

# A Guide For Non-Conformists

## WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

If you've ever worked on a tapestry or any sort of weaving, you know that what you see on the one side looks like a tangled mess of threads and layers. And our lives feel like that. Sometimes we feel like the events of our lives are clashing colours, woven together in a strange way that doesn't make any sense.

We only see our lives from down below – the underneath, if you would – but God sees from above. And what we don't realize now will one day be revealed to be a beautiful tapestry – threads of gold and silver, preparing for us the royal rule he has prepared for us.

But as we wait for that day, life feels very messy. The trials that come in to our lives are hard to understand. It's one thing to be the one saying, "Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds!" It's another thing to joyfully embrace the upheaval. You can have all of the knowledge in your head, but when the trials come, we actually realize we don't know as much as we thought. And if we do, we will find out that the trials will increasingly humble us. Trials are disorienting by their very nature.

James does not write as a distant, remote, cool and detached theologian. He writes as one who knows about the trials of life. And he understands that when we go through hardships, we don't know what we need because we don't understand what God is doing. Because trials are disorienting, our lack is revealed. King Jehoshaphat would pray, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (2 Chron. 20:12).

Trials are disorienting. Instinctively, we ask questions like, "Why me? How long? What's the point?" What these questions reveal is our need to...

### Ask for Wisdom

James begins by saying, "If any of you lacks wisdom..." which is a humble way of putting it because we all lack wisdom. We all need help when we go through trials. So James encourages us to ask.

What is wisdom? I used to define wisdom as "living skillfully." But after preaching through the book of Proverbs, I came to see how deficient that definition is. The Old Testament definition of wisdom is living skillfully by living in repentance and faith. Wisdom wants to point you to the good life, and the good life is living in light of God's commands and ways. As Proverbs would say, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10).

When we ask, James gives us a lot of motivation to ask God for the ability to live skillfully with repentance and faith. Let's consider three motivating factors James gives us so that we would ask.

### A Guide for Non-Conformists: Living Skillfully When You Feel Lacking – Jas. 1:5-8

First, James says we should ask God *who gives generously*. Literally, James says “let him ask of the giving God.” So often, people have a view of God that is tight-fisted, that he is stingy, that he is a withholding God. But the description that James has of God is a giving God, a God who gives generously.

How generous is God? The Bible’s description of God’s generosity is explained in the New Testament. In the most famous verse of the Bible, it says this: God loved the world in this way: that he gave his only begotten Son (Jn. 3:16). Jesus would say it like this, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11). In Luke’s version, Jesus says what the Father will give is the Holy Spirit (Lk. 11:13). Or Paul could say, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).

The consistent description of God in the New Testament is one of being generous in giving himself to us. He is not hesitant, reluctant, or miserly. He is willing, eager, and generous. So when you lack, ask!

The second reason we should ask God is that he gives *to all*. God does not play favourites when it comes to need. Those who are needy and ask, those who humble themselves and ask, God is so generous. God’s indiscriminate giving is contrasted in chapter 2 with those who play favourites to those who are perceived to be wealthy. When you’re disoriented by the trials, God’s gracious gift is to all. So we should ask because God’s generous gifts are not reserved for the elite or the ones who have it all figured out.

The final reason James gives for asking is that God gives generously to all *without reproach*. What does that mean? Most simply put, God gives without insult. God does not say to you, “What? You’re asking me again? I can’t believe it. After all I’ve given to you, you come back and are asking for more?” There is a way to give that is belittling and there is a way to give that is empowering. When we come to God and we ask of him, the way that he gives is with lavish grace.

This is the way that Paul will describe God’s giving in Ephesians 1 – he gives out of the riches of his grace and he lavishes it upon us. God is not stingy. He is not keeping a record. He isn’t asking you what happened to the wisdom and grace he gave you last time you found yourself in a trial. He is generous, giving to all who humbly ask, and without any record of how much he has given. He just keeps on giving without criticism, but out of generous grace.

This is the nature of the gospel. This is the God that we discovered when we first came to him in our sin, our sorrow, our pain. He hasn’t changed. If anything, we’ve only begun to discover how radically generous he actually is!

## **Believe and Don’t Doubt**

### **A Guide for Non-Conformists: Living Skillfully When You Feel Lacking – Jas. 1:5-8**

The next thing that James tells us to do is to ask in faith, without doubt. But if we are honest, which one of us can say that we've never had doubts? What does James mean? Does that mean that if we are uncertain, unsure, or afraid, God will withhold wisdom from us? Let's be honest – in the middle of a trial, the last thing that I need to be figuring out is if I'm asking without doubt.

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, there's a favourite scene of mine towards the end of the movie. Indy is looking for the Holy Grail so that he can save his father's life. He knows that he's on the right path, but suddenly he comes to a dark, deep ravine. He doesn't know what to do and says, "Impossible! No one can jump this! It's a leap of faith!" Eventually, mustering up all the courage he can, he takes a step forward only to discover a secret path camouflaged by the darkness.

This isn't what James means – he's not asking us to step out into the unknown. The doubt that he has in question isn't a spiritual question or a struggle of the heart. He defines this kind of doubt: it's double-mindedness. It's the kind of person who is fickle, who is hedging their bets. It's the person who wants to believe God and have some other security blanket.

In the Old Testament, this double-mindedness was often seen in the kings of Israel. God had called them to trust him in the face of political opposition. But many of the kings of Israel formed political alliances with other nations. And the result was disastrous.

This is what it means to be double-minded and unstable. It's the kind of suspicion that God won't come through for you, so you better shore up your options with something else in case God fails.

This kind of doubt is called "unstable." It's like trying to make your plans with one foot firmly rooted in something that is sure, but another foot planted on something that is moving, just in case the firm foot gives way. James says this will not result in wisdom being given.

There is something very important that we need to understand here. There is a difference between receiving wisdom and feeling wise. There have been many times in the face of trials I have asked God to give me wisdom. And you know what? I haven't had a light suddenly turn on that enables me to get out of the darkness easily. I haven't known what to do instantly. I haven't felt more confident like I've got it all figured out.

Rather, so many times I've asked God for wisdom and it's still been hard. I haven't seen the path across the chasm like Indiana Jones. But here's what I know – God has never let go of me. He's never let me down. When I've asked, he's kept me by his power from stupid mistakes. He's allowed me to walk through the darkness without being beaten down or destroyed. He's never left me. It's felt dark. It's felt uncertain. I've not known what I am doing at the time. But I can look back and go, "Wow – God really guided me through that!"

The hymn writer Dora Greenwell would write about this experience. She would describe her inability to see but be confident in God's ability. In the face of trials, she could write these words:

I am not skilled to understand  
What God has willed, what God has planned;  
I only know at his right hand  
Stands One who is my Saviour.  
I take him at His Word indeed;  
"Christ died to save me," this I read  
And in my heart I find the need  
For him to be my Saviour.

- Dora Greenwell, "I am not skilled to Understand"

In other words, we can look back to the very start of our faith. When sin and death and hell overwhelmed us, when we felt like we didn't deserve a second chance, when we faced the trial of how we would proceed, we can look back and see how God gave his only Son so that we might not die but have eternal life.

Are you facing a difficulty and you don't know what to do? It's okay. God will carry you through the trial. He has before. He will again. You don't have to have it all figured out. He's got it. And he's got you.