

Article: DI503

## CONTEXT! CONTEXT! CONTEXT!

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

Years ago, a confused 15-year-old boy interpreted this verse to mean that he should ask God to show him which denomination to join and which one was right. He later had a vision in which he was told to join none of them since they were all wrong. He concluded, “I had found the testimony of James to be true — that a man who lacked wisdom might ask of God, and obtain, and not be upbraided.”<sup>1</sup> Believing he had been given wisdom from God as promised in James, the boy, Joseph Smith, Jr., went on to found the Mormon Church. Today, Mormon missionaries point to this verse and urge people to pray for wisdom to know whether The Book of Mormon is true.<sup>2</sup>

Does this verse really mean that we should ask God for wisdom to make decisions or to discern the truth or error of some teaching, denomination, or book? Is this what James was talking about? How can we know what this verse really means?

**Get the Whole Picture.** The most important rule for discovering what this or any Bible verse means is to interpret the verse *in its context*. Interpreting a verse in its context means interpreting that verse in light of all the factors that shaped its meaning when the author wrote it. Context is similar to a jigsaw puzzle: by looking at only one puzzle piece we can't really tell what part of the puzzle picture it is. Only by seeing all the pieces together can we know for sure how that one piece fits. In a similar manner, only by considering how a verse fits within its context can we tell what it really means.

The context of a verse is, of course, more complex than a jigsaw puzzle, but in both cases the parts are correctly understood only within the whole. This is true for words, sentences, paragraphs, sections, and whole books. The word “trunk,” for example, has several possible meanings. It needs to be understood within the context of a sentence to know whether it refers to the nose of an elephant, the main stem of a tree, the storage compartment in a car, or a piece of luggage.

Sometimes even a sentence is not enough context. The sentence, “I bet that trunk can hold five gallons of water” needs further context in order for us to know what is being described. The reason for this is that communication has continuity, or a flow of thought, and some point or purpose; it is not a jumble of unconnected words, sentences, or thoughts.

The same is true for the Bible: the words, sentences, and thoughts are connected. Interpreting something *in its context* is a matter of understanding how those words, sentences, and thoughts are connected. If we isolate a verse and ignore its context — its connection to the surrounding text and thought — we may end up with an incorrect interpretation of what it means, just as we would if we isolated a single piece of a jigsaw puzzle and tried to figure out what part of the picture it is.

**Ask Questions.** Many factors make up the context of a verse: the historical background, the author, the audience, and more. Discovering the context is a process of asking and answering questions about these factors. There are various approaches to this process, but each has the same purpose — understanding the parts within the whole. One approach is to ask questions about: (1) *the general historical context* (When and where was the book written? What was the culture like? What was going on in that part of the world at that time?); (2) *the specific historical situation of the author and the audience* (Who were the author and the

audience? What was their relationship? What specific problems or situations were they facing?); (3) *the purpose or theme of the book* (What is the main topic? Does the author state his purpose or make a summary statement? What are the different sections? Does the author look into the past, the present, or the future?); and (4) *the immediate context of the verse* (What is the topic being discussed in the paragraph or section in which the verse appears? What part does the verse play in the flow of thought? Is it part of an argument? Is it an illustration? Does it prescribe some action, or does it only describe some historical event?).<sup>3</sup> Answering these questions helps us understand how the verse fits in the overall discussion. It's like putting the puzzle together — the more pieces we can put together, the easier it is to tell how any one piece fits.

**James in Context.** All the questions that need to be asked can't be answered in this short column, but let's see if we can put together some of the context of James 1:5 and see how it fits.<sup>4</sup>

*The general historical context.* The traditional view is that the author was James (see 1:1), the Lord's brother, who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13ff; 21:18). This was possibly the first New Testament book written, probably around A.D. 50, or at least before James's death in A.D. 62.

*The specific historical situation of the author and the audience.* The early date of the book, and its contents, suggest that the scattered Jewish believers to whom James was writing (1:1; 2:1) were those who had fled Jerusalem after Stephen's death (cf. Acts 8:1). The early church, made up largely of Jewish believers, continued to experience trials from without and from within.

*The purpose or theme of the book.* James wrote this epistle (or letter) as a pastor to instruct Jewish Christians how to live righteously. Even though it was written to Jewish believers, the many ethical exhortations in it apply to all believers. James is mostly concerned with practical matters such as practicing the Word (chap. 1); discrimination, works of faith (chap. 2); controlling the tongue, selfish ambition (chap. 3); quarreling, judging, boasting (chap. 4); and unfair business practice, suffering, patience, and prayer for the sick (chap. 5). His emphasis is Christian living rather than Christian doctrine such as Paul often emphasized (along with Christian living) in his letters.

"Wisdom" is discussed twice in James (1:5; 3:13–17), and the theme of practical righteousness runs throughout the book. The instructions and exhortations are similar to those found in Proverbs. For example, look to God for wisdom (James 1:5; Prov. 2:6); be slow to speak (James 1:19; Prov. 29:20); the wise sow seeds that bear the fruit of righteousness (James 3:18; Prov. 11:30); God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6; Prov. 3:34); don't boast about your plans because you don't know the future (James 4:13–16; Prov. 27:1); love covers a multitude of sins (James 5:20; Prov. 10:12). James didn't talk about wisdom in terms of philosophical or theoretical knowledge but in practical terms, where "the rubber meets the road." It's the same wisdom that the writer of Proverbs talked about: *the skill of living righteously*. James said the evidence of wisdom is good behavior (3:13) and described it as "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy" (3:17 NASB).

*The immediate context of the verse.* The topic of the section in which James 1:5 appears is *how to respond properly to trials*. Verses 2–4 tell us to welcome trials; verses 5–8 instruct us to ask God for wisdom; verses 9–11 talk about how both rich and poor face trials; verses 12–18 warn us not to accuse God of tempting us in trials.

Verses 2–3, meanwhile, urge us to rejoice when we face trials because we know that when our faith is tested it produces endurance (perseverance, patience, steadfastness) in us. Verse 4 exhorts us to let endurance do its work in us and bring us to maturity and completeness. If we are patient and allow them, trials have a way of producing virtues in us — such as humility and graciousness — that we would otherwise not have. The verb "lack" ties together verses 4 and 5. In verse 4 it refers to those things that patience produces. In verse 5 it refers specifically to wisdom.

**Wisdom in Context.** By keeping in mind all we have considered, especially James's view of wisdom as knowing how to live righteously, we can interpret verse 5 *in its context*. It is saying that, as we face a trial,

if we find that we do not know how to respond properly and allow patience to produce maturity and virtues in us, then we should ask God to give us the ability (the wisdom) to respond properly and allow spiritual growth. Because the context of verse 5 is not *how to make decisions* or *how to confirm the truth of some teaching or book*, there is no reason to interpret “wisdom” here to mean *information* in the form of a revelation, vision, or impression in order to help us make the kind of decision Joseph Smith made. The principle of asking God for wisdom in order to make good decisions is biblical, and we certainly need to distinguish between truth and error, but neither of these situations is what James was talking about.

The context of James 1:5 suggests a very different view of the wisdom for which we should ask than the view that Mormons suggest. Think how different today’s religious landscape would be if Joseph Smith had interpreted this verse *in its context*.

-- Steve Bright

## NOTES

1. The Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith — History 1:26.
2. See The Book of Mormon, Moroni 10:4–5.
3. These categories are adapted from Henry A. Virkler, “Historical-Cultural and Contextual Analysis,” in *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981). See also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Contextual Analysis,” in *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, “The Epistles: Learning to Think Contextually,” in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).
4. See Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994); Douglas J. Moo, *James*, vol. 16 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Leon Morris (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1985; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Donald W. Burdick, *James*, vol. 12 of *Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).