



"Zeal is like a fire: in the chimney it is one of the best servants, but out of the chimney it is one of the worst masters."
—Thomas Brooks

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Sons of Thunder (Part One)

In [Mark 3:16-19](#), [Jesus](#) calls the disciples that were to follow Him throughout His time on earth. Verses 16-17 contain parallel statements: "Simon, to whom He gave the name Peter; James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, to whom He gave the name Boanerges, that is, 'Sons of Thunder.'" He first gives a surname to Simon, and from then on he is referred to as "Peter" or "Simon Peter." Then He gives the brothers James and John a surname, nickname, or title, "Boanerges," which is Greek for "Sons of Thunder."

As far as we know, these three are the only ones to whom Jesus gave new names, calling them in our vernacular "Simon Stone" and "James and John Thunderson." Why does Christ only rename these three? Given that [God](#) names things what they are, why did He name them so, particularly the two sons of Zebedee?

We will start with James, looking a little more closely at how his names may apply to his character. "James" is the English form of the Vulgar Latin name *Iacomus*, which was derived from *Iakobos*, the New Testament Greek form of the Hebrew name *Ya'qov*. Put more simply, "James" is the English form of

the Hebrew "Jacob." The name *Jacob* means "supplanter" or "holder of the heel," referring to Jacob's being born holding onto his brother Esau's heel ([Genesis 25:26](#)). We have too little information about the life of James to compare him to the patriarch Jacob in any meaningful way.

For the most part, James is mentioned alongside Peter and John (and sometimes with Andrew, Peter's brother), their lives overlapping to such an extent that it is difficult to mention one without the others. In time, James became known as "James the Great" or "James the Greater." It is not clear if he was called this because he was among the first to be named in the four lists of the apostles or because he was the first apostle to suffer martyrdom. Since there are two apostles of the same name, he could simply have been called "James the Great" to distinguish him from the other James, the son of Alphaeus. He, being the older of the two, may have rated the "great" honorific solely for that reason. Scholars are sure, however, that it had nothing to do with describing his character.

In most instances, he is called "James the son of Zebedee, brother of John." He was a disciple, then an apostle, of Christ for around 17 years before being put to death by King Herod Agrippa I ([Acts 12:2](#)), becoming the first of the Twelve to be martyred. Other than the three years or so that he spent with Jesus during His ministry, there is not much more recorded in the New Testament about his life or personality.

The gospels indicate that his parents were righteous people—or at least it appears that his mother was. There is no mention of Zebedee after Jesus calls his sons to follow Him. Some expositors, using [John 19:25](#), assert that James and John's mother, Salome, was Mary's sister. They also base this on her request that her sons be allowed to sit on Jesus's right hand ([Matthew 20:20-21](#)), essentially alluding to the old adage that "blood is thicker than water." If we compare Matthew's, Mark's, and John's accounts of those in attendance at [the crucifixion](#), the chances that Salome was Mary's sister increase. She was also one of the women who came to anoint Jesus' body after His death ([Mark 16:1](#)). Salome appears to have been a disciple and active in some of the major events of Christ's life.

James followed his father in the family fishing business, as did John. Some sort of business arrangement seems to have existed between the fathers of

James and John and of Peter and Andrew, a fact that Luke indicates in [Luke 5:7](#). After being called by Jesus, these four comprised a close circle of disciples following Him. Normally, when one is listed, all of them are, although Andrew is sometimes left out. In fact, James is never mentioned separately from John or Peter.

The gospels record three episodes in which these three disciples—Peter, James, and John—are alone allowed to witness an event firsthand:

1. They alone were allowed to witness the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead ([Mark 5:37](#)).
2. Only these three were chosen to witness Jesus' transfiguration on the mount ([Matthew 17:1](#)).
3. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus went to pray the night before His death, He took only these three into His private place, telling them to watch and pray with Him ([Mark 14:33](#)).

The special relationship they shared is one that can be defined by the principle, "To whom much is given, from him much will be required" ([Luke 12:48](#)), as Christ was preparing them for the jobs that lay ahead after His death and resurrection.

In regard to James and John being called "Sons of Thunder," most commentators refer to two episodes in their lives as disciples, surmising that they provide the answer for Jesus' giving them such a colorful name. The first is recorded in [Luke 9:53-56](#). The time had come for Jesus to head to Jerusalem, and on the way He sent his disciples ahead to prepare for Him to enter a Samaritan village. But, as events unfolded, the Samaritans of that city rejected Him. Incensed, James and John were ready to strike, asking Jesus if He wanted them to wipe them off the face of the earth by calling lightning from heaven! They were offended that people would reject their Savior.

While this may account for Jesus' naming of them, Adam Clarke comments: "[They were] probably so named because of their zeal and power in preaching [the Gospel](#)." Yet at this point, their zeal and power were terribly misdirected. Commentator Albert Barnes makes a similar statement: "Some

suppose [Jesus called them "Boanerges"] because they wished to call down fire from heaven and consume a certain village of the Samaritans, [Luke 9:54](#). It is, however, more probable that it was on account of something fervid, and glowing, and powerful in their genius and eloquence."

They were certainly ready to use deadly power on the poor Samaritans, but [wisdom](#) had not yet come to them. Jesus turns to face them and rebukes them: "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of." They were ready to enact vengeance on these people by wiping them out in a flash, and God's Spirit was not the one that was influencing them.

In Part Two, we will consider the second episode as well as reflect on the meaning of thunder in God's Word.

- Ronny H. Graham

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Christian Zeal](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

As exemplified in his famous "Man in the Arena" speech, Theodore Roosevelt lived his life with vitality and energy. Whether hunting wild game or entertaining at an embassy party, he conducted his behavior with effervescent zeal. Quiet only when he was reading or studying, Theodore Roosevelt loved boxing, sparring, hiking, hunting, riding, ranching, fighting, and exploring. Roosevelt believed in living vigorously and zealously, pursuing life with all the energy at his disposal, giving his absolute all. His exemplary life provides a model for zeal, ardor, and enthusiasm. Zeal has often been discredited as the tool of the huckster or the charlatan. Christians, however, must develop passion and zeal for the Christian way of life and the prospect of the Kingdom of God. The Laodicean does have a form of zeal, but it is focused on material goals rather than spiritual goals. Consequently, it comes across to God as lack of zeal and commitment, appearing as apathy and detachment. God demands that our zeal be boiling hot, exuding ardor, fervency, and intensity focused single-mindedly on a goal, leading to a

motivation to action or motivation to do something specific to please our God. Jesus Christ demonstrated godly zeal and fervor when He drove the moneychangers out of the temple. Wherever Jesus went, huge crowds pressed Him to heal the sick; He obliged them wholeheartedly. God's work provided His food. The apostle Paul's misguided zeal was (in the blink of an eye) sublimated into godly zeal at his calling on the road to Damascus, keeping him motivated in God's service for the rest of his life. Any Christian act we can do we should do with zeal.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Jealousy of God](#)

by Ronny H. Graham

Deuteronomy 4:24 may strike an astute reader as somewhat controversial, if not contradictory. How can our holy and perfect God be jealous? Knowing that the Bible is consistent in its revelation of God, Ronny Graham reasons that since God's Word is not at fault, it is our limited understanding of godly jealousy that must be expanded.

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