

CAN YOU FACE HARDSHIP?

Today's Text: Mark 13: 1- 23

Extracts:

And Jesus, answering [His disciples] began to say: “Take heed that no one deceives you... But *watch out for yourselves*, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. *You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them...but do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit... And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But, he who endures to the end will be saved* [Mk 13: 5, 9, 11, 13]

On Thursday, 17 June 2010, Nigeria played its second (must –win- to-advance) 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa Group B match against Greece.¹ Nigerian matches attract huge expectations from a fanatical and expectant country of 150 million people, each of whom thinks he is better than the national coach! The match started quite well when Nigeria scored first. Then came the fateful 33rd minute. In an off the ball incident, Nigeria's 24-year old midfielder, Sani Kaita, kicked the thigh of a Greek player perhaps in reaction to provocation. The referee kicked him out with a straight red card for deliberate misconduct, leaving Nigeria with ten men to face Greece's eleven. The game changed soon after and unfancied Greece went on to win, 2-1.

In our journey with Christ through life here on earth, we run into booby traps set by Satan and his evil agents, spiritual or human. Their aim is to derail us and make us miss salvation, the same way that Kaita was sent off the soccer pitch in South Africa, thus hurting his country and his own football career with the national team. Are you going to fall for the devil's tricks or endure to the end?

This week's lesson will help you to answer that question.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: Paul Fletcher, “Moment of madness costs Nigeria dear,” http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/paulfletcher/2010/06/moment_of_madness_costs_nigeri.html#223919 ; Thurs., 17 June 2010; Tony Ubani, “Kaita shows no remorse,” Fri., 18 June 2010 <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2010/06/18/kaita-shows-no-remorse/> ; ‘Nigerians react to defeat by Greece,’ <http://www.nguardiannews.com/>; Fri., 18 June 2010; and Colin Udoh, “Eagles promise to win for Kaita,” <http://www.kickoff.com/news/16205/eagles-promise-to-win-for-kaita.php> ; Fri. 18 June 2010.

1. Background: Life is a painful journey on a hard road!

Somebody has said that the road to success is always under construction. That should not be strange because nobody knows for sure what constitutes success. It is a moving target! That is why life on earth is a perpetual struggle. In the words of the Preacher, “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favour to men of skill; but *time and chance* happen to them all” [Eccl. 9: 11]. Some people call “time and chance” luck but what is luck? Some people may see it as providence or blessing while others may dismiss it as mere coincidence. Therefore, if we really want to understand and appreciate what makes the difference between any two persons in life, it is good to look at how they have coped with hardship or tribulations, that is, how they were able to overcome something that caused them great difficulty, affliction or distress.

Examine your own situation right now. What is it that is giving you sleepless nights? It could be a civil war in your nuclear family with husband and wife not on speaking terms or siblings going their separate ways as mortal enemies. It could be a financial crisis where the pay cheques (checks) from both parents are not enough to pay mounting bills. It could be an illness which is defying medical treatment. It could be a marriage being threatened by inability to have children. You could even be the CEO of BP who is trying to figure out how to deal with the oil spill in the Mexican Gulf or a teenage girl whose first boyfriend in life has just broken with her. The easiest way out is to give up and sulk but the word of God says, “If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small” [Prov. 24: 10]. Life without problems and challenges is a Utopia- it does not exist! As long as you remain here on earth, you will face physical, psychological and spiritual challenges. If you do not deal with them, they will deal with you. Therefore, there has to be a better way out! That is what this week’s lesson is about.

The disciples were leaving the temple one day when one of them said to Jesus, “Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!” [Mk 13: 1]. The young man was admiring the magnificent temple built by Herod the Great and his descendants. Jesus replied him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down” [v. 2]. So, perplexed by the Lord’s response, Peter, James, John and Andrew came to Him, as He sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple and asked Him privately to tell them when His prophecy of the destruction of the temple would take place and what would be the sign of the time of its fulfilment [vv. 3-4]. That temple (with all of Jerusalem) was in deed completely destroyed under the Roman General Titus in A.D. 70, according to the Roman historian, Josephus. If Jesus was crucified at about the age of 33, that event was over three decades into the future that He did not disclose to His disciples. That makes the event analogous to our unknown and indefinite wait for the second return of Jesus. Only God the Father knows “the day and hour” [v. 32]. Understandably, therefore, the Lord addressed the disciples’ second question concerning the signs of the time to

prepare them for His return [v. 26]. As we examine them, we need to pay attention to how they apply to our circumstances as we await Christ's return.

Here are the key signs that Jesus said they needed to watch out for:

a) *Conflicts between nations and peoples*

There would be “wars and rumours of wars ... for nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom” [vv. 7-8a]. In the last one hundred years, the world has seen more devastating wars than in the rest of human history, including two world wars, 1914-18 and 1939-45. Ethnic cleansing is now a routine occurrence as is currently being reported in Kyrgyzstan.² The question is no longer if but when and where is the next one.

b) *Natural disasters*

Jesus told the disciples that “there will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines and troubles” [v. 8b]. In 2010 alone, we have had very destructive earthquakes in numerous countries, notably, Haiti and Peru, leading to thousands of dead or injured and massive destruction of property. Floods are a more common occurrence in virtually every country today than ever before. Right now, the Gulf of Mexico is seriously threatened by the BP oil spill which has continued for almost 60 days and every attempt to stop the leak has so far failed. The damage to the environment and economic activities is estimated in billions of US dollars.

c) *Religious deception and persecution*

Believers would be delivered up to councils and beaten in the synagogues. They would be brought “before rulers and kings” for Christ's sake [v.9]. False Christs and false prophets would rise and show signs and wonders to deceive possibly even the elect [vv. 21-22]. Christian persecution has today been stepped up, even in so-called Christian nations, where laws have been passed to make sin, such as abortion or same-sex marriage, a civil right. In such cases, you are branded a fanatic when you preach God-fearing sermons instead of user-friendly contraptions. It is much more difficult to be a Christian today than at any time in human history.

Jesus left His disciples with a message of hope. First, no matter the tribulation, “the gospel must first be preached to all the nations” [v. 10], and second, “he who endures to the end shall be saved” [v. 13]. Are you ready to be among those who are able to endure to the end?

² Ted Rall, “Ethnic cleansing in Kyrgyzstan,” http://news.yahoo.com/s/ucru/20100617/cm_ucru/ethniccleansinginkyrgyzstan ; Thur June 17, 2010

2. Learning to bear hardship

I believe that all true believers want to gain the crown of salvation at the end of their pilgrimage on earth. Therefore, no matter the hardship that the enemy may throw at them, they have to endure to the end to wear the crown. The following principles will help you to cope with your own share of hardship:

a) *Know its cause*

When you suddenly find yourself facing trials and tribulations, there must be an explanation for them. A proper diagnosis is necessary because you cannot treat an ailment you do not understand. It is possible that *you brought the crisis on yourself*. For example, if the wind is blowing in your direction and you throw filth at it, you will be pursued by foul smell which you cannot blame on your enemies! Therefore, when you engage in sinful acts, such as sexual immorality, you cannot blame the devil when unwanted pregnancies and sexually-transmitted diseases show up! After Jesus had rescued the woman caught in adultery from instant death by stoning, He told her, “Go and sin no more” [**Jn 8: 11**], suggesting that her ordeal was self-inflicted. Even when God had forgiven David for adultery and murder in the matter of Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah, God told him, “The sword shall *never* depart from your house because you have despised Me” [**2 Sam. 12: 10**]. The child of the adulterous affair died [**v. 18**], and for the rest of his life, David was plagued by incest [**2 Sam. 13: 11-14**] and rebellion within his family [**2 Sam. 15: 1-16**]. Therefore, the first thing to do when you face trials and tribulations is to rule out your own contribution by confessing your sins and renouncing a life of sin.

However, every such situation may not be self-inflicted. It could be *a training opportunity that God has allowed to either bring you to a place of blessing or to prepare you for harder challenges*, the same way that parents raise their children for a brighter future. For example, Joseph went from slavery to servitude to prison on the road to becoming the governor of Egypt. If he had remained in his father’s house in Canaan, there was no way that he could have fulfilled God’s plan for him to be the saviour of his people from famine [**Gen. 50: 20**]. David spent over twelve years in the wilderness from his anointing as a teenager [**1 Sam. 16: 10-13**] to his crowning as King of Judah at the age of thirty [**2 Sam. 5: 4**] so as to learn how to rely totally on God. In such circumstances, you can cope by strengthening yourself in the Lord, as David did when the Amalekites overran his camp at Ziklag and took his family members captive [**1 Sam. 30: 1-6**].

A third possibility is that you have done nothing wrong and it has nothing to do with your future plans. You are *a mere pawn in a spiritual contest between God and Satan*. In that case, you are like a worm that a fisherman puts on a fishing hook to attract fish. There is no quarrel between that worm and the fish trying to pluck it for food. Meanwhile, the innocent

worm is in deep pain because the fisherman has impaled it to the hook! A well-known example is Job who lost seven sons and three daughters and all his wealth within days simply because God had allowed the devil to take them away from him so as to test the resilience of his faith in God [Job 1: 1-12]. In this case, you must leave everything in God's hands to handle things according to His purpose. Like Jesus concerning His death on the cross, you will learn to say to God, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done" [Lk 22: 42].

b) Know its course

It is easier to cope if you know for how long your hardship will last. For example, a pregnant woman knows that her ordeal will not last more than nine months. A student knows that a four-year degree programme will one day come to an end. In such cases, you can strive to bear the hardship because you know that it will soon end, for as the Psalmist says, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" [Ps. 30: 5].

However, it becomes a challenge when you do not know when or how the tribulation will end. For example, even though God had assured Abraham that He would make him the father of many nations [Gen. 12: 1-3], He never told him when or how. In the end, the journey to Isaac's birth took twenty-five years, when Abraham had become one hundred years old and his wife, ninety [Gen. 17: 17], and after Abraham's 'detour' to have Ishmael by Hagar [Gen. 16: 16]! We do not know when or how we will die, not to talk of for how long to endure salvation-related hardship. That is what makes people flounder, listening to wrong advice, or falling for religious deception, in an attempt to hurry the hardship process or truncate it. A few people are able to hang on to their faith, which is easier said than done! Nevertheless, that faith is all you have got.

c) Know its price

Hardship can take a heavy toll on people. It may require you to give up your comforts and human pride. You will be persecuted. They will frame incredible lies against you and you may be condemned without any chance for fair hearing in the court of public opinion. See, for example, how Jesus was mocked and derided by both Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers during His trial. They called Him a blasphemer for calling Himself the Son of God that He truly is [Matt. 26: 63-65]. The Roman soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" that He truly is [Matt. 27: 29].

The high cost of hardship may drive you away from trying but if you do not try at all, you cannot win. According to a popular saying, if you do not like smoke, get out of the kitchen. But who will finish the cooking if you are the only cook or if everybody leaves the kitchen? That is your challenge!

d) Focus on the prize

What you hope to get at the end can also influence you to hang in there or give up. People ask themselves, “Is it worth all the trouble?” Therefore, you must know what battles to fight. If the prize is important for your future and it meets God’s standards of integrity, the hardship may be worth it. For example, Jesus knew that the salvation of the world was the prize of His suffering and death on the cross [**Jn 3: 16**]. Therefore, He was willing and able to bear it all. Today and forever more, at the name of Jesus, all knees bow and all tongues confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father [**Phil. 2: 9-11**].

From the forgoing, it is clear that *it takes more than will power to overcome hardship*, whether economic, social or spiritual. As we approach end-times, wickedness is growing. Believers are going to face more persecution from extremists of other religions and from public policies and laws of democratic societies that promote evil as human rights. Therefore, the new persecution may be much more subtle than brutal for, in the words of Jesus, “There will be tribulation, *such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be* [and] *unless the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh would be saved*” [**Mk 13: 19-20**]. As a believer looking forward to eternity with Jesus, *you need faith, watered by the blood of Jesus and the comfort of the Holy Spirit [v.11] to strengthen and guide you to final victory* for “many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all” [**Ps. 34: 19**].

3. Conclusion: Pain begets Gain!

In concluding the “Faith Hall of Fame,” the writer said that all the ‘awardees’ were able to endure to the end “through faith” by which they subdued kingdoms, preferred torture and martyrdom to surrender and wandered in deserts and mountains, among other hardships [**Heb. 11: 33-40**]. He urged believers to “run with endurance the race that is set before [them], looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” [**Heb. 12: 1-2**].

Can you face hardship? Yes for pain begets gain!