

ONE OF THE 'SONS
OF THUNDER' HIS
LIFE WAS CUT
TRAGICALLY SHORT

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WHO IS James Zebedee?

Key Quote By Jesus	"You will indeed drink from my bitter cup." Jesus to James and John, Matthew 20:23
Key Characteristics	• Dynamic. • Competitive. • Aggressive. • Greedy. • Manipulative.
His Names	Means "supplanter" • AKA: Jesus nicknamed him and his brother John, "The Sons of Thunder" (Boanerges)
Family	Son of Zebedee and Salome, brother to John
His Profession	Fisherman, Fishing partners with Simon Peter and Andrew
His Home	From Galilee (probably Capernaum.)
Did You Know	This is NOT James, the brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55) and NOT James, the son of Alphaeus and NOT the James who wrote the book of James in the Bible (that was thought to be Jesus' brother).
Specifically Mentioned In The Bible (Key incidents only)	• The call: Matthew 4, Mark 1, Luke 5 • Listed: Matthew 10, Mark 3, Luke 6 • Transfiguration: Matthew 17, Mark 9, Luke 9 • Opposition by the Samaritans: Luke 9:51 • The Favor: Matthew 20:20, Mark 10:35 • Gethsemane: Matthew 26, Mark 14 • Mom: Matthew 20, Matthew 27 • Jairus' Daughter: Mark 5, Luke 8 • At the Mount of Olives: Mark 13 • With the group: Acts 1 • Death: Acts 12
Actual Quotes (only key ones mentioned)	• "Tell us, when will all this happen? What sign will show us that these things are about to be fulfilled?" (Mark 13:4) • "Oh yes, we are able!" (Matthew 20:22) • "Teacher, we want you to do us a favor." (Mark 10:35) • "When you sit on your glorious throne, we want to sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and the other on your left." (Mark 10:37) • "Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?" (Luke

	9:54)
Best Known For	• Being part of the “privileged” inner circle of the apostles: Jariu’s daughter (Mark 5:21-43, The transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13), in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37) • The request of a favor of Jesus – Mark 10:35

James was part of another very close brother/apostle team and, like Simon Peter and Andrew was also part of a family fishing business on the Sea of Galilee. In fact, James and his brother John (along with their father Zebedee) were partners with Simon Peter and Andrew.

James was a member in the “privileged three” - those apostles (Simon Peter and James’ brother John were the others) who were the only ones to witness the raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead, Jesus’ transfiguration, and Jesus’ final prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Like Andrew, he is never mentioned without the company of his brother, John.

Jesus nicknamed the two Zebedee boys, “The Sons of Thunder,” a distinction Jesus made with none of the other apostles leading many to postulate on the cause. Was it a fond label given in jest or was it a stinging reminder of past indiscretions? Maybe it was both. No one really knows for sure. Of course, it *was* James and John who wanted to call down fire from heaven to burn up an unwelcoming Samaritan village. (Hey, Elijah had done it three times. Why shouldn’t they? I Kings 18:38, 2 Kings 1:1-17) Rebuked by Jesus for the suggestions, it’s quite easy to imagine Jesus’ nickname being born from that experience.

Jesus’ transfiguration must have had an incredible impact on Simon Peter, James, and John. (The Samaritan village incident was immediately after.) What a terrifying sight it must have been to Jesus’ appearance literally transformed before their eyes, to witness Jesus in conversation with the prophet Elijah and the great Moses, and then to hear a voice from a cloud say, “This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him.” (Mark 9:2-13) Perhaps most difficult of all was Jesus’ firm admonition to the three to not to tell anyone until he had “risen from the dead” – a statement that thoroughly puzzled the men.

Jesus of Nazareth seemed to reveal things to all his followers (including his apostles) in a gradual, piece by piece manner. Witnessing the transfiguration would have been an overwhelming revelation that the three would have discussed endlessly – especially between the two brothers. Whatever they had seen, whoever this Jesus of Nazareth was, and whenever all these things were going to occur the brothers would have certainly realized that they were at the top of the pile of “those in the know” (even if they didn’t understand half of what they’d seen and heard). With each passing day and with each consecutive miracle, the apostles’ opinions of themselves would have grown and grown.

Even prior to the Transfiguration, there were accounts that the disciples had begun to argue among themselves as to which one of them was the greatest. (Luke 6:46) John Zebedee, James’ brother, exhibits an almost proprietary attitude toward the ability to perform miracles and cast out demons, actually reprimanding someone else who was performing similar abilities in Jesus name but not part of “The Twelve.” (Luke 9:49) Surely the specially chosen three held a secret hope that they were *the* most special! Which lead to another shocking instance between Jesus and the Zebedee brothers.

“Teacher, we want you to do us a favor,” Mark records them asking (10:35). “When you sit on your glorious throne, we want to sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and the other on your left.” The Sons of Thunder asked this favor of Jesus, quietly – secretly - when the other disciples were otherwise occupied (and the other apostles were indignant when they eventually

found out). And although Mark records them asking this request themselves, Matthew records them ... having their mom ask it for them.

Regardless of who did the actual asking, in both accounts Jesus addresses both James and John directly recognizing the initiators of the request. “You don’t know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink?”

James and John had seen miraculous things in their capacity as first Jesus’ followers and then later as Jesus’ privileged apostles. Their belief in whom and what Jesus of Nazareth was was unshakable. True comprehension of Jesus’ mission, however, was an entirely different matter. At the time of this requested favor the brothers only understood the very basic elements of Jesus’ task on earth: to reclaim his rightful place as Messiah and King. The rejection by the people and the antagonism of the leading religious authorities, up until this point, had been stunningly thwarted by Jesus through both clever words and miraculous deeds. Hadn’t they witnessed resurrections, transfigurations, healings, and the calming of the wind and the waves? Surely there was nothing to stand in their way; nothing to fear.

**A wise apostle
surrenders the
direction of his
future to the
One who
knows best.**

James and his brother were right in their understanding of who Jesus was and what he was capable of. James and his brother were completely ignorant, however, as to what Jesus’ goal was. We can only begin to image what both James and John felt over the course of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion. His prophetic words, “You will indeed drink from my bitter cup and be baptized with my baptism of suffering ...” (Mark 10:38-39) would certainly have haunted them.

James and John never lacked for passion or enthusiasm over the course of their involvement with Jesus of Nazareth’s ministry. Quite the contrary, their zeal at times needed significant restraint. It would seem that Jesus recognized their tremendous value as apostles who were unafraid to act and undeterred by rejection mitigating those attributes lacking in patience and understanding. Given the volatile mood that existed within Palestine after Jesus of Nazareth’s death – and resurrection – it would seem that James and John were exactly what were needed to continue to lead this ministry forward.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you think that John liked or disliked his nickname of “Son of Thunder”? Why?ⁱ
2. What positive qualities did Jesus see in James? What negative ones did Jesus have to work on?
3. James was the first apostle to be martyred (and the only apostle death recorded in the Bible – Acts 12:2). How do you think his death impacted his brother John?

ⁱ Mark 3:17