

James - From Unbeliever To Leader

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A while back in the newspaper there was an amazing discovery that came to light. A French scientist/historian had made the discovery of an ossuary with the inscription “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” on it. An Ossuary is a small limestone box that was used in New Testament times to hold the bones of a dead person. After a person died, their body would be buried in a tomb. About a year later, the family would collect the skeleton, and put the bones in this small box. It is less than 2 feet long, just over a foot high, and less than a foot wide. The box had been in the private collection of a man in Jerusalem when someone recognized the importance of the inscription.

The inscription is amazing – in Aramaic, the language of the day in Israel, it reads, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” If it really does refer to the James of the Bible, this is the earliest tangible evidence of Jesus of Nazareth. While there is some controversy, all evidences point to it being the James in the Bible. The inscription is authentic by most accounts, the style of handwriting, and the limited use of such boxes puts the ossuary in the right time frame, and although all three names are very common, the statistical probability of all three together in that order is very slim. It is also very rare to have a brother mentioned on an ossuary.

Is this the James of the Bible, the brother of Jesus, the writer of the Book of James and leader in the Jerusalem church? In the grand scheme of things, it really does not matter. It is interesting that there are those in the world who will find this captivating enough perhaps to cause them to crack open the Book of James, and hopefully study the great truths that are presented there. If they will do that, they will not find so much a guide on how to become a Christian, as it is more a passionate plea to the readers to live a vital, active, and practical Christian life. For James, the Lord’s brother, and inspired penman, is saying in the book that bears his name – Let’s get real about living our lives!

In this lectureship we are examining examples that can and should be emulated. In this particular lesson we are to examine the example of James, the Lord’s brother, who went from unbeliever to believer and leader in the Lord’s church. It is a fascinating study which will only help us to appreciate the role of James’ life, and give us an example of just what it means to be a true believer.

James, the Brother of Jesus

There are four different James’ that are recorded in the New Testament.

1. James the Son of Zebedee, brother of John who was one of those closest to Jesus (Peter, James and John);
2. James the Son of Alphaeus who was also known as James the Less;
3. James the father of Judas, (not Iscariot);
4. and James the brother of Jesus who eventually became converted and in a leadership role in the Jerusalem church.

As this lesson is to deal with the Lord's brother, there is only one that fits that description. This brother of the Lord is also the inspired penman of the Book of James. When you study his life and then study his book, you will be challenged to a deeper walk with the Lord.

It may surprise some that Jesus had a brother. According to Matthew 13:54-56, Jesus had come into His own country, and while He was teaching in the synagogue, the people were amazed at his knowledge and wisdom, and inquired if this man was not the carpenter's son, and his mother named Mary, and his brothers, James and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? His sisters are also mentioned. The reason this may seem surprising to some is because of the teaching of the Catholic Church. They believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary and that she never married or ever had any other children. But this idea does not stand up to the scrutiny of the Scriptures. Also, Matthew wrote, "And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus" (Matt. 1:25). What would be the purpose of saying "her firstborn son" if there were no others? We also know that James was the brother of Jesus for Paul wrote in the book of Galatians, "But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother" (1:19).

James, the Unbeliever and Opponent of the Lord

I can only imagine that it was interesting growing up as a brother of Jesus. You would think that being so close to Him, that James would be one of his brother's most outspoken and ardent supporters, but in the beginning that was not the case, in fact, in the beginning James was as unbeliever, and opponent of the Lord.

James and Jesus had spent most of their lives together. Jesus was about thirty years old when He left home. We read that during His younger years Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, growing in favor with both God and man (Luke 2:52). But it doesn't seem that the favor was found in Jesus' own family. To say that James and Jesus were different would be an understatement. In fact, James and his brothers had a different take of their older brother. As Jesus roamed about the land preaching and doing miraculous signs and wonders, you have to wonder what Jesus' family thought about all of that. There are several passages of scripture that will give us some insight.

James, the half-brother of the Lord is mentioned in Mark 6 and Matthew 13. We say half-brother because Joseph was not the father of Jesus. That is brought to light when Joseph and Mary had left Jerusalem without Jesus, and turning back to find Him did so in the Temple as Jesus was disputing with the teachers. When asked about His conduct, Jesus replied, "...wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49).

When we are first introduced to both James and Jude, half-brothers of Jesus, sons of Joseph and Mary they did not believe in Jesus as the Son of God. John the seventh chapter and the first few verses make the statement that His brethren did not believe in Him. It is also an interesting reading for it seems as though his brethren are telling Jesus to go to Judea when the Jews were trying to kill Him in Judea. The first time they are mentioned as believing in Jesus is not until after His resurrection in Acts the first chapter. Isn't it interesting, that James and Jude, brothers of Jesus, who once didn't even believe in Christ, wrote two great books of the New Testament. And, when

they refer to themselves, they refer to themselves as “servants” (James 1:1; Jude 1:1). They didn’t claim to be kin in order to pull rank.

For a few minutes let us survey what James’ life might have been like growing up as the brother of Jesus. It is a thrilling story to see James move from unbelief to faith. The little home at Nazareth was well-filled. According to Matthew 13, there was Joseph, Mary, Jesus, four brothers, and at least two sisters (13:55-56). At least nine people in that humble home.

Since James is always listed first in the list of Jesus’ half-brothers, he was probably the oldest, next to Jesus. Think of him as just a little younger than Jesus and growing up in the same environment. Basically, there seems to be congeniality in the family circle, even when Jesus left home to start preaching. John informs us of a scene during that time in the second chapter: “After this he went down to Capernaum, he, and his mother, and his brethren, and his disciples: and they continued there not many days” (John 2:12). But then reports started filtering back that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, and He claimed to perform miracles. “My big brother has gone crazy!” must have been the thought that entered James’ mind and of others of Jesus’ family and friends. Mark writes, “And when his friends heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself” (Mark 3:21). The family traveled south to find Him and bring Him home. They even came to the conclusion that He was mad, and not only rejected Him, they also openly opposed Him. In Mark 3:31-35, his family, thinking Jesus had lost it (v.21), sought to speak to Jesus right in the middle of His teaching His disciples. Matthew says, “...desiring to speak with him...” (Matthew 12:46), and I don’t think it was to invite Him to Sunday supper. They were concerned and had plans to seize Him and perhaps drag Him away by force. “Hey Jesus, come out here, we want to talk to you.” Jesus knew their hearts, and He wasn’t about to go out to them. Instead, Jesus said, “Who is my mother, or my brethren?...For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother” (Mark 3:33-35). Were they trying to protect Jesus from a fate they saw Him steering Himself into, or were they just trying to protect themselves and their family name. No doubt James felt this rebuff keenly. Following this incident Jesus “had the nerve” to come to Nazareth, where James would have been still living, and claim to be the Messiah (Matthew 13:54-58)! When the people didn’t believe Him, Jesus left, but James would have had to live day after day with the taunts about his “lunatic brother.” Perhaps that was the reason that Jesus’ brothers (James as the oldest would probably have been the spokesperson) taunted Jesus in John chapter 7 about showing off His “powers” in Judea.

Think about the sadness of the occasion when Jesus hung on the cross and did not feel that He could commit the care of His mother to the next oldest, James (John 19:26ff), probably because James was so totally out of sympathy with all for which Jesus stood.

The three years of Jesus’ ministry, when He was confirming His true identity, James probably thought were the worst three years of his life. In the middle of the family meetings about what to do about big brother Jesus, is James. In Matthew 13:57, Jesus remarks that a prophet isn’t accepted in his own country, even his own house! These incidents certainly put a new light on Jesus’ words, “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his

own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worth of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:34-38). How true that was of Jesus' own family.

James, the Believer

We know that James opposed His brother during His earthly ministry, but this opposition didn't last, for we see that after the death and resurrection of Jesus, James was no longer an adversary, but became a believer.

We often speak of the dramatic conversion of Saul and the turnabout in his life. The change in James is no less dramatic. In fact, we see similarities between Paul and James. Both of them were ardent defenders of the Mosaic Law. They both held Jewish views until they came to believe in Jesus as the Christ. They both went from one extreme to another, from ardent Jew to ardent Christian. Where was the turning point? We know that even at the cross Jesus did not commit the care of His mother into the hands of His own brothers, but to John (John 19:25-27). After His death and burial in the rich man's tomb, the family must have thought, "Well, that is over." I'm sure they grieved at the loss of a son and brother. But the brothers were not forgotten. When Paul is listing the resurrection appearances of Jesus, he mentions the appearance to the five hundred, and then says, "After that, he was seen of James" (1 Corinthians 15:7). James must have been very special to Jesus. What an event that must have been for Jesus and James to have met face to face. As Jesus appears to James this time, they are not only brothers in the flesh, but brothers in the faith, and more than that, now Master and disciple.

From that point on James' progress in the faith is remarkable. When the disciples were waiting in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit, James and his brothers joined their number along with their mother (Acts 1:13-14).

As time went by James grew in the faith. Finally he emerged as a figure of prominence in the church at Jerusalem. Think about this for a moment – James as a leader in the church at Jerusalem. It is not a place known for its prominence, but more for its persecution. From the breathing hate of Saul, to the harassment of King Herod, it seemed like the church at that time was not the place to be if you wanted to be somebody, if you wanted to be recognized. From this time forward James starts to distinguish himself among the brethren. When Peter had been miraculously freed from prison in Jerusalem and appeared at the house of Mary the mother of John, the people were astonished. Peter told them to hold their peace while he rehearsed how the Lord had freed him. And then he said, "Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren..." (Acts 12:11-17). Three years after Paul's conversion, Paul spoke of visiting with "James, the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19). Fourteen years later, Paul wrote, "And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision" (Galatians 2:9). At the so-called "Jerusalem Conference," James was one of the principal spokesmen (Acts 15). When Paul, knowing what his fate would be should he go to Jerusalem, went there, the brethren received him gladly. And the very next day Paul would present

himself to James and report unto him and the elders that were present the great things God had done among the Gentiles (Acts 21). Was James an elder? It is hard to tell from that passage alone. He certainly was a leader in the Jerusalem church.

James, the Bondservant

What a progression in the life of James, the brother of Jesus. From unbeliever and opponent of Jesus to believer, to a leader in the Lord's church, and yet, there is another line that James desired to cross that we need to give attention to. As you begin the rich study of the book of James, the author begins by identifying himself as, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ..." (James 1:1). Here is the true title wherein lies his honor and glory, a servant or bondservant of the Lord Jesus Christ. This servant or bondservant is not one who is forced to serve, but who willingly submits to the Lord. A bondservant is one who does the work of someone else. Jesus is the perfect example of the bondservant. Jesus said, "For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38). "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17:4). In the garden He said, "...nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). Jesus had the proper attitude of bondservant. Is that where James learned the idea?

Is it not interesting that James does not identify himself as Jesus' brother? He does not say, "James, a bondservant of my brother Jesus." He does say, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." Perhaps that is because of what Jesus said earlier, "For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother..." (Mark 3:35). As someone said, "It is more important to be Christ's brother in the faith than in the flesh." Paul would say, "...heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17). James wrote with humility. He wrote as a bondservant, not using titles to impress.

James, the Martyr

Something of James' later years is given by various historians. James came to be known as a man of great piety, commanding the respect of Jews and Christians alike. He was called James "the just" because of his sincerity and honesty. It is said that his knees became as calloused as those of a camel because of his constant kneeling in prayer.

Ultimately, however, according to Clement of Alexandria, James incurred the wrath of the rich and corrupt leaders of the Jews and they sought to discredit him. This took place about one year after the close of the book of Acts, and about five years before Paul and Peter were martyred. At the Passover, when thousands of people would be assembled in Jerusalem, they called on him to deny that his half-brother was actually the Messiah, the Son of God. Instead, he boldly and loudly confessed the faith that he once denied. This enraged his tormentors, and using the excuse that he was a breaker of the Law, they threw him down from the roof of the temple.

Some accounts claim that he survived the fall, and that he was echoing the prayer of his Lord for his murderers, while his condemners stoned him and finished him off with a club. Thus perished

James the Just, kinsman of Christ, who emulated His Lord in life and in death. James came to love his brother, but more importantly he loved his Master.

James, the Great Example

We looked into the life of a man named James, the half-brother of Jesus, who began as a cynic, but ended as a faithful servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is amazing to me to see the progression of a man who went from unbeliever to the man they called “old camel knees.” We must learn his passion for holiness. We must learn this passion for prayer. We must learn this passion for worship. We must learn this passion for getting so close to the Lord Jesus Christ, that wherever we go in secular and public places, people will meet Him. Don’t you see James that way?

Conclusion

James moved from cynic to believer to bondservant! The question of the hour is, WHICH ARE YOU?

- Maybe you are the unbeliever who desires to move to the level of believer. Jesus points the way with these words: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). He said, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). And what are those commandments? Jesus said to believe on Him (John 8:24); repent of your sins (Luke 13:3); confess His name (Matthew 10:32); and be baptized to be saved (Mark 16:16). Jesus has a profound effect even upon the most cynical of unbelievers. He can raise up even the hardest of hearts. Have you seen the resurrected Christ through the scriptures? It will melt the heart of the unbeliever.
- Perhaps you are the believer who desires to move to the level of bondservant. The bondservant willing submits to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister” (Matthew 20:26). Are you willing to give up all and count the cost of following Him?

We have seen the transition that took place in the life of this unassuming man from Galilee. We have seen him go from simply one of Jesus’ younger brothers to opposing Him and His ministry, to the transformation that takes place when James sees the resurrected Lord. And when he does, he become one of the most ardent supporters of Christ that has every lived. He met the real Jesus and his life was never the same. Have you met Jesus? If so, your life will never be the same either. Jesus wants to meet you, right now!