

“The Twelve Disciples”

James: The Son of Thunder

(Luke 9:51-56, Matt 20:20-24, Acts 12:1-2)

It would seem that Peter was not the only impulsive disciple. James was a man of passion and intensity, as is proven by the name given to James and John by Jesus – *Boanerges* – which means “*sons of thunder.*” But unlike Peter who’s name was to be a reminder of what Jesus knew he could become, “*Boanerges*” seems to have been bestowed on the sons of Zebedee to scold them when they allowed their fiery temperaments to get out of hand.

We know very little about the apostle James from Scripture, other than along with his brother John and Peter, he was a part of the intimate inner circle of disciples that was privileged to be with Jesus on several crucial occasions, such as, the raising of Jairus’ daughter, on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the garden of Gethsemane. James almost never appears as a stand alone character, he is always paired with his younger, but better known brother, John. James and John were the “*sons of Zebedee*” (Matt 20:20), a family that was prominent enough for John to be “*known to the High Priest*” and that is how John was able to get Peter admitted to the High Priest’ courtyard on the night of arrest of Jesus (John 18:15-16).

Perhaps it is because of his evident zealousness that James was singled out by Herod Agrippa to be the first apostle to die for his beliefs. We want to examine two prominent characteristics that illustrate why Jesus referred to James as a “son of thunder.”

First, *He was a man of Untempered Zeal.* You remember that in our first study we saw Andrew as he quietly brought individuals to Jesus, but James wanted to call down fire from Heaven to destroy a whole village of people. The first incident that we want to examine is where James wanted to call down

Fire From Heaven – (Luke 9:51-56) “Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem,(52) and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. (53) But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. (54) And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?"(55) But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. (56)"For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them." And they went to another village.”

Jesus is headed to Jerusalem for the final Passover, which would end with his death, burial and resurrection. Jesus has chosen to pass through Samaria, which although the most direct route was not the route usually chosen by a good Jew. Most Jews traveling between Galilee and Jerusalem, deliberately took a the longer route through the desert of Perea in order to not have travel through the hated Samaria.

The Samaritans were a mixed race, of Israelites who had married with pagans during the Assyrian captivity. These people still claimed to worship Jehovah but they wanted to do it in their own way and in their own place (Mt. Gerizim). What had developed was a hatred of the Jews for the Samaritans, and of the Samaritans of the Jews.

Because it is obvious that Jesus is headed for Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and the Samaritans believed that such feast and ceremonies should be observed on Mt Gerizim, they refused the messengers of Jesus any accommodations. The Samaritans not only hated the Jews they hated the worship that took place in Jerusalem. Jesus represented everything Jewish that they despised. The problem was not that there were no accommodations available; it was that the Samaritans were being deliberately inhospitable. They were treating Jesus, the Son of God with deliberate contempt and James was hot about it!! James and John, the sons of Thunder, were instantly filled with passionate outrage. They had an instant remedy for this situation. They said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?"(v. 54).

The mention of Elijah is significant because in Elijah's day Samaria was a hot bed of pagan Baal-worship (1 Kings 16:32). James and John probably had one incident in particular in mind. During the reign of Ahaziah, the son and successor of Ahab, fell and was seriously injured (2 Kings 1:2). The injuries were apparently life-threatening and the king wanted to know whether he would recover, so he dispatched messengers to inquire of the pagan soothsayers (the Physic Friends Network) of the Day.

Elijah is sent by the Lord to intercept the messengers (2 Kings 1:2b) to ask why the king was consulting with these frauds. And sent him a message that said, "Here's a message from the GOD you've tried to bypass: "You're not going to get out of that bed you're in--you're as good as dead already." [2 Kings 2:3-4 - The Message] The king did not take kindly to this message and sent 50 soldiers to arrest him and bring him back to the king. Elijah brought down fire from heaven on the men and they were totally consumed (2 Kings 1:10).

But the king was both foolish and stubborn, he sent an additional fifty soldiers to arrest Elijah and bring him in. These men were also destroyed by fire (vv. 11-12). Incredible as it seems, Ahaziah, sent a third group of men. But the captain of this group was a wise man and he pleads for he and his men to be spared. So this time Elijah personally went to the king and delivered his message of doom (vv. 15-17).

So when James and John suggested that fire from heaven as a fitting response to the inhospitality of these Samaritans they no doubt thought that they were on firm historical ground. But they had not considered two important facts.

In the first place their motives were wrong. Notice again what they said in verse fifty-four, "Lord, do You want *us* to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" They of course did not have the power to call down fire from heaven, they are asking that Jesus give them the power to do this.

Secondly, Jesus had a mission that was very different from Elijah's. Jesus expresses this mission in many different places.

Luke 19:10

"for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Matthew 20:28

"just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

John 3:17

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

John 12:46-47

"I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. (47) And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world."

James would come to learn that compassion and mercy are virtues to be cultivated as much and sometimes more so, than righteous indignation and fiery zeal. For zeal unbalanced by knowledge can be dangerous and zeal not tempered by compassion can be cruel.

He not only was a man of untempered zeal but ...

Secondly, *He was a man of unrestrained ambition*. The second characteristic of James as a "son of thunder" is recorded in (Matthew 20:20-24). "Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. (21) And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." (22) But Jesus answered and said, "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?" They said to Him, "We are able." (23) So He 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." (24) And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers."

Although this account records that it is the mother of James and John who made the request of Jesus, comparison with Mark's account (Mark 10:35-36), make it clear that it started in the hearts of John and James.

James wanted a crown of glory; he received a cup of suffering. He wanted power and recognition, he was given a place of service. He wanted a place of prominence; he became the first apostle to die for his faith.

James is the only apostle whose death is actually recorded in Scripture. The end of James life from an earthly perspective is recorded in Acts 12:1-3. "Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. (2) Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. (3) And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread."

James was still a man of passion but a man who's passion had been tempered by control of the Holy Spirit. One of the early church fathers, Clement says "that one who lead James to the judgment-seat, when he saw him bearing his testimony, was moved and confessed that he himself also a Christian. They were both, therefore, he says, 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 beheaded at the same time." In the end James learned to be more like Andrew, bringing people to Christ instead of calling down fire on their heads.