

1. Introduction to the Letter of James

Who is James?

Before we begin looking closely at the letter of James, we should first examine some Biblical information about its author. Who was James? What kind of place did he have in the early Christian church? The name “James” was rather common, and it appears several times in the New Testament. Only one man called James can be the author, however, and so we will briefly look at each one.

First, there was an apostle named James. He was the son of Zebedee and a brother of John. As we read in Acts 12:2, he was executed by King Herod at a relatively early stage in the history of the church at Jerusalem. For this reason, the majority of explainers discount this James as being the author of the letter.

Second, there were several men called James who are mentioned only once or twice in Scripture, and are thus not likely to be the letter’s writer. There was James, the son of Alphaeus. He, too, was one of the twelve apostles and most likely a brother of Matthew, but we do not know anything else about him. There was James the younger, about whom we read in Mark 15:40 as a witness of the Lord’s death on the cross. His name comes up once more in Matthew 27:56 as the son of a certain Mary, but we know nothing more about him and so he also is discounted. Then there was James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot) who is only briefly mentioned in the listing of the twelve apostles (Luke 6:14-16).

There was only one other James who might be considered the author of the letter. This was James, the brother of the Lord Jesus. We know from Mark 6:3 that Jesus had four brothers: James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. This James is mentioned again in the book of Acts, where he is identified as the leader of the church at Jerusalem, a man of wisdom and authority whose position was recognized by all the apostles and other members of the church. Most explainers agree that James, the brother of the Lord, is the likely author of the letter and we may safely agree with them.

This brings us to John 7:5 where we learn that “even [Jesus’] brothers did not believe in him.” In this verse, we read how Jesus’ brothers, including James, challenge him to accept the consequences of his claim that he is the

Savior. They urge him to attend the feast of booths in Judea, knowing that this may endanger his life. Jesus is challenged by his own brothers to be faithful to his alleged calling by going to Jerusalem and manifesting himself there as Israel's Messiah, regardless of the cost. We will note how this challenge is issued and how it is received. This matter is important because the family relationship shows us that James' participation in the church and his standing as writer of this letter is the result of conversion and acceptance of Jesus as his Lord through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit.

The Brothers' Challenge

The Lord Jesus is still in Galilee at this point in his ministry, but there is now a sense of transition. The scene of events will soon shift to Judea where the Lord will confront the Jewish leaders and eventually be arrested and condemned. This is also the time when many of Jesus' disciples have already stopped following him (John 6:66). Jesus had called himself the "bread of life", the true heavenly bread, making it very clear that there is salvation from sin and death only through him. He had stated this so strongly and clearly that many of his followers came to the conclusion that he was mad. His teaching in this respect was difficult for his disciples to understand (John 6:60). It had led to estrangement between Jesus and many of his followers in Galilee, and we may conclude that the initial euphoria had ended.

The time past had been incredible. Great multitudes had flocked to and around Jesus. We read in Mark 6 how Jesus entered a house, and it became so crowded with people that no one could enter or exit anymore. The people would not allow Jesus to leave, and the mass hysteria was at its highest point. The situation had become so extreme that his family had concluded something needed to be done.

Taking Charge of Jesus

In Mark 3:21 we read, "When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'" We later discover that at this time, his family consisted of his mother and brothers (Mark 3:31). Joseph had already passed away, leaving only Mary and her sons to take charge of Jesus. The expression "they went to *take charge* of him" is very important. Jesus' family wants to exercise its familial duty and rights by demanding that he come home. They claim that he is out of his mind, that he has lost all self-control, and that he consequently must be placed under special care.

His family agrees that they must take charge of him. Today we would say that such a person must be committed to a psychiatric ward or a mental institution, for he can no longer care for himself properly. According to his mother and brothers, Jesus has become a danger to himself and is influenced by delusions of grandeur. “I am the bread of life”? What nonsense!

In the eyes of Jesus’ family, he has gone too far. At first, everything that had happened around Jesus was rather exciting. Mary had even encouraged Jesus at the marriage feast in Cana, implying that he should do something about the lack of wine. Now, however, the Jewish leaders are claiming that Jesus is possessed by demons and has become a servant of Beelzebub. Apparently, the eldest brother of the family is headed for trouble and needs to be protected from himself.

When Mary and her sons arrive, they are unable to enter the house where Jesus is. News of his family’s arrival quickly reaches Jesus, and he learns that his mother and brothers are seeking him. The appropriate reaction would be to honor his mother and return home with the family who has his best interests in mind. The Lord Jesus, however, does not do what is expected of him. He looks at all those around him and says, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:34). With these words, Jesus makes it clear to the crowd who his true family is. Perhaps James’ emphasis in his letter on doing the will of God stems from this incident.

How would this have felt to Mary and her sons, standing at the door when word comes back that Jesus does not acknowledge them as his family and that he is not going to leave with them? Mary will have been upset and concerned, but James, Joseph, Judas and Simon will have been furious. How dare he treat his mother in this way? How dare he shame his family like this? They are not even given a hearing with their own brother. Their good intentions have been publicly rejected and they are deeply humiliated.

Lack of Belief Among Jesus’ Brothers

What kind of family life did Jesus experience as he was growing up? What kind of position did he hold among his brothers and sisters? From Luke 2:52 we know that, as a youth, Jesus grew not only in stature but also in favor with God and men. The fact that he never sinned may not have been clearly evident, but people, especially family members, would have noticed that he was *different*. His love was genuine and deep. He did his work and carried his load in the family without complaining. His brothers and sisters could go to him and

ask him for help and advice. He was always humble and genuine. Jesus did not contribute to sibling rivalry; yet he was in every way a true brother.

We can only imagine what it must have been like to grow up with the Lord Jesus and to be part of his family. In many ways it would have been the same as in other families, for our Lord also knew the limitations of the human body and soul. He could be tired and sick and he needed food and rest. He was the same as his siblings in almost every way, except that he did not sin. This made him different and his brothers and sisters must have noticed. Perhaps they could not pinpoint exactly where the difference lay, but they could be certain that Jesus was indeed distinct from other people.

Jesus had extra responsibilities as the eldest son, especially after Joseph's death. Despite this, he did not lord it over his brothers and sisters but served their best interests humbly and with deep love. We have no reason to believe that there was any tension between the Lord Jesus and his earthly brothers, unless it came from *their* side. They may have been envious of Jesus, but we do not know if Mary and Joseph had ever told them about Jesus' birth. As parents, they may have decided to keep it hidden from their other children because they feared that jealousy might result.

There are many things that we do not know about Jesus' relationship with his family, but we do read in John 7:5 that his brothers did not *believe* in him. They may have been caught up in the initial euphoria along with others, and perhaps they thought that they could benefit from Jesus' popularity, but they did not believe in him. What does this mean? They could not see him as the Messiah of God, the Son of David. They did not accept him as *their Savior* and he was not the Bread of Life for them.

There is perhaps an explanation for this. They may have been too familiar with him and felt resentment when he became so popular. What did he have that they did not? How dare he make such claims and perhaps endanger all of them? They felt that he was going too far, that his popularity had made him arrogant, and he had to be stopped.

The Brothers' Challenge Issued

In John 7:1, we find Jesus still traveling around in Galilee. He is purposely avoiding the Feast of Tabernacles in Judea because the Jews there are waiting to take his life. He knows of the danger he faces and so do his brothers. The crowds are not as large anymore as they had once been. Support for Jesus has dwindled and he appears to be withdrawing somewhat into himself. His brothers notice in him what they perceive to be indecision and maybe even fear at

the prospect of attending the feast in Jerusalem. This feast was held every year, as a feast of the final harvest. At this event, Israel would also remember the exodus out of Egypt, how the LORD had delivered them and given them prosperity. Every faithful and able Israelite from far and wide participated in this feast. When it becomes evident to Jesus' brothers that he is not preparing to go, they question him about it. It is not the questioning itself that should concern us, but the manner in which it is done. The brothers issue a challenge in no uncertain terms.

They point out that Jesus remains in Galilee where the action is dying down. The brothers suggest that he should leave and go to Judea, so that his disciples may see the miracles he does (John 7:3). They mean here the disciples in Judea, who are eagerly waiting for Jesus to manifest himself in Jerusalem. According to the brothers, the field of action should be shifted to the south where there are still disciples waiting to be dazzled by Jesus' signs and wonders. They do not say that it is best to remain where he is until some of the tension dies down. They do not tell Jesus that they are concerned for his well-being and that he should wait before he goes to Jerusalem. Instead, they question why he is not preparing to leave for a place that holds the most danger for him.

The brothers are rather nasty to Jesus. They pointedly remark that no one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret (John 7:4). They make it sound as if Jesus *himself* wants to be a public figure. Literally, this passage says, "someone who himself wants to be much talked about, as if he is seeking his own glory." The brothers imply that if Jesus has this need for recognition and this striving for fame, he must go to where the real action is. Since he has this ambition, he should show himself to the world. Jerusalem is the gateway to the world, the place where the real glory starts, and Jews from all over the world will gather there for the feast. That is where they think Jesus should go with his power and his miracles.

The brothers further insinuate that staying in Galilee will be counter-productive. They believe that in order to get his momentum back and inspire the crowds again, he must go off to Jerusalem. If they truly stood behind Jesus and were planning to protect him, this would be good advice, but we read in John 7:5 that "even his own brothers did not believe in him." Notice the word "even". Many of the disciples had given up on Jesus. The Jewish leaders had rejected him. The people of Nazareth had almost cast him off a cliff, and *even* his own brothers did not believe in him. Their advice is full of sarcasm and disdain. A deep family split now exists between Jesus and his brothers. The brothers are sick and tired of his claim and his fame. They feel that events are

not heading in the right direction and that the Jews will get him in the end. They challenge him to go to Jerusalem to see if he can conquer the world from there.

Complete Unbelief

The verb tense indicates that Jesus' brothers *constantly* did not believe. They were skeptical from the beginning and, as time progresses, their skepticism becomes worse. They feel that Jesus is only digging a deeper hole for himself, and they want no part in it. They do not *believe* in him. According to them, he is not the expected Savior, not the Messiah. They say to him that if he wants to continue believing his own claim, he should go to Jerusalem.

Jesus and his brothers had grown up together and studied the Scriptures together. The brothers had perhaps learned much from their eldest sibling, but now their unbelief in him and frustration with him emerges. They challenge him to go to Jerusalem, for that is where he will face the real test. This scorn will have been a great blow for the Lord Jesus. Previously, when everyone else had left him, Jesus had asked his disciples if they wanted to leave him as well. Their response was to remain with him, yet Jesus' own brothers no longer stand by him and his claim.

This seems to be the lowest point for the Lord Jesus up to this time, comparable only to the later desertion of his disciples. It is extremely difficult when caring becomes mockery, love turns to derision, and one is disregarded by one's own family.

This is not how a family should function. There should be a good understanding and a constant support of one another. The term "sibling rivalry" is better understood as the playful and well-meant challenges that family members sometimes extend to each other. We may certainly challenge one another to reach ahead and realize potential, but we must do so honestly and seriously. We must recognize and accept the abilities of our siblings, and warn them gently if they go beyond their limits. In this way the family bond remains strong and even deepens.

Here, however, there is evidence of a deep rift, caused by unbelief and expressed in mockery. The members of Jesus' family are no longer on the same wavelength, if they ever were. We can safely assume that the Lord Jesus never completely fit in with his family. He was human, and yet so different. How could his brothers understand this? Sometimes it is even harder for family members than outsiders to accept certain things. In this light the letter of

James which speaks so positively about Jesus as the Savior is quite remarkable.

Fitting In

There are certain reasons why someone may no longer fit in a family. With respect to Christian families, it can happen that, in the course of time, certain members break loose and no longer fit in. What is the bottom line? It is faith and obedience, not to mother or father only, but to the Lord. It is faith in the same Lord that must keep families and friends together as co-workers in God's kingdom.

If family members do not share this together from the beginning, there is little hope for the family to mature and function in the service of Christ. It can also happen that a family dedicates itself to the Lord, but one member leaves the service of the Lord and breaks with the church. Often we hear in such situations that he is not breaking with the church, but only with the local congregation. It is true that we are not to judge whether someone is saved or not, but there is no reason to leave a church if it is faithful to God's Word. We have to maintain the unity of faith and the church. There is no reason for someone to leave unless that church points out his sins and demands repentance, but he is not prepared to acknowledge these sins and turn aside from his sinful way.

Leaving the church is often a matter of not recognizing Christ's complete Lordship over our life, not seeing his complete and perfect love, and mocking his work of redemption. As minister, I have found through the years that people generally leave the church because they do not want to break with a certain sin. They may or may not acknowledge something as a sin (and I believe that deep down we all know quite well if something is sinful or not) but they do not want to break with it.

It can be the sin of pride: not loving others, not showing respect and care, and thinking only of ourselves and what *we* need and want. It can be the sin of dissatisfaction: never seeing the blessings, but only what is missing. It can be the sin of envy: wanting what other family members have. Our Lord cannot fit in with his family anymore if they continue in their unbelief, and we wonder how the brothers were able to find Jesus again.

Despite their unbelief, the brothers *did* find Jesus again. There is James, who wrote such a beautiful letter. There is Jude, another brother, who begged the believers to remain faithful to Christ. What a turn-around the Holy Spirit worked in their lives! They came to accept Jesus Christ in the light of his cross and, standing there together, they learned to see the meaning of his sacrifice.

Thereby he bound them together with a tie that is stronger than blood: the bond of true faith.

A Broken Family Restored

There is much brokenness in our families as well, not just physical and mental illnesses, but also the concerns that we can have over loved ones who do not serve the Lord. In many families there is an unrepentant covenant child, someone who may or may not still believe in the Lord but who refuses to serve him.

We can sometimes be so harsh towards such unfaithful covenant children that love is no longer evident. Our holy anger at them lacks all compassion. We do not pray for them enough, or seek them in humility, or continue to present to them God's claim upon them. We do not even examine what it may have been in our family life that turned them away, not as an excuse but as an explanation. It is such a blow to parents when a child rejects the Lord Jesus Christ, not because they failed in the upbringing or their child failed them -some look at that aspect only- but because their loved one's salvation is at stake.

The family of the Lord Jesus was broken when his brothers challenged him in unbelief to go and face the consequences of his supposed calling. How it must have hurt the Lord to hear this kind of mockery from his brothers on this key issue. They did not need to remind him of his task in Jerusalem, as if he would ever shrink from it, and as if he was afraid and did not trust his Father in heaven. Jesus' brothers really did not know him at all.

Yet his family could never stop our Lord from doing what he had to do. He knew that a man's enemies sometimes arise from his own household. He simply went on the way of his commitment to the Father, biding the time of heaven and not following the schedule of his brothers on earth.

This must have hurt Jesus deeply. Few things in life hurt so much as when our own father, mother or brothers let us down and reject us. What are we without our family? "One is the loneliest number that you ever knew." Yet even this was not the worst. Brothers and disciples had all left him, but when his Father closed heaven and took away his grace and fellowship, it was the last straw and Christ was utterly broken. He became the judgment of God that we might receive mercy, for in Christ mercy triumphs over judgment.

Jesus' own family was restored by him. We rejoice in him who alone can bind in love and faith that which has been broken by hate and unbelief. Let us also in our families never lose hope, but continue to pray and work for each other's salvation. In this light let us study this remarkable letter.