

James

Ambitious Man Who Gave Up All for Christ

“James was miraculously and marvelously transformed from a man who thought only of himself and his family into a dynamic and steadfast Christian who was willing to give his life for the One who gave His life for him.”

There are only a few passages found in the Bible about James the Apostle, almost no explicit details about James’ life and character, and very few words from his lips, yet with the information we are given we find strong hints of his strengths and weaknesses.

“And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. ²²And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.” Matthew 4:21-22

I. Background of James

A. He was from a prominent family in Galilee.

- Firstborn in the family Because James’ name appears first with his brother John in the Scriptures most feel comfortable saying, he was the oldest. The culture at the time of Christ would have placed more privileges and responsibilities on the oldest son. James would have been counted next to the father in honor and eventually would have inherited a large portion of his assets.

James means Jacob. He seems to be second only to Peter within the disciples’ leadership structure. Don’t forget, “the greatest” was a discussion the disciples had many times!

2. Father was Zebedee - mentioned with his son’s names We are given this man’s name eleven times in the New Testament. He never speaks, but he did raise two disciples of Christ! The family had connections within the high priest Caiaphas’s household, which would have placed them higher on the scale than most in Galilee. Because Zebedee’s sons were tagged with their father’s name, it indicates he was a man of importance.
3. Mother was Salome - ministered to Christ We find James’ mother named as one of the women that traveled with Jesus and His followers to “minister” to them. In other words, the ladies helped facilitate Christ and the disciples’ ability to do ministry – cook, purchase food, wash clothes, etc. There is strong evidence Salome was Mary the mother of Jesus’ sister, so James and John were cousins to Christ. Mark 15:40-41; 16:1; John 19:25 She was also mentioned as being at the crucifixion and the tomb. Matt. 27:56 Salome was a devoted follower of Jesus; brave for being at the cross and the tomb; compassionate
4. Family owned a fishing business. Zebedee would have probably owned the fishing business and his sons worked for him. In Luke 5:10, we are told that Peter was a partner

in the fishing business. Again, this places the family at least in the upper-middle class range.

- B. James immediately obeyed Jesus' call. Matthew 4:21-22 This is a wonderful positive aspect of James. He immediately walked away from everything he knew and followed Jesus with his brother. We need to emphasize the level of social and cultural negativity and disrespect it would have meant for them to leave responsibilities and their family and follow a relatively unknown Rabbi unconnected to the religious establishment! This was huge and could have driven a big wedge between the two sons and their parents. But with Salome traveling with them it seems to indicate their parents were supportive. Oh, how we need to be quick in our obedience! Family connections could also be playing a part in parental support. Mary's story of Jesus' birth could have been known to Zebedee and Salome. This is conjecture but also human nature if these family connections were fact.
- C. James became part of Jesus' three specially selected disciples known as the "inner circle". On three different occasions, it is recorded Jesus had only Peter, James, and John accompany Him. It was a great opportunity and honor.
- D. Christ called him and John "the sons of thunder" Mark 3:17 There is not much about thunder that I like. It's loud, scary, can literally shake the ground, does damage randomly, and can kill. Jesus called James, and his brother John, "the sons of thunder." Why? Well, let's look at a few recorded incidences where James, along with his brother John, make a lot of noise, shake things up, and want to kill! Fiery temperament; intense, outspoken, violent
- Luke 9:51-56 – (scripture below) After a Samaritan village didn't allow Jesus to stay in their town, James and John wanted to blow them off the face of the earth! Jesus rebuked them and said, "For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."
 - Matthew 20:20-24 – (scripture below) James, John, and their mother Salome came to Jesus and requested a place of honor when Jesus would set up His kingdom. Jesus explained it was not a place for Him to give but when the other ten disciples heard it "they were moved with indignation" against the two brothers. Definitely shaking things up within the group!
- E. James is never mentioned alone Though James was the oldest, and naturally more prominent within his culture, we never see his name stand alone in the Scriptures. He will always be tagged as "the brother of John." This could be simply to distinguish between him and the other James in the group of disciples, but more likely it is because John, his brother, became more known to the readers of the gospels and Acts.

Before we talk about the negative aspects recorded about James, let's review the positives. 1) He obeyed Christ's call to follow Him and immediately left all. 2) He was one of the three named to the "inner circle" that Christ gave great privilege. 3) James gave his life as a martyr for Christ.

II. Changes to James

“And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,⁵² And sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him.⁵³ And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem. ⁵⁴And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elijah did? ⁵⁵ But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. ⁵⁶ For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And they went to another village.” Luke 9:51-56

A. Personality seems to be one of ambition and aggression. These character traits are all based on pride! Pride desiring a better station in life and the aggression to obtain it disregarding who or what gets in the way. God is not involved in a decision process based on climbing some kind of ladder!

1. Inner-circle incidents that James allowed to encourage these sins. Keep in mind, **Jesus** singled out James with Peter and John to accompany Him to some private incidents. This was a great privilege and an opportunity for each of them to grow in their faith and understanding of Christ's power and person. Unfortunately, instead of these increasing their faith, there seems to be evidence this special singling out caused pride to grow not their faith!
 - Healing of Jairus' daughter Mark 5:22-23; 35-37 This incident is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke we find Peter, James, and John were the only ones to “follow” Jesus into the house of Jairus. There they observed the scoffing at Jesus when He said “the child is not dead, but sleepeth.” With that, Jesus put those unbelievers out, took the little girl's parents and these three disciples, and raised her from the dead. Mark 5:42 says about those who saw it, “And they were astonished with a great astonishment.” What an amazing privilege to watch, and to be a part of this miracle!
 - Mount of Transfiguration Luke 9:28-36 This incident of Christ is again found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We are told Jesus took these three men with Him for a time of prayer “into a mountain.” During Christ's time of prayer, His whole being changed to “white and glistening.” Not only that, but two men, whom we are told were Moses and Elijah appeared and the three of them spoke of Christ's upcoming death in Jerusalem. Wouldn't that have been amazing to observe? But look at Luke 9:32. Only Luke tells us that the three disciples were asleep! They missed at least part of this amazing opportunity because of sleep! Wow! But that wasn't all, God the Father called from heaven and spoke to Peter, James, and John! God spoke to them! (Verse 35) “This is my beloved Son: hear him.” God told them to listen to Jesus! Wow!
 - Garden of Gethsemane Matthew 26:36-43 This is another incident found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where these three disciples again were accompanying Christ during a private prayer time. You would think these men would have learned their lesson and helped each other stay awake and focused. You would think they would have feared missing something amazing. You would think that Jesus' sad and disturbing countenance would have been enough for them to stay alert and to “watch” with Him as Jesus had

requested. But no, they fell asleep again. Even after Jesus woke them up and rebuked them, they didn't see it as important enough to fight sleep for Jesus. Wow!

Twice James, along with Peter and John, was taken with Jesus to pray privately. And twice they fell asleep! Could it have been simply a mental attitude of seeing these two times of private prayer as unimportant because they lacked limelight? It certainly didn't have the excitement of "a raising from the dead!" Instead of being out and about before the masses which built their egos, being with Jesus in private prayer in seclusion was dull and difficult. James, along with the two other men, were selected by Christ to have great privilege for growth in faith and knowledge and they failed miserably! It is very probable this singling out as a special disciple might have added to an already healthy ego. Matter of fact, we see James and John's pride and arrogance in the next two incidents:

2. Cursing of the Samaritans Luke 9:51-56 In Luke 9:28-36 is the incident of the mountain of transfiguration. Later in the same chapter, we read of the Samaritan village that rejected Christ's coming into their village. James and John said to Jesus, "Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elijah did?" It's obvious they were still wowed by the fact they saw the "fire blasting" prophet Elijah, and desired to do the same as Elijah had done to the prophets of Baal. They were putting themselves on the same plain as Elijah. Though they had seen Elijah these two brothers certainly didn't understand God's heart!
3. James & John and their mother asks for prominent positions Matthew 20:20-24; Mark 10:35-41 We can confidently say James came from at least an upper-middle-class family. They had their own business and had friends at high places in Jerusalem. More times than not, those with connections and positions have so because they value and pursue them! And this is exactly what we see. Matthew tells us that James and John along with their mother came to Jesus to ask for prominent positions for the young men in Jesus's upcoming kingdom. They were not inhibited to ask! As a mother, I find myself embarrassed for the brashness and manipulative attitude of Salome, especially if she was related to Jesus in any way! Together they had a "go for it" "first is best" "get it if you can" "beat the others" and "use your influence" attitude! These young men already were in the "inter-circle" now they were going for the two sides of Jesus!

Ambition and aggression are certainly seen in James's life and in all the disciples. They will fight and discuss who was the greatest many times right up to hours before the cross! Jesus teaches them what it means to be a humble leader by washing their dirty feet and saying, "The servant is not greater than his lord, neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him." There is no place for ambition, aggression, and self-seeking pride within the kingdom of God! It is wonderful to see that with the coming of the Holy Spirit James' life and attitude changed.

"Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword." Acts 12:1-2

James changed from ambitious and seeking prominence to the first martyr. Zeal for Christ!

B. After Pentecost the apostles demonstrated boldness and singleness of heart. Scholars place James' death at 44 AD, 10 years after Christ's crucifixion. Here is a brief history to the persecution of early Acts.

1. Growth of Persecution in Jerusalem

Jewish Leaders vs. Apostles Gospel Message

1. Pentecost & Peter's first message – Acts 2
2. Peter's second Message – Acts 3
3. Growth of believers and church – Acts 3-6
4. Stephen's message & martyrdom – Acts 7
5. Saul persecution & conversion – Acts 8-9
6. Peter goes to Gentiles – Acts 10-11
7. James is martyred and Peter imprisoned – Acts 12

2. James is the only apostle whose death is recorded. Acts 12:1-3 Jesus prophesied James' death as recorded in both Matthew and Mark. (Matt. 20:20-23; Mark 10:35-45)

“Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. ²¹And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. ²² But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. ²³And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father. ²⁴And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren.” Matthew 20:20-24

III. Lessons from James' life

A. *“No matter what our family background, Jesus Christ can mold our lives into His image.”* No parent or family situation is perfect. All people including our parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, and uncles are sinners and their sins and consequences from it can affect us.

Examples –

Abuse of many different kinds – emotional, physical, sexual

Addictions and Habits – alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling

Marriage struggles – divorce, infidelity, argumentative

Character Traits - selfishness, irresponsible, laziness, materialism, negativity, gossip, critical, manipulative, overspends

Spiritual Immaturity – lack of interest in Bible study, church attendance, church involvement, critical of leaders and members

These and many more sins can begin to mold a person into a warped normalcy, contrary to the will and Word of God! But for many this is reality! So how do we as believers break the mold? Romans 12:2 tells us, “And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.” So, we renew our minds, we get rid of our old normalcy and replace it with God's normal! This is done by:

1. the power of the Holy Spirit within us John 14:26 “he will teach you all things”

2. knowing God's mind through the Word of God - Learn godly living, read Jesus' words, study the admonitions of the Epistles, look at the Old Testament saints, and see what God blesses and what brings Him grief.
 3. then obedience to it
 4. surrounding ourselves with godly believers to be our examples of right living. They should be found within our churches Look for positive role models within your circle of Christian friends; older believers who have dedicated themselves to love and serve God.
 5. Make pleasing God and walking His ways a daily prayer and ask Him for guidance to break the mold and scars of your past.
- 2 Cor. 5:17-18; Heb. 10:19-25 Know Christ!

- B. God is looking for dedicated servants who are willing to be consistent in the limelight and behind the scenes. As we studied James, it was pretty glaring that when He was with Christ as He prayed in the quiet of a mountainside or in a garden, James was fast asleep. These times with Jesus in prayer didn't seem to hold the interest and were not seen as important as a miracle. Oh, that we might be a consistent follower of Christ; humble, dependable, compassionate, kind, with a heart full of gratitude. Actively doing our best wherever and whenever we can! Whether in the limelight on a church platform, in the bathroom cleaning a toilet, teaching a class, or working in a nursery. All we do for the Lord should be done consistently to the best of our ability! Phil. 3:1-15

James was still a man of passion but now it was under the Holy Spirit's control. It became a wonderful instrument in the hands of God to spread the truth of the Gospel.

“Jesus did not choose spiritually and emotionally mature men to enroll in His training program... He looked for strong personalities that He would mold and shape into His image.”

All italicized quotes are from Gene A. Getz's book
The Apostles, Becoming Unified Through Diversity