

## **THE FULL FAMILY CHURCH**

**DATE** : 14 SEPTEMBER 2008

**MESSAGE** : THE LETTER OF JAMES (1) – **“WHEN HARD TIMES COME”**

Today I am starting a new series. It comes from the Book of James in the New Testament.

Let's read from chapter 1, verse 1.

This letter was written by James. And according to the evidence, this James was the half brother of Jesus. One of the children of daddy Joseph and mommy Mary. Why His half brother? Because Jesus' biological Father, was God the Father.

James, during the lifetime of Jesus, never realised or believed that his Brother was the Messiah. It was only after His death and resurrection that when Jesus appeared to him, he became converted.

After James' conversion, he took up a leadership position in the first church in Jerusalem. That happened shortly after the apostle Peter left.

Historians and researchers guess that this letter, James, was the first New Testament book ever written. At round about 44-49 B.C.

It appears in the form of a letter, and James directed it to the Jewish followers of Jesus who formed a part of the 12 tribes of Israel and who by then probably lived in the Roman Empire in Europe, and who spoke in Greek.

These people went through incredible persecution. They were especially persecuted by the wealthy citizens of that city. By writing this letter, James tried to reach out them and encourage them to stand steadfast in their faith: the one and true faith in Jesus Christ.

Subsequently, James also addresses a few key points in his letter. And these key points focus their attention on the fact that they should not fall in the habit of lovelessness and unfaithfulness like those wealthy Romans.

James received news that those Jews came to the end of their perseverance. Their constant suffering took its toll. They wanted to give up the faith and join the pattern of the Romans who persecuted them.

I can imagine that is where the saying: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” came from.

Yet, this is not what God had in mind for us. Jesus intends for us to be more than conquerors. He proclaims a definite, NO! You and I can not succumb to the likeness of the world, because then we cannot share in God's glory.

In verse 1 of chapter 1, James introduces himself to the readers. He says, "This letter comes from James, a servant [*a slave, a free will slave*] of God and the Lord Jesus."

When we study the slave structure in the Bible, then a very important fact transpires. James, the brother of Jesus, declares himself as a slave, a slave of his Brother. His Brother, who meanwhile became the Messiah, his Redeemer. He submits himself to the household, rules and ruler ship of his Brother, Jesus.

Interesting when we see how people became slaves. When a slave is captured and sold at a public slave auction to a new owner, he/she was taken to the new owner's home. Then a kind of nail was hammered through the ear lobe of the slave right into the doorpost of the owner's house. Once the piercing was made, a ring was put through the ear lobe of the slave, marking him as a slave of the owner. By wearing the ring everybody knew that he/she was a slave and to whom the slave belonged.

This is also where the word, "slave" in Greek came from, "Doulos", an earmarked slave. Once the slave has completed the prescribed period of service to the master, he/she could apply to be free. However, a "doulos", mostly became a free will slave who remained faithful to and in the permanent service of the master up to his/her death.

It is within this context that James informs his reader, that 'I am marked ... I carry the mark of my Lord. I am His slave. I carry the scar and I carry the name of my Lord.'

Then in verse 2, James, the comforted with the rod in his hand, speaks to the oppressed people.

He says, "My dear brothers and sisters, when you go through various hardships, you should be glad. Surely you know: once your faith has stood through a test, it brings about perseverance. However, you have to persevere till the end. Then you will reach your end goal and will be spiritually healthy. You will fall short of nothing."

When gold or silver or any other metal is put through fire and the temperature is increased to the point where it melts, a wonderful thing happens. The liquid metal releases impurities. The metal smith scoops it off the surface of the metal. He then fires the metal for a second, third and many consecutive times. Until all the impurities surface. By doing this the metal becomes more and more precious.

This is exactly the process that James refers to here. When we go through hard times, we should realise that we are being purified. God sees it, and He permits this process to take us to a next level. Our faith is being tested during these situations. The impurity boils to the surface and is visible to the Gold Smith. Once it surfaces it can be seen and removed.

In the old days, before glass mirrors, most mirrors were made of metal. If the metal was not put through thorough purification, a clear mirror could not be casted. Only the most precious cleaned metal could be used as mirrors.

What does suffering do to you? Do you give up when times are tough? Or do you keep standing through the hard times and allow God to purify you? Do you allow Him to see those imperfections and help you to get rid of them?

How clear is the mirror that God is trying to make of you? Is the image that people around you see, murky? Or can people, who do not know Jesus, see His image clearly in your mirror?

The only way our faith in Jesus can be strengthened, is through suffering. For it is through suffering that we realise that we can achieve nothing through ourselves. We come to realise suddenly that we need the Lord more and more. During these times we should flock to church services and care group meetings so that we can get direction in our times of suffering. This is the time that you need prayer and Bible study more than food.

But if we become touchy, the other side of reality will follow. We stay away from our fellowship of the saints. We choose to become bitter and sit in our little corners moaning and groaning. We focus on our discomfort and pain in such a way that we cannot see God's plan of purification in our lives. And instead of becoming better, we become more and more bitter.

There is something else that can cool us off in such a way that we do not want to join the Body of Christ. That is our comfort zone of wealth, success and earthly happiness.

Excuses follow: I cannot join the care group or church service this week, because we are getting guests for the weekend. I cannot come because I am going home with my lover; I have to catch up on work during weekends; I have to study for exams or tests; or the most ridiculous one, we had such a great lunch that we fell asleep and when I woke up I did not feel like getting dressed up and going to church; I need a break; Sundays are the only days I have to get to myself again.

Excuses excuse! And you call yourself a Christian? You want to carry the mark of your Lord, but you are not devoted to Him. Instead of serving Him, He has to serve you. The Master becomes the slave and the Slave becomes the master.

James now continues directly in verse 5 and gives us good advice. When you go through a difficult time or persecution and you do not know what to do, James says, "Ask God if you do not know what He wants you to do. He will give you that wisdom without blaming you for asking. But when you pray you have to have faith that God will answer, because someone who doubts is like a wave in the sea that is driven to and fro by the wind. How can such a person think that he can ask anything of the Lord? He is someone who cannot make up his mind; on such a person you cannot depend."

Despite the fact that we so often focus on our own suffering when we go through hard times, and do not pray, we also do not know how to pray. This is what James refers to here.

So, how should we then pray?

Jesus gives us clear guidelines regarding prayer in Mark 11:24. "Therefore I say to you: everything that you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and you will receive it."

Look at what is happening here. Jesus says when you ask, you have to believe that you have ALREADY received it. You have to see in your mind's eye that you have already received it, and if you KEEP BELIEVING that you have already received it, a certain amount of time will pass before that which you have asked for will manifest.

This is what faith is all about! Even if I do not have or see it in the physical world, I believe that I have already received it. This is the moment of excitement, because in the spiritual realm I have already received it. The physical manifestation of it later is only the proof of my first moment of receipt.

Let me give you an example: You go out fishing. You put attractive bait on your tackle, and look for a good spot where you know people fish successfully. What are you looking for? Fish! You came to fish. This is what you need. Now you cast and believe that a fish will take the bait. Your line is in the water. In your mind you can almost see that fish in the pan. You become hungry and can almost smell the mouth watering aroma of frying fish.

Now, the fish takes a while longer to take the bait. An hour has passed and there hasn't been a tug on your line. You are positive that there are fish. The people who left just before you caught several.

You now become impatient and pull in the line.

Can you still catch that fish now? No! Because the tackle and bait are not in the water anymore. How do I know that the fish was not at the point of taking the bait when I decided to pull in the line?

This is what we do in our prayers. God is busy organising the catch, and meanwhile He is allowing our faith to be tested. He so much wants to give us what we are asking for, but we pull up our lines too soon and too many times.

We mess around with the bait too often and our line is not in the water long enough.

If you want a fish, keep your line in the water!

Get your faith sorted out when you pray. Because if you do not believe, God cannot follow through with the miracle of answering your prayers. You are the one with the line in the water. Keep it in the water! This is your act of faith and firm belief.

Does God answer all prayers?

Yes. Absolutely.

Do we get what we ask for?

No, not always.

God knows best what we need. If you ask for something out of selfishness and to boast, or to gain something that will destruct or hurt you, you will not receive it.

Yet, God always answers prayer. He is not deaf. He heard and He acts. Even if it is by saying a gentle, "no".

James says in verse 12, "Happy is the person who perseveres in times of hardship! [*He repeats what he mentioned earlier.*] When the test proves that his/her faith is true, he/she will receive the crown of victory. [*We also read in the book of Revelations about crowns or awards for different achievements.*] God promised this life to those who love Him."

What does your prayer life look like?

Do you have a prayer life?

Do you try to pray, but the prayers bump off the ceiling?

Do you pray?

Or do you only run to God with your shopping list when you desperately need earthly things or when you are in trouble?

How often do you thank the Lord?

How often do you thank Him for your health, for your family, friends, children, a partner, a job, an income, for food and clothing, for talents ... all those things that we so often take for granted.

And when the smallest thing goes wrong, do you suddenly experience severe persecution and depression?

Do we thank the Lord enough for all the blessings that we receive from our wonderful God? Or are we only focussed to receive more and more?

How often do you tell God how much you love Him? It is quite all right to say that to somebody from whom you can get something in return, winning favour; subtle manipulation to gain something.

No!

How often do we make time to be still, or to become loud of excitement because of our love for our Lord?

Or are love languages and love talking only phrases that we reserve for the bedroom?

It is time to blow the ram's horn and to wake up the sleepers. To give the Lord Jesus Christ His rightful place here on earth. "Here on earth as it is in heaven." Here were we have been called to make a difference. Where we are called to be mirrors of precious metal, in which others can see the Lord Jesus clearly.

This is where we can carry our crosses in a community where prejudice, hate speech and homophobia towards same gender preferenced people can be overcome through love and through education.

This is the kind of purification that the Lord asks from us here in James. To become more and more like Jesus.

When people bad mouth you, not because you deserve it, but because we keep the image of Jesus high as same gender preferenced people, you have to realise that those words and action were not aimed at you, but at God. Because God also made you and me perfectly in His wonderful image.

This is when we should experience in our spirits that purification is happening. That we are being purified more and more; fired to be cleansed so that Jesus' perfect image can transpire through in us.

What a wonderful privilege.

Amen.

Pastor Anton Smith