

Study 4 - James, Son of Thunder



Starting Point

Do you prefer 'certainty' when it comes to looking ahead to the immediate future, or can you cope with a degree of uncertainty? What problems can uncertainty bring?

Read



Matthew 4:18-22

Background Info

The sea (or lake) of Galilee is around thirteen miles long and eight miles wide and lies in the Jordan valley, almost 700 feet below sea level, a location which enjoys a very warm climate surrounded by fertile countryside. When Josephus was writing there were nine cities on its shores, and hundreds of fishermen making a living in its waters.

A fishing boat carbon-dated to the period of Jesus' life has been lifted from the sea bottom and is now available to view in a special exhibit. The fishermen had small family businesses, earning enough to live on but probably not making a fortune.

Fish was plentiful and there was a good market for their produce. Fishing was challenging work, sometimes dangerous, but it was a secure profession.

The James we are looking at is easy to distinguish from others of the same name in the New Testament, because he is always mentioned together with his brother John, and they were known as 'Sons of Thunder' possibly because of their temperament!

It is quite possible that the meeting with Jesus on the shoreline was not their first, as in John's Gospel we hear about some of the fishermen being

'What do you want me to do for you?'

SAM

disciples of John the Baptist (John 1:35) so it is quite possible that they had already heard Jesus talk. However, now they face the call to leave everything and follow Jesus.

The martyrdom of James by Herod Agrippa I marked the beginning of a time of severe persecution in the early church (Acts 12:2).

Questions

- 1) There is an immediacy in the response of the four fishermen to the call on their lives 'to follow'. How does that relate to your own spiritual journey?
- 2) The true cost of discipleship would only become clear to James and his brother later, but immediately there is an impact because they now have no income, and have made it more difficult for their parents to continue the family business. How much is cost an issue?
- 3) Why fishermen? What qualities might a fisherman possess that would make them an ideal choice as a potential disciple for Jesus?

This is my Son



Read Luke 9:28-36

The location of this story, appearing in three of the gospels is probably Mount Hermon, not far from Caesarea Philippi where Jesus and the disciples were a few days earlier according to Matthew 16:13. It's a high mountain and the episode is likely to have been on the slopes rather than the peak which is some 9400 feet high. Luke tells us that Jesus took some of his disciples there to pray. It seems to have been around sunset or late evening when the vision took place, as they come down the following day to a crowd waiting to greet them with an epileptic child (v 37ff).

Luke doesn't use the word 'transfigured' as do Matthew and Mark, just that Jesus' appearance changed, and his clothing became dazzling white. But what can we make of the two prophets who appeared in that vision?

Moses had his own mountaintop experience at Sinai. He reminded people



of the past (the Exodus), whilst Elijah was seen by Malachi 4:5,6 to point to the future as a forerunner of the Messiah, echoed in the life of John the Baptist. So, they look to the past, present and future of God's dealings with humankind and emphasise the importance of Jesus in the bigger picture.

Questions

- 1) What does Jesus' action in verse 28 say about the three disciples?
- 2) Who do you think this spectacular vision, of Moses and Elijah, the brilliance surrounding them, and the cloud through which God speaks, was created for – Jesus or the disciples?
- 3) Read the last sentence in the reading again and discuss the question, 'Why?'

A Request



Read Mark 10:35-45, Luke 9:51-56

The disciples struggled to understand that Jesus was heading toward Jerusalem to die. They were thinking about a physical kingdom of God being established in their lifetime, and as such, James and his brother John had in mind their future positions in such a kingdom. Matthew tells us that their mother accompanied them and spoke first. To be sat at the right and left hand of Jesus would give them the highest place possible in influence and honor. The idea of a Messiah of earthly power and glory was very much ingrained into the mindset of even Jesus' closest followers.

Jesus issued a mild rebuke but then went on to prophesy that both would suffer as he had suffered. The baptism he talks of is the terrible experience that he will go through, emphasizing that without a cross there can be no crown. James would suffer death by beheading under Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2) and John, though possibly never martyred certainly suffered for his Savior. Interestingly, both James and John seemed willing to accept this challenge and continue their journey with Jesus. Despite their confusion they still knew that their place was at his side, and still believed that Jesus was headed toward triumph, not disaster.

The passage from Luke also reveals that James and John still had much to learn, and here it's about tolerance of others, and looking at them not with indifference but with eyes of love. Their nickname 'Sons of Thunder' was quite a fitting title.

The word 'ransom' is difficult for many, as it infers a cost, and begs a question as to whom that ransom might be paid. It may help when thinking about 'cost' to think about the phrase, 'freedom can sometimes only be obtained at the price of blood, sweat and tears' and consider that it cost the life of Jesus to bring humankind back from their sin and into the love of God.

"God places us in the world as his fellow workers-agents of transfiguration. We work with God so that injustice is transfigured into justice, so there will be more compassion and caring, that there will be more laughter and joy, that there will be more togetherness in God's world."

- Desmond Tutu

Questions

1) How much sympathy do you have for James and John as they struggle with understanding and jump to conclusions?

2) How tolerant are you with those whose interpretation of Scripture, baptism, the Sacraments, veneration of saints or other theological issues varies from yours – give yourself a score between 1-10, where 10 is very tolerant!

3) Should we expect opposition and a degree of suffering as disciples, and why might that be in this generation?

4) What do the final three verses tell us about life in the kingdom of God, and how does Jesus' life illustrate this?



Personal Reflection

Consider why Jesus might have chosen someone like you to follow him.



For Prayer

Pray for the various Christian denominations that meet for worship where you live, and for unity.