

James: Practically Real Faith Wisdom

James 1:5-8

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on April 28, 2024.

The Puzzle

Imagine the level of difficulty in putting together a 5000 piece puzzle. That is a monumental task. Now, take away the box so you are trying to work without a picture to examine as you study each piece. No clue what piece would go where. Not sure if that blue is the sky or the water. Now, imagine that all the pieces were turned over and you were tasked with figuring this thing out upside down. How impossible does that seem? Sure, you might be able to piece together the corners and the border, but each and every piece would simply be trial and error by shape without the benefit of the picture and the box.

Sometimes, our life feels like that. Troubles, hard times, difficult seasons crash into us. Suddenly, the box seems to have disappeared and we cannot clearly see what our lives are supposed to be looking like. The trial has come in and just knocked us off of our feet. And what is worse, we often feel like we are trying to put our lives back together and we are dealing with the back of the puzzle. It is discouraging and seems impossible to put things back together that way. It will take forever.

James has a word for us today. If you are in the middle of a trial and it seems as if you cannot figure out your way through, James has something just for you today. And if you are not in that place in your life now, pay close attention because you can be very soon. We can receive something from God that will help strengthen us through these various trials. We can go to the One who not only sees the puzzle clearly, He sees it completed. Let's read James 1:5-8 and see what God provides for those believers stuck in the middle of various trials. (read text)

Why Me, Lord?

In the middle of our troubles, it seems to be a common response to ask God the familiar question, "Why me, Lord?" We may be convinced that nothing good can come from our struggle. We may ask God why he continues to let this go on, drag on, day after day after day. Or perhaps we've asked God for some sort of problem parachute, a get-out-of-trouble free card. "God, just get me out of this."

Remember the last time you were in need, in troubles and trials. I know that it may be a difficult season to re-live. But skim the surface of that for a second. Perhaps you don't have to think very far back, because you are in the thick of it right now. As you reflect, can you recall, while you were being tested, praying, "God, give me wisdom. God, please use this trouble to deepen wisdom and expand my understanding of you, of your people, of my life in you."

I remember sitting with my older brother at several meetings of a twelve-step group he attended. Their meeting time was anchored in a prayer that concluded in a petition for wisdom. It is commonly referred to as the Prayer for Serenity. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Have you prayed for wisdom in the midst of trials?

This is exactly what James calls us to do. "Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God – who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly – and it will be given to him." Ask for wisdom – but what specifically are we asking for? The answer becomes clearer as we discern what it is NOT.

First of all, wisdom is NOT knowledge. Wisdom is far more than the accumulation of information and intellectual comprehension. I mean, mankind can certainly be praised for the incredible advancement in technology and overall knowledge accumulation. But according to Romans 1, we are traveling faster and faster in the wrong spiritual directions.

We have never known as much about the world as we do now, but yet we reveal an abysmal lack of wisdom by failing to live any better within the world.

Differing from knowledge, wisdom is understanding for living. Biblical wisdom is understanding for living that surpasses all earthly wisdom. Biblical wisdom is practical both temporally and eternally. Wisdom is the practical use of knowledge.

The Bible teaches that this wisdom is rooted in the fear/reverence of God. Job asked, "But where can wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:12), Then, as Job discussed its whereabouts, wisdom is revealed to be extremely valuable, priceless. We read in Job that wisdom cannot be purchased with gold or silver.

Wisdom is more valuable than pearls. Then Job reveals, “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens.” (Job 28:23-24). Job finally concludes about wisdom: “And [God] said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom.’” (Job 28:28). That proclamation is consistent with what the Old Testament teaches. Consider what the OT says about wisdom:

- *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever! (Psalms 111:10)*
- *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)*
- *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Proverbs 9:10)*

This means that, as smart as the smartest smarty-pants has ever been, without the fear of God, they were a person without wisdom. I have known a few people that could be described as “too smart for God.” They had accumulated so much information, that they were convinced in that pursuit that there must not be a God after all. They believed that as you got smarter, you would eventually have to give up on the idea of God. God’s Word tells us that “the fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” (Psalm 14:1)

True wisdom begins with a healthy reverence for God. For believers today, this is experienced through a personal connection with Jesus Christ, “who became to us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30). Jesus Christ is the perfect expression of the wisdom of God, and if you know Jesus, you can be changed by his wisdom and then have access to it for yourself.

This wisdom is truly a gracious gift from God. We begin with reverence for God and then receive even more wisdom from Him – practical wisdom that will help us to navigate the storms and troubles of life. Navigating the storms and troubles of life with the wisdom of Christ means that we will end up on the other side of the storm with a deeper understanding of faith.

Reading through James 1:5 and the thrust of the language here is that God is ready and just waiting for us to ask. In the Greek, it reads “God, who gives” – emphasizing giving as a grand characteristic of God. Literally it reads, “let him ask the constantly giving God.” The Scriptures are filled with this aspect of God’s character.

- *“He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” (Acts 17:25)*
- *“He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)*
- *“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)*

We use a water filter pitcher at home. Each day, several times a day, I take it to the sink to fill it up. Sometimes, there are some dishes soaking in the sink and so I tilt the pitcher a bit to fill it. As it fills, it often begins to automatically pour out water because of its inclination to lean. All I have to do is turn on the water. Well, God is like a pitcher that is always tilted toward his children, just waiting to pour out wisdom over his parched and thirsty children in the middle of their troubles. All we have to do is ask.

Did you take note of the words that James uses to describe HOW God gives? “Generously” and “ungrudgingly.” Have you ever had to explain something to someone one time beyond what you considered to be reasonable? How frustrated do we get when we have to, once more, show someone how to do something or answer, again, a question we have already answered. We sigh. We roll our eyes. We close our eyes and shake our heads. We do not give generously. We do not give ungrudgingly. We give stingily and begrudgingly.

God will pour wisdom all over us without putting us down. He doesn't say, “Alright, dumb dumb, pay attention.” He doesn't sigh in frustration and roll his eyes. Unlike people, God does not get worn out. We will never ever encounter divine irritation in answering our prayers. God will not throw his hands up and say, “You see that big lump on top of your shoulders? Use that thing. Its called your head.” Instead, James teaches that God's response to our requests is, “So glad you asked! Here it is!”

Last week we considered “various trials.” James teaches that these troubles, these tests, these hardships are nothing less than huge opportunities for wisdom. The smartest Christian, the one that you think knows the most about the Word, remembers everything and has amazing Biblical knowledge, that person does not have any sort of head start on wisdom.

The oldest among us, those who've circled the sun for decades, don't have any advantage over anyone else for wisdom.

You want to know who has an edge on wisdom? Those who are in the middle of struggle and are persevering through it with strength. And you and I can become wise if we open ourselves up to the wisdom that God is willing to offer. The Apostle John wrote, “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us” (1 John 5:14). That is an important spiritual discipline we must learn early. Ask God for wisdom in trials rather than getting angry and questioning “Why me?” We have to learn the spiritual muscle memory to ask God for wisdom during trials and trouble instead of begging for relief or an escape hatch.

We should commit to ask God for a large measure of what he promises here in James 1: wisdom.

Wisdom for the Believer (vv.6-8)

James does reveal that there is one condition that must be met in order to receive wisdom in troubles. Faith. “But let him as *in faith* without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord, being double-minded and unstable in all his ways.”

James dives into a sailing simile. He is driving home to us how futile it is to doubt. How counter-productive it is. How limiting doubt is. Have you ever stopped to consider the limits you place on yourself simply by doubting that God has anything for you to learn or grow from in your troubles?

Once, taking a ferry across to Cozumel from Playa del Carmen, I got pretty green around the gills with the waves bouncing us all up and down. I had to force my way to the back so I could sit closer to a trash can, because the waves were forcing things loose. In reality, it was nothing unusual, as the ferry would not have crossed in very dangerous conditions. But in my mind, it was like the Perfect Storm. To me, it felt like the waves were several stories tall. The surface seemed to go up, down, sideways, even whirling around. This is what James is describing here.

The emphasis falls on the word *tossed*. It implies being moved by the impulse of the uncontrollable, unpredictable wind. This is what doubt does to us. It tosses us around. It shakes us until we flail. Doubt tosses us around, not even in straight lines.

We are tossed into rising and falling peaks of pain and confusion. James provides a vivid picture here of doubt's instability in four dimensions.

The doubter is completely out of control. It is a wild ride to nowhere. In faith, we are trusting God to be our anchor in the storm. In doubt, we are untethered to anything strong, and it leaves us ultimately among the wreckage.

James caps this experience in verse 8. "Being double-minded and unstable in all his ways." The doubter is literally a "two-souled man." There is one soul that believes and one that does not. Puritan John Bunyan called this type of person in *Pilgrim's Progress* "Mr. Facing Both-Ways."

James provides a tragic picture of a person bobbing like a battered cork on the raging sea, torn apart on the inside by two souls. This honestly describes so many people in churches today. Now look back at the warning shared by James in verse 7 and consider how applicable and appropriate that warning is for so many who struggle with the facing-both-ways issues of doubt: "That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord." Do you see the warning, the danger, that doubt brings? It limits us from receiving the wisdom that could be a gracious gift in trouble. And this isn't a warning for someone outside of faith.

"That person" James describes IS a believer. That person has received eternal life. That person is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. But the doubting, unstable, facing-both-ways life means that person will not receive any wisdom to help handle and deal with troubles. No right perspective. No sense of deeper understanding. No peace. Trials will shipwreck that person, rather than that person riding troubles and trials onward toward spiritual maturity in Christ. What a terrible tragedy.

James compels us to ask in faith, without doubt. Faith is the essence of spiritual living. Hebrews 11:6 says: "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Faith compels us to believe in the divine, eternal, holy God of Scripture. Faith further pushes us along in the understanding that God freely and generously gives wisdom to his children.

So, if and when we are in trials and troubles, when life is battering over the side of the boat, when waves look insurmountable,

if we ask for wisdom and truly believe in Christ, God will give it to us. It is as simple and straightforward as that. God doesn't demand perfect faith. He doesn't insist that we never waver in any way. Jesus himself honored the stumbling faith of the distraught father in the midst of testing – "I believe; please help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

And let's be clear. When James writes about the double-minded man, he is not referring to the person who is wrestling with doubt but to the one who has two minds. That double-minded, looking-both-ways person is looking to God. But that person also thinks he has answers to find in other places too. James wants us to wholeheartedly seek wisdom for what we need from the God who will graciously give to us when we ask in faith.

I know that for many of us, it seems as if we are trying to put the puzzle together without help. We feel like there is no picture on the box and we are struggling to put together something that we simply cannot see clearly. Nevertheless, James calls us to trust the one who sees the whole puzzle both completed and clearly. And the wisdom provided will help understand something of what God is doing and it will also help us embrace the process and see purpose in the trouble.

This morning, are you tired of trying to ride these wild waves beyond your control? Ask God for wisdom, believing in Him and then receive it.