

Text: James 1

Theme: Making Sense of Trials

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Evening Worship Service on 04/10/2015 at 5.00pm

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.*

The first verse really sets the scene of the circumstances, the personality of James, and the features that caused him to write this very important letter.

Let us examine the introduction with respect to the writer of the book. There are several men named **James** mentioned in the New Testament, but reliable tradition assigns this book to the one called *James the Just*, the half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55) and the brother of Jude (Jude 1), who led the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13).

Knowing that this James was the half-brother of Jesus makes his self-introduction all the more significant. He did not proclaim himself "the brother of Jesus" but only **a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**. Jesus was more than James' brother; more importantly, Jesus was his **Lord**.

When he did follow Jesus, he followed with great devotion. An early history of the church says that James was such a man of prayer that his knees had large and thick calluses, making them look like the knees of a camel. It also says that James was martyred in Jerusalem by being pushed from a high point of the temple. Yet the fall did not kill him, and on the ground, he was beaten to death, even as he prayed for his attackers.

The opening verse also leads us to the features that caused him to write this important letter. He wants people to be sure of the quality and genuineness of their faith as their eternal destiny is at stake. Anything that is in and of itself of intrinsic value, like gold or silver or diamonds or precious metals, is subjected to testing to affirm its true worth. And the most valuable commodity in all the world is the commodity of eternal salvation. It is priceless! To be eternally bound in a relationship with God is a commodity that is priceless. And all those people who believe they have that possession should subject that to a process of testing to determine its validity.

There are people, you know, all over the world who if asked whether they have salvation would reply "yes," but who are wrong. True salvation needs to be subject to examination, subject to testing. That is a biblical concept, the testing of salvation is throughout Scripture called for. Read Psalm 17:3, Psalm 26:1 & 2; Psalm 139: 23 & 24.

Some critics of James quote Martin Luther's famous estimation of James as "a letter full of straw." They argue that it preaches salvation by works. But they are very wrong, because Luther's remark should be understood in its context. He was sometimes frustrated because those who wanted to promote salvation by works quoted certain verses from James against him. His intention was to observe that there was little or nothing in James that preached the gospel of justification by faith alone. In another place, Luther wrote regarding James, "I think highly of the epistle of James, and regard it as valuable . . . It does not expound human doctrines, but lays much emphasis on God's law." (Cited in Barclay)

Martin Luther knew and taught exactly what the book of James teaches. The following is from his preface to Romans regarding saving faith: *O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether*

good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works. (Cited in Moo).

In many ways, we listen to the book of James because it echoes the teaching of Jesus. There are at least fifteen allusions to the Sermon on the Mount in James. A man who knew the teaching of Jesus and took it seriously wrote this letter. James emphasis is that you cannot claim to have faith and have nothing, no fruit, to show for it. Such faith is hollow and, deceptive.

Verses 2-4: Patient endurance in trials.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds because the testing of your faith develops perseverance...

But how is it possible to rejoice in the middle of trials and what does James actually mean by rejoicing when being tried? I am sure he does not mean an unrealistic attitude of those who would say "I've just broken my leg." "It is no big deal. I praise the Lord." No. God never belittles our pain. He knows pain is painful. Jesus wept at his best friend's tomb. He knew the pain of betrayal and rejection. So, what does James mean? Well, joy in the Bible is more of an attitude than a facial expression. Joy is a deep-seated delight in God which allows us to rejoice in him even in the most difficult circumstances. The apostle Paul can say that he is "sorrowful yet rejoicing." It's no contradiction.

James regarded trials as inevitable. He said when, not if you fall into various trials. At the same time trials are occasions for joy, not discouraged resignation. We can count it all joy in the midst of trials because they are used to produce patience.

So why should we rejoice and have a victorious attitude when we are tried?

These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. If your faith remains strong after being tested by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day Jesus is revealed to the whole world. (verse 12). On the other hand, trials rightly used help us to mature. How does God spell maturity? - patience, endurance - the ability to keep going when it's tough to keep going!

IIIs - During Summer, my wife and I told our grandchildren we were going to Southend on Sea for two days and they loved it. But before we arrived there, - 2-hour journey from London, they kept asking the question: "Are we there yet" "How long"? Too immature to understand the journey. They want the blessings of Southend on Sea (maturity) without travelling (journey of growth). The only way God can develop patience and character in our lives is through trials! When we go through trials, when we trust God and obey Him, the result is patience and godly character.

Someone rightly said that God has only one Son who is without sin but none of His children is without a cross! Jesus had His and so shall you if you are called by His name.

We notice that it is faith that is tested, and it shows that faith is important and precious - because only precious things are tested so thoroughly. "Faith is as vital to salvation as the heart is vital to the body: hence the javelins of the enemy are mainly aimed at this essential grace." (Spurgeon)

At the same time trials are occasions for **joy**, not discouraged resignation. We can **count it pure joy** in the midst of trials because they are used to produce **patience**.

But we need God's wisdom to develop a mindset that can rejoice and see good coming out of trials. See verse 12. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him. V.12 does not say, "Blessed is the man who is never tried or tempted." Nor does it say, "Blessed is the man who finds all temptation easy to conquer." Instead the promise of blessedness is given to the one who perseveres (endures) under trial. There is a special gift of blessedness from God to the one who can say "no" to temptation, thereby saying "yes" to God.

Verse 5. In trials, we need **wisdom** a lot more than we need *knowledge*. Knowledge is raw information but **wisdom** knows how to use it. Someone once said that knowledge is the ability to take things apart, but wisdom is the ability to put things together. When we have God's wisdom, we are able to see that God's purpose is to bring us to maturity in Him. God's goal for our lives is maturity. It would be tragic if our little children remained little babies. We enjoy watching them grow through the various stages of life.

Consequently, God has three tasks to complete in our growth: -Eph. 2:8-10

For us - Salvation. Jesus completed this work on the cross.

In us - We are His workmanship or literally his masterpiece. This is sanctification. God builds our character and we become more like Jesus.

Through us - This is service. He has created us anew so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

God doesn't work in us without our consent - we must surrender our will to His! If we face trials without a surrendered will, we will remain immature infants. God cannot and will not build our character without our cooperation. He is a gentleman and will not push, prod, pull or drag us against our wills. However, when we submit to him, then He can accomplish His work.

James 1:9-11 explores this truth with two classes of Christians - the poor and the rich. God's testing has a way of levelling us all. It is not our material resources that are going to get us through the trials of life, but our spiritual resources. Sometimes God uses a trial to pose the question - "Which do you love more - this or Me?" (Immaturity).

The riches of this world will certainly fade away - but James says that the rich man also will fade away. If we put our life and our identity into things that fade away, we will fade away also. How much better to put our life and our identity into things that will never fade! If a man is only rich in this world, when he dies, he leaves his riches. But if a man is rich before God, when he dies, he goes to his riches.

The writer of James is really echoing the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus – the beautiful attitude that should characterise his disciples. He is our greatest example and we should follow in His steps if we want to achieve God's greatness. He was God but He humbled himself and was born as a man and He died on the cross. His life was dedicated to a journey to Golgotha but in God's wisdom, saw beyond Calvary. He saw His glorious resurrection and ascension and a reuniting of Father and Son. That should be our goal too. That is maturity.

Verses 13-18

"Satan tempts: God tries. But the same trial may be both a temptation and a trial; and it may be a trial from God's side, and a temptation from Satan's side, just as Job suffered from Satan, and it was a temptation; but he also suffered from God through Satan, and so it was a trial to him." (Spurgeon)

God sometimes allows great tests to come to His people, even some who might be thought of as His favourites. We think of the hard command He gave to Abraham (Genesis 22:1), and the affliction He allowed to come to Job (Job 1-2). Other times He may send tests as a form of judgment upon those who have rejected Him, such as sending a spirit to bring deception (1 Kings 22:19-23) or departing from a man and refusing to answer him (1 Samuel 28:15-16). Yet in no case does God entice a person to evil.

God is the good guy. This is a reminder to us that God is the One who does things for our benefit and this is James' way of reminding His readers that it is never God's intention to drag you down. **In verse 16**, he says: Don't be deceived by your own hearts, and don't be deceived into thinking it is God who tempts you. It is not. Rather God is the good God who only ever does things for our benefit and to help us on to heaven. Rather **verse 17**: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." This is our God who remains faithful to help us and be with us in all circumstances. His character is the same for ever more. Sometimes it is easy to forget this, in difficult times.

Verses 19-27

It was common in the ancient world for people to hear a teacher. If you followed the teacher and tried to *live* what he said, you were called a *disciple* of that teacher. We may say that Jesus is looking for disciples: doers, not mere hearers.

A healthy person looks in the mirror to *do* something, not just to admire the image. Even so, a healthy Christian looks into God's Word to *do* something about it, not just to store up facts that he will not put to use by being a **doer** of the word. The word of God should bring a transformation in our lives and help us to discern the pollution that is in the world and run away from it.

Verse 27 is not saying that a Christian retreats away from the world; instead they interact with **orphans and widows in their trouble** and others in their need. The Christian ideal is not to retreat from the world; they are in the world, they are not *of* it; and remain **unpolluted by the world**.

From the book of Genesis, Lot is an example of a man who *was* spotted by the world. He started living *towards* Sodom, disregarding the spiritual climate of the area because of the prosperity of the area. Eventually he moved to the wicked city and became a part of the city's leadership. The end result was that Lot lost *everything* - and was saved as only by the skin of his teeth.

One day a farmer's donkey fell down into a well. The animal cried piteously for hours as the farmer tried to figure out what to do. Finally, he decided the animal was old and the well needed to be covered up anyway, it just wasn't worth it to retrieve the donkey. So, he invited all his neighbours to come over and help him. They all grabbed a shovel and began to shovel dirt into the well. At first, the donkey realized what was happening and cried horribly. Then, to everyone's amazement, he quieted down. A few shovel loads later, the farmer finally looked down the well and was astonished at what he saw. With every shovel of dirt that hit his back, the donkey was doing something amazing. He would shake it off and take a step up. As the farmer's neighbours continued to shovel dirt on top of the animal, he would shake it off and take a step up. Pretty soon, everyone was amazed, as the donkey stepped up over the edge of the well and trotted to getting out of the well. Each of our troubles is a stepping stone. We can get out of the deepest wells just by not stopping, never giving up! Shake it off and take a step up! Don't waste the opportunities God gives you to prove Himself.