

Who was James the son of Alphaeus?

James, son of Alphaeus, was one of Jesus' twelve apostles (Matthew 10:2-3) and one of three people named James mentioned in the New Testament. He is distinguished from the other Jameses in the Bible by his father's name. In Bible times, people did not have last names as we do in Western cultures. They were often identified by their fathers and grandfathers. For example, the other James of the twelve apostles is described as "James the son of Zebedee" (Mark 3:17). A third James mentioned in Scripture was the brother of the Lord Jesus (Galatians 1:19), a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; Galatians 2:9), and the author of the book of James.

James, son of Alphaeus, is also called "James the Less" (Mark 15:40). The word less should be understood to mean "little" or "younger." Some Bible versions call him "James the Younger," but the word may also imply smallness of stature or a lesser importance. Other than being listed as a disciple, nothing else is known about James the son of Alphaeus.

Mark 2:14 has an interesting detail that some connect with James son of Alphaeus: when Jesus calls Matthew (Levi) to follow Him, Levi is described as "the son of Alphaeus." Some scholars take this to mean that Matthew and James were brothers. This is unlikely, however, because Scripture elsewhere clearly identifies two sets of brothers who followed Jesus: Peter and Andrew (John 1:40), and James and John (Mark 3:17). No such link is ever drawn between Matthew and James. Other scholars believe that James' father, Alphaeus, is the same man called Clopas, the husband of Mary, in John 19:25. There is no way to be sure one way or the other.

Tradition implies that it was James the Less who may have taken the gospel to Persia

(modern Iran) and was martyred there. But other than that possibility, James the son of Alphaeus is the picture of obscure service.

The lack of information about James the son of Alphaeus is a lesson in itself. This James was just as much an apostle as were Peter and John. He will sit on a throne in Jesus' earthly kingdom (Matthew 19:28) with as much authority and honor as the other apostles. His name will be engraved in a foundation of the walls of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:14). James will not be considered "less" in eternity because he was faithful to his calling on earth.

James the son of Alphaeus can be an encouragement to those called to lives of obscurity. Our callings are just as sure, just as God-honoring, but few will ever know our names on earth. There will be no billboards, Time articles, or headlines praising our efforts. Some toil for decades in remote regions of the world with little to show for it. Others serve quietly in their homes or neighborhoods and then die relatively unnoticed. But God notices. James the son of Alphaeus reminds us that God uses a different set of standards to choose His heroes. He honors faithfulness (Luke 18:8), endurance (Matthew 24:13), obedience (Matthew 7:21), and sacrifice (Galatians 2:20). Our only responsibility is obedience, not the results of that obedience. While some apostles wrote books of the Bible and others were featured regularly in the gospels, it appears that James the son of Alphaeus was quietly faithful to his Lord. For that, he will be equally honored with them for all eternity.