

James

Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ

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James is a more obscure figure in New Testament history. His letter is brief; yet, pointed. Most notably, James was a brother to Jesus. This astounding feature of James' background is unmentioned in his writing. Instead, he describes himself as "a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Jas. 1:1). The life story of James illustrates the power of the resurrected Jesus to change our lives.

Early Life

James was a younger brother to Jesus. This is perhaps the most intriguing part of James' background. We know so little about Jesus' upbringing; yet, James had a front row seat. Before we analyze James' relationship with his older brother, consider his parents.

For better or worse, our parents are formative influences in our lives. James' parents were Joseph and Mary. The Gospel of Matthew introduces them by writing, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly" (Matt. 1:18-19).

This text tells readers about Joseph's reaction to Mary's pregnancy. Joseph is described as a "just man." He cared about justice. He cared about the law. Divorcing Mary was well within his legal right; yet, he did not want her to suffer the social ostracism that was sure to follow. Before Joseph could begin the process of divorce, the angel Gabriel spoke to him. Mary's conception was miraculous. Thankfully, Joseph accepted the situation.

Joseph being described as a "just man" brings to mind what James wrote about justice: "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jas. 2:13). In time, James would come to be known as "James the Just." His earliest awareness of justice came from his father.

James' mother, Mary, was a spiritual tower. Her faith is inspiring. When the angel Gabriel gave her information about her divine conception, Mary responded by saying, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word..." (Luke 1:35). There are two important connections between this statement and James. First, James wrote about how we are to "receive the implanted word of God which is able to save our souls" (Jas. 1:21). This command receives greater emphasis when understood in light of Mary's divine conception of the Messiah. Second, James thought of himself in the same way his mother: a servant of the Lord. There is no greater title than this.

Also, Luke records what has come to be known as “Mary’s Song” (Luke 1:46-55). She expressed her deep faith in God and what her child would mean to the world. She praised God for scattering the proud and exalting the humble. She declared how God would feed the hungry and send the rich away empty. The prayer of James’ mother is echoed in much of the content of his letter (Jas. 2:1-8, 4:6-10, 5:1-6).

Family Life

We know very little about the family life of Joseph and Mary. Aside from two events, the upbringing of Jesus and his siblings is not described. However, we are given insight into their relationship during the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus and his younger siblings did not get along. The siblings did not believe the claims and teaching of their brother, Jesus. They were embarrassed by Him. They thought He had lost His mind. Notice the following passages indicating the unbelief of Jesus’ family.

“And they (the crowd DF) took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.” And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief” (Matt. 13:57-58).

“Then he (Jesus DF) went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind” (Mark 3:20-21).

“Now the Jews’ Feast of Booths was at hand. So his brothers said to him, “Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.” For not even his brothers believed in him” (John 7:2-5).

Transformation

Without question, James was an unbeliever. He was embarrassed by his older brother. Jesus’ public execution must have brought disgrace upon the family. When Jesus was crucified, none of His siblings were present: only His mother. So, how did James go from being ashamed of Jesus to becoming a servant of the LORD Jesus Christ?

In first Corinthians chapter fifteen, the apostle Paul describes the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Along with many other people, Paul notes how the resurrected Jesus appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7). James became a believer in Jesus after witnessing His resurrected form.

James became a “pillar” in the Church (Gal. 2:9). He was an unflinching servant of Jesus. When the disciples in Jerusalem were persecuted and expelled from the city, James wrote to them out of his concern for their faithfulness. While many were forced to leave Jerusalem, James stayed in the city. Eventually, his life was taken by the Pharisees.

There are three different historical accounts of the death of James (Eusebius, Hegesippus, and Josephus). According to the historian Eusebius, James was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. Surprisingly, he did not die. He began praying for God to forgive his murderers. As he was praying, a fuller/laundrer took out his club and dealt James a fatal blow to the head. He was martyred.

Conclusion

James is an often overlooked figure in the New Testament. Perhaps that is how James would want it. James would want us to know about Jesus, his Lord. His life shows us how the resurrected Lord can bring us to faith and propel us into ministry.