

James, the Lord's Brother



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 27

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: John 7:2–5; 1 Corinthians 15:5–7; James 1:3; James 2:5; 1 Peter 2:9, 10; Matthew 7:24–27.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘You are my friends if you do what I command’ ” (John 15:14, NIV).

TODAY WE ARE A LONG WAY FROM THE EARLY DAYS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH. So, we do not have much idea of what it was like to belong to the first Christian movement. At that time many groups of believers met in homes. Most believers were Jews. They were attacked by their fellow Israelites, who were against the followers of Jesus. The letter of James gives us one of the earliest pictures of Jewish Christianity before it disappeared in the fog of Jewish-Christian struggles. And it was written before the Jews were separated from the more powerful Gentile church in the second century.

It does not seem that some trouble or powerful need in a local church forced James to write this epistle (letter). Instead, James was writing to the broader Christian community “scattered abroad” (James 1:1).

Before we dive into James's letter, we first need to learn what we can about the writer himself. Some of the questions are: Who was James? What was James's background? What had been his relationship to Jesus? And what position did James have in the church?

JAMES, THE BROTHER OF JESUS (John 7:2–5)

The author of this letter must have been well known in the church. This is because there is no more information about James other than what we find in James 1:1: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.”

So, we can narrow down the possibilities of who James is pretty quickly. Four people in the New Testament are named James: there are two of the twelve disciples (Mark 3:17, 18). There is the father of Judas (another of the twelve but not Judas Iscariot, Luke 6:16, NKJV). And there is one of Jesus’ brothers (Mark 6:3). Of these four, only the brother of Jesus lived long enough and was well known enough in the church to have written such a letter. So, we believe that it was James, the brother of Jesus, who wrote this New Testament book.

As a carpenter’s son (Matthew 13:55), James would have had more educational opportunities than would a common person. James’s letter is among the best examples of literary Greek in the New Testament. James’s rich vocabulary and beautiful language in his letter shows that he was well-educated. Because his name appears first in the list of Jesus’ brothers, James was probably the oldest son. But when Jesus entrusted the care of His mother to John, the beloved disciple (John 19:26, 27), it suggests that His brothers were not Mary’s own children but the sons of Joseph by an earlier marriage.

With Jesus’ ministry (work done for God) in mind, read the following verse: “His [Jesus’] family heard about this. So they went to take charge of him. They said, ‘He is out of his mind’ ” (Mark 3:21, NIV; read also John 7:2–5). What do these verses tell us about how Jesus was judged by His own family? What lessons can we learn from these verses for ourselves? How can they give us courage during those times when we find ourselves misunderstood by those we love?

“It was a false understanding of the Messiah’s [the Chosen One’s; Jesus’] work. And it also was a lack of faith in the character [who God is] of Jesus too. Both of these things led Jesus’ brothers to urge Him to present Himself publicly to the people at the Feast of Tabernacles.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pages 485, 486.



James, the Lord’s brother, most likely wrote the book of James.

JAMES, THE BELIEVER (1 Corinthians 15:5–7)

Read 1 Corinthians 15:5–7 and Acts 1:14. What do they tell us about the changes that happened to James?

Jesus appeared to many after His resurrection,¹ including Peter and “the Twelve” (except for Judas Iscariot). Then He appeared to more than five hundred people at one time. But James probably was not at this meeting with the five hundred. This is because Jesus appeared to him separately. And that appearance must have been special. The Bible makes a special note of this meeting. Whatever happened at that meeting, the Bible does not say. It must have had a big influence on James. That is because James became a faithful follower of Jesus and a powerful leader in the church.

What else do we know about James? Read Acts 12:16, 17; Acts 15:13, 14, 19; Acts 21:17–19; Galatians 1:18, 19; and Galatians 2:9.

James quickly became a leader of the Jerusalem church. After his rescue from prison by the angel (A.D. 44), Peter wanted James to know what had happened to him (Acts 12:17). This shows James’s importance in the church. Five years later as its leader, James announced the decision of the Jerusalem Council. Paul names James first, before Peter and John, in his listing of the “pillars [leaders]” in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9). Several years after this event (A.D. 58), Paul brought the collection for the poor in Jerusalem from the different churches. The delegates from each church in turn put the offerings at the feet of James (read Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, pages 208, 209).

James appears to have been greatly honored for many years after the death of the apostles (leaders and teachers). In fact, so many stories developed about James’s spiritual leadership that he is remembered as “James the Just.” James started out in great doubt about Jesus, but he ended up being a great spiritual leader of the early church.

DEFINITIONS

1. resurrection—return to life from the dead.

JAMES AND THE GOSPEL (James 2:22, 23)

Sadly, perhaps because of Luther's influence, many Christians have failed to see the important message James's epistle holds. Without lessening the contribution Luther made for the church of his day, we must remember that "the Reformation² did not . . . end with Luther. It is to be continued to the close of this world's history."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, page 353. This is because the Reformers³ continued to teach serious errors. And many important truths were still to be shown.

So, such errors were the reason for the need for the Great Awakening with Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield and then later the Wesley brothers,⁴ who gave birth to the Methodist movement. They pointed to the important truths about holiness in the Christian life. The work of reform continued with the Second Awakening. During that time God raised up Seventh-day Adventists to preach the third angel's message. This worldwide preaching ends with the Spirit-filled witness of a people who "keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

Read James 1:3; James 2:5, 22, 23; and James 5:15. How does faith work in these verses? What do they tell us about what it means to live by faith? How do they show us that faith is more than just saying "Yes" to different Bible truths?

We may be surprised to learn that James speaks of *believing* and *faith* 19 times in his short letter. This is more than his frequent use of the words *works* and *justification* (*forgiveness*) combined! In fact, James says that faith is very important. He says this right at the beginning of the first chapter in which he talks about hardships and the need for wisdom (verses 3, 6). This shows that James was not only writing to believers but also that he expects them to have strong faith. As we will see, the act of believing may not affect a person's life, but true faith is seen in a person's life and shows in their character (the thoughts; feelings; actions).

What things do you do daily that show that your faith is strong and real, even in small things?



Belief alone is not enough; true faith means living out one's beliefs.

DEFINITIONS

2. Reformation—16th-century religious movement that led to the establishment of the Protestant churches.
3. Reformers—people who disagreed with the Roman Catholic Church and started teaching from the Bible. They established Protestant churches.
4. Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and the Wesley brothers—early religious leaders who brought people closer to Bible truths in the 18th century.

TO THE TWELVE TRIBES SCATTERED ABROAD (Acts 11:19–21)

Read James 1:1; Acts 11:19–21; and 1 Peter 2:9, 10. Who are these “twelve tribes”? How did they become so widely scattered?



The seed of the gospel was planted throughout the Roman Empire.

As we have seen, James wrote to believers. At first, the gospel work was focused in Jerusalem (Luke 24:47). But attacks against the church became worse after the stoning of Stephen. So, these believers were scattered, and the seed of the gospel was planted throughout the cities and surrounding areas of the Roman Empire.

According to Acts 11, the gospel spread to the Gentiles (non-Jews) quite early, beginning in Antioch. So, “the twelve tribes” probably means Christians as a whole. There do not seem to have been different churches established on race groups.

Read Acts 15:13–21. How does James deal with the problem that was troubling the early church?

James points to Amos’s prophecy (message from God) that Israel’s restoration (being made new) and growth would include Gentiles (Acts 15:16, 17). This prophecy is based on Moses’ laws for foreigners who lived in Israel (Leviticus 18–20). James speaks to his readers as “the twelve tribes” to remind them of their relationship to Israel as fellow heirs of the promise made to Abraham. Peter has almost the same idea when he describes Christians as a “holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9; read also Exodus 19:5, 6). He speaks of them also as those “scattered” abroad (1 Peter 1:1). The Greek word in both verses is *diaspora*, which means Jews living outside the geographical borders of Israel (read John 7:35).

A church scattered abroad? Sounds like us, as Seventh-day Adventists. We may have cultural, geographical, and social differences among ourselves. But what unites (joins together as one) Seventh-day Adventists in Christ as a special Protestant⁵ church?

DEFINITIONS

5. Protestant—belonging to one of the Christian churches that separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century.

JAMES AND JESUS (Matthew 7:24–27)

James had the opportunity to watch and study Jesus when Jesus was a child, a youth, and an adult. Later, James believed in Jesus as the Messiah (Chosen One) and became a leader of the Christians in Jerusalem. But James does not call himself a brother but a “bondservant” (James 1:1, NKJV) of Jesus. Clearly, James learned to be humble and wise. Therefore, it is understandable that being humble and wise also are important themes (ideas) of this letter (read James 1:9–11, 21; James 3:13–18; and James 4:6–10).

Compare⁶ the following verses and summarize what they have in common: James 1:22 and Matthew 7:24–27; James 3:12 and Matthew 7:16; James 4:12 and Matthew 7:1.

People have noticed the closeness of the letter of James with the teachings of Jesus. “Jesus’ strong influence is seen in all of James’s teaching.”—Adapted from Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), page 50.

A close comparison of James with the Gospels shows that this letter is not dependent on any of them. Rather, James writes from his close and personal knowledge of the teachings of Jesus. Jesus is the One who always inspired (led) His listeners to faith and challenged them to use and show it.

As we study the book of James this quarter, we will see that James does the same thing in his letter. James is not satisfied with a wavering (weak) or fruitless faith. As we will see next week, faith is a strong subject in the early part of the book. And James shows how faith plays a very important part in a relationship with Christ.

Think about how strong your own faith is. How real is it? How deep does it go? How does it help you to live the Christian life? What things could you do, and what choices could you make, that could help to make your faith grow stronger?



James does not call himself a brother but a “bondservant” of Jesus.

DEFINITIONS

6. compare—show how two or more things are the same or different.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “Jesus’ brothers often brought forward the philosophy [teachings and beliefs] of the Pharisees [Jewish religious leaders], which was empty and old-fashioned. The brothers thought that they could teach Jesus, who understood all truth and all mysteries. His brothers freely criticized what they could not understand. Their criticisms made Jesus feel weary and discouraged. His brothers claimed they had faith in God. They thought they were representing God, when God was with them in the flesh. But they did not know Him.

“His brothers made Jesus’ path a rough one to travel. So pained was Christ by the misunderstanding in His own home that it was a relief to Him to go away from it.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 326.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① The letter of James is really a handbook on useful Christian living. It may even have been the first New Testament book written (sometime between A.D. 44 and 49). It tells us how to live out the Christian life. Why is living out what we believe just as important as what we believe, or more? Or is *what* we believe more important than *how* we live out that belief? For example, what is better: a sincere Sunday keeper who truly and seriously keeps the first day of the week holy or an unfaithful Sabbath keeper who “keeps” the seventh-day Sabbath but does not really keep it seriously? Explain.

② As we have seen in Sunday’s study, James was the brother of Jesus. Jesus was God Himself, the Creator of all, but He was also human. He had brothers. How does this wonderful truth help us to understand how the great separation between heaven and a fallen world was healed or brought to an end? What does it say to us, too, about how far God goes to save fallen sinners? How does Christ as a human help us to understand how we can have victory over sin? How does Christ as a human help us to understand that God understands how real our struggles are?

③ This week’s lesson explained that being humble was a theme in James’s letter. Why is being humble so important in the Christian life? When we look upon the Cross and what happened there, how can any of us ever feel self-satisfied or self-important in spiritual things?