

*A medical doctor, James Brown, tells this story:*

*As we rolled five-year-old Mary into the MRI, I tried to imagine what she must be feeling. She had suffered a stroke that left half of her body paralysed, had been hospitalized for treatment of a brain tumour, and had recently lost her father, her mother and her home. We all wondered how Mary would react.*

*She went into the MRI machine without the slightest protest, and we began the exam. At that time, each imaging sequence required the patient to remain perfectly still for about five minutes. This would have been difficult for anyone - and certainly for a five-year-old who had suffered so much. We were taking an image of her head, so any movement of her face, including talking, would result in image distortion.*

*About two minutes into the first sequence, we noticed on the video monitor that Mary's mouth was moving. We even heard a muted voice over the intercom. We halted the exam and gently reminded Mary not to talk. She was smiling and promised not to talk.*

*We reset the machine and started over. Once again we saw her facial movement and heard her voice faintly. What she was saying wasn't clear. Everyone was becoming a little impatient, with a busy schedule that had been put on hold to perform an emergency MRI on Mary.*

*We went back in and slid Mary out of the machine. Once again, she looked at us with her crooked smile and wasn't upset in the least. The technologist, perhaps a bit gruffly, said, "Mary, you were talking again, and that causes blurry pictures."*

*Mary's smile remained as she replied, "I wasn't talking. I was singing. You said no talking." We looked at each other, feeling a little silly.*

*"What were you singing?" someone asked.*

*"Jesus Loves Me," came the barely perceptible reply. "I always sing 'Jesus Loves Me' when I'm happy."*

*Everyone in the room was speechless. "Happy? How could this little girl be happy?" The technologist and I had to leave the room for a moment to regain our composure as tears began to fall.....<sup>i</sup>*

A couple of weeks ago, we finished studying the book of Acts (we've been at it since February). And we've heard the stories of the early church and the first generation of Christians; Of the Power of God; the movement of the Holy Spirit; the excitement; the miracles; the spread of the Kingdom of God..... But we also heard of persecutions and trouble and strife.

Stephen was the first martyr – the first Christian to be killed for his faith... James the son of Zebedee was another. And many others followed. Peter, Paul, Silas were imprisoned. Paul was stoned and beaten and run out of town after town. And of course we know later on Peter and Paul were executed. And even today (or maybe I should say “especially today”), Christians are put on the spot “deny Jesus, or die”... Or worse still “Convert from Christianity to Islam, or we're going to cut the heads off your children”....

What would you do – if you were given that choice, what would you do? Would you remain loyal to Jesus – counting physical life as nothing, compared to the glorious inheritance of eternity, that is ours???? ... Or would you deny Jesus, and get on with life?

What would you do????

Let me tell you, “As a preacher, I grapple with this all of the time”. “Loyalty to Christ, in the face of persecutions”, comes up in the Scriptures over and over again, and so I have to preach on it over and over again. And in my head and in my heart, I say “Yes, Jesus. I’ll stand true for you”... But then the reality of my human weakness, leaves me wondering, “How can I be so confident of such a commitment, until it’s been tested?”

And so the temptation, is to weaken resolve, and say, “I **hope** I would never deny Jesus, but how do any of us know, until I’m in that position?????”

Persecution, is **one** of the trials, that Christians may meet in life. James is talking about all sorts of trials. He said:

**<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds**

There are all sorts of trials. Persecution; sickness; disease; temptation to sin; relational conflict; enemies who rise up against us; untrue rumours and gossip about us; betrayal; drought; cancer; infertility; the death of a child; unfair legal rulings; war; famine; cyclones; car accidents; character

assassination; the loss of employment; a debilitating injury.....

Who here, has never had a time of trial in their life? – We all have... And of course, some trials are more major than others, and we all know, more trials are coming, don't we? Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us **not** into temptation” or “do **not** bring us to the time of trial” , but they still come, don't they?

And you know, we humans – we're always looking for a **reason** for these things... If something bad's happening in my life, then I want to know “What have I done to deserve it?” or “God, what is the purpose of this?” If a disease is killing somebody, well, why do **they** have the disease, and not somebody else? What's the reason? What's the cause?

*I used to visit an old fella at the old-folks home... And he used to say, “What have I done to deserve this, as he'd winge about his aches and pains, and general ailments that the elderly suffer. I haven't done anything bad in my life..... But then at other times, he used to skite how when he used to work on the classifiers stand at the Wheat Board, he'd sometimes drop a few poppy seeds into the sample of the cockies he didn't like, so their whole load would be rejected, and they'd have to go and get it graded... He had a fair bit of power there, and he abused it.*

*So, “No”, he wasn't a good man... But he expressed what a lot of us actually feel and believe – we're always looking for a cause – we're always looking for a reason – if this is happening, then there must be a reason for it... Well get this: Sometimes there is no reason.*

James said: <sup>2</sup> **Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds**

And the Greek word that James used there, for “meet”, περιπέσητε (peripesete), has a sense of “to encounter, or fall into, a hazard<sup>iii</sup>” ... And I want to highlight the “falling into”<sup>iii</sup>.

Yep, **sometimes** we **do** bad stuff; sometimes we make **bad** decisions; And our sin can leave us with consequences..... But very often, the very **worst** things that happen to us in life, are totally out of our control – they are **not** a consequence of our prior actions.... – we’ve just fallen into it, through no fault of our own.

And James is saying, when these things happen, count it all joy. When bad stuff happens, there’s a **reason** for joy.

What possible reason could there be? Well, I could point you all the way to eternity... What’s the worst thing that could happen to us? Well, we could die... Hey, there’s a cure for that – eternal life. Death is just a transition to glory... And that’s true...

But is that the only reason for joy? No, it’s not. James tells us, that through these trials, steadfastness does a work in us, that moves us to perfection...

These various trials that we fall into, are a **testing** of our faith (interesting word that one – ... The word used for “testing” δοκίμιον *dokimion* – in the Old Testament, is used to *recognise coins as valid currency*<sup>iv</sup> – is it **true** money, or is it counterfeit? It’s a testing of the mettle. And times of trial, test our faith. Is it a **real** faith, or a counterfeit faith? Is it a

faith, that makes us stand fast in Christ? Or is it not faith at all???

Do you remember the parable of the sower. Some of the seed fell on the rocky ground. The crop came up but it didn't have any root, and it withered away... Jesus said, <sup>Matthew 13:20</sup> .....

this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, <sup>21</sup> yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.

And as our faith is tested – as we stand fast in Christ (**through** the trials) the **act** of standing fast (trusting in Christ; glorifying Christ; worshiping Christ; never denying Him) – this **act**, does a work in us. It perfects us. And it is an act – it is a doing word.

Would anyone here like to be perfect? What does it mean to be perfect? Well, let me tell ya, the world's idea of perfection, is very different to God's idea of perfection.

The picture of perfection, by the world's standards, might be:

- Attractive
- Slim
- Sporty
- Straight teeth
- Popular
- Likable
- Smart
- Fun

- Certainly not socially awkward, or old fashioned; or dependant
- And definitely not too religious or righteous.

But God's idea of perfection, is eternal perfection. He wants to perfect our character, to fit us for eternity.

In God's economy:

- You could have a face so ugly, it scares little children
- You might be so un-coordinated that you're the only kid who could never catch a ball, or kick a footy straight
- When it comes to IQ, you might be the bluntest tool in the shed
- You might be the most socially inept person, who finds it difficult to get anyone to talk to you
- The righteousness you live by, might mean people distance themselves from you, because **your** righteousness makes them feel guilt
- You might be boring, the slowest runner, and feel like the most unpopular person in the world

And yet, you might be the one, who is nearing perfection. How can this happen?

The sense of "perfection" is "completion". Standing fast, through trials, does a work in us, to perfect our character – to complete our character – to finish us off, so that there is nothing in us that is lacking. We're being fitted-out for eternity.

As, through the time of trial, our faith fixes on Christ – our **faith**, leaves us knowing that the **only** hope **any** of us have, is the hope of His grace and His mercy, and His salvation.... A knowledge and experience, that The Lord our God, holds us close, tightly to His bosom, and nothing – nothing, can separate us from the love of God.

That's why Jesus could say <sup>Matthew 5:3</sup> **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** It's only when we're at the absolute end of ourselves, and God is all that we have got left, that we can be made ready for the Kingdom of Heaven.

But let me come back, to where I began. What if I'm not sure, if I'm up to it? What if, when the time comes, I don't know if I'll stand fast? What if, when persecutions come, I deny Christ? What if, when I lose a child, I can't keep trusting in God? What if, when I'm diagnosed with cancer, all I want to do, is hold on to this life, feel cheated that God's cutting it short, and I'm just not so sure that God is with me?????

And so the temptation, is to weaken resolve, and say, "I **hope** I would never deny Jesus – I hope I would have a steadfast faith, but how do any of us know, until that time comes?????"

And **there** – **right there** – is the issue that James is addressing.

V5: <sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

James' answer, for assurance, is “wisdom” – spiritual wisdom – a Godly wisdom... Don't you, for a moment feel that it's **your** faith or **your** strength, that gives you steadfastness... It's Godly Wisdom, through the Holy Spirit, who gives us strength – a strength that you and I could **never** have on our own. It's an ability to see things and understand things from God's perspective. And as I said last week, for James, wisdom is almost a picture of the Holy Spirit. And why wouldn't that be so, when the Holy Spirit, is the Spirit of Wisdom?

How can you or I be certain, that we **will** stand fast on the day of trial? We pray for wisdom.... And stop doubting that God will give it... Stop wondering, “Am I rocky soil? When the time of trial comes, will my faith wither away???”

Stop doubting. Pray, and ask for wisdom. And understand and believe, that when you ask the Lord for His wisdom, He will **give** you His wisdom. He will pour His Holy Spirit into your life, and increase your faith – He will make your faith, the real deal – don't doubt Him about that. Believe it.

To be unsure if your faith is real, well James describes that as being “double-minded”. Pray for the Holy Spirit to fill you with wisdom, so that you will stand fast in faith... And if you have prayed this, don't be double-minded about it... I don't want to hear any of you, ever say, ever again, “Well I **hope** I will stand fast for Christ, but how will I ever know until it's tested?”

I'll tell you how you know – it comes down to what you believe about God. It's not what you believe about yourself – it's what you believe about God. God has said, "If you ask for it, I'll give it". Now, do you believe that?

James said, <sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. Alright, there's no reproach there. Don't feel that you're a bad Christian, or an inadequate Christian, if you have to ask for Spiritual Wisdom to increase your faith – to make your faith, something which is true and steadfast.... There's no disgrace in asking for this – that's exactly what God wants us to pray...

But when you pray: 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. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Alright, are you getting this?

Ask for wisdom, and believe that God will give it. Don't be double-minded about it. And can you see the logical outcome here? If you're not double-minded about whether God will give you wisdom or not, you won't be double-minded about your steadfastness.

Last week, as we introduced James, I summed up the drive of the letter with one word "non-passivity". The Christian faith

is not a passive faith – it is an active faith. For James, faith and works, go together. (Faith and deeds. Faith and actions. What we believe, and what we do.)

And so, if we ask for wisdom, and believe what He says, we won't be double-minded about whether God has given us wisdom or not. And we won't be double-minded that we have a truth faith – a faith that is steadfast.

A faith that will say, “There's no doubt about it – when the time of trial comes, I **will** stand fast. I **will** trust in Christ. I will **not**, lose sight of His gift of salvation and eternal life. My love for Him, is just as strong as it's ever been, because His love for me, has not changed...

And then of course, we'll see our times of trial, very differently. And all of a sudden, we'll realise there is a very good **reason** for rejoicing.

- God has given me faith
- I've asked for Holy Spirit Wisdom, to increase my faith
- And He has.
- My faith is steadfast
- Nothing can shake it
- My faith is being tested, and it's seen to be true – it's genuine – it's the real deal
- And steadfastness, is doing its work in me – it is perfecting me – it is completing me
- In the world's eyes, my experience is an absolute tragedy
- They think I'm losing everything
- And yet I know, I lack nothing
- He, is my all.....

We need to encourage one-another about this. We share sorrow, with those who suffer. But we also must share their

joy. Because their faith is tested, and proven to be genuine. In their steadfastness, they are being perfected – completed – readied for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Praise God.

Trials, Tests, Steadfastness and Perfection – Pray for Wisdom, and don't doubt, that the Lord will give it.

Let's pray.

Wisdom – true faith – a faith that when tested will be found to be true

- Testing produces steadfastness
- Steadfastness has its full effect – does its work – of perfecting (completing) lacking nothing.
- We ask for wisdom. You said “Don't doubt” “Don't be double minded”

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<sup>i</sup> www.holwick.com ; KERUX ILLUSTRATION COLLECTION; ID Number: 4793; SOURCE: Internet: Chicken Soup Of The Day; TITLE: The Crooked Smile; AUTHOR: James C. Brown, M. D.

<sup>ii</sup> Faithlife Corporation, 2015. Logos Bible Software Bible Sense Lexicon.

<sup>iii</sup> Bauder, W., 1986. πίπτω L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, & H. Bietenhard, eds. *New international dictionary of New Testament theology*.

<sup>iv</sup> Haarbeck, H., 1986. δόκιμος L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, & H. Bietenhard, eds. *New international dictionary of New Testament theology*.