

# James, *the* Lord's Brother



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *John 7:2–5; 1 Cor. 15:5–7; James 1:3; 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:9, 10; Matt. 7:24–27.*

**Memory Text:** “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you’ ” (*John 15:14, NKJV*).

We, today, are a long way from the early days of the Christian church, both time wise and culturally. Thus, we have little idea of what it was like to belong to the fledgling Christian movement at a time when many congregations met in homes, and most believers were Jews persecuted by their fellow Israelites. The letter of James gives us one of the earliest glimpses of Jewish Christianity before it disappeared in the fog of Jewish-Christian controversies and before the marginalization of the Jews by the predominantly Gentile church of the second century and beyond.

Unlike many of the epistles, it does not seem that some crisis or urgent need in a local church impelled James to write this epistle. Rather, it is written to the broader Christian community “scattered abroad” (*James 1:1*).

Before we dive into his letter, however, this week we want to try to learn what we can about the author himself. Some of the questions we'll address are: Who was James? What was his background? What had been his relationship to Jesus? And what position did he hold in the church?

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 4.

## James, the Brother of Jesus

The author of this letter must have been well known in the church because there is no more specific information in this letter as to who he is 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.”

Thus, we can narrow down the options of his identity 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 one of Jesus’ brothers (*Mark 6:3*). Of these four, only the brother of Jesus lived long enough and was prominent enough in the church to have penned such a letter. Thus, we believe that it was James, the brother of Jesus, who authored this New Testament book.

As a carpenter’s son (*Matt. 13:55*), James would have had more educational opportunities than would a common peasant. His letter is among the best examples of literary Greek in the New Testament. Its rich vocabulary, rhetorical flair, and command of the Old Testament are surpassed only by Hebrews. Because his name appears first in the list of Jesus’ brothers, James was probably the oldest son. However, the fact that Jesus entrusted the care of His mother to John, the beloved disciple (*John 19:26, 27*), suggests that His brothers were not Mary’s own children but the sons of Joseph by a previous marriage.

**In the context of Jesus’ ministry, read this verse: “When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind’ ” (*Mark 3:21, NIV; see also John 7:2–5*). What do these texts tell us about how Jesus had been perceived by His own family? What lessons can we draw from them for ourselves, if indeed at times we find ourselves misunderstood by those whom we love?**

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“It was a false conception of the Messiah’s work, and a lack of faith in the divine character of Jesus, that had led His brothers to urge Him to present Himself publicly to the people at the Feast of Tabernacles.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 485, 486.

## James, the Believer

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

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Jesus appeared to many after His resurrection, including Peter and the Twelve (minus Judas Iscariot). Then he appeared to more than five hundred people at one time. James, apparently, wasn't at this meeting with the five hundred; Jesus appeared to him separately, and that appearance must have been special, because it is specifically noted. Whatever happened at that meeting, the Bible doesn't say. It must have made a big impact on him, though, for James did become a faithful follower of Jesus and an influential leader in the church.

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

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James quickly became a leading figure in 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*). Five years later, James presided at, and announced the decision of, the Jerusalem Council. Paul mentions him first, before Peter and John, in his listing of the “pillars” in Jerusalem (*Gal. 2:9*). Several years after this event (A.D. 58), when Paul brought the collection for the poor in Jerusalem from the various churches, the delegates from each church in turn laid the offerings at the feet of James (see Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, pp. 208, 209).

James appears to have been held in high esteem for many decades after the death of the apostles. In fact, so many legends developed about his piety that he is remembered as “James the Just.” Thus, despite starting out in great doubt about Jesus, James ended up being a spiritual giant in the early church.

## James and the Gospel

Unfortunately, perhaps because of Luther's influence, many Christians have been unable to see the important message James's epistle contains. Without diminishing the contribution Luther made for the church of his day, we must remember that "the Reformation did not . . . end with Luther. It is to be continued to the close of this world's history," because "grave errors" were perpetuated by the Reformers and many "important truths" were still to be revealed.—Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, p. 353.

Thus, the need for the Great Awakening with Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield—and the Wesley brothers who gave birth to the Methodist movement and its emphasis on the vital role of holiness in the Christian life. The work of reform continued with the Second Awakening, through which God raised up Seventh-day Adventists to proclaim the "third angel's message." This worldwide proclamation culminates with the Spirit-filled witness of a people who "keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (*Rev. 14:12*).

**Read** James 1:3; 2:5, 22, 23; 5:15. How does faith function in these passages? What do they tell us about what it means to live by faith? How do they show us that faith is more than just an intellectual assent to various propositional truths?

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It may come as a surprise to some that James refers to believing and faith 19 times in this short letter, more than his references to works and justification combined! In fact, the importance of faith is stressed right at the beginning of the first chapter in connection with trials and asking for wisdom (*vss. 3, 6*). This shows that James was not only writing to believers but that he expects them to have a certain quality of faith. As we will see, the act of believing, in itself, is of little avail; true faith carries certain recognizable credentials. That is, true faith will be revealed in the life and character of the believer.

**What things do you do on a daily basis that reveal the quality and reality of your faith? How can you show the reality of your faith, even in the "small" things?**

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## To the Twelve Tribes Scattered Abroad

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

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As we have seen, James wrote to believers. At first, the gospel work was focused in Jerusalem (*Luke 24:47*); but, as a result of persecution, which intensified after the stoning of Stephen, these believers were scattered, and the seed of the gospel was planted throughout the cities and surrounding regions of the Roman Empire.

According to Acts 11, the gospel spread to the Gentiles quite early, beginning in Antioch; so, “the twelve tribes” probably refers to Christians as a whole. There do not seem to have been different congregations based on ethnicity, which is why the Jerusalem Council soon had to decide whether believing Gentiles should first become Jews by being circumcised (*Acts 15:1–6*) in order to become Christians.

**Read** Acts 15:13–21. How does James address the problem the early church struggled with?

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A scriptural solution preserved a unified church: James cites Amos’s prophecy that Israel’s restoration and ultimate expansion would include Gentiles (*Acts 15:16, 17*), a decree that is based on Mosaic laws for foreign residents themselves (*Leviticus 18–20*). James addresses his readers as “the twelve tribes” to remind them of their identity as fellow heirs of the promise made to Abraham. Peter has a similar idea in mind when he describes Christians as a “holy nation” (*1 Pet. 2:9*; compare *Exod. 19:5, 6*), addressing also those “scattered” abroad (*1 Pet. 1:1*). The Greek word in both passages is *diaspora*, which normally referred to Jews living outside the geographical boundaries of Israel proper (see *John 7:35*).

*A church scattered abroad? Sounds like us, as Seventh-day Adventists. Despite the vast cultural, ethnic, and social differences among us, what unites Seventh-day Adventists in Christ as a distinctive Protestant movement?*

## James and Jesus

James had the opportunity to observe Jesus when He was a child, a youth, and an adult. Then, at some point, James not only believed in Jesus as the Messiah but became a leader of the Christians in Jerusalem. And yet, James calls himself not a brother but a “bondservant” (*James 1:1, NKJV*) of Jesus. Clearly, James learned humility and true wisdom. Not surprisingly, these are also important themes of this letter (see *James 1:9–11, 21; 3:13–18; 4:6–10*).

**Compare** the following passages and summarize what they have in common:

*James 1:22 with Matt. 7:24–27* \_\_\_\_\_

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*James 3:12 with Matt. 7:16* \_\_\_\_\_

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*James 4:12 with Matt. 7:1* \_\_\_\_\_

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The affinity the letter of James has with the teachings of Jesus and particularly the Sermon on the Mount has been widely recognized. “Jesus’ pervasive influence underlies the whole of James’s teaching.” —Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), p. 50.

From a close comparison of James with the Gospels, it appears that this letter is not dependent on any of them. Rather, James writes from an intimate and personal acquaintance with the teachings of Jesus, who always inspired His listeners to faith and challenged them to exercise it.

As we study the book of James this quarter, we will find a very similar approach. James is not content with a weak, fruitless, or vacillating faith. As we will see next week, faith dominates the early part of the book, and James shows how this crucial quality undergirds a vital relationship with Christ.

**Dwell on the quality and reality of your own faith. How real is it? How deep does it go? How does it enable you to live the Christian life? What things could you do, and what choices could you make, that could help improve the quality and depth of your faith?**

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**Further Study:** “His brothers often brought forward the philosophy of the Pharisees, which was threadbare and hoary with age, and presumed to think that they could teach Him who understood all truth, and comprehended all mysteries. They freely condemned that which they could not understand. Their reproaches probed Him to the quick, and His soul was wearied and distressed. They avowed faith in God, and thought they were vindicating God, when God was with them in the flesh, and they knew Him not.

“These things made His path a thorny one to travel. So pained was Christ by the misapprehension in His own home that it was a relief to Him to go where it did not exist.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 326.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 The letter of James is essentially a handbook on practical Christian living. It may even have been the first New Testament book written (some time between A.D. 44 and 49). That is, besides it being a book on theology, it also tells us how to live out the Christian life. Why is living out what we believe just as, if not more, important than what we believe? Or is what we believe more important than how we live out that belief? For instance, what's better: a sincere Sunday keeper who truly and seriously keeps the first day of the week holy or an insincere Sabbath keeper who “keeps” the seventh-day Sabbath but doesn't really take it all that seriously? Give reasons for your answer.
- 2 As we have seen in Sunday's study, James was the brother of Jesus. In other words, though Jesus was God Himself, the Creator of all that was made, He was also human, one of us, even to the point that He had siblings. How does this amazing concept help us to understand how the vast gap between heaven and a fallen world was bridged? What does it say to us, too, about the lengths that God goes to in order to save fallen humanity? How does the humanity of Christ help us understand how we can have victory over sin? How does the humanity of Christ assure us that God understands the reality of our toils and struggles?
- 3 This week's lesson mentioned that humility was a theme in James's letter. Why is humility so important in the Christian life? That is, in light of the Cross and what happened there, how dare any of us ever assume an attitude of arrogance or self-importance, especially when it comes to spiritual matters?

## God's Guiding Voice

JACQUES CESAIRE

As teens, my friends and I partied and drank, but I was not satisfied. I was searching for meaning but didn't know what it was or where to find it.

Often when we were away from the crowd, our conversation drifted toward religious topics. Frequently we talked about the existence of God. One boy, Felix, seemed to know a lot about God. I didn't know it, but his family was Seventh-day Adventist. Although Felix was not active in the church, his childhood training was having a positive influence on us.

Felix sometimes told us stories from the Bible. I had never heard these stories and thought they were fairy tales. So, Felix brought me a Bible so I could read the stories; then I found some prophecies. I didn't understand them and asked Felix what they meant. He said I wouldn't understand unless I prayed before reading. I laughed, but he insisted. I tried it, and it worked.

As I continued reading, I learned that our bodies are the temple of God and that we should not defile them with unclean foods or impure habits. I told Felix that I had decided to stop going to dances and parties and to stop smoking, drinking, and even eating unclean foods. I thought he would be surprised, but he agreed! He told me that I should go to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He even offered to go with me.

On Saturday morning, the phone rang. Felix had decided to go to work instead of church, but he had been injured in a motorcycle accident. I hurried to the hospital but learned that he had been transferred to another hospital. It was almost 9:00. I prayed, Lord, what should I do? Should I go to the other hospital or go to church? I felt impressed to go to church, and I'm glad I did.

I began attending church regularly. When Felix was released from the hospital, he came to church with me once but never returned. He is still using drugs, smoking, and disregarding God's laws.

My younger brother saw the difference God was making in my life, and he attended church with me. Then my other brothers and a sister began attending church. Eventually we all were baptized. But my parents resisted.

The pastor asked me to lead a small group. I prayed and asked my parents if I could hold the meetings in their home. They agreed to let me use their front porch. When the group began singing, my mother stepped closer to the window. Soon she came out and sat down. The next evening my father joined us.

When evangelistic meetings began, my parents attended all the meetings and decided to be baptized. Knowing how they felt when I began attending church, I found it hard to realize that within four years my entire family had become united in the Adventist Church. We are all actively involved in church ministries today.

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