

DG Guide: James 1:1 - The Sceptic Who Became a Servant

Opening Prayer

Father, we come to your Word today wanting more than information — we want encounter. James met the risen Christ and it rearranged him completely. Would you do the same in us? Open our eyes to see Jesus clearly, and give us the courage to follow him honestly, wherever we actually are. Amen.

Starter Question

Think of a time when someone completely changed your mind about something you were previously quite sure about. What happened, and what made you shift?

Key Takeaways from the Sermon

1. Proximity to Jesus is not the same as faith in Jesus.

James grew up in the same house as Jesus. He saw the miracles, heard the teaching. And he still didn't believe. Familiarity with the story of Jesus, even close exposure to it, does not automatically produce trust in him.

2. James was an active sceptic, not a passive one.

John 7:1-5 shows James publicly challenging Jesus to prove himself on a bigger stage. This wasn't quiet uncertainty — it was visible, family-level disbelief. The resurrection that changed him was a genuine reversal, not a mild adjustment.

3. The resurrection is the only thing that explains what happened next.

1 Corinthians 15:7 records that the risen Jesus appeared specifically to James. Before: James doesn't believe. After: James leads the Jerusalem church, chairs the Jerusalem Council, and eventually dies rather than deny it. One event explains everything.

4. James chose the lowest title available to describe himself.

He doesn't introduce himself as 'brother of the Lord', a recognised credential. He calls himself *doulos*: slave, servant. Someone whose life is not their own. That humility didn't come naturally. It came from an encounter.

5. The resurrection doesn't just save you, it reorganises you.

James went from 'show yourself to the world' to 'servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.' The resurrection changed not just what he believed but who he was. That reorganisation is what this letter and this series is about.

Scripture Reading

CityLight Church Read together:

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings." James 1:1

Also read: John 7:1-5 and 1 Corinthians 15:7

Discussion Questions

Understanding the Man

1. Before this sermon, what did you know about James, the brother of Jesus? Did anything surprise you in what you heard?
2. John 7:5 says plainly: "For not even his brothers believed in him." Why do you think proximity to Jesus, growing up with him, seeing the miracles, didn't produce belief? What does that tell us about the nature of faith?
3. Don said James was an active sceptic, not a passive one. What's the difference? Does that distinction matter to you?

The Hinge Event

4. 1 Corinthians 15:7 says the risen Jesus "appeared to James." We don't know the details but we can infer everything from what comes before and after. What do you think that moment might have been like for James? What would it mean to see someone you knew was dead, standing alive in front of you?

5. Don used the illustration: "My brother died... if three days later he had appeared to me — not as a ghost, not as a vision, but recognisably, bodily, eating fish, showing his hands, I would either be insane or completely certain. James chose certainty." Does that logic land for you? Why or why not?

6. James is described as one of the most credible witnesses to the resurrection precisely because he had every reason not to believe it. How does the cost of someone's testimony affect how much weight you give it?

What the Resurrection Does

7. James calls himself *doulos*; slave, servant. Not "follower," not "admirer," not "member." A person whose will is entirely subject to another's. In 2026 Australia, where individual autonomy is deeply valued, what does it actually mean to take that title for yourself? What would you have to give up?

8. Don said: "The resurrection doesn't improve you, it reorganises you entirely." What's the difference between improvement and reorganisation? Which one does your current faith look like?

9. James could have traded on his family connection, "brother of the Lord" was a known credential in the early church. He chose not to. What does it tell us about the resurrection that it produced that kind of humility in that kind of person?

Applying It to Our Lives

10. Don addressed three groups at the end of the sermon: (1) someone who has grown up around Christianity but is still outside it, (2) a long-term Christian who has gotten comfortable, (3) someone

CityLight Church carrying heavy doubt right now. Which resonates most with where you're at? Why?

11. The closing image was James dying at the temple wall, praying "Father, forgive them" - echoing Jesus's last words. A man who once said "show yourself to the world" dying in that posture. What would it mean for the resurrection to have done that kind of work in you?

Personal Reflection

Take a few minutes individually before sharing:

- Where are you honestly with Jesus right now? Not where you think you should be but where you actually are. James in John 7 didn't pretend to believe what he didn't. Where is your John 7 moment?
- Has there been a point in your life that functions like 1 Corinthians 15:7 for you? A moment where the risen Christ became undeniably real; not abstract, but personal? What happened? What did you do with it?
- What word honestly describes your relationship to Jesus this week? Member? Admirer? Attender? Follower? Servant? The gap between that word and *doulos* is the gap this series is addressing. Name it honestly.

Group Commitments... Choose 1–2

1. Honest audit: This week, write down one sentence that honestly describes where you are with Jesus right now; not the "correct" answer, but the true one. Bring it to next week.
2. Read the letter: Read James 1–2 this week. Notice: does this feel like advice from a wise religious teacher, or testimony from someone whose life was reorganised? Does the difference matter to how you read it?
3. Sit with 1 Corinthians 15:3-8: Read the full resurrection appearance list. James is specifically named. Pray: "Lord, I want the kind of certainty that reorganises, not just the kind that agrees." Sit with that prayer.
4. Cost audit: When faith costs you something small this week, an awkward moment, a conversation you'd rather avoid, name it consciously. James died at the temple wall. Calibrate your discomfort accordingly.
5. The *doulos* question: Look up the word *doulos* (slave/servant) and how Paul and James use it as a self-description. Come back next week and share what you found.

Closing Exercise

Go around the group and complete this sentence; one word or phrase each:

"If the resurrection reorganised me the way it reorganised James, the thing that would change most in my life is..."

You don't have to have an answer. "I don't know" is honest. James in John 7 didn't know either.

Closing Prayer

Pray together, focusing on:

CityLight Church • Worship: Thank God that the resurrection is real, and that it produces transformation, not just information.

- **Honesty:** Confess the gap between where we are and *doulos*, the distance between agreeing with Jesus and belonging to him entirely.
- **Gratitude:** Thank Jesus for appearing to James specifically, for pursuing a sceptic with every reason to resist. Thank him that he still pursues people like that.
- **Openness:** Ask for willingness to be reorganised, not improved, but reorganised. Ask for the courage to name honestly where we are.
- **Boldness:** Pray for anyone in your group (or someone you know) in a "John 7 moment"; near Jesus, not yet believing. Ask that the risen Christ would show up for them too.

For Next Week

- **Follow through:** If you chose a group commitment, do it before next week's DG.
- **Memory verse:** "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings." James 1:1. Read it slowly every day this week. By Friday it should mean something different than it did on Sunday.
- **Preparation:** Read James 1:2-12 before next week. Notice: James opens with trials, not with comfort. After everything you now know about who James is, why do you think he starts there?

Leader Notes

- This guide is designed for honesty, not performance. Some people in your group may be in a "John 7 moment" — they know the story but aren't convinced. The Starter Question and Personal Reflection create space for that. Don't rush to the theology questions. Sit with where people actually are.
- The *doulos* question is the most confronting part of the sermon. Don't soften it too much. James didn't say "follower of Jesus" — he said slave. If the group bristles at the language, that's productive. Stay with it.

- Doubt is not the enemy here. Create a culture where honest doubt is welcomed, not corrected. The resurrection is robust enough to handle the questions.
- The closing image (James dying, praying "Father, forgive them") is heavy. If you use the Closing Exercise, give people a moment of silence after. Don't jump straight to announcements. Let it land.
- You don't have to know all the history. If someone asks about Josephus's account of James's death, or the "camel knees" nickname — you can say "worth digging into, but let's stay with the main question today." This is Week 1.

Alternative Discussion Prompts

Or, if you just want a bunch of discussion prompts:

1. James grew up with Jesus and still didn't believe in him. How does that challenge the idea that if people just knew more about Jesus, they'd believe?

CityLight Church 2. What's the difference between believing things about Jesus and actually trusting him? Which does your daily life more closely resemble?

3. If someone could look at the pattern of your life over the last five years, what would they say has "reorganised" you? Is Jesus in that story?

4. James is described by early historians as someone with calluses on his knees from prayer "camel knees." What would it mean for prayer to be so central to your identity that it left marks?

5. The resurrection is, for James, not a theological proposition but a personal encounter. Can you say the same? What's your 1 Corinthians 15:7 moment.. the moment Jesus became real to you, not just believed?

6. Why do you think Paul lists the resurrection appearances the way he does in 1 Corinthians 15 naming individuals, giving specific details? What is he trying to establish?

7. James calls himself doulos - slave - in a culture that regarded slavery as the lowest possible status. What does it say about the resurrection that it produced that kind of voluntary self-description from a man with genuine social credibility?

8. Don said: "Australians who won't believe a doctrine will listen to a biography." Do you think that's true? Does James's story change how you think about sharing your faith?

9. The letter of James is described as "not tips but a portrait, this is what a life looks like when Jesus has had his way with you." What would your portrait look like? What would need to change?

10. James died at the temple wall rather than deny the resurrection. His testimony cost him everything. How does the willingness of someone to die for a claim affect how seriously you take it?