejoice in all of them? That's what I preached fourth months ago from the first four verses of James: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (Jam 1:2).

Maybe some of you struggled with that this past week — struggled to rejoice in times of trial. All of you have no doubt struggled with it at some point in your lives. I certainly have. We know we're supposed to count it all joy when we meet trials, but when it comes right down to it we can have a pretty hard time rejoicing when bad things happen, can't we?

We know that the testing of our faith can produce steadfastness, but when it comes right down to it we can have a pretty hard time caring much about that in the heat of the moment. How are you supposed to count it all joy when your mother dies or your father dies or your baby dies? How are you supposed to count it all joy when you lose your job or your house burns down? How are you supposed to say the right things and do the right things when you just feel like screaming — or worse?

The answer is *wisdom*. Wisdom to see things in their proper light, wisdom to see the big picture, wisdom to exalt God for his glory and might and goodness, wisdom to truly care about growing in steadfastness through trials. Wisdom from above.

That's why James turns to wisdom in the very next verse after writing about trials. The big question is, how do you get it? How do you get wisdom when you're at the end of your rope and you feel crushed by the weight of a terrible trial? That's the question James answers in vv. 5–8 of chapter one.

And that is what I am preaching on this morning — James 1:5–8. But before I do that, I want to read this whole letter from James. As I read this letter, pay attention to what James is saying. Pay attention especially to what kind of trials he brings up (I'll give you a hint: it has to do with rich people vs. poor people). And pay special attention to everything he says about wisdom in this letter.

[Read the Epistle of James]

More than once James talks about the rich and the poor, especially the trials of poor people when rich people oppress them. And how should you respond when you face trials like these? With bitter envy that the rich are richer than you are? With a mouth full of nastiness when your boss treats you badly? No. That's "not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic . . . but the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere (3:15,17)."

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That's the wisdom we need if we're going to pass the test in the time of trial. So James says:

James 1:5–8 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 6 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. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Here we see three things: what we need, who to ask for it, and how to ask for it. Those are the three points of my sermon this morning. What do we need? Wisdom. Who do we ask for it? God. And how do we ask for it? Faithfully.

Exposition

I. What We Need: Wisdom

Let's start with the first thing James says here in v. 5. What do we need? We need wisdom.

Look at the way James says this. Do you see something in common with this verse — verse 5 — and the verse that came before? The common thread is this word, “lack,” or in the KJV, its synonym, “wanting.” In v. 4 he wrote, “And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, *lacking* in nothing [KJV: wanting nothing].” And then in his next breath he says, “If any of you *lacks* wisdom . . .” But if we are lacking in *nothing*, then obviously we won't be lacking in wisdom.

This is why I think James is talking about something that comes *before* being steadfast in times of trial — something we need *in order to be* steadfast. In order to endure our trials, in order to rejoice in our trials, something has to come first. And that something is wisdom.

It is as if James is answering a question that he knows will come up after what he has said in vv. 2–4. The Christian Jews he is writing to are going through terrible trials. What are they going to think when they start reading James' letter, and the first thing they see is that they should be happy about the trials they are facing? Some of them are going to just shake their heads. Some of them might even roll their eyes. Easy for you to say, James. You must not know how hard it is for us out here. It's just not that easy.

But here in v. 5 James stops them. If you are having a hard time rejoicing in your trials, if you are having a hard time enduring them, don't despair. Don't turn away from God. Don't do or say anything that would fail the test. Don't be a fool. What you need is a dose of wisdom.

That can be a hard thing to hear. It takes humility to keep listening. Who do you think you are, implying that I need wisdom? Me, in need of wisdom? Yes. And that goes for all of us:

1 Corinthians 3:18–20 18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise

in their craftiness,” 20 and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”

We need to be humble and consider ourselves fools if we’re going to admit how much we need wisdom. I need it, and you need it. None of us, I hope, would claim to be perfectly wise.

You might think, well, I know that. I’m humble enough to know I need wisdom. But are you humble enough to know how desperately you need it? How much do you crave wisdom?

There is a story about a young man who went to Socrates seeking wisdom. Socrates took him down to a river and then took him out into the water. Suddenly, he pushed the young man under the water and held him there until he fought with all his might to get free. When Socrates finally let go of him and the young man came to the surface, gasping for air, he asked Socrates why he had tried to drown him. Socrates asked him, “When you were under the water, what did you want more than anything?”

“I wanted to breathe,” the young man said.

“When you want wisdom as much as you wanted to breathe, then you will find it,” Socrates told him.

Do you want wisdom that much? Do you want it so much that it feels like you are drowning in your own foolishness, your spiritual lungs bursting just to have even one gasping breath of wisdom?

It takes humility to admit such foolishness. It takes humility to admit that you really do need wisdom that much. The proud won’t do it. If you’re proud like that, you might think a sermon like this is just a waste of time. If you’re not a believer, all this talk about wisdom from above is just a bunch of superstitious nonsense. Of if you are a believer, you might think, “Oh, I wish so-and-so were here to hear this sermon.” Or you might think, “Oh, this is a good sermon for my son to hear, or my daughter to hear, or that person sitting over there.” And you would be right. But you need to be humble enough to admit *you* need wisdom, need it as desperately as a drowning man needs a breath of air:

Proverbs 1:20–22 20 Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; 21 at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: 22 “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?”

Don’t be a scoffer. Crave wisdom — crave it more than your favorite toys, your favorite hobbies, your favorite clothes or jewelry or cars. Crave it more than all the money in the world. Don’t be like the rich man who was so poor, all he had was money.

Proverbs 3:13–18 13 Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, 14 for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. 15 She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. 16 Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. 17 Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are

peace. 18 She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed.

But how do we lay hold of wisdom? How do we become wise? James says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God” (Jam 1:5).

II. Who to Ask for It: God

In other words, pray. Pray for wisdom. Pray to God and ask him to give you wisdom. If you forget everything else you hear this morning, remember that. Pray for wisdom.

And God will give it to you, if you ask for it in faith. That’s a big “if” — I’ll come back to it in a few minutes when we get to vv. 6–8. But if you ask for wisdom in faith, God will give it to you. James says so: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him!”

Solomon prayed this prayer. You can read about it in 1 Kings 3. After Solomon offered burnt offerings to God at Gibeon, “the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, ‘Ask what I shall give you’” (1Ki 3:5b). Solomon could have asked for anything. He could have asked for health, for wealth, for conquest over his enemies, for anything. But what did he ask for? He asked for wisdom. And he asked for it with great humility.

1 Kings 3:7b–9 7 . . . O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. 8 And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. 9 Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?”

Solomon presented himself to God as a fool. He said, “I am but a little child. I’m so foolish that I don’t even know how to go in or out of the door of my own house.” And so he begged God for “an understanding mind . . . that I may discern between good and evil.” That is the very heart of wisdom.

And God was overjoyed:

1 Kings 3:10–12 10 It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. 11 And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, 12 behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.”

God was so happy that Solomon asked for wisdom instead of health and wealth that he gave him everything — not only wisdom, but health and wealth, too.

Oh, but that was Solomon. Of course God would give *him* wisdom, right? But you and I aren’t kings or queens, much less a king who is the son of David! Surely God wouldn’t give *us* wisdom, would he?

Yes, as a matter of fact he will, if you ask him. James says that God “gives generously to all without reproach.” Generously to all, whether you’re rich or poor. God won’t look at you and say, “No, I’m not going to give you wisdom because you haven’t earned it. You aren’t good enough. You aren’t high or mighty enough. I only give wisdom to the people who need it the most, like rulers and judges and teachers.” That’s not how God answers the prayer for wisdom.

When he hears your prayer for wisdom, he grants it to you no matter how poor and lowly you are, no matter how sinful your past, no matter how young you are, no matter what job you have. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him!”

Now at this point I have to pause for a few minutes to clear up a misunderstanding that some people have. Some people think that since wisdom is ours for the asking, we shouldn’t bother with advanced academics. I listened to a sermon like that as I was doing research for this sermon.

I do that, sometimes. After I have studied a passage and read commentaries, sometimes I’ll go out on the Internet and listen to what other preachers are saying about the passage. Sometimes, I hear things that I hadn’t thought of, applications that hadn’t occurred to me. But I often hear things that shock me — things that are wrong, things that I never dreamed a preacher could get out of a passage. And I think to myself, it’s a good thing I heard that sermon. I need to warn the church against what some people are saying about this passage!

So let me warn you about what some people are saying about this passage. Some people say that since wisdom is ours for the asking, we shouldn’t go to school. We shouldn’t send our children to universities and we certainly shouldn’t send our men to seminary. The further you go in school, the more you are seeking wisdom in the wrong way. You should just be asking God for wisdom, and that ought to be good enough for you. That’s what the truly spiritual people do, the truly wise people.

But that’s not what James is saying here. If it were, then he wouldn’t even have to write the rest of this letter. All he would have to do would be to write these four verses in our passage this morning, and that would be good enough. Just ask God for wisdom. Period. End of letter.

But James does write more. He writes a lot more. Why? Because that’s part of the way God gives us wisdom. God gives us wisdom through:

Ephesians 4:11b–13 11 . . . the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ

And in Proverbs 19:20, we are told, “Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.” And that’s not the only place in Proverbs where we are told to seek out counsel from other people.

Imagine how silly it would be to ask God for wisdom, yet plug our ears and refuse to listen to the advice and instruction of wise men! “God, I’m tired of listening to the advice and instruction of other people. If you don’t mind, would you just give me wisdom directly so that I can ignore everybody else?” That’s almost as bad as saying, “God I don’t want to study the Bible. Would you just give me all the wisdom I need right now so I don’t have to study your Word?”

And yet there are people out there who do say something like that. The sermon I told you about did. The preacher mocked serious study of the Bible in the original languages, in Hebrew and Greek, by serious students. All you need is to ask God for wisdom and then read your King James Bible, he said.

But why pray for wisdom if you don’t take Bible study seriously? I’m not saying that everyone should go to seminary. It’s not for everyone. But even if you don’t go to seminary, you should take Bible study seriously. Not only should you study the Bible on your own, you should come here seeking advice and instruction on what the Bible says — and you should want your teachers and preachers to be as well educated as possible.

Enough on that. But before I leave that sermon I heard, let me say something good about it. It reminded me that no matter how much education we get, we had better be praying for wisdom. As bad as it would be to pray for wisdom without trying to learn, it would be even worse to study without praying for wisdom. When you study your Bible, when you go to school, when you go to college or seminary, pray for wisdom.

Go to God humbly, like Solomon did, presenting yourself to God as a foolish child, and beg him for a wise and discerning mind. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”

III. How to Ask for It: Faithfully

If, that is you ask for it in faith. That’s the big “if” I promised you I’d come back to. Look again at what James says in vv. 6–8 about the one who prays for wisdom:

James 1:6–8 6 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. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Well, isn’t this a contrast to what we just saw in v. 5! In v. 5, we saw that God will give wisdom generously to all who ask for it. But now we hear the rest of the story — that if you don’t ask in faith, you shouldn’t expect *anything* from the Lord. James isn’t contradicting himself here; he’s explaining himself. He’s qualifying what he said in v. 5.

What does he mean here? Does he mean what Jesus meant in Mark 11:24, “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours?” Maybe. But it might be more fundamental than that.

Because when you face a terrible trial and are tempted to respond terribly, that’s a “come to Jesus” moment. At that moment you either obey your own gut impulses, or you obey God. At that moment, you either act based on the wisdom of this world, or you act based

on the wisdom that is from above. At that moment, who will you turn to? To the world, the flesh, and the devil, or to God?

That's what repentance is — turning. If you aren't turning to God, you're not repentant. And an unrepentant prayer is nothing but doubt.

“The one who doubts,” James says in v. 6, “is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” Do you know what sailors call the sea when waves are driven and tossed by the wind? They call it “lumpy.” The water heaves and swells and tosses their boats about unpredictably because the sea is so unstable.

That's the way you are if you doubt God. The one who doubts “is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways,” James says in v. 8. I once met somebody like this. He said he doesn't think there is just one true religion, so he looks for the good in all religions. He doesn't believe that everything in the Bible is true, so he just picks and chooses what he likes and ignores the rest. He says that he prays to God. But he is a double-minded man. On the one hand he claims to believe in the God of the Bible, but on the other hand he doubts the God of the Bible. And no surprise, he was unstable in all his ways. His life was a mess, especially in the way he faced trials.

Maybe you don't go as far as this person. You know that there is only one true faith. You believe that the Bible is the only Word of God. But if you are deliberately living in sin that you refuse to give up, you too are unstable because you doubt God's promise of blessing in paths of righteousness. Like a wave that tosses back and forth in a lumpy sea, you pray for wisdom one moment but then refuse God's wisdom the next. You pray for God's wisdom without really wanting it. You pray for something that God doesn't even offer — a wisdom of your own choosing, a wisdom that is really foolishness. In your prayers and in your life you are in agony as you go back and forth, unstable in all your ways. And you are utterly unfitted for the trials that you meet in your life. Instead of enduring them in a way that brings glory to God, instead of rejoicing in them, you capsize and sink under the unbearable weight of your trials.

The only way to pray to God is in faith — faith in the God of the Bible, the God of the *whole* Bible. So put your faith in Jesus, live in faith in Jesus, trust God's promises without doubting, and pray for wisdom.

Conclusion

And when you do, you will face your trials with stability. You will face them with endurance. You will face them with joy. God will grant you wisdom to see things in their proper light, wisdom to see the big picture, wisdom to exalt God for his glory and might and goodness, wisdom to truly care about growing in steadfastness through trials. Instead of melting down, blowing up, lipping off, or worse, you will say and do the *right* things when you face your trials.

So beg God for wisdom, in faith — especially when you meet trials of various kinds. And “God, who gives generously to all without reproach,” will give you the wisdom you need.