

## STUDY 7. NOTES FOR LEADERS

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*The accompanying notes from the Holman Bible Dictionary will give you an overall background in the Biblical concept of wisdom. There are three definitions of wisdom given in this excerpt - the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> apply to the wisdom described in the book of James. The study is a long one so you will need to choose which parts will be most relevant to your group.*

1. **Who do you regard as a wise person?** What are their characteristics that make you think they are wise?

*As a group leader, you should listen to these comments and refer back to them in later discussion. Eg. "Shirley, you were saying that your father was wise because he..... Is that the same understanding that James has about wisdom?"*

2. **See Proverbs 6:6, 9:8, 9:9, 13:30, 14:16, 15:20, 17:28.**

These verses from Proverbs describe wisdom. Which one do you appreciate most?

*Proverbs is basically a collection of sayings that contrast wisdom and foolishness and thus is attributed to Solomon who had a reputation for being wise.*

### WISDOM IN JAMES

**Read James 1:5-8.**

3. **How do you think people become wise?**

- a. i. Growing old and becoming mature?
- ii. Just born that way?
- iii. It is a personality factor?
- iv. Learning to reflect on what happens in life?
- v. Reading and listening?

- b. In these verses what dimension does James add to the "gaining of wisdom?"

*Later in the study we will see that James distinguishes between earthly and heavenly wisdom. Here he is saying that wisdom is not associated with age or upbringing, but rather **with prayer**. Wisdom is a gift of God. See also 1 Corinthians 12:8. One commentator suggests that "if we lack knowledge, go to College. If we lack wisdom, go to God."*

4. Do you pray for wisdom in general or seek guidance for specific issues? How has God answered that prayer?

5. Indirectly James associates doubting and being "double minded", with a lack of wisdom.

- a. Are you a doubter?
- b. Do you see it as evil?
- c. Has it helped you grow in faith, or has it destroyed faith?
- d. In the above passage, how is doubt/faith associated with wisdom?

*The doubting is associated with the prayer that seeks wisdom. More than likely the doubt is associated with God's ability or willingness to answer the prayer that seeks wisdom.*

6. Do you remember what being "double minded" means? Are you ever like that?

What has "double minded" got to do with wisdom?

*Previously, we mentioned that being "double minded" meant not being in focus. Here it means trying to be in two worlds, or wavering between 2 masters. In the OT it is seen as sin eg Psalm 12:2, 1 Chronicles 12:33. Rabbinic literature refers to the "two impulses in man", one towards good and the other towards evil.*

7. How would you respond to the following comment?

"Is it possible to be any thing else than double minded? Surely we live in the real world and try to be spiritually wise at the same time!"

8. **See verse 6.** Unstable - “tossed by the wind.”

- a. Is that ever a description of you? Do you see yourself as a ‘Steady Eddy’ or as sometimes unstable?
- b. How is instability a contrast to James’ understanding of wisdom?

*James uses the images of light material being tossed by the sea and the wind. The image carries the meaning of a lack of purpose or direction, characterized by sudden changes that are made on the spur of the moment. The word could also suggest “restless”.*

9. **Read James 3:13-18.**

*Note in this passage that James is not talking about knowledge, but rather motives and behaviour. “It (wisdom) cannot be present in a jealous or ambitious atmosphere.” To James, wise men are known by their behavior, not, as in parts of the Old Testament, as keepers of the law or tradition.*

- a. What is the difference between cunning and wisdom? How does this difference come out in this passage? (*This question is asking the group to look at motives for behaviour.*)
- b. Does the image of the grey bearded sage, living on a mountain and spending time in meditation and reflection, fit in with James’ idea of wisdom?

*Partially yes and partially no. James (not surprisingly) identifies wisdom with action and good works, but also sees wisdom as reflecting the inner person and their sense of peace with themselves and with God.*

10. **James condemns envy.** How are the qualities of wisdom and envy incompatible?

*Envy is usually associated with a dissatisfaction with what you have or what you are. Ask the group to again look at 4:1-6 which is really a development of this passage. James here is not condemning ambition (see next question) but rather an ambition that seeks to serve the needs of self before others. Envy can lead to actions that are cunning and often seeks to destroy the welfare of others. It is not the basis of God’s wisdom.*

11. **James also has something negative to say about ambition.**

- a. Is it wrong for us to be ambitious about our church, our jobs, our families, our qualifications?
- b. Are you ambitious?
- c. Would you describe your ambitions as godly or ungodly?

12. How does the phrase, “If there is confusion at the core there is chaos on the fringe,” apply to this passage?

*It is really a phrase about leadership but here, could refer to people behaving with mixed and confused motives. Their behavior eventually reflects what is going on in their minds.*

13. **See James 3:17.**

- a. How do you score on the qualities of wisdom that are mentioned in this verse? Which quality would be the greatest challenge for you? Why?
- b. How do you understand “willing to yield”? Is that you?
- c. Do you see any similarity to the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-10?

*b. Here James is pointing to the person who is not dogmatic but will listen to an argument and be willing to change their position.*

*c. Note justice, peacemakers, righteousness, purity etc as qualities of the blessed person.*

14. **Overall, how would you define wisdom in the letter of James?**

15. **In this series on Christian Living we have looked at the issues of:**

*Faith, Anger – Helpful and Unhelpful, Dangers and Blessings of the Tongue  
Poverty, How to Handle Temptation, Suffering and Wisdom.*

- a. Which of these has been the greatest challenge for you?
- b. Which one has been least relevant to you?
- c. Which of these do you think would have been most relevant for your work mates? Your family? Your friends? Your church?
- d. Overall what are your thoughts about the series?

**WISDOM AND WISE MEN** An educated class of people responsible for preserving and transmitting the culture and learning of the society. Though wisdom and the wise men who perpetuated it have been around almost as long as have people, the study of wisdom in the Ancient Near East is a relatively new endeavour. This has been due, in part, to a lack of a clear definition of the term wisdom, as well as the difficult nature of the poetic language within which most of the wisdom material has been found. Sad to say, neither of these issues is completely solved today though much has been learned in recent years.

**Real Wisdom Is the Fear of God** Three basic definitions of wisdom summarize the status of the field of study very well. Note that the first two of these definitions are quite secular in nature while the third is religious.

**First**, wisdom is considered by many to be simply the art of learning how to succeed in life. Apparently, ancient persons learned very early that there was an orderliness to the world in which they lived. They also learned that success and happiness came from living in accordance with that orderliness (Prov. 22:17-24:22). **Second**, wisdom is considered by some to be a philosophical study of the essence of life. Certainly, much of the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes seem to deal with just such existential issues of life (see particularly Job 30:29-31). **Third**, though the other definitions might include this, it seems that the real essence of wisdom is spiritual, for life is more than just living by a set of rules and being rewarded in some physical manner. Undoubtedly, in this sense wisdom comes from God (Prov. 2:6). Thus, though it will involve observation and instruction, it really begins with God and one's faith in Him as Lord and Savior (Prov. 1:7; Job 28:28).

**The Wise Men Preserved This Wisdom** Though at first such wisdom was probably the responsibility of the patriarch or head of the clan, it appears that every ancient culture developed a distinct class of people, the ahakam or sages, who were responsible for the creating and preserving of their wisdom. No doubt these people were part of the more educated group of their societies who could read and write and had the economic freedom to do so.

Certainly Israel was no exception. The first clear reference to wise men in the biblical text is the one about Ahithophel and Hushai during the reign of David (2 Sam. 16:15-17:23). However, during Solomon's day, the wisdom movement took on a whole new significance, for Solomon and his court became world renowned for their wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34; 10). Certainly his reign became known as the "golden age" of Israelite culture (Luke 12:27).

Though the movement became less visible during the early part of the divided monarchy, it was still quite active, for Hezekiah's wise men were very concerned about preserving the wisdom tradition for future generations (Prov. 25:1). Later still, Jeremiah's enemies even confronted him regarding his prophecy that the Law would perish from the priests, the prophets, and the sages (Jer. 18:18). Thus, clearly by the fall of Judah, the sage had taken his place as one of the key leaders in Israelite society.

No doubt, as the role of the prophet became less visible during the intertestamental period, the role of the sage and the priest became more prominent (see particularly Ecclesiasticus 38:24-39:11). Apparently, this development continued right on into the New Testament era where the magi (or sage) announced the birth of Christ (Matt. 2:1-12) who became the greatest of all wisdom teachers (Matt. 12:42; 13:54; Mark 6:2).

**Most Wisdom Is in Poetic Form** Most of the Ancient Near Eastern wisdom material has been found in some type of poetic structure. Until recent years these structures have been a mystery because they did not seem to rhyme either in meter or sound as modern languages do. However, in A.D. 1753 Bishop Robert Lowth unlocked the key to such poetic writing when he discovered that Hebrew poetry rhymed in thought. Moreover, he surmised that such thoughts were most commonly expressed in parallel patterns. Some of these patterns expressed the same thoughts (Prov. 20:1), while others expressed opposing thoughts (Prov. 10:1), or developed a given thought (Prov. 31:10-31). In time, these parallel patterns were structured into specific forms such as the proverb, riddle, allegory, hymn, disputation, autobiographical narrative, didactic narrative, and lists. No doubt, such beautiful and intricate poetic structure was clearly a mark of the sage and the wisdom schools of his day and age.

**Wisdom Became the Guide for Daily Living** Though in recent years many parts of the sacred Scripture have been considered under wisdom's umbrella, no doubt the greatest contribution of Israel's sages has been the three books found in the "writings" (Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes). However, certain of the other "writings" such as the Psalms, the Song of Solomon, and Lamentations contain figures of speech and stylized forms reflective of the wisdom tradition. In addition to these, the intertestamental works of Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon continued the tradition and laid an excellent foundation for the ultimate revelation of wisdom in Christ Jesus (Matt. 11:19; Luke 11:49-51; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Cor. 1:24,30; Rev. 5:12).

Certainly, biblical wisdom like that of other cultures emphasizes the success and well-being of the individual. This is visible not only in the topics it chooses to deal with, but also in the way it deals with them. Some of its major topics are: knowledge, the world, justice, virtue, family, and faith. The greatest of these may be faith which is constantly watching over wisdom and really all of life (Prov. 1:7).

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