

James 1:5-11 — Why We Need Wisdom

Last week we looked at patient endurance in trials — James 1:2-4. This week we will cover James 1:5-11. Remember our memory verses for the book of James:

James 1:2-4

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

This week we continue in James chapter 1. Remember the big picture: verses 1-11 talk about the wisdom of God. We need wisdom in trials so that we don't waste our suffering and miss the spiritual growth that God intended. This week, after explaining verses 5-11, we will look at Joseph as an awesome example of a man who understood that the many and difficult and varied trials and sufferings he experienced were from God and for his good, and he was therefore blessed with excellent character and joy. We'll also quickly look at Saul as an example of someone who did waste his trials — he missed the opportunities to develop the character trait of patient endurance in trials and his life was truly a miserable mess. Let's start by reading our text for today.

James 1:1-11

**James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad:
Greetings.**

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

⁹ Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, ¹⁰ but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. ¹¹ For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.

Ask for Wisdom

James 1:5

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

v 5 **If any of you lacks wisdom:** David Guzik comments: “Trials bring a necessary season to seek **wisdom** from God. We often don’t know we need **wisdom** until our time of difficulty. Once in a time of trial, we need to know if a particular trial is something God wants us to eliminate by faith or persevere in by faith. This requires **wisdom**.”

Remember how Hebrews 11:30-40 first lists those who overcame their trials by faith, then lists those who persevered through their trials by faith. The important point is that, whether or not they were delivered or had to persevere, they all received a good testimony through faith.

For us, sometimes our error can be that we only focus on seeking deliverance, refusing to accept that our continuing trial is God’s will. In effect we are rebelling against God: we are saying my will be done, not God’s will. Other times, God wants us to ask for deliverance, but because of doubt we resign ourselves to the situation and wallow in despair, living in unbelief and defeat. Neither is right. In both cases we are out of God’s will, out of fellowship with God.

Deliverance or perseverance, we need to ask God, because both will bring glory to Him. Either people will see God’s strength in us as we persevere through the trial, or people will see God’s power as He delivers us from the trial. (Example of our injury free car wreck vs someone else who was injured and has a long road to recovery or lives with perpetual pain. It’s not that we are better than they, but it was God’s will.)

Another important question is: what is the difference between knowledge and wisdom? Knowledge is simply information, but wisdom tells us how to use it. For example, there are many very intelligent fools in our schools and universities today. They know many facts, but many times fail to come to rational, logical or scientific conclusions. Instead, they believe nonsense like nothing produced everything, life came from non-life, and random mistakes in our DNA, called mutations, create new, very complex, information. None of these things have ever been observed or are possible, yet they believe them anyway. Consider that a good scientist is not only someone who has knowledge, but also wisdom to correctly use the knowledge they have. The same is true for those who teach the word of God. There are many intelligent but foolish theologians out there today who are teaching foolishness. Why? Because they haven’t asked God for His wisdom and understanding.

Now, in trials, what do you think is most important: knowledge or wisdom? Well both are important, but a person with just a little knowledge but some wisdom will be much better off than a person with a lot of knowledge but no wisdom. Better a little knowledge applied correctly than a lot of knowledge applied incorrectly. Knowledge incorrectly applied is foolishness. Foolishness is the opposite of wisdom.

Wisdom is personified in the book of Proverbs. It has many benefits:

Proverbs 8:17-21 AMP

17 I love those who love me, and those who seek me early *and* diligently shall find me. [I Sam. 2:30; Ps. 91:14; John 14:21; James 1:5.]

18 Riches and honour are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness (uprightness in every area and relation, and right standing with God). [Prov. 3:16; Matt. 6:33.]

19 My fruit is better than gold, yes, than refined gold, and my increase than choice silver.

20 I [Wisdom] walk in the way of righteousness (moral and spiritual righteousness in every area and relation), in the midst of the paths of justice,

21 That I may cause those who love me to inherit [true] riches and that I may fill their treasuries.

Remember that the books of James and Proverbs are both essentially wisdom books.

v 5 **let him ask of God:** God is the source of wisdom. All we have to do is ask. Now consider what many often do first (including myself at times). We ask our friends, we rely on our own smarts and logic, we go to a seminar, complete a course, get counselling (some even from a secular person), we read books, and we may even ask the pastor. And when all that fails, we get around to asking God. This is such a basic thing, but truly we are so deceived by our prideful human nature that we love to think of ourselves as wise, and therefore don't think that we need to ask God for wisdom. The first thing we need to do in every situation is humbly ask God. God may then chose to reveal Himself directly by His Spirit through His Word, or He may provide wise counsel from other believers.

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another...

Another important, but far more subjective and therefore more dangerous, way that God reveals His will to us is experiencing the peace of God.

Colossians 3:15

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts,...

This means that the peace of God rules in your heart like an umpire — yes or no, right or wrong, God's will or not God's will. This is especially important when there is no absolute right or wrong answer. E.g. there is a Christian girl and you are wondering if she is the one for you to marry. Well, simple, if you are at peace with marrying her, then marry her. However, this would be fine if we were always abiding 100% with the Lord. Everything we want would be what God wants. God's desires would be our desires (Psalm 37:4). But, because of our sinful nature, we don't always desire the things of God, and so our emotions can be at peace with doing the wrong thing — that girlfriend, that job, that promotion etc — it's what we always wanted. We are at peace, but at peace with our own desires and ambitions and not at peace with God's will for us. Remember that our hearts are deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9).

So how do we know if this feeling of peace is just our emotions, or actually the peace of God? Firstly, take your time. Emotions come and go on a daily basis. They are influenced by many things. Secondly, commit the issue to the Lord in prayer.

Earnestly seek God's will on the matter and have an obedient heart, one that will obey whatever God tells you. Over time, maybe even months, God will give you direction. Fast and pray. Above all, stay in the word. Most often God will confirm things by something you read in the word and you will just know that this is from God because you are listening for His still small voice.

Now we come back to the idea of humbly asking God. Why is humility so important? Spurgeon puts it well. "It does not say, 'Let him buy of God, let him demand of God, let him earn from God.' Oh! No—'let him ask of God.' It is the beggar's word. The beggar asks for alms. You are to ask as the beggar asks of you in the street, and God will give to you far more liberally than you give to the poor. You must confess that you have no merit of your own."

The take home point here is that we are without merit. God isn't obliged to give us wisdom, He doesn't owe it to us, nor can we earn it or deserve it. It's always give as a gift and so must be received as a gift. This keeps us humble.

v 5 **who gives to all liberally**: one of the wonderful attributes of God is that He is a generous God. No-one will ever out give God.

v 5 **and without reproach, and it will be given to him**: this simply means that God will never despise or resent us or get sick of us asking for wisdom. We can never ask too many times, and we can never ask for too much. God delights in giving us much more than we need, more often than we need it. Our God is never impatient. Our God is a loving Father with an open hand who never tires of giving, and He will never run out of things or wisdom to give. In fact, because God loves His children so much, it brings Him much joy whenever we humble ourselves, admit our need, and make the time to ask, so ask more and more. Let your answered prayers be the engine that drives you to pray and ask for even more according to God's will.

James 1:6-8

But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

v 6 **But let him ask in faith**: How do we ask? In faith. Faith in what? Both God's desire and His ability to give us His wisdom. This is why many of our prayers fail, because we don't ask in faith, and therefore are not really believing that God both can and wants to bless us with His wisdom. We say the words, but our hearts aren't in it: we don't really believe that God will answer the prayer, either because He doesn't want to (we doubt God's love and care for us) or isn't able to (we doubt God's ability). This is an insult to God, as it would be for us if our children had that attitude towards us as their parents. It clearly says here that God won't answer doubting prayers.

v 6-7 **with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways**: It's very simple, the one who doubts and lacks faith should not expect to receive **anything from the Lord**. This lack of faith and trust in God also reveals that we have no firm foundation, because we are **unstable in all our ways**. A firm foundation gives us stability. A firm foundation is a true faith in God's word and the truth and promises contained in it.

v 6 **Like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind:** Clarke says: “The man who is not thoroughly persuaded that if he ask of God he shall receive, resembles a wave of the sea; he is in a state of continual agitation; driven by the wind, and tossed: now *rising by hope*, then *sinking by despair*.”

I have heard so many testimonies of Christians who sound just like this — all driven by emotion and feelings, and not by faith in God’s promises. They have no firm foundation. They have not experienced God as their Rock.

v 6 David Guzik comments on “**a wave of the sea**”:

A wave of the sea is a fitting description of one who is hindered by unbelief and unnecessary doubts.

- **A wave of the sea** *is without rest*, and so is the doubter
- **A wave of the sea** *is unstable*, and so is the doubter
- **A wave of the sea** *is driven by the winds*, and so is the doubter
- **A wave of the sea** *is capable of great destruction*, and so is the doubter

v 8 **A double-minded man, unstable in all his ways:** What does it mean to be double minded?

“To ask God but to ask Him in a doubting way, shows that we are **double-minded**. If we had no faith, we would never ask at all. If we had no unbelief, we would have **no doubting**. To be in the middle ground between faith and unbelief is to be **double-minded**.” (David Guzik)

According to Hiebert, **double-minded** is literally *two-souled*. Another way of saying it is that a person is of two minds or two competing desires. They have their worldly appetites, then they have their desires for heavenly rewards. They are not fully committed to either. They can’t make up their mind. They won’t give up their worldly appetites or desires, nor will they let go of their heavenly desires or promises.

This is the underlying cause for doubt — an inability to make a clear break from one reality for another — the temporary reality of this world or the eternal heavenly reality. We want the best of both worlds, but experience neither. We are miserable, not being content either in our worldly pursuits, nor our relationship with God.

It’s not a matter of how much faith we have. It’s a matter of whether or not all the faith we do have is in only one thing — God. Remember what Jesus said in:

Matthew 6:24

“No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money.”

Consider Joshua’s ultimatum to the double-minded Israelites in:

Joshua 24:14-15

“Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord! ¹⁵ And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that *were* on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

I know of people who are saved, and are leading bible studies, but are indulging in lustful fantasies almost every day. This is a real world example of being double minded, of having a foot in each camp, serving God but also loving the world. God is looking for total commitment to Him which means completely forsaking the world and its gods and idols.

So when we come to God, how should we ask? Spurgeon puts it well:

“Do you believe that God can give you wisdom, and that he will do so if you ask him? Then, go at once to him, and say, ‘Lord, this is what I need.’ Specify your wants, state your exact condition, lay the whole case before God with as much orderliness as if you were telling your story to an intelligent friend who was willing to hear it, and prepared to help you; and then say, ‘Lord, this is specifically what I think I want; and I ask this of you believing that you can give it to me.’” (Spurgeon)

James 1:9-11

Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, ¹⁰ but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. ¹¹ For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.

v 9-10 **Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation:** As much as it is appropriate for the **lowly** to rejoice when they are lifted up by God, so it is appropriate (but far more difficult) for those who are well off or well liked (**the rich**) to rejoice when they are brought to **humiliation** by trials.

v 10 **Because as a flower of the field he will pass away. ¹¹ For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits:** Trials serve to remind the rich and powerful that though they are comfortable in this life, it is still *only this life*, which fades as quickly as the grass turns brown and the flowers fade away. Remember what the word says: you can't take it with you, but you can send it ahead (treasure in heaven).

Joseph as a godly example

Remember Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 37, 39-50). Joseph was sold by his brothers to slave traders because they were jealous of him being the favourite son and the dreams that God gave him. He ended up being sold in Egypt and serving as a slave in Potiphar's house for around 10 years. After proving faithful, Joseph was promoted to overseer of Potiphar's house. Then Potiphar's wife had eyes for him and harassed Joseph daily trying to get him to sleep with her. Finally, when there was no one around, she grabbed him and demanded that he lie with her. Joseph did what any godly young man should do with sexual sin — he fled, leaving his coat behind. He was then falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and subsequently thrown into the king's prison, the one that Potiphar was in charge of.

There, Joseph remained forgotten in the dungeon for a number of years until the butler and the baker were also thrown into the king's prison. Joseph correctly interpreted their dreams — the butler was reinstated and the baker was hanged. More time goes by. Joseph is still forgotten — but then Pharaoh has a dream, and the butler remembers his sin of forgetting about Joseph. Joseph is then called out of the prison to appear before Pharaoh and to interpret Pharaoh's dream concerning the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine. Joseph is then promoted to Prime Minister of Egypt and is second in charge to Pharaoh. Then, years later, during the seven years of famine, Joseph's brothers turn up. After a series of encounters with them, Joseph finally reveals himself to them and the whole family, including Jacob, come down to Egypt. Then a few more years later Jacob dies, and the brothers wonder if Joseph will now pay them back for all the wrong that they had done to him. Let's pick up the story at:

Genesis 50:15-21

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent *messengers* to Joseph, saying, "Before your father died he commanded, saying, ¹⁷ 'Thus you shall say to Joseph: "I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you." ' Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father." **And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.**

¹⁸ Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, "Behold, we *are* your servants."

¹⁹ Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for *am* I in the place of God? ²⁰ But as for you, **you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good**, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive. ²¹ Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Q Why did Joseph weep when they lied to him about what their father said? Because they doubted his love for them. Keep in mind that Joseph is a type or picture of Jesus. We cause God much grief when we doubt His love for us.

Q What did Joseph mean when he said "**you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good**"?

Joseph recognised that the brothers did really hate him at one stage and really did want him dead — yes they were responsible for their actions — they were exercising their God given free will. But at the same time, God was in control, and exercising His free will. God had a plan for Joseph, and He allowed Joseph's brothers to act according to their evil plans so He could bring about good. Basically, Joseph looked back on his life and saw the loving hand of God, and not the hatred of his brothers. He knew that God was in control, directing his life, every step of the way. Joseph could therefore forgive His brothers, not blaming them for his difficult life, because he knew that nothing could happen to him unless God allowed it.

One thing to remember is that the bigger the task or responsibility that God has planned for us, then the longer and harder will be the preparation time for it. Joseph understood this when he said, “**you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good**”. Looking back, Joseph knew that he had to go through all those trials and sufferings to prepare him for the very daunting and difficult task of being in such a high position. Another way of saying it is this: the lower we are willing to let God take us, the higher He can raise us up. God exalts the humble. Our exaltation is always in proportion to our humiliation. Jesus is the ultimate example. Jesus suffered the ultimate humiliation, but then also received the highest exaltation.

Philippians 2:8-9

He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross. ⁹ Therefore God also has **highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,**

Another example of how Joseph applied wisdom to his various trials was when he refused to sleep with, or even be with, Potiphar’s wife because it would be sinning against God. This wisdom was an awareness of God’s holiness and that fact that Joseph knew that God was watching him. Furthermore, Joseph had already determined that his goal was to please God.

Genesis 39:9-10

How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?”

¹⁰ So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her.

Also, Joseph always had a positive attitude and gave his absolute best, no matter how he was treated or falsely accused:

Genesis 39:20-23

Then Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king’s prisoners *were* confined. And he was there in the prison. ²¹ But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. ²² And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph’s hand all the prisoners who *were* in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. ²³ The keeper of the prison did not look into anything *that was* under *Joseph’s* authority, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made *it* prosper.

Because Joseph maintained a good attitude, or the right perspective, he was always usable or available to God. Also, God was able to continue to prepare Joseph for the job of ruling Egypt. Just imagine what would have happened if Joseph had spat the dummy and doubted either God’s power or His love! Joseph trusted God even when he didn’t know why the bad things just kept happening to him. Joseph was putting into practice Colossians 3:23-25:

Colossians 3:23-25

And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵ But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.

The main points of wisdom that we get from Joseph's life are:

1. He accepted all circumstances as being from God.
2. He trusted that God loved Him and everything was working for his good and God's glory, even in the middle of severe and ongoing trials. (Genesis 50:20 is the Old Testament version of Romans 8:28)
3. Joseph avoided sin because his desire was to please God by obeying God. He understood that God was watching his every move and that God is a holy God.
4. Joseph always had a positive attitude and the right perspective. He always worked hard and did his best — even when unfairly treated. As a result he was able to glorify God and God was able to be blessed even in his dark circumstances.

King Saul as a failure to avoid

Now a quick look at king Saul. God set him up as being king, but he had one big problem — he feared man more than God, and was therefore more concerned with his reputation among other people than what God thought of him. As you read through his life in 1 Samuel, you will see that this ultimately lead to his ruin. Time and time again Saul decided that it was more important to impress the people rather than impress God.

Proverbs 29:25

The fear of man brings a snare,
But whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe.

If we trust in the Lord and walk in obedience we will be safe in His will.

Summary — Who to believe?

If we trust God, then the trials will work for us and not against us; but we must be sure that our hearts are fully yielded to God. If our hearts and minds are divided, then the trials will tear us apart. Basically what this means is that if we listen to and believe Satan like Eve did, then what he intends from the **temptation** will be what we experience - misery and bitterness. However, if we listen to and believe God, trusting Him, then what God intends from the **trial** will be what we experience - growth in our character resulting in joy and love.

Remember that the words trial and temptation are used interchangeably. Why? Both are correct in context. From Satan's point of view all the times that we suffer, either through persecution, temptation to sin, or hard times, is a temptation to turn us away from God and stop trusting God — just like he did to Eve in the garden of Eden. But from God's point of view, who never tempts anyone, the trials are opportunities for our growth. That's why we are to "Considerate all joy..."

James 1:2-4

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Let's finish with:

Romans 5:3-5

And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.