

St. James of Jerusalem, Brother of Our Lord – Pr. Faugstad sermon
James 1:1-12: “Faith Is Focused on Jesus.”
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In Nomine Iesu

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O God, who founded the earth upon the seas and established it upon the floods, and whose Word is forever settled in heaven, grant unto us grace, we humbly ask You, to look beyond the things which are seen and temporal to the things which are not seen and eternal, that, walking rather by faith than by sight, we may not be unduly moved by any events in this world, but be able to endure in the way of life unto the end; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 74)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the first chapter of the Epistle of St. James. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. / Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. / If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. / Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. / Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, the Savior of both those who were near to Him such as His relatives and those who were far away such as you and me, dear fellow redeemed:

Imagine growing up in the town of Nazareth at the same time as Jesus, maybe even living next door to Him, both of you about the same age. What would you think of Him? Would you admire Him for His honesty, for being so kind to others, for His respectfulness toward His parents and superiors? Or would you tease Him and criticize Him for always doing the right thing? “Oh, You think You’re so good, Jesus, so much better than the rest of us! Why don’t You loosen up? Live a little?”

We don’t know what these years were like except for the account of Jesus staying behind at the temple when He was twelve. Other than that, we have this summary statement from the

evangelist Luke, *“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man”* (2:52).

One person who knew what it was like to live near Jesus was James, whom we remember today. James is referred to as a brother of Jesus, as were Joseph, Judas, and Simon—different people than the apostles (Mar. 6:3). We don’t know that these sons were born from the union of Joseph and Mary. In fact, the church has a long tradition of regarding Jesus as the only biological child of Mary. It is suggested that these “brothers” of Jesus could have been sons from Joseph and a previous wife who had died. Or they could have been close relatives who had joined the household or lived nearby.

Whatever James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon thought about Jesus in their younger years, we know that they did not believe He was the promised Messiah. After Jesus began teaching and performing miracles, and crowds started to gather around Him, His family did not like it. *“He is out of his mind!”* they said, and they tried to get Him away from the crowds (Mar. 3:21). When they couldn’t get Him to stop, they eventually seemed to grow tired of what looked to them like an act. The evangelist John reports that *“not even his brothers believed in him”* (7:5).

It is possible that their doubts remained all the way through Jesus’ earthly ministry. We are not told that they traveled with Him to Jerusalem when He entered the city on Palm Sunday. They were not in the upper room where Jesus instituted His Supper. And only Mary is mentioned as standing at the cross when Jesus gave her to the care of His disciple John—not to the care of the brothers James, Joseph, Judas, or Simon.

So why are we taking time today to talk about James? We are talking about James because of what happened after Jesus died and rose again. Paul writes that after His resurrection on the third day, Jesus *“appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James”* (1Co. 15:5-7). That made a believer out of James! Just as the eleven disciples did, now James understood how wrong he had been. He thought he had seen everything clearly, but he was totally blind. He did not see who Jesus was until then.

Jesus’ resurrection changed everything. After His ascension forty days later, we are told that Mary, James, and his brothers now devoted themselves to prayer with the apostles (Act. 1:14). Fast forward still more, and we find James as the recognized Christian leader in Jerusalem. Paul visited with him before setting off on his missionary journeys (Gal. 1:19). Peter acknowledged him as a leader in the church (Act. 12:17). And when a dispute arose about whether Gentiles should have to follow the Old Testament laws, James had the final say as we heard in today’s first lesson (Act. 15:12-22).

We see how much James’ view of Jesus had changed by the time he wrote his epistle. His opening words were, *“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”* He didn’t really know Jesus before as they grew up together, but now he knew. Jesus was the Christ, the anointed One, the Son of God. Jesus was his Lord and his Savior. James was just a humble servant in Christ’s church.

When James wrote in his epistle about faith, he must have thought about the way he had doubted Jesus years before. James thought his own thinking was so wise. He thought Jesus was so misguided. He learned that it was exactly the opposite. He saw how merciful God had been toward him, how the Holy Spirit had worked faith in his heart, so that he now understood who Jesus was. Now he knew that his former plans and pursuits were all empty. Now he knew that there was no better service to enter into than the Lord's service.

That doesn't mean James' life was easy. Being the leader in Jerusalem was very difficult since the Christian Church continued to face persecution there. As James wrote to the Christians who had been scattered from there throughout Asia and Europe, he said, *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."*

A faith never tested would remain a weak faith. Your faith is being tested all the time as you live in this fallen world that is under the spell of the devil. But if your faith is not regularly fed and strengthened through God's Word and Sacraments, you will not notice the conflict between your faith and the world, or you will notice it less and less.

It is common for Christians who no longer go to church to say, "I have faith; I don't need the church." But there are some things that should be true of a person who has faith. That person should be able to explain what he believes, and it should match what the Bible teaches. He should recognize that Jesus calls him to stay connected to His saving Word and Sacraments. And he should live a life that reflects the faith he says he has.

That last point is a major concern in the epistle of James. James makes bold statements about the necessity of works in the Christian's life. He writes: *"be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves"* (1:22). And, *"faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead"* (2:17). And another one that really makes the eyebrows go up, *"You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone"* (2:24). How does that square with the letter to the Romans which says, *"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law"* (Rom. 3:28)?

What James emphasizes in his Spirit-inspired epistle, is that faith is more than knowledge. It is not just knowing the basic facts about Jesus. Faith is firmly believing and trusting that if Jesus had not perfectly kept the Law for us and died for our sins, we would be damned to hell. A person who has faith, who knows how gracious God has been to him, will not live like a pagan. He will not behave, speak, and act in such a way that no one could guess he is a Christian.

A faith that has no love for God and His Word and no love for his neighbor is a dead faith. A dead faith is no faith at all. That's why James writes that a person who has faith will produce fruits of faith. Faith will be active in love. But what about the times that love is the last thing on our minds? What about when we are unkind to someone, when we say harsh and regrettable things, when we behave selfishly? Does that mean we no longer have faith, that we have lost it?

Your faith certainly can be lost. But if you are worried about having lost your faith, you haven't lost it. A person who has lost faith won't care about the truth anymore. If you are troubled by your sins, if you desire forgiveness in the name of Jesus, you have not lost your faith. In fact, your faith may be stronger at that moment than it usually is, because you realize how weak you

are and how impossible it is to save yourself. On the other hand, when you feel like you have a strong faith, it may be very weak, because you are trusting in your own strength.

It is not possible to measure your faith, and measuring your faith isn't necessary anyway. Our focus is not on our faith; it is on Jesus and His Word. We do not trust in our faith or lean on our faith. We trust in Jesus and lean on Jesus. Jesus is the only person who ever had perfect faith. He perfectly obeyed the will of His Father which resulted in your salvation.

Jesus lived a life of perfect works on your behalf. He did not become impatient or angry, even when His own family members and friends rejected Him. He willingly suffered and died for their sins and for everybody's sins. He died for your sins of not taking Him at His Word, of doubting that He is who He says and that He does what He promises. He paid the penalty for your sinful compromises, for setting your faith aside in order to indulge in what the world has to offer.

You and I are so often the doubters, the double-minded, unstable people tossed around like a wave of the sea that James writes about, just as he was too. But Jesus gave Himself for us. He redeemed us and washed us clean. He covers us in His holiness. He calls us not just "friends" but even "brothers and sisters." We are "*fellow heirs with Christ*" (Rom. 8:17). We must suffer in this world as He did, but God works it for our good.

"[T]he testing of your faith produces steadfastness," wrote James. He learned that firsthand as he humbly served the church and was later martyred for his faithful confession. The Holy Spirit granted him a saving faith in Jesus just as He has done for you. Your faith may not always be so strong, but even a little faith is a saving faith, because **Faith Is Focused on Jesus**, and He is not weak.

Jesus will see you through the trials and storms of this life. And when your time here comes to an end, He will bestow on you "*the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him.*"

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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