

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for July 19: When common sense isn't enough

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James is an ancient (possibly the first and oldest of New Testament writings), extraordinary book as relevant as today's newspaper. Culture has changed dramatically since James was accepted into the canon of Scriptures after 350 A.D., but human nature remains the same.

James has the practical purpose of showing us how to live a good and godly life in all circumstances. Written from the viewpoint of a Christian Jew, this epistle reads like a tract and is filled with positive imperatives and ethical instruction. The book's practical nature brings many powerful returns and speaks clearly to the spiritual needs of mankind.

The author is James, the brother of Jesus, who became a believer following the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7). He, along with Peter and John, was a primary leader of the church in Jerusalem, who believed their mission was the conversion of the Jews while Paul was sent by God to the Gentiles (Acts 15:12-29, 21:17-26; Galatians 1:10, 2:0). The recipients of this letter were the "12 tribes scattered among the nations," or all Jewish Christians, in the sense of the new Israel—those who are children of Abraham by faith, not birth (Galatians 3 and 4).

James, the epistle, has similarities to the ancient wisdom literature, (Proverbs 9:10), but also the gospel presentation of the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:17-40). James, insightfully, tells us the source of spiritual wisdom: "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" (1:5).

James surely chose "wisdom" because of its relevance to the subject matter of trials and tribulations. Wisdom is to know God and to know one's self within that blessed relationship. Wisdom is to think and act under the wisdom and guidance of God.

Common sense tells you that asking God does not imply an immediate miraculous, mysterious experience that suddenly fills your mind with wisdom. Neither does that prayer leave out Bible study or experience. God does not sit in heaven with an automated dispenser that shakes out what one desires whenever we ask. There are many different ways a prayer for wisdom can be answered.

Asking God to fill one's desire for wisdom involves direct divine insight but also inspiration as one experiences God through the Holy Spirit in Bible study, prayer, church and teachers. Wisdom exceeds common sense in quality, but adds content to common sense. Common sense without input from God into the human mind always is insufficient. God's wisdom always is sufficient and true.

Recall that even Christ benefited from this same process: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8).

Wisdom in trials (James 1:1-8)

Insight into wisdom for enduring trials takes priority in the mind of James, who, according to Josephus, was stoned to death in 62 A.D., in Jerusalem, by orders of the high priest. Christians in Jerusalem lived in constant life-threatening danger. Jesus knew well what he was asking of his followers (Luke 9:21-27). His journey to Jerusalem would be fraught with conflict, hostility, opposition, anger, misunderstanding, rebuke, physical pain and rejection. The disciples found the conditions intensified after the resurrection. Christians are not exempt from struggles, hardship and

difficulties. Good people suffer along with those who are evil.

Connect wisdom with perseverance through faith. Wisdom is of the mind and will, informing and strengthening faith that wills to persevere steadfastly in personal responsibility to pursue or keep the purpose of God regardless. If this seems complex, it is, but at the same time very simple. Simply stated, the goal desired can be achieved because of God's will working in the will of man by persevering faith.

The key to wisdom from God is to "believe and not doubt." Should doubt creep in, one becomes unreliable like paper tossed in the wind and is "unstable in all his ways" (v. 6). Wisdom insists on a steadfast faith, without doubt, or the person will not receive "anything from the Lord" (v. 7) even though God "gives generously to all without finding fault" (v. 5).

"Trials of many kinds," multiple in number and varied in type, primarily refers to hardship and difficulties that come from conversion to Christ and faithful living of the Christian life. These kind of hardships can be avoided by denying Christ and one's faith in Christ. Trials are not joyful and joy is not created through trials, but when trial-traps come, they can be endured in the disposition of joy, joy that shows through the tears and pain.

God's wisdom suggests it is all about perspective, of seeing the trial as a test of faith. The perspective is voiced in the phrase, "you know." Wisdom already has anticipated the possibility and probability of trials that trap us in the corners of life and force "perseverance" or capitulation. In persecution, there are no other choices.

Anticipation inspires preparation for coming trials so as to know in advance how to make an appropriate response. Christians know in advance that testing brings a heightened spiritual maturity and deeper faith (vv. 3-4). Joy takes on a kind of spiritual pleasantness, acceptance, peace and contentment through it all, like singing hymns in the face of persecution

and death. Trials are part of the permissive will of God, and God uses them to strengthen our faith in him.

Have you positioned yourself, already made up your mind, to have a joyful attitude regardless of how difficult circumstances might be. Athletes and soldiers understand that without a strong will, perseverance and pain there is no ultimate achievement or victory when the great race is run or battle is fought. Hours are spent in exercise, practice, muscle building, determination and precise effort to be ready mentally and physically for the test or trial. Adversity inspires preparation to be up to the responsibility.

“My brothers” (v. 2) is not just a greeting but a point of identification. James was going through persecution and identified and understood, sharing in their suffering and comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). However, the principles suggested are applicable in any kind of hardship.

Testing through trials produces a residue of maturity when perseverance completes its work (v. 4). Trials are turned into triumph by God’s wisdom and should not be spiritually detrimental. James sought to give those weaker brethren a foundation for strength in their Christian faithfulness.

The urgent value is obtaining wisdom from God. Ask God for wisdom, but then partner with him to discover it before the trials and through the trials. In life, I have learned the most when life was the hardest and most difficult.

Wisdom with possessions (James 1:9-12)

The assumption is that the new subject of poverty and wealth is an illustration, moving from the general to the specific, of the application of wisdom. Textual indications would mean that both poverty and wealth are two of the varied kind of trials.

James commends his “brothers” who are in “humble circumstances” with the moral word of encouragement. I find it pastoral that James does not call

them “poor.” Jesus taught that the exalted would be made low and the humble would be exalted. Many of the early followers of Christ were the poor, afflicted, down and out, lower class and disadvantaged financially.

Poverty is a significant trial and challenge in life. James encouraged and instructed that these humble people should take pride in their “high position,” or spiritual exaltation (Philippians 4:19) which is mostly ignored by the rich and famous. They were poor financially but rich spiritually. Had not Jesus taught, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?” (Luke 1:22; 9:25; 12:13-21).

In contrast, James commends the rich man noted for taking a humble or “low position” (v. 10). Wealth has its stress and shadows and the wealthy often glory in their possessions. The person of affluence, in wisdom, will wear his wealth with humility rather than with arrogance. An illustration follows of how the rich man is like the flowers that bloom but soon wither in the scorching sun and their “beauty is destroyed.” The rich man “will fade away even while he goes about his business” (v. 12).

Both the poor and wealthy will do well to listen to the wisdom of James and live humbly before God. Wealth and poverty are temporary conditions in this life while life beyond the grave is eternal.

Those who persevere through trials and tribulations are blessed, or are inwardly compensated in this life with the most profound quality of joy, peace, contentment and satisfaction through faith in Christ. Those people also are blessed in eternity with the “crown of life.”

Wisdom to resist temptation (James 1:13-15)

Giving God the blame or credit for everything in life was a common way of thinking for the Jews. Since God is the creator of all things, he was thought to have created evil. The reasoning goes: “God made me the way I am, and

I cannot be held responsible for what I think and do.” Such thinking creates an interesting rationale for criticizing God. God gets credit for all that is good and all that is bad.

I heard it this week, when a brother of Michael Jackson said in the memorial service, and I paraphrase, “I don’t understand why God took Michael from us.” Why blame God for the demise of Michael? Why not look at Michael’s lifestyle of excesses and mistreatment of his body, God’s temple. Perhaps, it is more appropriate to blame Michael for Michael’s death.

Everyone lives within God’s permissive will and makes choices that can hardly be blamed on a loving heavenly Father. God, often, is the scapegoat for our poor theology and misconceptions of God. Human nature places blame on everyone and everything except ourselves—peer pressure, genes, family upbringing, weather, full moon, tide, depression, economy and temptation.

James turns from outward trials to inner temptation. There were those readers who would blame God for temptation. To overcome when tempted, one must understand the source of temptation. James states boldly that God does not “tempt anyone.” Temptation rather is self initiated by one’s “own evil desire” which entices (James 1:14, Psalms 51:5).

Within every person, there is a constant battle of good and evil. When evil is enticing, the individual is passionately drawn away and either overcomes or succumbs. “Each one” brings the responsibility down to the individual person with the human condition of depravity.

“Desire” (vv. 14-15) is a strong craving. This craving can be good or bad. In the bad sense, desire can corrupt: “after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (Romans 6:23). “Death” refers to spiritual death. The evil, self-centered deed is

conceived in the mind from the cravings of the flesh. Metaphorically, like fishing, the fish craves the bait, takes the bite, is hooked, cannot escape, and is jerked from the water to die.

God permits trials (for example, Job) but is not responsible for the outcome of man's choice. God expects individuals to make the better choice. The responsibility falls upon each individual. God cannot be persuaded to be tempted to tempt because of his nature of purity and holiness. The wisdom of God points out that man's sinfulness is his own responsibility.

Wisdom in providential goodness (James 1:16-18)

Rather than being a tempter, God gives man "every good and perfect gift" which is a characteristic that never changes (vv. 16-17). Wisdom knows that to think otherwise is to make a grave and serious error about God. God's "good and perfect gifts" keep on coming continuously. In all trials and temptation, God's unchangeable providential love keeps on giving good things. Understanding man's dilemma, God chose to "give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created" (v. 18). The gift of new birth is the ultimate in God's goodness.

Conclusion

Trials become either opportunities or stumbling blocks and make one either better or worse. When they come, we are to put our faith in Christ regardless of the circumstances. Faith, informed by wisdom, can be strong and steadfast and give glory to God. The joy is in the journey and in the victory over death, heartache, brokenness, loneliness, despair, poverty, wealth, dysfunction, burn-out, failure, rejection, disease and pain. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Desire wisdom from God for it is the great teacher of our conscience and common sense.