



JESUS'
INNER
CIRCLE

Church of the Transfiguration atop Mount Tabor. The church marks the spot where, according to tradition, Jesus appeared in His glory before three of His disciples. A church has been on the site since the 6th cent; the present Franciscan church was built in 1924. Rising to 1,843 feet above sea level, Mount Tabor overlooks the Jezreel Valley below.

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DURING HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY JESUS had many disciples, and from among these He chose twelve men to name as His apostles. These men followed Him, and He trained them to continue His ministry after He had departed. From among the Twelve Jesus chose an “inner circle” comprised of Peter, James, and John, who had been among His earliest disciples. These three experienced some significant times with Him that the other disciples did not.

Although Jesus may have singled out these three men numerous times, the Scriptures record only three occasions when the Lord shared separate moments with them. Not only did Jesus choose these men to be with Him on the mount of transfiguration, but they were also at the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:22-43) and were present during Jesus’ prayer time at Gethsemane on the night of His betrayal and arrest (Matt. 26:36-56).¹

Why, we might ask, did Jesus choose these three over the others? The Bible does not answer this question directly but we can draw inferences from what we see in the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke identify these three as among the first four disciples Jesus called. The Gospel of John goes further and identifies two of these first four disciples, Andrew and an unnamed disciple, as having been disciples of John the Baptist (John 1:35-40).²

According to John’s Gospel, on the day following Jesus’ baptism these two were standing with John the Baptist when Jesus walked by and the Baptist said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” (v. 35).³ The two disciples immediately left John the Baptist and followed Jesus. They spent some time with the Lord, and the Scriptures state that Andrew went (probably the next morning) and found his brother and brought him to Jesus.⁴ John 1:42 explains that Jesus looked at Andrew’s brother and said: “‘You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas’ (which is translated ‘Peter’).” This indicates that Jesus immediately saw

the potential of what this simple fisherman would one day become. Peter, or “Rock,” would eventually be an apt description of the man who became the spokesman for the disciples and an important leader of the early church.⁵

As we consider James and John, we get a clue from Mark’s Gospel where, in listing the Twelve, he placed Simon Peter, James, and John as the first three. With reference to the sons of Zebedee, Mark wrote that Jesus gave these two brothers “the name ‘Boanerges’ (that is, ‘Sons of Thunder’)” (Mark 3:17). The Gospels do not state precisely why Jesus gave them this name, but the Gospel writers do reveal something of the nature of these two that could have led to this description. On one instance, when a Samaritan village refused to receive Jesus and His disciples, James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy the village (Luke 9:52-56).⁶ Another snapshot that gives insight into the character of these two occurred when the brothers asked Jesus to seat them at His left and right when the Lord established His kingdom, which they apparently thought would come when Jesus entered Jerusalem. The only promise they received, however, was to share in the Lord’s suffering (Mark 10:35-40). Some writers describe James and John as being ambitious, which, on the basis of this request they made of the Lord, would be an understatement.⁷

According to the late New Testament scholar A. T. Robertson, Jesus chose these three because they understood Him best. While this may be true, the Gospels make plain that Jesus understood them completely.⁸ These descriptive names the Lord gave these three men illustrate that He recognized their potential to fulfill the roles He ultimately had for them. Only to these three did He give nicknames, names that obviously reflected characteristics that caused them to stand out above the other nine.⁹

Another consideration as to why Jesus chose these three may be the closeness that existed between the four fishermen who were His first followers. After all, they had been



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partners in the fishing business before they came to know and follow Jesus as His disciples (Luke 5:9-10).

Still other writers believe that Jesus included James and John in His inner circle because the two brothers may have been Jesus' first cousins. This conclusion comes by merging some passages concerning the women who were present at Jesus' crucifixion. Supporters of the cousin explanation use the listing of names in Matthew, Mark, and John to identify James and John's mother as being the sister of Mary, Jesus' mother. Matthew, Mark, and John list three women other than the mother of Jesus as being present at the crucifixion. All three Gospels agree on Mary Magdalene and another Mary. Matthew identifies the third woman as the mother of Zebedee's sons, while Mark identifies this third woman as Salome. John identifies a third woman as the sister of the Lord's mother. Those supporting the cousin view argue that these are one and the same woman who has merely been identified differently in these three passages. Neither the Bible nor the writings of the early Christian church attest to this relationship. Such a conclusion is conjectural at best, but an interesting possibility nonetheless.

Why were these three men present at the specific experiences the Gospels describe? Once again, the Bible does not give an answer, so we must consider the Lord's goal. He knew His time of physically ministering in the world was limited and that His work would have to continue after His departure. He thus chose men to initiate that work, knowing that this inner circle would be the leaders in this effort of sharing the good news locally and, ultimately, throughout the world.¹⁰

Even with what appears to be a shortage of information concerning this inner circle of disciples, we have been able to ascertain several facts from the Scriptures. First, these three, along with Andrew, had been business partners in the fishing business before they met Jesus and were well acquainted

Above, from left to right: Fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.

Interior of the rebuilt synagogue at Capernaum; worshipers would sit on the benches along the wall. Although the

visible structure dates from the 4th cent. A.D., the foundation below was part of the synagogue that existed in Jesus' day. Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, asked Jesus to heal his daughter.

Part of the route going between Jerusalem and Jericho.

Olive trees growing in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem.

with one another. Second, they were among the first whom Jesus called to be disciples. Third, Jesus gave them nicknames that reflected their personalities and possibilities. Finally, they were the only group of disciples the Lord took with Him during special occasions that were learning opportunities that the other nine apostles did not share. While the Scriptures provide mere glimpses as to why Jesus selected these men as part of His inner circle, their roles in carrying on the Lord's work are well documented. 🕯

1. The Scriptures do not indicate that Jesus ever took any other group of disciples aside in this manner.
2. Early church tradition identifies this unnamed disciple as John and names him as the writer of the Gospel that bears his name. Although neither of these traditions can be proven they are the most prevalent view held today.
3. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
4. We can probably assume that John did likewise and brought his brother to Jesus also.
5. Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, vol. 25A in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1996), 140-44.
6. R. Alan Culpepper, "John" in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible, 1991), 804.
7. James A. Brooks, *Mark*, vol. 23 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 167-68.
8. Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 139.
9. David L. McKenna, *Mark*, vol. 2 in *The Communicators Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 79-82.
10. William Barclay, *The Mind of Christ* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960, 1961), 61-62.

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