



James

Wisdom From Heaven

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
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Introduction

In the course of everyday living we are faced with many decisions that can have long-lasting repercussions; decisions such as who to marry, where to send the children to school, how to spend money and what to watch on TV.

With the introduction of the Internet, modern man has found it quite easy to accumulate massive amounts of knowledge on a multitude of subjects including the above mentioned. However, the mistake that is often made is thinking that knowledge is the same as wisdom. A person may have tremendous knowledge on marriage, but show little wisdom in how they treat their mate. Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge in accordance with God's will and purposes. This does not happen by accident but is the result of a hungry heart's search for the mind of God as it pertains to everyday living. We see in this study that like faith and works, wisdom is demonstrated by good deeds. Wisdom is when the skill of God intersects the mundane resulting in a life that can be described as pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering and without hypocrisy.

Colossians 2:3 reveals that in Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." In short, wisdom is a person whom we must pursue, learn from and emulate.



James 3:13-18

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. 18 And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.





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Questions on the Text

Have you ever...

1. In an attempt to sound wise, have you ever been cruel to someone by using cutting words?
2. Have you ever had knowledge about a thing, but didn't know how to apply it?
3. Have you ever felt "put down" by someone else's "so-called" wisdom?

Homework

1. Have you ever bought something, brought it home and tried to assemble it without reading the instructions only to find out, after much frustration, that the information you needed was in the manual all along? Describe the frustration and the relief you experienced.
2. In the Western world today there is more of an emphasis on obtaining quick answers rather than acquiring understanding and wisdom. How has this trend affected the way we discern true wisdom?
3. Proverbs 2:2 says to make "your ear attentive to wisdom." What are your main sources of wisdom for daily living?
4. Can you think of a time when you felt put down by someone who was coming across as though they were wise? How did it make you feel?
5. Many cultures today put a premium on youth and beauty. How has this trend affected our attitude toward the elderly? In what ways are we missing out on a real treasure by ignoring the elderly?
6. In James 1:5 we are told that if we lack wisdom we should ask God. Have you asked for wisdom since that first study? What did you ask for and have you received an answer?



Questions for Reflection

1. The instinct of both the Old and New Testament writers is to recognize that wisdom is ultimately related to persons rather than to mere intellectual cleverness. In Proverbs, wisdom is portrayed in the person of a woman rather than as a mere set of instructions. In the New Testament, Paul makes clear to us that Christ himself is our wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30). That is, knowing him is different and superior to merely knowing about him. How should a wise person who knows *about* Christ and theology use that knowledge to cultivate wisdom rather than mere cleverness?
2. James 3:13 speaks of the "meekness of wisdom." Can you think of the time in which Jesus or the apostles exhibited the "meekness of wisdom"?





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Questions for Reflection (cont.)

3. James 3:14 gives very curious counsel. It says, “If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.” This is curious because, instead of hurrying us on to repent (which of course we should do) James bids us to not “be false to the truth.” That is, we are urged to take a good look at the nasty things in our hearts and really acknowledge they are there. This is not done to make us wallow in shame, but rather to prevent us from piously skimming over a real problem in the soul that needs healing and forgiveness. What do you do to prepare yourself for the sacrament of reconciliation?
4. James 3:14 speaks of “selfish ambition.” Many people assume that, for the authors of Scripture, all ambition is selfish ambition. But this is untrue. St. Paul, for instance, says, “If anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task” (1 Timothy 3:1). Further, he tells the Romans (15:20) that it is his “ambition” to preach the gospel. The desire to do great work is therefore a gift from God. What James warns against is our tendency to turn that desire toward our own glorification and not toward the glory of God. What opportunities has God given you to be ambitious for Him?
5. Colossians 2:3 tells us that in Christ are hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Given this, how can we foster a more intimate relationship with Christ, so as to incorporate more fully God’s wisdom into daily living?
6. The Catechism tells us, “Arising from talent given by the Creator and from man’s own effort, art is a form of practical wisdom, uniting knowledge and skill [CF. Wisdom 7:16-17.] to give form to the truth of reality in a language accessible to sight or hearing.” Given this, how should wisdom play a role in choosing the books we read and the movies we view?
7. In Proverbs 2:1-4, Solomon uses many action words to describe our relationship to wisdom. He tells us that we should “receive,” “treasure up,” (vs 1) “make your ear attentive,” “incline your heart,” (vs 2) “cry out for insight,” “raise your voice for understanding,” (vs 3) “seek it like silver,” “search for it as for hidden treasure.” Solomon’s message is very clear: effort must be expended if one is to become wise. How can you apply these words relating to the acquisition of wisdom to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? For example, how can you “search for” wisdom or “make your ear attentive” within the Mass?
8. James 3:17 also tells us that godly wisdom is “peaceable, gentle, full of mercy” but in the same breath he declares it is “without uncertainty.” Most people today have a deep fear of a religious faith that is “without uncertainty.” The typical modern view is that a religious faith without uncertainty is just itching to launch a holy war. Yet, Jesus and the apostles had such faith while exhibiting none of these fearful tendencies. How might it be that someone could have a confident faith that is also “peaceable, gentle, and full of mercy”? Can you think of someone you know who has or had such faith?





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Questions for Reflection (cont.)

9. The Old Testament is filled with verses relating to wisdom. The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokma* and it carries with it the idea of repeatedly pounding in the truth, like a hammer continuously striking the nail. This Hebrew definition suggests that wisdom is better understood as a result of repeatedly hearing or observing a thing. Given this, how can you more effectively communicate wisdom to your children or loved ones?
10. The Church calls Mary the “Seat of Wisdom” because wisdom became flesh in her. How can Our Lady help us in exercising wisdom in our daily life?



Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

Wisdom

The epistle of James is to the New Testament what the book of Proverbs is to the Old Testament. That is, it is the New Testament’s “wisdom literature.” The literary distinction between “law” and “wisdom” literature is this: law is what binds, prohibits, and punishes. Wisdom, in contrast, more generally tends to illuminate, guide, construct, and liberate. Typically then, law binds children and adolescents, while adults (and particularly parents) are guided by wisdom. In addition, Scripture tends to distinguish between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is having right answers; wisdom is doing the right thing in the right way in the right time. Wisdom, therefore, is the application of knowledge. Knowledge is theoretical; wisdom is practical. Knowledge is intellectual; wisdom is relational. This means that when reading Scripture, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Papal Encyclicals or attending mass we must listen carefully, and ask the Holy Spirit to help us find practical ways of living out the knowledge we have received.

Now, James speaks of the New Covenant as the fulfillment of the “royal law” (James 2:8). And, of course, a “royal law” is a law enacted by a King. Jesus, the King, is the “son of David” — King David who was promised by God through the prophet Nathan that one of his descendants would always be upon the throne of Israel. Curiously, in 2 Samuel 7:19, David recognizes that the covenant God was making with him was a “law for adam” — a law for mankind. And this fits well with James because, in his covenant with David, God paradoxically dispenses a “law of wisdom” for the whole human race, not just for Israel. Indeed, James is writing what is termed a “catholic epistle”. That is, he is writing an epistle for all those baptized into the New Covenant and not just a letter to a particular person or community. In other words, he is also reiterating the wisdom of the “law for adam” given by Jesus “bar-Adam” (Jesus, the Son of Man). Similarly, Isaiah tends to conceive of Torah or law, not so much as the law given at Sinai, but rather as almost synonymous with wisdom. This also makes sense, because Isaiah is concerned with showing Israel and the nations the way to the coming messianic kingdom of Zion under the “son of David” and not, so to speak, going back to Sinai (cf. Isaiah 2:3). So Isaiah, like James, sees that the law is not static, but itself points toward and moves us toward the future coming of the Messiah and ultimately toward eternity. James, looking back at what has been accomplished in Christ, reminds us that





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

we can never simply get rid of the law, but neither can we simply call the law of Moses “enough.” Rather, we must be transformed by the wisdom of the Spirit of God so that we transcend the law. That means obeying the King. But even more, it means obeying him in love as mature adults in Christ and not merely conforming like children out of slavery to the letter of the law. It is a whole new way of seeing and a whole new conception of law and wisdom.

True and False Wisdom

In James 4:4 we are told that “friendship with the world is enmity with God.” And in fact, those two kinds of friendship produced two entirely different systems of wisdom. If it is friendship with the world that you want, then worldly wisdom will serve you well. But if it is friendship with God you seek, then divine wisdom alone will suffice and worldly wisdom will, in fact, block the way. That is why James warns us that worldly wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish and counsels us to seek that wisdom from above which is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity” (James 3:17). For as Paul tells the Corinthians, “It is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:19-25).

False Wisdom

James tells us that there is an earthly wisdom that is motivated by “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.” These characteristics are the opposite of humility, that disposition of gentleness, which is conducive to learning and correction. The adjective *pikros* (“bitter”) speaks of one who is demanding to be acknowledged as wise. The noun *eritheia* (“selfish ambition”) describes the man who is motivated by personal glory. In other words they want to be a teacher so others will have to listen. James warns that when self-glorification is the motivation in Christian ministry, it will become evident by disorder, contention and practices of evil. This serves as a warning to those who have a gift for teaching, but use it for selfish purposes.

True Wisdom

James places humility at the heart of true wisdom. The wise man is a humble man, one who places himself before God and others as a student, always ready to learn, looking for opportunities to exercise wisdom and willing to be corrected. The wise man is more interested in acquiring wisdom for the purpose of serving God, rather than demonstrating to others his skill. The wise man also recognizes that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Pr. 9:10). This awe and respect for God acts as a continual guide reminding the believer that wisdom is serious business. God’s wisdom is not merely a suggestion, but it is the plumb line for living. True success in life cannot be achieved without the application of God’s wisdom. Joshua said, “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success.”

Both James and Joshua agree that we should “receive with meekness the implanted word” (Vs 1:21), but we must be careful as wisdom necessitates an effort to do the word of God.





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)



Catholic Scripture Study

Catechism Connection

Referenced from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

No. 721 "Mary is acclaimed and represented in the liturgy as the 'Seat of Wisdom.'"

No. 272 "Christ crucified is thus 'the power of God and the wisdom of God.'"

No. 299 "Because God creates through wisdom, his creation is ordered."

No. 301 "Recognizing this utter dependence with respect to the Creator is a source of wisdom and freedom, of joy and confidence."

Family Devotions

There are several books in the Bible known as wisdom literature that will be of special interest for those who want to gain wisdom; Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom and Sirach. Proverbs is divided into thirty-one chapters, thus making it convenient to read a chapter a day, thereby completing the book in one month. The book of Wisdom touches on wisdom's gift of immortality, the nature and power of wisdom and divine wisdom in the Exodus. Sirach, (Ecclesiasticus, the Latin title) is the most comprehensive example of wisdom literature in the Bible. In the face of Greek influences (180 BC) Sirach demonstrates to the Jews true wisdom from God.

Rome to Home

A papal quote relating to the lesson:

"The ultimate Old Testament fruit of this in-depth examination is the Book of wisdom written shortly before Christ's birth. It defines divine wisdom as "a breath of the power of God, a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (Wis. 7:25-27). At this level of personalized symbol of the divine plan, wisdom is a figure of the intimacy of communion with God and of the demand for a personal response of love. Wisdom therefore appears as a spouse (cf. Pr. 4:6-9), the companion of life (cf. Pr. 6:22; 7:4)." Pope John Paul II 4/22/87





In this lesson, we observed that:

If we are going to walk in the wisdom of God, we must be prepared to walk in a way that may be contrary to what is in vogue. We see in scripture that God often asks those in his kingdom to do things that seem to be at odds with the wisdom of this age. For example, Jesus taught that “he who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:10). As shocking as the cross of Christ may seem, Paul tells us that Christ crucified is the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). Next time you see a crucifix, be reminded that you are looking at pure wisdom.

Finally, remember that wisdom, like faith is not something that we merely possess in our head. If we are wise we will demonstrate it in our conduct. As an exercise, write down on a piece of paper the major areas of your life where you need wisdom (marriage, children, work, money, etc.). Write down the questions you have pertaining to each area and begin to ask God for wisdom. Be attentive to His wisdom in Scripture, prayer and when attending mass.

A Message from the Authors

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

