

# JESUS' THREE "MIGHTY MEN"

The Apostle James



If you were asked to name the apostles of the Lord Jesus, who would be the first ones to come to your mind? Probably the Apostle Paul would come first. He is pretty much the main character in one of the most exciting books in the Bible, the Book of Acts!

Or, perhaps you would think of Peter, the spokesman for the twelve disciples. He seemed to be the first to do everything: the first to speak when

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Jesus asked a question, the first (in fact, the only one!) to jump out of the boat and walk on water when his Lord told him to, the first to grab a sword and whack away at Jesus' enemies, even when this was exactly the wrong thing to do. Or, if not Paul or Peter, it would probably have to be John, the "disciple whom Jesus loved," the young man who wrote more pages of the New Testament than even Paul, and who lived to be an old man in his Lord's service, dying in exile after receiving a glorious vision of God's ultimate purposes for His people.

Well, you're in good company. If you had asked anyone in Israel this question while Jesus walked



the earth, and for a few years after His Resurrection, do you know the first three names they would have said? “Peter, of course, and then James, and, oh yes, his brother John.”

In the Old Testament, King David had his “mighty men” who followed him, and out of all these mighty men he had three who were so special they were called *The First Three* (1 Chronicles 11:11-18). That is what Peter, James and John were to the Lord Jesus. Whenever Jesus had something out of the ordinary that he was going to do, whether it was raising the dead to life, or talking to Moses and Elijah, or praying to the Father just before the most momentous act in



the history of the world, He always took with Him these three men who were closest to Him.

Do you remember how they first came to follow Jesus? They had met Him before—Peter’s brother, Andrew, who had been a disciple of John the Baptist, had taken Peter to meet the Lord early in His ministry, and since James and John were partners with them in a fishing business, no doubt they came along. But they did not seriously begin to follow Him until one day when Jesus used one of their boats as an informal pulpit. Peter and Andrew, and James and John with their father Zebedee had been trying to catch fish all night without success, and were washing out their empty nets when the Lord Jesus came by. He was being followed by a crowd of people wanting to hear Him teach, so He got into Peter’s boat and asked him to cast out a little way onto the lake, and then taught the people from there. This way, He could easily be seen and heard without the people crowding all around Him, and they could stand or sit on the shore and just listen. When he had finished teaching, He told Peter to “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (Luke 5:4-6 NKJV). Peter didn’t think this was a very good idea—and he was careful to let the Lord know it! He said, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” However, when he obeyed, so many fish filled the net that it began to break, and

he had to yell for James and John to come quickly in the other boat to help. When they got there, they filled both boats with so many fish that they began to sink under the weight! They were still wondering and exclaiming about where all these fish had come from – when the Lord said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” They didn’t hesitate. The Bible says that they brought their boats to the shore, and immediately left their nets (and that enormous catch of fish) with the others, and “forsook all and followed Him” (Luke 5:1-11 NKJV).

These men were the first ones the Lord Jesus chose to be His disciples, and when the twelve apostles are listed, they are always mentioned first. You may remember that Peter’s name was actually Simon, but that Jesus gave him the nickname of “Cephas”—meaning a stone, or a rock (Peter is the Greek form of this word). He called him this, not because Simon was built like a boulder, or because he was particularly stable when the Lord first chose him, but because the Lord meant to transform his character into someone who would be a source of rock-like strength to the young and struggling church. James and John, however, apparently got their nicknames not because of who they would be one day, but because of how they were then: Jesus called them “Boanerges” which means “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). What do you think of when you think of thunder? Is it a polite and

timid noise, like someone knocking on a door asking to come in? No, it's loud and aggressive, and immediately catches your attention. If it's close enough, it even makes you jump; you probably want to look for the nearest shelter, because you know dangerous lightning might not be far behind! Apparently, this is what those two young fishermen were like, bold and with a kind of take-no-prisoners attitude.

For three years, Peter and James and John were Jesus's closest companions. He took them to places where none of the other disciples were permitted to go. When Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, came and begged Jesus to heal his little daughter, "He permitted no one to follow Him except Peter, James, and John the brother of James" (Mark 5:37 NKJV). And when they arrived at the house and found the little girl already dead, Jesus ran everyone out of the room except her parents and His three disciples, who were allowed to stay and witness His power over death. "Then he took the child by the hand, and said to her, 'Talitha, Cumi,' which is translated, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise.' Immediately the girl arose and walked, for she was twelve years of age. And they were overcome with great amazement. But he commanded them strictly that no one should know it, and said that something should be given her to eat" (Mark 5:37-43 NKJV).

Later in His ministry He chose them to be the ones who would not "taste death till they see the kingdom

of God present with power” (Mark 9:1 NKJV). He took them “up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them. His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them” (Mark 9:2-3 NKJV). This was but the slightest glimpse of His true glory, which he had concealed by taking on our humanity to save us. The three friends were still blinking in astonishment at the sight when they realized that those two strange men he was talking to were Moses and Elijah! Peter was so overcome that he thought the best thing to do would be for them to set up sturdy shelters, so they could all stay up there longer! But then something even more astounding happened, for suddenly they found themselves overshadowed by a bright cloud, and “a voice came out of the cloud saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him.’” The three disciples were terrified, and fell on their faces, too afraid even to look up until Jesus “came and touched them and said, ‘Arise, and do not be afraid.’ When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only” (Matthew 17:5-8 NKJV).

As he led them back down the mountain, he commanded “that they should tell no one the things they had seen till the Son of Man had risen from the dead” (Mark 9:9 NKJV). They didn’t understand what he meant about “rising from the dead”, and apparently

didn't dare ask Him at the time. However, they did pluck up enough courage to ask Him why the scribes had always taught that Elijah must come before the Messiah. Clearly, Jesus was the Messiah, and yet they had just now seen Elijah for the first time. Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist (Matthew 17: 11-13 NKJV).

Just as they had promised, the three didn't say a word about what they had seen up on that mountain to the other disciples, but you can bet they didn't forget it for a minute. They'd seen Moses, the great law-giver who had talked to God face to face on Mt. Sinai, and Elijah, who had confronted wicked kings and queens and called down fire from heaven to humiliate the false priests of Baal. Not only that, but they'd seen their Master, their kind and patient Rabbi, shining like the sun, and being treated by these holy men with reverence! Surely, Israel's long-awaited Messiah was here and about to reveal His power to everyone, and take vengeance on all of God's enemies! What an exciting time to live in—and these three fishermen, James and John, sons of Zebedee, and their good friend Peter, were privileged to be right in



the midst of God's great kingdom work, and among the closest companions to the Messiah Himself!

Now, these three did not necessarily seem like "mighty men." But God was training and preparing them each to stand for Him in the days to come. These days with Jesus while He was on earth strengthened them to face any and every challenge to their faith, and to stand bold and firm for the truth. The history of the church after what is recorded in Acts tells us that each of these men died a courageous death. James was the first to die while risking his life in spreading the gospel (Acts 12:2). Peter is said to have been crucified upside down by the Romans, because he didn't feel worthy to be crucified in the same way as Jesus. And John, though he lived long, suffered banishment and exile on Patmos "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9 *ESV*). Because he lived long, he was able to encourage and strengthen a new generation of disciples. So, we see that the line of bold witnesses for the Savior can be traced back to these mighty men and the other disciples from Jesus' time on earth. They set the pattern of holding fast to God's Word, even in the face of severe opposition and the threat of personal harm or even death. As those who saw Jesus in His glory, and had close fellowship with Him, they lived and preached in such a way that people were amazed. Acts tells us: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John ... they were

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astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13 ESV). And through the centuries that followed, the saints of God have continued to bravely face those who attack and persecute them. If you faithfully walk with Jesus, however weak you may feel yourself, or seem to others, you too will be made brave and bold when persecutions come. The Lord God will always be present with you when the enemies roar, and He will always be faithful to strengthen you to face the lions!