

Introduction

Waterfalls are one of God's great works of art. A river can be making its way downstream with little indication that it is even moving. But the force and power and the sense of an endless supply becomes pronounced whenever there is a sudden change in the terrain. What was clear as glass now turns into a snow-white cascade. The water billows over the edge and relentlessly crashes on the rocks below. The ground trembles as it feels the constant blows of the mass of cumulative droplets. The air is filled with decibels of uninterrupted thunder.

Flowing even on the days there is no rain, rivers are the circulatory system by which God provides an ongoing supply of hydration to his creation. Waterfalls are like exclamation points along the river course to remind us of the life-giving power and the magnitude of constant provision the rivers bring by the design of our amazing God.

Water is not the only thing God delights in supplying for his people. James reminds us how God delights to provide wisdom as well.

[Read Text and Pray]

It is important for us to remember where we have been in our study. James's instruction on wisdom does not arise out of a vacuum. It comes in the context of his exhortation to "count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds." We always need wisdom but especially when facing the challenges, afflictions, and problems of which trials consist. And it is apparent here that there is a connection. In fact, to count it all joy when facing trials is counter-intuitive. It runs against the grain of our natural tendency. Everybody in the world knows that you rejoice when times are good and you just endure it or try to make it better when they are not. But James says that even times of trial are times to count as joy. Wisdom is essential to come to that conclusion. It's wisdom that recognizes where the times of trial are taking us. Through wisdom we learn to welcome them as friends because trials produce steadfastness the full effect of which is being perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But as long as we are on this side of glorification, one of the things of which we can never have too much is wisdom. So James proceeds to focus attention on wisdom and how it is obtained. Essentially, he tells us that God delights in giving wisdom to those who ask in faith. This is his main point. The focus is on three aspects of wisdom—the need for it, the God who gives it, and the one who receives it. These will be our anchor points this morning—the need for wisdom, the God who gives wisdom, and the one who receives wisdom.

I. The Need for Wisdom.

James sets forth the need for wisdom. Today stands in contrast to the day when the brother or sister will be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. We have not yet reached that point. Among other things, we still lack wisdom. That is not to say we are completely lacking in wisdom, but the demands of living in this fallen world necessitate that we possess wisdom to navigate well. Meeting trials is one of those times when our need for wisdom is acute. For one thing we need wisdom to embrace that trials are actually good for us, but we also need wisdom to know what to do in the midst of trials. How do we navigate them with steadfastness and endurance to the glory of God? We need wisdom.

But what is wisdom? This is an important question. We live in the age of the elites where people think that those with the most education are the wisest ones. It is a gravely mistaken notion. It stands opposed to the scripture. In the scripture you don't even possess a shred of wisdom if you do not fear God because "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Pr 9:10). So wisdom is much more than knowledge. It is far more than possessing information, intellect, or education.

So, again, what is wisdom? There are two sides to wisdom. One is perception; the other is direction. Perception applies to an accurate understanding of the way things are. It is a biblical understanding. Proverbs 1:7 says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Knowledge is the perception component of wisdom. It rightly perceives of the way things are. It includes that God created the world. God is in control of the world. He is moving it toward an end that magnifies and glorifies him. He governs and judges according to his holy law. All creatures are accountable to him. You can be smart as a whip but if you do not perceive the world from this perspective, you cannot be wise. To be able to conceive and embrace that trials are partly good because God teaches that they contribute to steadfastness is a perceptive aspect of wisdom.

But then, wisdom is also direction—directing your life according to what God teaches. Wisdom acts to count it all joy when it meets various trials. Wisdom fears, loves, and obeys the great and wondrous God who has created all things. Wisdom applies God's word to life.

To bring together perception with direction into a clearly stated, easily understood definition, you could say that "wisdom is knowing how to live God's way and living accordingly." Wisdom is "knowing how to live God's way and living accordingly." We could also say, "Wisdom is grasping the world in the light of God's word and letting God's word grasp hold of us and the way we live in the world."

Jesus was very clear in the Sermon on the Mount with his concluding illustration. After all his preaching, he closed by telling a parable of two builders—one foolish and one wise. The foolish one built his house upon the sand, and the wise one built his house upon the rock. The storm came and decimated the house of the foolish builder, but the house of the wise builder stood fast. A wise builder KNOWS HOW to build for the storm and HE BUILDS ACCORDINGLY. And what does that look like in life? Jesus said, "everyone who HEARS these words of mine and DOES them" is the wise builder, and "everyone who HEARS these words of mine and DOES NOT do them" is like the foolish man who built his house on sand. Wisdom fears God and HEARS God's word and LIVES in God's ways. It soaks up God's word and applies that word to living. It grasps and lives according to the will of God.

I just want to show you how the Apostle Paul understood this as well. In Colossians 1 in the opening verses of his epistle, he writes his prayer for the Colossians. He prays that they "may be filled with the knowledge of [God's] will in all spiritual WISDOM and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord." You see. He has perception and direction and the word wisdom right there in the middle of it!

Now at its very core, wisdom is humble. Perhaps that is why James words his initial phrase the way he does—"If any of you lacks wisdom." The self-assured and the prideful are prone to think they know everything they need to know. They may be intelligent. They may even know the Bible well. But they do not apply the Bible to understand the way things are in their life nor to direct the way they live. Wisdom says, "IF anyone lacks wisdom!?! Of course I lack wisdom! I need wisdom! I must have it! I have not arrived in my understanding nor in my application. I have a long way to

go. I want to get to where I am perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, but I am not there yet." If ever you struggle to count it all joy when you meet various trials, then you need wisdom. And I am guessing that includes every single one of us.

And how do we obtain said wisdom? The key says James is to ask God for it. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God." A very obvious application of James' message for us this morning is that we need to pray for wisdom. It is for this very thing that Paul said he prayed for the Colossians. We need to pray for wisdom for ourselves and we need to pray for wisdom for our brothers and sisters in the Lord. God works through prayer. He wants us to ask. This is not a short-cut for the study and memorization and meditation of the word of God. But it is as essential as those activities. It is by grace that God gives light to grasp and apply his word. And we need to pray for that light. We need to pray for that wisdom. It is a gift from God for which we need to pray. So when was the last time you prayed for wisdom? Every day we need to pray and ask God for it.

The word here is ask. It is not "command" or "order" but "ask." The act of asking God recognizes that we have no claim on it. It recognizes that our receiving depends upon his willingness to give it. It treats God with respect and honor. Think about this. Do you just order God around in your prayers? Do you treat him as a restaurant host? "I'll have the fish fry." "Give me an order of cheeses curds." . . . "I'll have some wisdom, God." No! Ask! Request! Honor the One from whom you are seeking a gift. Because that is what wisdom is. James then points us to God as the God who gives.

II. The God Who Gives.

James highlights why we should ask God for wisdom. It is because of who he is. When one asks of God, He "gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." Why these words alone are a minefield of glory! They paint a wonderful portrait of God. And it is who God is that should move us to ask for wisdom.

A. God is wise. He has wisdom to give. Scripture ascribes glory to "the only wise God." His perception is undimmed by darkness and his direction is straight. For those who will lean not on their own understanding but acknowledge Him, he will make their paths straight. God is the fountain of wisdom.

B. God is a giver. He delights to give. Very simply and straightforwardly, James says that God gives. The word is distinct from other words like sell or exchange or pay what is owed. God gives. The same root word occurs in John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he GAVE his only begotten son." God loves so he gives. He gifts. He delights to give. He provides freely and lavishly. It is his joy to do so. The way in which James describes the giving of God makes this fact undeniably plain.

C. For he gives generously. Of this there can be no doubt, but there are deeper riches in the word James uses here. The word translated "generously," if literally translated, would be "simple" or "singly." It stands in contrast to the word down in verse 8 that describes the doubter. The doubter is a DOUBLE-minded man. God rather is single-minded in his determination to give. It communicates that he is without hesitation and without wavering. He is of one mind in regard to giving. God is an intentional giver. He has the intentionality of a flowing river. It moves in one direction. So God is one who moves steadfastly in the direction of giving. His generosity is determined and unwavering.

D. He gives "to all." That is he gives without partiality of persons. The giving of God does not diminish or increase based on the color of skin or the style of hair. Rich, poor, skilled, unskilled, from the north or from the south, tall or short, strong or weak—none of that matters. He gives to all.

E. He gives without reproach. None of us deserve God's gifts. We do not deserve wisdom. We certainly do not deserve salvation. We do not deserve the gift of God's son. We deserve eternal punishment for our sins. But God being rich in mercy because of his great and amazing love gives without reproach. He does not chide sinners who come to him seeking forgiveness. He runs to meet repentant sinners with open arms and kisses. Oh today, if you are far from God, but you will repent and turn from your sin and come to Jesus Christ, God's only son GIVEN in the place of sinners, he will save you. He will forgive you. He will wash your sins away. And he will not come at you with a shaking finger and a scowl to scold you for all your bad. He will not meet you with a frown and ask why you did not come a lot sooner. He comes with open arms and delight written all across his face.

God is not the cranky old man who wants to know why you dare disturb his peace with a request! First things first! And with God the first thing is to give, not to reproach, not to demand why you did not come sooner or why you have come back again so soon. If you ask God for wisdom it is his delight to give it.

F. He gives with certitude. You can be sure God will give wisdom to those who ask. The condition is asking. God's readiness and determination to give are certain. As he said to the Israelites in their wanderings, he says to you and to me, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it" (Psalm 81:10). But the Israelites would not open their mouths; will you?

The reason why James is so certain God will give wisdom is not invested in how deserving are the dispersed believers. It is because of the greatness of the determination of God to give what his people need. James was not a believer when he heard Jesus preach, but the sermon seems to have stuck with him. For Jesus had preached the truth of God's giving nature. Jesus preached: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7)

God is a giving God. He is worthy of our awe and praise. We need to Behold our God. We need to praise his name. And we need to come to him in prayer, boldly and assured. Not brash and disrespectful. Not entitled or demanding. But bold and confident in who he is, that he delights to give. So draw near with a humble heart in your time of need. He must not be thought of as unwilling to give you EXACTLY what you need. And among your first and great needs is the need for wisdom.

We turn next to . . .

III. The One Who Receives.

Although God is ready to give, and he does not demand that we meet some unattainable prerequisite in order to receive, he does require that we ask in faith. He requires that we ask, believing and without doubting. Now it is really important that we rightly understand this demand. Because you might be thinking, how can that be? My mind is almost always filled with some kind of doubt or lack

of complete certainty. Is this faith, after all, some unattainable bar that somehow gets God off the hook when I ask for wisdom but do not receive it?

The answer most assuredly is no. Let me explain. We have already pointed out that God is single-minded about his intent to give believers the wisdom we need to progress on through our trials toward maturity and completeness. At issue in this point is the question of whether WE are single-minded about wisdom as well. The doubting about which James is speaking is not some ounce of wonder whether God is really willing or some experience of unbelief in the midst of belief. Rather, this doubting is the doubting of a double-minded man. He is like a river undecided whether to go this way or that. He wants it both ways. He is trying to go up and down the escalator at the same time. Talk about instability! He is leaving open a door to the world and the wisdom of the world. He is asking God for wisdom but he is not so sure when he gets it that he is going to follow it. It just depends on whether he actually likes the advice or not. He is unstable. He is a wave driven by the wind.

In the midst of his marriage he is asking God for wisdom for how to deal with his wife and he reads, "Now husbands live with your wives in an understanding way," and he says, "What kind of wisdom is that?" No thank you. I rather like better what the psychologist down the street is telling me. Or she reads, "wives, be subject to your own husbands so that if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives." And she wonders, "God what were you thinking? That will never work in my situation!" This is double-mindedness. It is not the experience of doubting thoughts but the presence of a doubting heart. It is vacillating between whether it really wants the wisdom of God or not.

Double-mindedness is illustrated by the wandering Israelites. They said they would worship God alone and then they made a golden calf. They said they would trust God, but they complained with every inconvenience. God said, "Go, take the land," but they said, "I don't think so." Then God said, "Okay, turn back to the wilderness," and they said, "Let's go take the land." Psalm 81:10ff. recounts, the Lord God said to them "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. But [says the Lord] my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to FOLLOW THEIR OWN COUNSELS. Oh that my people would listen to ME and walk in MY ways . . . I would feed you with the finest wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you." The problem with the Israelites was not intellectual doubt but inner resistance of heart.

James's point then is this: When you ask for wisdom, God will pour it out generously and gloriously IF you are really wanting that wisdom, if you really intend to hear and live accordingly. If, on the other hand, what you really want is for God to bless YOUR wisdom and go with you YOUR way, sorry, it is not going to happen. With that approach, do not expect to receive anything from the Lord. You can just expect more trouble and instability.

If you want to weather trials well, ask God for wisdom and take every shred of it he gives you. Love it and live it. You will progress towards stability and steadfastness and endurance. You will be stable and strong. You will not be driven by the wind but be held in his hand.

Conclusion

Last October the ACBC conference was in North Carolina. Kyle went along with Melissa and me. So after the conference we planned a day of sightseeing in the mountains. We awakened that morning to the blood curdling sound of a government alert on our phones. We were being warned that a torrential downpour had taken place that night and morning. Flood warnings were issued. Travel in

the mountains was "unsafe," but we really had no choice. We made our way to DuPont State Park where there are several waterfalls. All the rain that had occurred overnight had a powerful impact on the falls. What normally would have been pretty and serene was now intense and exponentially impressive. The rain had found its way into creeks. The flooded creeks fed into swollen rivers. The rivers were full and the falls were staggering. What originally seemed like a bad day for sightseeing turned out to be pretty amazing. The water was gushing and billowing and thundering.

God can make it rain any time he wants to and he can make rivers swell. And he can make a waterfall become a torrent. We sure were glad he did it that day. And he delights to do exactly that in terms of the supply of wisdom for those who ask in faith. He pours it out lavishly, abundantly, intentionally, graciously, and without reproach. All you have to do is ask.