

Wisdom for Trials – The Christian Skill

James 1:2-8

Introduction

What is wisdom? In English, we use it to refer to the intellectual ability to make good decisions and avoid bad ones. To the ancients (and through much of human history), wisdom was not merely intellectual but was intimately tied to craftsmanship and skill. Moses and Solomon chose “gifted artisans” to whom God had given wisdom so that they would be skilled in constructing His tent and temple (Ex. 36:1, 1 Kings 7:14). Similarly, Ezra had specifically God-given wisdom to oversee the appointment of appropriate magistrates (Ezra 7:25). Biblically, wisdom is not merely intellectual but is also related to particular skills. This should inform how we read this passage in James, for here he urges Christians to practice a skill that is peculiar to Christians.

Count it All Joy

James writes to Christians he loves (1:16) who are scattered, likely because of persecution. He opens his letter with an imperative concerning their persecution or any other trial they face: “Count it all joy.” They are to regard their trials a “*matter of chief joy*” (Manton) (v. 2). With respect to persecution, James here echoes Jesus’ own teaching (Matt. 5:11-12), although James does not seem to limit his imperative to trials of persecution. He leaves the application very wide by saying “various trials.” But why does God require us to regard our trials of various kinds as joy? This does not mean we are required to feel happy amid our trials. Jesus Himself was grieved at the death of His friend Lazarus and as He awaited His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. So why and how are we to count such things as joy?

James tells us. Christians can count their trials as joy because we know that they are not meaningless. In the midst of grief and hardship, we know they have a very specific purpose, which is to grow us up into maturity (v. 3). Trials of all sorts test our faith. Any time you are faced with an inconvenience, a difficulty, a hardship, your faith in the sovereign Lord of all is being tested. In this sense, our faith, our trust in the Father, is like a muscle that must be exercised. We are pushed, stretched, perhaps torn a little as our Father grows us up and strengthens our faith. The testing of our faith produces “steadfastness” or “*fortitude of mind when bearing evils*” (Calvin). James goes on to say that this work of producing steadfastness in the Christian has a culmination, has an end, a final purpose. God gives trials to those He loves so that He might make them mature and complete, lacking nothing (v. 4). “*Why should I start at the plough of my Lord, that maketh deep furrows on my soul? I know He is no idle husbandman; He purposeth a crop*” (Rutherford). The question for the Christian facing a trial is, do you see God at work? And if you do not in the moment, can you trust that He is at work (Rom. 8:28, Gen. 50:20) and that He is good? Can you rejoice in His goodness?

Wisdom for Trials

James knows that this is hard. James gives this as a command, but he knows it is something we must grow into. It is hard to see God’s hand in all that goes on in our lives. And so, James urges that if we lack wisdom, we should seek it from the Lord (v. 5). As said previously, wisdom is not merely an intellectual capacity. But, it is also not only related to skills and abilities. Wisdom is also tied to morality. True wisdom is grounded on the worship of the

one true God (Prov. 9:10), and a rejection of God's words removes wisdom from the wise (Jer. 8:9). James here intends by wisdom *"skill to bear afflictions"* (Manton). When you are beset by a trial and you think you cannot handle it, you cannot see God at work in it, your faith is being tested to the limit—then, James says, ask God for the skill to count it joy, to trust that He is at work for your good. God gives us trials to make us complete, and part of that maturation is teaching us to actually turn to Him. *"God's wisdom suffereth the creatures to lack, because dependence begetteth observance; if we were not forced to hang upon heaven, and live upon the continued supplies of God, we would not care for him"* (Manton).

So, James urges that we ask wisdom of God who gives generously, with the expectation that He will give it (v. 5). Note that James does not urge us to ask that God would take away the trial, although we know from other Scriptures that this can be appropriate. Rather, he urges that we ask God for the skill to faithfully endure the trial. Why? Because coming through the trial means that we are maturing, moving closer to that final goal that God has set for us. When we ask for this wisdom, God will give it without reproach, not criticizing us because we ought to know better. But, we must ask in faith. Doubting God's handiwork or His goodness makes us double-minded, unstable like Peter on the waves when he took his eyes off Christ. We become like the waves themselves, tossed about by our trials (v. 6, 8). In fact, James warns that if we ask doubting God's work and His goodness and His timing, then we should not expect to receive the wisdom that will enable us to be steadfast (v. 7). So do not waver. Remain steadfast in simple obedience to God's Word, trusting Him in the midst of the trial. Ask, seek, and knock in faith for this wisdom, this skill to count it all joy, knowing that God is at work to make you steadfast and complete. And by faith remember that it is a skill that comes through practice, through more opportunities to count it all joy.

Conclusion

James' imperative to count it all joy when we encounter various trials is grounded on two things. First, God is sovereign and sovereignly good over all things. He is at work in everything, even to the numbering of the hairs on your head (Matt. 10:30). Because of this, Christians can rest in His providence even when the circumstances are hard. Second, Jesus Christ has already won. There is no trial that undoes this gospel truth. Do not let the evils and hardships of this world take away your joy in Christ and in His victory over you and the world. He said: "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." Jesus has conquered sin and death. Christian joy comes from knowing that God is at work in us and in the world to consummate the victory of Christ. Christian joy is one of the Spirit's weapons to change the world, but first it begins by changing you in the face of your circumstances. We do not do this alone, but rather, we follow our Lord Jesus who endured the cross, counting it joy, knowing the inheritance the Father had for Him on the other side (Heb. 12:1-2). So, in all your getting, get wisdom to count it all joy in the face of whatever trial your heavenly Father sees fit to place in front of you. "I will bring [them] through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'This is My people'; and each one will say, 'The LORD is my God'" (Zech. 13:21).