

From the first four verses James has set before us the path to maturity and completeness. It is spiritual fortitude that comes from the testing of our faith. But how are we able to look at the trials of life with joy? Dick Seume wrote beautifully about this:

*Life on earth would not be worth much if every source of irritation were removed. Yet most of us rebel against the things that irritate us, and count as heavy loss what ought to be rich gain. We are told that the oyster is wiser; that when an irritating object, like a bit of sand, gets under the “mantle” of his shell, he simply covers it with the most precious part of his being and makes of it a pearl. The irritation that it was causing is stopped by encrusting it with the pearly formation. A true pearl is therefore simply a victory over irritation. Every irritation that gets into our lives today is an opportunity for pearl culture. The more irritations the devil flings at us, the more pearls we may have. We need only to welcome them and cover them completely with love, that most precious part of us, and the irritation will be smothered out as the pearl comes into being. What a store of pearls we may have, if we will!*ⁱ Saying it and living it are two different things. James goes on to tell us that what we need to see life this way is wisdom.

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. James 1:5 Later in his letter he will call it the wisdom that comes from above (James 3:17ⁱⁱ). Wisdom helps us discern God’s purposes in the trials. Wisdom guides us to respond in the right way and helps us to order our affections in such a way as to help us down that road. Wisdom tells me that my complaining is not helping. It also tells me that praising God by faith is uplifting. Wisdom points me to the conclusion and shows me it is worth enduring.

We get this wisdom that comes from above by asking God for it. The normal human reaction is complaining to God about the trials of life. James tells us that the redeemed should be asking God for wisdom in dealing with them. That is the response of the new creation. In the original language it is an imperative command. Are you lacking the wisdom to see yourself through this trial you are facing? We usually are, so, you must ask God for wisdom. This world certainly does not have it. Ask AI and it cannot tell you. Only God knows what He is working into your life.

Even the faithful can find trials perplexing for the moment. Joseph had a preview of the greatness God had planned for his life. I do not think it came to mind as he walked, hands bound, behind the camels of the Ishmaelite slave traders (Genesis 37:28ⁱⁱⁱ). Looking behind him and seeing his brothers laugh as they divided up the silver, I do not think his heart filled with joy knowing he was on his way to the fulfillment of the God given dreams (Genesis 37:7^{iv}). But he had faith and he persevered and asked God for wisdom. In time he saw the promises of God come to pass.

Wisdom is more than knowledge. The world has amassed more knowledge and continues to do so at an increasing rate, but we lack wisdom. *For the Jewish mind wisdom meant practical righteousness in everyday living.*^v We look at our country’s out of control spending, corrupt politicians, violent inner cities and the promotion of lawlessness, and the rush toward hedonism and we can clearly see the increase in knowledge has not resulted in wisdom.

Job asked, “But where can wisdom be found?” (Job 28:12^{vi}). The answer came in verse 28 of the same chapter. *²⁸ And he said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is*

wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.” Job 28:28 The Psalms and the Proverbs agree. ¹⁰ *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.* Psalm 111:10a ¹⁰ *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.* Proverbs 9:10 Considering these verses, to ask for wisdom is to ask for the fear of God. That is to understand that God is holy and we are not, and that He is a righteous judge whom we should honor and trust.

We can define it by its opposite, what the Word says about those who have no fear. Psalm 36:1-4^{vii} tells us that for those who do not fear God transgression speaks deep in their hearts. They believe their iniquity will not be found out. Their words are trouble and deceit. They do no good. They plot trouble and do not reject evil. The fear of God then will result in the opposite: shunning evil, knowing God sees you, being careful of what you say, planning good things, and rejecting evil. That is the beginning of wisdom, but we are to go beyond that beginning and see the life of Jesus as a display of the wisdom of God in His behavior and His words. Knowing and following Him is to follow the way of wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30^{viii}).

James is telling us to ask from the constantly giving God for the wisdom that comes from above. That would include getting to know Jesus of the Gospels better. That would also be an understanding of the Scriptures and their application to our lives, as well as sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The wisdom we gain from these sources then helps us to respond as we should to the trials of life, letting them mature us rather than making us bitter.

James wrote that God gives without finding fault. God does not say you are not good enough for wisdom to be given to you or that when you reach a certain level of holiness that He will give it. That is what pagan religions teach. Nor will God withhold wisdom because you did not apply it the last time that He gave it to you.

God knows we need wisdom to mature. He is just waiting for us to recognize that fact and ask. Ask and you shall receive (Matthew 7:7^{ix}). The Giver of all good things longs for us to ask, for that is the sign that we recognize our need and are looking to Him to meet that need (Luke 11:13^x). Until we get to that point, we think we are doing just fine. It is the trials of life that help us recognize that we are in great need of wisdom from God. We have the promise that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us (1 John 5:14^{xi}). What we need is supplied by our generous God so that we are “lacking in nothing” (Philippians 4:19^{xii}).

God generously gives, but we must be still and receptive. It does us no good to ask then go about everything in our own understanding. Hear from God in the life of Jesus, in the Word, and from the Holy Spirit illuminating the Word and you will receive the wisdom God is pouring out in response to your prayer. Then act on it. The following verses warn us that our request must be sincere and with a willingness to act accordingly.

⁶ *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.* James 1:6 If we are going to ask for wisdom, James tells us that we must ask in faith. That is the assurance of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1^{xiii}). In other words, it is being certain that God is the generous giver He has declared Himself to be. We must stand on His promises and know that He will fulfill them in His time and His way. He wants us to have wisdom, so we can know we are asking for what is in His will (1 John 5:14^{xiv}).

If we doubt that God will do what He has declared in His Word, either we doubt His Word is indeed the Word of God, or we doubt God's ability to fulfill His Word. We may even be doubting God's generosity. After all that God has done for us, that is ridiculous. If God is all-powerful, could He not oversee the process by which the Scriptures have come down to us? Maybe we doubt ourselves, and to some extent we should, but we must also trust that God can make new creations of us. Doubting God is an insult to God. He has already proven His love for us on the cross (John 15:13^{xv}). He has given us life and breath and every good thing (Acts 17:28^{xvi}).

James goes on to describe the doubter as being like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. One moment it is this way and the next it is that way. That is often the case with those who are not yet born-again. Even with those who are born-again, tragedy can be used by the enemy of our soul or our old nature to cause us to doubt God's goodness. Our soul can become overwhelmed with grief. But that means we are not standing on the rock of God's Word which cannot fail. The Word gives us faith (Romans 10:17^{xvii}). We should recall all the past trials and how the Lord brought us through and stand on His promises.

I think in most of the believers' lives there comes a point when we decide we have had enough proof, enough encounters with the living God, enough assurance that no matter what comes we will reject doubt. It may knock on our door, but we have learned not to answer. That is one step forward down the path of wisdom. We take what comes to the Word of God and settle the issue in our hearts. Faith aligns our emotions with our firm convictions.

⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; James 1:7 The persons who doubts God's promises, His Word, and the very nature of God should not expect God to give them wisdom. *⁶ 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.* Hebrews 11:6 Remember that we are talking about the testing of our faith that brings about perseverance and the wisdom that helps us live it out. But if we do not have faith, we cannot even begin this process to maturity. Trials will just be meaningless pain we think we must endure. Lack of faith blocks us from receiving wisdom.

If you are struggling to have faith, first ask yourself if you are open to God's will for your life. I encourage you to read God's Word and meditate on it. Talk through your issues with someone who knows the Bible well and applies it to their life. Ask God to increase what faith you do have. We need to be honest with God about where we are in our spiritual journey. He already knows our hearts.

⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. James 1:8 The double minded man, that is the doubter, cannot be a solid believer and follow Jesus, nor can he be happily going down the broad road. The very fact that he doubts means he is considering it may be true. He is one step closer than those who have no fear of God. *Double-minded is the translation for dipsychos, which is literally 'two-souled' or 'with divided soul'.* (Motyer) It may be that James created this word as it has not been found to be used earlier. Jesus expressed it as trying to serve two masters (Matthew 6:24^{xviii}). It is a matter of where our loyalties lie. If we have not committed to be loyal to our Lord, then why would He give us wisdom we will not apply? This is the one exception to the Lord not finding fault when asked for wisdom.

This frame of mind means that everything the doubter does will be unstable. One minute he is sure he will do this and the next he decides not to. He is fighting within himself over what he believes and how he should live, but most of all whether he is the master of his fate or if God is. **Is the meaning of life to serve oneself or to serve God? This is the constant battle within the one who doubts.**

The introduction to James' letter tells us that the church of that day was struggling with persecution. James is telling them that though it is hard, it should be met with a joyful heart for God is polishing our faith through it and making us mature and complete. But also, he is telling them to beware of letting doubt keep them from receiving wisdom from God to help them through the trials.

James moves now to the application of wisdom in the church. He was probably addressing some problems he had witnessed or that had been reported to him. ⁹ *Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation*, James 1:9 Humility is lauded in Scripture as an important attribute. Philippians 2 even tells us that Christ humbled Himself when found Himself in a human form (Philippians 2:8^{xix}). Why would James tell the lowly brother to boast in his exaltation?

In the early church there were slaves who were appointed as elders within a church. I believe this is what James is referring to. Since we apply Scripture to Scripture to help us understand, we cannot interpret this as a lowly person boasting in himself, but rather in the amazing reality of the upside-down world of God's kingdom. In the kingdom of God social status is not a factor, but rather one's relationship with the Lord Jesus, the wisdom given to them from God, and their faithful interpretation and application of Scripture has promoted them. What the lowly are boasting in is that God looks on the heart not the social status. This is predicted in Scripture (Ezekiel 21:26^{xx}; Luke 1:52^{xxi}). When Samuel was sent to anoint the next king of Israel, the Lord told him not to look at the outer appearance because the Lord looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7^{xxii}).

This is why the lowly could boast in his exaltation: God saw his heart and chose him to be an elder. He could boast in the way God exalts those who have Jesus' servant heart (Matthew 20:28^{xxiii}), unlike the world that exalts those who can benefit themselves or have the best outward appearance.

¹⁰ *and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.* ¹¹ *For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.* James 1:10,11 The rich should boast in their humiliation. Wealth often causes those who possess it to be prideful. Therefore, they can boast in their humiliation. God has done a work in their hearts. If the master of slaves finds his slave is his elder and he submits to the elder's leadership, he can say that God has truly made him a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17^{xxiv}). He realizes how temporary life is, like grass that is here today and dries up and blows away tomorrow.

This reminds us of the parable of the rich man who had a great harvest and built bigger barns to hold it all. He said to himself that it was time to kick back and be at ease. But the next day he died. Jesus referred to him as a fool (Luke 12:16-21^{xxv}). Unlike that rich man, the one whom James is referring to has humbled himself. He is laying up his treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19,20^{xxvi}). He had found true wisdom that helped him acknowledge the brevity of life.

He realized that he will pass away like that grass, like a flower that blooms and then falls. That is something to boast about. God gave him wisdom that most people do not have. I was just thinking what year it will be when my granddaughter is my age: 2084! George Orwell's 1984 was written in 1954. I read it in the 60s and wondered how close it would be to reality. When 1984 rolled around I thought about how quickly things change and how time passes. 2084 sounds like an impossibility to me. The actors and actresses I admired in my youth are like that flower of the field, scorched by the sun, and I have watched them fall. And before we know it, we too will find our bodies fail and we are called to our heavenly home. **The wisdom that sees that the timeless is infinitely more important than the temporal is blessed.** You can boast that God has given you that knowledge. If you are acting in accord with that knowledge you can boast that God has given you that wisdom. Knowledge is one thing, living it out is wisdom.

I will boast in the Lord making this church a church that honors the relationship with the Lord above one's status in life or wealth or education. We have every status in life here and love for one another, knowing that we are the family of God.

James started his letter addressing the readers as brothers. He will also use the terms 'dear brother' and 'my dear brothers'. He saw not only his church in Jerusalem as family, but also those believers scattered abroad. We too should see the worldwide church, with all our different expressions, as family. That is why we are so involved in missions around the world. Their suffering is ours as well (Hebrews 13:3^{xxvii}). Their joys are shared by us too and ours with them.

To this point in the first chapter of James, we have been challenged to see the world very differently from the way the unbelievers see it. We are to see trials joyfully as a way to test our faith, build endurance, and become mature. We are told of the need to ask God for wisdom, recognizing how little we know on our own. We are warned that if we doubt our prayers for wisdom will not be answered. And we are to see that God looks upon the heart, not social status or wealth. The uneducated may have a deeper relationship with God and greater wisdom than the PhD among us, for wisdom comes from above while being at the feet of Jesus in His Word. The wealthiest find that the servant is the greatest of all. James is describing the upside-down world of the kingdom and inviting us to embrace the wisdom that comes from above.

Questions:

- 1 How can we increase in wisdom?
- 2 Why does God not reproach us?
- 3 What is the beginning of wisdom? Why?
- 4 What is our main source of hearing from God?
- 5 What is our part?
- 6 What must we not do if we are to receive?
- 7 What is being double minded?
- 8 How do we deal with doubt?
- 9 What was the application in the church?
- 10 What does the brevity of life charge us to do?

ⁱ Lehman Strauss, *James, Your Brother* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1972), p. 12 quoted in ¹R. Kent Hughes, *James, Faith that Works, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 21.

ii **James 3:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

iii **Genesis 37:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

iv **Genesis 37:7 (ESV)**

⁷ Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.”

^v Ralph Martin, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 8, p. 17

vi **Job 28:12 (ESV)**

¹² “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?

vii **Psalms 36:1-4 (ESV)**

¹ Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. ² For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated. ³ The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit; he has ceased to act wisely and do good. ⁴ He plots trouble while on his bed; he sets himself in a way that is not good; he does not reject evil.

viii **1 Corinthians 1:30 (ESV)**

³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

ix **Matthew 7:7 (ESV)**

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

x **Luke 11:13 (ESV)**

¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

xi **1 John 5:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

xii **Philippians 4:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

xiii **Hebrews 11:1 (ESV)**

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

xiv **1 John 5:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

xv **John 15:13 (ESV)**

¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

xvi **Acts 17:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”

xvii **Romans 10:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

xviii **Matthew 6:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

xix **James 1:9-11 (ESV)**

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

xx **Ezekiel 21:26 (ESV)**

²⁶ thus says the Lord GOD: Remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, and bring low that which is exalted.

xxi **Luke 1:52 (ESV)**

⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;

xxii **1 Samuel 16:7 (ESV)**

⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

^{xxiii} **Matthew 20:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

^{xxiv} **2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

^{xxv} **Luke 12:16-21 (ESV)**

¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

^{xxvi} **Matthew 6:19-20 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

^{xxvii} **Hebrews 13:3 (ESV)**

³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.