

James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Two

Strength, Wisdom, and the Problem of Doubt

Why the gap shows up when life hits hard

JAMES 1:5-8

We are picking up our study in the book of James, and last week set the tone for everything that follows, so let me remind you of the highlights. This letter was written by the brother of Jesus, a man who spent the entirety of Jesus's ministry not actually believing that his own brother was the Messiah. It was only after the resurrection that he came to faith, and he would become what Paul later called a pillar of the church (Galatians 2:9). James would pen one of the earliest books of the New Testament we have, our subject in this series, written around 45 AD.

We spent a great deal of time working through his audience, and it is so important that we keep this at the forefront of our minds as we open the scripture. In verse 1 he explains that he is writing to those who have been dispersed. This was largely the Jewish people who had converted to Christianity and as such had to flee Jerusalem for their own safety. The people he is writing to were in an extremely hard season. They were living in a land that isn't theirs, part of a culture that isn't theirs, surrounded by people who were not for them and did not understand them, all the while hiding from those who would kill them. If we could say it this way, they were under immense trial. And rather than *comfort* them in their trial, James *confronts* them. He calls them to greater devotion, to remember the prize at the end, and to allow the trial to do what it does best, strengthen the believer.

i.

The Gap

James then introduces us to the problem that will continually pop up in this book. It is the thesis of the whole letter. We are not perfect and complete, and we are lacking. That word “perfect” means *whole*, and the word and its cognates show up seven times in this letter. Here is the idea: we are not whole. We are fractured, fragmented, and inconsistent. We are not single-minded but double-minded. We are not whole-hearted but half-hearted. The gap between what we believe to be true and how we actually live is wider than we’d like to admit, and James is calling us to close that gap and live out what we believe. It is moving from broken to whole, immature to mature.

There is a quote I often give from C.S. Lewis because it speaks to me greatly. Lewis argued that Christianity, if false, carries no importance at all, and if true, carries infinite importance. “The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.” The thing Lewis is pointing to is astounding. He is cutting through the noise, the religious rhetoric, and the theological jargon, and like James, he is making it simple.

Christianity is either true or it is false. If it is true, the impact affects everything in your life. If it is false, then it should affect nothing in your life. So here is the big question for you: is God real and the Bible true? If you answered yes, then that truth should affect every moment of your life, and James is a letter written for you.

So go ahead and open your Bibles to James 1. We are going to start in verse 5.

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

ii.

If Any of You Lacks Wisdom

These people are in real trial. In the verse just before this one, James tells them they need steadfastness. You just need to know that in order to get through your trial, you are going to need grit. You are going to need endurance. You are going to have to learn how to take a punch, because life hits hard. But when you are going through a trial, you don’t just need strength and you don’t just need endurance. You need wisdom.

Knowledge won't serve you in a trial, wisdom will. Knowledge is information; wisdom shows you how to apply it. What good is raw information if you don't know what to do with it? The funny thing about wisdom is that it is a subject spoken of more than two hundred times in the Bible. It is a whole class of literature used in scripture, and we have entire books dedicated to it, such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. It is something humans seek after and long to have.

It was actually the desire for wisdom that caused the fall. Eve saw that the tree was to be desired to make one wise (Genesis 3:6), and she took. In our pursuit of wisdom we often move straight to seeking insight, yet the Bible is clear that wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 9:10). People often say that just means awe, and that isn't the whole picture. You should have a healthy fear of the day you stand before Him. Not afraid that you won't make it in, not a fear that God hates you, but a fear that knows you are going to give an account. Listen to me: everyone in this room wants to be wise. It starts with fear. It starts with asking how this is going to play out when I give an account for it. Eve got in trouble not because she wanted to be wise, but because she sought wisdom while forsaking the fear of the Lord.

iii.

Let Him Ask God

How many of you are going through a trial right now? Life is hitting, and you need wisdom. Here is your answer: ask God. As Spurgeon pointed out, we are so quick to move to inferior sources of wisdom in our day and age, and we often skip the superior source. We are too quick to go to conferences, books, teachers, AI, and counselors. We are too quick to go to our friends or our pastors. Those all have a place, but that is not where you should start.

You start first by asking God. This implies prayer. This implies not just thinking about your problem and processing it, but praying it. You need wisdom? You need to know what to do, and how and when to do it? Sit down in a quiet place with no distractions and pray. Lay the whole situation before the Lord. Explain the problem, confess your fears, and ask Him what to do. Then, and here is the hard part, you listen. Stop talking, and listen.

Sometimes He will answer on the spot. It can come in the form of a revelatory thought you didn't have before that unlocks the whole situation. It can come in the form of a conviction, a sense that you feel compelled to move a certain way as it relates to the trial. Maybe it comes in the form of a text from a friend in the moment, and they are speaking to your situation in a way that is clearly God and not merely them speaking. The possibilities for the Holy Spirit to speak to you are endless.

But let me give you some advice. Don't stop listening. Say nothing happens. It has been thirty minutes and you have got to continue with your day. Don't move out of the posture of listening. Keep your eyes open to the answer of your prayer.

This is a really good time to tell you that the Word of God is exceptional at communicating the wisdom of God. The more you know the totality of the scripture, the easier it will be to operate out of divine wisdom. While it may not give you the details of who to marry, what job to take, or what to do in your specific trial, it lays out clearly how you are supposed to think, act, and feel, which is more than half the battle.

iv.

But Let Him Ask in Faith

This verse is often misunderstood to mean that if I have faith for it, I'll get it. That is wrong, and it is really bad theology steeped in New Age philosophy. That isn't what James is communicating. Remember the context: there is a gap between what we say we believe and how we live, trials expose that gap, and in trials you need endurance and wisdom. Now read it in light of the context.

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 1:6-8, ESV

He is once again highlighting the issue, but this time he is being practical. He is showing how the gap manifests in our life. We often pray with doubt, which is an oxymoron. Why pray if you doubt? It is the gap showing. I believe one thing, but I practice another. Doubt is the big issue, and it is the primary cause of the gap. Doubt is the root of your sin problem. Doubt is the root of your fear, your anxiety, your control issues, and your greed.

And James here says that the doubting man is like the waves of the sea: restless, turbulent, unsettled, and moved with the direction of the wind. Some of you are the doubting man. I just described the state of your soul and mind. And it shows up in your life by the high highs and the low lows, constantly cycling through peace and fear, hope and despair.

You think you have a lust problem, you think you have a pride problem. You don't. You have a doubt problem.

Hebrews would say it is a problem with unbelief (Hebrews 3:12). It is doubt that causes us to be double-minded, or, as the Greek itself puts it, two-souled: διψυχος, *dipsychos*, a word found nowhere in the New

Testament outside this letter. It is the picture of having one soul in heaven and one soul on earth. Or as Jesus might put it, lukewarm, neither hot nor cold (Revelation 3:16).

BEFORE YOU TURN THE PAGE

Sit with the description for a moment before you move on. The high highs and the low lows, the cycling between peace and fear, the praying while quietly assuming nothing will change. If that is the state of your soul and mind, James has already named it.

Name the thing you have been calling a pride problem, or a lust problem, or an anxiety problem. Then ask the harder question underneath it: where am I not actually convinced that God is who He says He is?

v.

A Warning

Now, what we often see people do with this verse is take a specific instruction, tied to a specific prayer, and turn it into a broad principle that applies to all prayer. I said it earlier: if I want something, I must have the faith for it if I am to get it. But we can't do that. This instruction is tied to wisdom here. James guarantees that if you pray for wisdom, God will give it to you. James does not mean that if you pray for the promotion you'll get it, that if you pray for the house without doubting it is yours, or that if you pray to be delivered from the trial it will disappear. He says very specifically that if you need wisdom, you can trust that God will give it to you if you ask.

Which makes so much sense if you think about it. How many of you are parents? Imagine your kids coming to you with a problem, and with all sincerity asking you for your wisdom on the situation. How many of you are going to turn them away? Likewise, let's imagine they come to you and say, hey, will you give me a nice house? Will you make my life easier, take me out of the hard situation, give me a million dollars? How many of you are granting that request? Probably none of you. Why? Beyond the fact that you may not have it, it wouldn't be good for them. You aren't going to give them something that would be bad for them, and it is the same with the Lord. But wisdom is always good for us, so it is always answered.

vi.

Practical Recap

When you are going through a trial, you need strength, endurance (grit), and wisdom to navigate it. Some of you are praying for deliverance when you need to be praying for wisdom.

WHERE WISDOM COMES FROM

The fear of the Lord > Asking God in prayer > The Word of God > Outside counsel

Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, then moves to prayer, and only after that to outside sources. God promises to answer that prayer in some shape or form. We should ask for wisdom in faith and not full of doubt, because doubt is the cause of our double-mindedness and the root of our sin problem. We need to be honest about our doubt problem and address it.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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