

The Wonderful Wisdom God Promises

James Series

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Bible Text: James 1:5-8

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Open your Bibles to James the first chapter. We will read the first eight verses.

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect [work or] result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.¹

Thus far God's holy Word.

You may be seated.

Now, children, if your father promised you that this Saturday he would take you out for pizza and ice cream you would be excited. You would believe that promise. You would have no reason to expect that your father would not do exactly that which he promised to you to do. But what if your father promised that he would fly you to the moon? Would you believe that promise? I mean, dads can do a lot. But would you believe he could fly you to the moon?

Well, no. You wouldn't because the ability to fulfill a promise is dependent upon the power of the one who makes the promise. And that is true with anybody who makes any kind of promise. Does that person have the ability and the authority to fulfill that promise?

¹ James 1:1-8.

Now, there is only one person in all the world who can promise anything and keep his promise. And you know who that is. It is God. And God's Word is full of grand promises, promises that we should never doubt because they are the promises that the Lord God himself makes to us. And we have one such promise here in James chapter one verses five through eight, a promise for wisdom, wisdom particularly to help us in times of trial and great difficulty.

In the previous paragraph that we looked at three weeks ago we have this very curious commandment to, "Count it all joy, brethren, when you fall into various trials." And we noted at that point that God is teaching us that we are to rejoice in all things knowing that God is using all things in our life to work within us that perfect work of endurance that leads to Christian maturity.

But as we think about that commandment and particularly when we think about that commandment in connection with various difficulties that we face in our lives we recognize that there is often a gap, isn't there, between what we know the Bible tells us to do. But how do we respond? How are we supposed to behave in the midst of this particular trial? What are we to seek in it?

That is why immediately upon the curious commandment we have now this enabling promise, a promise that God will give us wisdom as we seek it by prayer in faith. God promises to give us wisdom as we seek it by prayer in faith.

We will consider the text under two headings: the promise of wisdom and the condition of the promise. The promise of wisdom is given to us in verse five.

"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."²

Notice there is an assumption here. It is an assumption that you and I ought to know quite well and that is: All of us need wisdom. Now matter how mature we are as Christians, no matter how long we have walked in the Christian life, we all need wisdom. We will never have perfect wisdom in this life as we will never have perfect godliness in this life. We will have degrees and the more mature should have a greater degree of wisdom than the younger in the faith, but we all need wisdom. And we need new wisdom in each particular circumstance.

Now what does the Bible mean by wisdom? You well know that wisdom is something that is beyond understanding or knowledge. A lot of people have a lot of knowledge and don't know what to do with it. Wisdom is knowing what ends we ought to seek and the best means to accomplish those ends, what we ought to do and how we ought to do it.

And particularly in the context of our trials, wisdom is that ability to know what are we to be seeking here. How are we to improve this particular trial in our lives? What ends are we to use unto or what means are we to use unto that end? What do we do? How do we

² James 1:5.

behave in this trial in order to see the perfect work of God worked out in our growing Christian maturity?

Now, we all need wisdom in all of life. Everything that we do we need wisdom. We particularly need wisdom in the matter of trials. And you see the promise.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God... and it will be given to him.”³

An absolute promise that God gives to us that as we come to him conscious of that which we lack in the ability to understand the situation, how to respond, how to behave, what to do, what profit to seek, whether it is with our trials or whether it is the broader issues of life, God promises wisdom to everyone who seeks it by prayer.

Now I mentioned when we began the study in James that James makes a number of allusions to the Sermon on the Mount. And, of course, this is the very first allusion that James makes to that sermon and he would have in mind here Matthew chapter seven, the great promise with respect to prayer.

Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!⁴

Wisdom is good. God, alone, is the source of wisdom. Christ is the treasure chest of wisdom. And here God promises us that as we ask him in prayer for wisdom that he will give that wisdom to us.

Notice, as well, how he encourages us with three conditions. In the first place he says that he will give to all men. Regardless of who you are, as you rest in Christ Jesus, you are part of this all, young or old, mature, immature, bright and intelligent or unintelligent, rich or poor. Regardless of who you are as a believer, regardless of circumstances in your life, you are part of this all to whom God promises to answer the prayer of wisdom.

Notice the second qualification to encourage us.

He gives to all generously. Here James uses the word that the apostle Paul uses in Romans chapter 12 as he discusses Christian gifts. He says, “Let the one who gives give with liberality.”

³ Ibid.

⁴ Matthew 7:7-11.

Our God is a generous Father who delights in heaping blessing upon blessing upon blessing to his children. He is generous. There is no limit to his bank account. There is no limit to his generosity. There is no limit to that which he is willing to do for us as it is for our good.

So he will not be stingy about saying, “Well, you have got your ration of wisdom for this week or this month.” No, constant supply from a liberal God who gives liberally to us.

The third qualification is he does it without upbraiding us or reproaching us. He gives to all men generously and without reproach.

Sometimes, parents, when our children come to us after they have blown it, it is necessary for us in parental wisdom to explain to them what they have done wrong and how they are reaping the consequences of what they have done wrong. There will be necessary reproaches as part of child rearing. And, of course, God reproaches and teaches us as well, but he never holds back when we humble ourselves to come to him. Even though we first tried to do it ourselves, we thought we didn’t need God until suddenly we find ourselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place and we start crying out to God. He will not hold back. He will not reproach. He is glad that we have done so.

Or we have waffled. We believe and we didn’t believe, but we come back and we say, “Father, I need you.” Or we have been time and time again we are wrestling through a particular problem and we inch along and we keep crying out for God’s grace and for God’s wisdom. He doesn’t say, “You have already asked me about that. I have already shown you what you need to do.”

No, he gives to everyone of us in Christ Jesus generously, liberally without reproach. What a glorious promise that God makes to us.

As I said, we all need wisdom. We lack it to some degree or other. God will put circumstances into our lives to test us and show us our need yet of further measures of wisdom in coping and dealing and in moving forward. You need wisdom in a broad number of circumstances. You need wisdom as you deal with a text of Scripture. You need wisdom how to order this text. You need wisdom what application do I make. How do I write this paper? What is the best way to communicate the truth? You need wisdom as you rear your children. How do you do it with each child according to his or her nature, needs, weaknesses, strengths?

There is not a thing in life that we do not need wisdom for and God promises us wisdom and particularly wisdom in our trials and afflictions.

Now before we leave this point let me remind you of the pathway to wisdom, the things that we are doing as we seek wisdom by prayer. And the Bible teaches us that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. It is the acknowledgment that he is God and we are his creature saved by his grace. We live in absolute dependence upon him and by

his Word. And it is the acknowledgement as we fear him that he is this generous God who loves to give to his people.

Second, as we are instructed here, we pray. We pray for wisdom. We pray, specifically for wisdom in each of the situations where we need it.

Third, we are to be immersed in Scripture so that we know the mind of God as it is generally expressed. But we search the Scriptures then in respect to the particular issues with which we deal so that the spirit, Christ the prophet which by the Spirit through the Word will instruct us in the wisdom and then the Bible teaches us how we are to use godly counsel. We are not islands unto ourselves. God has placed us in the covenant household. He has placed us in the Church community. He gives Christian friends. He gives spouses for the purpose of seeking counsel, counsel to develop in wisdom.

And then we prayerfully apply these things as we meditate on the particular circumstance where we find ourselves. We do so, pray, the Spirit will lead us and he will give us the insight and the wisdom whether it is solving a problem or working our way through a trial, knowing how to endure, knowing what we are to seek from God's hands. And particularly, then, as we deal with trials, let us be mindful that, yes, we do seek release. We do pray for deliverance or healing or whatever, but we first should be seeking the lessons.

Why has God sent this trial? What does he want me to learn? How does he want me to live through this to respond and to behave?

We do that individually. We do that within the broader community of the family and Church. Our trials are designed not just for the individual, but for all of us. And so we apply these principles. We seek God's wisdom and he promises to give that wisdom to all who come to him in prayer.

But you will notice that there is a condition that is attached to the promise because sometimes we look at a problem and we think this is just way too big. And what we are really saying is, "I don't think God can help me with this problem. I don't think that he can get me through this problem."

Or sometimes we begin believing, but then God doesn't immediately answer our prayers—or so it seems—and we don't persevere in prayer.

Sometimes God answers us and we suddenly think that we don't need him. You have heard the story about the man who fell off the mountain and as he was falling he prayed, "God, save me. God, help me." And his backpack catches on a branch. And he says, "It's ok, God, I'm safe."

Now we do that. We pray and God answers our prayer and we fail to realize, well, it is God who has done this and I still need him even though he has given me an immediate answer in the crisis.

And so this condition to the promise is attached here in verses six through eight. In verse six we are taught that prayer must be believing prayer. He lays it out both positively and negatively.

“Let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”⁵

You see, we must do more than utter the words of prayer mechanically or, “Well, I should pray so I will pray,” but we pray with no faith. We pray with no confidence. And what the Holy Spirit is teaching us here is that we must stir up within ourselves a belief, a faith, a confidence as we pray.

Now the Bible has wonderful promises attached to prayer. We looked at the one already in Matthew chapter seven that as we ask and seek and knock and all those in the present tense as commandments, as we keep asking and seeking and knocking, God is going to answer and to give and to provide. But the very necessity of that perseverance teaches us the need of faith.

We have the wonderful promise of prayer in 1 John chapter five verse 14.

“And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”⁶

Grand promises attached to prayer.

But the praying is to be believing prayer. The Savior gives us a clear instruction on the relationship of faith and prayer in Mark chapter 11. After the withered fig tree has been noted by the apostles and Christ says to them in verse 22, “Have faith in God.”⁷

And then notice,

Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, “Be taken up and cast into the sea,” and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted [to] you.⁸

And we will come back to the qualification.

But the truth that the Savior is driving home here is that we are to pray with confidence that God answers prayer.

⁵ James 1:6.

⁶ 1 John 5:14.

⁷ Mark 11:22.

⁸ Mark 11:23.

Do you believe that? When you pray for a lost loved one, when you pray for someone that has a serious, even a terminal disease, when you pray for God's grace as you step in the pulpit to serve him, do you pray believing that God is going to do significant things because you have prayed?

See, this is the problem. James will address it again about praying amiss. We pray without faith. We pray because we are supposed to pray. We pray because we know, well, I am a Christian and I am instructed to pray.

But it is almost like spitting in the wind. You know, we really... well, we really would be surprised, wouldn't we? We would be like the prayer meeting when Peter is in prison about to be put to death. And the angel releases him. He comes. He knocks on the door and Rhonda goes and tells the folks and they say, "Well, he can't be here because he is in prison and we are praying [?]."

And that is [?], isn't it?

"Oh, that can't be so."

That is what the Savior is driving at, that we must ask in faith.

And then he puts it negatively. He says we must ask in faith without doubting.

Now the word that he uses there is used, for example, in Acts chapter 10 verse 20 or actually the phrase he uses to talk about confusion.

The Spirit says to Peter when the Gentiles come seeking him, "But arise, go downstairs, and accompany them without misgivings."⁹ Don't second guess yourself. Don't doubt. Go without misgivings.

In Romans chapter four it is then applied to the exercise of faith in the illustration of father Abraham.

"[And] yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God."¹⁰

And this wavering is the same word that we have here in James chapter one, "Ask in faith without any doubting."¹¹ No wavering, no fear, no apprehension.

And then he gives this beautiful illustration.

"For the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind."¹²

⁹ Acts 10:20.

¹⁰ Romans 4:20.

¹¹ James 1:6.

Now, I imagine every one of us have stood on the gulf or the shore of the Atlantic or Pacific ocean and watched the waves and the very motion come up and then go back, come up and then go back. And then if you have watched the waves in a storm not only the coming up and going back, but they are tumultuous, they move sideways, they are full of dirt and sand and the Holy Spirit uses this picture with which we are familiar to describe to us what it is like to waver in unbelief.

We are like the waves of the sea driven by the wind, up and down, back and forth, sideways, tumultuous. There is no peace. There is no confidence. There is no subtleness. How different the tumultuous waves of the sea from a placid lake.

God wants us to be like the placid lake in our confidence as we rest in him. And so the condition attached to this promise—it is a prayer that God would give wisdom to those who ask—is that we must really believe that he will do so and we must believe in such a way that we don't go back and forth. We believe, we don't believe. We must have a subtle conviction.

Faith is described to us, for example, in Hebrews chapter 11 verse six.

“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God...”¹³ That would be coming to God in Christ and coming to God in prayer. “He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”¹⁴

So faith in prayer is the believing that God is who he says he is. He does what he says he is going to do. He rewards those who seek. In other words, he answers our prayers.

So lets apply this to how we pray. How do we come to God believing? Well, in the first place, we must have a subtle confidence that for Christ's sake he receives us and, thus, he receives our prayers. You see, Christ in his perfect work in our behalf has accomplished for us the redemption that gives us the Spirit of adoption. He is the one who has opened the way. The veil of partition was rent from top to bottom to show that now in Christ Jesus as he has entered for us into the holy of holies, we come boldly for his sake. And faith must begin there that God hears me because I rest in Christ and God delights, then to give me what I ask for in Christ's name.

This was the concluding instruction that the Savior gave to the apostles in John chapter 16 verse 23.

And in that day you will ask Me no question. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name. Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full. These things I have spoken to you

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hebrews 11:6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will speak no more to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father. In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from the Father.¹⁵

Come in faith believing that because we have been accepted in Christ our prayers are accepted in Christ and the Father delights to give to us when we come to him in the name of Jesus.

This is summarized so well in the Larger Catechism 180. “What is it to pray in the name of Christ? To pray in the name of Christ is in obedience to this command and in confidence on his promises to ask mercy for his sake, not by bare mentioning of his name, but by drawing our encouragement to pray, our boldness, strength and hope of acceptance in prayer from Christ and his mediation.”

So we are not merely tacking the name on. In fact, we don't always have to tack the name on. It has to do with a subtle conviction. It has to do with the acting of faith, that we come with confidence, with boldness. We are encouraged to come. We stir our hearts not to come in prayer because we are coming in Christ, because of Christ we are accepted.

And so to pray in faith and not wavering is to come consciously in Christ knowing that because of Christ God receives us and our petitions.

Next, to come confident in the promises of God. We read in 1 John 5:14 that whatever we ask in his name, if it is according to the will of the Father, he grant it to us. There are many promises that are quite specific, such as the one before us, wisdom. We don't have to hedge that.

“Lord, if it is your will, give me wisdom.”

No. He said, “I will give you wisdom if you ask me. I will give you holiness if you ask me. I will give you the Holy Spirit if you ask me. I will give you boldness and strength and confidence.” And it is a long list of things that we ought to be praying for boldly because God has promised them. We must believe those promises. Quit doubting God.

Sometimes you will find yourself in a counseling situation where one or both of the couples have really given up, Christian couples. And they have got to understand that they are denying God and denying the power, the Word of sanctification. That is God's promise. He stands by it. If you are in Christ he is going to change you, which means he can change any relationship that two Christians are in.

But we recognize that we don't always know God's will. And then we must come to him as the leper came to him.

¹⁵ John 16:23-27.

“Lord, if you are willing, I know you are able to cleanse me.”

You see, we too often hide behind it is not God’s will. And what we are really doing there is disguising our unbelief, isn’t it?

To pray with confidence is to believe that God is able to do whatever is consistent with his nature.

And so we go back to the promise of Mark 11. Whatever obstacles are in the way of the advance of the kingdom, God is able perfectly to remove them in whatever way he designs. He can shipwreck the Spanish Armada. He can enable Christ to walk through a crowd that wants to throw him off the cliff.

He is able. And you have got to believe he is able regardless of the obstacle. And so when you are praying for someone who is unconverted, a covenant child that has departed, don’t become so pious that you hedge your prayers so much that, “Well, Lord, if you are willing...” No, you [?] “Lord, you are able. And this brings great glory to you to own your covenant. Lord, I know you can do it. I know you will do it, if it is the best thing for your glory and for the good of your people.”

We have got to start believing that as we pray confidently that we keep in mind that our God is able to do everything that he has revealed in his Word. We don’t know how he will answer those prayers if they are not specifically revealed in Scripture, but we pray with confidence.

Which leads to the fourth thing and that is we pray with confidence as we exalt the attributes of God in our hearts and meditations as we pray, not just his ability, but his love, his grace, his wisdom, his knowledge. We fortify our hearts with the realization of who God is and that he glorifies himself in answering prayer.

Then James enforces this condition of praying with belief and confidence by warning us, then, in the last two verses, that we can expect nothing if we don’t approach God in this way.

For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.¹⁶

That man, the one who doesn’t believe, the one who wavers between doubt and faith can have no confidence that his prayers will be answered.

Now, James doesn’t say here that God won’t answer prayer. God is a God of grace. And he sometimes answers the feeblest of prayers of a doubting sinner. But we can have no confidence that God is going to grant us these things if we have no confidence in the God whom we are addressing to grant us these things.

¹⁶ James 1:7-8.

So you can't expect that God is going to honor prayer that is not offered in confidence and in faith. And he explains why because a man who prays like that, a woman who prays like that is double minded. And the word is double souled.

We would say he is of two minds. She loves me. She loves me not. She loves me. She loves me not. You know, does she or doesn't she? Does God love me? Does he not love me?

Well, God [?] not do it. And we don't come with a confidence that God loves us and will do exactly what is best and we constantly pray on that basis, then we waver between two opinions about God. Well, what that creates in us is not simply the lack of answered prayer, but an instability in our lives. And the very thing that we are to be seeking is tendered by our unbelief because a double minded person is unstable in all his ways.

The purpose of wisdom is that we would have a clear mindedness about how to respond in a certain circumstance. The problem with the lack of faith is that we are already unstable. We are unstable in the midst of the trial. We are like a ship that has lost its balance. And in that instability we dart this direction and that direction. We have an unfounded confidence. The next moment we are cast down in the depths of despair and our whole life is a mess, lacking the very maturity that God has promised to us in our trials. And that makes, then, our prayers, prayers of this immaturity, unstable because we are unstable in all our ways. We don't need to be.

If you are resting in Christ Jesus this promise is for you, the promise that God will give wisdom to all those who seek him by faith in prayer.

Our fathers can't take us to the moon. But our heavenly Father can do for us anything revealed in his Word, consistent with his nature that is for his glory and our good. He want us to believe that. To believe that, then, in the midst of our trials, to recognize the trials that come upon us apart from his love and wisdom as we saw three weeks ago, to recognize that with the trial he is going to send all the grace that we need in that trial, to recognize he is going to give us, then, the mind of Christ as we seek it, how to seek the proper ends, what means to use, how to conduct ourselves, how we behave.

But I want to stretch this out in application to one more thing. And that is our approach to prayer, period. I have certain desires for the students, staff and faculty of Greenville Seminary, but particularly for your students, as you leave here that will be godly, a premiere example of godliness, that you will be careful expositors and lively appliers of the Word of God, that you will be good, faithful pastors. But coupled with those three things I want you to leave here, men, powerful in prayer. Now is the time to develop yourselves to become powerful in prayer, not just praying, going through your prayer calendar, praying for the things you are supposed to pray for. I want you to learn to pray with such confidence and boldness that whatever it is that you are about to do, you know that God's hand will be upon it: preparation of a paper, a pastoral visit, a witnessing opportunity, particularly the preaching of sermons. I want you to pray in such a way that

you will never step into the pulpit without expecting God to do something in the lives of people.

I consciously pray that now for chapel when I go to a church and God honors that prayer, whether it is pulpit supply or a conference. He loves to honor that prayer.

But, men, you must become bold and confident men of prayer and develop your wives and children to be people of bold and confident prayer because God loves to answer prayer and the greater the petition, well, the more greatly he loves to answer such a prayer.

But then remember, you children remember the very first step and it is God only promises to answer the prayers of his people. There is no promise here for you if you are not trusting in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. So be sure today that you are a believer and that then you may bring your need in prayer.

Amen.

Our Father, we thank you for your Word. It invigorates us, Lord. It makes us strong and bold and may your Spirit not just do that here under the moment, but oh Lord, breathe into our lives such confidence to pray. Make us fervent in prayer. Let prayer not be dull, but lively as we take hold of heaven according to your promises, according to your nature, for all the tasks that you have set before us. Amen.