

The Letter from James

What's it Like to be God's Half-Brother

The Barna Group's 1996 national survey found that "the average American owns, respects and swears allegiance to the Bible, but doesn't read it." 80% say it's the most influential book ever. 90%+ "of households surveyed owned a Bible (75% had more than one), but nearly half said they never or only rarely read it." Too tough to study? Nah, you and I are discovering it's actually user-friendly.

Instead of targeting holy-guys-in-caves, God wrote it to be easily understood, to help us make sense of life lived at Web-speed and to connect us personally with Him!

Tom Shrader says, "*A timeless God doesn't produce dated material.*" Written by 40-odd authors over 1,500 years on three continents in three languages, the Bible helps you relate to family, friends, enemies, career, money, yourself and your future.

As fresh as today's *Drudge Report*, this ancient book claims to be the very words of God, revealing the *only* path to God. It spells out how to know God *mano e mano*. John the Baptist (not the denomination but his job description) announced, "*He who believes in the Son (Jesus) has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*" (John 3:36) Like those on the Titanic, we either sink or swim -- in a place the Bible calls heaven or the other one it calls hell. No middle ground.

Someone said the Bible *is* history -- *HIS*-story. Henrietta Mears writes, "*You can go down into the minutest detail everywhere and see that there's one great purpose moving through the ages: the eternal design of the Almighty God to redeem a wrecked and ruined world.*"

In math, fractals are complex, geometric shapes, identical in detail at any level of magnification, however infinitely small or large. Take a grain of sand and reduce it to an invisible atom or zoom it up to the breadth of a typical Jerry Springer guest, and you'll see uniform configurations. That's true with mountains, clouds, galaxies -- anything God's made. Their patterns are astonishingly consistent, demonstrating the incomparable genius of our Creator. If God's physical creation is that reliable, can we trust Him?

Sue Bohlin of Probe Ministries International, (see <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/evidence.html>) says wind and rain didn't erode Mt. Rushmore into the likenesses of four presidents. Nor is a fine timepiece an accident.

How about how our bodies are designed (at least *before* Ben & Jerry reshaped mine)? Can mechanical engineers create a robot that lifts 500 pounds? No problem. Have that

same robot play piano like Billy Joel? Check. But ask it to go through the King County permitting process to subdivide its property, and forget it!

DNA's the stuff every living thing's genes are made of. Scientists sweat to decipher the code written on the genes of micro-organisms. In Pony Express days if Morse code was sent, somebody had to tap it out. No code-maker, no code. DNA's probably the best indicator that our world was created and is maintained by an intelligent Designer who left His fingerprints all over creation.

CAN I REALLY TAKE THE BIBLE TO THE BANK?

Like Mt. Rushmore, a Rolex and DNA, the Bible can be mysterious 'til we discover its fractal-like consistency: (a) God is its Author, (b) Jesus is its theme, and (3) together they went to the wall to demo their love for you and me. The Bible's unity proves that God is.

Another proof is this Book's mountain of fulfilled prophecy -- detailed predictions written centuries *before* they came to pass! Who else but an all-powerful God could *know what's coming* -- and consistently *make it happen*, down to a fractal!

Again, Sue Bohlin presents evidence that would bowl over even Judge Judy: *"God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel against the bustling seaport and trade center of Tyre. In Ezekiel 26:3-6, He said He would bring nations against her: 'They shall destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers; and I will scrape her soil from her, and make her a bare rock.'* Ezekiel 26-28 has many details of this prophecy against Tyre, which would be like Billy Graham announcing that God was going to wipe New York off the map.

"Tyre consisted of two parts, a mainland city and an island a half-mile offshore. The first attack came from the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar who laid siege to Tyre for thirteen years. Finally, his battering rams broke through the walls, and he tore down the city's towers. But the island part of the city wasn't yet destroyed because this prophecy was fulfilled in stages. For 250 years it flourished until Alexander the Great set his sights on Tyre. Even without a navy, he was able to conquer this island city in what some consider his greatest military exploit. He turned the ruined walls and towers of Old Tyre into rubble which he used to build a causeway from the mainland to the island. When he ran out of material, he scraped the soil from the land to finish the land-bridge, leaving only barren rocks where the old city used to be.

"He fulfilled the prophecy, 'They will break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses; your stones and timber and soil they will cast into the midst of the waters.'"

When God fulfills prophecy like this, He proves only *He* can write *HIS*tory in advance! The Bible is trustworthy because God is.

“HOME, JAMES!”

If you missed any of our previous studies, from Genesis to today, they're all available. So we'll skip the orbiting overview of the Bible and cut to this month's focus, the 59th book overall, book #20 of the New Testament, The Letter of James.

As an only child, I've wondered what it's like to have a sibling. Some are best friends; others fight like Jesse Ventura being interviewed.

James was Jesus' half-brother. They had the same Mom (Mary) but not the same Dad because Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. Later she and hubby Joseph the carpenter got it on and, according to the Bible, had at least four more sons -- James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (not the Kissing Traitor) -- and some daughters.

In your wildest dreams can you ever imagine saying, "Billy? Yeah, he's my brother. Okay, he's also God! So what's the big deal!!!"

Growing up with a member of The Trinity, and even seeing Him do miracles, James didn't buy into Jesus 'til he saw Him alive after He'd been crucified (I Cor. 15:7)! That was the proof he needed before putting his personal trust in Christ. James was a tough sell.

After Jesus returned to heaven, James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. But he was not to retire in Sun City. A few years before the Romans demolished Jerusalem in AD 70, when Jews in great numbers were embracing a personal faith in Jesus as their Messiah, the Sanhedrin (Jerusalem's high court) ordered James, "the brother of Jesus who was *called* Christ," to publicly declare that Jesus was *not* the Messiah. When James refused and cried out that Jesus *was*, his enemies shoved him from the top of the temple, a 100 foot drop. Managing to get to his knees to pray for his assailants, James was then beaten and stoned right into heaven.

In this letter, written about 45-48 AD probably the earliest-written NT book, we see James' total reverence for Jesus, a sibling with whom he eaten, slept, played, worked with and, at first, disbelieved!

Per James, if you've really put your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, you'll prove it by the way you live. You recall that Paul taught (Eph. 2:8-9) that we're saved by God's grace through faith, faith that is *given* to us by God. Isn't this a contradiction?

No, James is *not* saying that good deeds can save us; they *demonstrate* that we *have* saving faith. It's beyond *agreeing* with the Bible; it's a real commitment to put our faith into action.

James is writing to Jewish Christians being severely persecuted for their allegiance to Christ. They were scattered east of Palestine in Babylon and Mesopotamia where their ancestors had been hauled into captivity centuries before. James diagnoses their misbelief and misbehavior, writing a powerful prescription for not only *knowing* the

Truth, but *living* it! His letter's goal, like a coach's pep talk, is to get his readers ready for life's second half.

James explains how to become spiritually mature in who we are, what we do, say, feel and possess. One of my spiritual mentors, Ray Steadman, says, "*Properly understood, this is one of the most powerful, inspired, life-changing books of the Bible! It is the road map for the walk of faith.*"

In ch. 1 James answers "**What makes faith grow?**" The two-part answer is as tough to swallow as a horse vitamin. First, he says trials bring about growth, and we should *joyfully* accept them as tools from God to produce good stuff in our lives. (C'mon, Jim, get real!)

Remember, James isn't talking about "trials" like having your cable channels turn to snow -- or an NBA strike -- or the wettest winter since Jurassic Park. James is talking stonings, beatings, jail, ethnic cleansing. Trials teach lessons not offered at City University.

The second element that makes our faith grow is God's Word, the Bible. If the *only* way to get to know the God who loved you and me so much that He sent His only Son to earth to be crucified so that we might be forever forgiven of our sins, if the *only* way to know the great thoughts of this great God is to spend time reading His love letter to us, what are we waiting for! **Let's read ch. 1.**

James shows how something as squishy as faith can become palpable, giving three ways to recognize if someone's faith in Christ is the real deal. First, that person will be prejudice-free. Second, he'll perform acts of mercy -- not to impress God, but out of a heart of gratitude to God for His having shown *him* mercy! Kindness and mercy always ultimately win over a harsh, critical spirit. God-talk with no God-walk is bunk. **Now let's read ch. 2.**

Now James gets into the third way we'll know that a person's walk with Christ isn't bogus -- that person will have a God-tamed tongue. Being truthful is our first line of defense in living God's way. James' writing is said to rival any other Bible author's as he taps his knowledge of Jewish tradition and Greek classics to illustrate that 'though small in size, the tongue is powerful, perverse and polluted. No human, he says, can control it because it speaks what we think! So, only as we're influenced by God can we speak words of wisdom that are pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, merciful, impartial, sincere, resulting in good deeds. **Let's tackle ch. 3.**

Having answered "**What makes faith grow**" by telling us that we become mature in our faith by living through trials and by being steeped in God's Word, that genuine faith walks the talk, and that we're to let God control our speech, James answers "**What happens when faith fails?**" In short, rumbles break out.

We show our faith in God, says James, by *praying* to Him, and that produces love and peace. When our dialog with God is severed, we take out our frustrations on each other, giving rise to fighting, hatred and mistrust. Then Christ's people begin being influenced

by the world, rather than letting God use *them* to influence the world. If enjoying what the world has to offer is more important to us than knowing God, we cannot be His friend, says James. But only God can give us the strength to be faithful.

James has a few tips for Christians who knock each other, reminding us that God alone is qualified to judge us because He knows our hearts. James also addresses those who use God to rubber stamp their personal plans. This'll be a fun chapter, eh? **Let's read #4.**

James wraps up "How to live the Christian life" by offering wise counsel for wealthy believers, for those who've grown impatient, for those who swear, for those who are ill, and for those Christ-followers who've slipped away from God. **Let's go to the video and roll ch. 5.**

Today James has described the godly life. Since he was writing to the choir, he didn't spell out how to *begin* that journey. If you've never taken that first step, today's your day! You can do it right now in the privacy of your own thoughts.

Just speak silently to God, saying something like this:

"Lord Jesus, I'm learning a lot about You ... but I guess I haven't taken the plunge yet to give You my heart and my life.

"Thank You for dying on the cross for me so that God the Father would forgive me of *all* my sins and guarantee me *eternal life* with You. That sure sounds better than the alternative!

"So, yes, I *do* accept You as my Saviour. Right now. Please begin to teach me how to truly follow You."

If that's your heart's desire, God will take that prayer and give you a brand new life from the inside out! Hang on! It'll be quite a ride.

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