

The Life of James

As we prepare to study the Letter of James for the lessons God would have us see, understand and live, we begin by examining who James is. This message this morning is more of a history narrative than a sermon. It is my desire that we understand who James was and the background and purpose for his writing this letter in an effort to gain all that is possible from the study and preaching of James' letter. Today we will deal with verse 1 and next week start digging into chapter 1 of James.

The writer of the New Testament letter of James was not one of the original twelve disciples of his half-brother Jesus. James the apostle, one of the original twelve, was the son of Zebedee and the brother of John. The author of James is the half brother of Jesus and was the oldest son of Joseph and Mary, as indicated in Matthew. Reading from the Gospel According to Matthew, written between 50 and 60 A.D., chapter 13, verse 55, men of the Nazareth asked after Jesus taught, **“Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?”** (Matthew 13:55 ESV) The list of Jesus’ brothers, as is Jewish custom, gives the birth order with James being the oldest son. Verse 56 tells us that Jesus had sisters as well, **“And are not all his sisters with us? ...”** The structure of verse 56 makes clear Jesus did not have one sister or even 2 but there were at least 3. From this passage in Matthew and from Mark chapter 6 it is made clear that Jesus had 4 brothers and at least 3 sisters through the marriage of Joseph and Mary. The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians clearly identifies James as the brother of Jesus. Paul went to Jerusalem after Jesus had saved him

three years earlier to meet with Peter and the other apostles, but it appears after three years of no longer persecuting Christians and preaching the Gospel of Christ he may still not have been fully trusted. Paul wrote, “I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.” (Galatians 1:19) So Paul confirms that within 3 years of his conversion James, Jesus’ half-brother, is considered an apostle and in a place of leadership in the Jerusalem church.

Some religions attempt to get the Scriptures to say something other than what they say. They would have us think that these children mentioned in the scriptures were of Joseph by a previous marriage. We know this cannot be true because of the age of Joseph, most probably in his early to mid-twenties, when he wed Mary would not have made it possible for him to be a man with at least 7 children. Others teach that Mary was a perpetual virgin, not having sexual relationships with Joseph after the birth of Jesus and the brothers and sisters recorded in Matthew were actually cousins of Jesus. This would go against the Greek word structure and Jewish language usage. Therefore those listed are indeed Jesus’ half-brothers and sisters by the marriage of Joseph and Mary.

James and his brothers did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah during His earthly ministry. They were raised in a God fearing home and in the Jewish religion. We read from the Gospel According to John, written between 80 and 90 A.D., beginning at chapter 7, verse 3, “So his brothers said to ~~him~~ Jesus, ‘Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. ⁴For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.’ ⁵For not even his brothers believed in him.” (John 7:3–5) Jesus’ brothers were taunting Him to openly do miracles to prove He was who He claimed to be. How could Jesus’ brothers see him grow into manhood, living without sin and not believe? How could they see the miracles Jesus performed and not believe?

Yet, this is what Jesus said when he was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth after teaching in the synagogue. The Gospel According to Mark, written between 50 and 60 A.D. records this event, **“And Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.’ ”** (Mark 6:4) Jesus said those who did not believe in Him were **“his relatives”** and those within **“his own household.”** The people of Nazareth saw Jesus teach with wisdom beyond human understanding, they saw Him do miracles and yet, they did not believe. Where Jesus’ brothers blinded by the social pressures of their Jewish society and in particular the people of Nazareth? Have we, you and I, not meet people that have been exposed to the wisdom of God through the Bible, God’s written Word and Jesus, God’s Living Word and yet they refuse to believe? Do we not wonder what it will take for them to see Jesus as the Christ? Then we remember a spiritually dead person’s soul knows no spiritual wisdom. The Holy Spirit must awaken one’s soul for one to know Christ and this would have been true for the half-brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. **Without the Holy Spirit breathing life into a person’s soul, no preaching, witnessing or miracles will convince that person of the reality of who Jesus Christ is.**

We know from Acts that those who believed in Jesus, as the Christ, gathered in the upper room to pray after His resurrection and we see things had now changed. **“When they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying ... The apostles and many others ... ¹⁴ with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.** (Acts 1:13–14) Now Jesus’ brothers are counted among those praying and they are praying because they have come to believe. Seeing the resurrected Jesus finally removed the scales from their eyes and the stone hardness from their hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit they believed.

We learn from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written around 55 A.D., that Christ resolved James' unbelief. Paul wrote, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas (*The Apostle Peter*), then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to **James, then to all the apostles.**" (1 Corinthians 15:3–7) Christ's appearance to His brother James created two immediate results. First, James became a believer and from the historic records we know James was not a lukewarm believer but was a staunch believer who lived and taught the gospel. Second, having been seen with the resurrection Lord, James was recognized as part of a select group of those who had seen the resurrected Christ and by Christ's appearance to and with James that he was to be a leader of the new church in Jerusalem. We find James role as a leader in Jerusalem recorded in the scriptures 15 years later. **The council of Jerusalem recorded in chapter 15 of Acts took place in 50 A.D., which was after James had written his letter. Luke wrote Acts of the Apostles around 62 A.D.** At the council James' thoughts bore great weight and gave credence that the gospel should go out beyond the Jews in Jerusalem to those Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire and to the Gentiles also.

James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and as such his influence would have spread not only to the rest of Palestine but to the Jewish Christians living in Gentile countries. We know from Paul's letter to the Galatians that there was a strong Jewish Christian community and there was a growing Gentile Christian community in Antioch. Peter was living in Antioch and eating with both Gentile and Jewish Christians. James from Jerusalem sent a group of men to check on the Jewish Christian church about the same time James wrote his letter in 48 to 49 A.D.

Upon their arrival Peter withdrew from the Gentile Christian community and only met with the Jewish Christian community. This angered Paul and he confronted Peter for being a hypocrite. It was this conflict that led to the council in Jerusalem in 50 A.D. and James' strong testimony that the gospel must go out not only to the Jewish Christians but also to the Gentiles. I hope you are beginning to see how all these events are interrelated.

Because James lived devoutly the gospel of Christ, the early church began calling him "James the Just." Hegesippus (*Hee-ga-sippus*) was a Christian chronicler of the early Church who appears to also have been a Jewish convert to Christianity. He was born in the early second century in Palestine. He called James "The Just" in his writings. He recorded that James lived a life of such holiness and piety that even non-believing Jews respected him. Although by what we know from history this respect did not include the leadership among the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that during the transition of Roman governors to Jerusalem the high priest Ananias seized the opportunity to call a council and charged James of violating Jewish law by preaching the Christian doctrine. James was convicted of heresy and stoned by the council convened by Ananias in 62 A.D. James' death preceded the writings of most of the books found in the New Testament.

The Letter of James

James is the most Jewish book within the New Testament; apart from the two references to Christ it would fit well into the Old Testament. James letter has been compared with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, particularly the teachings found in Proverbs because of its direct and powerful directives about living as a believer. The Gospel, redemption, incarnation and resurrection are not

mentioned. James is a Jewish Christian writing to believers in Christ who were Jewish and who were also familiar with the Old Testament. **The focus of James' letter was not on how to become a Christian but rather on how to live and advance in holiness. This involved the ethical implications of faithfulness in living out the gospel.** James defends the practical and ethical demands of God upon His people. James is calling believers to lives of faithfulness and discipline – leading lives that bring God and Christ glory and serves others through good works.

Another striking fact about James' letter is the number of parallels between his letter and the words of Jesus. It has been said that James contains more verbal reminiscences of the teachings of Jesus than all the other apostolic writings. Instead of quoting specific gospels, which had not been written yet, or even quoting Jesus directly, James reflects the words and principals he heard from Jesus as He taught. James' letter gives evidence that he was well aware of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' parables and his teachings about life, poverty and the values of the Christian faith. These unique facts about James' letter and his unique approach in which it is written maybe due to the fact it is the first book of the New Testament to be written. James penned his letter between 44 and 49 A.D. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark were both written between 50 and 60 A.D., Luke was not written until 60 or 61 and John not until 80 to 90 A.D. So, although James knew the teachings, stories, parables that would be included later in the Gospel accounts by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, he wrote to Jews about living as Christians before all other New Testament books were written.

Reading verse 1, **“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”** Despite James being the prominent leader of the Jerusalem church he identifies himself as **“servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”** Depending on your translation this verse may use the words;

“servant” or “slave” or bondservant.” The Greek word is “*doulos*” meaning slave. James is saying he is the slave of God and his Lord Jesus Christ and has given up all personal freedom and is completely controlled by his Master – the Triune God. As James continues his greeting the most natural understanding of “[to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion](#)” is that James intended this letter to be sent out to the Jewish communities scattered throughout the Roman Empire. As the church spread throughout the Roman Empire James sent his letter to give these Jewish converts a framework for living as Christians. Also as Gentiles began to be added to the church they would also find James’ letter instructing them in the path of obedience and faithfulness and good works of the Christian life. Even though only about a dozen years had passed from Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection within this letter is evidence that the original fervor of the converts to Christianity had, at least for some, begun to wane. The same is true today, we see for some that as time passes their fervor and love for Christ grows cold. God’s people often have short memories of who they were before God saved them and who He is making them into. Jesus requires obedience for His gift of the Holy Spirit to work within us and grow us spiritually. Our natural state is at times one of complacency, but James calls Christians to action.

The controversy that some find with James’ letter is they believe James and Paul contradict each other. They use this controversy to challenge that the Bible is not inspired by God and in truth is a product of men’s minds. They say Paul teaches one only needs faith and James teaches both faith and works is needed for salvation. Neither of these statements is true as they are out of context of their complete writings. Paul taught one is justified by faith alone. In Romans 3:28 Paul wrote, “[For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.](#)” However, in the second chapter of James, he wrote, “[You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.](#)” (James 2:24) It is important for us to understand

what each of these statements means and we will study this in greater detail later. For now an overview is that Paul taught faith was a trust that cannot exist without obedience and obedience is the working out of ones faith. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” (Galatians 5:6) Faith is evident of our love first for Christ and then working through love for others. As Paul wrote to the brethren in Philippi, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” (Philippians 2:5-7) Jesus emptied Himself of His true divine nature to take human form and be a servant of mankind. Jesus then demonstrated faith lives out through good works of serving others.

This is exactly what James teaches. Faith is not a magic formula of salvation that requires nothing else. One’s good works, as a servant of Christ, must accompany faith, otherwise it is not true faith and in truth it is a dead faith. Both Paul and James brought forth the same principle as they wrote to believers to live in opposition to their common enemy, the devil. Live for the glory of Jesus the Christ and this means knowing God’s written and Living Word and using these to serve others by sharing the Gospel and meeting people’s spiritual and physical needs. The Apostle Mark recorded Jesus’ words in chapter 10, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43-45) Jesus gave us the example of being servants and James brings this out in his letter.

James writes of the way to test if ones faith is true and how to examine ones faith to determine if it is true. To be deceived by counterfeit money leads to financial lost,

just as when one buys a counterfeit painting – they pay for something of great value that in truth was worthless. These result in temporal loss, but to be deceived by a counterfeit faith results in eternal loss. The master of all counterfeiters is Satan who gets people to believe they are saved by believing in a counterfeit Jesus. This is what Satan has done with so many religions where mankind has accepted the counterfeit at great cost. I came out of Mormonism. When one studies the Bible as compared to the Book of Mormon it does not take long to see one is true and one is a counterfeit written by man to look, as best as he can, to be of God. It does not take deep research to see what is of man and what is of God. Yet, without spiritual wisdom from the Holy Spirit people are deceived that the counterfeit is real. This is why Glen Beck, a Mormon, truly thinks he is a Christian. It is impossible for a Mormon to be Christian, but to teach why this is true would be another lesson. Study the Bible and know the truth and the counterfeits are easy to identify. This is what James means about knowing the truth and living the truth. **“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”** (James 1:5) As we study James we will see God, the true God and His wisdom compared with the counterfeit. I look forward to beginning this journey through the Letter of James with you beginning next week. Amen!