

Doubter, Believer, Pastor, Martyr

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Date: 03 May 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. We are beginning a new sermon series today in the New Testament letter of James. So let me invite you to grab a Bible and to turn with me to James.

James is a short but incredibly practical book about wholehearted Christian living. What does it mean to live a life of steadfast living faith in Jesus? What does it look like to live this vibrant life of living faith when you're under pressure, when you're experiencing trials?

That's what James is all about. So as we come to God's word, let's go ahead and pray together. Oh, Father, as we have just sung, it is our Lord Jesus Christ who is the source and center and goal of all that we have been created and redeemed to be. So, Father, would you by your Spirit grant us mercy that as we come to your word this morning, as we embark on a new book, that you would grant us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to love our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Well, so in the coming weeks, we are going to take the book of James and we are going to unpack this timely letter section by section. But today, I want to start our study of this book by looking at the author. The author introduces himself in verse 1 as James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. But who is this James? Well, there are a few men named James in the New Testament. There's James, the son of Alphaeus, who is listed among the 12 apostles.

But we don't know much else about this James, so it seems unlikely that he's the author of the letter that we have. On the other hand, there's also James, the son of Zebedee. And we actually know a lot about him, along with John, his brother, and Peter. This James belongs to that close inner circle of Jesus's apostles. He's one of the three that go along with Jesus in many of his miracles and teachings, even in the Mount of Transfiguration. But we know from Acts chapter 12 that this James was put to an early death by Herod Agrippa I around AD 44. So it seems unlikely that James, the son of Zebedee, is the author of this book either. But there's actually a third James that we learn about in the New Testament. And most scholars agree that he's the one who wrote the letter before us. And that is James, the brother of Jesus. Now, we often find encouragement by looking at the lives of these early disciples and apostles and followers of Jesus. Their own spiritual journeys can help to clarify and even inspire our own. How often are we encouraged by the faith of Peter, by his betrayal and reinstitution by the Lord? How often are we encouraged by the love of John and his perseverance to the end in exile? How often are we encouraged by the dramatic conversion of Paul?

[3 : 3 3] But you know, James isn't a character that we often consider. And yet his story is just as rich with the grace of God, and it is just as encouraging. So I want to look at what we know about James. And I want us to just walk through his life story this morning under four headings. I want us to think about James, the doubter, James, the believer, James, the pastor, and James, the martyr. So first, James, the doubter. In Mark chapter 6, after Jesus has been teaching for some time, he comes back to his hometown of Nazareth to teach like he'd been doing in other towns. But the people in his hometown are not buying it. This is what they say when Jesus comes back to Nazareth. They say, is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judah and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us?

So this is one of the earliest references that we have to James. He grew up in the household with Jesus, along with at least three other brothers and some sisters as well, a home of at least seven children. And if there's any truth to the tradition that Joseph, his father, died and left Mary a widow, then the picture we get is that James came from a large family living in first century Palestine under very particular stresses. Not just the common economic stresses that were on the people of that day, but even some deep family stress as well. But you know, if the hometown crowd had a hard time believing in Jesus, what about Jesus' own family? What did James think about all of this?

Earlier in Mark's gospel, after Jesus had just chosen the 12 apostles, great crowds were gathering around Jesus. Mark writes this, he says, and when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, he is out of his mind. So it's safe to say that James was skeptical about his brother Jesus, to say the least. And as Jesus' ministry progresses, their unbelief grows.

In John chapter 7, we're told not even his brothers believed in him. Now, of course, at first, you can sympathize with James, can't you? I have four brothers. I have two older brothers and two younger brothers.

And if one of them started marching around saying, I'm the Messiah, I would immediately say, no, you're not the Messiah. But on a serious note, why did James doubt? You know, your siblings, my siblings, they're flawed. They're selfish at times. But James would not have seen that in Jesus growing up. Jesus was without sin from birth. James probably doubted because, well, it was just, it was just inconceivable. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Can anything good come out of my family? Surely Jesus isn't the Messiah. And what that means, you see, is that James, he knows what it's like to doubt. And so in the opening of his letter in chapter 1, verses 6 and 7, when he talks about doubting and he talks about being double-minded and how that can make us spiritually unstable,

[7 : 03] James knows what that's like from the inside. Maybe you've grown up close to Christians. Maybe you've come from a Christian family. And honestly, maybe for you, that's part of what makes believing in Christ so difficult because you've been so close to it. But be assured that the Bible, the God of the Bible, he welcomes doubters. The Bible is actually full of people who doubt.

And not just minor characters, Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, James. They can all attest to having their doubts. But is there hope for us doubters? That's the question, isn't it? I mean, what in the world would make James come to actually believe that his brother was the Messiah? At the end of Jesus' life, when he's dying on the cross and his mother Mary is there mourning, do you know where James is? According to John 19, nowhere to be found. Jesus actually entrusts Mary to the care of John, his disciple. But when we turn over just a few short pages from John chapter 19 to Acts chapter 1, we see something incredible. The followers of the risen Jesus are gathered for prayer in Jerusalem, and the apostles are there. And then Luke adds, all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer together with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

And this brings us to the second part of James' story. The doubter becomes a believer. So what happened to James? You know, we often marvel at Paul's conversion, how the persecutor becomes the preacher. And rightfully, we look at Paul's story as evidence of the reality of Jesus' resurrection. How could this enemy of Christ become a follower of Christ, a preacher of Christ?

You know, what else could turn Paul around like that except for an encounter with the risen Lord? But you know, for me, I find James' story just as powerful, though we know less about it.

How could this family member come to believe that his brother was the Messiah? Listen to 1 Corinthians 15. This is Paul writing about some of the earliest teachings of the church, the earliest events of Christianity. He says, I delivered to you as a first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, that is Peter, then to the 12, that is the rest of the apostles. Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James.

[9 : 58] The fact that James, the brother, the doubter, the skeptic, comes to profess faith in Jesus as the Messiah, as the King, as the Lord, is just as powerful a testimony of the resurrection of Jesus as any.

But is it not also an incredible testimony to the grace of Jesus? Can you imagine you spend your whole ministry teaching, preaching, healing the sick, performing miracles, and your own brothers reject and ridicule you the whole time, and in your final hour, they completely abandon you? How would you treat them if you had the chance to come back and treat them in any way?

Thankfully, Jesus is not like us. He comes to James, his brother, in mercy. He appears to him personally after the resurrection and extends him grace and forgiveness.

Jesus, and James's hard heart comes alive with saving faith. What a wonderful, merciful Savior Jesus is.

But what about you and me? How does this heart change happen to us? Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father. We shouldn't expect a personal resurrection appearance to us.

[11 : 31] But look at what James writes in chapter 1, verse 18. He writes, of his own will, that is God, God brought us forth, that is he gave us new birth by the word of truth.

That we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. James is saying that the same power that rose Jesus from the dead, that same new creation power that was unleashed in those first resurrection appearances is at work now in what James calls the word of truth.

And what is that? What is this power that's being unleashed even now? What is this, this means whereby it comes, this word of truth? Well, friends, it's the gospel. The good news that Jesus has died and risen again for us so that we can now be freed from condemnation and made new, a new creation.

For James, this is what it means to be a disciple, life-changing trust in Jesus as Lord and it's available now to those who hear and respond to you and me today just as it was available to James and his audience back then.

And when you read the letter that James wrote, you realize something very important about what this faith in the Lord Jesus means. It doesn't mean we simply sort of acknowledge Jesus and then go about our lives in the same old way.

[13 : 01] No, that kind of faith, James will say in chapter 2, is a dead faith. In reality, that's no faith at all. No, what we see from James' letter is that genuine faith in Jesus means a whole life shaped by the person and work and words of Jesus.

You know, at first glance, the book of James doesn't seem to have a lot to say about Jesus. Jesus is only explicitly referenced in chapter 1, verse 1, and in chapter 2, verse 1.

But when you keep reading, you realize that again and again and again, James' letter is just saturated with allusions and references to the words of Jesus.

It's woven into the very fabric of the letter. It's as if James can reflect the words of Jesus almost unconsciously as he speaks and as he writes. In that sense, faith is a bit like a marriage.

Couples that have been married for a long time, they tend to speak similarly. They tend to have facial expressions that mirror each other. Sometimes it seems like they can even have the same thoughts.

- [14 : 14] And you know, at the emotional climax of the letter of James in chapter 4, verse 4, James will use that same metaphor for our relationship with God in Christ, the metaphor of marriage, when he challenges our worldliness and our selfishness and he says, you adulterous people.

In other words, to act like the world is to betray your loving spouse. So what is real faith?

Real faith is falling into the arms of your loving Lord, forsaking all others and letting your whole life be constantly shaped by him.

That's what James, the believer, shows us. But the story of James continues. As the book of Acts unfolds, we see that James, the believer, becomes James, the pastor.

In fact, James becomes one of the key leaders of the church in Jerusalem. By the time of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where the great issue of Gentile inclusion is settled in the early church, who is it that's presiding over that great gathering of massive theological, spiritual, and practical importance?

- [15 : 32] It's James. James is the one who brings that council to a peaceful and life-giving conclusion. And it's James, the pastor, that we hear speaking in this letter before us.

Like a good pastor, this book is incredibly practical. There are more practical commands per verse in the book of James than any other New Testament letter. And James, like a good pastor, is a master of illustrations.

He puts before us the billowing sea, the withered flower, a face in the mirror, a bit in the horse's mouth, the rudder of a ship, destructive forest fires, pure springs of water, corroded metal, moth-eaten clothes.

Every paragraph of this letter comes to life in our mind's eye. But what is James' great pastoral concern in this letter?

Well, the audience is most likely Jewish Christians who are living outside of Palestine, scattered because of the persecution that took place after the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts chapter 8.

- [16 : 43] In fact, later in Acts 11, we learn that those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen, Luke writes, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.

And so, James addresses his letter in chapter 1, verse 1, to the 12 tribes in dispersion. The 12 tribes are referenced to the people of God, referencing the 12 tribes of Israel in the dispersion.

That is, the ones who've been scattered. And we learn from James' letter that these Christians were facing hardship. Having left their homes, they're trying to establish new lives in often hostile foreign environments, and in particular, it seems like they're facing economic strains and stressors even at times it looks like they're facing economic oppression by wealthy landowners.

And under that kind of pressure, they're being tempted to begin acting like the world. Showing favoritism to the wealthy and powerful, giving in to jealousy and selfish ambition, engaging in conflict and dissensions in their midst, forgetting to care for the marginalized and the poor.

And so James, the pastor, writes this letter to serve like an extended sermon. It's a collection of encouragements and exhortations to help his scattered flock remain faithful to Jesus and to keep on living the faith they profess.

- [18 : 14] And you know, one thing is particularly striking about James, the pastor. In this letter, James never once mentions that he's the brother of Jesus.

He never plays that card. I mean, I have to confess, if I had been writing this letter and I had some hard words to say, I think I'd be tempted to slip that in at least once.

You know, you should really listen to what I'm saying. After all, I'm the brother of Jesus, you know, the Messiah, the Lord, that's who I am, so listen up. And yet for James, not once does he do that.

You see, James had come to see that real wisdom, real love comes not in exalting ourselves, but by humbling ourselves.

Again, in the heart of the letter in chapter 4, he will write, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

[19 : 31] James' life and his ministry is living proof of the central fact of the gospel. That what gets us into a relationship with God and what allows us to progress in that relationship with God, what gets us into that relationship with God, our standing with him is not about our good works, and it's not about our family background, and it's not about our intellect, it's not about our performance.

Not even being a physical brother of Jesus counted for anything because the whole thing is sheer undeserved grace.

Every good gift comes down from the father of lights, James will write in chapter 1, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

You know, if you read James' letter quickly, you can miss the fact that God's grace is there at almost every turn.

When believers need wisdom to grow under trials, he points to God who gives generously to all without reproach. When we're caught up in favoritism and the glory of fine clothes and worldly wealth, he points us to Jesus, the Lord of glory, where our real wealth is found.

[20 : 54] When we're struggling with judging others, he reminds us of the mercy God has shown us that triumphs over judgment. When we're wrestling with self-centered desires, he reminds us of the desire of God for us like a loving spouse jealous for his bride.

When we need patience to endure suffering, he points us to the coming of Jesus our Lord who is compassionate and merciful. When our bodies are sick, he reminds us of God's willingness, eagerness to answer prayer and he reminds us that our greatest sickness, the sickness of sin has been forgiven.

And at the end of the letter, he reminds us when our hearts are wandering far from the truth, he reminds us that we can return. Like the prodigal son, we can come home and find that our father will welcome us back from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Salvation's by grace, not for the strong, the proud, or the can-do, but the humble, the ones who know they're weak. This is James, the pastor. And this leads us to our last point.

James, the pastor, becomes James, the martyr. How does the story of James' life end? Well, in the New Testament, the last picture that we get of James is that he's still shepherding the church in Jerusalem amidst growing tensions and growing conflicts between the religious establishment and the burgeoning Christian movement.

[22 : 26] That's the last picture we get of James in the New Testament. But we know from historical records outside the New Testament that James was put to death in 62 AD. At a moment of political transition in Jerusalem when things were sort of precarious, the religious authorities found an opportunity to accuse James of transgressing the law and they delivered him up to be stoned.

James, once the doubter, once the doubter in the end refused to deny his belief in Jesus as Lord even though it cost him his life.

What made James so steadfast in the face of such pressure? how easy it would have been for him to just compromise with those worldly machinations around him to find a pragmatic solution to say, no, I followed the law my entire life.

I can sit loose to Jesus as the Messiah. Yet he doesn't do that. He holds fast. James, it seems, really believed what he wrote in chapter 1, verse 12.

He writes this. He says, 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.

[23 : 56] The steadfastness of James in death in martyrdom was rooted in the deeper steadfastness of God.

God's promises were like the bedrock, the unshakable foundation on which James stood. God's promises stood firm.

God had promised in the Old Testament that he would save his people from their sin and death, that he would bring them back from exile, that he would gather them in. And what James knew is that he did. God remained steadfast to his promise at the cost of his own son.

Jesus willingly remained steadfast for us, enduring the cross, bearing our shame, rising again in new life. What will keep us steadfast today?

Like James' audience, we are a church under pressure. What will keep us steadfast today? The answer is knowing the same Lord that James knew.

[25 : 06] You know, the end of our story may not be martyrdom, but the road for us will not always be easy. Charles Spurgeon wrote, the best of God's saints must drink the wormwood.

The dearest of his children must bear the cross. no Christian has enjoyed perpetual prosperity. Now that you are stronger in the spiritual life, you must enter upon the riper and rougher experience of God's full-grown children.

We need winds and tempests to exercise our faith, to tear off the rotten bough of self-dependence, and to root us more firmly in Christ.

That's what we learn from the life of James, the brother of Jesus. James, the doubter, the believer, the pastor, the martyr. Through it all, James' life was one of becoming rooted more and more firmly in the steadfastness of Jesus until his whole life, even his death, bore witness to the grace of God in Christ.

And God extends that same grace to us right now. An invitation to let our lives be made whole by him and to root our lives in his unchanging mercy, knowing, as James says, that God has promised a crown of life to those who love him.

[26 : 41] Let's pray. O Lord Jesus, we confess that we are often blown and tossed.

And we confess sometimes when we look at the stories of these great saints in the New Testament, we can be discouraged because our lives so rarely, it seems, in our own eyes, reflect these rich realities.

And yet, Jesus, we thank you that though our stories in our lives may look differently, your presence and your grace and your power and your spirit in our lives are just the same.

Give us eyes to see your faithfulness to us and the fruit of your spirit at work in us. Help us to encourage one another with the signs of life-giving reality that we see in one another.

And Lord Jesus, root us more deeply in your steadfastness so that we too might become steadfast in faith. We pray this in your name, Lord.

[27 : 51] Amen. Amen. Amen.