

Wisdom Is a Person

Series on the Book of James

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Bible Text: James 1:5-8

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It was the call that no parent ever wants to get. I was in Virginia and I got a call from Luella that our daughter Nicole walking down Walnut Street had had a SUV careen up onto the sidewalk and crush her against a wall. We didn't know exactly how serious these injuries were. I knew that Luella was at the hospital and that Nicole was in the trauma center. And as that day unfolded we knew that we were dealing with something very, very serious. That had to be the longest car ride I have ever taken as we tried to make our way back to Philadelphia stopping by Baltimore on the way to pick up our son Darnay because we didn't know how serious things were.

My mind raced. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to do. I felt extremely helpless. I will never ever be able to forget walking into that intensive care room that evening and seeing the broken body of my daughter. My mind raced. You can't be a human being without weeping and saying, "God, why? Why?"

I knew that I am meant to be a spiritual leader in my family, but I felt completely unable to lead. The one thing I was good at was crying. It is hard to know what to say, hard to know what to do. It was impossible to know what we would face next.

If you haven't been in one of those moments, you have been near somebody who has. There will be a moment when your life is a mystery that you can't solve. There may be already for you moments where you can't figure out what God is doing. You don't understand why he has brought what he has brought into your life and in your lack of understanding you can't quite figure out what to do. You hold tightly onto the things that you know, but when you wake up in the morning you wake up with a knot in the pit of your stomach and you can't believe that your story is actually your story. You are forced to the point of profound questions that you thought you would never ask. You wonder about things that you once thought you were sure of.

Well if you have had those experiences or if you want to be prepared for those experiences, then the passage we are going to look at this evening is for you. Turn if you would to James 1:5-8. It is written there in your bulletins.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 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. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.¹

If any of you lacks wisdom, you need to understand that that phrase is not meant to be a change of a topic that we began to look at last week. We are still talking about trials. And we are still looking at this principle. Remember this principle that God will take you where you have not intended to go in order to produce in you what you could not achieve on your own. Remember that theology of uncomfortable grace. And it makes sense that one of the things that trial very effectively does is drive you beyond the normal range of your insight and the normal range of your wisdom, because trial is meant to drive you beyond you. That is what God is seeking to do, because as God drives you beyond the normal range of your strength and abilities, you reach out in humility and cry for his help. That is what he intends to do. Trial is meant to release you from the bondage of self reliance.

And all of us are there. All of us think we are wiser than we actually are. All of us think we are stronger than we actually are. All of us think we are more righteous than we actually are. And listen. Your weakness does not keep you from your Lord. Your delusions of strength does, because the gospel is for the weak. The gospel is for the unable. The gospel is for the fool. The gospel is a welcome to people who say, “I can’t.” But they say that running to a Redeemer who can. That is the gospel.

And when you read the phrase that says, “If any of you lack wisdom,” you should raise your hand and say, “That is me.” Don’t think of the person next to you. Don’t think of that person who you think just made a silly decision. Don’t think of you husband or wife or friend or neighbor or child. Think you. Because one of the things that sin does to all of us is reduces us to fools. And it is not only that trial will take us beyond the normal range of our insight, the problem is that we tend to be fools. That is what sin does to us and as long as sin remains in us there are still pockets of foolishness in us. We can be so foolish.

Out of the pursuit of pleasure we will spend ourselves into hopeless debt. Out of the pursuit of pleasure we will eat ourselves into ill health. For a moment, a short moment of physical satisfaction, a man will throw away a relationship to a wonderful wife and wonderful children, will argue with somebody in such a way that it leaves a legacy of hurt and destroys a relationship rather than living for peace and unity and love. We would rather be right than to love.

“If any of you lacks wisdom,” yes, Lord, that is me. As long as sin remains inside of me, Lord, I need to be rescued from me. The scariest foolishness in my life—are you ready for this—is my foolishness.

Notice what it says next.

¹ James 1:5-8.

“...let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”²

Isn't it an amazing thing that in the face of our foolishness God is a God of generous grace. What is your hope in the throes of your own foolishness? What is your hope in the throes of your own weakness? Your hope is a God of glorious generosity. What is this thing wisdom?

Well, you could say that wisdom is a penetrating understanding into how things actually work that leaves me with practical direction as to how I should live. Here is what that means. Wisdom is being able to look at life from God's perspective. Why can I have hope even in my moment of greatest foolishness? Why can I have hope? Hear this. This is radical. Because as believers, we don't believe that wisdom is first an outline. We don't believe that wisdom is first a theology. We don't believe that wisdom is first a set of answers. We don't believe that wisdom is the theology. We believe that wisdom is a person. And his name is Jesus. And when you are brought into relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ you are now brought into personal communion with the one who is the ultimate source and definition of everything that is knowledgeable and everything that is true and everything that is insightful and everything that is wise. How could you not say anything less than praise him?

Listen. Ultimately wisdom is not known by research. Wisdom is not known by experience. Wisdom is known by relationship. And so this means this, that this generosity that James is talking about you have already been blessed by that generosity, because as you have been drawn into community with the Lord Jesus Christ, if this evening you are one of this children, you have already benefited from the ultimate of the awesome and the practical wisdom that could only be found in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. I reflect back on my life. And I cannot say, “Paul, you have really been smart. You have chose a very intelligent pathway. You have made decisions so well. Paul, you impress me.”

I can't bask in the glory of my Paulism, because what I recognize again and again and again is I couldn't have written my story. I couldn't have written myself to this moment. My story is a story that again and again I have been blessed by the wisdom of God again and again. God has protected me from me. What do I celebrate in a wedding anniversary? The glory of the stunning autonomous wisdom that Luella and I have had as a couple? No. We think: How would have we ever conducted this relationship if it hadn't been for the protecting wisdom of our God. How would I have ever known what to do as a father, how would I have ever known how to view my money, how would I have ever been able to construct a worldview? How would I have ever been able to make the decisions of life? How would I have ever been able to conduct healthy relationships? It is all him. It is all his wisdom.

² James 1:5.

Your God is the ultimate source of everything that is wise and everything that is true and everything that is insightful, but that is not enough to say this passage says he is also the definition of generosity.

God loves to give wisdom. He loves to rescue people from foolishness. He loves to protect you by his grace. He loves to guide you by his truth. He finds pleasure in generously and liberally and lovingly and faithfully giving you the wisdom that you need. And he does that without reproach. He doesn't mock you for your need of wisdom. He doesn't throw your failures in your face. He doesn't keep account of the amount of times that you have had to come. He doesn't play favorites. He says these sweet words. "You need? You come. I love to give wisdom."

Listen. Your hope in life is not that some day you are going to get it right. Your hope in life is not that you will reach a level of righteousness that grace won't be necessary anymore. Your hope in life is not that you will grow to a place of wisdom where you won't need to seek wisdom anymore. Your hope is one thing, the character of a generous God, because he is generous, you and I have hope. This God loves to meet your needs. Did you hear what I said? This God delights in meeting your needs and he will never throw your neediness in your face. He wraps arms of grace around you and he says, "Don't be afraid to be needy. You keep coming. I love you."

What a sweet picture. But there is something else that this passage points us to is the timeliness of God's wisdom. God uniquely meets us in those moments of neediness.'

I love what it says in Acts 17. It says he determines the exact place where we will live and the exact length of our days and he does this so he is not far from each one of us, so, perhaps, we can reach out and touch him. Isn't that beautiful? It is the theology of immanent sovereignty. God is sovereignly near. He is involved in the intimate details of your every day experience and he involves himself in the intimate details of your every day experience so that in any moment of need you can reach out and touch him because your God is near.

My mom once went to her pastor. She was watching saints die with such amazing grace and she said to her pastor, "Pastor, I just don't think that I have dying grace." And her pastors aid something very wise to her. He said, "Faye, that is because you are alive." At that moment when you need that grace you will have that grace. God's wisdom is a product of his nearness. And it is apt for the moment that I face as I am pushed beyond myself. Now this all makes sense. It makes sense that God would be generous, because that is, again, what trial is meant to do. Trial is meant to do two things. It is meant to bring you to the end of yourself. Listen, the end of yourself is a wholesome place for you to be. Some of us are in trouble because we haven't yet come to the end of ourselves. And I could like to say to you pastorally there is a short distance between not coming to the end of yourself and being full of yourself. That is not... that is a pretty short distance of those of you who are measuring.

God wants you to come to the end of yourself. Your righteousness is in the way of his grace. Your strength is in the way of his grace. And he wants you to be driven where you no longer rely on yourself. You now are left with nothing else but to rely on him.

See, trial is meant to bring you to the end of yourself and as you come to the end of yourself to drive you to him and that is why it makes sense that this God who is Lord over trial is a God who is gloriously generous.

And so I am comforted in trial not because I understand what is going on, but because my Lord is wise and generous and near. There is hope for me.

Now that is the comfort of the gospel. But as the previous passage that we looked at contained both the comfort and the call of the gospel, so does this one. Look with me at verse six through eight.

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. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.³

Now I think this part of the passage needs very careful attention. I think it is a passage that is traditionally misunderstood. This passage that I have just read, this warning and this call is not a warning about intellectual or theological doubt. It is not saying the moment you doubt God turns his back on you and walks away. It is not what it is teaching. And let me take you to two particular clues in the passage that will help you to understand the deeper more profound thing that this passage is teaching. First, it says, "Let him ask in faith with no doubting." That word for doubt is the same word that is used in the second chapter and the fourth verse for the distinctions that believers are making between the poor and the rich. They are making this choice to ignore the poor who come into the services of worship and to show favoritism to the rich. That word doubt is not about intellectual struggle. It is about being torn between two choices.

There is another clue. At the end of the passage where it says he is a double minded man, unstable in all his ways, there is evidence that James may have actually coined a word. It is a word that is found nowhere else in the New Testament. It actually means double souled. It is a picture of having two souls. And probably the best way to translate it is this: A double hearted man is unstable in all his ways.

Now here is what James is saying. There is in all of us a conflicting set of desires. There is a way in which we really do want the wisdom of God because we really do have our foolishness exposed, but at the same time we sort of want our own way. We love us and we have a wonderful plan for our lives. And what James is saying is God has no commitment to giving you wisdom so your self focused purposes will work.

³ James 1:6-8.

God's wisdom is kingdom wisdom. And it is for those who are loyal to the work of his kingdom.

Now that makes sense if you would think in your mind back to Genesis chapter three when Eve is being tempted. It says not only that she saw that the fruit was desirable for food, but it was pleasing for food, but it was... do you remember what comes next? Desirable for gaining what? Wisdom. And so if it is possible for me to gain autonomous wisdom then it is possible that somehow, some way I could use that wisdom to advance my purpose. I want my will to work. That is part of the self focus of sin. And so there in all of us, brothers and sisters, a tug of loyalty between God's will and our will, God's way and our way, God's kingdom and our kingdom. That tug is in every situation and every location of human life. There are times when you will live in God's wisdom and you will submit to the wisdom that is revealed in his Word. There are other times when you will have no doubt what is right, but you choose to do what is wrong, because that wrong pleases you at the moment.

You know it is wrong to speak to your children that way, but you give way to your anger. You know it is wrong to gossip about a friend, but you like the titillation of telling the tale about another person. You know you shouldn't buy that next thing. You know you have spent way too much already. You have more than you need, but you indulge your pleasure. You know that you should have more time in your life for the reading of God's Word, but you would rather give yourself another 45 minutes of sleep. You find it easier to spend x amount of dollars on a luxurious meal than you would to find to put the same amount of dollars in the offering plate.

You can't humbly read this passage without saying, "Lord, this disloyalty is in me. I am yet a man, I am yet a woman with a divided heart." And I would love to be able to say, "I am always filled with love for your kingdom. I am always filled with a sense of your glory. I am always filled with a magnitude and beauty and wisdom of your law. I always find delight in the things you have clearly called me to, but I can't say that. Because there are times even the face of clear knowledge and clear understanding I choose my own way."

I will continue to give you this principle until you and I need it no more. God hasn't given you his grace to make your claustrophobic kingdom of one work. God has given you his grace to invite you to a much better kingdom. Listen. Wisdom runs on the rails of submission and obedience. Do you hear what I said? Wisdom, true wisdom runs on the rails of submission and obedience.

An amazing word picture here that this double minded man is an unstable man. Like the waves of the sea, they are just tossed about, because he lacks the loyalty of faith. He is driven by every wind of desire. He is driven by every wind of emotion. He is driven by every wind of temptation. He is driven by every wind of envy. His life is unstable.

Maybe tonight the instability of your life has nothing to do with the distance of God. Maybe it has a lot to do with the disloyalty of your heart. And maybe it is time once again to bow before your Lord and say, "I want to be loyal, but I am not. I want to love your kingdom more than I love mine, but I don't. I want to be submissive and obedient, but so often I go my own way. Thank you that you were completely loyal. Thank you that you were willing to suffer and die in acts of obedience so that I do not need to be afraid to bring my failure and my foolishness and my disloyalty to you and I can know that you are glorious in generosity, because you are a God of glorious grace.

In your struggle, don't hide from your Lord. Don't run from him. You don't need to do that. This sacrifice is enough. Run to him and find the rescue that can only be found in him.

Let's pray.

Thank you, Lord, for the beauty, the practicality of this passage. Thank you for the comfort and call of the gospel. Lord, I pray that in our struggle, in our divided hearts, in our foolishness that we would run to you and not from you and receive the grace that can only be found in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.