

THE TWELVE DISCIPLES OF JESUS

(Mark Strauss)

Although Jesus had many followers, he selected twelve key disciples whom he appointed and designated apostles. "Apostle" (*apostolos*) means a "messenger" sent out with a commission. Jesus's choice of twelve is reminiscent of the twelve tribes of Israel and suggests that Jesus viewed his mission as the restoration or reconstitution of the people of God, with himself as its leader. Jesus says as much when he promises the Twelve that they will sit on thrones in his kingdom, "judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:30). Here is a brief description of the Twelve.

Simon Peter. Simon Peter is always named first in the lists of disciples, and often serves as their representative and spokesperson. Jesus called Simon to be a disciple and nicknamed him "Peter" (Greek: *Petros*; Aramaic: *Cephas*; John 1:42), meaning a "rock" or "stone." Known for his boldness and an impetuous spirit, it was Peter who first acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah (Matt. 16:13–20 and parallels) but later denied that he even knew Jesus (Matt. 26:69–75 and parallels). After the resurrection, Jesus restored Peter to a position of leadership (John 21:15–19), and in the book of Acts Peter appears as a key leader in the early church.

Andrew, Brother of Simon Peter. Andrew was originally a follower of John the Baptist, until John pointed Jesus (the "Lamb of God") out to him. Andrew brought his brother Simon to meet Jesus (John 1:40–42). He is known as the disciple who kept bringing others to Jesus: his own brother, the boy with the loaves and fishes (John 6:8–9), and, together with Philip, a group of Greeks who wanted to meet Jesus (John 12:20–22). Andrew and Peter were from Bethsaida (John 1:44) but operated their fishing business in Capernaum (Mark 1:29).

James, Son of Zebedee. Like Peter and Andrew, James and his brother John were fishermen who followed the call of Jesus (Matt. 4:21–22). Jesus nicknamed them *Boanerges*, meaning "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17), perhaps because of their volatile personalities (Luke 9:54). James was arrested and executed by Herod Agrippa I; he was the first apostle to die as a martyr (Acts 12:1–2).

John, Brother of James. John, James, and Peter make up the "inner circle," Jesus's closest disciples who accompanied him at key points in his ministry: the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37), the transfiguration (Mark 9:2), and the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). John is traditionally identified as the *Beloved Disciple* and the author of the fourth Gospel, the letters of 1–3 John, and the book of Revelation.

Philip. Philip, who was from Bethsaida, introduced Nathanael to Jesus (John 1:45). Outside of the lists of disciples, he appears only in a few scenes in John (John 6:5–7; 12:21–22; 14:8–9).

Bartholomew. Bartholomew means "son of Tolmai" and may be another name for Nathanael (John 1:45).

Matthew, the Tax Collector. The Gospel of Matthew identifies this disciple as the tax collector called "Levi" by Mark and Luke (Matt. 9:9; Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). He is traditionally believed to be the author of the Gospel that bears his name.



Thomas. Also known as Didymus (meaning “the twin”), Thomas is best known as the disciple who doubted Jesus’s resurrection until he saw and touched Jesus himself (John 20:24–29). Church tradition claims Thomas later evangelized eastward into India.

James the Son of Alphaeus. Sometimes identified as “James the Lesser” (or younger) of Mark 15:40, he may be the brother of Matthew/Levi since both of their fathers are named Alphaeus (Mark 2:14).

Thaddaeus, Lebbaeus, or Judas the Son of James. This name is the most disputed of the Twelve. Matthew and Mark refer to Thaddaeus (some manuscripts say “Lebbaeus”). Luke instead has Judas the son of James, which could be another name for the same person.

Simon the Zealot. In Luke, this disciple is called the “Zealot”; in Mark and Matthew, the “Cananaean,” from an Aramaic term meaning “zealous one” (not a “Canaanite”!). It is unclear if Simon was zealous for the law of Judaism or whether he was a former member of the revolutionary movement known as the Zealots.

Judas Iscariot, Who Betrayed Jesus. “Iscariot” probably means “man from Kerioth” (a region of Judea) and was a family name (John 6:71). The fourth Gospel asserts that Judas, as treasurer, used to pilfer the group’s money even before he betrayed Jesus (John 12:6).