

What would you have done? Christianity was at a precipice. Its very existence seemed to be in danger. I was desperate to take care of Jesus' precious bride, the Church, but had no answers. I went down on my knees, calloused from prayer, and begged Holy Spirit to give me clarity on what to do. And he did.

Holy Spirit assured me that what I saw as a problem was just the normal progression of events that had been ordered by God eons ago. He gave me the solution of a weapon of spiritual warfare that would be the most powerful weapon ever used. I was going to be one of the first of many people to wield this weapon, so I needed to be a good example. What was the weapon? A...simple...letter.

For the first decade of its existence, the Church was comprised almost entirely of Jews who followed Jesus. We knew the Old Testament Scriptures and were able to participate in most of the benefits of the complex Jewish social structure. Even though many of us lived outside of Jerusalem, everyone relied on the direction of the apostles and Jewish leaders, many of whom lived in Jerusalem.

In the second decade of its existence, the Church added many non-Jews to its membership. Peter's conversion of Cornelius started the change, and Paul's preaching increased the speed at which non-Jews were added.

As the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, I saw things differently than most. I saw that our efforts with the Jews had reached a point of diminishing returns. We had saturated the market. Most of the Jews who might become Christians had already converted, and the rest were resistant, if not antagonistic to hearing our message. I saw that the Jerusalem Church leaders were losing their ability to influence and control the Gospel message as Christianity went to non-Jews living further away from Israel. I saw that the Jerusalem Church members were financially impoverished and in desperate need of help.

It was the year 49 AD, and we leaders had just finished the Council at Jerusalem where we decided that non-Jewish Christians did not have to follow the Laws of Moses, especially the rite of circumcision. Holy Spirit revealed to me that this was the turning-point for Christianity. No longer would we leaders at Jerusalem control the content and message of the Gospel. No longer would we direct the daily lives of so many Christians. In order for the Church to grow, it would have to be done in such a way that each Church would be independent and responsible for itself.

In your terms, we needed to go from a centralized organization to a decentralized organization. A more flattened leadership model. That would allow the Church to grow rapidly, but it would come with the costs of more chaos, more church failures, and less control over the content of the Gospel message.

I was old and tired, and was more than happy to give up control. But I was scared for the welfare of my flock. Not my flock in Jerusalem, but for the world-wide flock of Christians. How would they flourish without the constant leadership of the apostles and Jerusalem leaders?

The Holy Spirit laughed when he heard my concern. When you hear Holy Spirit laugh, you know everything is well. He pointed out that the apostles and leaders were old and dying off anyway. They were scattered as they went to other countries spreading the Gospel. He showed me that the old way was finishing and a new way was beginning. Not only would the Church grow by converting non-Jews, but the leadership of the Church would move to local leaders guided through written letters and accounts which he, the Holy Spirit, would inspire. This was not Plan B, this was the progression of Plan A that had been in effect for eons.

Holy Spirit told me that I was to write a letter giving necessary counsel for all future churches and Christians. In one short scroll, I was to pass along everything I thought important. Being a practical, and not a highly educated man, I had no choice but to pass along the things I knew had been important to lives of the people in my flock. I wasn't qualified to address the new problems that would arise as Christianity spread, just the problems that I had been addressing as leader of the Church in Jerusalem.

As I started writing the letter, it became obvious that I had to write in generalities. I did not have the ability to address little details or to talk about things that were obvious. What should I include? What was important to write about, and what should be excluded? Where should I start?

One thing I knew from past experience was that most problems had a common root...and it could be described in one word: faith and faithfulness.

Wait a minute you say, that's two words. I said the secret is one word, and that is true. In the Hebrew language, the words faith and faithfulness were the same word. In other words, faith did not mean "mental assent" like many in your culture take it to be. Faith meant "acting in accordance with your belief."¹

¹ You can see that in your NIV versions of the Bible, where they interchange the words in various versions over time in verses such as Habakkuk 2:4, the original verse that says, "the righteous person will live by faith/faithfulness."

If that causes you a lot of angst, perhaps you should stop and ponder for a while why it does. Paul and I were not in disagreement about the subject of faith, we just defined faith differently than many in your culture.

When I wrote, “faith without works is dead,”² I was *not* making a complex theological argument. I was saying faith and faithfulness are the same thing, you cannot have one without the other. I was actually incredulous that people could think such a thing was possible.

I think a good analogy for faith and works is what I wrote about in my letter, you can find it in Chapter Two Verse Twenty-six “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” Perhaps I could have been more politically correct by saying “lifeless” instead of “dead,” but the meaning would have been the same. Faith without works is lifeless.

Another reason many of you are misled about the meaning of faith is because of the way your Bibles are printed. The chapter headings many of you have were not in the original text. When you read the famous chapter of Hebrews 11, you might have seen it as the “Faith” chapter. However, it is much better described as “The Faith in Action” chapter.³ The whole chapter is about how people of the Bible put their faith into action. None of them could have imagined a faith consisting only of mental assent.

What sorts of things could you, your family members, and church do to put your faith into action? In my little letter, I mention three types of things: those evidenced by *deeds*, those evidenced by *conduct*, and those evidenced by *speech*. Here are some of the things that I mention in my little letter:

For faith evidenced by deeds, I wrote: You believe that there is one God; that’s good: the demons also believe, and tremble. But won’t you know, vain man, that faith without works is dead? Wasn’t Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son on the altar? See how faith worked with his works, and by works his faith was perfected? And the scripture was fulfilled which said, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness:’ and he was call the Friend of God. You see then how a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, wasn’t Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way. For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.⁴

² James 2:17

³ As the NIV Bible currently does

⁴ James 2:19-26

For faith evidenced by conduct, I wrote: But if you show favoritism, you commit sin, and are convicted of the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and breaks just one point, he is guilty of all.⁵

And for faith evidence by speech, I wrote several nuggets. Therefore, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger: for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.⁶

And the tongue is a fire, a world of evil: as one of our body members, the tongues corrupts the whole body, and sets on fire the course our lives, and itself is set on fire of hell. For every kind of animal, and bird, and snake, and things in the sea are tamed, and have been tamed by man. But no man can tame the tongue; it is an uncontrollable evil, full of deadly poison.⁷

What sorts of things can you, your family, and your church do to express your faith by your deeds, conduct and speech? Here are some practical types of things:

- Believe that God will answer your prayers
- Don't just read the Scriptures, but do what they say
- Help widows and orphans
- Clothe and feed people who need it without regard to judging why they need it
- Pray for each other

As you can tell, I am no great theologian. Thankfully, that is not what Holy Spirit trained me to be nor needed for me to be. I just had to have the experiences and desire to guide my flock and all future Christians with a little practical wisdom by the use of the most powerful weapon ever devised...a letter.

⁵ James 2:9-10

⁶ James 1:19-20

⁷ James 3:6-8

Very few people in the world have the ability to tell this story. I am one of them. Not because I am an incredible storyteller, but because I grew up in the home of the carpenter Joseph ben Heli ben Matthat¹, and his wife, Mary. I grew up with Jesus. And James². And that is what makes me one of the very few.

My name is Jude, a shortening of the common name, Judas. About the only thing most of you know of me is that I wrote the one-chapter book in the Bible that is placed just before *Revelation*. That book is named after me, but I suspect few of you know what is in the book, and fewer of you have ever quoted a verse from it. It only takes a few minutes to read, and you will find some very interesting information in it that is found nowhere else in the Bible. You may see some similarity to *Second Peter*, and may notice I used some of the *Apocryphal* writings as sources. Jesus was quite a bit older than me. As one of the younger ones, I was expected to learn as much from anyone older than me than I did from my father. Naturally, I hung on every word that Jesus, said but often he wasn't around. That meant I spent a lot of time with James.

Kids... you know how they can be. Have you ever wondered whether Jesus was ever (he pauses) "disciplined?" Kind of a funny thing to consider. I won't tell you for sure, but I will tell you that one reason God picked Joseph to raise Jesus was because he was the type of father who would be willing to correct Jesus if he needed it. Joseph certainly believed the proverb, "Whoever refuses to discipline his son, hates his son, but he that loves his son will discipline him diligently."³ So, I won't tell you any details, but I will tell you that "time-outs" had not yet been invented!

My brother, James, was the quiet, authoritative sort. He didn't waste words, and I was expected to obey him like I would have my father. We were poor, but he had a heart for those in our village who were worse off than we were. He loved to go with the adults as they took food to the poor of our village, and as an adult, he would often fix their houses and not charge anything.

Life in our little mountain town of Nazareth was calm and peaceful. We could look to the south and watch the caravans traipse down a spur of the important Via Maris trade route. We could look to the southwest toward Mount Carmel and over the Jezreel Valley. We knew we could

¹ Luke 3:23-24

² Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3

³ Proverbs 13:24

start walking east and be at the Sea of Galilee before a day went by. We even had our town synagogue where the men could study the Scriptures in peace. And that's where the trouble started.

Jesus had not been gone very long when word started filtering back that he was able to perform miracles and was teaching some radical ideas about the Scriptures. We were anxious for him to come back and show us a hometown boy that went away and did well. One Sabbath he showed up in our synagogue as if he had never been away. As was the custom, when it came time to read the Scripture, it was offered to him as a guest. I had to smile at the irony when he read from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted."⁴

"Good news to the poor." When he read that, my heart just swelled thinking of what a great job Joseph and Mary had done teaching him that. It was part of him. You know the rest of that story and the story of his life, so I won't go into that now, but I think you're starting to get the idea of how Jesus' obedient nature and heart for the disadvantaged was formed by Joseph and Mary. "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."⁵

When Jesus looked at a poor person, he was looking at his parents. When he looked at a widow, he was looking at his mother. When he looked at an orphan, he was looking at one of our neighbor's children. Literally, when you help one of those types of people, you are helping Jesus.⁶

If you think about it, you have very few facts about Joseph and Mary. Even if you know the Bible perfectly, you can't know how old Joseph was when he died, or if he had brothers or sisters, or where he was born. You can't know if they ever lost their tempers or were always perfectly calm.

You can know that they were poor, at least when they were first married. You can know this because of the type of the sacrifice they gave for Jesus, their firstborn⁷. But the most important thing you know about Joseph and Mary is that they were obedient to God.

Every reference to Joseph and Mary shows them as being fully and completely obedient to God. And, you can be assured that Jesus was taught to be completely obedient as well. You know that about Jesus because his whole life was one of obedience. One of the first descriptions about him as a very young man was that he was obedient to Joseph and Mary⁸. One of his first

⁴ Luke 4:18

⁵ Proverbs 22:6

⁶ Matthew 25:40

⁷ Luke 2:24

⁸ Luke 2:51

actions when he went to preach was to obediently get baptized, even though he was sinless.⁹ At the end of his life, Jesus summed up his entire reason for coming to earth as, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.”¹⁰

Joseph and Mary were both from the House of David. This was one of the driving factors in their thought process. Jesus knew all of our ancestors on both sides of the family. In the Scriptures, he always preferred the books talking about David, or written by David or Solomon. If he had favorite books, they would have been *Psalms* and *Proverbs*. All of our relatives were always distinctly aware that any firstborn son could turn out to be the Messiah. Not likely, but possible. You might have noticed that in the New Testament, there was never any doubt that Jesus was of the House of David.

Joseph and Mary were not trained theologians by any means. They made every effort to keep their beliefs simple, and consistent with their actions. One way they could make things simple was to be very clear with their definitions. Mary would simply say things like, “Always do what you are supposed to do.” How simple, obedience is always doing what you are supposed to do.

Their personal examples showed the decision rules for obedience. First, the commands are inviolate. You cannot break the commands of God. Second, there are Godly guidelines to get you through your life. Proverbs are an example of those. Third, no matter what else you do, learn to know the Spirit and follow him. Wisdom is when you know how to do those types of things, and do them. Folly is when you don’t.

James was highly influenced by his childhood, but he was equally influenced by being a long-term leader of the Jerusalem church. There is nothing like watching a friend or relative starve or be tortured to death to shape your stance on theological issues. Just ask my brother, James.

Now that you know a little bit more about him you can probably understand why he thought the way he did. He knew that obedience was the bedrock for leading a life of faith. I have some selected passages for you from his little book that illustrate these things I've talked about. Perhaps you will see them in a little different light than you might have before.

Don’t deceive yourselves but be doers of the word, and not hearers only. For if anyone is a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like a man looking at his natural face in a mirror: for he beholds himself, and goes his way forgetting what kind of man he was. But whoever looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues in it, not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deeds.¹¹

⁹ Matthew 3:15

¹⁰ John 17:4

¹¹ James 1:22-25

If you fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well.¹²

But above all things, my brothers, don't swear! Not by heaven, not by the earth, not by any other oath: but let your yes be yes; and your no, no; or risk falling into condemnation.¹³

Such great writing, isn't it? You can tell he knows the Psalms and Proverbs by heart! I am so proud of my brother. (he corrects himself) Brothers!

(he's emotional as his whole world comes together)

And I am so honored to have been born into the family...of a simple carpenter. And that I can share my story. And tell others about the good news. I feel...chosen. And you know what, you're chosen, too.

¹² James 2:8

¹³ James 5:12

I understand you have something called movie stars. Also; professional wrestlers, and I understand you have one in particular, who is both. Dwayne Johnson is his name but his, nickname? "The Rock." Well, whatever "movie star" or "professional wrestler" is, Mr. Johnson is a copycat. I was the first to be named The Rock, and I got that name from Jesus himself.¹

Truthfully, though, I don't feel much like The Rock at the moment. I feel like a rock that has been crushed, ground, and sifted into little pieces of sand. Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he said Satan wanted to sift me.² For the last three I decades have experienced all sorts of persecution, along with my fellow church members. However, when I start feeling sorry for myself, I go to a writing³ you know as the book of *Hebrews*.

My very good friend wrote that book, and in it he described the suffering that other God-followers have endured while staying faithful. You can find this in Chapter 11, the chapter that many of you call the "Faith in Action" chapter. In verses 35-37 it says: "Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trials of cruel mockings and floggings, and chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, sawn in two, tempted, killed with swords; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted and tormented."

History shows these same types of treatments were inflicted on Christians from time to time, but the author was describing the treatment of Old Testament saints. When you talked to people in my time, this is what they thought of when you said the words "persecution" and "suffering": Flogged, imprisonment, sawed in two, destitute.

You might be saying to yourself, "That Peter is no ray of sunshine today." Or you might be wondering why I have gotten off on such an unpleasant topic. Well, the first observation is right. There are few days anymore when my body doesn't hurt so badly that I am a ray of sunshine. And, the second observation is also correct. I got off on an unpleasant subject, but I got to it for a reason. First, however, I need to talk about the nature of God.

We early Christians struggled to understand the nature of God, even those of us who had lived with Jesus for three years. We grew up knowing God as the God of the Old Testament. Creator

¹ Matthew 16:18

² Luke 22:31

³ Although the NIV says it is a letter, most versions do not do so.

and owner of all, just, and jealous of idols. He wanted to have a relationship with the Jewish people, but we were typically obedient only because we were scared of him, not because we loved him. Then, Jesus opened our eyes so we could understand that God is a loving God, who had sacrificed his most precious possession so that he could love us as children, and we could love him as a father. A huge change for us was the beginning of understanding that God is good, and wants what is good for us.

God is good, God is loving. Suffering exists and is the natural course of life. We saw no contradiction in those statements. I didn't, the rest of the apostles didn't, James didn't, and Paul didn't. Frankly, neither did most Christians for the next many, many centuries. God is good. Suffering exists, but that does not mean God is not good.

Here is why I bring all of this up. I understand that one of the main reasons people of your time choose not to be Christians, or choose to quit being Christians, is because they cannot resolve their understanding that a good God would allow suffering, especially to people who seemingly don't deserve it.

I certainly don't have time to resolve that issue to your satisfaction, but I do want to point out a few things so that you can better understand what James wrote about the topic.

First, when James wrote about suffering, he was writing about it in the terms I previously mentioned: flogged, imprisonment, sawed in two, destitute. And, he was mainly talking about suffering for the cause of Jesus Christ, not suffering for other reasons.

Second, the assumption that a good God would not allow people to suffer is contradictory to the New Testament. It presents suffering as both something natural to happen in a sinful world, and as a tool that God sometimes uses for his benefit or our benefit. Jesus and some writers of the New Testament tell Christians to expect to suffer. The existence of suffering does not mean God is not good. It means that God does not behave as you want him to.

Lastly, God wants and expects us to remain faithful to him when we do suffer. God wants and expects us to remain faithful to him even if we are not suffering. We are to remain faithful, even joyful and thankful, in all circumstances.⁴

So, our understanding of God and of suffering was quite different from that of many people in your modern world... Another thing that differs from your era is our view of time.

Jesus said he will come back. We early Christians took him at his word, and imputed our own timing. We expected him not only to come back, but to come back soon. With a firm expectation of his coming back, we thought of suffering as a very short-term situation where

⁴ 1 Thess. 5:18

the pain was certainly worth less than the reward.⁵ Christians of your world probably believe Jesus will return, but don't really expect it any time soon, so the price of suffering seems very high to them.

James was a very practical man. He knew that unmet expectations were often the source for discontent and unbelief. He knew that if Christians only expected good things to happen in their lives when they became Christians, that they would soon be disappointed, and maybe lose their wavering faith. He knew that if they expected suffering, they would not be disappointed.

With those thoughts in mind, let's examine a few passages that my friend and colleague, James, wrote:

Count it all joy when you fall into all kinds of trials; knowing this, that the testing of your faith produces patience.⁶

Blessed is the man that endures temptation: for when he perseveres, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to them that love him.⁷

Be patient therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, patiently waiting for the early and late rains. You too, be patient, having firm hearts: for the coming of the Lord is near. Brothers, don't hold grudges against each other, or you will be condemned: look, the judge stands before the door. My brothers, consider the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. We count as blessed those who endure. You have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen what the Lord has done. The Lord is very compassionate and full of tender mercy.⁸

Even in the face of suffering, the Lord is very compassionate and full of tender mercy. Even when you don't feel like it's true. Even when you don't feel faithful and strong. Even when you don't feel like The Rock...either one of us.

⁵ 2 Cor. 4:17-18

⁶ James 1:2-3

⁷ James 1:12

⁸ James 5:7-11

You can tell I am nothing special. That is exactly why I was chosen to tell my story. There is another reason, but you'll have to wait a bit to learn about that.

In my lifetime, we... Jews... were an interesting people. We were not exactly a distinct ethnic group, although most of us had common ancestors. What distinguished us was our desire to follow the Laws of Moses. To do so, you had to be born a Jew, or be accepted in a ceremony by the Jewish leaders. If you were a man, that ceremony included being circumcised. Our dedication to the Laws of Moses is what set us apart from all other people.

To non-Jews, we were all lumped into one category—Jews. Inside of the Jewish community, we had so many distinctions that we didn't bother to count them. "Where there are two Jews, there are three opinions." Even in my time we had that saying. We had the obvious distinctions, like country of origin, original tribe of Israel, which part of Israel you came from, language, looks, rich or poor, and countless other physical distinctions.

Your New Testament talks about two religious and political factions, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Your historians know of two others, the Essenes and the Zealots, but there were many other small factions that had their own opinions on how to deal with the intricacies of the laws of Moses, how to live under Roman rule, and how to improve our economy.

When we Christians arrived on the scene, we could have been just another internal faction to throw in the mix. Our teachings on the Messiah didn't really cause a big stir to the general population, because other groups had their ideas about the Messiah, too. All Jews wanted a Messiah to deliver them from the harsh Roman Rule.

There were two things about the Christians that the Jewish leaders could not allow to exist. First, early on, the Christians continued to accuse the Jewish leaders of murdering an innocent man. Obviously, they did not want that teaching to continue because it undermined their authority. Second, and most important, the Christians insisted that Jesus was God, and that he had fulfilled the Law of Moses. If that were true, the leaders lost all of their authority... and income. The entire social structure of worshiping at the Temple was finished. If that were *not* true, the Christians were blasphemers and needed to be extinguished, and the leaders kept their high places. As you know, they decided that the claims of the Christians were not true.

However, that put the leaders in a quandary. They could threaten the Christians within certain limits, but we were still part of the Jewish community and could not be entirely excluded as long as we also followed the Laws of Moses.

It put us in a quandary, too. We wanted access to the Temple and the Jewish people, and we wanted to keep following the Laws of Moses because that did not generally conflict with being Christians.

The solution that worked for both the Jewish leaders and for us, was for us to separate into our own little social groups, which we called *churches*. We met regularly to worship God in our own way, and we slowly started separating and distinguishing ourselves more and more. We became known as members of The Way.¹

We Christians started separating ourselves from the rest of the Jews by taking care of ourselves financially. We shared our goods among ourselves so everybody had enough. Sometimes our wealthier members sold their own property to provide extra.²

The widows among us had to be taken care of, just as they always had been taken care of by the Jewish social system. That is when we found out that we had distinctions even within The Way. Apparently, the widows that were not of Israeli roots thought they were being treated less generously than the Israeli widows.

In order to handle this problem, as well as many other daily issues, the apostles had the Church choose seven men of good reputation, and full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom to take care of such things.³ We later became known as deacons, a word meaning servant or minister. Stephen and Philip were the most famous of the original seven deacons. I was one of the other five.

I was nothing special, except that I had a good reputation and was full of the Holy Spirit. I had no special skills, was not a good business man, didn't have any money, and wasn't very good looking. All in all, I was as ordinary a person as you could find. Perhaps you think of yourself as ordinary, too.

What made me a little different was my willingness to serve without recognition. Perhaps you have that willingness, too. I served as a deacon for the next forty years, and was the only original deacon serving in the Jerusalem church when it was forcibly dispersed in 70 AD. That is a long time to serve without recognition from anyone but God. That was good enough for me, and perhaps that is good enough for you.

But I didn't get chosen to tell you my story because it is about me. I got chosen because I am the most qualified person to tell you about part of the book of *James*. James saw the development of our church from his point of view as a leader, but I saw it from the point of

¹ Acts 9:2

² Acts 4:32-5:11

³ Acts 4:1-2

view of someone who was just trying to keep the wheels turning. Or more accurately, just trying to keep the wheels on every day.

It's one thing for James to tell me, "Our God will provide," but it's another thing entirely for me to go that same afternoon to a widow who is starving and tell her that I have no bread to give her! But, I am getting ahead of myself.

As I told you we early Christians were also Jews. As the friction grew between us and the Jewish leaders, we began to be excluded from their social system. It wasn't long before they began an active persecution of us, even to the point of physical harm. After Stephen's death, a man named Saul began a deadly extermination of Christians in Jerusalem, and threatened to go elsewhere to do the same.

For their own safety, and in an effort to begin evangelizing other villages and cities, many of the Christians began leaving Jerusalem. Eventually, all of the apostles left, so James became the undisputed leader of our dwindling group of Christians. That wasn't the big challenge.

The big challenge was that the Christians that moved away tended to be better off economically than those who remained. Every year, our church in Jerusalem became poorer and poorer. As the deacon in charge of helping the poor, I found that we had so many more requests for help than we had resources to share. You never saw so many widows and orphans as at one of our Sunday services.

We were so economically fragile! When a famine anywhere hit, and food prices rose, it was a huge crisis for us. Such a famine hit the Empire during the reign of Claudius.

A little over fifteen years after the church started, we Christians in Jerusalem were literally starving to death. We had no one to turn to because we were at such odds with the Jewish leaders. Then, God raised up a man that would soon change the course of Christianity.

Paul. Saul the persecutor of Jerusalem Christians transformed into Paul the Jerusalem Christian defender. Along with Barnabas, he helped raise the first relief fund for us from Christians in Antioch. You cannot imagine how much we praised God for him providing for us through Paul and Barnabas.⁴

That was not the last relief fund Paul raised for us either. Talk about faith in action! He was as much as a hero to us as any Old Testament figure that had saved the Jews.

Paul taught us that community wasn't just among the members of one church, but community is among churches throughout God's kingdom. God's community is world-wide, and Christians are to take care of each other regardless of their location.

⁴ Acts 12:28-30

James not only was a shepherd over those people who stayed in Jerusalem, but he continued to be concerned about all those who left Jerusalem. Clearly James had to rely on the Holy Spirit to lead him, because James had not been outside of Israel, and had little personal experience with Gentiles and foreign governments.

The Christians had to take care of each other because nobody else was there to help. Now that you have this bit of historical background, perhaps you can better understand why James wrote these verses:

1. Let the brother in humble circumstances rejoice in his high position.⁵

That doesn't sound much like what is considered high in your society, but it wasn't considered high in my society either. James was trying to teach us a new way of thinking. A new way of thinking that would even impact the way that we thought.

2. If any man among you seems to be religious, and doesn't control his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure religion and faultless before God and the Father is this, to visit the orphans and widows in their distress, and keep unblemished by the world.⁶

This next quotation from James is perhaps his most controversial, but maybe it won't be for you, now that you've heard my story.

3. In the first chapter and verse of his book, he announced his audience. "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greetings."⁷
4. "What good is it, my brothers, if a man says he has faith, and has not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Leave in peace, be warmed and filled with food, but do not give them those needed things, what good is it? Even so faith, if it has not works, is dead, being alone. Yes, a man may say, 'You have faith, and I have works'; show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."⁸

And to show you how much wisdom James can pack into a couple of sentences:

⁵ James 1:9

⁶ James 1:26-27

⁷ James 1:1

⁸ James 2:14-18

5. Who is wise and knowledgeable among you? Let them show it by good conversation and works done in humility and wisdom.⁹

What are works? I'm not much of a theologian, but here is my definition: just keeping the wheels on. Every day. Nothing special.

⁹ James 3:13

I want to tell you about some of the wisest choices that were made in the history of the early church. All of them were made through the leading of the Holy Spirit, so none of us can take credit for making them. I say that emphatically because one of the wisest decisions was made by me.

Wise decisions made by the church or its leaders in the first few years of its existence... here are some:

1. The believers waited in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit as Jesus instructed them to do.
2. The believers started making disciples as Jesus instructed them to do.
3. The believers listened to the Holy Spirit and fully followed him
4. The church selected seven Greek men to solve the food distribution to the Greek widows.
5. As Jesus instructed them to do, the believers scattered to Judea and Samaria upon the death of Stephen... and that “wisest decision” I made, only the Holy Spirit would have been able to talk me into this one—
6. I vouched for Saul after he had become a believer.

These decisions followed a common pattern of believing and trusting God enough to obediently and lovingly follow him. This was the same pattern we followed as we started making disciples of the Gentiles.

I knew James for almost all of his career as the leader of the Jerusalem church. You can only imagine the respect and love we had for one another. James played a key role in the way we made disciples of the Gentiles. Virtually all of the first Christians were Jews. Even though they believed in Jesus and followed him, they also continued following the laws of Moses as best they could. They continued doing this for many years after the church was established.

Once the Gentiles started becoming Christians, there was a fierce argument whether they also needed to follow the laws of Moses as well as follow Jesus. Those opposed to it were led by me, and Paul, who had started converting Gentiles in large numbers. The case was settled at a council in Jerusalem. The council ended when both parties acceded to James making the final judgment in favor of making it easy on the Gentiles, which resulted in them not having to follow the laws of Moses. This wise ruling of James opened the flood gates to making disciples of Gentiles.¹

¹ Acts 15

Although the ruling of James settled the issue concerning following the laws of Moses, it did not settle another argument that began to bubble up. The argument essentially centered on whether believers needed to do good works or if an intellectual faith was sufficient. Now, James was not a trained theologian, but he had watched many of his church members nearly starve to death. No matter what anybody thought, James knew the truth of the matter; that wise people backed up their faith with deeds, not out of obligation, but out of love for God and for their fellow men.

This was not just an empty argument or point of doctrine. Since Christians were expecting Jesus to return... soon! It was a reasonable thing for them to quit working and quit taking care of their families. What difference would it make if Jesus came back? That thought process got so bad in Thessalonica that Paul had to address it directly a few years after James wrote his letter.

James was a direct descendant of King Solomon, and was a huge fan of Proverbs. Since Proverbs has so much to say about wisdom and folly, James could not help but think in a similar way.

James knew that problems would arise from many sources for Christians, and he knew that it was impossible for him to deal with every type of problem in detail. His solution, inspired by Holy Spirit, was to encourage people to be... wise. That would work much better than giving them rules or detailed solutions to specific problems.

James observed the subject of wisdom from five different perspectives:

It is wise to trust and honor God. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men liberally and doesn't find fault, and it shall be given to him. But let him ask in faith, without doubt. For he that doubts is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.²

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, considerate, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.³

It is wise to be humble. But he gives us more grace. The Scriptures say, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore, submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God and he will come close to you. Clean your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, and mourn, and cry: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to sorrow. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up.⁴

² James 5:1-6

³ James 3:17

⁴ James 4:6-10

It is wise to pray. Is any among you in trouble? Let him pray. Is any happy? Let him sing psalms. Is any one among you sick? Let him call for the church elders; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, they shall be forgiven. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that you may be healed. The powerful prayer of a righteous man is very effective.⁵

Did you hear that last line? “The powerful prayer of a righteous man is very effective.” If you want to have more effective prayers, perhaps you should consider trying to be more righteous.

It is wise to make peace. Peacemakers who sow peace harvest the fruit of righteousness.⁶

It is wise to strive for salvation for everyone. Brothers, if any of you stray from the truth, and someone converts him, remember this: he who converts the sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.⁷

James was the most humble man I ever met. Also the wisest. Hmmm. I wonder if those two things are connected?

⁵ James 5:13-16

⁶ James 3:18

⁷ James 5:19-20

I want to talk to you about Jesus. My *descendant* Jesus. Did you know Jesus was my descendant? Matthew, the genealogist records this. I am his 25th great grandfather.¹

Jesus grew up with James. And James writes quite a bit like me. So actually, I want to talk to you about James.

James grew up in a family that loved reading my writings and those of my father, King David. In fact, James loved our writings so much that he even writes quite a bit like us. His personal history is much better than mine. Fortunately.

God blessed me by making me the wisest man who ever lived. Many people know this. Unfortunately, that didn't keep me from being foolish, as well, although it should have. 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines, nobody knows more about foolishness than me. And that's just one example. Against the rules of Moses, I piled up massive heaps of gold and silver, and collected horses and chariots from Egypt.² And those follies just led a long, long list of others. That could have been avoided if I had simply listened to the greatest prophet of the Jews, Moses.

Many centuries before Israel had kings or even thought about having kings, Moses gave three very clear commands that any king of Israel should follow.³ A king must not accumulate large amounts of gold and silver. With the help of my father David, I piled up such massive heaps of gold and silver that silver was considered as common as rocks.⁴

Moses said that a king must not acquire great numbers of horses and must not make the people return to Egypt to get more. The horses of Egypt were the best, God knew that, but the temptations of Egypt were vast, God knew that, too. I collected so many horses that I had to build cities to house them. And you can bet, many of these horses and chariots were from Egypt.

¹ Mat 1:17 says there were 27 generations from Solomon to Jesus

² Deut. 17:16-17

³ Deut. 17:16-17

⁴ 1 Kings 10:27

Most importantly, Moses commanded that a king should not take many wives, or his heart would be led astray. I violated that command in an extraordinary way. I took 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines.⁵ Many of those wives worshiped foreign gods, and I let them lead me into idolatry. Worse, I was the primary cause that so many Jews became idolatrous. My actions led directly to the downfall of Israel. No one was more foolish than me.

I wrote many wise sayings about folly, fortunately for you, and compiled them in the books you know as *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*. Read and learn them as James did so you can avoid my mistakes. That's my recommendation, anyway.

One of the craziest things about the Bible is that it talks about its heroes' follies. Stories that would have been killed by any good marketing group today. But God knew that learning from people's mistakes was as important as learning from their wise choices. The history of the early church was replete with both wise choices and foolish choices.

As an example, here is a short list of huge follies that you can spot if you read just the first five chapters of Dr. Luke's church history book of *Acts*:

- The betrayal of Jesus by Judas, which was compounded by Judas' suicide
- The people who did not believe Peter on Pentecost, or the other times he preached or healed people
- The Sanhedrin who refused to believe Peter, but persecuted the Christians instead
- Ananias and Sapphira trying to deceive the Holy Spirit

People have an incredible capacity to be foolish. James, warned of foolishness in at least specific six areas. It is no stretch to think that he might have been thinking of me when he wrote some of his letter, because I exemplified all six.

It is foolish to be materialistic. But the rich man should be humble since he will pass away as a flower of the grass. For the sun rises with burning heat and burns up the grass and the flower on it. Likewise, the rich man will fade away while he is doing his business.⁶

Pay attention, you rich men. Weep and howl for your miseries that will certainly happen to you. Your wealth has rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and the rust on them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as if it were fire. You have piled up treasure for the end.⁷

⁵ 1 Kings 11:3-4

⁶ James 1:10-11

⁷ James 5:1-6

It is foolish to doubt God. For don't let a doubting man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.⁸

It is foolish to blame God for our bad actions. Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he doesn't tempt anyone. But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.⁹

It is foolish to yield to Satan and his worldly temptations. You adulterers and adulteresses, don't you know that friendship with the world means you are an adversary of God? Whoever will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.¹⁰

It is foolish to create strife and division. What is the source of the fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your lusts that battle inside of you?¹¹

And finally, it is foolish to be self-centered. For where there is envy and strife, there is confusion and all kinds of evil.¹²

You desire, but don't have: you kill and desire to have, but cannot get what you want: you fight and quarrel, yet you don't get your way, because you ask with the wrong motives. You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong intentions, that you may consume it all on your own desires.¹³

But now you rejoice in your arrogant boasting, even though such boasting is evil. Therefore, to him that knows to do good and doesn't do it, to him it is sin.¹⁴

The short letter by James was maybe the first of the New Testament writings. As you have heard in my story and in other stories, James was dealing with the practicalities of living by talking about faith, obedience, suffering, community, wisdom and foolishness. Through the centuries, countless Christians chose to find solutions to their life problems in his little letter. Maybe if he had written it a thousand years earlier, I would have learned from it. Nah! I was the wisest man that ever lived and I wouldn't even learn from myself, I was too prideful.

May nothing keep you from learning from James.

⁸ James 1:7-8

⁹ James 1:13-14

¹⁰ James 4:4

¹¹ James 4:1

¹² James 3:16

¹³ James 4:2-3

¹⁴ James 4:16-17