

James, *the* Lord's Brother



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?**

“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?

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.*

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?

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?

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?

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?

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 (*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 _____

James 3:12 with Matt. 7:16 _____

James 4:12 with Matt. 7:1 _____

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?

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 to 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?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *James 1:17–19*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the historical circumstances, life of, and faith in the early Christian church; and (2) discern the important contribution that the book of James makes to that understanding and the relevance it has on the church today.

Feel: Experience hope, knowing that God can change weaknesses into strengths so that, like James, he or she can move from doubt to faith.

Do: Choose to act upon his or her beliefs and to follow God’s instructions on how to live the Christian life.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Understanding Who James, the Brother of Jesus, Was

A How did James and his other brothers relate to Jesus during Christ’s earthly ministry?

B When did James become a believer in Jesus, and what kind of leader was he in the early church?

II. Feel: Peace Versus Cognitive Dissonance

A Why is it that some parents tell their children, “Do as I say, not as I do”? What is the difference between beliefs and actions?

B What “works” are expressed in your Christian life, and how do you feel when your faith and actions (“works”) agree? And when they do not?

III. Do: Aligning Faith and Actions

A How can your faith be complete? Why is it important to align faith and actions?

B Analyze your own motives for your “works.” Do they spring from faith? If they don’t, what changes do you need to make to ensure that they do?

► **Summary:** Written just over a decade after Christ’s resurrection, the book of James provides us with the earliest glimpse into the early Christian church. Additionally, James, the brother of Jesus, provides an excellent example of moving from unbelief to faith. James became a well-respected leader in the early Christian church, and through this letter he provides insights into how faith and actions work together and explains why that is important.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *James 1:5–7*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Through the example and writing of James, we learn that faith is not built on sight; instead, true faith will be revealed in the life and character of the believer.

Just for Teachers: As we begin our study of the book of James, some class members may have some apprehension about this epistle, fearing that it places “works” above faith. However, as we will see throughout this quarter’s lessons, James beautifully blends faith and works together, revealing what Jesus can do in the lives of all who love and long to follow Him. As the eldest brother of Jesus (*see Matt. 13:55*) and as someone who was not initially a believer, James is a powerful example of the change that can take place in one’s life once he or she surrenders to Christ.

Opening Activity: Two thousand years ago when the Roman Empire ruled the Western world, pretenders to the Jewish throne, madmen, and false messiahs abounded. Simon of Peraea (also known as “the son of Joseph”), a former slave of Herod the Great, rebelled and claimed to be king, successfully burning and plundering a palace and several royal homes before he was captured and killed. Athronges, a tall, strong shepherd, led a temporarily successful rebellion against Herod Archelaus and the Romans. Although claiming to be the Messiah, Athronges was cruel to Romans and Jews alike. Then there was Judas of Galilee who preached that God alone was Israel’s ruler. He led a violent resistance against the Roman census, claiming that Jews should not pay taxes to the Romans. Josephus, the well-known Jewish historian, links this group with the Zealots and blames them for the Great Jewish Revolt that led to the destruction of Herod’s Temple (also known as the “The Second Temple”). Judas of Galilee is mentioned in the book of Acts, where he is identified as a failed Messianic leader (*see Acts 5:37*).

Consider This: Given the religious and political atmosphere of the time, it is not difficult to imagine that some were skeptical regarding Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God. Even His own brothers, including James, did not initially accept His Messiahship. Although they knew Jesus as a child in the home and watched Him grow into adolescence and young adulthood, His brothers did not understand His resistance to conform to the expectations of Israel’s religious leaders and often taunted Him (*see Mark 3:31, John 7:1–5*). Despite their close relationship with Jesus, and even witnessing at least one of His miracles (*see John 2:11, 12*), why didn’t James and Jesus’

other brothers accept Him as the Messiah during His earthly ministry? Why is *seeing* not always *believing*?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: We might think that it would be a great privilege to have Jesus as a brother. But despite James being able to observe Jesus in earlier years, as well as during His ministry, it was apparently no easier for James to believe in Jesus than it was for anyone else. It may even have been harder. As Jesus said, “‘A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household’ ” (*Mark 6:4, NASB*). By the time Jesus ascended to heaven, however, James and his brothers, including Jude, are numbered with the believers (*Acts 1:14*). Like James, Jude also wrote a New Testament epistle (*Jude*; compare *Mark 6:3*). Emphasize to your class the fact that, despite being two thousand years removed from the events of Jesus’ life, God can transform us, even as He transformed the lives of His own brothers.

Bible Commentary

I. Paul Versus James (*Review Galatians 5:6 and Galatians 6:15 with your class.*)

As we study this epistle, it is important to keep in mind that James is writing about how to *live* as a Christian, not how to *become* one. This important distinction sets his epistle apart from Paul’s letters, especially Romans and Galatians, which focus more on how we are saved. It also most likely explains why James talks about the importance of works, but, unlike Paul, never refers to “works of the law” (*see Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10*).

As a result of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now know that the phrase “works of the law” was a technical expression referring to specific works that distinguished “genuine” Jews from Gentiles. [Martin G. Abegg Jr., “4QMMT, Paul, and ‘Works of the Law’ ” in *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape, and Interpretation*, ed. Peter W. Flint, Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 203–16. James D. G. Dunn, “4QMMT and Galatians,” *New Testament Studies*, vol. 43 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 147–153.]

For Jews living at that time, the most important of these works was circumcision; some Christians even argued that Gentiles who wanted to be saved had to be circumcised first (*Acts 15:1, 5*). Of course, at the Jerusalem Council, as a result of the prayerful study of Scripture, testimonies borne about the Spirit’s working, and the earnest consideration

of the issues, the church came to a clearer understanding—that baptism by immersion replaces circumcision as a symbol of salvation. Therefore, Paul can say that “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything” and even that “obeying the commandments of God is everything” (*Gal. 6:15, 1 Cor. 7:19, NRSV; also Gal. 5:6*).

Consider This: Note that both Paul (*Rom. 2:28, 29; Phil. 3:2, 3*) and James (*1:26, 27; 3:15–18*) show a concern for what it means to be a genuine believer. Help class members understand the similarities and differences in their definitions. Discuss reasons for the differences.

II. James on Living the Christian Life (*Review James 1:6–15, 3:1–12, and 4:7 with your class.*)

The letter of James reads like a practical manual on how to live the Christian life. It tells us how to handle doubt and temptation (*1:6–15*). It describes the kind of attitude we should have toward the rich and the poor (*2:1–7, 14–17*). We learn about the importance of controlling our words (*3:1–12*) and how to pray effectively (*4:2, 3; 5:15–18*). We also find many gems of wisdom worth framing: “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (*1:19, NRSV*); “the wisdom from above is first pure . . . without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (*3:17, NRSV*); “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (*4:6, NRSV*); “Submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (*4:7, NKJV*).

Consider This: One of the most important ideas in James is that what we do should agree with what we say. Compare this idea with what Jesus says in Matthew 7:21 and in Mark 3:31–35. What does Jesus indicate as evidence that a person is a member of His spiritual “family”? Point class members to verses in James’s epistle that illustrate this important truth (*see, for example, James 2:14, 18, 19*).

1. Give reasons for whether or not you think it was easy or hard for James to be a sibling of Jesus. What do you think Jesus would say to you about your own interactions with family members, and why?
2. Is faith essential to understanding and accepting the inspired Word, or is it the other way around? Explain. (*See Rom. 10:17, 1 Cor. 2:13, James 1:18, 1 Pet. 1:23.*)

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Application is a very important part of the lesson, guiding students not only to understand the main points but to *practice* and *apply* this knowledge to their personal lives. Thus, with the help of the Holy Spirit,

faith is transformed into action. Ask the class to consider how, in what specific ways, faith (or the lack thereof) is revealed in the life and character of an individual.

Today, much attention is given to the importance of aligning beliefs, values, and actions, especially in the educational, psychological, and financial communities.

“If your beliefs, values and actions are not aligned with your vision then you’re going to get conflicted results,” writes Stephen J. Healey, a transformational author and speaker. “Those results are probably not going to be what you want. . . . Your beliefs and your values really should be the basis of your actions.”—Stephen J. Healey, “Why Are Aligning My Beliefs, Values and Actions So Important?” Sept. 3, 2011, <http://www.sjhealey.com/prosperity/aligning-beliefs-values-actions-important>.

Thought Question:

What do you believe about Jesus concerning His life, His teachings, and His values?

Application Questions:

How do your actions line up with your professed beliefs and values? If they don’t line up, ask yourself, How may I bring them into alignment—by changing my beliefs and values or by changing my actions? How does Christ give us the power to change?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Throughout this lesson, we have emphasized that (a) it is possible to move from unbelief to belief in Jesus as our Savior; (b) it is essential that faith and action are aligned; (c) that being both a “hearer” and “doer” of the Word is important. The following activity is designed to assist class members in analyzing their faith, beliefs, values, and actions. Please emphasize the importance of giving quality time to this exercise and asking God for wisdom and guidance in its application.

Activity: During the coming week, take a large sheet of paper, turned horizontally, and create a four-column chart. At the top of each column, write these words: BELIEFS/VALUES/ROLES/ACTIONS. List your core beliefs and values in the first two columns. Then list the various roles you are assigned in your life, such as individual, Seventh-day Adventist Christian, Sabbath School/church member, spouse, parent, caretaker, professional, retiree, and so on. Finally, list the actions that accompany each of your roles and compare how they align with your beliefs and values. Which areas, if any, need better alignment? Ask God for wisdom (*see James 1:5, 6*) and help (*Phil. 4:13*) in making any needed changes.