

How Would You Like Jesus For a Brother? • James 1:1

I was born into a family with four sons. I have three older brothers, ten, nine and five years older than I am. It is amazing to me that I have lived so long and can still be the “baby” of the family!

I’m intrigued with the studies that have been done on birth order and its impact on life. They say, for example, that the oldest child in a family is most often more successful and smarter than the other children – which is somewhat bad news for those of us that are the younger! It seems that parents devote an enormous amount of time and energy on their first child but by the time the second, third or fourth child arrives, they are pretty much worn out. Younger children in families are said to get along better with other people because they learned survival skills as preschoolers.

While I see some truth to those theories, there is one thing I know from experience as the youngest of four sons. That is that all of life becomes a comparison to your older siblings. From the time I was born I can remember being compared to Roy, Paul and Adam — my older brothers. I was compared to the way they looked, the grades they received and the things they’d done.

It makes me wonder what it must have been like to spend a lifetime being compared as a younger brother or sister to Jesus Christ. There must have been days when those in his family felt like quitting because they knew that no matter what they did, no matter how hard they tried, they could never possibly measure up. It must be a hard thing to be compared to a big brother who heals the sick, raises the dead and speaks profound

truths that draw crowds of thousands of people.

This was James’ dilemma as brother of Jesus. It must not have been easy. There must have been times when he wanted to shout from the rooftops that his brother was Jesus the Son of God, the Messiah, and other times when he wished that he could change his name and switch his address so no one would ever find out whose brother he was.

James, the brother of Jesus, was the author of the eighth from the last book in the Bible. It’s a short book, only five and a half pages long, and is a letter written to Jewish Christians in the first century. Some people think it was one of the earliest writings of the New Testament.

He begins the letter with a standard letter writing form for the first century: identifying the author, the intended recipient and the opening salutation. (Today, we put the author at the end of the letter.) So James picks up pen and parchment and writes, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord

Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.”

It takes some explaining to understand how James came to be Jesus’ younger brother. We recall from the Christmas story in Matthew, chapter 1, that

Mary is presented as a young woman who is a virgin impregnated by the Spirit of God and the child to be born from her is to be Jesus.

There were multiple purposes in God’s doing this in such a spectacular and uncommon way. Jesus was to be both God and human. It was the intent and design of God that this child was to be born

There must have been times when he wanted to shout from the rooftops that his brother was Jesus the Son of God, the Messiah, and other times when he wished that he could change his name and switch his address so no one would ever find out whose brother he was.

without inherited sin. God's way of doing this was that Mary would be impregnated without a human male.

Now there are some people, sincere Christians, who think that Mary never had a sexual relationship. They talk about the "perpetual virginity" of Mary and claim that Jesus never had any brothers. I suppose it is rooted somehow in a mistaken notion that virginity is more holy than a normal sexual relationship. But the Bible never once hints that Mary remained a virgin. In fact, Matthew 1:25 says that Joseph "had no union with Mary until she gave birth to a son" (named Jesus).

I think the evidence is strong that Mary and Joseph had several children together through a normal marital sexual relationship. Actually the other children would be, of course, half brothers and half sisters to Jesus for they shared the same mother but not the same father. You can see other evidence as you read on in the New Testament. For example Matthew 13:54-56 quotes people from Jesus' hometown who are amazed and ask, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?... Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?"

And so it seems clear that the next oldest to Jesus was James. In some ways it must have been very hard to live in the shadow of a brother who was God's son, to hang out as a child with someone who was perfect, to share a bedroom with a brother whose previous bedroom had been in heaven, to play out in the streets with someone who did not sin.

Of course we don't know many of the details. We can only guess. There are those who think that as a child Jesus did miracles to impress the neighborhood children, but there is no real documentation or evidence of that at all. Actually, the people who knew him the best never thought him to be

particularly special. They considered him to be a normal child. It wasn't until he became an adult that the people of his own family and community distinguished him from anyone else.

Jesus had not come to earth to strike up a negative comparison. He did not come to put people down. The record is clear in John 3:17 that "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world." My guess is that Jesus was as great an older brother as any kid brother could ever have. He was always looking out for them, bringing out the best in everyone and turning them from bad to good.

Are you an oldest brother or sister? Maybe you have never thought about it, but do you have any idea how important you are to younger brothers and sisters in your family? It doesn't make any difference whether you are a grade schooler or you are a senior adult, there is a natural influence that older brothers and sisters have on those who are younger within a family. The very best thing that you can do is to be an older brother like Jesus.

Imagine what an indescribable privilege it must have been for James, Joseph, Simon and Judas and for their sisters to have had Jesus as an older brother. Then imagine what an indescribable privilege it would be for your younger brothers and sisters to have you be like Jesus as well.

Unfortunately family members can sometimes be the hardest people to convince. There are two very pointed stories in the biography of Jesus that illustrate this point. One is in Mark 3:21 when Jesus' family actually came and tried to arrest him and bring back home and lock him up because they said, "He is out of his mind."

The other story is in John 7:5 where Jesus' brothers went to talk him out of his traveling around teaching and preaching and into coming back home. The reason was clear: "For even his own brothers did not believe in him."

Do you have members of your family who do

not believe in God, who are not persuaded for Jesus Christ? Are there brothers or sisters, your parents or one of your children for whom you have prayed every day as far back as you can remember and pleaded with God that that loved one would come into a relationship with Jesus Christ? Have you ever wondered why they have not responded and thought perhaps if you were a better Christian maybe they would not have been turned against God?

Jesus had the same problem. Jesus was as good at home as anyone could ever be. Jesus said all the right things. He lived a godly life in front of his family for thirty years and they still didn't believe.

James, the brother of Jesus, was not a Christian. He was a skeptic. He was an opponent of Jesus for a very long time. It wasn't until after the death of Jesus that something big happened — a change; a transformation — when James, the skeptic, became James, the Christian. He was converted. His life and his relationship to Jesus were totally transformed. My guess is that it happened shortly after the resurrection, because when you read the biography of Jesus you quickly discover that when he was crucified, James wasn't there.

By that time Joseph, Mary's husband, had died, and the custom of the country was that the oldest son was responsible to care for the mother. But Jesus, the oldest son, was dying and in desperation he turned to John and asked him if he would take care of his mother because he couldn't count on the next older brother, James, to take the responsibility. But then when you read on in the New Testament in I Corinthians 15:6-7 there is the record of how Jesus, after his resurrection, actually appeared to 500 people at one time, and then he appeared to James.

For some reason that we do not know, it took a

special appearance to convert his brother, James. And that day the brother who knew Jesus all of his life finally saw him in a different way. He saw him not as the kid he grew up with, not as the embarrassment to the family, not as someone who was mentally ill, but as the risen Christ. In an instant he saw him differently and he became a believer.

All of this is to say to those of us who have members of our own family who do not believe, don't give up. Don't quit if it takes 33 years or a multiple thereof. Be patient and pray for that day when he or she also will see Jesus Christ in a new and different way.

James the great skeptic became James the great leader. You can trace his biography in bits and pieces through Acts, the history book of the New Testament. James' rise to leadership is woven through the record.

Acts 1:14 tells of Jesus' disciples along with Mary and the brothers of Jesus "joined together constantly in prayer." James' first step to leadership was prayer.

Reading on in Acts 12:17, Peter, who many people perceive to be the leader of the church, was in prison, and to his own amazement God intervened and set him free. As soon as he was free Peter said

"Tell James and the brothers about this." Peter recognized in James an emerging leader.

By the fifteenth chapter of Acts the

young church was facing an enormous decision. There was a fierce debate going back and forth in a counsel meeting over the admission of Gentiles into the church. The issue was this: if a Gentile or non-Jew wanted to become a Christian, was it necessary for that person first to become a Jew and go through all the ritual and all of the regulations, or

James, the brother of Jesus, was not a Christian. He was a skeptic. He was an opponent of Jesus for a very long time.

can non-Jews become Christians simply through faith in Jesus Christ?

The arguments went back and forth and the tension was strong. Then James stood up with a clear word from God that cut through it all and settled the issue forever. James had become the leader of the Jerusalem church.

Now all of this background makes the opening words of James 1:1 even more amazing. Wouldn't you think that he would start out, "James, the close personal brother of Jesus Christ himself, the one to whom Jesus specially appeared after the resurrection, the bishop-boss-leader of the thousands of Christians in the first church of the world in Jerusalem?" After all, if you've got it, flaunt it! Show off and impress people!

Instead, he writes, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." I think our English translation has done something of an injustice to the text; James chose the Greek word *doulos*, which means "slave" more than "servant." Do you know that freshmen at the United States Air Force Academy outside of Colorado Springs are called "doolies" from the Greek word *doulos* for slave? It's the lowest of classes, and that's the word that James chose.

There are two characteristics of slaves: ownership and obedience. A slave is someone who is owned by somebody else, and the owner can do anything that he or she chooses with a slave. Slaves have no rights; they own nothing of their own. Slaves don't even have control over their own bodies for they can be bought and sold at the master's will. Because of ownership, obedience is required. Slaves can't ask for an explanation. When an order is given, a slave has no right to ask "why." There is no veto in a slave's world. Slaves go where they are sent, and they do what they are told. Their only job is to please the master because no one else really counts.

Most of us would never choose to be slaves.

We all daydream about all the things we might have done or become, but I doubt if any of us have considered being a slave! We certainly wouldn't want to become the slave of our older brother! And yet that's what James writes. He saw it differently. For him the greatest honor, the greatest privilege, the most marvelous title, the best identification was to be "a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" because he knew that belonging to the Lord is the very best. James knew that to be freed from God would be worse than any slavery to the pit of hell, and he knew that to be a slave of God would have a freedom that human words could never describe. He delighted to think of himself not in terms of privilege but duty, not in terms of rights but responsibility, not of what he could get from God but what he could do for God.

How do you like to be addressed? What kind of title do you prefer on a nameplate on your office door? How do you like people to refer to you — as rich, young, mature or good looking? Do you like it when people say Mr. or Mrs., Miss or Ms., Doctor, Mayor, Governor or President?

Consider just once that there is a title and a position that is better than them all — even better than being known as the brother of Jesus Christ, better than being a world famous leader. It is to be the slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
612-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
©Leith Anderson