



# **Peninsula City Church**

## **The letter of James: Wisdom for Every Day Life**

**Wisdom in Context: James 1:1-8**

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## James: Wisdom for Every Day Life

### An Introduction

**Q.** As a Christ-follower, where do you get wisdom for everyday life?

We can try to acquire wisdom from various sources and experience will tell us that some wisdom is better than others. But there is one source of wisdom that has stood the test of time. This source is the Bible as the supernatural Word of God. Since, it is from God, it is eternal and profound in its quality and quantity. The book of Proverbs probably stands as one of the greatest collections of God's wisdom given to humanity. The book of Proverbs declares on this matter,

<sup>13</sup> "Joyful is the person who finds wisdom, the one who gains understanding. <sup>14</sup> For wisdom is more profitable than silver, and her wages are better than gold. <sup>15</sup> Wisdom is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. <sup>16</sup> She offers you long life in her right hand, and riches and honour in her left. <sup>17</sup> She will guide you down delightful paths; all her ways are satisfying. <sup>18</sup> Wisdom is a tree of life to those who embrace her; happy are those who hold her tightly" (Prov 3:13-18 NLT).

It is within this context of wisdom that we would like to review the New Testament letter of James. He has much to say on this matter and especially in light of wisdom for everyday life. The letter of James has been observed by some as a collection of wise sayings on the practical issues of the Christian life. As a matter of fact, it is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as an inspired book of the Bible that this letter was written. The subject of the letter is the testing of the faith and the wisdom needed to live that faith.

James challenges Christ-followers to have faith in the power and wisdom of Jesus Christ to become more Christlike. He encourages Christ-followers in their relationships and how to act within these relationships. Another issue that he raised was their justification by faith. He wrote to encourage those being tested in all areas of their faith to ask for and rely on the wisdom that comes from above. So, the letter deals with how to walk with God and in the way of God as Christ-followers.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. A brief historical setting, outline and teaching of James

**Q.** How would you understand the historical outline of the letter of James?

The historical background is that James wrote to Christ-followers of the 12 tribes. This implies that his style and audience were Hebrew. That is, they were Hebrew Christ-followers as (Jas 2:1) seems to indicate a believing audience.

<sup>1</sup> "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered abroad: greetings. <sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. (Jas 1:1-2 ESV).

So, the letter to the 12 tribes scattered abroad, was to encourage them to live wisely in the midst persecution (or trials, suffering) that they had experienced. This is not to say that James was not also writing to the non-Hebrew Christ-followers. A reason for this would have been that the early Church was becoming more and more a mix of the two Jewish and non-Hebrews Christ-followers in to one church.

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<sup>1</sup> Jensen, I.L. *Jensen's Survey of the New Testament*. (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1981), 421.

Yet, the tone of his letter is authoritative in its analysis regarding the matters dealt with by James. The letter has been divided into 108 verses, and in these verses are some 54 are commands. Although, these commands were cushioned in the language and idea of him writing to brothers and sisters in Christ, cf. Jas 1:2,19; 2:1,5,14; 3:1,10; 5:7,9,10,12,19). Therefore, it is in fact, a letter an iron fist in a velvet glove.

The following outline of the letter suggests that the letter has nine segments. The suggestion here in this outline is that, James put forward his thesis in James 1:1-8. That is, all Christ-followers need wisdom for everyday life to live wisely. He then gave eight examples of how this wisdom is to be applied in everyday life. So, in effect, James' premise in 1:1-8 is the focus of his letter. Then the remaining chapters are eight real-world matters that he has signposted that need to have this God given wisdom outworked in them.

- James 1:1-8: Wisdom in context
- James 1:9-20: Wisdom under examination
- James 1:21-27: Wisdom that practices what it sees
- James 2:1-13: Wisdom that values
- James 2:14-26: Wisdom maturing through faith is not dead
- James 3:1-18: Wisdom or no wisdom, you choose
- James 4:1-17 Wisdom seen through humility
- James 5:1-12: Wisdom that is fair, patient and that has staying power
- James 5:13-20: Wisdom in prayer

Remember that this is a reasonable outline of the letter, as long as it is not forced, and the letter remains exactly that, a whole letter. That is, it is a whole letter made up of its sum parts. James 1:1-8 is the thesis, but the whole letter is the context.

James has been called the least theological work in the New Testament other than Philemon.<sup>2</sup> However, I agree that we do not have a thorough going theology as in Romans or Galatians, but to see it as scarce in its theology is not true. The unique theme of the letter is that of the wisdom needed for the testing of faith that works. That is, how Christ-followers are to act as they live in the midst of their trials by faith in the wisdom of God, because of their justification by faith. James urged his audience to, stay with Christ through trials and temptations. To be precise, he was encouraging them not to go back to your old ways to solve your problems, but seek God's wisdom.

One thing that stands out in his letter, is how personable he was to those he was writing to, and how they were to relate to each other. That is, he regularly used family related terms, when compared to the size of the letter is quite a high usage (16 times). For example, he used terms like: my brothers (Jas 1:1; 2:1,14; 3:1,10,12; 5:10,12); my beloved brothers (Jas 1:19; 2:5); a brother or sister (Jas 2:15); the lowly brother (Jas 1:9); brothers (Jas 4:11; 5:7,9,19).

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<sup>2</sup> Gaebelien, *The Expositors Bible Commentary: Hebrews to Revelation*. 164. "In fact one of the reasons for the delay in canonical recognition of the epistle was its lack of theological content." Moo states the fact, "Some say that James has no theology. The validity of that claim depends entirely on what one means by 'theology.' To be sure, James says little about many basic Christian doctrines... But this kind of argument from silence does not carry much weight... More serious is the charge that James fails to ground his teaching in Christology... But such a definition of theology is much too narrow. If we expand the definition to include teaching grounded in an understanding of God and His purposes in the world, then James is thoroughly 'theological.' Appeal to God's person, the values taught in the Word, and His purposes in history undergirds virtually everything in the letter. Moo, *The Letter of James*. 27. Morris, also sees this as a "mistaken inference" to see James as having "little theological interest." Morris, L. *New Testament Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 312. Marshall, I. H. *New Testament Theology*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2004), 628.

## Wisdom in James: Jas 1:1-8 (in the context of the letter)

**Q.** How do you read the letter of James?

The central teaching of the letter is that, God given wisdom is needed as the faith of Christ-followers will be tested to see if it is the genuine article. This faith is to be worked out in our maturing in Christ in everyday life. When you are buying a brand name article, do you check to see if it is the genuine article and not just a cheap copy or cheap import? Why do you buy genuine brand name articles? Isn't it for the quality of workmanship in the article (you would hope that it is of quality)? James was with dealing the quality and preparation of a genuine brand name article in his letter. Namely, those who are His called by Christ's name. They were not to be cheap copies; rather, they were to be known by the quality of workmanship in their lives by the Master craftsman.

As believers they would all go through trials in life. However, how could they effectively endure in the midst of these trials? What is the purpose of these trials? James dealt with this question within the context of his letter. Yet, it is proposed here that, James 1:1-8 was the main proposition and the rest of the letter applies this thesis. He was pointing out that, God had an overall plan, for His church. That is, to grow to be more Christlike. One aspect of this growth was being formed and tested by the trials of life, and not just seeking an immediate release. God is interested in the genuine article of the ultimate maturity in Christ. To be able to mature, there is a need for godly wisdom to be able to grow until they were complete lacking nothing.

James 1:1-8 is tied into the practical outworking of the theology of the whole letter, i.e. the genuine article of their ultimate perfection in Christ. Of course though, the issue of joyfully enduring in the midst of trials until they ultimately come to maturity is seen through out the Bible. In the letter James pointed to such examples as Job, Elijah, Abraham and Rahab. In trying to release the fluency of James 1:1-8, I have aimed at not only attempting to exegete the text, but also deal with it as a part of a whole letter. To do the passage at any justice, it must be seen in the light of the whole letter. Note the following exegetical outline,

### James 1:1-8:

1 "James (Jacob), a bondservant<sup>3</sup> of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad<sup>4</sup> greetings.<sup>5</sup>

2 My brothers, I command you (for your own good) to count it all joy<sup>6</sup> whenever you might fall into *the* midst of<sup>7</sup> various<sup>8</sup> trials,<sup>9</sup> 3 constantly knowing that the testing<sup>10</sup> genuineness of your faith is constantly producing<sup>11</sup> endurance.<sup>12</sup> 4 But I command you to constantly be letting endurance be having *its* perfect<sup>13</sup> work, that you might be perfect (complete, unblemished)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A slave that loves their master and has chosen to remain their property, in this case the property of God

<sup>4</sup> The Diaspora (cf. Jn 7:35; 1 Pet 1:1), i.e. "the Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine." Rienecker, F. *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency, 1980), 721.

<sup>5</sup> It can also be justifiably translated, "be constantly rejoicing." Adamson, J.B. *The Epistle of James*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 51-52.

<sup>6</sup> Paul also rejoiced in the midst of trials (cf. 2 Cor 7:4; Col 1:24).

<sup>7</sup> Fall among, or be surrounded by, (cf. also Lk 10:30; 1 Pet 1:6,8).

<sup>8</sup> Many colored. Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 721.

<sup>9</sup> Tasker says this, "has the double sense, that of outward trials and inward temptations. Outward trials very often become occasions of temptations." Tasker, R.V.G. *The General Epistle of James: An Introduction and Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 40. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Trying, proving i.e. the approved after testing, tested and approval of the *genuine article*

<sup>11</sup> Thoroughly working

<sup>12</sup> Patience is better rendered endurance, staying power, or to stand ones ground (cf. 1:12; 5:11).

<sup>13</sup> Complete, unblemished. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 55.

<sup>14</sup> Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 55.

and entire,<sup>15</sup> lacking nothing.<sup>16</sup> **5** If any of you lacks (is being left behind for your self) wisdom, I command you be letting him be constantly asking<sup>17</sup> of God, who is constantly giving to all openly<sup>18</sup> and without constantly reproaching,<sup>19</sup> and it will be given to him (from God). **6** But I command you let him be constantly asking in faith,<sup>20</sup> not constantly doubting,<sup>21</sup> for he who is constantly doubting (wavering, is divided) is being like (resembling) a wave<sup>22</sup> of the sea constantly being driven back and forth and constantly being fanned<sup>23</sup> by the wind. **7** For I command you let not that man suppose that he will receive anything (*wisdom*) from the Lord; **8** *he is* a double-minded<sup>24</sup> man, unstable<sup>25</sup> in all his ways.

## a. Some general observations from the Passage

James in writing in this section of his letter used an interesting literary device. That is, he blended ideas and thoughts together by repeating and connecting some of the significant words. For example:

- greetings or it could be translated rejoicing (1:1) and joy (v2)
- patience better translated endurance (v3) and endurance (v4)
- lacking nothing (v4) and if you lack (v5)
- he should ask (v5) and when he asks (v6)
- and he must not doubt (v6) and he who doubts (v6)

James who called himself a bondservant (property of God), wrote this letter to the scattered and persecuted believers (v1). Most people would consider it all joy when they are finally out of their trials. Yet, here James encouraged Christ-followers to have the opposite reaction to their trials i.e. one of pure Joy (v2). The idea of trials and joy do not naturally go together. It is actually a puzzling thought. James confirmed that trials will come, but there needed to be joy in the midst of these trials. For example other believers went through their own trials: Job's trials (Job 1:2-2:10); Jesus warns His disciple of the many trials to come (Matt 10:22; cf. also 24:8-14), Christ went through His own trials (Heb 2:18; 4:15,16).<sup>26</sup>

The testing of the genuineness of their faith was crucial for growth, i.e. trying, proving; better still the approval after being tested and the approval of the genuine article of your faith (v3). So, James knew that they were going to need the wisdom to get through them. True faith in wisdom will mature regardless of how hot the fire gets.

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<sup>15</sup> Wholly called, fully developed, or complete in every part

<sup>16</sup> Not being left behind, maturity. Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 721.

<sup>17</sup> Just for the asking.

<sup>18</sup> Liberally, simply, unconditionally, without bargaining, open-heartedly, freely, assistance is readily available from the giving God

<sup>19</sup> Insulting, or taunting

<sup>20</sup> Trust, confidence, confidence in prayer

<sup>21</sup> Wavering, being divided, being divided between two options

<sup>22</sup> A surge of the sea, the unsettled behavior of the wave. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Tossed is too strong a word, being fanned is a better and truer word here. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James: An Introduction and Commentary*, 42.

<sup>24</sup> Two-souled, divided between faith and the world, (cf. 4:8). Martin, "storm tossed." 21. Rather be single or whole minded. The idea is one of doubt! "A mind distracted by lusts and trials." Adamson, 60.

<sup>25</sup> Unsettle, vacillating, disturbed. Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 722.

<sup>26</sup> Peter taught on the same issue (cf. 1 Pet 1:3-12, Read v6,7) and Paul rejoiced in the midst of trials (Read 2 Cor 7:4; cf. also Col 1:24).

James was trying to get Christ-followers to see that endurance (patience, staying power, or to stand one's ground), becomes an important aspect of their character, which cannot exist without the approval by trials (vv3,4). He painted the picture of an: endurance with its connection with trials (Jas 1:3,4; cf. also Rom 5:3,4); endurance in connection with joy (Jas 1:2; cf. Rom 5:3; 15:4,5; Col 1:11).<sup>27</sup> However endurance was only the beginning of the benefits (vv3-4). It must finish the work (complete, unblemished work), Jas 1:4. James encouraged them to endure like the prophets of old and Job (Jas 5:10,11).

They were to grow up in Christ both perfect and complete (better translated mature) i.e. fully developed and complete in every part and mature (v4). Perfect is an important theological word within James (Jas 1:4 x2,17,25; 2:22; 3:2, see also Matt 5:48). He looked forward to their full maturity in God's plan, which would be complete when they were glorified and in the presence of God. This was an eschatological idea that he wrote about in the letter e.g.: perfection (v4); the crown of life (v12), Christ's coming again (5:7-9). Until then, the Christ-follower is to joyfully, stand one's ground in trials. The idea of a perfect work (v4) can be taken several ways that, their endurance will be carried through completely; or, their character will be achieved in its completeness as endurance does its work of perfecting.<sup>28</sup> Their perfection then was not easily secured, and the twelve tribes must expect to share in trials as did Israel's prophets, (Jas 5:10,11,17).

To be able to grow and seek to be fully developed and complete in every part and grow in maturity they would need God's wisdom (Jas 1:5). They were to ask, and then they would receive good gifts (Jas 1:17); wisdom from above (Jas 3:15,17); not false wisdom from below (Jas 1:13-16; cf. also Job 28:12,28; Prov 1:7; 2:3-6; 9:10). Assistance was readily available from the giving God, just for the asking. Prayer was an important lifeline in the midst of trials that, they would need to be connecting into if they were to lack nothing. Godly wisdom was needed to be able to respond properly in the midst of trials. James encouraged them to trust God fully for this wisdom to joyfully stand strong in the midst of the trials (Jas 1:5; 3:17,18). This kind of wisdom would not be found in people (Jas 1:20; 3:13-16; 4:1,13-17). The end result would be that they needed to see the benefits of trials, although this could be difficult. Consequently, they could only get this wisdom from God by asking for it in faith.

In all of this requesting there needed to be a single mind attitude, and not doubt plagued by double-mindedness or indecision (Jas 1:6-8). Some prerequisites in (v6) were:

- That they are asking in faith; not doubting (divided); not fanned like a wave (back and forth).
- The believer was to respond in faith with a whole heart (v8).
- They were not to be double-minded (two-souled, the idea is one of doubt), unstable (unsettled, vacillating, disturbed). Since, they would not receive the much need wisdom from God at all (v7).

The truth underlined in these verses should not stand in isolation; rather it needs to be understood in light of the whole letter. For instance throughout the letter there are themes of trials, joy, endurance, wisdom, faith, maturity and life mentioned in clear unity and purpose within the letter. This was to encourage the scattered Christ-followers of the 12 tribes, to live a practical, mature and holy life in the wisdom of God in the midst of their perfecting trials. To put it this way,

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<sup>27</sup> Barclay, W. *New Testament Words*. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964), 144.

<sup>28</sup> Martin's, R.P. *Word Biblical Commentary: James*. Vol. 48. (Waco: Word Books, 1988), Lxxix.

“In order to attain Christian maturity and holy conduct it is essential to have a firm foundation. The believer must be able to stand with confidence. He dares not be pushed down by trials. He must not be pulled over by temptations. Push, pull-stick, stick, must be the motto.”<sup>29</sup>

Although, it seems to be a common theme among commentators, that there is a lack of unity in the letter itself. That is, it is a letter dealing with the different issue, rather than one binding theme.<sup>30</sup>

James was obviously writing a letter to Christ-followers who were going through some real trials and temptations, he was not merely writing a theological paper. Consequently, in doing so, he touched on some of the possible trials that they were going through. Trials and temptations such as,

- Wealth and its correct usage: Jas 1:9-11; 5:1-6
- Lusts and strife: Jas 1:12-18; 4:1-12
- Not living the life faith: Jas 1:21-27
- Preferential and discriminatory treatment: Jas 2:1-13
- Having a dead faith, using both Abraham and Rahab as e.g. of a living faith: Jas 2:13-26
- The powerful and untamable tongue (Jas 3:1-12);
- Having the wrong kind of wisdom: Jas 3:13-18
- Disunity and selfishness: Jas 4:1-12
- Thinking that they were the master of your own destiny: Jas 4:13-17
- Taking advantage of their brothers and sisters in Christ: Jas 5:1-7
- To endure to the end, he used Job and Elijah as examples here: Jas 5:8-18
- Be careful of walking away because of the trials & temptations: Jas 5:19-20

In light of these, it has been said that,

“One of the best tests of Christian maturity is tribulation. When God’s people go through personal trials, they discover what kind of faith they really possess. Trials not only reveal our faith; they also develop our faith and Christian character.”<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, his was a practical theology and not just theoretical. It is in light of the repeating theme wisdom in trials that James, spoke of seeking help from God. This help was to be sought while growing in wholeness or maturity in the midst of trials and temptations is obviously an important one in the letter (cf. Jas 1:4, 6-8,12,14; 2:4; 3:2,8,11-12,16-17; 4:4-5,8).

Nevertheless, James encouraged them that, all their trials could and should be faced with joy. For the reason that when it was infused with faith, then endurance would result and if endurance goes full term then, the result will be a mature Christ-follower lacking in nothing.<sup>32</sup> As Christ went through His own trials, Christ-followers could confidently pray and ask the Father for the wisdom needed to stand in the midst of our own trials, on our way to maturity.

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<sup>29</sup> Walvoord, J.F. & Zuck, R.B. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1984), 820.

<sup>30</sup> “What James wrote is not so much a reasoned argument as a series of sententious sayings clustered around certain recurring themes.” Gaebelein, *The Practical Epistle of James*, 14. “Lack of continuity of thought.” Dibelius, M. *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 1. “There is no discernible plan to the epistle.” Mitton, C.L. *The Epistle of James*. (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1966), 255. Although, F. O. Francis sees the letter as a unity. See this and other commentators on this subject in, Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary: James*, xcvi-civ.

<sup>31</sup> Wiersbe, W.W. *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Walvoord, & Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, 821.



The wisdom that was needed to attain maturity and how to obtain it was clearly dealt with in the letter. James assumed that all true wisdom came from the generously giving Father, and could be received by the prayer of faith. Doubt would only lead to instability, and unanswered prayer. He wanted the readers of his letter to see that the storms of the trials would blow away the rubbish such as the error of our ways, hypocrisy, and doubt in their life. Leaving the only the thing that is able to survive these tests, i.e. the genuine article of true the character of maturity in Christ. Therefore, it was this enduring of trials in joyful with a hope of maturity to come. James dealt with the quality and preparation of a brand name article in his letter, namely, those who are His called by His name, Christ-followers. They were not to be cheap copies or knock offs. Rather, they were to be known by the quality of workmanship, by the Master craftsman. For this to happen, the wisdom that comes from the Father is essential.

## Some concluding thoughts

So, coming back to the opening question,

**Q.** As a Christ-follower, where do you get wisdom for everyday life?

As a Christ-follower, do you want to live a Christlike life? Well, we can become a mature Christlike, well rounded and not behind in anything as a Christ-follower. But, to become like this, we will need the trials of life. You maybe think, “You are joking right, there has to be another way to Christlikeness?” No, that is the road that our heavenly Father has chosen. Yes, the trials of life will come our way and meet us head on at times. But, what are you like in the midst of these trials? Well, James tells us to count it all joy, when we meet trials of various kinds.

Remember that James has commanded us that perseverance **MUST** complete what it started,

“Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (Jas 1:4 NIV).

It was while it is finishing its work that we need the wisdom of heaven to get through and grow to maturity. We are to ask the Father for this wisdom as He is a generous giver. It is the wisdom to go through the trails and grow into a mature son or daughter; it is not wisdom to be squandered on selfish or pointless pursuits. But remember that when you do ask Him, make sure that your faith is in Him alone. Any double-minded asking, just won't cut it with the Father, we need to fully trust Him. But it is a journey that we are on, and He will slowly turn up the heat, to get rid of more of us and reveal more of Him.

Watch a person under the pump and you will most likely see the real inside person. We can all put on a show for those around us when things are going well. However, we will all some good days, and some hard days. But when the pressure of trials is applied what comes out of the inner person? Are you in the midst of a trial right now and your needing the wisdom of heaven to get through and grow to maturity? Or possibly, you're OK, but one day you will right in the place that I have just mentioned, then you will need to call out to your heavenly Father for His wisdom. And you will need to ask for His strength and wisdom and you may say something like this,

A Prayer for Strength and Wisdom

“Thank you, Father, that You are here right now and allowing me to cry out to you in my time of need. It's amazing that the God of the Universe would take the time to listen to me and to care about what I say. Father, You know there are things happening around me right now that I do not understand. Some of these things make me feel weak, helpless and afraid. But, even in the midst of this, I know that you are in control. I know that the situation's in Your hand, and I trust You. I sincerely ask You for strength and for wisdom that, I would be able to stand in the

midst of this situation and be able to handle it in a way that would bring glory to Your name. In Jesus name. Amen.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “Prayers for Strength and Guidance.” <http://www.prayers-for-special-help.com/Prayer-for-Strength.html> (Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> April).