

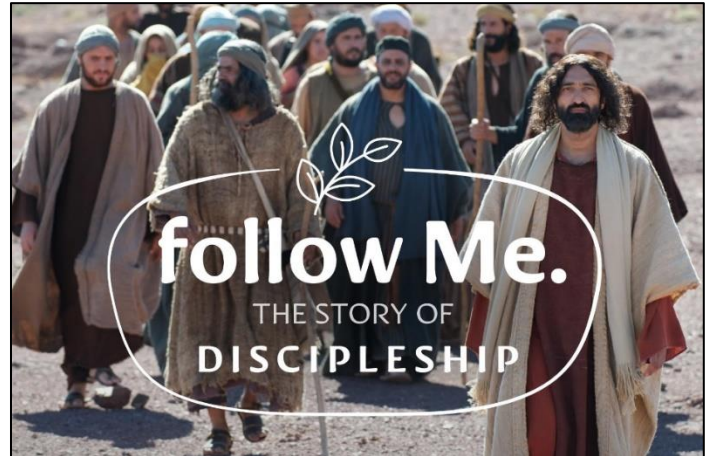


VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Passion Unleashed: The Transformative Journey of James

FOLLOW ME: THE STORY OF DISCIPLESHIP Various Scriptures

Tim Badal | July 9, 2023



Let me ask you a question this morning. Do you suffer from MCE? Some of you have no idea what I'm talking about, but for a great many of our young people today, Main Character Energy is something that has become part and parcel of their lives. In fact, it has become the subject of a great many articles and news reports because it is big with people under 30 years of age. It's a perspective on life that says you are the most important character in the grand story of humanity. You are the star of the show. Many have written about this, inspired primarily by a TikTok video from Ashley Ward that went viral in 2020. The term is social media slang for approaching everything as the central protagonist or main character.

Influencers like Britta Grace Thorpe and Yasmin Shahid have championed it as a way of taking charge and living life to its fullest. It could be as simple as dancing in public and not caring what others think, or running down the street in the city knowing everyone is looking at you. Inc Magazine said this:

For those unfamiliar with the concept, Main Character Energy of one's life is a notion that involves individuals, principally young ones, thinking of themselves as the main character or protagonist in their own life story. Instead of being content to see themselves as supporting characters with the action taking place around them, or worse, to them, they play the lead role, actively taking control of their lives, putting their wants, their needs, their desires first. According to one survey, 55% of millennials and Gen Z's think of themselves as the main characters in their lives.

Another one put it this way:

This is how you are to understand it. The world's big. Zoom further out, the universe is even more expansive. Contemplating your place as one of eight billion people on a relatively small planet can be scary. In spite of all this, you can still reclaim your own narrative from the cold indifference of the universe. All you need is a little so-called Main Character Energy.

What is it? It's when the cameras are trained on you. People should be lucky to be a part of your story. You dress how you want, you act how you want, you decide what you want to do with your life. There's so much more than always being at the whim of someone else's decisions, hoping that someone else sees value in you, overthinking other people's opinions of you, and finally, it involves our relationships.

Yes, I said it. Your life is made better by the presence of someone joining the story you've already written and are already the main character in. Listen, Main Character Energy says that you're literally in charge, not just of the decisions you make, the people you date, the friends you have, but the very definition of what makes you and your life great.

Young and old, all of us struggle with Main Character Energy. We are secondary, wanting to be in the limelight, in the spotlight. In the [New York Times](#) article I quoted from, they highlighted that there were some characters within movies who played secondary roles, but because of the energy they brought, because of how they viewed themselves, even though they were secondary in the author's intent, they stole the show—just as we should.

Cue “Aladdin,” where the genie—as the secondary character—becomes the highlight of the show. In “The Pirates of the Caribbean,” Captain Jack Sparrow, a relatively small character in the storyline because of the energy he brings, becomes the star of the show. Ironman in the Marvel series, though a secondary character because of the energy he brought to the screen, becomes a main character.

Listen to me, friends. This is nothing new. Every man, woman and child since the Garden of Eden has always played a secondary role in God's metanarrative—in God's story. God is the main character. God is the One in the spotlight. But here's the problem. Every one of us has MCE—Main Character Energy. We want to take the spotlight off God and put it on ourselves. The Bible doesn't call this MCE. The Bible calls it pride, arrogance and hubris.

This summer we have been looking at the lives of the 12 disciples, these individuals whom Jesus called to be His first and closest. We've been looking at the lives of each of these men and now we come to the life of James. James who was a part of the inner circle of Jesus. James who was one of the first to be called by Jesus.

Now James' big issue, his greatest struggle, was that he had Main Character Energy. Though he was called to follow Jesus, we're going to see in two episodes that James longed to be the star of the show. James and others around him longed for him to have the spotlight, to have first place.

As we've learned in our Scripture reading this morning, it is Jesus alone Who deserves preeminence. It is Jesus alone Who gets the limelight. It is Jesus alone Who is to get all the press, and we get the great opportunity to follow Him. When we start mixing that up, when we start trying to make it about us, we miss out on great good. Even greater than that, we miss out on giving God glory in and through our lives. So let's learn about this James and how we can be transformed by Jesus Christ, Who wants us to see life through Him.

James was the son of Zebedee. If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you learned a lot about James' younger brother John. Pastor Steve shared a lot about that, so I won't spend more time there. But just for review, James and his brother John lived not too far from Jesus' home town of Nazareth. They lived in an area named Capernaum, at the very north end of the Sea of Galilee. They were fishermen. In fact, Zebedee, their dad, was one of the most prominent fishermen and had one of the largest businesses, it would seem, in the area. There are many scholars who believe Peter, the apostle of Jesus, may have been one of the hired hands of Zebedee's business.

In Mark 1, James and John were called by Jesus. We're told they were with their dad when Jesus called them. Look at Mark 1, beginning in verse 16.

¹⁶ Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, [Jesus] saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.

¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

There are a couple things we need to know about James. First, it's my conclusion that James and his younger brother John may have been the youngest of the disciples. Most of them are in their 20s or 30s, peers of Jesus, whereas I believe James and John were teenagers because every time James is spoken of, he's always referred to as a son of Zebedee. That's what we do with young people. We identify them with their dad.

Growing up in this church as I did, I was not known as Tim, Bill's son. It wasn't until I became an adult, and in many ways became a father myself, that I was no longer Bill's son. Now I'm Noah, Josh and Luke's dad. You see, many times we're defined by our parents.

The second reason why I think they were young is that we see an episode where James' mom will come to Jesus with a request. It seems altogether odd that a grown man's mom would show up in front of other grown men and ask a question like she did. It makes a ton more sense if James was a teenager, then his helicopter-mom came on behalf of her teenage son, and advocated to Jesus for something for him. The reason I'm bringing this up is if we see James as young, we'll understand better why he was the way he was. It makes a lot of sense.

If we were to pick one word to describe James, one key word that applies to the apostle James, it would be passion. I borrow this from John MacArthur and appreciate his sentiment on this. From the little we know about James, it's obvious he was a man of

ardent fervor and intensity. In fact, Jesus gave James and John a nickname: *Boanerges*—meaning “sons of thunder.” That defines James’ personality in very vivid terms. He was zealous, thunderous, passionate and fervent.

Do you know anybody like that? These are excitable people. These are driven people with big personalities. Some of you are married to a James, or maybe you’re a James yourself. Maybe one or two of your children are like this. These people run hot. They’re passionate. They love passionately. And yes, they hate passionately. There’s no middle ground with them. There’s no lukewarm in them.

James was this kind of guy. He’s like one of the great men in the Old Testament—Elijah. Or like John the Baptist in the New Testament. Because James was part of Jesus’ inner circle, he experienced some awesome things. In Matthew 17, James, along with Peter and John, witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus. There on a mountain, Jesus was joined by Moses and Elijah, and Peter, James and John were the only ones who saw this. When Christ displayed His power by raising Jairus’ daughter from the dead, Peter, James and John were the only three who were in the room (Mark 5:37). Then there were also private discussions Jesus had with these three, as recorded in Mark 14:33.

So here is this passionate guy who was up close and personal with Jesus. We need to ask what made this man tick? It was his passion. This morning I want to look at the passion James had for life, for himself and for Jesus. I’ll do this by looking at it from two perspectives.

Who we are

First, I want us to think about who we are. If we’re really honest, there’s a bit of James in each of us. You might say, “Wait a minute. I’m not an extrovert. I’m not a big personality individual. I’m pretty quiet.” Here’s the thing. There’s a bit of James in each of us because all of us have passions. All of us get excited about something. All of us dream and hope for things. All of us have zeal for many things.

In fact, one of the ways you can really get to know a person is to ask two questions about their passions. One, what gets you up in the morning? That is, what are you most excited about? Number two, what irritates you the most? You see, passion drives us to the good and it frustrates us with the bad. You can learn a lot about a person by asking those two questions.

James was a passionate individual, which would lead him in the best of times to some great places, and in the worst of times, to very difficult and sad ones. What do we need to know about passions? Let’s understand this by looking at three things about passions.

Our passions can be good.

The Bible speaks of passion in a couple different ways. It uses words like appetites, desires and passion. It has been said that actions speak louder than words, but desires and passions speak loudest. Why? Because that which we desire will always lead us to where we’re going to go. It will drive us.

You and I are created in the image and likeness of God, what theologians call the *imago dei*. Inherent within that creation, every man, woman and child is born with a capacity to hunger, to desire, to have appetites. But unlike any other part of creation, not only do we have these hungers, appetites, desires and passions, God has given us the ability to determine how to achieve and satisfy what we desire.

John Bunyan, the great writer of the classic Pilgrim’s Progress, said this about our passions in a sermon he gave: “They are hunters.” That is their job. They’re out hunting for that which will fulfill them. One modern commentator said, “Your passions, your desires, your hungers are stalking through the cornfields in boots, camo overalls and blaze orange hats, as a fitting reminder that our restless hearts are in search of pleasures.” They’re on the lookout. They know we’re missing something, then our desires pursue something or someone to fill that. They’re searching for something that will satisfy. Now I want to tell you something that you should never forget: all of this is good.

Our passions can get the best of us.

The Bible says God gave us these appetites, hungers, passions for our good and even for our enjoyment. But here's the problem: our passions can get the best of us. We're going to see this in the life of James. As we go out hunting for that which will satisfy, a choice needs to be made. In my hunt, in my pursuit to satisfy my desires, I have to make a decision. Will I seek these in a self-centered way or will I seek them in a God-centered way? Every one of us is going to ask that question, whether we know it or not, then we'll answer it either by seeking to fulfill our hungers in a self-centered way or in a God-centered way.

Here's what James shows us. Filling our passions in self-centered ways is not the way to follow Jesus. So let's look at a couple times in James' life when his passions got the best of him. First, go to Luke 9. This is where we have the first of two episodes when James allows his passions to get the best of him. We'll start in verse one for context:

¹ And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, ² and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. ³ And he said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. ⁴ And whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart.

Then he says this in verse five which is important to what we're going to see later in this chapter: *"And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them."* In other words, "If someone rejects you for the gospel's sake, let it go." James hears this and not even a chapter later, we see this beginning in verse 52: *"And [Jesus] sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans."* Now the Samaritans hated the Jews, and the Jews hated Samaritans. There was a lot of animosity between them, so the Samaritan village rejected Jesus

Look at verse 53: *"The people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem."* Jesus was a Jew. The Samaritans didn't like Him because He was headed to Jerusalem to worship God there, so they wanted nothing to do with Jesus, His gospel and His disciples. Enter James: *"And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'"* That's passion that misguided. Jesus has just said, "If people reject you for the gospel's sake, let it go." But because James is so fiery, because he's so passionate, he allows his passions to get the best of him. He and his brother say, "Hey, Jesus, just say the word and we'll kill them all. We'll seek and destroy for You."

Some of us have allowed our passion and zeal for Jesus to send us down the wrong path. You're thinking, "How can that be?" Here James could say, "The people in the village rejected Jesus, so they deserve death." But notice what Jesus says. This might not be in your translation, but it should be at least footnoted. Verse 56 says, *"For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them."*

You see, even your zeal for Jesus, when it is not guarded and guided by Him, can get the best of you. It can cause you to do the wrong things at the wrong time. James wanted to light people up because they rejected the gospel. His passion had gotten the best of him. This is a good time for us to ask if our passions have gotten the best of us.

Turn now to Matthew 20. Here's where we meet James' mother. Now, we know a lot about James' dad, Zebedee, but what about his mom? Many Bible scholars believe that Salome, one of Jesus' closest female associates, is James' mom. She is one of the women who was at the cross when Jesus was crucified. So when Jesus speaks to James' brother John at the foot of the cross, "Take Mary My mother into your home," He was asking that Mary would be taken into the house of Zebedee and Salome. So Salome and Jesus were close, almost like family. They might even have been distant relatives.

Now look at what happens beginning in Matthew 20:20:

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. ²¹ And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."

Salome was the first helicopter mom, the first child-centered parent in the Bible. She was enamored with her boys. Let's face it, Jesus had picked her two young sons. No doubt she had gotten on her Facebook page and made sure everybody knew that Rabbi Jesus had chosen her teenagers. They made God's honor roll. They were the valedictorian and salutatorian. They were the MVPs. And she wants to make sure that didn't just happen for a short time, but that this would last for all of eternity. What she's essentially saying is, "Jesus, create a little space so my sons can get some of Your spotlight. I want my boys to have some of your glory." Here's how Jesus responded: *"You do not know what you are asking."* Then he turned to the two boys and asked, *"Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"* Both James and John replied, *"We are able"*

Let's just focus on James here. What he's saying is, "Jesus, I can play the main part in Your story. I can be the star in Your show." More than that, James is saying, along with John, "Whatever You can face, I can face. Whatever God has in His plan for You, we can accomplish that as well."

Listen, this represents the most arrogant and prideful approach. Peter can't even shake a stick at this kind of pride. However, I give them a little bit of a pass because they're two teenage boys. They don't understand what they're saying. I can't tell you how many times as a young person I said things that I know now I could never have accomplished.

So James and John told Jesus, "We can do this." But Jesus responded by saying, "If you want to be great in My Kingdom, you must be willing to suffer, as well as serve." Now, the other guys became indignant and rightly so. Jesus went on to say in verse 25, *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you."*

Listen, my friends. You and I cannot be the stars of the show. These two young ladies that just went through baptism declared by that one symbol, "Jesus, You're it; I'm not." They forsook their Main Character Energy and pointed it to Jesus. They said, "Jesus, You're it and You will forever be it." A follower of Jesus says that again and again and again. So what about our passions, desires and appetites? A follower of Jesus Christ recognizes that our passions can be good, but they can get the best of us, which leads us to our next point.

Our passions must be guided by God.

We live in a society and time when just because we feel something, we believe we deserve it. If we have some sort of desire, it must be fulfilled the way we want it to be. This is seen in no greater way than in our sexuality which is a gift from God given to us for our enjoyment and for a purpose. But our society says, "If I have sexual appetites and passions, that means I can do with it whatever I want." But the Bible says, "No. This gift has been given to you with a framework in which you are to enjoy it, for your good and for the glory of God." Followers of Jesus Christ say, "I have passions and they are good passions. They're gifts from my heavenly Father, Who loves me. But I need to use them as He has guided and directed." God must guide our passions.

What we are all about

This leads to our second point, which is much shorter than the first point. James' life is a reminder not only of who we are, but also of what we are all about. Are we going to be like James in the early part of his life, where it was all about him? By the way, he didn't learn this on his own; it was baked into his mom's life.

Parents, this is a reminder that if you and I aren't careful, if we give our children everything they want, they will grow up thinking the world revolves around them. "Oh, you want to do this. You want to spend that. We'll give you whatever time and energy you want." Brothers and sisters, if you want to raise up followers of Jesus Christ, tell your kids the world isn't theirs, it belongs to God. More than that message, you also need to live it out, showing them that the world isn't yours either. This world is God's and we were bought with a price. Because of that, our bodies are not our own. Our passions and our desires and our appetites must be guided by Jesus.

To answer the question of what we're all about, we need to ask four quick questions.

What excites me?

What are you most passionate about? What gets you out of bed in the morning? Now remember, these may not be bad things. If it's your job that gets you out of bed, that's not a bad passion. If what gets you out of bed is your kids, or the ability to make money, or the opportunity to serve people—whatever it is, whatever excites you—it's probably a good thing. God probably gave it to you for good.

But you must also ask what is it that excites me? Let's identify that. Ask yourself, "Where do I invest most of my time? Where do I spend most of my checkbook? How do I invest in my conversations?" Your time, your treasure and your talking—that's where you'll find your passion. Once you identify these things, you have to ask is God guiding you.

Who is examining me?

So the next question is who is examining me? Notice in both the stories we saw, Jesus rebuked James. Let me ask all of us, including myself this morning, when was the last time you allowed Jesus to rebuke how you're using your passions? When has He challenged

them? Jesus might be saying, “What I gave you was good—for your enjoyment, for your good—but it has become more about that thing than it is about Me.” When was the last time you looked at your calendar, your checkbook or your conversations and asked, “Jesus, are You okay with this? Jesus, do You approve of how I am using these gifts You’ve given me?”

What level of spiritual enthusiasm do I have?

I’m very passionate about some things. I’m passionate about my wife and my marriage. I’m passionate about my three sons and our family. I’m passionate about this church. I’m passionate about the business God has given me in the catering world. Yes, those things take up a lot of my calendar, my checkbook and my conversations. And those things are all good. There’s nothing wrong with any of those passions. But I have to ask do those passions transcend my passion for Jesus? But if those good passions are only used for me, then they’ve become my god. Actually, I’ve become my own god because everything is self-serving. I’m the main character.

However, it does me great good—and it gives God great glory—when I take my marriage, my family, my church and my business, funneling and guiding them by asking God, “How can I do these things for Your glory and not my own?” In other words, where is my spiritual enthusiasm? Am I passionate about the things God wants me to be passionate about?

Here’s what’s amazing. Look at Mark 1:20. When James is called, when this young teenage guy is called, we see that he left that which was familiar. He left his family. He left his father’s business and therefore his finances. He left a settled future and he immediately followed Jesus. If you want to know if your passions are in the right place, ask this question: “If Jesus was to ask me to leave those passions, would I do so immediately? Would I give them up immediately?”

To what extent am I willing to go for Jesus?

This begs the final question: to what extent will I go for Jesus? There’s not much written about James in Acts, but in Acts 12 we see that he was transformed by Jesus. From the point of being called in Mark, to these terrible disappointing moments in Luke and Matthew, we see that James got it. James was transformed. He no longer was about himself; he was about Jesus. After the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, James, along with the other disciples, went and preached Jesus, because Jesus was the main character in James’ life. He preached Jesus to whomever he met, no matter what it might cost.

One day, as we read in Acts 12:1-2, he was preaching Christ and by the edict and command of King Herod, a man came up to James and stabbed him to death. This man who had been so focused on himself, had wanted the lights on himself, had desired to be the main character in God’s story, was transformed to the extent that he was willing to die for Jesus. Now, it’s probably a far-flung idea that at any time soon you or I could be asked to die for our faith. But Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wants to follow Me” —remember, that’s the title of our series— “they must deny themselves.” What are we denying? Maybe it’s our passion for ourselves. He continued, “They must take up their cross,” which is a death sentence.

Maybe there are some things that need to die in our lives, so that God can take our passions, desires and appetites and redirect them for our good and for His glory. James got it. He said, “Whatever I have to do for You, Jesus, I’m willing to do,—even if it means I have to die.” James understood that without Jesus he would never find what his passions were looking for.

St. Augustine said this 400 years after James’ life: “Our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Jesus.” Our passions are restless. Our appetites are restless. Our desires are restless. Jesus doesn’t want to take away your passions; He wants to redirect them so they will be a blessing to you and to others. So build your life on that. Build your life as James did, allowing God to transform your passions and desires, so that Jesus will get the glory of being the Main Character of this epic story. Amen?