

**“O Brother Who Art Thou?”**

**John 7:1-13, Mark 3:20-21, 30-35**

*Series: The Walk – The Life of James Week 1. From Skeptic to Curious*

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Twenty years ago an announcement from Washington D.C. shocked the world. At a press conference, The Discovery Channel unveiled a two thousand year old limestone box measuring 20 inches long, 10 inches wide and 12 inches high. It's called an ossuary which roughly means “bone box.” Once the flesh is gone, Jews in the first century AD placed the bones of their relatives in these stone containers. What makes this ossuary so startling is not what's inside. It's actually empty. The surprising news is on the outside - five words in Aramaic which identify whose bones once lay within: “James son of Joseph brother of Jesus.”

It's not unusual to write names on ossuaries. These three names are also very common in the first century. What makes this ossuary earth-shattering is the combination of names – James, Joseph, Jesus. And one more thing – it's extremely rare for a person to be identified by a brother. If it is true then the James Ossuary is the one and only physical archaeological evidence of Jesus.

Some scholars say it's too good to be true. In 2003 the Israeli Antiquities Authority declared the inscription to be a fake. They charged the owner with 44 counts of forgery, fraud and deception. They claimed the box is old but the inscription was added in modern times. Eminent scholars argued on both sides. The trial dragged on for seven years. The final verdict? The court declared the owner not guilty of forgery but refused to rule on the authenticity of the inscription.

James is still making news two thousand years later. Today we begin our look at the Apostle James, the son of Joseph and the brother of Jesus. It's completely fitting for James to stir up controversy and skepticism since this great leader of the Church started out as a skeptic and he was no stranger to controversy. During the month of September we will examine the life of James in a series called The Walk. Clues buried in the New Testament reveal James actually went on a walk or journey from criticism of his brother Jesus to curiosity, from faith to follower, from learner to leader. Then, in October and November, we'll do a deep dive into the Letter of James. Through the centuries, it has generated both light and heat, encouragement and challenge. Today, as we look at this skeptic and critic, we can find help in wrestling with our own questions and doubts.

The first truth you need to know is James is not his name. It's Ya'acov or, in English, Jacob. His parents named him after the father of all the Israelites and after Joseph's father who was also named Jacob (Matthew 1:16). So why James? When Hebrew names pass through Greek, Latin, French and German to English they change. Jacob is the third most common Jewish name in the first century. In addition to Jesus' brother, two of the twelve disciples bear this name – James the brother of John and James the son of Alphaeus.

And how can James be Jesus' brother? The villagers of Nazareth describe a large family.

Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. “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? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him. Matthew 13:54

Four brothers and numerous sisters. That's a lot of mouths to feed. If you were raised Roman Catholic you were taught Mary was a perpetual virgin before and after Jesus and therefore did not have any other children. The official teaching is that James and his siblings are either cousins or step-brothers and sisters – perhaps when Joseph was married before Mary. Trouble is: there is no mention of a previous marriage or other children before Jesus. You are welcome to believe what you wish but in this series I will follow the reading of Scripture which calls them brothers and sisters from Joseph and Mary.

It's likely James was in the same business as Joseph and Jesus. Carpenter is the traditional translation of the Greek word "tekton" but it can also mean a builder. So they were employed in the construction firm of Joseph and Sons. The other clue we notice is Joseph does not appear in the Gospels after the story of Jesus in the Temple at age 12 (Luke 2:41-52). He lived long enough to father this big family and then, at some time, passed away leaving Jesus as the head of the house.

So what was it like to raise the Son of God? You probably think: Easy! Piece of Cake! No need for a grocery store. He can feed fish and loaves to the whole village with yesterday's leftovers and provide a perfect wine pairing from well water. Yet think for a minute: what would it be like for a child in the terrible twos or the tumultuous teens to have the power of almighty God?

One or two centuries after Jesus, someone wrote a book of legends called *The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ* which portrays little Jesus as a holy terror. In one story Jesus and his playmates take clay and mold them into donkeys, oxen and birds. When the other kids boast about their creations, Jesus one ups them by making His creatures walk and fly. Immediately the kids go home and tattle on Jesus and their parents say, "Don't play with that kid anymore." The book says Joseph "was not very skillful at his carpenter's trade." Apparently he never learned the rule "Measure twice, cut once." While creating a throne for the king of Jerusalem, he cuts the boards too short. Jesus saves the day. He tells Joseph to pull on one side of the throne while Jesus pulls on the other until they stretch it to its proper size. Later Jesus goes to school and, being a smart aleck, shows up the teacher. When the teacher tries to whip the boy, his hand withers and he dies. After this Joseph says to Mary, "Henceforth we will not allow him to go out of the house; for everyone who displeases him is killed."<sup>1</sup> That's how Christian home schooling started.

These are fairy tales made up by people hundreds of years after Jesus who tried to imagine raising an Almighty baby. The truth is we only have one story about Jesus between the age of two and thirty. It contains no miracles. This bothers some believers yet I think it reveals a wonderful truth: when God became human he didn't fake it. He didn't cheat. He didn't secretly use His powers like a Marvel superhero. He truly led an ordinary human life. Imagine what it would be like for you to live in a remote village without your cell phone, car, air conditioning, internet, grocery store, clean water, medical care and you will start to understand a little of what it was like for the Son of God to leave heaven and live with us. He did it to show how far He will go to be one of us, one with us, and to win us back.

So what was it like for James to have the Son of God sleeping in the bunkbed above him? There were probably lots of moments when James looked at Jesus and thought, "O brother who are thou?" It must have been tough. You can never blame anything on Mr. Perfect. Your parents always side with Him. Instead of punching you back He always forgives you.

Things really change when Jesus returns from His baptism by John down south in Judea. Giving up the family construction firm, Jesus moves from village to village announcing God chose Him to bring a new Kingdom. Their neighbors in Nazareth are first curious and then furious. They even try to kill Him. So Jesus stays away from His hometown. The rest of Galilee flocks to Him. They are attracted to His miracles

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<sup>1</sup> Infancy, Chapter XX, verse 16 from *The Lost Books of the Bible* (Bell Publishing, New York, 1979) p. 57.

and messages. Yet James and his brothers are skeptical. Brothers tend to poke, prod and push each other just to get a reaction. One time they use peer pressure.

But when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." For even his own brothers did not believe in him. John 7:2-5

Jesus refused to take the bait. Later James is afraid for his brother and, possibly, afraid of him.

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." Mark 3:20-21

I realize this may be hard to hear but this verse says his brothers think Jesus is crazy and they plan to forcibly take control of Him and take Him back home.

It's not hard to imagine some of the reasons James entertains. 'We must stop him before something dangerous happens. It is for his own good. He is disgracing our family name. We have to get him home before he hurts himself and brings the wrath of Rome down on us.' So the family travels down to Capernaum. Since the crowd prevents them from getting in, James sends in a message to tell "Mr. Messiah" that his mother and brothers want him to come out and see them. They wait and wait until finally word is passed back. A stranger tells them Jesus says,

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." Mark 3:33-35

Furious, James and his brothers stomp off home.

Like James, the number of skeptics, doubters and critics of Jesus are legion. Certainly there are many outside the Church. Yet even Christians have questions and qualms. With the internet, social media and google reviews it's become very popular to be a skeptic and critic. To stand back, fold your arms, and fire arguments at believers can make one feel powerful. Actually "skeptic" comes from a Greek word which means to look, to consider, to review. It really means to seek. For those who seek there are three obstacles to faith.

First there are **Obstacles in the Mind**. Many say faith goes against reason, that it's even crazy. James thought his brother was out of His mind. Jews do not believe any human can be God. That's just one of the many barriers which prevent some from embracing faith. They want proof, facts, evidence, scientific experiments.

Christianity is not irrational, anti-reason and certainly not anti-science. Many of the founders of modern science were in fact Christians. They longed to understand the plans and designs of our Creator. Science and reason are wonderful blessings. Yet they can only take us so far. Even scientists affirm there is a limit to what we can know with our minds. The trouble begins when critics say the only truth is what can be tested by experiments, the only reality is what can be confirmed with reason. This is actually being closed minded. Reason is the ramp that leads up to the step of faith. We accept many things on faith. You and I don't have the time to review every experiment, fact-check ever news item or test every theory. We trust others. So even our reason relies on faith.

Then there are **Obstacles in the Heart**. Behind many rational objections to faith are hidden emotional scars. You answer all their questions and still they doubt since those are not the real problem. Some are angry with God, others were hurt by the Church, still others feel unworthy, guilty or ashamed. James may have been jealous of his older brother. He saw Jesus up close. Often when you witness what goes on behind the scenes, what goes into the special sauce, you may doubt. I'm thankful my children are followers of Jesus despite the mistakes I made which could have given them reasons to turn away from Christ. A frequent barrier to faith is feeling God, our heavenly Parent, is a big version of one's earthly parents. If I have trouble with our father or mother here on earth, why should I trust our Father who art in heaven?

You can be free when you discover God is so much greater than your earthly parent. Jesus teaches us God is not an angry, distant, vindictive tyrant but a loving Father who runs to us and welcomes us home even when we're coated with the emotional slime and stink of the world. Faith helps you discover God is not the parent you know but the parent you long for, the parent you need.

Underneath all these are **Obstacles of the Will**. The ultimate barriers are not reasons or emotions. The original issue, going all the way back to Eden, is our unwillingness to let God be God. If I believe God is Lord then I can't be. If I accept God is running the show then I have to let go of the controls. If God tells me to forgive, to serve, to care, to surrender my will then I must do it. This is why Jesus' main prayer is, "Not my will but yours be done." This is why Jesus tells James and His brothers, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." The way to become part of God's family is to do His will. If you want to bear a family resemblance to God, do His will. If you want to be close to God, do His will. We know James learned this lesson and took it to heart because it is the basis of His entire letter: don't just say you believe. Do it!

The way to begin the Walk with Jesus is to take a step. The way to overcome the obstacles of faith is to take a step. Don't wait for all your rational questions to be answered. Don't wait for all your emotional struggles to be resolved. Take a step of faith first and the tangles will unravel. Trust God. Surrender your will. Don't wait until you see to believe. Believe and you will see.

Fiona tried a variety of faiths: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, the Bahai movement. "Nothing ever quite fit," she said. So she went nowhere. She met and married Don and they had a daughter named Michaela. When she reached three they enrolled her at Woodside Christian Preschool. At the orientation, Don and Fiona explained to their daughter's teacher she would need to tell her who Jesus is since she'd never been to Sunday school.

I never met Don. The first time I met Fiona was this day, September 11<sup>th</sup>, twenty-one years ago. It was Michaela's first day of school. Fiona came into my office in tears to tell me that Don was on the 101<sup>st</sup> floor of Tower Two and he was missing. "What should I tell my daughter?" We talked and prayed and Fiona went out to pick up her daughter. The next day, Michaela asked, "Is Daddy at work?" "No," said her mother carefully choosing his words, "His building isn't there anymore. We don't know where Daddy is." "I miss Daddy," she said. "Well, I'm still here. You've got me," Fiona reassured her. "And Daddy will always love you, and you have to keep him in your heart." And then little three-year-old Michaela said something she learned on her first day of school. "Mommy, Jesus Christ is in my heart." It had been twenty years since Fiona had gone to church. After that she said, "You either believe or you don't. And the bottom line for me is it is more comfortable to believe. I need it very much."

Take a step, Believe and you will see.