

Can you imagine what it must’ve been like to be the brother of Jesus—to grow up in the same household as the Son of God and promised Messiah? Those of you with siblings, I invite you to consider what your response would be if your brother or sister started a religious movement and began gaining followers. Well, a man named James didn’t have to imagine this scenario. It happened to him. His initial response was about what you’d expect. His later response was quite different and the main reason we’re talking about him today.

October 23rd is the day the Church observes the Feast of St. James of Jerusalem, Brother of our Lord. Since today is the 23rd, our readings—and this message—examine what we can know about this man, who came to receive his brother as his Savior and King.

So, what can we know? First, James was one of the several brothers of Jesus, and was probably the oldest of Joseph and Mary’s naturally born, since he heads the list in Matthew 13 verse 55. At first, he did not believe in Jesus or understand what he was up to. John 7 verses 2—5 captures a confrontation in which Jesus’ brothers basically tell him, if you’re trying to lead a movement, Jesus, you’re doing it all wrong. Sibling stuff, right? However, things got heated in Mark chapter 3. Jesus had begun publicly healing the sick, teaching, and calling disciples, and there was something about that combination that led to the events of verse 21: “When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.” Now it’s getting serious. When someone tells Jesus, your mother and brothers are looking for you, Jesus asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” and proceeds to answer his own question by looking at his followers and saying, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” Wow! This is the kind of thing that can tear a family apart. So how do we go from this volatile situation to having a feast day named after you? What moved James from active disbelief to a living faith in Jesus?

Simply put, it was Jesus’ resurrection. Think about it. Squabbles and grudges die hard, but if you knew for a fact your brother had died, and then he appears to you physically alive after that, that would have to power to change your mind, not to mention heal old wounds. The apostle Paul reveals that Jesus appeared to James in resurrected form in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 7, and in Acts 1 verse 14, we read about

the first group of Christian believers, gathering after Jesus rose and ascended, and guess who was there? The verse reads, “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, *and with his brothers.*” Jesus’ death and resurrection flipped the switch for James, and he suddenly found himself at the forefront of a movement he had once made fun of.

From skeptic to leader in the Jerusalem Christian Church; that is the trajectory of James’ life. The Apostle Paul, himself a former opponent of Jesus who had his life turned upside down by a resurrection appearance, considered James a “pillar” of the Church, a term he used in Galatians 2 verse 9. Paul made it a point to visit James on his first and last visits to Jerusalem. And the book of Acts in the 15th chapter shows James presiding over an important church council meeting. And finally, various historical sources report that James died a martyr’s death, executed for his faith in his risen brother.

Now that’s a lot of information and history to digest, so let me stop for a moment, and I just invite you to think about what James’s story has to say to us. We live in a time of skepticism and disbelief. Every day it seems we hear about the rise of atheism. And all the while, we struggle with our own doubts. But look at James. If they had high school yearbooks back then, his caption would’ve read: “Most Unlikely to Believe in Jesus.” But that all changed when he came face to face with his resurrected relative. Do you see? If it happened to James it can happen to anyone. Nothing is impossible with God, and we cannot begin to guess who He is going to flip next by the power of His Word and Spirit. Someone could always say, “Yeah, but James had the actual Jesus standing there; if He’d do that to me, I’d believe too.” Maybe so. What we have to share with skeptical people is news—news of a King who came down to serve, to die and rise again for His people. What we have to share with a disbeliever is not an air-tight argument but an air-tight person, a person who gave up everything he was to gain you and me. The fact that James knew this person intimately complicated things at first, but the weight of what Jesus did turned his light on—and that’s what always does it. Not a series of proofs, or a finely tuned closing argument, but the reality of a person switching places with us so we can live; the reality of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for us. For Us.

The arc of James’ life was from skeptical opponent to faithful believer and respected leader. But his most lasting legacy is that we still have his words. What I mean is, a letter he wrote is part of the Bible. It’s a New Testament Epistle, the

beginning of which was read today. If you really want to know who James was, read his letter. Again, here's how that letter starts:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Now first off, do you hear the family resemblance? Do you hear the way this sounds like Jesus? Just in this intro there are a number of concepts that directly echo the teachings of the Lord. Ask and it will be given to you. The exaltation of the lowly and the humbling of the high and mighty. These are Christ-like themes. And so is this one: Count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. This is something Jesus said; James says it here; Paul says it in Romans 5 verses 2—5 and Peter says it in his first letter chapter 1 verses 6 and 7. Count it all joy when you meet trials. Remarkable consistency among these writers; consistency that comes from listening to Jesus and living the truth of it. These men all met trials and difficulties specifically because of their allegiance to Jesus, and here's the thing, it did not drive them away from their Savior and King—it brought them closer to Him. It somehow gave them joy, because it was making them more like Jesus, more like the suffering servant who had saved them.

And let's be candid—that message hits in different ways depending on what's going on in your life right now. On one hand, in general, we love comfort. Our lives are geared towards it. We pursue pleasure and run from pain. When things are running smoothly, we worry about disruptions, and then we hear Jesus, James,

Peter and Paul say, “Rejoice in your trials” and we kind of resist it. That’s if you’re on a winning streak. But, on the other hand, if you’ve suffered a loss—if you are suffer-ing—if you’re on a downswing, do you hear the practical wisdom in the inspired words of Scripture? Do you hear the Bible speaking directly to you in your time of testing?

Listen to what James is saying. He’s saying that your trial, trouble, problem, suffering, is not meaningless. It is testing you in the sense that you are being refined by it. It’s helping you see what you really don’t need—and what you really do. It’s making you stronger by making you need God more.

Christian author Jim Gerrish shares the following story:

My daughter is a persistent gardener. She always grows her plants inside until the long-lingering Colorado spring finally arrives. One day as I observed her plants basking in the indoor sunshine I noticed that she had a fan turned on them. When I asked why, she assured me that the fan with its manufactured turbulence toughened the plants and caused them to be better survivors when the real winds would later blow on them outside. Without the fan they were likely to be weak and spindly. She gave me a good lesson in what testing and perseverance are all about.

Suffering that leads to perseverance and steadfastness also makes us useful people. What I mean is this: In a local community, who are usually the people doing the most for disabled or handicapped children? Is it not the parents of those children? Or who is working hardest on behalf of those affected with dementia—is it not the family members of those who are fighting this battle with them? Trials drive us to action—to step out of our comfort zones and get things done, and this all traces back to someone who

did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2: 6—11)

Did you hear that? Suffering—then glory. Trials—then triumph. It is the pattern of Jesus and of all who follow in His way. Locate your joy in knowing that God is

using whatever is happening in your life to grow you into a more Christ-like, humble person. There's that family resemblance again.

We thank you, heavenly Father, for the witness of James, the brother of Jesus, whom you moved from skeptic to servant, and who blessed the church with the word of truth. Move us, by your grace, to continually trust you and to find joy in our trials, as you make us useful and loving servants, to the glory of your Name. Amen.