

Text: James 1:5-8

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Title: Scattered but very stable

The path that guarantees receiving God's Wisdom for your life as a Christian scattered among the world

1. Ask the giver of wisdom (5a)

2. Accept what He gives (5b)

3. Believe what He gives (6a)

4. Discern other influences (6b)

5. Reaffirm your Lord (7)

6. Transform your ways (8)

Open your Bibles to the letter of James, written for Christians scattered throughout this world. We are in a battlefield. A battlefield where everything is honed in on destroying our faith. We, though, stand stable and settled, fully **assured of the wisdom of God**.

God's wisdom is given so freely, that a simple request for it will make it yours! God's wisdom is given in such simplicity that a simple faith in Him is sufficient for anyone and everyone to understand and live it. God's wisdom is given without any difficult terms and conditions.

And yet, doubts in our very soul abound; do they not? We waver. Sometimes it feels like we're simply being tossed from one thing to another, not sure where to touch ground again. Or we are so sure of ourselves, but still wrong, and we only discover it when it seems too late.

God's wisdom is readily available for the taking. By itself, it is simple enough to understand. It never changes and is always clearly presented to us. Why then, do we still waver? Why do we still get tossed about? Why do we still persist in our own ways? Why, to use the word in our text today, do we still doubt?

Before we get to our text in the book of James today, I want to give you a brief theology of doubt. A brief theology of why we doubt, why we waver, why we don't always know the right thing to do, or why, even if we are sure that we are right, why we are still so often still wrong, and therefore seemingly perpetually immature. The word "doubt" is a good summary word for all that.

Doubt is a strange thing. It really makes no sense. It is what we do, when we *know* what is true, but for some reason, don't readily believe it. Doubt is different to ignorance and arrogance. Arrogance says it will do whatever it wants irrespective of the truth. Ignorance doesn't know what is true. But doubt *knows*, just doesn't embrace it wholeheartedly. It wavers. It both, wants to, and doesn't want to.

You experience this in some of the world's ways of dealing with ethical conundrums. You know it is wrong to lie, but you also know that the consequences for telling the truth might be severe; what do you do? You are not ignorant, you are also not arrogant, you *know* what is right, but you hesitate, waiting perhaps for a miraculous escape out of the predicament.

The world further obscures confidence in the truth with theories like "the greater good", or "the lesser of two evils", as though Truth sometimes contradicts itself and you need to oppose the one to choose the other.

In the past few months we've all wrestled with these kind of issues. Especially the earlier levels of lock-down, right?! Can I deliver my products, open my salon, meet a friend for coffee, travel across town to a preferred grocery shop, drop of a meal, or escape for a weekend holiday—we had those discussions, didn't we?!

We *still* have some of those niggling, doubting questions. Can I drive to help my family with a crisis after the lock-down curfew? You know your responsibility to both family and government, but you sre doubting which trumps which.

Can I come to church to obey the law of fellowship, even if I cannot sing out loud in the direct worship-of-God part of the service? Again, you know your one-another duties, and you love singing loudly to your Lord, but you're doubting in your conscience over which would be worse to abstain from.

Do my children count as part of the ten people allowed over for a visit at my home? I know how to count to ten, but I also know that my family by itself is already six, so, if they are included, that doesn't give much room for beneficial interaction with family, friends, and neighbours.

You see, doubt is like that. It is conflicted between two things. It is informed enough about each side not to be completely naive, but at the same time, it clearly doesn't know enough on how to deal with these things to be crystal clear about it all. So eventually we settle on one over the other, perhaps still a bit uneasy about it, or we convince ourselves of one even if we never actually got to the bottom of it all.

On top of that, sometimes we even value doubt, as a cover-up for mediocrity and indecisiveness.

What does God say about doubt? We can start perhaps with the story of Peter who stepped out of the boat to walk on the water like Jesus did, and then sank because of doubt? In **Matthew 14 (verses 28-33)** we read how he was rebuked for "little faith" and "doubt". Those two go together—"little faith", and "doubt". Peter's faith said, "I have clarity on what it true about Jesus and about water, and can walk!" But then doubt said, "I'm torn between the truth about Jesus and the truth about water, and therefore I'll choose one and neglect the other." He almost

drowned because of doubt! The first bit of theology about doubt is that **Doubt isn't safe!**

In **Mark 11 (20-25; Matt 21:18-22)** Jesus cursed the fig tree, which obediently withered, but you remember how the next day the disciples expressed surprise about the state of the dead tree. Jesus replied with the same double-barrelled warning "Have faith, don't doubt". He proceeded to say that mountains can jump into the sea for one who "does not doubt, but believes". It wasn't a lesson on mountain removing; it was a lesson on God's word that *always* comes to pass, so don't be slow to obey it even if it means forgiving a very personal offence because God said so. Add to that the disciples, being surprised by the resurrection of Jesus (**Matt 28:16-20, Luk 24:36-49**), proving that although they knew the Scriptures, and had heard Jesus' own predictions, they still didn't really think that is how life was going to work. Like Thomas, we trust our own eyes more than we trust God's word. Such accounts teach us a second lesson about doubt. **Doubt exposes how subtly we distrust God's Word.** We *know* it, but we don't really expect it, actually, to be true.

In **Romans 14**, another faith-doubt connection is made for us. It is all about issues that we feel very strongly about, but are not clearly sin or righteousness. Our consciences, meant to be informed guardians of our behaviour, are sadly often biased towards one or other extreme. Subsequently, division exists between Christians where humble love should thrive instead. A mature faith is able to place *all* the truths of Scripture next to each other and honour it *all*, but doubt, this is our **third lesson on doubt, doubt always emphasises the wrong thing.** It over emphasises one thing to the exclusion of another. That is

what happened in Romans 14 and often happens in our own relationships too. But truth is always all-encompassing, consistent in everything. Doubt, though, always plays one truth against another, emphasising one to make it overrule the other.

The little book of **Jude** deals extensively with doubt too. It has something to say about the *source* of doubt, the *friends* of doubt, the *result* of doubt, and thankfully also, the *solution* to doubt. But to take what is perhaps the most striking lesson on doubt from Jude, we could add as our **fourth lesson on doubt**, that **doubt attempts to vindicate your desires**. Doubt tries to give your desires a voice too, whereas faith simply obeys the truth.

Doubt is a reality for us as Christians, perhaps more so than it is a reality for unbelievers; that is because we *know* the Truth! Doubt knows the truth, but is divided in oneself. It knows, but isn't sure. It believes, but not wholeheartedly. Personal expectations and desires still pull us aside every time. We need to overcome doubt with Truth.

If there are four basic truths about doubt, it is that doubt isn't safe, doubt exposes how subtly we distrust God's Word, doubt always emphasises the wrong thing, and doubt attempts to vindicate your desires.

I say this things rather pointedly and seriously, because this was in one way or another at the heart of many a conversation that we as believers wrestled through in the past few months. This is not a philosophical discussion or some ethical debate; it is daily, weekly, Christian living in a world where we are a minority, and where even, within ourselves, our desires often cause trouble.

How then do we wisen up? Just pray more? Just have more faith? Well, yes!, but probably not in the way that you typically think of praying more or having more faith.

Doubt is overcome with conviction in Truth. Foolish desires are overcome by Divine wisdom. And our next passage in the letter of **James**, to Christians scattered across this world, will tell us how better to live in this world.

James 1:1 is our big heading: Christians scattered across this world. **James 1:2-4** was about meeting trials with joy, knowing that we will be perfected in every part, not still lacking in some areas of our lives.

You might well respond though, that you still feel lacking. **Verses 2-4** were mind-shifting, joyful and purposeful, and easy to fall in love with, but then Monday came, and with it some personal fears, doubts, and concerns. Therefore **v. 5** begins this way, **READ James 1:5-8**.

These verses are **the path to God's wisdom** for Christians scattered across this world. These verses are going to place the *practice of prayer* and the *exercise of faith* in their right place so we can walk clearly in God's wisdom for this life. These verses are going to mature our faith to overcome the immaturity of doubt. These verses are going to focus our eyes off our own ways, and onto God's ways.

By way of moving us along through each part of this passage, we are given **six signposts on the road to God's wisdom for your life. Six signposts on the road to God's wisdom for your life as a Christian scattered in this world.**

The **first signpost on the path that guarantees God's Wisdom for us** as Christians in this world is to ..

ASK THE GIVER OF WISDOM (5A)

READ verse 5a. This is no surprise to us, "first pray". "First pray" is perhaps the most foundational practise of the godly. I often think of Nehemiah, who when questioned unexpectedly by the king about a detailed plan, immediately answered the king, but still "first prayed". **Nehemiah 2:4-5** records what is probably the shortest prayer in all of Scripture: "the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king," Do what needs to be done in the moment, but if Nehemiah could "first pray" in the pause of a conversation, then we can always "first pray" in our lives too.

But note, it is "first pray", not "just pray". Prayer for the sake of prayer is not the point. If you want wisdom for life, don't just pray and see how things work out or how you then feel about it, this prayer for wisdom is a very specific kind of prayer. It is probably not a very long prayer. This particular prayer is also not one of those persistent prayers. Rather, it is a simple request to the right God, for something that is easily given.

Before we get to the "and it will be given him" part, look at how God is revealed to us in this verse. **READ verse 5a.** There is one description of God, and then three sub-descriptions of that description. The one description of God is that God is the "God who gives"—God is the giving-kind-of-God. God is a giving God—perhaps one of the most obvious truth about God. God gives each life and breath. God gives each some sunshine and rain. God gave His Son. God gives the Holy Spirit. God gives daily food. In fact, look down to **verse 17**. Here James reveals that if

you ever received or experienced anything good in this world, then God was the source of it, and He gave that expression of goodness to you as a present—a gift! If it weren't for the world's ungrateful hearts, the most obvious truth about God each day would be that He is a *giving* God.

Back in **verse 4** though, there are three specific descriptions of God's giving nature. Some translations change the order of these three things for proper English, so let's stick to the ESV order for the sake of staying with one another.

The **first description of God's giving nature** is that He gives "generously". Perhaps a better word to keep in your mind here is the word "**simply**". Generously is better English in a giving context, but "simply" is really the point. God gives simply. No second-thoughts, no divided interests, not conditions, no reservations, without hesitation. God gives wisdom *simply*, or ... God *simply*-gives wisdom.

We don't often believe this. We agonise over the prayer for wisdom. We delay our actions often for days on end, believing that our prayers about our decision are not yet producing the conviction, or peace, or clarity that we need. But God gives wisdom simply. It isn't complicated. I think we sometimes confuse ourselves unnecessarily about the role of prayer in living wisely. I think we sometimes consider prayer to be the key to wise living. Instead, *wisdom* is the key to wise living, and prayer is simply the means to obtaining that wisdom. God's very nature, is to give wisdom simply because it was requested.

The **next description of God's giving nature** adds to this simple, straightforward giving of wisdom. **Verse 5** says God gives "to all". God gives **indiscriminately**. If you ask, you get.

If others ask, they get too! God's wisdom is not something to seek earnestly, or long for wishfully, or search for diligently. Just ask! It might take a while to *understand* all the wisdom of God for this life, but it doesn't take much to *receive* it. Whoever asks, receives. This is the same as we see in **Proverbs 8**, where wisdom is personified as walking around looking for you, calling out to you, making itself available to the slightest interested party.

God is a giving God. God gives wisdom very simply. God gives wisdom to all.

The **third description of God's giving nature** is that He gives "without reproach". This description holds hands with the other two—they all convey the same unified picture. Without reproach means without strings attached, without deceptive fine print, without ulterior motives, without discrimination based on your worthiness, without ever demanding it back. God doesn't give like the banks with their endless legal paperwork, interest rates, and enslaving advertising. God doesn't give expecting some favour in return, or to guilt you in some way. God is the good kind of giver. Generously, freely, abundantly, lavishly, liberally, simply. To all, big and small, rich and poor. Without even a hint of vindictiveness; eagerly with His whole heart.

These three descriptions will be contrasted later by how we often are, so understand this well. We vacillate; we are torn between different motives and agendas; we make decisions, then doubt them; we know the truth, but still don't always obey. But God is the very opposite of us. God gives with a single-minded generosity, keeping it simple and uncomplicated, removing any and all pretext and agendas. God gives, simply

because He is a giving God, and because you asked. **If you want the wisdom to live life well, then simply ask the One Whose wisdom it is, for His nature makes Him simply give.**

That is the **first signpost on the path to God's wisdom** for your stability in this world.

The **second signpost** might sound a bit redundant, but it deserves our attention, for although James mentions it almost in passing, I think there is something very specific that he has in mind. The **second signpost on the path that guarantees God's Wisdom for us** as Christians in this world is to ..

ACCEPT WHAT HE GIVES (5B)

Yes, a little obvious if you asked the generous giver, but it deserves to be said. **READ v. 5a+b.**

We often skip this signpost altogether and keep circling back to the previous one of asking. If you are faced with a situation that needs Divine wisdom, then ask God, and then *take what He gives!* Like most prayers of petition, we ask, not to *make* God give, as much as we ask because of our great need. So also, ask for wisdom, because you sense your need of it, not because you are trying to persuade God to give it. God is such a giving God, than simply by acknowledging your need of wisdom assures you of it. You already have it! It *will* be given you!

James doesn't explain how it is given, or what it looks or feels like—at least not here, but he has woven the wisdom of God throughout this letter for us. **Verse 12** refers to *God's promises* as the wisdom for enduring in trials. **Verse 18** speaks of God's *will* and "*the word of truth.*" as the wisdom for living as God's

creatures. Verse 21 says the wisdom to overcome sin is found in "*the implanted word*". Verse 22 refers to wise living as being "doers of the *word*". Verse 25 says we are to look into the perfect *law*, the *law* of liberty. You get the point don't you?

So, if you lack wisdom to deal with life as a Christian, then "pray first", asking the giver of wisdom for what you are lacking. Then, accept what He gives, read it, do it!

There is a reason why the most mature Christian is often also the most decisive and confident Christian. It is not a self-made confidence, for there remains a deep awareness of God being the only giver of Wisdom. It is a God-made confidence, where God's Word is received, known, believed, and obeyed without even a second thought. Oh, much time might be spend studying God's given Word to build that confidence, but already, from the very beginning, there is a wholehearted acceptance of God's Word as the only accepted book of Wisdom for this life.

If you lack wisdom, if you are doubting, then get to God's Wisdom as fast as you can. First **ask the actual giver** of Wisdom for wisdom, then **accept** His given Word.

The **third signpost on the path that guarantees God's Wisdom for us** as Christians in this world is to ..

BELIEVE WHAT HE GIVES (6A)

It is easy to *accept* what God gives, for all you need is to lift up your Bible and read it. But I'm sure all of us are Bible readers, and yet we still doubt at times, or nonetheless settle on a completely misguided course of action. It is because, as doubt always does, we *know*, we just don't have that firm a conviction that it is actually true and reliable and trustworthy, or we do

have a firm conviction, but it was still too tainted by our own personal beliefs. **Believe what God gave.**

READ verse 6a. This is really the centre-point of this passage, and the tipping point from all the truths about God and God's gift of wisdom, to the double-minded, doubting instability of our own ways. "Ask in faith, with no doubting". I mentioned the significance of the "faith, no doubting" theology earlier. Here the rubber hits the road. If you want to stay on the path of God's wisdom, with faith in God's Word, and no more doubting, then **accept God's given Word**, and **believe** that it is really true, and right, and good, and perfect, and trustworthy.

To put in in the form of an idiom, with God's Word, you can put all your eggs in one basket. Stop wondering if the eggs will be safe—it's *God's* wisdom. Stop moving some eggs to your own basket—God's Word is just sooo much better. Don't entertain the world's wisdom. Don't imitate your friends' opinions. If you, being a Christian, want to survive this world with your faith held high, then take God's Word and just assume it is always right and never wrong. With God, you can put all your eggs in His basket. You do so by realising your need for wisdom, asking God for His wisdom, accepting His given Word, and **believing it all.**

The **fourth signpost on the path that guarantees God's Wisdom for us** as Christians in this world is to ..

DISCERN OTHER INFLUENCES (6B)

Up to know it is entirely possible to smile and nod in agreement, and still end up disagreeing with everyone else who is also smiling and nodding in agreement. Just because we are

all Christians, all ask God for wisdom, and all accept God's Word and believe it, just because we all do all that, doesn't mean that we are all actually following God's wisdom.

Some are still praying for wisdom as though it is evading them. Some are reading the same Bible, but making vastly different conclusions. Some are forging ahead, but in a completely wrong direction. We find ourselves eager to do life God's way, but still being pulled back to a place of doubting or false assurance by what seems to be an endless array of distracting forces.

It is those other influences that need to be addressed. To accept God's Word is not just a positive addition to our lives. It is one of those additions that replaces whatever else is present. Just like getting married *again* presupposes that your spouse either died or was divorced, so accepting God's Wisdom for Christian living presupposes that your own ways and the ways of the world have died or been divorced from you. Discern what those influences are, and divorce them!

READ James 1:6. This is a great picture. Especially with many of James' readers probably being somewhat fearful of the sea. God's Word is an immovable rock. On it alone, you will be stable, firm. But, add some other influences in your life, and you will be no better than the wave of the sea—up, down, up, down, crashing, only to rise again for another crash, blown into a big spray by a gust of wind. That is the description of a man who has God's Wisdom in his hands, but is still being driven by other influences.

You read the Bible and you know what to do, but still feel pressured to do something different—perhaps because of family, friends, peers, or habit. Or, you read the Bible and you know

what to do, but then you find something else in the Bible that seems to contradict it, and instead of getting help on obeying *all* of Scripture, you prioritise Bible verses as though one can trump another. You are like a wave, driven and tossed, not firmly founded on God's Word. Sometimes you might even think you are on the rock, strongly affirming your faith in God's Word and obeying it, but never realising that you only found the verses that agree with your conclusions and never listened to the correction of another—that too is a wave, driven by your convictions and decisions, at times in clear conflict with God's Word.

Put all your eggs in God's basket, and learn to identify the other baskets that sometimes make you second-guess, compromise, or misuse God's basket. It might, as I said, be family, friends, culture or peers. It might be the advertised values of this world. It might be your own subtle desires for something else. It might be your habits and convictions. It might even just be the fact that you are hesitant in accepting correction because it might require of you to grow in an area that you think you've got figured out already.

Going from a wave on the sea to a Christian on the rock of God's Wisdom requires discernment, honest accountability, sincere counsel, one-another exhortations. Instead of being the wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind, get back to God's wisdom and never budge again.

The **fifth signpost on the path that guarantees God's Wisdom for us** as Christians in this world is to ..

REAFFIRM YOUR LORD (7)

READ James 1:7. God gives wisdom to all who know they are lacking wisdom and ask Him for it. But a doubter receives nothing. It doesn't mean he didn't ask. It doesn't mean God didn't give. It just means he didn't receive, for he is still too driven by other influences. So **reaffirm your Lord**.

Verse 5 says *God* gives, here the giver is called "the Lord"—the master, the one who gets to say what you do. No one can have two masters, for one will always get neglected for the other. You cannot be wise in your own eyes *and* claim to fear the Lord. You cannot walk in the ways of the world *and* in the ways of the Lord. If you want God's wisdom, then say no to all else, and affirm that He will indeed by your Lord. Don't for a moment presume on God's wisdom while still going your own way—it doesn't work that way—you'll receive nothing from the *Lord* if He is not *your* Lord.

These last two sign-posts of **discern other influences** and **reaffirm your Lord**, are merely the warning signs for the last **signpost on the path that guarantees God's wisdom** for us as Christians scattered on this world. **Verse 8** is one of the clearest denunciations of a man who claims to know God's Word but persists in his own ways. To put the emphasis where James puts it, but phrase it constructively like all the other points, the **final signpost on the path that guarantees God's Wisdom for us** as Christians in this world is to ..

TRANSFORM YOUR WAYS (8)

READ James 1:8. This is the very opposite of **verse 5**. God's will is singularly predictable; man's soul is divided between truth,

desires, habits, and fears. God's ways are indiscriminate; man's thoughts are inconsistent—firm in one area perhaps, but weak in a dozen other ways. God's has no hidden motives, unexpected terms and conditions, or personal agendas; man's ways are tainted by pride, selfishness, anger, greed, vindictiveness, jealousy, ... fill in the blank.

Throughout the history of the world, God has made known to man that there are only two ways to live, and the one excludes the other—God's way, or your own ways. And throughout the history of the world, man has tried to mix those two together, as though there is some merit in each. There is no merit in your ways! There is no mixing of God's ways with your ways! It always ends in disaster—ask Adam and Eve!

Proverbs 3:5 "Trust in the LORD with *all* your heart, and do *not* lean on your own understanding." Your heart should be like God's—singularly engaged on God's ways, with no part deviating elsewhere. Your understanding is not reliable enough to support the weight of this life! **Proverbs 3:7** "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and depart from evil." As Christians living scattered in this world, we tend to want to walk with one foot in the Word of God, and with one foot in the ways that we like to do things. That is foolish! It is like a kid eat ice-cream and dirt at the same time, thinking it will taste better.

Double-minded, divided, hypocritical, inconsistent, ... like an *unbeliever*! Unstable, restless, unsettled, fickle, ... like an unbeliever. Or to use the most condemning phrase of them all "his *own* ways", in other words, not at all following God's wisdom.

If you want to have *God's* wisdom, you will need to give up *your own* ways. You need to stop thinking that you are so right. You need to stop doing things the way you always do them. You need to stop doing what you like most. You need to stop looking to the world for insight.

By way of replacement, you need, to use the most common command in the book of Proverbs, to start *listening* to the godly who have, as Hebrews 5:14 says, "their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil". You need to embrace correction. You need to seek God's grace. You need to set your heart fully on the wisdom of God and never look back.

This verse, [James 1:8](#), is written *to* us who believe, but the vocabulary is actually unbeliever-vocabulary. [TURN to James 4](#) for more of these theme. [READ James 4:4](#). The word "double-minded" is used again a little further in [READ James 4:8](#).

This is why we need the book of James. It shows us how to draw near to God, ask for His wisdom, and cleanse our hearts from all the worldly influences we all-too-easily adopt.

Trials produce in us a maturity that touches every little area of our lives. But if you still lack the wisdom needed to deal with something that comes up in your life as a Christian in this world, then **ask the giver of wisdom**, for He gives His wisdom very readily. Then **accept what He gives** in His perfect law of liberty, and **believe what He gives**, knowing that every word given is truth. **Discern** that you might still well be driven and tossed by **other influences**, perhaps even in ways that you are not even aware of. Reaffirm, always **reaffirm that Jesus is Lord**, His Word is truth, and all that He has said you will do. Go

then, with a confidence in God's wisdom, informing all doubts with truth, overcoming all double-mindedness with wholeheartedness, and **transform your ways**.

Amen.