

# HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

David Robinson



## Applied Christianity— Studies in James

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# The Life of James

**Scriptures: Mark 6:3; Acts 15:13; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 2:9**

**Aim: By the end of the lesson I will understand the background of James, the man God used to write this book.**

## Start Here



Before we begin the study of the practical aspects of Christianity taught in the book of James, we need to take a close look at the man God used to write this book. Most people who study the New Testament know something about the apostles. Many are familiar with the personal lives of two apostles, Peter and Paul. Much has been written about the personal lives of both these men. But much less is known about the man named James.

The name James is used forty-two times in thirty-eight verses in the Bible. There are at least five different people in the Bible named James. It would be interesting to see what we can learn about each of them, but the life of the man who wrote this book can offer us some great lessons about our own lives.

As we study the life of James, we will see how he applied many of the lessons God gave him in his own personal life. We will also learn some things about the process of inspiration.

The Bible was not produced like books are today. The men who wrote the Bible did not do so on their own initiative. They were not contacted by editors and publishers and asked to write. Instead, the Holy Spirit moved in their hearts, and they then wrote down the message that He gave them. James was one of the men God used to write the New Testament.

## Take a Closer Look



**The Background of James.** The only direct information we have about James is found in his introduction of himself in James 1:1. There he introduces himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Like any author, James could have said many things about his life and his ministry. But he chose to use these simple and plain words to introduce the book that bears his name. His use of his name in this way probably indicates that he was well known to those who originally read this letter. He did not need to introduce himself to them. Since James did not give us his personal history, we have to use our interpretive skills to understand what we can glean about his life.

In all cases, the Bible serves as its own best commentary. So when we look into all the Scriptures that refer to anyone named James, the one man who emerges as the most likely to have written this book is the son of Joseph and Mary, the half brother of Jesus.

It is important to realize that Joseph and Mary had other children besides Jesus. Jesus had four half brothers whose names were James, Joses, Simon and Judas. These are named in Matthew 13:55. Jesus was the oldest son of Mary, but Joseph was not Jesus' father. Mary was expecting Jesus when she and Joseph were married. Jesus is the Son of God. After their wedding, Joseph and Mary did have four other boys.

The names of Jesus' parents and brothers were common names, and there were other men and women who had the same names. Because of this, we have to look closely at how the names are used to determine who is who in the Bible. For instance, Simon was the name of one of the half brothers of Jesus, but it was also the name of Simon Bar-jona, also called Peter. So we have to do a little detective work here. This is interesting to do and you can take your Bible and look up all the references to these names and make your own conclusions.

Most Bible scholars agree that the James who wrote the book that bears his name was the second born child of Mary and the half brother of Jesus.

**The Salvation of James.** One of the strongest evidences that the man who wrote the book was the half brother of Jesus is that he begins his book by referring to the council at the church at Jerusalem, an event recorded in Acts 15. By this time, James the brother of the apostle John had been killed. Herod had that James executed in the early days of the church at Jerusalem.

But in Acts 15 we read of another man named James who was a leader in the church at Jerusalem. This James was not only a leader in the church; he was an expert in Hebrew law. He was the one who wisely made the decision that the Gentiles should be included in churches without having to be circumcised. This decision was in harmony with the things that are taught in the book of James.

James the half brother of Jesus was not saved until after the resurrection of Christ. The earthly family of Jesus evidently had a skeptical attitude about his ministry. We must remember that the public ministry of Jesus only lasted about three or four years. For most of his life, Jesus lived in Nazareth and worked alongside his father and brothers as a carpenter. Only as he approached his thirtieth birthday, did Jesus begin his work as a preacher. Evidently, his family was not altogether behind him in this pursuit.

One principle that we have to remember here is that God is not a respecter of persons. Those who lived in the same house with Jesus did not have a special advantage over all other people on the earth. God was not showing them a special favor because they were the children of Joseph and Mary. In fact this nearness to Jesus evidently caused them to shy away from his ministry. John 7:5 plainly states that his half brothers did not believe in Jesus. But we know that James did come to know the Lord as His personal Savior.

A clue as to how this happened is given in 1 Corinthians 15:7. There we read that James was an eyewitness to the resurrection. After James saw that Jesus was victorious over the grave and death, he trusted Him and was saved. This is the same issue that bothered Saul of Tarsus, and, like James, Saul was saved when he came face to face with the resurrected Jesus.

Our faith revolves around the answers to two simple questions. Was Jesus who He said He was? Did Jesus do what He claimed to have done? Jesus said that He was the Son of God, and He claimed to have come out of the grave in victory in the resurrection. In one

sense neither of these claims can be proven, but both of them can become real to us when we will believe in Christ.

Without faith it is impossible to please God, and whatever is not of faith is sin. So we have to do as James did and set aside our prejudice and even what we think we know and simply trust what God says and believe in what Jesus has done of us. This is the way James was saved, and it is the way we will be saved.

**James decides to serve the Lord.** James was not a silent and secret disciple. Evidently, he had been brought up as an orthodox Hebrew and had learned the principles of the Old Testament. As we study the book that bears his name, we will see how he had a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament. But James was willing to be used of the Lord, and he was used in a great way.

James emerged as a leader in the church at Jerusalem at a difficult time for this church. His other brothers evidently also believed in Jesus and even got involved in mission work. Paul seems to recognize them in 1 Corinthians 9:5. James was instrumental in clearing the way for the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles in the same way it was preached to the Jews. He stood for respect for Jewish law, but he did not use the law as a barrier to others who wanted to be a part of the work of the Lord.

One of the great works of James, other than the book that bears his name, also reflects the practical approach he took to serving the Lord. In his decision recorded in Acts 15, he mentions that the Jews were to accept the Gentiles as brothers in the faith and not require them to become Jews before they became Christians. And he also asked the Gentiles to keep away from idols, from immoral conduct, and from certain foods that were offensive to the Jews. This was a practical solution to a serious problem.

Instead of dividing Christians from each other, James gave them a way to unite in love and in service to their Master. This is wonderful insight into the life of a remarkable man.



Although some seem to think so, the Bible is not silent about the family of Jesus. One of the interesting things we note is the names of his brothers. Jesus half brothers were named James, Joses, Simon and Judas. All these were

common names among the Jews of that day. Perhaps having a half brother named Simon is why Jesus chose to give the disciple named Simon Bar-jona another name. Jesus called him Peter, which in Greek means “small rock.”

At this time in history, people were beginning to use surnames, or what we call last names, to better identify each other. Often these were extensions of family names. For instance Peter’s name was Simon Bar-jona, which translates to Simon, son of Jona. The Hebrew term *bar* means “son of.” We would probably have called him Simon Jonason.

Following this reasoning James name would have been James Bar-joseph, or James Josephson. We should realize that the men and women in the Bible were real people who lived in a set of circumstances. Their lives are not fiction. The more we can learn about them the better we can understand their ministry to each other and to us.

## Building Blocks

One key rule in interpreting and understanding the Bible is to understand who actually spoke the words that are recorded for us. Although James wrote the words that are contained in this book, the thoughts behind them were not his. God inspired the Bible. God used human beings to write down the truth that He wanted to communicate to mankind.

The Bible was written in two languages. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament was written in Greek. But God did not use men in the way we use word processors. He did not just dictate to the people what He wanted them to say. Instead, He moved in their hearts to speak certain things, certain ideas and concepts that were to be conveyed to the minds of others.

Our words serve as containers for our ideas. Like the great boxes on trains and trucks that move freight of all kinds across the land, words carry ideas from one mind to another. God chose men and allowed them the freedom to express in words the great ideas that constitute the Bible. God was always in control of this process and He superintended it so that no error or contradiction would ever appear.



God does not ask us to walk in darkness. In fact the opposite is true. He expects His children to walk in the light of truth, 1 John 1:5. The purpose of the Bible is not to keep information away from us. Instead, God wants us to know everything that we can possibly learn about His Word, His will and His way while we are on this earth.

Jesus stated plainly that Heaven and earth would pass away, but His Word would not pass away. Truth is eternal. The truth that you learn today will be with you throughout all eternity. Your physical body will perish and eventually even this earth will perish, but the truth will go on and on.

This is why it's so important that we open our Bibles, open our hearts and allow the Word of God to live in us and change us. The things God teaches our hearts are eternal truths, and we prepare ourselves to live, and we even prepare for life after we die by knowing, believing and walking in the truths of God's Word.

James only learned this lesson after Jesus died and rose from the grave. We can learn it now and live our lives according to the wonderful things the Bible teaches us.



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