

I was not one of the original apostles of Jesus. (James hobbles in and slowly sits down clearly favoring his knees as he does. It's slightly uncomfortable to watch.)

Are you looking at my knees? Most people do. The little kids call me "Camel Knees" (rubs his knees) misshapen and callused just like those of a camel. I think it's a little joke that my older brother, Jesus, is playing on me.¹ I had all those years to talk to him face-to-face and didn't do it. Now I spend hours on my knees in prayer while I talk to Him.

I have other nick-names, too. James the Brother of Jesus, James the Just, and who knows what else. One of the reasons people give me names is to distinguish me from James the Son of Zebedee, one of the original apostles. That James was a very close friend of mine, but he was the first of the apostles to be martyred, by Herod Agrippa I.² People also want to distinguish me from James the Son of Alphaeus, another original apostle.

When Luke decided to write the story of Jesus and the early church, he came to me to verify some information and stories that hadn't been recorded. I gave him some good ones, but you'll have to read Luke's first book to learn the amazing things that my mother, Mary, told him. When she convinced him about the way she got pregnant with Jesus?... mindblowing. It's not often you see a doctor come to believe something like that enough that he puts his reputation on the line by writing about it.³

You might not think Luke and I have much in common. Educated Greek doctor. Uneducated Jewish carpenter. Handsome, not so handsome. Him well-dressed. I

¹ Galatians 1:19

² Acts 12:2

³ Luke 1:26-38

dress like the poor man I am. But Luke and I have something very important in common. Something he has in common with Paul. And, we three have it in common with many other dedicated followers of Jesus. It is this – even though we have the right to call ourselves friends of Jesus, we all call ourselves his slaves. While it is common for Christians of your time to wear a sign of the cross, we would more likely wear awl-punched holes in our ears that signify we love our owner and his church family.⁴

You see an old, bent-over man with camel’s knees...known for being wise and gentle, but it wasn’t always this way. Growing up, I had to work in our family’s carpentry and construction business. Jesus ran the business for most of my early life. When he was about thirty, he went away to preach. So, he turned the business over to me and my brothers so we could continue to provide for our mother and sisters.

Jesus was an excellent carpenter, but too compassionate to be a good businessman. Business was booming in the nearby town of Sepphoris because the Romans had a huge restoration project going on there. All of the brothers could have moved the five miles to live there, and made a very good living. But Jesus thought it was much more important to keep away from the bad influences there, take care of our mother and sisters, and give away what we could to the few people in Nazareth who were poorer than we were.

Plus, Jesus was always talking to God. He had Bible interpretations at the synagogue that drove the old rabbis crazy. Frankly, many of our family and townspeople were almost glad when he decided to move to Capernaum and start preaching. In fact, it wasn’t many months before he came back to Nazareth and offended our synagogue leaders so much that they tried to kill him.⁵

Later, we found out he was going around Galilee acting like a crazy man in his teachings and healings. He was saying things that the Jewish leaders found blasphemous, and we were afraid they would kill him. We went as a family to

⁴ Exodus 21:5-6

⁵ Luke 4:28-29

calm him down and bring him home, he quietly renounced us and sent us away.⁶ Every day we prayed that Yahweh would bring him to his senses, and he would quit bringing embarrassment and danger to our family and community.

After a year or two, my brothers and I went to convince him to go to Jerusalem and reveal himself as the Messiah... at one of the major feasts. We thought he was possessed or crazy, and we hoped the priests there could heal him. Little did we know that Jesus was the only one in Israel who was truth, and there was nothing about him that needed to be healed.

From Luke's first book, you know Jesus' life story, so let's move ahead to his resurrection. After Jesus was resurrected, he showed himself to over five hundred people, and then, he paid me the highest honor...he made a special appearance to me!⁷ ME! It gives me the shivers just to think of it. I was sitting there trying to comprehend all the rumors I was hearing, and then BAM! Jesus is sitting next to me. I couldn't quit crying and apologizing for not believing in him. But he just gave me a hug, instantly I understood all he had been saying and doing his entire life. He had been preparing me for my whole life, and it came together (he snaps) like that.

Nothing had made sense until that point, in a flash I understood everything. Have you ever felt like that? It still shakes me to the core when I think about it.

I went back to Jerusalem, the apostles immediately accepted me as one of their own. I think Jesus told them to give me some slack since I was his little brother. After Stephen was killed by the Jewish leaders, our band began to be persecuted. Peter and the other apostles were singled out because they were so closely identified with Jesus, so they began to leave Jerusalem one-by-one. Pretty soon, I was about the only leader left because none of the Jews had ever heard of me. Sneaky plan by the Holy Spirit, I think.

From there, two things happened that greatly defined who I am today. The first had to do with the Jerusalem church. The early church took off like a bottle

⁶ Luke 8:19

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:7

rocket. We shared everything we owned, and we grew at a tremendous rate. When persecution hit the church, many of the members scattered to other nations, which caused the spread of the Gospel much faster than we could have ever imagined.

As so often happens, those who moved away from Jerusalem were the most economically well-off among us. The poor, widows, orphans, and I were left behind. Our poverty turned deadly when the famine hit. It was during the time of Emperor Claudius, in 45 AD when it hit with a vengeance, and it lasted three years. During this time, I began to see the wisdom in having churches work together and have compassion for other Christians around the world. If it hadn't been for the collections that the church at Antioch took up on our behalf, many of us would have starved to death. That's what it took for me to understand that faith without action is actually no faith at all.⁸

The second defining event... a split began developing among the Christians over whether they should or shouldn't follow the tenants of the Old Testament and the Laws of Moses. It was clear from Peter's interaction with Cornelius and other Gentiles, and from the results of the first trip of Paul and Barnabas that God wanted all non-Jews to become Christians. What wasn't clear was whether Christianity would be a sect of the Jews, or whether the Jews would be a sect of Christianity! It was almost twenty years after the death of Jesus, and the church was at a crossroads that would define its future.

This disagreement came to crisis because of a dinner invitation. Peter was in Antioch celebrating the results of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary trip. The reports were so encouraging that I sent some of our Jerusalem brothers who were former Pharisees to verify the reports. However, when they arrived, they began teaching that non-Jews who became Christians should be circumcised and follow the laws of Moses. Peter was persuaded by their teaching and began to quit eating with the new non-Jewish Christians. Even Barnabas was persuaded to do the same. This, of course, made the impatient Paul go crazy, so he confronted Peter about it.⁹

⁸ James 2:17

⁹ Galatians 2:11-14

Understanding the long-term importance of the matter, the brothers in Antioch wisely decided to send Paul, Barnabas and the former Pharisees back to Jerusalem to have the Jerusalem Church leaders give their opinion.

You have probably never heard a room full of rabbis argue over a minor detail in the law, like how many steps can a man take on the Sabbath before it becomes work. They can talk over something like that for years. You can only imagine how long and detailed the discussion was over this major turning point in the development of the church.

What made the issue so complicated was the interplay between the religious and cultural aspects of the question. This was not a question of good people versus bad people, or right people versus wrong people. It was mostly a question of how people understood the ways culture should interact with religion. Looking back over the last two thousand years, you have the perspective of seeing how this has been an issue nearly everywhere the Gospel has been spread.

Peter started turning the tide when he gave his point of view. We all knew that it was his actions in Antioch that had stirred the pot. But we also knew of his encounter with Cornelius. You should have heard Paul and Barnabas argue their case. For the first time in Paul's life, he led with his heart, not with his mind. And for the first time in his life, he won over the hearts of everyone in the room.

From personal experience, we all knew the impossibility of new Christians following the Jewish laws. Even the Jews couldn't consistently follow the laws. We had another case to consider that many people don't think about. There were many God-fearers who hung around the synagogues and Temple area. These people were non-Jews who loved God and wanted to be obedient to him, but they did not want to convert to Judaism to do it. They proved that Christianity would not grow very much if conversion to Judaism was required of new Christians.

We all yearned for the freedom of Christ and hated the futility of the Law. Plus, both Jesus and the Holy Spirit had revealed to us that the Temple would soon be destroyed, and Judaism and its laws would nearly disappear. So, even if the Spirit

hadn't revealed it so vividly, it was logical that the Jesus-following Jews would soon become a sect, and a quickly diminishing sect, of Christianity.

After hearing from all sides,¹⁰ everyone deferred to my judgment in the case, which is why I attained the nickname, James the Just. I laid down three specifics: Christians should abstain from food that had been offered to idols, abstain from the meat of strangled animals and from blood, and abstain from sexual immorality. The former Pharisees were appeased because they had satisfied their need to have rules, Paul was thrilled because he understood the long-term importance of my ruling.

In reality, this judgment made it easy for Gentiles to come to the Lord, gave them the opportunity to lead righteous lives, and showed everyone that Christians are saved by grace through faith, not by keeping the laws of Moses. It became perfectly clear that salvation and holiness came through the Gospel only, not the Gospel plus the laws of Moses. This provided the foundation for church unity that would be needed for the growth of Christianity for all time.

I was pretty proud of myself for solving such a thorny problem. Then, the Holy Spirit brought me to my calloused knees. He reminded me that Jesus had predicted the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem. He told me it was to occur forty years after Jesus' resurrection... we were half way to that time! Then he asked, "If you are so smart, how should I grow the church for the next twenty years so that the world-wide body of Christ will continue to grow after the church in Jerusalem is destroyed and all the apostles are dead?" I had no answer.

Late in my life, our church members encouraged me to write down some of the lessons I had learned as the leader of the Jerusalem church. I understand that through the centuries other Christians leaders didn't like my little letter. In particular, Martin Luther. He was offended by some of my writings, but he was a shining example of doing much of what I wrote about.

It only takes a few minutes to read my little letter, but let me give you the highlights to speed your reading and understanding. First, God is God, and you

¹⁰ Acts 15, Galatians 2:8-10

are not. Second, don't have any gods before God, including your job, your hobbies or your sex life. Third, if you help the poor and helpless, you please God. Fourth, trust your love and compassion instead of highly theoretical religious conclusions.

That's about it. Thank you for your patience with the rambling words of an old man with funny knees. But you know what? This old man played as a little boy with Jesus, looked into the same mother's eyes as Jesus, and got special forgiveness...from Jesus. Wouldn't you be willing to have camel's knees to have experienced those things?