

What can we learn from what the Bible says about James the apostle?

Jesus had two disciples named James: James the son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus. Another James, the half-brother of Jesus, was never one of the twelve disciples but was a leader in the early church of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13) and wrote the epistle of James. One of the Twelve, James the son of Alphaeus, is called James the Less (or the Younger) in Mark 15:40, where we also learn that his mother's name was Mary. Scripture does not record much more about James the son of Alphaeus, so we'll focus on the other disciple, James the son of Zebedee, in this article.

When Jesus called James to follow Him, he was in a boat mending fishing nets with his father, Zebedee, and his brother, John. “[Jesus] called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him” (Matthew 4:21-22). From then on, James was in full-time ministry with Jesus.

James was one of Jesus' “inner circle.” James, John, and Peter are frequently mentioned together as the only apostles to witness some of Jesus' miracles: the raising of a young girl from the dead (Mark 5), for example. Jesus took James up a mountain along with Peter and John, where James saw Jesus' transfiguration and watched Him talk with Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:1-9). James, along with John, Peter, and Andrew, privately asked Jesus for clarity after He told the disciples the temple would be destroyed (Mark 13:2-3). Because of their desire to understand Jesus' words better, the four received some prophetic words from their Lord regarding the near future and also the end times (Mark 13:5-37).

James and his brother, John, were given a nickname by Jesus, who called the two

“Boanerges,” which means “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). This name gives us a clue to James’ personality. Both he and his brother were characterized by zeal, passion, and ambition.

James and John asked Jesus to let them sit on either side of Him in His kingdom (Mark 10:37), and Jesus told them that wasn’t a request He could grant. Then He prophesied about their future—James and John would suffer persecution just as He would (Mark 10:39). Jesus handled the brothers’ audacious request graciously, turning it into a lesson in humility for all the disciples (verses 42–45). The other ten disciples weren’t very happy with the brothers because of their brazenness—and probably because they wanted those positions of honor in the kingdom for themselves (verse 41).

Later, James and John showed their zealous, thunderous personalities when Jesus sent messengers before Him into a Samaritan village. The people of the village refused to welcome Jesus, however, because they knew He was journeying to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–53). James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy the village (verse 54). This impetuous, vindictive desire earned Jesus’ rebuke, and He reminded the sons of thunder that His mission was to save lives, not destroy them.

Scripture doesn’t record any specifics about James’ activities following Jesus’ resurrection other than he went fishing with some of the other disciples on the Sea of Galilee, witnessed another miraculous draught of fish (John 21:1–11), and had breakfast on the shore with the resurrected Christ. After the ascension of Christ, James was present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and did his part in fulfilling the Great Commission. Given James’ outspoken nature, he was probably a bold witness for the Lord and led many to faith.

As Jesus had predicted, James experienced persecution soon after the church began. King Herod decided to arrest some believers, and he had James killed (Acts 12:2). James thus became the first apostle to be martyred.

The life of James the apostle shows us that Jesus knows our nature: He identified James as a “son of thunder” right away. Also, Jesus patiently works with us to conform us to His will, just as He did with James. We also learn from the life of James that courage in our service to Christ is a valuable asset in spreading the gospel—although it can make us the target of persecution. At the same time, boldness should not be allowed to descend into brashness. Our zeal must be tempered with grace, and impetuosity must be curtailed by a steady commitment to the will of God.