

What Is Wisdom and How Do I Get It?

An angel appears at a faculty meeting and tells the dean that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, the Lord will reward him with his choice of either infinite wealth, wisdom, or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean picks infinite wisdom.

"Done!" says the angel and disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. All eyes are now riveted on the dean, who sits surrounded by a faint halo of light. Finally, one of his colleagues whispers, "Say something."

The dean looks at them and says, "I should have taken the money."¹

What value do you place on wisdom? In fact, what is wisdom and why should any of us want it?

Today we come to a fascinating and incredibly timely passage, considering the list of local and even worldwide problems we face, which all seem to be completely unsolvable. James, the author of this book and the half-brother of Jesus, points us to the only path that will lead us to any real solutions—the path of godly wisdom. So first, let's begin with a biblical definition.

I. What Is Wisdom?

Theodore Levitt of Harvard Business School says, "Experience comes from what we've done. Wisdom comes from what we've done badly." That's partly true but not a full biblical definition of wisdom. First of all, biblical wisdom is not synonymous with knowledge. It includes knowledge but it's much more than that. Knowledge is something you work for; it's something you can attain through effort and intense concentration. Some people are extremely fortunate in that they are gifted with incredible abilities to retain knowledge. Have you ever known anyone who has a photographic memory? They read a chapter in a textbook once and—BINGO!—got it all memorized. You read it five times and can't remember the title!

But that's the knowledge game and there are rewards in that game. Knowledge gets you good grades, good grades get you into a good college, and a college degree gets you a good job. But there's one thing that knowledge will not get you. It will not tell you what to DO with all that knowledge. That's the job of wisdom. Wisdom, in our most elite colleges, is in short supply.

Sam Bankman-Fried, Caroline Ellison, and Sam Trabucco all graduated from elite universities: two from M.I.T. and one from Stanford. They became co-CEO's of FTX, a cryptocurrency exchange. But in December of 2022, all three were arrested for committing massive securities and wire fraud. Thousands of people lost millions of dollars because of the unwise decisions of this trio of "Whiz Kids". How could three young adults, who one year earlier had appeared on Forbes 30 under 30 listing of the most promising young leaders in our country, be guilty of massive fraud? They had great knowledge but zero wisdom.

According to the Bible, wisdom and knowledge do not come from the same source. Knowledge comes from human effort. Wisdom comes only from God. So, if you want wisdom, your massive IQ will not help you. If you want wisdom, your enormous capacity for hard work will not help you. Why? Because wisdom cannot be earned. Wisdom can only be received. It comes from God. It comes as a gift. James is affirming this in verse 5:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. (James 1:5)

The Hebrew word for “wisdom” is *hokmah*, which isn’t just “thinking clearly or logically.” We tend to define wisdom as just “thinking right” but the Hebrew word includes “doing right.” This word is used, for example, to describe the craftsmen who worked on the temple or the wits of seasoned sailors who knew how to use the wind. In Proverbs, “wisdom” signifies skillful living—the ability to make wise choices and live successfully according to morally right standards. The one who lives this way produces things of lasting value to God and to their community. ²

Dr. D.A. Hubbard, former Director of Biblical Studies at Westmont College, writes: Wisdom in the fullest sense belongs to God alone. (Job 12:13, Is. 31:2) ... The universe and man are products of His creative wisdom ... Natural and historical processes are governed by His wisdom ... God in His grace must reveal it if man is going to grasp it at all ... Even wisdom derived from [our] natural abilities ... is a gracious gift, because God’s creative activity makes such wisdom possible. ³

Many of you know the story of Solomon, the son of King David, who, when he became king of Israel, asked for help from God. Listen to the actual conversation between Solomon and God. Solomon prays:

“And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father ... Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?”

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, “Because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, (health, wealth, success) but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind ...” (1 Kings 3:7-12)

So, biblical wisdom is both thinking and acting like God. Solomon asked for “understanding to discern what is right,” not what is easiest, not what would produce the greatest profit, not what would give him the most fame. No, Solomon asked for “understanding to discern what is right.” Sam Bankman-Fried, Caroline Ellison, and Sam Trabucco were highly educated. But their high-level education did not include knowing God, which deprived them of wisdom. Biblical wisdom is thinking and acting like God.

Which leads us to the next logical question: “If real wisdom is not something I can acquire through my own efforts, then ...

II. How Can I Get Wisdom?

Well, James already said that we just ask, right? Yes-s-s-s, but in verse 6 James says there’s a hitch.

But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. (James 1:6)

Now, what is this saying? First, let me point out what this is NOT saying. This is not a blanket promise that no matter what you ask for, you will receive it if you just believe hard enough! It’s also not warning that if you doubt for even a second, God will cancel your order. So, this isn’t saying that you can ask for anything—a new car, a new house, a new spouse! Anything ... and it will be yours! Just don’t doubt! Have you heard any TV preachers say this? That’s not what this passage says! How do I know?

First of all, this passage is speaking specifically about how to acquire wisdom. James is not talking about acquiring a new car or a new house or anything other than wisdom. Secondly,

he's talking about asking "in faith," which means there are boundaries around your asking. To be "in" something means you are bound in some way, correct? It's like going to a restaurant and the waitress comes to your table and says, "So, what can I get for you tonight?"

And you reply, "I'd like the sardine sandwich."

And she says, "Excuse me but, um, I don't believe that's on our menu."

And you say, "Oh no, it's right here, see?"

The waitress looks at it and says, "You wrote that in!"

You say, "Yeah, but now it's on the menu."

And she patiently says, "No, only our chef decides what's on our menu, we don't serve sardine sandwiches in our restaurant and, as of right now, we don't serve you either!"

That might seem like a far-fetched example, but do you know anyone who's tried to "edit" God's menu, His Word? This is actually a huge issue in the American Church today. For example, on the issue of how many genders there are, God's Word is quite clear. There are only two, and marriage that is blessed by God is when one biological man and one biological woman come together as man and wife. But some churches have tried to "pencil in" their own definition of marriage and then expect God to bless it. Do you see what they're doing? They're trying to "edit" God's menu. This is what James describes in verses 7 and 8:

For that person should not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:7-8)

To "ask in faith" is to ask within the boundaries of God's Word. James is telling us to boldly and confidently ask for "wisdom" because it is definitely listed on God's menu. But he's also saying, "Don't try to edit the menu because there's only one Chef in God's kitchen."

So, you want wisdom? How well do you know God's menu? If you were here last week, you heard Pastor Rob open up for us the verses that immediately precede this invitation to receive wisdom. They show us the boundaries of faith that lead us to His wisdom:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. (James 1:2-3)

But who's going to ask for trials? Probably none of us. But, if you look carefully at God's menu, you'll see that, if you order wisdom, it comes with a side dish of trials and testing of your faith. Why? Because while trials and testing may be difficult for you physically and even emotionally, they actually are healthy for you spiritually, increasing the strength of your faith which is summed up in the word "steadfastness." And guess where steadfastness leads?

And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:4)

Lacking in nothing... includes wisdom.

How do we "get" wisdom? We "ask in faith." Which is like going to a restaurant where the chef is a dear, dear friend, whom you have known for decades. He knows everything about you! And when the waitress comes to take your order, you say, "Tell my dear friend, your chef, that I want whatever he thinks would be the best meal for me tonight." Do you have that kind of faith in God that when you ask Him for wisdom, you know that whatever comes next in your life, it will be for your good and His glory? How do we get wisdom?

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God... but let him ask in faith ... (James 1:5-6)

Which brings us to our last and most practical question about this text...

III. How Do We Use This Wisdom?

On this Father's Day weekend, how motivated are you both to receive and use this wisdom from your Father in heaven? My guess is that your level of motivation is pretty closely linked to the health of your relationship with your earthly father. So, let's explore that relationship. Silently answer three questions about your relationship with your dad:

1. True/False – As a child, I was certain that my father loved me.
2. My father expressed his love:
 - a. verbally
 - b. physically
 - c. with material gifts.
 - d. not at all.
3. As a child, I heard the words, "I love you" from my father:
 - a. frequently
 - b. every so often
 - c. rarely
 - d. never that I can remember

If your answers to those questions were "True, a, b and c and a" then it's likely that it's always been easy for you to think of God as a loving father because you had an example with your earthly dad. But if your answers were all negative—false, not at all, and never, then it's likely that you've struggled and maybe still struggle to believe that God loves you.

You see, here's how it usually works. Someone who experiences poor fathering gets stuck on two sets of questions. The first is, "Who am I? Where's the other half that produced me? Where do I belong?" The second is, "Am I really loved? If I'm really loved, why isn't my Dad around?" When we don't have answers to these two sets of questions, we often go looking for answers, many times in bad places.

But now, listen carefully: If you grew up in a home with an absent father or with a dysfunctional father, then you are in the right place HERE today. Your heavenly Father brought you here so that He could gift you with wisdom about who you are, where you belong, and how much He loves you. God is speaking to you right now. Our heavenly Father continually tells us that He loves us through His Word, the most common conduit for His wisdom:

... I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. (Jeremiah 31:3)

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions ... (Ephesians 2:4-5) NIV
How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! ... (1 John 3:1) NIV 1984

But what about physical demonstrations of His love?

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8) NIV

Okay, so that's a powerful physical demonstration of love. How about materially?

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19) NIV

Are you certain yet of His love? Let's all read this out loud together:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything

else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the LOVE OF GOD that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39) NIV

Oh, brothers and sisters, how God loves you! There is no lack or absence of human love that He cannot fill! Have you let Him? Have you “asked in faith” for Him to fill that empty hole in your heart? There’s just no doubt about it. His Word says if you’ll ask, He’ll fill it.

There’s an old Roman story of a great emperor who was returning from a victorious battle. As was the custom in those days, the emperor marched at the front of a great parade through the streets of Rome. His conquering soldiers followed behind him with their helmets gleaming and their banners waving. The streets were filled with cheering citizens and the Roman legionnaires stood at attention along the route to keep the crowds in their place.

A small boy watched the emperor coming closer, closer, and when he was right in front of him, the young guy jumped down from his perch, burrowed through the crowd, slithered through the legs of one of the legionnaires, and started toward the emperor’s chariot. But the muscular soldier scooped him up and said, “Hold on son, where do you think you’re going? You can’t go running out there. Don’t you know that’s the emperor’s chariot?”

The little guy just laughed and said, “He may be your emperor, but he’s my daddy.”⁴

Throughout 99% of the Gospels, we really don’t hear Jesus’ original words because He didn’t speak Greek; He spoke Aramaic. There are just a couple of places where the Aramaic words of Jesus are left unchanged. Both times, He’s speaking to His Father in heaven. The Aramaic word for “father” is *Abba*. Aramaic is not Hebrew, the language of the Temple. It’s not Greek, the language of business. Aramaic is the language of the home, of everyday life. It literally could be translated, “Daddy.” When we hear Jesus speak to His Father, we hear His actual words: “Abba, Father, Daddy.”

If you’re here today, struggling with this Father’s Day because of your broken relationship with your human dad, this is your chance to let God heal that wound. Have you done it? When the Heavenly Emperor called your name years ago, did you run to Him or did you hesitate? He’s marching through our town, right here today. He’s calling you again right now. I can hear Him. Don’t wait this time. Don’t let the crowds or guards stop you. Run, run to Him! Feel Him lift you up in His arms. Now, tell Him what your heart has longed to say forever, “Oh, my Abba, Daddy, I love you so.” And hear Him say, “Oh, my precious child, I’ve waited so long to hear you say that. And I’ve waited so long to tell you this, ‘Welcome home.’” Let’s pray ...

¹ Betsy Devine and Joel E. Cohen, *Absolute Zero Gravity*, Simon and Schuster, 1992

² Dr. Allen P. Ross, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1991), pp. 904-905

³ Dr. D. A. Hubbard in *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1974), p. 1333

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 293