

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord;⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

⁹The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.¹⁰ But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

¹²Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. (James 1:2-12)

Ask for Wisdom

A very disturbing thing happened to me this week: I got an invitation in the mail to join AARP. It's bad enough that my daughter graduated from high school and that my youngest son is now a teenager and that my middle child has his driving permit – now I'm being recruited by the American Association of Retired Persons. I joke about my age a lot because I'm several years older than my wife, but AARP? Am I really that old? I guess it was inevitable. While there are probably things that I'm not going to like about reaching an advanced age, there are supposed to be some advantages to getting older. The most obvious one is wisdom, right? There's nothing like experience to teach us about life. Wisdom is what our epistle lesson is about today. James, the brother of Jesus, encourages us today to seek that gift. But he doesn't mean that we should try to get older. He isn't talking about the practical wisdom that comes from experiencing life. Rather, he's talking about a kind of wisdom that can be ours at any age: true spiritual wisdom. That wisdom doesn't come from anything in this world. It comes from God. So it's natural that we would pray for it. My friends, turn to God and **ask for wisdom.**

I.

What is that wisdom? It's an attitude that's born from trust. It's viewing this life from the perspective of people who are going on to the next life. It includes things like knowing how to live a God-pleasing life and maintaining a proper attitude in both joy and sorrow. That kind of wisdom causes us to do things and to adopt attitudes that run contrary to everything that our culture and our human reason dictate. Sometimes, the things God says that wisdom does even surprise us Christians, because while we're here, we aren't perfect in wisdom or faith yet. That is definitely the case today. **Ask for wisdom so that you can rejoice in trials.**

James says, **“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.”** What are trials? They're things that challenge our faith. They're all the things the devil uses to get us to question our faith. So they're the things that hurt and make us unhappy. Notice, James talks not just about one trial or an occasional difficulty. He tells us to consider it pure joy whenever we face trails of many kinds. How can he say that? Because of what those trials do for us. James says, **“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”** We can consider trials, hardships, challenges to be pure joy when we have the wisdom to trust that God is using them for our spiritual good.

What is he doing? Developing perseverance. Trials make us rock solid in the faith. How? Well, the Greek word James uses when he says “the testing of your faith” really means “passing the test of your faith.” God sends difficulty and hardship so that we cling to him and then he keeps his promise to carry us through, and we see the evidence of his love in our own lives. God takes our faith to the next level. Over and over again, he brings us right up to the brink of what our faith will bear. Then he sends our pastor or a spouse or a Christian friend and he reminds us of all that he promises in this life and in the life to come. He works through that gospel and gives us a stronger faith.

God does that because he loves us. We live in a world that's broken by sin. So God makes our faith stronger so that we can stand up against the devil and the forces of evil in this world. He purifies our faith so that we can feel joy even when life hurts. We are blessed when we have a stronger faith, even though it hurts to get it. But it takes wisdom to see that. You could compare it to rejoicing after surgery. If you have a hip or a knee replacement, you spend weeks in physical therapy learning to walk again and especially at first, it is very painful to walk on those repaired joints. Yet, if you had the surgery, it's because your old knee or hip wasn't working anymore. Either it was damaged suddenly in some kind of fall, or it had worn out and every step was painful, maybe for years. So, you don't enjoy the post-surgery pain. But you do rejoice that the hip or knee is replaced. You rejoice in the promise that you are going to walk without pain in the not so distant future. God uses all the trials to our faith like that. We rejoice during the trial because we know that when the hurt is done, the strength and the joy will still be there.

But what if you don't see it that way? What if you whine and complain every time life hurts? What if you wonder why you have it so bad? In the end, aren't you doubting God's promises? God promises that everything that happens in your life is for your eternal good and he tells you to look for proof at the cross. There you see his love. He tells you to look into the empty tomb. There you see his power to overcome all that sin does to us: death and hell and even the hurts and sorrows of this life. He calls you to trust that everything he sends, even the most painful disease or loss, does you good. If you doubt that promise, you lack the wisdom to trust what God has done for you and what he's still doing for you. So you don't deserve the love he continues to show you.

Doesn't that sound like all of us? Take heart. God doesn't abandon us, no matter how weak we are. James says, **"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."** When we come to God and admit all that's wrong with our faith, God doesn't find fault. God simply wipes away all our sin and weakness and doubt in Christ. Jesus died and he paid for all that's wrong with our faith – for all our whining and our doubt and our failure to trust him. Jesus rose and wiped all that sin away. God has forgiven us for every moment of doubt and stupidity. In that forgiveness God gives us wisdom because in that forgiveness God gives us trust and joy and maturity in faith, regardless of our years.

Ask God for wisdom. God will answer that prayer. He'll give that wisdom through the gospel, so you can't just sit around and wait for a lightning bolt from heaven. But it will be God that gives the gift. But James also issues a warning here. He tells us not to doubt when we make that request. What does he mean? It's impossible for us sinners to have a perfect faith. The Old Man inside us undermines every prayer we ever offer. But James is talking here about another level of doubt. You can see that in his description of the Christian who doubts as "double-minded" and "unstable in all he does." The Bible often pictures a sincere Christian as being single minded or better, single hearted. Our true self is devoted to God, even though we continue to fight against our Old Man. So James is telling us to come in faith, to come knowing our Savior, to come trusting in God's promises, and come committed to the idea that Jesus will answer. But if we come out of convenience, if we come as a last resort, if we come not really believing that God is going to do anything, but prayer is somehow therapeutic, then don't imagine that God is going to answer that prayer. But if you come because you are a child of God and you are at war with the sin and doubt in your own heart and you know that God alone has the power to change you, come and Christ your Savior will mature your faith. He will give you the ability to trust in God's promises and to see all that happens as part of his blessings for you.

II.

That wisdom is a wonderful gift for our lives here. God gives so that we can be content in a world where sin constantly damages our lives and our hearts. That wisdom also gives us a different perspective on our lives. We realize that our place in this life is not the same as our place in the life to come. Once we know our real place in heaven, we can approach the successes and the defeats of life here with a measure of joy and confidence that an unbeliever cannot have. **Ask for wisdom so that you can rejoice in your true position.**

We often measure our positions here by how people treat us and by how much stuff we have. Some people command the respect of society and they would be popular no matter what they did. Some people have more money and more opportunity than the rest of us. For those of us who don't naturally come by respect and popularity and wealth, being left out of those blessings can be a real trial.

But James tells us that true wisdom sees past wealth and respect in this life. He says, **“The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.”** Most Christians aren’t movers and shakers. The sinful world doesn’t give us many opportunities to move up in society. It does not welcome us to the halls of power or to the vaults of the wealthy. Many Christians struggle just to make ends meet. Often the high and mighty in this world have nothing but contempt for us. But what we are here is not what we will be. You command the highest position any human being can: you are an adopted child of God. You are a prince and an heir of heaven. When Jesus returns, the whole world is going to see him turn things upside down. It will see you for what you really are. Rejoice in that honor!

The flip side is also important for us. James says, **“But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.”** When God gives us wealth in this world, we dare not make that the center of our life, because we will all die, just like summer flowers die when winter frosts come. All the wealth that the rich accumulate will go to someone else. So when God gives us wealth, he calls us to have the wisdom to understand that we are nothing and nobody without him.

Do we have that attitude? When we live in humble circumstances, when God does not give us the lifestyle he gives other people, do we rejoice that we are the children of God? If not, we sin. On the other hand, do we get lost in our wealth? Do we make our lives about the latest smart phone and the newest I-pad and the coolest car and the most beautiful home? God has blessed our society beyond our ability even to comprehend it sometimes. We have no concept of how much more we have than even our grandparents had, to say nothing of what people had in Jesus’ day. Are we humble in all those blessings? Do we thank God for his gifts and acknowledge that we deserve none of it and that we would have none of it unless he blessed us? Or do we think we built it all and earned it all and deserve it all?

Either way, we sin. Either way, we betray an attitude that is totally lacking in faith and wisdom and we deserve God’s punishment in hell forever. But God sent his Son to rescue us. Jesus alone rejoiced in the things of God and never let himself be distracted by the pleasures of this life. His perfect heart counts for us. God sees us as perfect now. Jesus died and paid for all the times we resented our low estate and all the times we were absorbed in the things of this life. Jesus died and paid for all that idolatry and sin. Then he rose and wiped all that sin away. God has forgiven us.

And in love, God sends every trial that comes to teach us to let go of this life. James says, **“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”** Nothing that we have matters here except our faith. Nothing that we own here will last past the grave. Only the Church will endure. By the grace of God, we will endure every trial of this life and we will reach eternal life. True wisdom trusts what God is doing and sees all this life through the lens of the life to come. And that wisdom doesn’t come with age. The kindergarteners who are graduating this morning have it. It does come with maturity – maturity of faith. It comes as a gift of God. Trust in his love in Christ and ask him to give you wisdom. Then come and hear his gospel message so that you have that gift. Amen.