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Last Sunday we started a study into the letter written by James, the younger brother of Jesus. The first generation of disciples, were possessed with the emotional vigour of **first love**. Grippped by a bold, fearless, pioneering spirit they drove themselves to distant lands and endeared themselves to people whose language they could not speak, whose customs they did not know, and yet they communicated the Gospel of Jesus the Christ, giving birth to vibrant worshipping communities, active to this day! For all their valiant efforts, except for John who dies of old age on the island of Patmos, all the others died ignominious, humiliating and wretched deaths.

The years following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection would have been traumatic for Mary and all her surviving children, James included. It is likely, though not certain, James stayed in Jerusalem to be with and comfort his grieving mother, before she left for Ephesus with John to whom Jesus entrusted her, to be to her, the eldest son and bear the responsibilities that went with being the "eldest son".

Jerusalem was hotbed of politics. Battle lines were drawn between the religious leadership and the Romans, the religious leaders and the fast growing sect called Christians, and the Romans and the Christians. Disputes and disagreements and disputes between all three groups grew ever louder.

Let me read these lines; stop me when you identify its source, *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."*

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These famous words from the opening chapter of Charles Dickens, "A Tale of Two Cities", convey a mood no different from the tensions in Jerusalem some 1800 years prior!

In the midst of this divisive atmosphere, James opens his letter to the Jewish diaspora scattered all over the world, **CONSIDER it pure joy my friends, WHEN you are faced with trials and difficulties of ALL kinds...**

Note three key words:

- **CONSIDER:** use the free will God has given you to choose joy; decide with the strength of your mind God has given you, to be joyful; if you have a choice between moping around feeling sorry for yourself and being joyful, then **OPT** for joy. James' opening statement is, *You can make the difference how you face trials and difficulties, by exercising your will-power, not to let trials and difficulties overpower you!*
- **WHEN:** not **if** you are faced with trials and difficulties, but **when**. Trials and difficulties are a part of life; it is absolutely certain, everyone will face trials and difficulties in life, the question is, **with what attitude will you face trials and difficulties.**
- **ALL:** No two people face the same trial, nor the same intensity of trials and difficulties. Every individual's trials are unique to them.

Then comes the important word, **because...** trials and difficulties in life are about testing our faith! Last Thursday, while studying this passage, we asked the question, *What is the need for our faith to be tested?* and Michael was quick to reply, *So that we learn more about God's love which protects us!* Perfect!

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James does not waste words, and cuts to the main point of his letter, **Life here and now, is about faith in God**. James' letter opens with this declaration, difficulties and trials are a part of life to test our faith in God, and closes (ch. 5) with, *"the prayer of those with faith, who pray for the sick, will result in healing."*

We will look into this in greater depth when we come to the closing the lines in James' letter, so at this time, please don't think, calling someone who has faith to pray for you when you are sick, is a guarantee that you will be healed. But we are getting ahead of James' message. I only wanted to point out the central theme of James' letter is **faith** and we see this in his opening lines and closing lines, like bookends which hold his message throughout his letter which is about faith in God.

I will be the first to admit, however, having **faith** in God, in the person of God and in His plans and purposes, is a real challenge, over which we must be victorious!

The first time I stood on the seashore by the sea was when I was about 11 years old, and I remember thinking, there has to be someone beyond the horizon who was making waves, because the ripple of waves reminded me of making my bed the way Mum taught, which was to grasp the ends of the sheet, lift and flap it up and down several times so that it spread into the corners, and the action was similar to that of making waves.

Reading James' letter reminds us that trials and difficulties arrive in waves, some are small waves which lap at our feet, and others are rightly referred to as "storms" in our lives, which can wreak havoc!

Having told us that trials and difficulties arrive in waves, progressively testing us with a view to building our faith in God (like professional

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examinations we noted last Sunday), helping build stamina (Mo Farah vs Usain Bolt) to go through life, ending the marathon of life in the perfect way as Jesus did¹.

James also knows, the reader going through trials and difficulties may find it difficult to *be joyful*, he explains, "*If any of you lacks wisdom...*"

Not everyone goes through life on a need-to-know basis; some are quite content with simple answers to the question **why?**, but others need-to-know, and need-to-know **NOW!**

It is natural to want to know what's going on in our lives, but we cannot always make sense of it. James says, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, let Him ask God, who generously gives ungrudgingly, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN THEM!!*"

James is describing the character of God: God has no reason to hold anything back from us. When God created the world, and all that is **on** it, **in** it, **under** it and **above** it, He gave it to us to enjoy. Everything He created was for us to delight in and take in the wonder of God. The one thing the first man and woman did not do, is what James is pointing out. When faced with a challenge, *Did God really say...*, they consulted themselves and agreed amongst themselves, to accept the challenge. If only they did what James is alluding to, "*If you lack wisdom, ask God, who generously gives without condition, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU!!*" James is of course, quoting Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount! (ask...seek...knock)

The key to asking God for wisdom, is our attitude. **Ask God in faith**, says James, and **without doubt**.

¹ 1 Peter 1:16

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You might have heard people say, *Go ahead and ask God. He will give you you one of three answers: yes, no or maybe.*

Others say God's response is *Yes, no and not now.*

God does not delight in torturing us by denying us our needs, even our wants. Santa Claus delights in tantalises us, *You better watch out, you better not cry, You better not pout, I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town. He's making a list, He's checking it twice, He's gonna find out, Who's naughty or nice, He knows if you've been bad or good, So be good for goodness sake...!*

Santa Claus' character is the complete opposite of the character of God! Santa Claus is not interested in knowing you personally, all he wants to know is whether you have been naughty or nice, and he will reward you accordingly! Given his exceeding rotund size, he appears to be more interested in himself than anyone else.

God is not offering us any rewards for being naughty or nice. God offers us the abundance of His kingdom, in eternity, for eternity, to enjoy without condition of restriction!

"Ask God with pure faith", says James, "untainted by doubt, without a whisper of uncertainty."

Doubt is the opposite of faith. A moment's hesitation and faith wobbles like the wave of the sea.

Remember when the disciples were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and a storm broke out. Experienced fishermen all thought they were going to drown. Jesus appears to them through storm. Peter, the impertinent and reckless one says, *"Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water"*. Peter steps out on the water, sees the strength of the storm, and

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starts to go under crying, "Lord save me!" Peter's faith wobbled when he took his eyes off Jesus and looked at the power of the storm.

The reason we fail in prayer is that we allow our doubt to creep in, and faith wobbles. James says, *a moment's hesitation, and the shadow of doubt gets a foothold and tosses you into the wind.*

Anyone who tries to balance faith and doubt, is a double minded person, says James, unstable in their ways!

James' letter to the Jews dispersed across the world is to tell them, the fundamental quality of faith is that it **only** works in the absence of doubt.

The decision is yours: will you live your life trusting God in faith for what He has planned for you, or will you entertain a shadow of doubt as an insurance policy, just incase faith fails, doubt might see me through.

It won't! Doubt will only toss you further into the storm, away from peace and tranquility, safety and security.

Ask God in faith, without a shadow of doubt, and He will transform your life.

AMEN.