

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Forgotten Lives of the New Testament: James, the Martyr

When you think of the Bible, how many of the characters in it readily spring to mind? Most will think of Him whom the book is all about - the Lord Jesus, God's Son come into our world. Some will think of Adam and Eve, of Abraham, of Moses, perhaps of King David, of Peter and of Paul. In this series of four talks, we are looking at some of the less well-known characters in the Bible. So far, we have looked at Joseph, the husband of Mary and at John the Baptist. Today we are going to look at James the martyr and next week's talk, God willing, will look at Luke the friend. I find that tremendously encouraging. You see, most of us would not rate ourselves very highly in the list of notables in this world, but all of us can play some part in God's work in this world, if we are willing.

The apostle James might be known as one of that pair of brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Not so many will remember him for his martyrdom in the cause of Christ. In fact, he is only the second Christian martyr we read of in the Bible, the first being Stephen (see Acts 7:54-60). Of course, down through the centuries many have followed them in giving their lives for Christ and, in parts of the world today, some are still doing this. It will be interesting to look at the road which led to the martyrdom of James.

For clarity, we should just point out that we read of at least three James in Scripture. There is James, the son of Zebedee; there is James the son of Alphaeus, another of the twelve apostles, as we shall see later - he may, or may not, be the same as the one called James the Less (Mark 15:40); finally, there is James the brother of the Lord Jesus. He would have been amongst those of whom, during Jesus' lifetime, John tells us, "Even His brothers did not believe in Him" (John 7:5). Clearly, Jesus' death at Calvary must have had a profound effect on him, since we find him mentioned amongst the group of disciples who, after Jesus' ascension to heaven, "all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication" (Acts 1:14). He later wrote the Epistle of James. His conversion to Christ was a real triumph of grace!

The James we are considering today was amongst the earliest disciples called to follow the Lord Jesus. We will read Mark 1:16-20. "And as [Jesus] walked by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then Jesus said to them, 'Come after Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed Him. When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat, mending their nets. And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him."

Note how readily these four disciples gave up everything to follow the Lord Jesus. Dear listener, have you responded to the call of the Lord Jesus to follow Him? Or perhaps you once gladly responded to that call, but now, for one reason or another, you no longer actively follow Him. Today, as we think about this servant, James, may each one of us be challenged to renew our commitment to the Lord Jesus.

We should not underestimate the sacrifice which James made in following the Lord Jesus. Note those significant words, "they left their father Zebedee in the boat *with the hired servants*". This was no small scale operation as may have been the case with Simon and Andrew, but rather a prosperous enterprise with its associated wealth. I can almost imagine the notice board outside their fishing yard, "Zebedee & Sons, fishermen". It was no small thing for James to give up this assured, comfortable life-style for an unknown future.

It is likely that, in those early weeks of Jesus' ministry, many others followed Him, attracted by the power of His words. These were His earliest disciples. The word 'disciple' simply means 'learner'. They followed Jesus to learn from Him. We need to do the same! A little while later, the Lord Jesus chose from this group of disciples a special group of twelve men whom He called apostles. Luke tells us, "Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples to Him; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles: Simon, whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot who also became a traitor" (Luke 6:12-16). That Jesus spent all night in prayer before coming to this decision is a clear indication of how much it mattered to Him to choose the right people. The word 'apostle' simply means 'one sent forth'. Mark tells us, "Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them forth to preach" (Mark 3:14). Note the order there; it's highly

significant. Firstly, those apostles were to be with Him, learning of Him. Then, and only then, would He send them forth to tell others about Himself. We still need to follow that order today. Before we can go out in service for the Master, we need to spend time in His presence!

From that time onwards, the three apostles, Peter, James and John, seem to have occupied a special place in the purposes of the Lord Jesus. For example, only these three were with the Lord Jesus as He went into the room where Jairus' 12 year old daughter lay dead and they would see Him raise her from the dead (Mark 5:37).

It was only these three who were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Luke tells us, "He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening. Then behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:28-31).

It is striking that, in this scene of unparalleled glory, the topic of conversation was the death of Jesus. But this death was no humiliating defeat! Rather it was indeed an accomplishment, for through that atoning death of the Lord Jesus at Calvary, the basis would be laid whereby God's forgiveness of sins might righteously be offered to all who call on the Lord Jesus for salvation. The writer to the Hebrews tells us, "But now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26). What an accomplishment! These special three apostles little realised then that this emphasis on the death of the Lord Jesus was God's way of preparing them for the suffering that they would encounter in the future. Tradition has it that Peter was crucified upside down, and his death is later hinted at by the Lord Jesus (John 21:18). John was banished to the isle of Patmos for his Christian witness (Revelation 1:9). Finally, as we shall see, James was martyred by King Herod.

Peter, James and John were also privileged apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane. Matthew tells us, "Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, 'Sit here while I go and pray over there.' And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, 'My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me.' He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.' Then He came to the disciples and found them asleep..." (Matthew 26:36-40). Would those privileged apostles have heard something of the cries of One "who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear..." (Hebrews 5:7)? In later years, as these three faced their moments of trial, perhaps this scene would encourage them.

But what kind of a man was the apostle James? Mark tells us, "James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, to whom [Jesus] gave the name Boanerges, that is 'Sons of thunder'" (Mark 3:17). That nickname was probably given because of their fiery temper. Something of that fiery temper came out when a Samaritan village would not receive Jesus and His disciples. "And when His disciples, James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven to consume them, just as Elijah did?' But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them'" (Luke 9:54-56).

The transforming power of the Lord Jesus would, in time, change those fiery tempers. It is remarkable that, in later years, it is the gentle apostle John who writes so movingly of the love of God - perhaps because he had learned what that transforming love could do in his own life. It may be that James experienced that same transforming power. And all of us today may still experience that same transforming love and power to make our lives more useful for Him. The hymn 'At even ere the sun was set' reminds us "Thy touch has still its ancient power". May we all continue to know it!

There may, too, have been an element of pride in the heart of James and his brother, John. Mark tells us, "Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, 'Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.' And He said to them, 'What do You want Me to do for You?' They said to Him, 'Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you ask. Can you drink the cup that I drink, and be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?' And they said to Him, 'We can.' And Jesus said to them, 'You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptised with you will be baptised; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not mine to give...'" (Mark 10:35-40). The Lord Jesus could not grant such a request but Jesus' words clearly warned them of the baptism of suffering that awaited them. Years later, an older and wiser John would write, "...the pride of life - is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 John 2:16). May the Lord keep the hearts of each one of us free from such pride, particularly the sin of religious pride!

The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus had a drastic effect on the disciples. "Then they all forsook Him and fled" (Mark 14:50). But after His resurrection, the Lord Jesus, that Good Shepherd of His sheep, lovingly drew them back to Himself. Even then, Peter with James and some other of the disciples impatiently went off for a night times' fishing. (John 21:1-14) Not surprisingly, it was unsuccessful! However they were there to enjoy the breakfast of bread and fish

which the Lord Jesus had already prepared for them on the seashore. James would have been there to listen when afterwards the Lord Jesus spoke to Peter about His future martyrdom. “Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish” (John 21:18). Did James wonder then what the Lord had in store for him in the future?

James was with the other disciples as they met together in an upper room in Jerusalem after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:13). No specific mention of James is made then until Acts 12:1-3: “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.” Significantly, this Herod, Herod Agrippa the first, was the grandson of Herod the great who had all the baby boys killed when Jesus was born (Matthew 2:12-23) and the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist executed (Mark 6:14-29). Clearly a cruel streak ran in that particular family!

However, Peter did not suffer martyrdom at that moment as James had done. God sent an angel so that Peter was miraculously delivered from prison (Acts 12:5-19). We have already seen that the Lord Jesus had previously spoken of Peter’s martyrdom, but as an old man. Why God takes one of his servants to heaven at a relatively early age but allows another to live for many years, their latter years sometimes plagued by ill-health is one of life’s mysteries that has puzzled believers down through the ages. David was a man who experienced many attacks on his life firstly from King Saul and later from the Philistines. At times, he even despaired of life. But as he looked back upon his life, he was able to declare, “As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the LORD is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him” (2 Samuel 22:31, Psalm 18:30). However difficult we find it to understand the circumstances that God allows us to pass through, we need to cling to those simple words, “As for God, His way is perfect”. As another has put it,

*Not till the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas
And explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
In the Weaver’s skilful hands
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.*

But God has the last word! Acts 12 goes on to tell us that shortly after James’ martyrdom, “an angel of the Lord struck [Herod], because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died” (Acts 12:23). What a terrible end for that supposedly mighty monarch! After Herod’s death, we read, “But the word of God grew and multiplied” (Acts 12:24)! It has been aptly remarked that “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”. It was so in James’ day and it is still so today in those parts of the world where the Christian Church is persecuted.

It is interesting that our English word ‘martyr’ comes from the Greek word ‘martur’. That word in the Greek New Testament essentially meant ‘witness’. So the Authorised Version of Acts 22:20, “And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen...” is better translated ‘thy witness Stephen’. In English, it has come to be used of those who, by laying down their lives for the cause of Christ, witness to their faith in Him. Jim Elliot was one such 20th century martyr. Jim, together with four friends, all young men, set out, with their wives, to bring the Gospel to primitive Auca Indians living in the forests of Ecuador. After some initial contacts, those five young men were all martyred. Earlier Jim had written those memorable words, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in exchange for what he cannot lose”! Our apostle James might well have echoed those words!

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