

Real Change Is Possible

Do You Know Someone Skeptical of Salvation?

I have a friend. He was an alcoholic. His wife nearly left him. He caused someone's death. Depression fueled his drinking and anger boiled within him. What sort of future do you think he would have? Statistics indicate that he would wind up in prison, divorced, ruined by his drinking, a psychological wreck or all of the above. Yet he became sober, his marriage survived infidelity and he became widely respected as a leader in the community. What saved his life? We had a president, who after being shot in an attempted assassination dedicated his life to serving Christ and even as he lay in the hospital bed recovering prayed for the salvation and blessings of God for the one who tried to kill him. How could such a transformation take place in someone so popular and successful? Today we are going to look at a hero who was thoroughly convinced Jesus was not who He claimed and that following Him was practically insane. Our big idea for today is "Never underestimate what Jesus Christ can do in you or others!"

Perhaps you should know this about our hero today. According to Josephus, a Jewish historian during the first century AD who was a strong critic of Christianity, James, the brother of Jesus, and Josephus calls him that, was condemned by the Sanhedrin for his part in the Church to be executed by stoning. That is faith, is it not? He was willing to die a terrible death because of his loyalty to the cause of Christ. Five years earlier, in 57 AD James was well-known as the primary leader in the Christian community of Jerusalem. Paul had gone to Jerusalem to report to the church all that God had done in his missionary work in the non-Jewish parts of Europe and Asia Minor. Luke, the Gospel writer and author of the book of Acts, gave his eyewitness report of how the meeting went. **When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.** (Acts 21: 17-19 NIV) Notice an important detail in this report. James is the only one mentioned by name among the leaders of the great church of Jerusalem. James's status as the chief of the elders in the Christian community is underscored here.

Go back another seven years to 50 AD. The Christian community faced a great dilemma. When the Church was just made up of Jewish believers, getting along was easy. All the Christians were used to following the Old Testament laws including circumcision. It was perfectly normal for everyone to not eat unclean foods, celebrate the Jewish festivals and have their baby boys circumcised. But then a seismic shift occurred. Non Jewish believers in Jesus Christ were entering the church in droves around the world. They were not interested at all in practicing Jewish eating rules, the Jewish feasts were not a part of their culture nor easy to begin to practice and circumcision just seemed cruel to them. The Gentiles wanted to follow Christ and were baptized as believers but there was nothing Jewish about them. Paul, who was the primary reason why so many in the non-Jewish world were now Christian, was called along with others of the missionaries to testify before the leadership of the church in Jerusalem about what was happening with regard to the Gentile Christians not following Jewish practices. After Paul and others gave an account of the wonderful news of how the Holy Spirit brought so many non-Jews to faith in Christ, some prominent Jewish Christians argued that the Gentile Christians needed to follow the Jewish practices including circumcision. Paul and others contended otherwise. **The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.** (Acts 15: 12-14 NIV) At this meeting were the Apostles themselves as well as the most influential members of the Church at Jerusalem. Notice who it was that spoke for the church. It was James, the brother of Jesus.

His response to Peter and Paul as well as the Jewish Christians reflects the place he had in the Church. **"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."** (Acts 15: 19-21 NIV) That is an authoritative declaration, and you cannot miss the place James the brother of Jesus had in the Church by 50 AD. Consider even farther back the profound respect the Apostle Peter had for James, Jesus' brother. Perhaps six or seven years earlier, Peter had been thrown in jail by the Jewish king Herod. The other James in the church, the brother of John had been ordered executed by Herod. Seeing what a popular decision this was among the Jewish religious leaders, he had Peter tossed

in prison, planning to have him killed also. It didn't go as Herod planned though. **The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.** (Acts 12: 6-7 NIV) The angel led Peter to the home of John Mark's mother. After letting the group in the home who were there to actually pray for his release know he was safely out of jail, Peter gave this instruction before he left. **"Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.** (Acts 12: 17b NIV) It was James, the brother of Jesus who stood out in Peter's mind above all the others in the Christian community. Even Paul, the Apostle saw James as the key leader in the Church, at least in Jerusalem. Just three years after the death of Christ, Paul wrote, **Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles — only James, the Lord's brother.** (Galatians 1:18-19 NIV)

To the day of his heroic martyrdom, James was a key, if not the most influential leader in the church at Jerusalem. And as early as three years after the death and resurrection of Christ, James was highly respected in the Christian community; even by Paul himself. Now consider this lesser known fact of James the brother of Jesus. He did not always believe in what Jesus was doing. In fact, he, along with the rest of his family thought Jesus was insane. **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 NIV) It seems James and his family were not sold on Jesus' ministry. When James and Mary and the rest came to pull Jesus away, Jesus would have nothing to do with them. **Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." "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 3:31-35 NIV)

When Jesus came to preach in Nazareth, His hometown, skeptics pointed out the obvious. **When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.** (Mark 6: 2-3 NIV) Jesus' response to this criticism is telling. **Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor."** (Mark 6: 4 NIV) Now what do you make of this? Among his relatives and in his own house a prophet is without honor. That is a serious condemnation of the unbelief of His family members, of whom James was most prominent, other than His mother Mary. What brought about such a dramatic change in James, something so revolutionary that he went from convinced skeptic and certainty as to the mental instability, even insanity of Jesus to the most important leader in the Church of Jerusalem?

Listen to Paul's account of what triggered the transformation. **For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,** (1 Corinthians 15: 3-7 NIV) Did you catch that? After Jesus succumbed to what James and his family feared might happen, execution for preaching, James experienced the shock of his life, something that transformed him forever. Jesus, raised from the dead, personally came to James and revealed His glory to him. James became a born again believer in Jesus Christ because he met Jesus raised from the dead and it completely reinvented who He was and what he did. The same is true of the most logical and informed skeptic you know. From the alcoholic broken soul to the most confident banker, the tipping point for life change and complete salvation is a simple meeting with Jesus. However it happens, through a perusal of a Gospel tract to a conversation with a Christian co-worker, when Jesus Christ meets a person and reveals Himself, no one is immune to the power of eternal life Jesus brings. Our big idea for today is "Never underestimate what Jesus Christ can do in you or others!" Recommit this week to bring up in your conversations the good Jesus has done in you and the power for salvation He offers. No soul is too far away from the transformation Christ provides; no person too lost to gain eternal life when Jesus reveals Himself.