

Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

Asking God for Wisdom

James 1:5-8

Mark Vroegop

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. (James 1:5–8, ESV)

Hardship and suffering are disorienting.

You might think of it like playing in the ocean when the waves are coming in fast and strong. At first, you can see the waves coming, duck under them, or even jump with them to body surf. But if you aren't careful, the crashing of the waves can catch you off guard. Sometimes it's not just the strength of the waves, though problematic, but the relentless crashing of wave after wave after wave that causes you to lose your bearing. An undertow can make it hard to get your footing. A big wave with swirling currents and lots of foam can make it hard to find the ocean floor.

The image of disorienting ocean waves is a pretty good picture of what it can feel like when waves of hardship roll in too. Pain of any kind has layers. Life can be incredibly complicated. The future can feel uncertain. People may even ask you what you're thinking and what you're going to do. And just when you are about to have a clear thought—another wave hits.

As a result, life begins to feel like one triage decision after another. I've said to younger pastors that, when it comes to church ministry, you usually don't have problem-free options. Every decision has unintended consequences.

Part of the reason that suffering is hard is because of how complicated everything becomes. You can find yourself saying, "I just don't know what to do" or "It seems like everything I've tried isn't working."

We need help. That was true before we started suffering, but hardship makes it painfully and desperately clear that what we need is a divinely given resource outside of ourselves. We need God-given wisdom.

Another Reason to Love James

This is our third week in our verse-by-verse study of James where we aim to discover how to embrace steadfast joy as we faithfully follow Jesus through hardship. In week one, we learned to “count it all joy when we experience various kinds of trials.” The calling is to “lean into” the hardship—not away.

Last week we looked at how to “let steadfastness have its full effect.” We learned that suffering is something that produces spiritual maturity in us. We are called to embrace the process and love the result. Hopefully that helped you think differently about the challenges you faced last week.

Verses 5-8 are merely an extension of the first four verses and this theme of suffering. In the journey of embracing steadfastness, there are moments when we’ll struggle to know what to do next.

Another reason to love the book of James is because of its focus on wisdom. When we don’t know what to do, we can call upon God to help us.

Three Questions About Wisdom

Suffering and the process of spiritual maturity can create the need for divine guidance and wisdom. Let’s consider three questions from this text that we should ask when it comes to wisdom.

1) Do I know I need wisdom?

The first part of verse 5 makes a very simple but profound statement: “If any of you lacks wisdom...”

Let’s start with a definition that you may remember from our study in Proverbs. Wisdom is the application of biblical truth to life. It takes scriptural principles and applies them in the real world.

Wisdom is getting the mind and heart of God on how we are to live. It’s the ability to know and do the will of God. What could be more valuable than that?

In verse 4, James talked about perfection or spiritual maturity. And immediately following his statement about perfection and maturity, James talks about wisdom. He does this because wisdom is a vital part of what it means to be mature. Let me give you a few examples:

- Luke tells us this about Jesus: “...the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40).
- Here’s what the apostle Paul prayed for the church at Colossae: “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...” (Col. 1:9).

One of the marks of spiritual maturity is knowing that you need wisdom. It’s realizing that your ability to understand the world and know what to do is insufficient. It’s embracing the true value of wisdom:

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold (Prov. 3:13-14).

Further, suffering or hardship make wisdom more (obviously) necessary in our lives. We run into things that press us, hurt us, or confuse us; and we need help to know what to say or what to do. Jesus both predicted this and promised his provision:

But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives (Luke 21:12-19).

Jesus promised his disciples that, when we face difficulties, he can give us the wisdom that we need. So, it's important to realize how vital wisdom is for both our spiritual maturity and our ability to endure through seasons of difficulty. We need wisdom to grow, and we need wisdom to persevere.

That's one of the reasons I'm so thankful that James asks this simple question: "If any of you lacks wisdom..." It reminds us of the importance of wisdom and our need for it. Verse 5 helps us to see where wisdom fits into the equation when it comes to endurance.

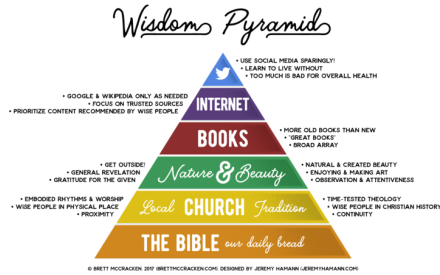
One of the greatest barriers to getting wisdom and growing in maturity is a self-delusional sense that we can figure things out on our own. The Bible defines a fool as someone who doesn't listen to instruction and doesn't seek advice. The fool is unteachable, over-confident, and stubborn. The first step in becoming wise is realizing that you're not wise.

This is one of the reasons suffering is effective in creating maturity. It puts us in a position where we realize that we are not in control, we don't know what to do, and we need God's help. Now, that was true before, but hardship makes it very obvious and plain. And that's a good thing—a really good thing.

So, if you find yourself saying or feeling, "I don't know what to do! I need the Lord's help," that's a beautiful place to be; in fact, it's the first step. Realizing that we need wisdom opens the door to wisdom.

On the other hand, it may be that you don't find yourself very wisdom-aware right now. Perhaps this message is making you realize that you've allowed irritation, exhaustion, or frustration to eclipse any thought about your need for wisdom. Perhaps you know that you need it, but you are so upset about what's going on around you that you've missed the value of wisdom.

Or it may be that we are confusing information with wisdom. With so many sources, we are inundated with more "knowledge" than what is even healthy. When we walked through the book of Proverbs, I shared an image called the Wisdom Pyramid from Brett McCracken, where he tries to help us think through the balance of our knowledge-diet.



This season of difficulty and hardship has deepened our need for wisdom. I had the chance to read the manuscript for a book that he’s written on the subject. The opening paragraph is powerfully relevant:

*Our world has more and more information, but less and less wisdom. More data; less clarity. More stimulation; less synthesis. More distraction; less stillness. More pontificating; less pondering. More opinion; less research. More speaking; less listening. More to look at; less to see. More amusements; less joy. There is more, but we are less. And we all feel it.*¹

So, the first question about wisdom that we need to ask is “Do I know that I need it?”

There’s a second question.

2) How do I get wisdom?

Once you realize that you need wisdom, James shows us how to get it: we should ask God for it. When suffering creates gaps or tension points in our understanding, we should use the trial as an opportunity to appeal to God for his provision of wisdom.

This is one of the ways that hardship creates maturity and can be viewed through a joyful perspective. The realization that I don’t have the answers is fruit of spiritual maturity. Hardship causes us to seek the Lord in ways we just won’t when life is easy.

The phrase “let him ask” is a present-active imperative. It’s a command. It’s something we should do intentionally, actively, and continually. The idea is for our lives to be consistently characterized by seeking God for wisdom. But the word “ask” means more than just a request. It can be characterized by begging or earnestly seeking something. Jesus uses the same word in Matthew 7 when he says, “Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you shall find.” It’s also used by the crowds at Jesus’s crucifixion when they called for him to be crucified.

Wisdom is a grace gift that must be sought. God can provide wisdom for you to know how to answer, when not to answer, how to be gracious, when to be more blunt, what you should do, what you shouldn’t do, what to say, who to talk to, and what steps you should take when you seek him.

¹ Brett McCracken, *The Wisdom Pyramid: Feeding Your Soul in a Post-Truth World*, (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2021), 11.

The point with wisdom is not so much its application but rather the source. God possesses all wisdom. He knows the future. He's working out his plan. And hardship presents an opportunity to appeal to him and to seek him. Seeking wisdom is part of the process of seeking the very heart of God.

Notice what follows. There's a beautiful promise connected to the character of God. James tells us three things about appealing to God for wisdom:

- God gives **generously**. The word here not only refers to the vast resources that God possesses, it also refers to God giving without hesitation. He hears our cry, and he's ready to help.
- God gives **graciously**. Wisdom is providing without condemnation for not coming sooner or rehearsing the previous times when you didn't come.
- God gives **consistently**. There's a promise here: "... it will be given him." The Bible guarantees that the Lord will help us. Now, it may not be as much help as we want, but it's more than we'd have on our own.

God grants wisdom to those who seek him for it—generously, graciously, and consistently. Why does James say this? Because knowledge, understanding, or "wisdom" can sometimes be regarded as something available only to an elite group of people. James wants every believer who is struggling under the pressure of hard circumstances to know that they can come to God for help.

It doesn't matter how many times you've asked him. The promise doesn't change if you've only recently become a Christian. The invitation to seek after wisdom is something that James applies to every believer without regard for the nature of the suffering or your spiritual maturity.

Learning to seek God for wisdom amid hardship is a vital part of growing in spiritual maturity. Learning this lesson and developing the habit of seeking the Lord is a vital part of God's plan for our lives. And in this way, suffering has the possibility of drawing us closer to the Lord.

Rather than pain creating a wedge between you and the Lord, it can become the very means by which you draw close to him. James anchors the concept of wisdom in the character of God. He could have talked about the value of wisdom or how helpful wisdom can be. James could have tried to motivate us with some other exhortation.

But instead, he connects wisdom and our need for it to the character of God. Suffering is disorienting. It creates doubts and fears. And James exhorts us to ask God for wisdom because, not only do we need it, but God is generous, gracious, and consistent. He will provide wisdom. But we need to ask. And, in asking, we're reminded of who God is.

3) How should I ask?

The final question moves beyond just the actual asking, and it speaks to how we ought to ask. In other words, wisdom and asking are built upon something else: faith. James calls us to use trials as an opportunity to practically work out our faith. We are to believe in God by asking him for wisdom.

Faith, of course, is at the center of what it means to be a Christian. Sinful human beings are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Spiritual maturity operates the same way. Trusting in God's promise for the forgiveness of our sins is simply the first of many promises that we continue to trust in. Suffering puts us in a position where we must live by faith in new ways.

In verse 6, the command is clear: ask in faith. In what? Faith in the promise that God will provide wisdom generously, graciously, and consistently. But what does that look like? Well, James answers that question for us by highlighting the problem of doubt.

The issue here is doubting God's character. It's an issue of unbelief. The problem emerges when believers begin to allow the disorientation of hardship to get the best of them and they start to question if God is generous, gracious, and consistent in his provision. When that starts to happen, it only gets worse. Doubt creates doubt. Fear breeds more fear. Discouragement leads to despair.

That's why James compares this kind of person to a wave that is driven and tossed by the wind. It's a person who is deeply affected by circumstances. His or her faith is based upon whatever happened that day. James calls this person "double-minded" and "unstable in all his ways."

He is a man with a conflicted soul. It's not just that he has doubts—everyone has those. It's that he allows his doubts to stop him from his seeking the Lord for wisdom. He starts relying on his own power, his own ingenuity, and his own wisdom. And the result is a pervasive instability in every way. He begins to look practically like an unbeliever in how he thinks, what he says, and how he acts.

And the tragic result is that he cuts himself off from the one thing he needs: God's help.

So, James calls us to not allow unbelief to take root in our lives, but to continually seek the Lord for wisdom. How do you battle unbelief and becoming a double-minded man or woman? By earnestly and continually seeking the Lord for help.

It means living by faith, especially when life is hard. It means leaning into prayer when the waves are crashing. It means joining together in seeking the Lord for help. It means recognizing that we need wisdom, asking for it, and doing so by faith.

This week in some reading, I stumbled across the words of an old hymn that helped my soul to be single-minded:

*Day by day and with each passing moment,
strength I find to meet my trials here;
trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,
I've no cause for worry or for fear.
He whose heart is kind beyond all measure
gives unto each day what he deems best--
lovingly, its part of pain and pleasure,
mingling toil with peace and rest.*

When suffering is disorienting, we can seek the Lord for the wisdom that we need. And he promises to provide it.

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