

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

HOW TO OBTAIN WISDOM FROM GOD

James 1:5-8

By

Steven J. Cole

April 24, 2005

© Steven J. Cole, 2005

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons
via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

April 24, 2005
James Lesson 2

How to Obtain Wisdom from God James 1:5-8

When I was in the Coast Guard, sometimes the skipper would ask me to steer the boat. He would tell me the compass course. My job was to keep the boat on that course. The wind and currents would cause the boat to drift, but I had to keep steering it back to the designated course. Eventually, we would come in sight of Long Beach Light, and right into the harbor.

One day, we had to go out in a terrible storm to rescue a man and his daughter whose sailboat had become disabled. On that occasion, the skipper did not ask me to steer the boat, but gave the task to a more experienced man. It is relatively easy to steer the boat in calm seas, but it's an altogether different matter to steer it in sixty mile-per-hour winds and thirty-foot waves.

As a veteran shepherd of souls, James knew that it's relatively easy to live as a Christian when things are calm. But it's a much more difficult prospect when the storms of life hit with full force. At such times, it's easy to get off course or even to make shipwreck of your faith. His readers were facing various difficult trials. They were dispersed abroad (1:1), mostly due to persecution. They had suffered the loss of their homes and possessions. Many were not able to escape persecution even in the places to which they had fled. James wanted them to know how to navigate through these trials so that they could not only endure, but *joyfully* endure (1:2).

As we saw last time, James exhorts them (and us) to adopt a *radical attitude* when we encounter various trials: "Consider it all joy" (1:2). We can do this if we understand a *reassuring truth*, "that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (1:3). But it is necessary to submit to the *refining process*: "let endurance have its perfect result" (1:4). But there is a further ingredient that we need to endure trials joyfully so as to bring glory to God, namely, God's wisdom. So James tells us how to obtain wisdom from God:

To obtain wisdom to endure trials joyfully, see your need, know your God, and then ask Him in faith to meet your need.

When James says, "If any of you lack wisdom," he is not suggesting that some have it together so well that they have no need of wisdom. The Greek conditional sentence implies that we *all* lack wisdom when we face difficult trials. But, we don't always see our need for God's wisdom. Thus,

1. To obtain wisdom to endure trials joyfully, see your need.

We need to be clear about the terms that James uses here:

- A. James is talking about God's wisdom that enables us to endure trials joyfully.

When you study the Bible, it is crucial to study the text *in its context*, and also to understand how the *words* are *used in Scripture*. In the context of James 1, wisdom refers to the wisdom that we need to endure trials with God's joy, so that we will be "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (1:4). James realizes that in a time of trials, God's people often do lack His wisdom on how to endure those trials with joy. Thus he adds verses 5-8. Of course, we can ask God for wisdom in any matter in life that we face, but in the context here, it is focused on asking God for the wisdom that we need to endure trials joyfully.

Enduring trials with joy goes against our natural inclination. When trials hit, we're all prone to ask, "*Why* is this happening to me?" But that is usually the wrong question. Sometimes, God graciously reveals to us the reason for our suffering, but not always. Often the answer to *why* we suffer must wait until we're in heaven. The important questions to ask when a trial hits are, "How can I understand this trial from God's perspective? How can I navigate through this storm in such a way as to bring glory to God? How can this trial help me grow in maturity?"

Pastor Warren Wiersbe (*Be Mature* [Victor Books], p. 29) tells about a secretary of his who was going through difficult trials. She had had a stroke, her husband had gone blind, and then he had to be taken to the hospital where, as far as they knew, he would die. Wiersbe saw this woman in church one Sunday and assured her that he was praying for her.

She startled him by asking, "What are you asking God to do?" He replied, "I'm asking God to help you and strengthen you."

"I appreciate that," she said, "but pray about one more thing. Pray that I'll have the wisdom not to waste all of this!" Wiersbe observed, "She knew the meaning of James 1:5."

It also helps to understand the meaning of the Old Testament word for wisdom (my sources here include, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [Moody Press], ed. by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, 1:282-284; and *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Zondervan], ed. by Colin Brown, 3:1026-1029). James is steeped in the Old Testament. The main idea of Old Testament wisdom is that of *skill*. It includes the skill of workers who made garments for the high priest and who were able to work with metal, stone and wood (Exod. 28:3; 31:3-5; 36:1-2). It also extends to those who are able to execute a battle plan (Isa. 10:13), lead in government (Deut. 34:9), and shrewdly assess a difficult situation and persuade others to take necessary action (2 Sam. 20:22). It refers to those who speak prudently (Ps. 37:30) and use their time carefully (Ps. 90:12).

Rather than just theoretical understanding, biblical wisdom focuses on practical living in obedience to God's revealed will. The fool in Proverbs is *not* the man who is *mentally* deficient, but rather the man who is *morally* deficient. He ignores God's commandments and lives according to human wisdom. The wise man lives in obedience to God. Thus he skillfully puts together a life that is beautiful from God's perspective. Thus the Bible affirms (Job 28:28), "The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (see also, Ps. 111:10)

So, by *wisdom*, James is talking about the skill that enables us to live obediently before God in the midst of trials. The result will be a truly beautiful life that glorifies God.

- B. You must see your need for wisdom to drive you to God to supply the need.

By nature, all of us are self-sufficient know-it-alls: "Mother, please, I can do it by myself!" In America, it's the spirit of rugged individualism, or the self-made man. But I'm sure that every culture idolizes the strong person who seems to have it all together by himself, because pride is endemic to the human heart.

To come to God, we must humble ourselves and admit that we do not know what we need to know in order to live joyfully in the face of trials. In fact, a main reason that God sends trials is to humble us from our pride, so that we look to Him. The proud Laodicean church thought that they were rich and had no needs, but God's view was that they were "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17). So a prerequisite to obtaining wisdom from God is to recognize our lack of wisdom.

2. To obtain wisdom to endure trials joyfully, know your God.

Our text shows four ways in which we must know God in order to obtain His wisdom:

A. Know that God is the source for all wisdom.

To ask God for wisdom implies that He can deliver. The Bible plainly states, "For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Prov. 2:6). It warns, "There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord" (Prov. 21:30). In other words, if worldly "wisdom" contradicts or goes against God, it is false "wisdom." Only God's wisdom stands.

I was a philosophy major in college. "Philosophy" comes from two Greek words meaning, "the love of wisdom." But I discovered that worldly philosophers are not so much in love with wisdom as they are with *their own* wisdom! They are not so much interested in how to live wisely before God, whose existence they question or deny, but rather in showing how wise they are in being able to win arguments.

Writing to those who took pride in the great Greek philosophers, Paul contrasted the so-called wisdom of this world with God's wisdom as seen in the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1:18-30). He sarcastically asks (1:20-21), "Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."

The point is, if you have not come as a sinner to the cross of Christ to obtain God's mercy through faith, you do not know God

and thus you cannot obtain the wisdom that comes only from Him. But, how does God impart the wisdom that we need?

B. Know that God reveals His wisdom by His Spirit through His Word.

God's wisdom does not come as a sudden revelation or impression that hits out of nowhere. You won't find it in "Dear Abby" or *Reader's Digest*, unless they accidentally say something that coincides with God's Word. God's wisdom comes directly from God and is revealed in His Word. It especially centers in the knowledge of Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3; see also, Col. 1:9; Eph. 1:16-17). God reveals His wisdom by the Holy Spirit to those who are spiritual (1 Cor. 2:6-16). That wisdom has to do with knowing how to apply biblical truth to particular situations in life. Thus if you are not spending consistent time learning God's Word, you will not have the wisdom that you need when trials hit. The time to seek wisdom from God is *before* the calamity hits (Prov. 1:20-33).

C. Know that God reveals His wisdom by His Spirit through His Word to those whose hearts are fully His.

James goes on to say that we must ask God for wisdom "in faith without any doubting" (1:6), and that the one who doubts is "a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (1:8). The Greek word, literally, is a "double-souled" man. It refers to a man whose heart is divided between allegiance to God and the allurements of the world. In other words, he's not sure that he wants to know God's wisdom, because he isn't fully committed to submitting to it. It would be nice to know God's wisdom for his situation, but before he commits to obeying it, he needs to find out if he likes it. In other words, he's shopping for answers that fit what he wants to do. If God's wisdom sounds good, he'll follow it. But if worldly wisdom sounds better, he'll follow that. James says that such a person will not receive anything from the Lord.

I have counseled with women who profess to be Christians, but they are engaged to be married to unbelievers. I always ask, "Do you want God's blessing on your marriage?" They *always* say, "Yes." I've never had one say no. I show them in God's Word that He commands us not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. This

creates a trial for the young woman! She wants to marry this nice (they're all "nice"!) unbelieving man, but God's Word says, "Don't do it." Not only would it be very difficult to break up with him, it would also mean being single with no prospect for marriage in sight. That's a trial! The test is, "Will she obey God, or is she a double-minded woman, unstable in all her ways?"

One woman told me that she had prayed about marrying her unbelieving fiancé, and she "had a peace about it." I told her that she had sinned by praying about this situation, because God has clearly revealed His will about marrying unbelievers. She didn't want to know God's will; she only wanted to do her will. So if we want God's wisdom in any decision or in any trial, we must be fully committed to obey Him.

D. Know that God gives generously and without reproach to all that ask Him in faith.

When verse 5 says that God "gives to all," you need to define "all" by the context (as always). God does not give wisdom to everyone in the world, but rather to every believer in Christ who asks in faith. But James emphasizes that the manner in which God gives is "generously and without reproach." "Generously" has the nuance of "simply," or "without mental reservation" (Peter Davids, *Commentary on James* [Eerdmans], pp. 72-73). He gives because He delights to give to His children. "Without reproach" means that He does not say, "What? You again? I just gave you what you wanted and you're back here bugging Me again?" God never makes you feel cheap or irresponsible for asking again and again. Rather, He invites you to ask for all the wisdom you need.

Some fathers are stingy and selfish. Their standard answer is, "No!" Or, if they grudgingly give you what you ask for, they never let you forget it. You have to budget your requests carefully, because if you get a yes on something, it will be a long, long time before you get another yes. I thank God that my Dad is *not at all* like that! He is a very generous, giving father, both with his money and his time. But if your dad was of the stingy type, you need to be careful not to view God in the same way. God is ready and willing to lavish His wisdom on His children who ask for it.

So to obtain wisdom from God to endure trials joyfully, the first thing is to recognize your need for it. Then know your God, who is the source of all wisdom. He reveals that wisdom chiefly in His Word through His Spirit to those whose hearts are ready to obey Him. He gives generously and without reproach to all that ask. That leads to the means of obtaining wisdom from God:

3. To obtain wisdom to endure trials joyfully, ask God in faith to meet your need.

There are three parts to this:

A. Ask.

The verb (1:5) is present tense, indicating that you probably will need to ask more than once to obtain what you need. But it's a simple command, "Let him ask." There is no magic formula or special incantation that you need to mutter while you sprinkle holy water on a consecrated altar. He does not say, "Let him work for or earn or buy wisdom." It's not for sale; it's a gift. Just ask.

B. Ask God.

"Let him ask *of God*" (1:5). Every believer is a priest who can approach God directly. You do not need to go through a priest or a pastor. I am not saying that it is wrong to go to a spiritually mature counselor, who can help direct you to God's Word for wisdom. But you don't need to approach God through any human intermediary. If you know Christ, ask God directly.

The Bible never tells us to pray to the virgin Mary or to some other saint. It never tells us to look within ourselves and decide what to do based on subjective feelings. It certainly never tells us to consult with a worldly psychologist or with Dear Abby! I find it incredible at times to read in that column of pastors asking her for advice! Actually, I did write to her once with a question, but she didn't respond. I asked her how she determines her moral standards, since she clearly rejects God's Word as the standard. She dispenses all kinds of advice on moral issues, but it's pure coincidence when her advice lines up with the Bible. But I digress!

Peter tells us that God's "divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by

these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises..." (2 Pet. 1:3-4a). Paul assures us (Eph. 3:12) that in Christ "we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him." So, when you need wisdom to endure a trial in a manner pleasing to God, go directly to God in prayer through the mediation of Jesus Christ. Ask Him to direct you to the wisdom in His Word that you need. He promises to give it generously!

Some Christians make the mistake of saying, "But I'm not worthy for God to grant my request. I've sinned too many times. I've failed Him so often. So I can't go to Him and ask for wisdom." But that's an excuse for disobedience and unbelief. *Every* Christian has sinned. *Every* Christian has failed. *Every* Christian is unworthy. We do not come to God based on our worthiness. We come to God on the merit of Jesus Christ and His shed blood. Since God commands us to ask Him for wisdom, we are disobedient and unbelieving if we do not ask.

C. Ask God in faith, without doubting.

Faith is essential in approaching God, because as Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." It would be silly to ask something of a Being that you weren't sure existed. Or, if He did exist, you weren't sure if He cared about your request or if He had the power to grant it! So to ask from God, you must believe that He exists, that He personally cares for you, and He is able to give you the wisdom that you need to endure your trial with His joy.

If you doubt God's existence or His ability to give you wisdom for your need, James says (1:6) that you're "like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind." The surf has no inner power or principle to direct itself. It is totally at the will of the wind. It is completely unstable and chaotic. And, it can be a destructive force as it batters a boat or drives it against the rocks. That's a picture of the person who lacks faith in God.

As I said, at the root of this unbelief is being double-minded. The person who doubts God is not committed to obey God no matter what. His heart is not fully surrendered to do God's will. He's curious about God's wisdom, to find out if it agrees with him,

but he's not committed to do it if it involves suffering or inconvenience. That person, James says, "ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord" (1:7). So the first thing in obtaining wisdom from God is to surrender your heart to Him.

Conclusion

Joni Eareckson Tada, as most of you know, was paralyzed from the neck down in a diving accident when she was 17. She wrote this about her suffering (*Joni* [Zondervan], p. 154):

God engineered the circumstances. He used them to prove Himself as well as my loyalty. Not everyone had this privilege. I felt there were only a few people God cared for in such a special way that He would trust them with this kind of experience. This understanding left me relaxed and comfortable as I relied on His love, exercising newly learned trust. I saw that my injury was not a tragedy but a gift God was using to help me conform to the image of Christ, something that would mean my ultimate satisfaction, happiness—even joy.

That is God's wisdom on how to endure a major trial with joy! She did not get that wisdom from the world. She did not make it up herself. It came from God, through His Word. If you need God's wisdom for how to endure any major or minor trial with joy, ask Him in faith and He will give it.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do believers turn quickly to the world's wisdom (psychology, self-help programs, etc.) when God offers His wisdom?
2. Why is it important that believers do not mingle worldly wisdom with God's wisdom in dealing with trials? What's at stake?
3. Why is it important to look to God's Word for wisdom, rather than trusting impressions or feelings?
4. How would you counsel a doubting Christian to get back to faith in God? Where should he begin?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2005, All Rights Reserved.