

The Book of James: Ancient Wisdom For Right now

James 1.1-8 | *When Trouble Knocks* | April 19, 2020

Introduction to the book of James

Imagine yourself sitting on a hillside on a warm day, surrounded by thousands of other people from all walks of life, and everyone listening to someone teach. The teacher is saying things like, "Don't hoard whatever you can. If you're going to hoard anything, fill up your shelves with what lasts – eternal, priceless God-treasure. What you hoard betrays your heart." (Matthew 6.19-21). Or the teacher says, "Treat others the way you'd like to be treated. This sums up everything God's been trying to get across to humanity since time began!" (Matthew 7.12). Or the teacher says, "Listen to what I'm telling you. If you listen and build your life on what I'm saying, even the worst storm won't blow you over. If you shut your ears, you'll erode away like a sandy riverbank." (Matthew 7.24-27).

It's been a long day, but you can't get enough of this teacher. He's passionate, he's ruthlessly honest, he's delightfully imaginative, using pictures and story. You *want* to do what he says; something deep inside says that this is the way to really live. Now imagine that you turn to your left and see a twenty-something man sitting next to you, who also seems enthralled by what your hearing. "Can you believe this?", you say, "I've never heard anything like it!" "I can't believe it!", the young man responds, "That teacher is my brother!"

It's widely held that the book of James was written by one of Jesus' younger brothers. The gospels tell us that at first Jesus' family found it hard to believe who he really was, but that after Jesus' death and resurrection they trusted. As a younger

brother to Jesus, James later became a leader in the first church in Jerusalem, and this little letter is what he left behind.

Siblings can be very different, but also quite similar. When you read the letter of James, little brother sounds a lot like big brother. In the gospels, Jesus' teaching was wise, compelling, compassionate and no-nonsense. Jesus spoke to the heart and James follows in his footsteps. Some people even think that the book of James is modelled after Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. So, reading James can at times feel like we're just one handshake away from Jesus himself.

There's all kinds of literature in the Bible: narrative, poetry, and ancient law codes to name a few. The book of James is what's called wisdom literature. When we think of someone wise, we might imagine someone who knows a lot, or who's had a good deal of life experience. But the scriptures say that wisdom is not about how many degrees you've earned, or even how much life experience you've got, or even how old you are. In the Bible wisdom is defined as *right living*. Wisdom is proved by the fruit of your life, by living like God lives or not. So, no matter how old or educated or experienced we may or may not be, wisdom is proved by how much we live like God in day to day life.

That's one way of thinking about Jesus. Jesus is supremely wise because Jesus lived as God lives, fleshing out God's character, God's ways of being for us as clear as day. That's what James aims to get across in his letter. Like Jesus, using metaphor and imagery and hard-hitting language, he invites us into a life that looks and sounds like God's life. A wise life filled with compassion and trust.

Trust & Trouble

Trust is where James starts. He begins by writing, *"when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is*

tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.” (1.2-4)

Scottish poet and minister George MacDonald, an influence on figures from *Peter Pan* author J.M. Barrie to C.S. Lewis to Mark Twain wrote, “To be trusted is a greater complement than to be loved.” One of the most helpful things anyone has ever told me was that faith is just another word for trust. So, when we think about our faith growing, maybe we’re not talking about some magical feeling we have to conjure up in order to know God. Maybe a growing faith is simply a growing trust in God, no matter what hits us. That’s what James launches into right away. If we’re facing trouble, it’s a chance to grow in our trust of God. Reflecting on MacDonald’s words about love and trust, what if trusting God is the best way to grow in our love of God?

James also says that trouble is an opportunity for joy! Anyone who’s seen real trouble might not go that far, but James, with ruthless honesty, confronts his readers with the truth. How can joy be a product of trouble? Because trouble drives us further into the arms of God, where we confess our need for God, learn to depend on God, and grow in trust with God. James says, God’s arms are the safest, most consistent, most loving arms we can choose to hold us. And with God’s company comes joy. What James does, with great wisdom, is to take any kind of negative trouble and helps us to see how it has a positive potential to lead us into deeper trust with God.

The first question we might ask ourselves in reflecting on James’ words is: *where are we taking our trouble?* James says, with your fists full of trouble, run wholeheartedly into God’s trustworthy arms.

Asking For Wisdom

James writes next that when we face trouble and turn to God in trust, we can ask God for wisdom, because God will help to steady us (James 1.5-8).

A few years ago, I was invited on a sailing trip. With a crew of four, in a twenty-five-foot boat, we crossed the Georgia Strait and spent a week around some of the local islands. I was the least experienced of the crew. When I say least experienced, I mean I'd never been sailing before, and couldn't tell starboard from port to save my life. And there were times when knowing that kind of information was literally going to save my life. I remember crossing the Georgia Strait, and even the experienced sailors felt were in pretty rough weather that day. Out in the open ocean we got battered around like a rubber ducky in supercharged hot tub. The only thing that kept me physically in the boat, and our boat the right way up, was the wisdom of the captain and our willingness to follow his instruction. There was no room for pride; if I had a question, I had to ask it. If he told me to do something, I did it, sometimes without knowing why I was doing it. We made it across the strait, and I didn't go overboard. To this day, just staying onboard is my proudest sailing accomplishment.

James writes that when trouble hits, when a storm hits, we can ask God for wisdom. We can ask God to show us how to live right side up, and God will generously give us the wisdom we need. A little like the captain of that boat I was on, we can turn to God in the chaos and ask God what to do. We can trust. But James says that we must put our *full trust* in God, or we'll end up all over the place. Again, a little like my captain in our boat, I had to either trust him, or not. It wouldn't have helped me to follow his lead one moment and do my own thing the next. I had to recognize who the captain was, and fully trust him. This is where James ups the stakes a little. He says when we ask God for wisdom, when we choose to trust God, that we shouldn't waver, trusting God one day, trusting ourselves the next. He uses the image of a water in the wind, saying that when we flip-flop in trusting God, we're like a little wave in a big ocean, being tossed and blown around. He goes so far as to say that someone like that has divided loyalties, that their instability spreads, and the ripples of that instability will

roll out through their whole lives. They've no clear bearing, they're just adrift, at the whims of the wind.

Now we're all going to have off days when it comes to trusting God. I'm sure James did too. But, all the same, he doesn't pull any punches. He dares us to only ever grow in our trust, so we that we mature as humans beings.

So rather than being adrift, tossed around people, James implores us to trust God with everything we've got, asking God for the wisdom we need for living. And James reminds us that God won't scold us for asking for what we need. He reminds us that God is generous. Later he writes "every good and perfect gift comes to us from the same God who lit the luminaries in the heavens." (1.17) On that sailing trip I had to learn how a few kinds of knots, and learn number of new skills. And I don't know how many times I asked for help, how many times I asked to be shown how to do things. Every time the captain and the first mate were gentle and kind with me, even when I kept getting things wrong. At one point while at the helm I actually grazed another boat in a marina! But even when that happened, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and the first mate said, with a wink and a warm smile, "It's okay. Just keep going. You can do it." and helped me navigate out of the marina. I think that's what God's like.

So the next question we might ask ourselves is, *what do we need to ask God for?* James says, ask away! God's as generous as they come with wisdom.

In Closing

All this talk about asking and giving might remind us again of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. Hear these words like the first listeners might have, with the sun on your face and the wind whistling up and around the

hillside. Hear the echo of Christ's voice over the hillside, and into your ears today. In reference to prayer, Jesus says:

"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened...your heavenly Father gives good gifts to those who ask him." (Matthew 7.7-11)

Discussion Questions

- *Where do you usually "take" your trouble? How do you process and deal with it?*
- *What do we need to ask God for in this season?*
- *What keeps us from taking our trouble to God or asking God for what we need?*
- *How does Jesus grow our confidence in God's character so that we can take our trouble to God and ask freely?*