

## James 1:5-12

### Faith Works: The Gift of Wisdom Under Trials

Not all endurance is worthy of medals and high fives. In fact, how one makes his/her way through some difficulty may fall outside of the very category of endurance. We probably wouldn't say that the guy who sat next us on a 16-hour plane ride, who couldn't make it 15 minutes without complaining, was a glowing example of one who persevered. A cheater in adverse circumstances may pass the perseverance eye test under many noses, but never with God who sees to heart's core. And from the realm of fiction, the hare traveled the same distance as the tortoise, but we could never applaud the hare as someone who stuck with it, worked hard, and persevered to the end, would we?

*How* we endure matters. And James will instruct the diaspora, and all those scattered through every age, that we're never left directionless in the dark. That in the place which seems unbearable and suffocating, dimmed with sadness, where hope seems razor thin, God has a well from which we might draw so that we might have something of Him and from Him in every valley. When things get difficult life's shadows seem to obscure what was once clear, it's not time to run away, but to move forward with His instructions. Someone once expressed, "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away your ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer."<sup>1</sup> You depend upon the one in charge.

You see, the essence of following Christ is dependence. In fact, tie these together in your mind from now until time as we know it is no more: There is no endurance without dependence. This is the cornerstone idea of our text today and what James will do is unfold other practices that reflect such dependence. Under the weight of *various trials*, God has made it so that His people discover what they need from a gracious open hand.

#### I. The wisdom needed in trials

<sup>5</sup> ***But if any of you lacks wisdom...*** Some versions omit it, but in the original, verse 5 begins with the conjunction ***but***, which ties the previous section to our current study. Another word you might have noticed does the same—the word ***lacking*** at the end of verse 4 and here at the beginning of verse 5, ***lacks***. So, we're not leaving one subject for another. James is still camping in the realm of *various trials*.

And he's not spinning words that would indicate a possibility of any one person who is only and always wise. There is an implied progression and growth in the sufferer's maturity from last week's text and running through this one. To "*let endurance have its perfect result*" is a time-oriented idea. We're not given the idea of a perfect sufferer. This life holds none of those. Who can say, "Whenever I'm under life's great tests, I always rejoice and lack nothing"? The idea of *perfect* and *complete* from verse 4, as Matt relayed last week, is the idea of maturity. We may have moments of clarity where we sing in shackles like Paul and Silas, or fellowship in the fire like the three Hebrew men from Daniel, or make a good confession in a bad situation like Job—and those instruct us and stir our faith, and exist for our growth in that direction, but we've not always made music in life's dungeons. Maybe we've complained instead of rejoiced. Maybe we've locked our eyes on the present, forgetting the thousands of mercies we've been loved through, and promised mercies that will get us through to the end.

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<sup>1</sup> This is attributed to Corrie ten Boom by a host of peoples, but I couldn't find a credible citation.

To be sure, we've lacked wisdom in our troubles, unsure where to turn, who to talk to, what to feel, how to think, and where to go from this reality or event that has gashed a hole in the middle of our soul. Some of our brothers and sisters at Harvest Church are right here. Matt and I were on repeat through Ecclesiastes that wisdom is not all we need and not the end all. Yet, it commended wisdom. And by wisdom we're not speaking merely of intellectual prowess, knowledge acquired via education, or quick-witted platitudes found through any web engine or website search. This is not the wisdom that lets you figure out all the secret things of God, or a kind of maneuvering that makes you stand out in the crowd of fools. No. Wisdom is the God-given insight into our circumstances that enables us to think and to do what honors God in Christ.<sup>2</sup> It is an anchoring of one's life in God's express purposes found in the Word, and wisdom is a grace-gift that leads one to trust God's unexpressed purposes hidden in His providence. From last week's text, it is a kind of seeing with joyful eyes that the trial has a designed end. James will later pen wisdom in these terms, "...If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is 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."<sup>3</sup>

So, wisdom is a matter of conduct, a pattern of acts and decisions that are selfless, humble, reliable, and truthful. It is from above, holy, patient, and judicious. Under the weight of difficulty, when we're broken by our struggles, do we naturally exude these character traits? Honest hearts, schooled by the Holy Spirit, know better. We need wisdom, and to have it, it must come from somewhere besides what we naturally harvest inside the heart. We need it imported. And James offers us all a clear word on the origin of such wisdom and how it's acquired.

## II. The God who gives wisdom for trials

### a. We're told to ask

<sup>5</sup> ***But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God...*** We all need one another. That's a message on repeat at 3175 South Germantown Road. As we continually open this book and explain its contents, there is no legit argument to be made that those who follow Jesus can do so on their own terms and strictly on their own. And certainly, one of those occasions we need each other is when we are in the heat of fiery trials. 2 Corinthians 1 makes this plain, "*Blessed be...the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction...*" It is within the scope of God's kind plan for Him to work in us to love and comfort our fellow brothers and sisters.

Yet, as important as that is for the glory of God and for the health of any church, the people beside you in this room are not the first line of defense when the walls of your life begin to crumble. That distinction should belong to God in the form of pouring Your heart out before Him.<sup>4</sup> You saw the order in 2 Corinthians 1—God comforts first, then we comfort others. Thus we are to pray—***let him ask...*** Now, as you wipe your tears and get up off your knees, yes, immediately search out one of these dear people to walk through the thorns and thistles. But we all need to reckon with the truth that we are not each other's Savior, that we can't take the place of the Holy Spirit who, "*intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words,*" That kind of closeness has been reserved for the Spirit of Christ in us! When "*we do not know what to pray for as we ought,*" it is the "*Spirit [who] helps us in our weakness.*"<sup>5</sup> He possesses that unique, first-place in our hearts.

<sup>2</sup> <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-christian-and-trails/>

<sup>3</sup> James 3:13-17

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 62:8, "*Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.*"

<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:26

We are to ask for what we could never conjure up on our own. We are to look beyond ourselves for how to move forward in pain, and we do this by asking Heaven. God—He is worthy of pouring out our hearts to in prayer. That’s the segue, because next...

**b. *We’re told Who to ask***

<sup>5</sup> ***But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.*** God is a giver. Most of you know this. I’ve heard many of your testimonies. I never heard any of you in your membership interview say that you seized salvation from God’s hands by your own strength and skills, but all of you expressed in one form or another that God gave you life in Christ. That He is the source of all the good things you enjoy. For, He is the giving God.<sup>6</sup> James could have stopped there, and the point would be well received, but he didn’t.

He instructs us to ask for wisdom from God, ***who gives to all generously***. The ***all*** can be understood as those who are able to exercise the true faith and humility called for in verses 6-11, as well as the ***any of you*** here in verse 5, which would signify the dispersion of believers throughout the Roman world. The gift of godly wisdom for-the-asking, then, is for those who have a living relationship with Christ. Now, as a gift of common grace, unbelievers may possess some aspects of the most generic parts of wisdom, i.e., a form of patience in suffering, but it’s a fruit that won’t be persevered till the Day when all will give an account.

Christ’s church is the beneficiary of what He possesses infinitely—wisdom. And He gives it to His own ***generously***. The word that James uses here carries such rich meaning and is one of those words that helps us to see the central, connecting idea of James in the whole of his letter.

It means that God simply gives, without hesitation or reservation. In fact, the word can be translated as single-mindedness.<sup>7</sup> God doesn’t have two minds when He is giving the gift of wisdom. There’s no double vision when He gives, granting our request for wisdom while desiring to hold it back based on that thing we did last week. He is not like the double-minded man that James describes specifically in verse 8—a doubter who has a bit of faith—but the double-mindedness also shows up in other ways in the book of James—blessing and cursing from the same tongue; welcoming and showing partiality; enjoying the world’s pleasures and boasting of friendship with God; having no consideration of God’s place in your plans and movements while saying amen to the pastor when he speaks of God’s sovereignty; praying for the crops and being impatient with the growth rate. God is not like us in this way. He gives unwaveringly in His kindness to His children—but that’s not all!

He gives ***without reproach***, writes James. With wide-open hands he gives, not internally conflicted on whether or not it’s a good idea to give wisdom so freely. But this says a word about the recipient too, doesn’t it? We have lived in a thousand shadows of change and sin. We might expect a gift from One in whom there is *no variation or shifting shadow*, the only Being who is immutably holy—we might expect that God to say at least a word or two about our daily attitudes and actions that fall short of His glory. But no! He gives, not hanging our mess-ups over our heads.

It’s a stunning promise when it finally settles on the mind and heart. It shows the distance between Him and every one of us. That we measure in vain, not understanding that there is a vast distance between

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<sup>6</sup> Alec Motyer indicates that James literally writes, “let him ask from the giving God” (The Message of James, 29).

<sup>7</sup> Craig Blomberg, *James*, 62. (agreeing with

“our drop and God’s ocean.”<sup>8</sup> God gives wisdom for hard times. He’s not balking, nor regretting when He does so.<sup>9</sup> And we’re told to ask for it, echoes of James’ half-brother for sure.<sup>10</sup>

Why would we not ask Him who died for our sin? How will He not then freely give us all things such as wisdom? If we fail to ask, it may be for a couple reasons. Perhaps in the midst of your troubles you’ve slipped into independence mode. You may not say it aloud, “I can get through this,” but that’s how you’re trying to pilot through your difficulties. Maybe you’ve calculated, “I’ve already asked Him. Nothing’s changed. I feel the same and the cloud is still hovering.” He sees you. You’ve been thrown for a loop by your difficulty, but He’s not moved in His grace. Another reason we fail to ask is that we forget how Fatherly He has been to us over and over again. How many times has God answered, even exceeded what you desired in your praying? Israel cried out in the wilderness, and manna and quail were given in abundance from heaven in Exodus 11. Solomon asked for wisdom, and God opened other storehouses for him. The prodigal, in angst over his squandering rebellion, just wanted to rejoin the family work force but was met with an embrace, a feast, and a place back into the family. Listen dear ones, our prayers will never rise to meet the excess of God’s goodness<sup>11</sup>—so, let us know our lack, see His promise full of generosity, and obey Him—ask for wisdom.

### c. *We’re told how to ask*

#### i. With genuine faith

***<sup>6</sup> But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, <sup>8</sup> being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*** No surprise here. Without faith it’s impossible to honor the LORD. Our own perceptions and judgments are not the way forward in this life, but we walk by faith and not by sight according to 2 Corinthians 5:7. Paul’s wordplay is not the world’s way. We gain our bearings with our eyes upon our faith’s Author, not upon our own understandings.<sup>12</sup>

Look at what James writes, ***the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.*** James qualifies the one who doubts in verse 8 as being ***a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*** This is the person that, at least in the moment, is not anchored to God and His trustworthy Word. He might ask God, but he has his own plans stashed away for a rainy day. She might pray for help in the storm, but the way forward she found in Help Yo-Self magazine is worth trying. He might join the prayer team, but deep inside he’s angry that his expectations have been shattered, and bitterness is strangling what was once a humble, daily walk with Christ. He and she have two minds, two faces, and two allegiances. And this way of living makes one ***unstable in all his ways.***

So, when we ask, ***we ask in faith without any doubting.*** And if faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ, then the connection of our knowledge of scripture and our walking in faith is paramount. Specifically, when asking in faith for God’s wisdom to guide us through *various trials*, the Holy Spirit will often wield the Word in us, strengthening us to persevere. Not every hard circumstance has a chapter and verse, but God can and has used a sea of texts through the ages to bear up His weather-worn saints.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Manton, *The Exposition to the Epistle of James*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> David Gibson, *Radically Whole*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus in Matthew 7:7, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”

<sup>11</sup> Manton, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Proverbs 3:5-6

ii. With humility under every difficulty

<sup>9</sup> *But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position;* <sup>10</sup> *and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away.* <sup>11</sup> *For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.* At first glance we might ask of these three verses, “What are you doing here?” “What do the poor—one in **humble circumstances**, and the **rich** have to do with wisdom for trials? I agree with David Gibson’s take, “It’s very likely that the greatest trial these believers were facing was that, in their poverty, they were being persecuted by the rich.”<sup>13</sup> The next chapter in James supports this, “*But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?*”<sup>14</sup>

The rich were so proud that they ran roughshod over the poor, betraying the gospel impetus to love without partiality. At root they were failing to remember that the gospel is the great leveler of humankind—all have sinned and deserve God’s eternal justice. The poor were so beaten down that they were failing to remember their status under the gospel—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, more than conquerors in Him, lavished with every spiritual gift in the heavenlies. They should hold their heads high with gospel-embedded dignity. And the rich should hold their heads low with gospel-embedded humility. Ligon Duncan nailed it, “If we are truly wise, we will see that both wealth and lack are trials designed to grow us.”<sup>15</sup>

Solomon nailed it before Ligon, “*Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die; [8] Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, [9] lest I be full and deny you and say, “Who is the LORD?” or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.*”

Poor or rich, or anything in between, our hearts can all fall victim loving what is passing away. And again, if we’re of two minds here—distrusting God by glorying in what we already have, or scavenging in distrust for what we don’t have, either way we’ve put the LORD on the backburner of our lives and pursuits, or He was never there to begin with. There is no wisdom in placing our trust inside of anything in this life as ultimate. The problem among some in the diaspora churches is that some professing believers that had means were being peacocks, unwisely boasting in what they possessed and taking advantage of those that had little. Those that lived paycheck to paycheck could have been doing a number of things to compromise their gospel witness—exerting jealousy towards their affluent church members or overcome by the temptation to gain in an ill-gotten way.

The illustration James offers here in verses 9-11 is a call to live in humble relationship to each other grounded in a proper estimation of themselves in Christ. This was the wisdom they needed. It’s the wisdom we all should pray for in faith, whatever our bank accounts reflect because not only will **the rich man in the midst of his pursuits...fade away**, but we all **like flowering grass...will pass away**. And when *this passing world is done, when has sunk yon glaring sun*, we’ll no longer feel the weight of trials, endurance will have its perfect result, and our generous God of no grudges will have the final word over our lives!

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<sup>13</sup> Gibson, 58.

<sup>14</sup> James 2:6

<sup>15</sup> <https://fpejackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-christian-and-trails/>

### III. The reward promised after trials

<sup>12</sup> *Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.* This word *blessed* occurs around fifty times in the New Testament.<sup>16</sup> It carries the general meaning of happy or fortunate. Of course, we find this idea in the Old Testament as well. Many of the blessings pronounced in Israel began with this word. “*Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*”<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, four centuries before the arrival of our Lord in Bethlehem, it was avoided by poets because it was in such common use.<sup>18</sup> But at least in the realm of the New Testament authors, it made a serious comeback with the arrival of God in human flesh, as attested at the beginning of the beatitudes of Matthew 5.

*Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial.* The world has its own list of what constitutes this blessed happiness. I sometimes sense my own heart gravitating towards a list that might align more with those on the broad road. If I only had this much, or that thing, or that association, then I might cage that elusive happiness and keep it for good. Yet James is telling us to look all the way down the passages of time, fast-forward to the end in your sanctified imagination, and see the reward for staying up on Jehovah, for waiting upon Him, for not cashing in your pain for privilege but enduring it in His power, for falling to your knees in your troubles and finding Christ to be enough. The reward for persevering under trials is the *crown of life*. Perhaps this is the same crown mentioned by another name from Paul to Timothy—“*crown of righteousness...to all who have love Christ’s appearing.*” Or Peter’s version—“*an unfading crown of glory*” received at the appearing of the “*chief Shepherd.*”<sup>19</sup> Beyond these mentions, there’s no further significant description of the crown of life. There’s no point to speculate, but isn’t the plain promise enough to make us long for these moments of reciprocating honor? <sup>20</sup> I’m convinced of it!

### Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, from the compost of our weakest prayers offered up with even fragile faith, God can grow an orchard for His glory.<sup>21</sup> Through James, He promises to be just what our hearts need most, to give what we could never gain alone, and to reward us beyond what we could ever deserve.

What trial is badgering your faith? Maybe in these moments you’re feeling the sting of struggle. Will you pray for the wisdom from a God who has a singular purpose, an undivided mind to bless you with help for every rough road. Our hope in finishing the race well is not some place outside of hardship.<sup>22</sup> The promise land is not a vacation spot in the Caribbean, or retirement with plenty, or a new job that comes with new toys, or even in a momentary respite of some kind. Escape is not the answer. Giving up is not an option. Endurance with dependence is the way forward. And we’re not to sit still in the dark tunnel as we trust the Engineer, but we show our trust by calling out for help. We ask. We ask our gracious God. We ask our gracious God in humble faith for the wisdom to see our way through the shadowlands of life.

Not all endurance is worthy of medals and high fives, but humbly persevering through trials with a faith that asks for wisdom for the journey—in God’s eyes that is a life of great worth, a life of dependence, a life worth rewarding.

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<sup>16</sup> Simon Kistemaker, *James, John, Peter, and Jude*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 32:1

<sup>18</sup> Colin Brown, *Dictionary of NT Theology*, 215.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Timothy 4:8, 1 Peter 5:4

<sup>20</sup> John Blanchard, *Truth for Life: James*, 55.

<sup>21</sup> N.D. Wilson, *Death By Living*, 167.

<sup>22</sup> Vaneetha Risner, *Walking Through Fire: A Memoir of Loss and Redemption*, 39.

