

Word on the Street Discussion Time: Down but not out

You could use this discussion starter with your family, your friends, or maybe in your class or your Church youth group. Read the story at the top and use the questions to start discussion. Then read the Bible story and talk through the second set of questions. You could finish with a prayer based on your discussion.

Stephen Hawking is one of the most looked-up-to scientists. His work, including the book *A Brief History of Time*, has added huge amounts to the world's understanding of physics, and got millions of people around the world interested, eager to learn from his genius.

Yet while his brain is among the best ever, his body is almost completely disabled. He suffers from an illness called Motor Neuron Disease, which means that he is unable to speak, can barely move his body, and spends all his waking hours restricted to a wheelchair, needing the help of other people.

But Stephen has gone to extraordinary lengths to prove that the illness has not beaten him. The computer system which is attached to his wheelchair recognises small movements of his right cheek, with which, incredibly, he is able to compose speeches and research papers, and even browse the Internet. He continues to contribute to the scientific world, and regularly gives talks to thousands of people through an electronic voice synthesiser.

Without wanting to patronise him, Stephen Hawking's example proves that when we choose to keep on going, the extraordinary can become possible. And even though he has known awful suffering, he uses a surprising word to sum up his life... Because his disease has got worse slowly, and it has given him enough time to give more to the world of science, he refers to himself as 'lucky'.

- Where do you think Stephen found the strength to pursue his ambitions?
- Do you believe Stephen really regards himself as 'lucky'? Why or why not?
- How well do you cope when things go wrong? Do you persevere (keep going), or are you more likely to give up?
- Can you give an example of a situation where perseverance brought a reward? Can you think of a time when giving up has proved the wrong choice? Or perhaps the opposite has been true...

Read James 1: 2-12 (you can find it on the next page)

- How are these verses illustrated in the life of Stephen Hawking?
- How do you feel about the idea of feeling joy in trials and suffering?
- How can someone in humble circumstances also be in a high position?
- How might these verses encourage you to persevere (keep going)? In what areas?

An extended version of this discussion appears in *The Ideas Factory: 100 Adaptable Discussion Starters for Teens*. It is written by Martin Saunders, the Editor of *Youthwork* magazine.

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James 1:2-12

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who "worry their prayers" are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.

When down-and-outers get a break, cheer! And when the arrogant rich are brought down to size, cheer! Prosperity is as short-lived as a wildflower, so don't ever count on it. You know that as soon as the sun rises, pouring down its scorching heat, the flower withers. Its petals wilt and, before you know it, that beautiful face is a barren stem. Well, that's a picture of the "prosperous life." At the very moment everyone is looking on in admiration, it fades away to nothing.

Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more life.

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