



LESSON 4

JAMES

THE APOSTLE OF PASSION

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher . . . grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory."

MARK 10:35, 37

Zeal can be defined as "eagerness and ardent interest in the pursuit of something."¹ People who possess zeal can be inspirational. They are so passionate about what they believe in and so committed to making it happen that others can't help but want to join the cause. Yet zeal has its downside as well. These two sides are illustrated in the life of James.

James is the least familiar to us of the three disciples in Jesus' inner circle. We have story after story about Peter. There are many references to John. But James never appears as a standalone character in the Gospels. He is always paired with

his better-known brother, and there are few details provided in the Bible about his life and character.

From a human perspective, James would have been the logical choice to dominate the group. As a member of Jesus' inner circle, he had the special privilege of witnessing Jesus' power in raising a dead girl (see Mark 5:37), seeing Jesus' glory when He was transfigured (see Matthew 17:1), and going further into the garden of Gethsemane with his Master (see Mark 14:33). Yet in two lists of the disciples, his name comes after Peter's (see Mark 3:16-19; Acts 1:13). While he was likely a strong leader, he was probably second in influence after Peter.

This is strange, because James and John are often referred to as "the sons of Zebedee" (Mark 10:35), which indicates their father was a man of some importance. There is even evidence that his family's reputation stretched from Galilee to the high priest's household in Jerusalem. Given that James was the elder brother from this prominent family, it seems natural that he would be the chief disciple. In truth, this might be one of the reasons why there were disputes about "which of them should be considered the greatest" (Luke 22:24).

What we do know about James is that he had great *zeal*. He was a man of intense fervor and passion. In fact, Jesus gave James and John the nickname Boanerges, which means "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). This defines James's personality in vivid terms. While Andrew was quietly bringing people to Jesus, James was wishing he could call down fire from heaven and destroy whole villages of people (see Luke 9:54)! Yet, through God's grace, James was ultimately transformed into a man of God who became one of the leading apostles.

STARTING OUT

Think about some of the best qualities of a passionate person whom you have known. How have you seen that person use his or her fervor for godly purposes?

EXPLORING THE STORY

Zeal apart from knowledge can be damning (see Romans 10:2). Zeal without wisdom is dangerous. Zeal mixed with insensitivity is often cruel. James sometimes tended to let such misguided zeal get the better of him. However, by the end of his life, his passion—now under the control of the Holy Spirit—would be so instrumental in spreading the truth that it would arouse the wrath of the king of Judea. In this section, you will explore James’s zeal toward *those who were inhospitable*, his zeal for *greatness*, and ultimately his zeal for *the gospel*.

Zeal Toward the Inhospitable

Jehu was a king of Israel in the Old Testament who said, “Come . . . see my zeal for the LORD” (2 Kings 10:16) and then annihilated the house of Ahab and swept away Baal worship from the land. Jehu’s passion was out of control, and his zeal for the Lord was tainted with worldly ambition and bloodthirsty cruelty. The Bible sums up the rest of his life with this somber statement: “Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the LORD God of Israel with all his heart; for he did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam, who had made Israel sin” (verse 31).

James’s zeal was mixed with similar ambition and bloodthirsty tendencies—though in milder doses—and he may have been headed down a similar road when Jesus met him. Luke gives us our best glimpse as to why this might be the case. Jesus was headed to Jerusalem for the Passover, which He knew would culminate in His death, burial, and resurrection. In that day, Jews had no dealings with Samaritans (see John 4:9) and even deemed the entire region to be unclean. However, Jesus chose the direct route to Jerusalem through Samaria.

Jesus sent messengers to the villages ahead to arrange accommodations for Him and the sizable party that was traveling with Him. However, the Samaritans in the first village refused to receive Jesus (see Luke 9:51–53). The messengers were, in fact, refused *all* accommodations. This was certainly due to the fact that the Samaritans had a long-standing hatred of the Jews—and the Jews a long-standing hatred of them.

James and John were outraged at the rebuff. They turned to Jesus and said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?” (verse 54). The reference to Elijah is significant. Centuries before, in this same region, Elijah had called down fire from heaven to destroy the soldiers that King Ahaziah, the son of Ahab, had sent against him

THE SAMARITANS

These people were descendants of Jewish mixed marriages from the days of captivity. They had devised their own worship, a hybrid of Judaism and paganism, with a temple of their own on Mount Gerizim. They were considered unclean by the Jews and were so hated that most Jewish travelers from Galilee to Judah took the longer route east of the Jordan River to avoid traveling through Samaria.²

(see 2 Kings 1:9-12). James and John knew this Old Testament story. When they suggested calling down fire from heaven as a fitting response to the Samaritans' inhospitality, they were probably thinking they stood on solid precedent.

But Jesus set a new precedent for them to follow. He taught James and his brother that *loving-kindness* and *mercy* were virtues to be cultivated as much as (and sometimes more than) righteous indignation and fiery zeal. He said, "The Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them" (Luke 9:56), and then went to another village. The detour was a little inconvenient perhaps—but far better than what James and John were proposing!

A few years after this, Philip the deacon (not the apostle) preached in Samaria, and many people came to faith in Jesus (see Acts 8:5-8, 12-13). Undoubtedly, many of the people who were saved at this time were some of the same people whom Jesus spared when James asked to incinerate their village. We can be certain that even James himself rejoiced greatly in the salvation of so many individuals who once had dishonored Christ so flagrantly.

- Read the full story of Jehu's zeal in getting rid of Baal worship in 2 Kings 10:18-31. How would you describe his actions? How does the conclusion of this story reveal that Jehu was not truly passionate in following after God?

- Read Nehemiah 13:15-22. Nehemiah was one of many leaders in the Old Testament who was passionate about following after God. What actions did Nehemiah take in this passage? Why do you think this kind of zeal was approved by the Lord?

- Read John 12:46-47. A time is coming when Jesus will judge the world, but how did He describe His mission on earth to His followers? What impact do you think these words might have had on a zealous person like James?

- What do you learn about the dangers of zeal based on James's attitude toward the Samaritans? How has this kind of zeal caused problems in your life?

Zeal for Greatness

As Jesus was traveling the road to Jerusalem to celebrate His final Passover, He took His disciples aside and said, "The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will

rise again” (Matthew 20:18–19). Jesus was about to lay down His life as a sacrifice for humanity’s sin—the ultimate act of humility and mercy.

Immediately after this, the mother of James and John approached Jesus and made this astonishing and audacious request: “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom” (verse 21). Clearly, James and John had enlisted their mother’s intercession in this matter. And, clearly, Jesus’ message of humility and servanthood was not hitting the mark in their lives. The story reveals that James was fervent, passionate, and insensitive—but also ambitious and overconfident.

Where did James and his brother get the idea to make such a request? Most likely, the plan was hatched when they heard Jesus say, “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28). James and John were already in Jesus’ intimate circle of three. So why *not* ask for this honor?

Jesus’ reply subtly reminded them that suffering is the prelude to glory: “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Matthew 20:22). James and his brother—ever confident—answered, “We are able” (verse 22). So Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink 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 is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father” (verse 23).



SALOME

By comparing Matthew 27:56 with Mark 16:1, we discover that the mother of James and John was named Salome. She was one of the “women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him” (Matthew 27:55)—meaning that these women supplied financial support and probably helped prepare meals (see Luke 8:1–3). Because of the family’s affluence, Salome would have been able to join her sons for extended periods of time, traveling with the company that followed Jesus everywhere and helping meet logistical, practical, and financial needs.³



Jesus had just explained to them that He was about to be crucified. He was now saying they would “drink the cup” He was about to drink and “be baptized” with the baptism He was about to receive. They did not understand in that moment what was stirring in the cup He was asking them to drink. They clearly did not understand what kind of baptism He meant.

James wanted power; Jesus gave him servanthood. He wanted a crown of glory; Jesus gave him a cup of suffering. He wanted a place of prominence; Jesus gave him a martyr’s grave. James would become the first of the twelve disciples to be killed for his faith.

- Read Matthew 19:28-30. What promise did Jesus give to His disciples? What reminder did He give at the end of this passage about who is truly considered great in God’s kingdom?

- Read Matthew 20:24-28. How did the other disciples react to the ambition of James and John? What reminder did Jesus again give to them all about greatness in God’s kingdom?

- Read Luke 22:24-27. What was the nature of the disciples’ dispute? What did Jesus say here about the connection between service and greatness?

- Why do you think Jesus had to remind James and the other disciples so often about the importance of humility and service? When have you needed this reminder from Christ in response to your own ambitions?

Zeal for the Gospel

There is one place in the Bible where James appears apart from his brother. As Luke records: "Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also" (Acts 12:1-3).

When Jesus was born, King Herod the Great issued a command to have "all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts" put to death (Matthew 2:16). Years later, his son, Herod Antipas, had John the Baptist killed (see Matthew 14:1-12) and Jesus put on trial (see Luke 23:6-12). Now, his nephew and successor, Herod Agrippa I, ordered the execution of James "with the sword," which means he was beheaded.

We don't know why this Herod was hostile to the church. Of course, his uncle had participated in the plot to kill Jesus, so the growth of the church would have been an embarrassment to his dynasty (see Acts 4:27). Persecutions led by the Jewish religious leaders had broken out against followers of Jesus (see 8:1), so Herod likely wanted to use the tensions this generated between the two groups to his political advantage. Herod first harassed members of the church, and then murdered James, one of Jesus' own disciples. When Herod saw how this pleased the Jewish leaders, he decided to target Peter as well.

It is significant that James was the first of the twelve disciples to be killed—the only apostle whose death is actually recorded in the New Testament. Clearly,

HEROD AGRIPPA I

Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, reigned from AD 37 to 44. History reports that he ran up numerous debts in Rome and fled to Palestine. Imprisoned by Emperor Tiberius after some careless comments, he eventually was released following Tiberius's death and was made ruler of northern Palestine, to which Judea and Samaria were added in AD 41. As a hedge against his shaky relationship with Rome, he curried favor with the Jews by persecuting Christians.⁴

James was still a man of passion! This Son of Thunder had now been mentored by Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and shaped by those means into a man whose zeal and ambition were useful instruments in the hands of God for spreading His kingdom. James had evidently learned to use those qualities for God's service rather than for his own self-promotion. His zeal for the gospel had become so great that when Herod decided it was time to stop the church, the disciple James was the first man whom he targeted to die a martyr's death.

This is bolstered by an account of James's execution from Clement of Alexandria as recorded by Eusebius: "The one who led James to the judgment-seat, when he saw him bearing his testimony, was moved, and confessed that he was himself also a Christian. They were both therefore . . . led away together; and on the way he begged James to forgive him. And [James], after considering a little, said, 'Peace be with thee,' and kissed him. And thus they were both beheaded at the same time."⁵ James had learned to be more like Andrew, bringing people to Jesus instead of itching to execute divine judgment against them.

There is nothing inherently wrong with zeal. When Jesus made a whip and cleansed the temple, His disciples remembered that it had been written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up" (John 2:17; see also Psalm 69:9). James, of all people, knew what it was to be "eaten up" with zeal for God. Much of what James saw Jesus do for the sake of righteousness likely stoked his zeal. James died in the place where he had always hoped to be (and where Jesus had trained him to be)—right on the front lines as the gospel advanced and the church grew.

- Read 1 Corinthians 9:16-18. How does Paul describe his zeal for the gospel? What does he consider to be his "reward" in preaching it?

- Read Philippians 1:12-14. Paul, like James, was imprisoned for proclaiming the gospel. What purpose did Paul see in the fact that he was in chains?

- Read Titus 2:11-14. What are some of the things followers of Jesus are to zealously pursue? Why are we commanded to be zealous for good works?

- Can you say that you are *zealous* in sharing the gospel with the lost? What do you learn from James's example about the sacrifice and rewards that result from this kind of zeal?

CONSIDERING YOUR STORY

Read Galatians 5:22-26. Somewhere along the line, James learned to bridle his tongue, redirect his zeal, eliminate his thirst for revenge, and lose his selfish ambition. As a result of this, the Lord was able to use him to do a mighty work in the early church.

- In which areas have you seen the Lord humble you or temper your passions? What was an important lesson that God taught you about your zeal?

- How has God's long-suffering with you directly impacted your patience and mercy toward others? How has walking in the Spirit helped you to keep from being self-centered?

- As you consider the life and transformation of James, which two or three fruit of the Spirit in your own life most need the Lord's pruning right now? Circle these below.

Love
Long-suffering
Faithfulness

Joy
Kindness
Gentleness

Peace
Goodness
Self-control

