

Wisdom to Live By
Good Advice for Tough Times
James 1:1-12; 3:13-18

Introduction:-

When we are confronted with personal difficulties and problems, we often try to find a way out of those of those difficulties and problems by seeking external help. And when we do, we hope that the advice that we seek not only proves to be wise advice, but will really prove to work for us in the best way possible. And as we come to the Word of God today, the book of James presents itself as wise advice for tough times, and has even been classified as a wisdom document of the New Testament, containing a number of brief homilies or sermons, with a faith that not only believes, but with a faith that also behaves and works! Let us now see how James, the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ, would bless us with his word of wisdom for our life today.

1. First, James introduces himself as the Servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes, scattered among the nations (James 1:1).

To begin, notice how James introduces himself. If, as is most likely, this James was the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ, then he does not make any mileage out of this. He adds no further qualification to this title, as Paul does. He simply describes himself by the title in which he feels his only honour and glory could be seen, as the slave or servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And in this way, James is actually seen to be practicing his own path of wisdom and humility found at James 4:10 where he says to the proud: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." This also helps us to understand his words at James 1:9: "Believers in humble circumstances (involving poverty and powerlessness in society) ought to take pride in their high position, as those who Christ exalts and lifts up, supported by 1 Peter 5:6. No doubt this attitude of mind also reflects James own conversion experience, because he had serious doubts about Jesus' earthly ministry, reflected at Mark 3:21, until Jesus graciously appeared to him during His resurrection appearance, reported at 1 Corinthians 15:7. As with the wisdom book of Job, theophany or God's appearance, made James a true believer! And as a result of this, James then became the leader of the Jerusalem church. This may also explain why James simply uses the word "Greetings" at the end of verse one, because this was the greeting sent to all Gentile believers from the first council meeting presided over by James at Acts 15:23. James had never forgotten the great grace which Jesus had given to him, and now he seeks to share and remind others of this grace as well. Finally, to whom was James writing? Following the stoning of Stephen, many Jewish believers had to flee Jerusalem because of persecution (Acts 11:19), and it maybe these believers that are specifically mentioned as the twelve tribes, scattered amongst the

nations, now constituting the true Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). But these may have also included Gentile believers as well, as the church began to grow. And so “James the Just” as he was named, seeks to honour God as the one who gives real wisdom, and he reflects the wisdom tradition by saying that we should not only hear what God has to say, but we must do what it says as well. In this way James echoes Jesus’ words at Matthew 7:24: “Everyone who hears these words of mine, and puts them into practice, is like a wise man, who built his house upon the rock.”

2. Secondly, we encounter the possibility of pure joy in tough times (James 1:2-12).

Someone has said that trouble affects people in different ways. It is like hot weather that turns milk sour but sweetens apples. James would agree with that smart saying, just so long as trouble itself was not considered the determining factor. Paul wrote that “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12), and James would have agreed. He does not say *if* you fall into trial, but *whenever*. But what are these *trials of many kinds*? These can range from financial hardship and oppression from the wealthy in verse 9, to inner temptations and wrangling in verses 13-15, followed by persecution in 2:6-7, as well as death and physical illness in 5:14. Finally, James frames this passage in verses 2-12 with an opening exhortation in verses 2-3 to *perseverance*, and a promise in verse 12 that puts trials into perspective. We will come to that promise shortly. In the meantime, *perseverance* is the ability to endure without cracking up. But in case this is a problem for the weak, James urges *perseverance* as a beginning only. It is a kind of promise, encouraging readers to hang in there, enabling *perseverance* to finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (Ephesians 4:13). As William Barclay puts it - Troubles are not meant to make us fall, rather, they are meant to make us soar. They are not sent to defeat us - rather, they are sent that we may defeat them.” Then at the centre of this passage, in verse 5-8, we discover James’ recipe for maturity of life. Already we have seen that James’ recipe for life is that we never allow trials to *abuse* us, but that we use trials as stepping stones to the perfect life. But his recipe not only requires long experience, or stores of knowledge. But what is required is wisdom. Age and experience without wisdom may lead us down a bitter path. Knowledge without wisdom may lead to cynicism. If we are to turn trial into a trail leading to perfection, we need wisdom that is beyond the “wisdom of this world” (1 Corinthians 1:20). At James 3:15 James calls that wisdom earthly, unspiritual, and devilish. What is required, he says, is wisdom from Heaven. This wisdom is also tied into many of James’ other themes, for example the use of the tongue, and so wisdom writings from the Old Testament, as well as Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, have influenced James’ style. Where is such wisdom found? James’

answer is simple. Ask God! Ask God in the confidence that He will not only give, but give generously, and will never remind the asker about previous bounty, or place blame for failure to properly use such gifts (Luke 11:13). However, there are two sides to asking and getting that James also reminds about. But as some familiar advertisements remind us: “conditions apply?” Faith is required. Hebrews 11:6 sets this out clearly. “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that He exists, and that He is a rewarder of those who earnestly seek Him.” Some commentators also think that being double minded in this passage not only relates to entertaining doubt in asking, but also relates to the person who is trying to serve two masters at the same time, as reflected at Matthew 6:24, which speaks of God and Money. Such is unstable as a wind-blown sea. Like John Bunyon’s “Mr Facing-both-ways”, the doubter is doubled-minded, wanting both God and the world. Such a person “should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord.” Riches and security are like the desert flower that can quickly pass away from the desert’s heat, leading finally to the contrast and blessing at the end of this passage in verse 12 - But blessed is the one who perseveres under the heat of trial, because having stood the test, that person will receive the imperishable crown of life, or the crown that is eternal life, that the Lord has promised to those who love him (1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 4:8). With this final blessing and thought, at last we have discovered how we might be able to experience pure joy, in the midst of trials and suffering.

3. Finally, we conclude with a contrast between two kinds of wisdom (James 3:13-18).

Within the book of James, themes that are introduced early in the book are developed at later points. We now find this with our theme of wisdom which we have been looking at back at James 1:5-8. There we were instructed about asking for wisdom should we lack it. Now, James instructs us about the right use of wisdom, amongst those who profess to have such wisdom, because the reality is that there are two types of wisdom – one that comes from Heaven, which is pure, peaceful, and yields a harvest of righteousness – and one that comes from below, which is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. The first which comes from above brings unity, peace, and order to any congregation – the second that comes from below, brings disunity, disorder, and every evil practice. Paul feared that he might find these things at Corinth with its quarrels, selfishness, conceit, and sinful practices at 2 Corinthians 12:20-21. James is therefore saying that you will know true wisdom by its fruit. No mistake about this! In introducing this passage to those who are “wise and understanding” in verse 13, perhaps James was especially addressing the teachers in their midst. Such were to demonstrate such wisdom and understanding by their good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom. People with intellectual gifts are too often

characterized by pride in their own ideas that makes them difficult to get along with. This often leads to bitter envy and *selfish ambition*, which translates a Greek word that Aristotle used to describe the political factions that were convulsing Athens in his day. Rather, one should not boast about having wisdom at all when filled with selfishness and bitter envy. Rather, the truth about Christianity is something that we must not simply understand, but live. Finally the true wisdom that comes from above is similar, in structure at least, to the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, and contains as many fruits or qualities, if we count peace-loving as two qualities rolled into one. Ultimately, the Spirit produces these virtues. The passage then concludes with a word about peace-makers. The harvest or fruit that peace-makers produce is community wide conduct that pleases God. James calls this a harvest of righteousness, where unity replaces disunity, and concern for others replaces selfishness and bitter rivalry. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pronounced a blessing on “peacemakers” at Matthew 5:9 when he said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons and daughters of God.” For after all, Jesus as the Son of God, has reconciled all things unto himself, by making peace through his blood, shed upon the cross of Calvary (Colossians 1:20). And in that marvellous truth, we find truth and hope today.

Conclusion:-

In this passage today, we have been challenged with the possibility of experiencing “pure joy” in tough times. By this James does not suggest that Christians should be glad because they are in trouble, but rather that they should be glad for what they can do with their troubles, as this enables us to develop perseverance, which leads to maturity of life. In this sense, trials may be seen as stepping stones to the perfect life. But in order to achieve this end, what is needed is wisdom. Not the wisdom of this world, but the wisdom that is pure, and comes from above. And if we lack wisdom, we may ask God for it, and when we do, God will give it to us in generous amounts. Let this be our blessing this year, as we come to God in full faith, believing that He exists, and is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Amen.