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“Come back, pick up the cross and follow Jesus”

Jesus called James and John “sons of thunder”. James must have been a powerful preacher. When King Herod wanted to please the Jews by executing a church leader, he chose this apostle and had his head cut off.

07/28/2025

What kind of man was he? Probably no different from the average

Christian today. If God had showed James in the beginning that following Jesus would mean watching the Messiah get crucified only to die an equally painful death not many years later, he would have run away. When Jesus was crucified, he did run away. What changed him? What gave him the courage to shed his blood for Jesus? We say it was the Holy Spirit. While that sounds far-fetched to sceptics, I believe it is the true. But it's not the whole story.

St Paul speaks of 500 who saw the Risen Lord. Another 3000 converts were added on the day of Pentecost. To the amazement of Jews who believed in Jesus, thousands of pagans received the Holy Spirit after making an act of faith.

One fact about the early converts intrigues each new generation of Christians. All those men and women

received the same heavenly gift; they did not all persevere to the end.

Judas Iscariot was not the only traitor. St Paul made this clear on several occasions. He once warned a group of bishops: “I know quite well that ... even from your own ranks there will be men coming forward with a travesty of the truth on their lips to induce the disciples to follow them.”

It is difficult to say why some remained faithful and some did not. It must be free will. Even after receiving the gift of faith, each Christian must decide for himself. The first decision—the one I make when believing that Jesus is the Son of God—does not seal my fate forever. I can rebel against God.

Speaking of an apostle, Jesus said: ‘Better if that man had never been born!’ Speaking of Christians also guilty of betrayal, St Peter said,

“Anyone who has escaped the pollution of the world once by coming to know our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, and who then allows himself to be entangled by it a second time and mastered, will end up in a worse state than he began in. It would even have been better for him never to have learnt the way of holiness, than to know it and afterwards desert the holy rule that was entrusted to him.” Does this mean Christ refuses to forgive a Christian who commits a sin? No, it means the sinner must repent.

Like St James, a Christian may be terrified of suffering and flee from the cross. To be truly Christian, like St James, we come back to the Church, pick up our cross and follow Jesus. It's worth it. “What we suffer in this life can never be compared to the glory, as yet unrevealed, which is waiting for us.”

*This article by Fr. Joe Babendreier
first appeared in the Sunday Nation in
July 2010*

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cross-and-follow-jesus/](https://opusdei.org/en-ke/article/come-back-pick-up-the-cross-and-follow-jesus/) (01/10/2026)