

St. James of Jerusalem ~ Brother of Jesus and Martyr
Acts 15:12-22a
James 1:1-12
Matthew 13:54-58

James the Just was the first-born son of Mary and Joseph, conceived in the natural way. Jesus was James' older brother, his older half-brother. Joseph didn't really have a say in what Jesus was named – that was picked for him. But Joseph did name his other sons, first James, which is an Anglicized version of Jacob. Jacob was Joseph's father's name so Joseph named James after his father and his next son Joseph named after himself.

What was it like to have the Son of God as your older brother? James didn't start out too hip to the idea, at least he didn't embrace the Messiah that Jesus had come to be. The Gospel of John tells us that not even the Lord's brothers believed in Him (John 7:5). They didn't mind having a religious rock star in the family but one who would suffer and die for the sins of humanity was not the pedestal they strove to ascend (John 7:1-8).

James later became the bishop of Jerusalem, the theological/spiritual leader of the most important center for early Christianity. In the book of Acts, there is a pivotal controversy where James simply has the last word on the topic (Acts 15:19-21). Jesus appeared to James specially after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7). From that point on, James became a pillar of the church (Galatians 2:9), one whose influence was both significant and blessed. Eusebius, a third century historian, and Josephus, a first century historian both credit James as having an extraordinary impact on the stability and integrity of the early church. At the time that the Gospel of Matthew was written, James was perhaps the most powerful human figure in Christianity. As a sign of this, Matthew, indicating the women who were at the crucifixion, refers to Mary, the mother of our Lord, as the mother of James and Joseph (Matthew 27:56).

I've said all this to give you an impression of the magnitude of this man. He could easily go about trotting out his status, his curriculum vitae, his unique position among the believers of his time. Yet how does he refer to himself? James, simply James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (James 1:1). Is there a rarer blend of qualities than authority and humility? The Gospel did to James what it has done to all of us. We have learned, in heart and soul, we have learned of the great love of Christ. The Son of God took up the form of a servant. Degradation, humiliation, the scorn of the radically unjust – Jesus willingly bore it, allowed it to saturate Him, and what did He do in return? He poured out His blood – a gift of undeserved love given to those who despised Him. The Gospel changes us. Humility and love are the foremost fruits of faith in Christ's disciples. Courage, mercy, sacrifice – the list of the fruit of Christ's life in believers is extensive but humility and love are the sweetest of all. We cannot be connected to the Son of God and not begin to look like Him.

James wrote his letter, the book of the Bible that bears his name, shortly after Stephen had been martyred. Imagine the shock wave that Stephen's death sent through the infant church. Persecution was not theoretical to those James ministered to in Jerusalem. Fear, anger, despair – it was rife within the Jerusalem congregation. Do you know those feelings? How do you deal with them? What, in your experience, liberates you from the darkest of emotions? Stephen had

been stoned to death simply for proclaiming Christ's name (Acts 7). Believers in James' care *knew* that Jesus was raised from the dead. They *knew* that Jesus is the very Son of God who was crucified to win forgiveness for sinners. They *knew* that life was found in no other name and they *knew* that they were being persecuted. Fear, anger, despair – a blend of internal enemies brewed in the people's hearts. Left unchecked, those emotions distort faith, robbing the heart of joy and hope. You are not immune to this.

Satan wants us to surrender our faith and He will use whatever tool is most effective with each of us. Some folks begin to say: "This Christianity business is just not worth it. Genuinely repenting of my sins and getting rid of the filth in my life is hard, too hard. I'd rather just dump it. There are so many pleasant things to enjoy in our godless culture." Now, I'm not sure if people actually think this clearly or this honestly but I *am sure* that the side of the road is littered with Christians who stop walking in faith. I *am sure* that Satan entices people to value other things more than their soul, more than their faith, more than the Lord Christ. Jesus said this: "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:38-39). James was helping people find real life.

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kind" (James 1:2). So many of you know what hardship is – pain, adversity, loss. It is real and it is unpleasant. There is no such thing as suffering alone for a Christian. When faith encounters difficulties there is keen interest in listening to God more closely, more seriously. Do you suppose that that is good for us? We know that suffering *for* Christ is suffering *with* Christ. He never leaves us in dark, sunless days. He is present, with us, in our difficulties. In olden days, when a ship was in a storm and was in danger of being swamped, the shipmaster pitched all the useless junk overboard. That which is of least value is jettisoned. When we suffer, do we hold onto the trappings of our vanity or do we cling to Christ and His promises? Those sins, those worldly things that you continue to hold onto, will it take an encounter with death for you to pitch them overboard because it was only then that you finally figured out that you can't hold onto them and Christ at the same time? They that love their ugly habits more than their souls will find that they are holding onto air, evaporating mist, and have cast the Most Valuable Thing this world has overboard. Is that you?

You all, with me, are being tested. Faith in this world is a lived reality. Loving God above all things, loving our neighbor as ourselves, repenting of those things which don't belong in a Christian's life, graciously forgiving others, serving Christ's church using the gifts that He has given us, training the young in the Way, praying for those in need, you are a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2) and this faith that God has given you is lived (James 1:22-25). The crown of life is in your future. Christ's Spirit animates your heart, His righteousness is credited to your account and one day you will die. The crown of life, the gift of eternal life, is God's promise to you. This whole life is a trial. You are in it. Your faith is being refined. Christianity is to take more and more space in your heart, more and more vividly is it to be lived. Listen to James: "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of eternal life, which God has promised to those who believe" (James 1:12).

He is referring to you. He is referring to Stephen. He is referring to Christ. You are under trial. This world is broken and no one is exempt from hardship. Endurance equals blessing. In this case the blessing is life with God in heaven. Stephen's name means crown. James is the first biblical writer to equate crown, alluding to Stephen, the church's first martyr, with eternal life. A crown, a mark of honor, a regal emblem of unique status – God has promised it to you. Christ is your crown. His life, His glory, His love, His humility, His blood, His death and His resurrection – Jesus is your crown. He is the man who remained steadfast under trial. He stood the test. He called out for His Father to forgive those who nailed Him to a tree. He lived a life that we are incorporated into. James shows us a more excellent way – total reliance on Christ the King. He calls himself a slave of Jesus Christ and yet James is truly His brother. As are you; the Lord's brothers and sisters. This is what James' Brother said: "My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). That, dear Christian, is you.