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Lesson 1

The Man James

The purpose of this first lesson is to introduce the man James to the readers and students of his epistle. It goes without saying that to know the author is to better understand and appreciate his writing. It is readily admitted that we do not have an abundance of information concerning the man James, but what we do know makes us feel that James is no stranger to us after all.¹ And what is more, Christians know the divine Author of this epistle in an experiential relationship, which is the master key to our understanding its message. (Note: As you study this lesson, be sure to read every Bible verse cited.)

I. PERSONAL NAME

The English name “James” in the New Testament translates the Greek *Iakōbos*. This is a Graecized form of *Iakob*, translated “Jacob” in the New Testament.

II. FAMILY BACKGROUND

To learn something of the author’s family background, we first need to identify which James this is. Actually, there are four different New Testament persons with the name James:

James the son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21; Mark 1:19; Luke 5:10)

James the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; 15:40; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13)

James the father of Judas the apostle (Luke 6:16, *Berkeley*)

James “the Lord’s brother” (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; Gal. 1:19)

1. Practically all of our knowledge of James comes from New Testament history. Tradition supplies a few items of interest concerning his life.

There is strong support for the belief that the epistle's author was the last-named James. This is the view followed by this study manual. James really was half brother of Jesus, both having the same mother, Mary, but not the same father. (Joseph was only the *legal* father of Jesus; Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit, Matt. 1:20.)

James had sisters and at least three brothers besides Jesus: Joseph (Joseph), Simon, and Jude (Matt. 13:55). The home environment in which James was reared must have been an exceptional one, with such devout parents as Mary and Joseph. Yet, the parents could not make their children's decisions concerning belief in Jesus as Saviour and Lord (Messiah). When it was that James made his decision is the subject of the next section.

Whether James ever married and raised his own family is an open question. The only passage in Scripture that may suggest marriage is 1 Corinthians 9:5.

III. CONVERSION

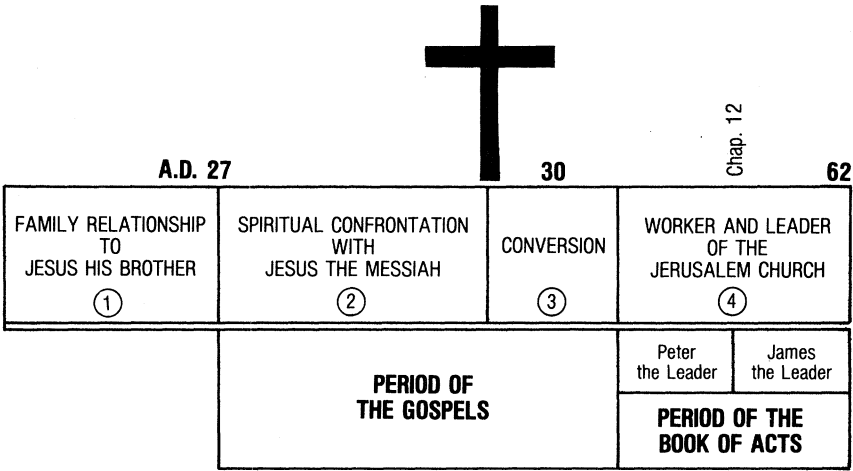
James and the other brothers of Jesus did not believe in Him as Saviour and Lord during the years of Jesus' public ministry. Read John 7:2-8. Does this passage suggest what hindered the brothers from believing? How do you account for this unbelief in light of the fact of such devout upbringing by Mary and Joseph?

What light does Proverbs 22:6 shed on this question?

From Acts 1:14 we learn that James had become a believe sometime before Pentecost day. His conversion may be dated at the time when Jesus appeared to him after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7). Or James may have believed just after Jesus' crucifixion. Whenever the experience, it was genuine, for James's entire life was transformed into one of service for Christ, as the book of Acts so clearly reveals.

IV. CHRISTIAN SERVICE

A biography of James's life would show four main periods as indicated by Chart A. Fix this chart clearly in your mind for help in background orientation.



The third period (conversion) is the shortest and most crucial of the four, representing about fifty days between Jesus' death and Pentecost day (Acts 2).² James's ministry as a "servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1) could not begin earlier than his conversion. From his earliest days as a believer, James identified himself with the local Christian group at Jerusalem, praying, working, and serving in various capacities (cf. Acts 1:14). Gradually he was recognized as a leader, so that at least by the time when Peter, the church's key leader during Acts 1-7, left Jerusalem, (Acts 12:17), James was the natural successor. Of this D. A. Hayes writes,

When he was exalted to this leadership we do not know, but all indications seem to point to the fact that at a very early period James was the recognized executive authority in the church at Jerus, which was the church of Pentecost and the church of the apostles. . . . All Christian Jews would look to Jerus[alem] as the primitive source of their organization and faith, and the head of the church at Jerus[alem] would be recognized by them as their chief authority.³

2. The word *pentecost* means fiftieth. Pentecost was the Old Testament Festival of Weeks (cf. Lev. 23:15; Deut. 16:9). The day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1) fell on the fiftieth day after the passion Passover.
3. D.A. Hayes, "Epistle of James," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 3: 1563. It should be observed here that the book of Acts does not give much information concerning James's leadership during those decades.

It was just about this time also that James wrote his epistle, whose content reveals that he was an active Christian worker and leader at the time of writing.

The Bible references shown below reconstruct for us something of the biography of James up to the time of his death. Read all the passages (plus the contexts surrounding them) and record the information furnished by each reference.

During Jesus' public ministry

John 2:12

Matthew 12:46-50

John 7:1-9

Early days as a believer

1 Corinthians 15:7

Early years as a servant of Jesus Christ

Acts 1:14

Galatians 1:18-19 (cf. Acts 9:26)

Successor to Peter as leader of the Jerusalem church

Acts 12:17

Acts 15:13

Galatians 2:1, 9-10 (What is the significance of James's being mentioned first in Paul's list of three pillars, Gal. 2:9-10)

V. CHARACTER

The biography of a man is incomplete without a description of his character. Review the verses you have just studied in connection with James's life. Recall, for example, that James was a praying man (Ac. 1:14). One church historian, Hegesippus (c. A.D. 175), commended James's prayer life especially, noting how he spent long hours interceding for the people, so that his knees became calloused.

The best insight into James' character is gained by reading his own writing. Take a few minutes at this point in your study to read the epistle with one object in mind: learning what kind of a man James was. Record your impressions, and compare these with the partial list given here:

a praying man

pure

powerful

practical

plain

persistent

humble

honest

single-minded

just ("fair-minded," "upright," *Berkeley*)

Concerning the last-named trait, James came to be known by the early church as “James the Just.” It is interesting to note that James’s father, Joseph, was “a just man” (Matt. 1:19); and that James refers to Jesus as “the just” man (James 5:6). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* pursues this thought at length, showing how the younger brother James and his elder brother Jesus were so much alike as to personality.⁴ The context and style of their messages were similar, as we shall see later in this lesson.

You will learn more about James’s character as you analyze carefully the epistle which he was inspired to write. For now, however, try to form a mental image of James’s entire life and character on the basis of your studies in this lesson thus far. Whenever necessary, fill in the blank spaces of his biography, with the help of a controlled imagination. When you begin your analytical studies of the text, bring this picture of James with you into your studies, and the Bible text will be more meaningful.

VI. DEATH

A strong tradition is that James was martyred at Jerusalem in A.D. 62. This date is about one year after the closing of the book of Acts and about five years before Paul and Peter were martyred. The manner of death, if Josephus (A.D. 37-95) and others are correct, was by stoning at the order of Ananias the high priest.

Why do you think the New Testament records the deaths of only a few of its main characters?

What spiritual teaching may be learned from this?

VII. REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who are the four different New Testament persons with the name James?

4. Ibid., p. 1567.

Which one is most likely the author of the epistle?

2. Recall what is known about James's family background.

3. What did James not believe about Jesus during His public ministry?

What may have been the main hindrance?

4. Draw from memory the chart of the periods of James's life.

5. What do you think brought James to believe in Christ?

6. List what is known from the New Testament about James's part in the local Jerusalem church's experience during the thirty years of Acts' history.

7. Describe the personality and character of James.

8. What is traditionally held about James's death?

9. List some important spiritual truths that you have learned in your study of this lesson.
