

“A MONUMENTAL WORK . . . ”

—Rick Warren

AFRICA BIBLE COMMENTARY

*A One-Volume Commentary
Written by 70 African Scholars*

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FOREWORDS BY JOHN R. STOTT AND ROBERT K. ABOAGYE-MENSAH

AFRICA BIBLE COMMENTARY

General Editor

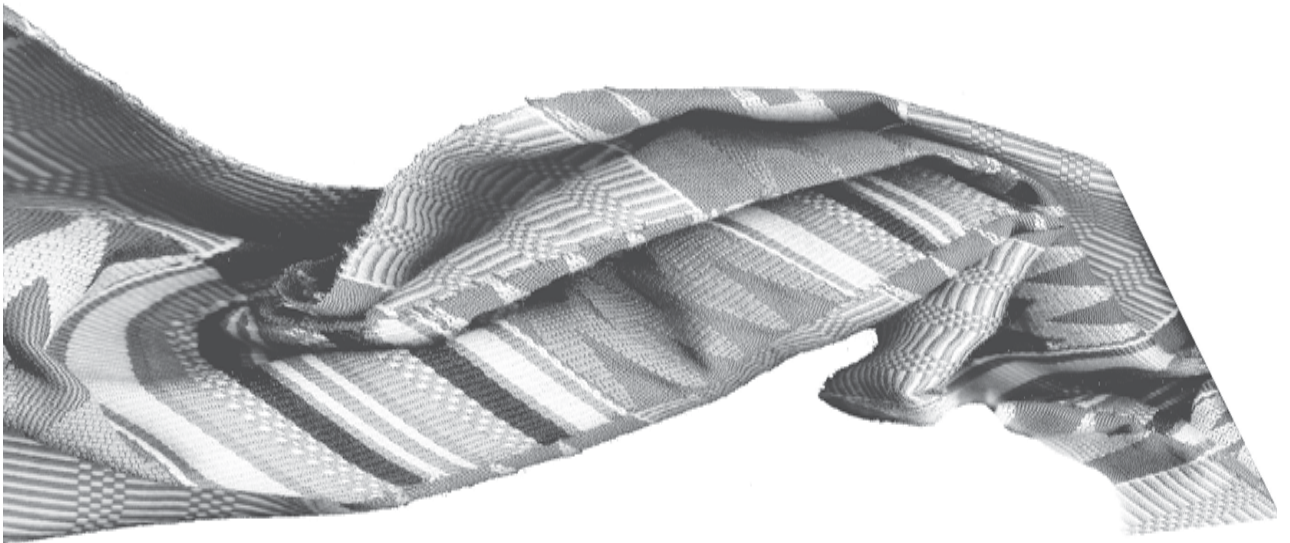
Tokunboh Adeyemo

Theological Editors

**Solomon Andria, Issiaka Coulibaly,
Tewoldemedhin Habtu, Samuel Ngewa**

Theological Advisors

Kwame Bediako, Isabel Apawo Phiri, Yusufu Turaki





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abc@piquant.net www.piquant.net

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Editorial oversight: Isoword isoword@sympatico.ca

Proofreading oversight: Editorial Suite www.editorialsuite.com

FOREWORDS

The Bible has an indispensable part to play in the church member's personal discipleship and in the pastor's preaching ministry. But this statement assumes that they can understand it. Hence the wonderful provision of the *Africa Bible Commentary*. One of the most significant recent developments in the churches of Africa is the rise of sound biblical scholarship. The church is fortunate indeed to see this resurgence in the continent that gave us such interpreters as Augustine and Athanasius. The *Africa Bible Commentary*

is a publishing landmark, and I congratulate contributors and editors on their achievement. Its foundation is biblical, its perspective African, and its approach to controversial questions balanced. I intend to use it myself in order to gain African insights into the Word of God. Indeed, I hope it will have a worldwide readership, so that we may better grasp 'with all God's people' the full dimensions of Christ's love (Eph 3:18).

John Stott
December 2005

The phenomenal growth of the church in Africa brings with it many challenges. One of these challenges is how to sustain the numerical growth while ensuring that the faith of Christians is firmly grounded in the revealed and written word of God – the Holy Bible. Grounding the people's faith in the Bible requires intensifying the teaching ministry of the church. This, in turn, creates a need for appropriate tools to assist pastors, seminarians, theologians, lay preachers and Christian Education teachers to teach effectively. The *Africa Bible Commentary* written by African theologians has come at the right time!

What makes the *Africa Bible Commentary* unique and relevant is the fact that it has been written by African theologians who love the Lord and are committed to the life of the church. They write out of their matured practical experience in teaching the Bible within the Christian community. The content of the commentary can thus be described as tried and tested material that will help others towards Christian maturity when prayerfully used.

In interpreting the biblical text, the authors have also been able to bring together Christian spirituality and the depth of their understanding of African culture and religion.

The *Africa Bible Commentary* will also be useful to Christians outside the African continent who want to enrich their own understanding of the Bible by stepping outside their own culture and experience. In so doing, they will gain insights into their own culture as well, for the African scholars who contributed to the commentary also have a rich and varied experiences of the life of the church outside Africa.

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to all those who contributed to the writing of this commentary and enthusiastically recommend it to Christians everywhere who want to understand the Bible in order to live out and share their faith.

The Most Rev. Dr Robert K. Aboagye-Mensah
Presiding Bishop
The Methodist Church, Ghana
February 2006

THE VISION

Vision statement for the ABC drafted in January 2001

The Africa Bible Commentary is a one-volume commentary written and edited by African biblical scholars on all the books of the Bible. The general aim of the commentary is to make the word of God speak relevantly to African realities today. More especially, it targets Christian leaders at the grassroots level – pastors, students, and lay leaders – who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can be instrumental in the establishment and nurture of a vibrant church in the continent. A one-volume commentary on the whole Bible is,

by its very nature, a major exercise in compression, with a rigorous discipline governing what needs to be included and what needs to be omitted. This volume, therefore, does not delve into critical and exegetical details. Based on the firm conviction of and belief in the divine inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, it seeks to offer the reader a contextual readable and affordable guide.

The fruit of that vision is now in your hands!

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Everything begins with an idea, a thought, or a concept. As the idea grows, possibilities begin to emerge, riding on the wings of creative thinking. It is like the seed in the parable of the Sower that falls on good soil and yields a bumper harvest (Matt 13:8). In the case of the *Africa Bible Commentary* (ABC), this harvest has sprung from an idea that began to grow in the minds of a number of African church leaders and a cross-section of overseas missionary partners working in Africa.

The History of the ABC

In September 1994, representatives of Protestant churches, both ecumenical and evangelical, gathered in Nairobi, Kenya, for the Second Pan-Africa Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA II). At this historic meeting, Christian leaders identified deficient knowledge of the Bible and faulty application of its teaching as the primary weakness of the church in Africa. They recognized that the church in Africa was a mile long in terms of quantity, but only an inch deep in terms of quality. The Bible needed to be interpreted and explained to the people in familiar language, using colloquial metaphors, African thought-forms and nuances, and practical applications that fitted the African context. After all, God is closer to the people when he speaks in their language, as St Augustine of Hippo once said.

Eventually a dream was born among the leadership of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) for an African Bible Commentary produced by seventy African scholars and theologians, male and female, Francophone and Anglophone, who would both explain the text of all sixty-six books in the Bible and apply the Bible's teaching to contemporary Africa. This commentary is the result of that dream—a fundamental resource for the church in Africa.

The Contents of the ABC

The ABC is not a critical, academic, verse-by-verse commentary. Rather, it contains section-by-section exegesis and explanation of the whole Bible as seen through the eyes of African scholars who respect the integrity of the text and use African proverbs, metaphors, and stories to make it speak to African believers in the villages and cities across the entire continent. The application is both bold and faithful. Thus the ABC does not speak of a Black Jesus. To do so would be a travesty of the Bible story and cheap scholarship. Instead, the ABC is true to the text and honest to its context both in Bible days and in our day.

The ABC is, in fact, a mini-library that equips pastors and teachers to teach the churches and encourages students and church members to study God's word for themselves.

Of special benefit are the up-to-date specialist articles dealing with burning issues and problems such as poverty, favouritism, HIV/AIDS, refugees, war, politics and so on. And all this information is in one volume, which is easy-to-use, easy to handle, surprisingly light to carry, and very affordable! Even better, it is being published in both English and French, and will soon be translated into several African languages.

Using the ABC

What can the ABC be used for? At the top of my list is personal devotion. As general editor, I had to critique and correct every manuscript. But after completing this task, I began to use the manuscripts for my quiet time. For the shorter books, I first read the entire book in the Bible and then the commentary on the book. For the longer books, I read between five and ten chapters a day and then read the corresponding commentary. My spiritual life has been enriched, and I strongly recommend this approach.

I have also used portions of the ABC for my sermon preparation and pulpit ministry. While doing this, I have learned many new things about African peoples of whom I previously knew nothing. For example, until I read the ABC on Leviticus, I did not know about the Iraqw tribe in northern Tanzania who are of Semitic extraction and have much in common with the Hebrews.

All of the ABC editors are seminary professors. All of them have used some portions of the ABC as part of their class lectures. In fact, some students at the NEGST who interacted with my own manuscript on 2 Peter sent me their comments, expressing their agreement or disagreement with what I had said. Such discussion is beneficial for all of us as we seek to understand and apply God's Word. This experience confirms that the ABC will be a powerful resource book for fellowship group discussions and even for Sunday school classes in churches. I expect to find the ABC in every library of every Bible college, seminary, university and other institution of higher learning throughout Africa and beyond.

I also strongly recommend the ABC to every missionary working in Africa or intending to serve in Africa as it will give them insights into the Scriptures and into Africa that can only benefit their ministry.

Though the ABC is written by Africans and primarily for Africans, it can be used with benefit by those who are not Africans. In fact, reading the Bible through African lenses may help to inspire others with the dynamism and excitement that is common in African churches.

Tokunboh Adeyemo,
General Editor, Africa Bible Commentary
February 2006

OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE / CONTRIBUTORS

Oversight Committee

General Editor	Tokunboh Adeyemo
Theological Editors	Solomon Andria Issiaka Coulibaly Tewoldemedhin Habtu
Theological Advisors	Samuel Ngewa Kwame Bediako Isabel Apawo Phiri Yusufu Turaki

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Lasisi, Lawrence Adenyi	Nigeria

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SCRIPTURE AS THE INTERPRETER OF CULTURE AND TRADITION

The Africa Bible Commentary attempts to relate the Scriptures and African cultures and in so doing to seek ways in which the gospel may be seen to be relevant to African cultures. As we do this, we as readers and as writers need to avoid oversimplifications about the nature of this relationship.

What Is Culture?

Culture comprises far more than just music, dance, artefacts and the like. Our culture is our world view, that is, fundamental to our understanding of who we are, where we have come from and where we are going. It is everything in us and around us that defines us and shapes us. When we turn to Christ as Lord, we are turning over to him all that is in us, all that is about us and all that is around us that has defined and shaped us. Thus salvation encompasses not just our 'souls', but also our culture at its deepest level. We need to allow Scripture to become the interpreter of who we are in the specific concrete sense of who we are in our cultures and traditions.

What Is Scripture?

But acknowledging the centrality of Scripture to our identity does not mean that we demonize our own traditional culture or learn to quote certain verses and chapters as proof texts to support particular positions we hold because of our denominational or traditional background. The centrality of Scripture is more fundamental and its significance much larger than that.

Scripture Is a Prism

When light passes through a prism, a rainbow of colours is revealed. Similarly, when our cultures pass through the prism of Scripture, we see them in a new way. The light and shade intrinsic to our cultures are revealed. We are no longer being defined by our traditions, but are allowing Scripture to interpret those traditions.

Scripture Is a Record of God's Engagement with Culture

Scripture is more than just a record of the history and religion of Israel and the early church. Rather, it records God's dealings with his people and with their culture, and is itself the fruit of that engagement. It thus provides a yardstick or a model for encouraging, identifying and controlling all subsequent engagements of gospel and culture in the continuing divine-human encounter that characterizes our faith.

Scripture Is a Road Map

Scripture is the authoritative road map on our journey of faith, a journey that began before we first believed in Christ. This road map reminds us that the journey we are on did not begin at the point when we ourselves received the map. By looking at the map in Scripture, we can see where we have come from and how we got to where we are. It also

points us in the direction we are to take if we are to reach our destination. This understanding is one that the early preachers of the gospel stressed when they so often used the phrase 'according to the Scriptures'. Paul reminds Timothy of the guiding role of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16). He demonstrates its use when he recounts part of the history of the Israelites and concludes, 'These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us' (1 Cor 10:1-11).

Too often, preachers tend to pick a particular text and use it as a launch pad for presenting their own ideas, but apostolic preaching was not like that. It presented the meaning of Scripture as a whole and applied that meaning to the concrete cultural and social situation of the hearers. That is what we have to do if Scripture is to be the road map for getting us to our destination.

Scripture Is Our History

All the references to Scripture in the New Testament relate to the Old Testament, although the majority of those addressed would have been Gentiles, who did not share the Jews' cultural background. Yet, Paul refers to 'our forefathers' when speaking to Gentile Corinthians (1 Cor 10:1). Israel's history had become their 'adoptive' history, for all believers in Christ become children of Abraham (Gal 3:26-29) and are grafted into the original olive tree (Rom 11:7-20). And all believers were slaves who have been set free (Gal 4:7). All of us have been adopted into Christ, with our traditions, and are therefore transformed, with our traditions. The God of Israel is not a tribal God but the God who created all humanity.

Scripture Is the Basis of Our Identity

The earliest church was tempted to see Gentile Christians as second-class Jews, latecomers. But at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) the apostles recognized that God was doing something new. Paul makes the same point when he writes as if there are now three categories of persons: Jews, Gentiles and something new, called the church of God (1 Cor 10:32; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:14-18).

In the early decades of the church, some Christian writers spoke of Christians as a third race. The first race was the Jews; the second, the Gentiles; and the third was the Christians. The basis of this new identity was religious, not ethnic, national, social or cultural in the narrow sense. We have become 'a kingdom of priests to serve God and his father' (Rev 1:5-6; 1 Pet 2:9-10).

Scripture Is Our Story

Scripture is not just a holy book from which we extract teaching and biblical principles. Rather, it is a story in which we participate. When David Livingstone preached in Africa in the nineteenth century, he is said to have always referred to the Bible as the 'message from the God whom you know'. In

other words, Scripture speaks to us because Scripture speaks about us. And it speaks about us because we are a part of the gospel we preach. Paul was very aware of this. He emphasized that God had had mercy on him, and now he was called to preach to others (1 Cor 15:8-11).

Africans have a strong sense of their pre-Christian religious journey and should be alive to this participation in Scripture. This was certainly true of the Liberian prophet William Wadé Harris (1865-1929). He was the first distinctive African Christian prophet of modern times, and a man who brought many people into the church. Harris cut himself off from his Grebo life and family in a radical conversion, but he did not live without ancestors or a community. He simply changed his family connections to those based on faith in Christ as known through the Scriptures. His was a spirituality of vital participation totally indigenous to his African way of being within a community. He did not think in terms of what Moses saw or Jesus did in the Bible, but of how his new ancestors, Moses, Elijah, and supremely Jesus Christ, interacted with him. That was how he broke through to many people and they became Christians.

In African culture, participation in a common life constitutes community and marks out an ethnic group. When a libation is poured, the community recites the names of all those who are absent, treating them as present. Traditional believers summon their ancestors, and they believe that these ancestors are present at the ceremony that follows. (Do we have a similar confidence that Jesus is present when we pray?)

In Christian terms, we participate in Christ, and thus also in the resources and powers of the entire community composed of those who are also one with Christ through the Spirit. This community includes both the living and the dead (Luke 20:33-38). It is a transcendent community in which the human components experience and share in the divine life and nature (2 Pet 1:4).

Bringing Scripture and Culture Together

We should not focus on extracting principles from the Bible and applying these to culture. Scripture is not a book existing independently of us. Scripture is the living testimony to what God has done and continues to do, and we are part of that testimony. The characters in Scripture are both our contemporaries and our ancestors. Their triumphs and failures help us understand our own journey of faith (Rom 11:18). Scripture is not something we only believe in, it is something we share in. This is why the people in the Bible will not be made perfect without us (Heb 11:40), nor we without them.

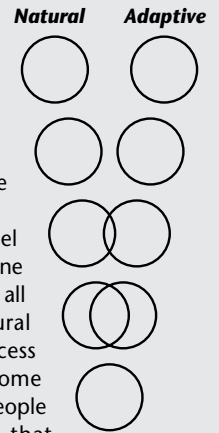
The application of Scripture to our cultures is a gradual process of coming together, of life touching life. Our particular culture encounters the activity of God in building up a community of his people throughout history, a community that now includes us and our particular traditions, history and culture. We will gradually come to share in a family likeness that is not measured by ethnic particularity but

by nothing less than Christ himself (Eph 4:13).

Scripture and culture are like merging circles, gradually coming to have one centre as we increasingly recognize ourselves in Scripture and Scripture becomes more and more recognizable as our story.

The process of bringing the gospel and culture together takes more than one generation. To look for a once and for all biblical 'answer' to a particular cultural problem is to misunderstand the process whereby a community and people come to see themselves as called into the people of God and come to participate in that community.

The process takes several generations, both ancient and modern. All the endeavours of believers from many backgrounds wrestling with gospel and culture are an integral part of our story. To fully understand the impact of the gospel engaging with any particular cultural environment we need to know of the struggle of ancient Israel to come to terms with the uniqueness and the majesty of Yahweh, their backslidings, apostasy, calamity, tragedy and triumphs. We also need to know how African earth shrines relate to God's way. We need to know how the gospel was brought from Alexandria to Axum, how it was taken from Ireland to the English, how it was taken from south-eastern Ghana to the Upper East Region. No part of the story of the people of God is alien to any other part of the story or is more important than any other part. The gospel has no permanent resident culture. It is as we take the experiences and the struggle in one context and funnel them through our own reading and experience of the Scripture in our mother tongue that we find that other Christian stories illuminate our story.



Scripture, Language and Culture

Mother-tongue Scripture has a fundamental place in the engagement of gospel and culture. If people recognize that Onyankopon (as God is called by the Akan of Ghana), the God they have known from time immemorial, is their Saviour, and that the coming of the gospel is what they have looked forward to, then God is continuing to ensure that they will hear him each in their own language so that they can marvel at his majesty and his love for them. Our mother tongue is the language in which God speaks to each of us. He does not speak in a sacred language, but in ordinary language, so that we may hear him and realize that this gospel is about us and that we have been invited to join a company drawn from every people, tribe, tongue, nation and language (Rev 7:9).

Kwame Bediako

(Adapted from Kwame Bediako, 'Scripture as the Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition', Journal of African Christian Thought, Vol. 4, No. 1 [June 2001], pp. 2-11.)

JAMES

This letter of James deals with how Christians should behave in the church and in society. It speaks of the conduct that should characterize a Christian. Because of its stress on how Christians should act, some great theologians such as Luther thought that James was teaching salvation by works. This supposed conflict with Paul's teaching that salvation was by faith led them to question the authenticity of this letter. But like the ancient church, these theologians ended up recognizing that James was also divinely inspired. They came to see that the writings of James and Paul complement each other marvellously, for while faith is the requirement for our salvation, works confirm the authenticity of our faith.

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COMMENTARY

1:1 Greetings

The author identifies himself as *James* (1:1a). He cannot be James the son of Zebedee, since he died prematurely (Acts 12:2), nor James the son of Alphaeus, about whom the NT gives little information. It is thus likely that the author is James, the brother of Jesus, who was one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:9; Acts 15:13-21). He and Peter may be thought of as representing Christians with a Jewish background, while Paul represents those Christians who had come from a pagan background. These two groups of Christians complemented each other rather than opposing one another.

The letter is addressed to *the twelve tribes scattered among the nations* (1:1b), that is, to Jewish Christians living outside Palestine. The conquest of Israel and the deportations of Jews had resulted in there being many Jewish communities in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea and even beyond that. It was these communities that had founded the synagogues in which Paul often preached (see, for example, Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:1). These communities would also have included Jewish Christians who had fled persecution in Palestine. This Jewish audience is apparent in the language the author uses. He writes in Greek, like all the NT authors, but the images and examples he uses and some of the words he chooses remind us of the OT.

The universal quality of the church is already apparent in the distribution of these readers. Like Paul, James could have addressed his letter to 'the church of Jesus Christ in Europe and in Asia Minor'.

1:2-18 Trials

1:2-8 A Requirement for Faith

The author comes across as a preacher, talking to people in front of him, rather than as an author writing a letter. Each time he tackles a new subject, he begins with the expression *my brothers* or *my dear brothers* (see, for example, 1:2, 16). The first subject he deals with is the problem of temptation and trials. But he does not answer the question of how to resist temptations or how to endure trials. Rather, he simply affirms that resisting temptations and enduring trials is a requirement for faith and results in spiritual growth (1:4). It will make us *mature and complete*, he says. This explanation helps us to understand why we must rejoice when we pass through trials (1:2).

As far as this author is concerned, faith is not a theoretical matter with a list of dogmas to recite or even beautiful doctrine to defend. He sees it as a practical matter that expresses itself in daily life, and especially in how we respond to trials. We can well imagine that the Christians to whom he was writing were constantly exposed to various temptations, perhaps more so than those who remained in Palestine. They were far from the official church leaders in Jerusalem. Thus the author starts his letter with this subject because falling victim to temptation has dangerous effects on a Christian's daily life.

Living a normal Christian life, especially in the face of temptations, demands wisdom (1:5) – that is, the ability to distinguish good from evil, truth from falsehood, and the important from the useless and to make timely decisions that conform to what is right. Wisdom is not natural to human beings; it is learned. Therefore, we must ask for it, without doubting the love of God, who always answers prayer (1:5). It goes without saying that, at the heart of this prayer, we must have active faith (1:6-7). Will God answer the prayer of the person who hesitates or waffles? Does such a person have true faith?

The reference to wisdom makes us aware that in many ways this letter resembles the wisdom literature in the OT. Books like Proverbs also give advice on how to live. But James is less interested in general advice for living than in helping his readers to relate their faith to everyday situations. While his advice may seem to be disjointed at first glance, on rereading the letter one discovers how the different parts are connected.

1:9-11 Resisting the Temptations of Riches

The first everyday situation to which James speaks is that of concern about social status. Some of those to whom he writes are *in humble circumstances* (1:9); that is, they are poor, with low social status, and may be tempted to envy the rich. James reminds these poor believers that their real value is not based on what they have. God has accepted them into his family, and so they occupy a *high position*. They need to remember that those whom the world sees as great are not necessarily great in God's eyes. In fact, riches can be a temptation for Christians because it is easy to trust in them for security rather than in God.

Those who are rich and belong to the upper class of society would be wise to be prepared for a fall and a drop in status. The fall of rich people is very common in Africa. James describes the life of a rich person as being like a *wild flower* that blossoms for a while and then fades for ever (1:10-11). The rich will die, just like the poor.

When the author speaks of the raising of the poor and the bringing down of the rich, he is not endorsing a struggle for a classless society. He does not condemn the rich because they are rich. He simply wants to make it clear that

life cannot be based on riches. In the long run, the rich have no advantage over the poor.

1:12-18 Why Does God Allow Temptation?

James next turns to the subject of what is at the root of temptations and why God allows tests. When discussing this subject, it is important to distinguish between two concepts that are both expressed by the same Greek word. The first concept is testing, which God allows to strengthen his children so that they may *receive the crown of life* (1:12). The second concept is temptation, which comes from the devil and aims to make God's children fail. It was testing that was being dealt with in 1:2, where James said that the goal of trials was to make God's children 'mature and complete' (1:4).

Tempting, however, is a completely different matter. God may test, but he never tempts. There is no way in which God can be the source of evil or of our misfortunes (1:13). On the contrary, he is the source of *every good and perfect gift* (1:17). He is faithful and does not change, and so he can be trusted to accomplish his plan for our good (1:18).

Temptations come when we entertain evil desires. These desires lead us to commit sin, that is, acts that dishonour God and lead to death (1:14-15). We need to seek out and destroy the seeds of envy and lust and create a healthy environment in which the various kinds of evil desires cannot thrive.

Some may doubt the faithfulness of God in moments of testing and trial, so James reminds them that God has chosen *to give us birth through the word of truth* (1:18), which means that he has made us his children so that we may *be a kind of firstfruits of all he created*. We will be the peak of his creation, as we were in the time before the fall! What a privilege!

1:19-4:17 From Hearing to Doing the Word

1:19-20 Learning to Listen

Here the author turns to another subject, again introducing it with the expression *my dear brothers* because he wishes to build a trusting relationship with his readers and to address them directly (1:19). The subject he is dealing with here is the extremely important one of learning to listen when faced with all kinds of ethical confusion. Most of his advice in this letter centres on this subject.

What they are to listen to is the word (1:21, 22), which includes the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Those who speak quickly are likely slow to listen (1:19). They tend to become angry and do not put the word into practice. They do not accomplish what the word teaches. To accomplish the word is to transform into action what we have heard and understood.

1:21-27 True Religion as Opposed to False Religion

The author's theology of listening includes a process: *listen ... get rid of all moral filth ... accept the word and do what it says (1:21-22)*. It is possible to listen to the word without accepting it if we do not pay any attention to what we are hearing or listen only to the parts that please us. The image of a mirror illustrates the point well (1:23). When this letter was written, mirrors were made of highly polished metal, not glass, and so a person's reflection was not as clear and sharp as it is in modern mirrors. That is why someone looking at their face in the mirror would have to do so *intently*. Moreover, a mirror only gives a flat image, never a three-dimensional one that shows all sides of the object being reflected. If we only glance at the Scriptures in a superficial manner, we will not be able to see what God is showing us there or get a good enough grasp of what God is really saying to be able to put his will into practice. The same truth applies when we walk out of a church service and say, 'That was a good sermon.' Too often we forget the content of the sermon simply because we make no effort to think about it or understand it thoroughly. We need to make an effort to understand what the word is saying (1:25), and after having examined and understood what the word says, we must appropriate it and integrate it into our lives.

If we stop partway through the listening process, we will fail and will live disordered lives. However, if we follow all the steps and put the word that we hear into practice, we will be blessed (1:25). After all, God did not give his law to restrict people's freedom or to estrange them but to regulate daily life and make it joyful.

Most of the Jews 'scattered among the nations' were religious. However, James condemns those who claim to be religious but do not concern themselves with putting their beliefs into practice (1:26). Without action, good doctrine is useless. Pure religion shows itself in behaviour. He gives an example of the type of behaviour he has in mind: *looking after orphans and widows (1:27)*. This example derives from the OT, which commanded God's people to care for those who had no one to support them financially. Orphans had no fathers, widows no husbands and foreigners no land to cultivate. James does not mention foreigners in this letter because the Christian Jews to whom this letter is addressed were all foreigners themselves.

But pure religion is not just a non-governmental organization, an NGO doing social work. The work done by believers is the product of their faith and the religion is characterized by the holy lives of its members. Briefly put, the word must produce in us acts that prove our relationship to God and a way of life that glorifies him.

FAVOURITISM

We all regularly encounter favouritism. Sometimes we suffer because of it; sometimes we benefit from it. But it is only when we are the victims that we condemn it. It is easy to benefit from favouritism without even being aware of it.

Favouritism manifests itself in various ways. For example someone may be given something they do not deserve simply because they are relatives of or come from the same village or the same ethnic group as the giver. Such nepotism is frequent in Africa. Unfortunately, it is also evident in the church, where people are sometimes given positions because they are recommended by an authority figure, a political official or even the leader of a denomination.

Favouritism also happens when people cheat and receive something at someone else's expense. For example, some patients get priority care in public hospitals because they are related to or know the doctor, while others who were there earlier must wait. This is favouritism because it is discrimination. The treatment that is being given to them is being withheld from those who are not associated with a prominent person, or who are simply poor. But everyone should be treated equally. James denounces discrimination and reminds us that God makes no distinction between people but treats us all in the same way (Jas 2:1-13).

Favouritism easily becomes corruption. A favour may be given in exchange for a bribe of money or some other

commodity. In this case, favouritism is not just a speck in someone's eye, but a plank (see Matt 7:3-5).

There are also more subtle forms of favouritism. For example, the line between favouritism and honour is not always clear. We owe honour and respect to those whose positions merit it (Rom 13:7). Thus it is right for us in Africa to show respect for the elderly (1 Tim 5:1-2). There is no favouritism when people are given what they are entitled to. But it can be difficult to tell where this justified respect moves over into favouritism. It is all too easy to show favouritism under the pretence that one is merely honouring someone. In the African context, respect for the elderly and for authority may easily lead to this type of favouritism, and the person receiving the favours may enjoy them and see nothing wrong with accepting them. However, those who are in positions of honour and authority need to be aware of the danger that the treatment they are receiving is actually unmerited favouritism.

The fight against favouritism is a major challenge for Christians who are in positions where it is always present. They should make a special effort to live as Christians, in a way that is different from those around them, because they are called to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13-16). But what can be done if the salt has lost its saltiness?

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2:1-13 Faith and Favouritism

As part of putting the word into practice, the author warns his readers against favouritism (2:1). He warns that if they are guilty of discrimination, they are disobeying the word.

The specific issue here is discrimination between the rich and the poor in their meetings (2:2). These meetings were probably held in a synagogue rather than in a church, for at that time most converted Jews still probably attended synagogues. This practice continued until the rabbis met at Jamnia in 90 AD and declared a clear and permanent separation between Judaism and Christianity. (Jamnia was also the place where the rabbis finalized the canon of the OT).

The author presents a hypothetical situation in which a rich and a poor man come into a meeting (2:2). There would be nothing unusual about this, for there were certainly rich believers (1:10). If the attitude of the leaders was to favour the rich to the detriment of the poor, they were guilty of discrimination, which James condemns as offensive (2:3-4). The sin is in the fact that these leaders, whom the author calls *my dear brothers* (2:5a), have set themselves up as judges by elevating the rich and insulting the dignity of the poor (2:6a). God is on the side of the poor, not because they are poor but because they are responsive to him and are near the Kingdom. If they are *rich in faith*, they *inherit the Kingdom* (2:5b). God rejects the rich, not because of their riches but because they commit violent acts: they are *exploiting you ... dragging you into court, ... slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong* (2:6b-7). The 'name' to which James is referring is the name of Jesus Christ. The rich assume that their wealth entitles them to do what they like and that they are not subject to the same rules as others.

Christian communities in Africa are not immune to this sometimes unconscious discrimination in favour of the rich since the power of money is strong when many are poor. The rich are easily noticed and gain the respect of leaders. Then the poor find themselves shoved to one side because, as the proverb says, 'thin cows are not licked by their friends'. They are ignored because they are 'thin' and cannot make a financial contribution to the community.

The solution to discrimination in the Christian community is to practise *the royal law*, the one that says *love your neighbour as yourself* (2:8). This law is royal because it is one of the two greatest commandments (Matt 22:39) and also because it was given by Jesus himself. James' emphasis emerges again: he does not tell his readers to 'obey' the law but to *keep* it, or in other words, to put it into practice. If they keep this law, Christians will not discriminate. If they do discriminate, they are disobeying the law (2:9). Christians of Jewish origin were eager to keep the law, but had failed to recognize that discrimination is as serious a sin as adultery or murder and that by breaking this one law they were guilty of breaking the whole law (2:10-11).

James encourages the believers to be careful in their relationships because one day they will have to give God an account of what they have done, and will be judged not according to the law of Moses, but *by the law that gives freedom* (2:12). He warns them that God will judge those who discriminate. Someone who shows favouritism insults the dignity of others and judges them. That person will in turn be judged by God (2:13).

2:14-26 Faith in Action in the Face of Nominal Belief

This part of the letter is well known to Christians today and was the section that so troubled the great reformer Martin Luther (see the Introduction). However, in considering whether James is indeed teaching salvation by works in 2:14, we need to remember when this letter was written. It was probably written towards the end of the first century, by which time Paul's teaching on justification by faith would have been widely known, since Paul's letters had been written decades earlier. However, some Christians in the generation following Paul were misinterpreting the doctrine of justification by faith and even twisting it by claiming that works were no longer important. So James is not opposing Paul. In fact, he places more stress on authentic faith than he is sometimes given credit for. He insists faith is empty and inauthentic if it does not involve putting the word into practice.

The preaching style of this letter appears here more clearly than elsewhere. James addresses his readers as if they were standing before him and sets out to question and persuade them. He uses a concrete example to make his point: What should one do when faced with a brother or sister in need, lacking even the most basic necessities such as clothing and food? (2:15). There were certainly many poor people in the churches to which James was writing. Fine-sounding words would not feed them, nor would good wishes (2:16). *Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead* (2:17). In other words, it needs no enemy to make it disappear.

To drive this point home, James stops using the plural pronoun and changes to the singular in 2:18, as if he were talking to only one person. This type of change is not unusual in the OT, especially in Psalms and Proverbs. As we have said, James' letter could well be a book of wisdom. The author contrasts faith characterized by nice words with the faith that produces works that can be observed. He emphasizes that such works are the result of faith (2:18). Faith that is not demonstrated by works is dead in that it is simply a nominal belief, like that of the demons, who also believe in God but do not obey him (2:19). The author has good reason to say that the person who advocates such dead faith is a poor man! He is worth very little in spiritual terms (2:20).

At this point, the author gives two examples drawn from God's word: Abraham (2:21) and Rahab (2:25), both of whom became ancestors of our Lord Jesus. *Our ancestor Abraham* was such an example of faith in action that he is called the father of believers (Gal 3:7-9). His faith expressed itself in his willingness to sacrifice his only son to God (Gen 22:1-19). This sacrifice is the action by which Abraham demonstrated his faith (2:23). He was not justified by this action, but by the faith that produced it.

Rahab in the second example is the very opposite of Abraham. He is the father of believers, whereas she was only a prostitute (2:25). But they shared the same faith, the faith that expresses itself in action. By faith, Rahab risked her life to save the lives of the Israelite spies (Josh 2:1-21).

The author concludes this part of his letter with a metaphor: *as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead* (2:26). This metaphor underscores the importance of putting God's word into practice if we are even to be able to speak about faith.

3:1-18 Considered Versus Hasty Speech

Earlier, James had said that 'everyone should be ... slow to speak' (1:19). Now he expands that command beyond speaking in the general sense to apply it to the speaking that is inevitably involved in teaching the people of God: *Not many of you should presume to be teachers* (3:1b). The reason that *we who teach will be judged more strictly* is that the more we say, the more likely we are to stumble and make mistakes. Teachers are not perfect and will make mistakes just like everyone else (3:2). But their mistakes may have destructive consequences. Thus those who are considering teaching must think carefully before deciding to do so. The judgment of which James speaks will take place when the Lord returns (5:7-9).

James uses three familiar things to illustrate how important it is for Christians, and teachers in particular, to control their tongues. The first two illustrations show how humans can use even small instruments to dominate the world. First, he speaks of how a rider can control and use a strong and dangerous animal like the horse if it has a bit in its mouth (3:3). Second, he reminds them that opposing wind and tides will prevent a ship from reaching its destination unless the pilot controls the rudder (3:4).

His third example shows how something small and useful can spread great destruction through an entire forest if not carefully controlled (3:5). Note that he says *The tongue also is a fire* (3:6), not the tongue is like a fire. It is more an identification than a comparison, for the author wants to emphasize how dangerous and destructive the tongue can be. We could translate 3:6 like this: *The tongue is a fire and also a world of injustice. It is a part of the body, but it defiles the whole body, sets the entire created world ablaze, and is itself set ablaze by hell.* This translation is also faithful to the

original Greek, but brings out the extent to which the tongue can do irreparable damage. While it is only one small part of the body, it affects all the other parts. More than that, it can set not only an entire forest on fire (3:5) but also the entire created world! James is using exaggeration, just as the psalmists did (see, for example, Ps 32:3; 42:3, 7) in order to drive home his point that an uncontrolled tongue can cause enormous damage to the body and to everyone around. And 'the body' is a common way of referring to a group of believers. Words can easily cause such groups to fall apart, much to the devil's delight. It is an irony of fate that in the long run the tongue that spreads such destruction will itself be destroyed by the fires of hell.

No matter how successful humans are in controlling the animal world in all its varieties (3:7), they have not yet learned to control the tongue (3:8). James describes it as an uncontrollable evil that leads inevitably to death. But this is not the whole truth, for the tongue does more than just destroy: we can use it to *praise our Lord and Father* just as we can use it to *curse men* (3:9). No wonder he compares it to fire, with which we may cook a meal or burn down the granary. We need to master our tongues so that they can be used for blessing, not cursing.

The fact that even believers use the tongue to say incompatible things is evidence of how difficult it is to control. James urges Christians not to be like a spring of water that produces both fresh and bitter water at the same time. All the fresh water in such a spring would be polluted by the bitter water (3:10-12). Christians should take pains that when they speak, their words are like fresh water – that is, kind words that build others up and that honour God.

Mastery of the tongue is a sign of wisdom, for the less one speaks, the fewer serious errors one will make. So James returns to the question of wisdom, which he has already discussed in 1:5-7. Wisdom is characterized by a *good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom* (3:13). Some of James' readers were no doubt claiming to be wise and intelligent. The author challenges them to prove it. Wisdom is not a philosophical theory but something that has to be demonstrated in daily life. And it, too, follows from applying the truth of the word.

James contrasts two types of wisdom: wisdom that is earthly and the wisdom from heaven. Earthly wisdom rests on lies, and thus on the bad use of the tongue. It divides people and sows hatred and jealousy. When people are not paying sufficient attention to God's word, their actions will spring from earthly motives such as *envy* and *ambition* (3:14). Any wisdom they claim to have will be earthly and unspiritual because it is *of the devil* and divides people (3:15-16). In contrast to the rivalry that characterizes earthly wisdom, heavenly wisdom fosters healthy human relationships and peace with others (3:17-18).

4:1-17 Conflicts and Sin

James has addressed several problems among the Jewish Christians scattered around the world, including discrimination in the churches (2:1-12) and wrong use of the tongue (3:1-18). Now he turns to the *fight and quarrels among you* (4:1). Refusal to listen and failure to obey the word are at the root of these conflicts and other sins.

He identifies one particular source of conflict: the pleasures that they desire and allow to dictate their behaviour. Their conflicts are rooted in the envy in their own hearts and their behaviour is self-centred. They think only of themselves. This selfishness is why they neither *have* nor *receive* blessing (4:2b-3). What he sees is a vicious circle. The believers allow their desires to excite them and drive them into action, and the action they take only strengthens their desires. Not surprisingly, they do not have what they want because they do not stop to ask for it. Rather than serving God, they serve themselves.

These conflicts can take dramatic form. James speaks as if his readers are at war among themselves, and even killing each other (4:2a), which seems unbelievable for a Christian group. No doubt he is exaggerating to force them to recognize the gravity of the situation. While there may not have been any literal war or murder, the tensions and disputes would have left victims. Such use of language was perfectly acceptable in ancient literature, and is often found in the Psalms (for example, Ps 59:6).

James seeks to shock his hearers by bursting out with *adulterous people* (4:4)! If we take this literally, it means that some of the readers were guilty of the sin of adultery. But he is speaking like an or prophet here, and what he is actually speaking of is spiritual infidelity. When the people of Israel turned away from God, they were regarded as an unfaithful wife (Jer 3:20).

Jesus used the same expression when he called the Jews who were demanding miracles ‘a wicked and adulterous generation’ (Matt 12:39). This type of infidelity is characterized by *friendship with the world*, on the basis of desires and pleasures (4:4). James denounces such compromise and duplicity. It is impossible to serve God and the desires of the world at the same time, for one cannot be simultaneously a friend and an enemy of God. A choice must be made. Reading James suggests that there must have been many men and women with divided hearts in the groups to which he was writing. They were no different than those who doubt and who resemble ‘a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind’ (1:6).

The next verse, 4:5, is difficult to translate and has no exact parallel in either the OT or the NT. James may be alluding to a lost sacred text or to a Jewish tradition. But the point of the sentence is that God is jealous as a husband is. He will not accept Christians living in duplicity, like an unfaithful wife.

Conflicts are the manifestations of subtle sins such as desires or pleasures nourished in the heart. They are also produced by pride (4:6) which is not that different from desire, as it is also focused on catering to the flesh. It too is self-centred and self-serving.

In the church, conflicts between people are not necessarily settled through negotiation, as would be the case in the political world. They are settled through repentance. So James invites the people concerned to return to God. They need to separate themselves from the things of the world, which are under the power of the devil, and to draw near to God (4:7-8). The verbs used emphasize the importance of repentance – *submit to God, resist the devil* (4:7), *wash your hands, purify your hearts* (4:8), *mourn and wail* (4:9) and *humble yourselves* (4:10). There is a clear change in the tone of the author. Whereas he previously addressed them as *brothers* (1:19; 3:1, 12) he now challenges them as *sinners* (4:8). He does not mince his words when it comes to dealing with sin.

Another sin that reflects a failure to listen and obey the word is slander. Slanderers enjoy spreading bad reports about other people so that everyone knows their faults and weaknesses (4:11). But this is a dangerous game, for they are setting themselves up as judges and are judging others by their own set of standards. Judgment is God’s prerogative, and he is the one who makes the laws. Usurping a function that is rightly his is a sin (4:12). This sin encourages conflicts and open warfare within the community and clearly shows a failure to obey God’s word, especially in relation to what it says about love for our neighbours.

James now gives a specific example of the pride he condemned in 4:6. Addressing a businessman or businesswoman who makes plans without any thought of God, he says something like this: ‘You drive yourself hard to succeed in business, but without God. You are very sure of yourself. And yet you are like a mist that appears and disappears’ (4:13-14). What is the good of making long-term plans when you don’t even know what will happen tomorrow? Earlier, he had compared riches to a flower (1:10-11). The rich person who is counting on his riches and the businessperson without God are alike. Both are guilty of the sin of self-sufficiency, of thinking they can succeed on their own. Both will come up short when they confront the brevity of life (4:15-16).

At first glance, 4:17 may seem to lack any obvious connection to what James has been saying so far. But we have seen that the thread running through all that has been said is the need to listen to the word of God and then apply it in the way we live. James has been dealing with the implications of God’s word ever since the beginning of the letter. Consequently, those who have read this letter will have no excuse for not putting into practice what they have learned. If they do not, they will be sinning by omission.

5:1-6 The Judgment of the Rich

Society has always been characterized by the gulf between the majority who are poor and the handful who are rich. The latter are the powerful ones. They set themselves up above the law. They make demands that are harmful to the interests of the poor. They insult poor people, drag them into court, and slander the noble name of the Lord (2:6-7). James does not call such people ‘brothers’ because they are not part of the family, even if they attend church (2:2). But God will judge them on that day when everyone will appear before the true judge to account for their behaviour (5:1). That day will be one of weeping and misery for the rich without God. The riches they relied on will evaporate – and will even be used as evidence against them (5:2-3).

The wealth the rich have hoarded should have been used to pay fair wages to their employees (5:4a). This injustice is yet another major addition to the catalogue of wrongs they have committed. But there is irony in the fact that those same rich people who dragged others before courts (2:6) will themselves be judged in court by the *Lord Almighty*, or ‘the Lord of Hosts’ (that is, armies), who defends his people (5:4b). The poor will be the ones to lay the charge, and the rich will be powerless before this judge, who cannot be manipulated or bribed.

The rich will face judgment on the last day, but some even face judgment now as a result of their overeating and drinking (5:5). In our day, we talk of the illnesses of the rich. Their anxieties and indulgence lead to stress and shorten their lives. All the thought they have put into their investments will prove useless as they are separated from them by death.

5:7-11 Hope

Endurance, patience and hope are three important themes in this letter. They blend well with the central theme of putting the word into practice. Faith should express itself in concrete action. Society judges Christians not on the faith they profess but on the way they live. For his part, the Lord, who is coming back, will judge us on the works that result from our faith in Jesus Christ. We are not saved by these works, but we will be held accountable for them.

Putting the word into practice requires patience and endurance because we will face many temptations, tests, obstacles and challenges. We must imitate farmers. After having worked hard to get the crop into the soil, they wait patiently for the harvest, which will come at the right time, neither too early nor too late (5:7). Just as the farmer waits for the day of harvest or of reward, so we who serve the Lord must wait patiently for his return (5:8). Patience will help us to avoid both the feverish speculation about the date of his return that characterizes some groups and the lack of

concern shown by those with divided hearts who say that the Lord will never return.

Impatience also shows itself in grumbling about other Christians (and about God), and James warns us against this (5:9). Grumbling is a sign of disorder and misunderstanding, and also reveals a failure to control the tongue, which causes great damage among Christians (see 3:1-10). The Lord will express his displeasure at it when he returns.

While we await that great day, our patience will be tried by suffering, just as the patience of the prophets was (5:10). They spoke out in the name of the Lord despite great opposition. They did not give up and fail in their mission because hope was alive in their hearts. They believed that the day of the Lord was near. We admire people like that.

Another person, not a prophet, who suffered patiently was Job (5:11). He feared God and also endured great suffering. Anyone who loves God may have to face suffering, but by the end of it they will know God better, and have a far deeper understanding of his love and mercy.

5:12 Truth

James tells the believers, *do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else* (5:12; see also Matt 5:35). In Greek and Jewish culture, when one swore by the heavens or by earth, one was asking a divinity to attest to the truth of what one was saying. James is strongly opposed to this because those who live in truth don’t need any further witness, least of all from some divinity! In other words, a believer will always speak only the truth.

5:13-20 True Christian Communities

James is looking forward to real Christian communities whose members put the word of God into practice. Such communities will resist temptations and overcome testing, will take care of the poor, of orphans and of widows, and will be examples of impartiality, endurance and patience.

5:13 Respond to Joy and Sorrow

All believers will experience times of joy and times of sorrow. James made this point clearly at the very beginning of his letter (1:2-3). There will be tests, temptations and sometimes conflicts among fellow Christians. There will also be joy, for James has said that practising the word will bring life and give happiness (1:25).

James’ advice on how to respond to different circumstances is simple. In times of suffering, pray (5:13a). Tell God about your physical or spiritual pain and wait for him to deliver you, if that is his will. You should express your dependence on him. In times of joy, there should be thanksgiving and songs of praise (5:13b). By singing, we tell God of our thanksgiving and tell him what he means to us. We

could do the same in a prayer, but singing is better because both the words and the rhythm and melody can express our joy, a joy that can come only from God.

5:14-18 Care for the Sick

A community that is faithful to the word also cares for the sick (5:14). James recommends calling the *elders*, that is, the people with responsibility for leading the church who thus have some authority. Through their intervention by anointing with oil and praying for the one who is sick, the whole church offers support to that person.

When a member is sick, the whole body is concerned. In other words, the church is a place of healing for the sick. But it is neither the oil nor the elders that heal, but it is the Lord himself, since the anointing is done in his name.

Some in Africa believe it is actually the oil itself that has miraculous power to heal. Others think that healing depends on the quality of the oil used. Such people must stop thinking of the oil as sacred or as possessing special powers and must cling only to the promises of God. That is why the author of this letter recommends prayer (5:15). It is the prayer of faith rather than the repetition of special formulas that brings miraculous healing.

The phrase translated *will make the sick person well* can also be translated as ‘shall save the sick’ (KJV). James then adds, *if he has sinned, he will be forgiven* (5:15). This linking of healing and forgiveness has led some to think that healing of the body is an integral part of salvation. The problem with this position is that someone may fall sick several times and be healed as a result of prayer. But one day that person may finally fall ill and die. Such a death does not mean that the person has forfeited salvation. Our salvation is definite and eternal. What this passage is teaching is that the healing of the body is a sign of our redemption. By healing our bodies and forgiving our sins, the Lord shows us that he saves us from eternal death. After all, if he can heal and forgive, how much more can he save!

The session of group prayer is also a time for mutual confession (5:16a). Sin is a dangerous enemy of the community. Hence it is important to articulate and express our sins, even the most subtle ones and those we consider insignificant, before God and before other believers. This is the only way to combat them. According to the promise of God’s word, mutual confession brings healing because *the prayer*

of a righteous man is powerful and effective (5:16b). This is another Semitic expression. In the OT, the righteous were those who feared God and obeyed his word. They would be rewarded by the Lord. In the context of this letter, the righteous are those whose sins have been confessed and forgiven. Their prayers are effective because God listens to them. He cannot listen to anyone who is hard-hearted and lives in sin. James cites the example of Elijah as someone whose prayers were effective (5:17; see 1 Kgs 17–18). God listened to his prayer because he was righteous. If God did that for Elijah, why would he not do it for us today?

5:19-20 Care for the Lost

James closes his letter with a sad possibility. The community takes care of the poor and of the needy such as orphans, widows and those who are sick. It should also care for anyone who may *wander from the truth* (5:19). He seems to be speaking of a hypothetical case rather than one he has specifically heard of. Some believers may wander away from the word and live in sin. They will follow paths that diverge from the path of walking with God. Unless the community intervenes, such people will die in their sin. This does not mean that they will lose salvation, since that is based on faith. But it is a pity that someone would die without getting spiritual help from the church. The community should not be judgmental but should lovingly seek to lead such a person back into the way of God (5:20).

This last paragraph of the letter confirms that James cannot be opposed to Paul (see the Introduction). He does not set works up against faith. Those who are lost are not those who have neglected works but those who have distanced themselves from the truth, that is, from the faith. Africa is fertile ground for new religions and sects, making it more important than ever to be well rooted in biblical truths through reading and studying the word of God. James’ focus on truth at the end of his letter undermines any assertion that all he is interested in is works.

Solomon Andria

Further Reading

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DR. TOKUNBOH ADEYEMO is the executive director of the Centre for Biblical Transformation, having served previously as general secretary for the Association of Evangelicals in Africa. He received his ThD from Dallas Theological Seminary and his PhD from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

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