

Palisades Community Bible Church

Online Bible Study

Who were the original 12 Apostles?

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The title; **Apostle**, means “to be sent.” Sometimes, we say **Disciple**, which means “one who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another.” We often read their names in the Scriptures as if it’s mainly a book title. Most often, we read their writings and of their deeds, and do not give much attention to the persons.

Do you ever wonder who the Apostles, these “sent disciples,” were? What were they like, that Jesus should call them to the most history-altering movement of all time? Let’s take a snapshot of each and discover who they were. Perhaps, you’ll see a bit of yourself in one of them?

Why Twelve Apostles?

God’s chosen people, the Israelites, were divided into twelve tribes. As Jesus called out a new people for Himself, He started with twelve men who would form the basis of a new Israel.

Before we dive in, can you name the original twelve? Do you assume that the four Gospels were written by Apostles in this original group? I must confess that I had a number of wrong assumptions about these twelve men, and it made the writing of this study a bit of a surprise! My hope is that this “Reader’s Digest” glance into the first Apostles will enlighten you.

In the sixth chapter of Luke, we find the first twelve Apostles that Jesus called to follow Him:

12 One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. 13 When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: 14 Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, 15

Matthew, Thomas, James, son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, 16 Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

These 12 disciples/apostles of Jesus were the foundation stones of His church, several wrote portions of the Bible. In Revelation 21:14 we are told that the twelve foundations of the wall of the New Jerusalem will have in them the names of these twelve. It is evident, therefore, that God attaches great importance to these 12 men.

Let's Get To Know Them

Matthew, the apostle, had been a dishonest tax collector driven by greed until Jesus Christ chose him as a disciple. He displayed one of the most radically changed lives in the Bible in response to Jesus' call. He did not hesitate; he did not look back. He left behind a life of wealth and security for poverty and uncertainty. He abandoned the pleasures of this world for the promise of eternal life.

We first meet Matthew in Capernaum, in his tax booth on the main highway. He was collecting duties on imported goods brought by farmers, merchants, and caravans. Under the Roman Empire's system, Matthew would have paid all the taxes in advance, then collected from the citizens and travelers to reimburse himself. Tax collectors were notoriously corrupt because they extorted far and above what was owed, to ensure their personal profit. Because their decisions were enforced by Roman soldiers, no one dared object.

Originally named "Levi," he became "Matthew," which means "gift of God." By surface appearances, it was scandalous and offensive for Jesus to pick a tax collector as one of his closest followers since they were widely hated by the Jews. Yet, of the four Gospel writers, Matthew presented Jesus to the Jews as their hoped-for Messiah, tailoring his account to answer their questions.

Despite his sinful past, Matthew was uniquely qualified to be a disciple. He was an accurate record keeper and keen observer of people. He captured the smallest details. He was an avid disciple of Jesus' teachings. Those traits served him well when he wrote the Gospel of Matthew some 20 years later.

On the same day Jesus invited Matthew to follow him, Matthew threw a great farewell feast in his home in Capernaum, inviting his friends so they could meet

Jesus too. From that time on, instead of collecting tax money, Matthew collected souls for the kingdom of God.

The Apostle John (the green color indicates brothers) had a brother; **James**. Both were sons of Zebedee, and were fishermen. In Mark 3: 16-19, Jesus called them “sons of thunder.” This isn’t explained but we do know that John (meaning; God is gracious) was the most prolific of the Gospel writers.

John is regarded as the author of the Gospel of John, the epistles 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John, and the Book of Revelation. He is referred to as “the Disciple whom Jesus loved” in John 13: 23, and Jesus tasked him with caring for His mother when on the cross in John 21: 7. John lived into the AD 90s and seems to be the only disciple who died of old age, the rest were martyred.

Paul (originally Saul and not of the original 12) refers to Peter, James, and John as pillars of the church because they played an integral role in supporting, building up, and maintaining the Christian movement. The early church stood on their leadership. When there were disputes about how exactly Christians should behave and what following Jesus looked like, the church appealed to these three original disciples of Jesus, who had witnessed more of his personal ministry than anyone else. There are three times in the gospels where Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus do things no one else saw:

- Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead, and he didn’t allow anyone else to watch besides these three (Mark 5:37).
- Jesus took them up to a mountaintop, where he was transfigured before them. Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah, and only these three people witnessed his glory (Matthew 17:1–11, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36).
- On the night of his betrayal, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus took these three with him to pray, and asked them to keep watch (Matthew 26:36–46).

The Apostle James is one of two “James” called by Jesus. This James, the brother of **John**; fishermen with their father Zebedee on the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus called them, they immediately left their father and their business to follow Him. James was probably the older of the two brothers because he is always mentioned first. His name means ‘to follow.’

Three times James, John, and Peter were invited by Jesus to witness events no one else saw. But James was not above making mistakes. When a Samaritan village rejected Jesus, he and John wanted to call down fire from heaven upon the place. James' zeal for Jesus resulted in his being the first of the twelve apostles to be martyred. He was killed with the sword on order of King Herod Agrippa I of Judea, about 44 A.D., in a general persecution of the early church.

James' zeal and commitment may have made him more direct with those who took their faith casually. The book of James looks a bit like the Old Testament book of Proverbs dressed up in New Testament clothes. Its consistent focus is on practical action in the life of faith, encouraging God's people to ACT like God's people. The pages of James are filled with direct commands to pursue a life of holiness. He makes no excuses for those who do not measure up. In the mind of this early church leader, Christians evidence their faith by walking in certain ways and not in others. For James, a faith that does not produce real life change is a faith that is worthless (James 2:17). He is the only Apostle whose martyrdom is recorded in the Bible (Acts 12:2).

Jude, the Apostle (Thaddeus) is most readily identified as the writer of the NT book of Jude and the half-brother of **Jesus**. He identified himself as the "brother of James" (Jude 1:1), and Matthew 13:55 records the names of the brothers of Jesus as James and Judas (Jude is a shortened version of Judas). Like his older brother James, Jude did not place his faith in Jesus while the Lord was still alive. Only after the crucifixion and resurrection did the scales fall from Jude's eyes and he became a follower.

By character, he was an intense and violent Nationalist (as was Simon the Zealot) with the dream of world power and domination by the Chosen People. In John 14: 22 he asked Jesus at the Last Supper, "**But Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?**" Judas Thaddeus was interested in making Christ known to the world; not as a suffering Savior, but as ruling King. We can see plainly from the answer Jesus gave him, that the way of power can never be substituted for the way of love.

1 Corinthians 9:5 notes that that the Lord's brothers and their wives took missionary journeys. From this scant portrait, we begin to picture Jude as a man who lived in skepticism for a time but eventually came to a powerful faith in

Jesus. Jude traveled on behalf of the gospel—telling the story in city after city with his name Judas butting up against that of Judas Iscariot—he would stand as a living example of faithfulness, a stark contrast to the betrayer.

Jude’s writing is brief and edgy. It communicates the urgency of condemning false teachers and removing them from the church (a lesson some congregations could learn TODAY!). Jude did not waste words and space dancing around the issue. He saw within the church people and practices that were worthy of condemnation, including rejecting authority and seeking to please themselves. In response to these errors, Jude created biblical imagery to make clear what he thought of it all—anything from Cain killing his brother Abel to the punishment of the sinful people who populated Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 1:7, 11).

Jude exposed the false teachers that had infiltrated the Christian community, and encouraged Christians to stand firm in the faith; to fight for the truth. Jude thought it important that believers stand against those working against Jesus Christ. Believers were to do this by remembering the teaching of the apostles, building each other up in the faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, and keeping themselves in the love of God (Jude 1:17, 20–21). Scholars believe Jude was martyred, along with Simon, in 65 AD.

The Apostle, James, the second “James” called by Jesus, was the son of Alphaeus. He is the younger brother of the Apostle, Jude. He is only mentioned in the four lists of apostles. So, all we know for sure about him is that he had a common name and he was the son of someone named Alphaeus. Pretty much everything else we “know” about him is speculation. However, in the absence of any negative statements in scripture, we can assume that he was faithful and present with the rest of the Apostles as they followed Jesus.

The Apostle, Simon (Peter) and his brother, **Andrew**, were fishermen. Jesus called to them to ‘**follow me and I’ll make you fishers of men.**’ Simon, who Jesus renamed Peter (meaning Rock) became a gifted preacher and bold leader. In the Gospels, he is portrayed as impetuous, always speaking and acting impulsively, and in Acts, his decisiveness made him one the early Christians turned to and relied upon.

Peter had preached the Gospel throughout the northern areas of Asia Minor to both Jews and Gentiles. In his letters to the churches, he spoke much about

persecution, especially that which would be suffered under Nero's reign (for more on Nero, see Bible study "Who Were The Famous Forty Wrestlers?" at www.PCBChurch.com). It's believed that Peter wrote his letters as the persecution under Nero was ramping up. He was arrested and martyred around AD 66-68.

In his letters (1 & 2 Peter), Peter focuses on the importance of believers bearing up under unjust suffering yet continuing to live well (1 Peter 2:20). The endurance to which Peter called these believers is similar to Job's; a man who suffered despite his righteousness. Peter maintained that this was the kind of true perseverance that God expects from His people.

Among the twelve, Peter was the leader. He stands out as a spokesman for all the twelve Apostles. It is he who asked the meaning of the difficult saying in Matthew 15:15. He who asked how often he must forgive and inquired about the reward for all of those who follow Jesus. He first confessed Jesus and declared Him as the Son of the Living God. He was at the Mount of Transfiguration.

It is he who saw Jairus' daughter raised to life. Yet, it is he who denied Christ after the Crucifixion. He was an Apostle and a missionary who poured out his life for his Lord. It is true, Peter had many faults, but he always had the saving grace of the loving heart. No matter how many times he had fallen and failed, he always recovered his courage and integrity.

Peter was martyred on a cross, but requested that he be crucified head downward for he was not worthy to die as his Lord had died.

The Apostle Andrew was **Simon Peter's** brother, also a fisherman. According to the Gospel of John, Andrew was the first disciple Jesus called, and while Peter gets all the credit for recognizing Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:13–20), Andrew not only brought Peter to Jesus, he told his brother that Jesus was the Messiah (John 1:41–42).

Whenever he and Peter are mentioned together, Andrew is always mentioned second, and he's referred to as Peter's brother—but Peter is never referred to as Andrew's brother, indicating that Andrew was either younger or less important. Andrew's name means 'man, or manly.'

The Apostle Bartholomew, Nathanael, son of Talmai, lived in Cana of Galilee. A number of scholars believe that he was the only one of the 12 disciples who came from royal blood, or noble birth. His name means Son of Tolmai or Talmai (2 Samuel 3:3). Talmai was king of Geshur whose daughter, Maacah, was the wife of David, mother of Absalom.

Matthew 1:45-51 recounts a miraculous encounter between Jesus and Nathanael:

45 Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” 46 “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.

“Come and see,” said Philip. 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” 48 “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” 49 Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

50 Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” 51 He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

Although the New Testament gives us very little information about him, Bartholomew's name (which means son of a farmer) appears with every list of the disciples (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13). This was not a first name, however; it was his second name. Along with his fellow apostle, Jude, Nathanael Bartholomew was one of the church's most adventurous missionaries. The Armenian Church claims him as founder; he is reputed to have been martyred for having converted Polymius, the King of Armenia to Christianity.

Philip, the Apostle, is only mentioned eight times in the New Testament, four of which are the lists of apostles. There are four different men named Philip mentioned in the Bible. Phillip was the name of two of King Herod the Great's sons by different wives (Luke 3:1 and Matthew 14:3). The other two Philips in the Bible were servants of Christ and instrumental in the early church: Philip the

disciple and apostle of Christ, and Philip the evangelist. The name means 'one who loves horses.'

The Apostle named Philip was, along with Peter and Andrew, from Bethsaida in Galilee (John 1:44; 12:21). Jesus called Philip, who had been a disciple of John the Baptist's (John 1:43), and then Philip and told Nathanael about Jesus. Nathanael also became Jesus' disciple. The Bible does not contain much biographical detail about Philip or any of the other disciples, but John records several times when Philip spoke to Jesus.

Philip's first recorded act as a disciple of Jesus was to tell his friend Nathanael. Later, Philip was approached by some Gentiles, more specifically, Greeks from Bethsaida who asked Philip to introduce them to Jesus (John 12:20–22). Philip was the disciple who calculated the amount of money it would take to feed the 5,000 (John 6:7). After the Last Supper, Philip requested that Jesus show them the Father, leading to Jesus' statement, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:8–9). The last time the Bible mentions the disciple Philip is as one of those gathered in Jerusalem to pray after the Lord's ascension (Acts 1:13). Scholars believe that Philip went to Phrygia (in modern-day Turkey) as a missionary and was martyred there in Hierapolis.

The Apostle, Simon (the Zealot), was intensely focused on Israel's independence and ridding Jerusalem of Roman rule - at the risk of being crucified. A zealot is anyone who fervently supports a particular cause. The zealots hoped to accomplish this by inciting the people to rebellion, driving out the Romans and establishing a Mosaic theocracy. The zealots also targeted Jews who were sympathetic to Rome. Roman rulers were vigilant and brutal in quelling any such uprisings....so were the ruling elites of the Jews who were deeply involved with the Roman rulers. (See Bible Study "Jesus Was Accused of Inciting a Civil War" at www.PCBChurch.com)

Scholars assume that Simon's priorities changed as he submitted to Jesus' teaching, which included "giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" (Matthew 22:21), and an emphasis on the kingdom of God, which was not of this world and was not established by use of violence and the force of arms (John 18:36). Simon would also have been informed by Jesus' revealing that the temple would be

destroyed and Jerusalem would be completely overrun by the Gentiles (Luke 21:5–6, 20–24).

Keeping the “nickname” of “the Zealot” may simply have been a way to distinguish him from the other Simon (who later came to be known as Peter) in Jesus’ group. Perhaps, in later years, he was known to be zealous for the gospel. Not much is known about Simon and it is assumed that he preached the gospel in Persia and was ultimately martyred for refusing to sacrifice to the sun god.

Interestingly, Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector for Rome, and Jude and Simon; Zealots, who sought to overthrow Rome. Opposite ends of the political spectrum were represented. Because of their greater allegiance to Jesus, they became brothers and coworkers for the Gospel. (see Bible study “Jesus Was Accused Of Inciting a Civil War at www.PCBChurch.com)

Thomas the Apostle is often referred to as “Doubting Thomas.” Thomas famously doubted Jesus’ resurrection, telling the other disciples, **“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25)**. Jesus then appeared and offered to let him do just that.

Upon seeing Jesus in the flesh with his own eyes (and possibly touching the wounds), Thomas proclaimed, **“My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)**. Jesus responded with one of the most powerful and prophetic statements about faith in all of Scripture: **“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29)**.

Though Thomas (which means twin) is not a major character in the Bible, he was always present with the others, and close to Jesus. Upon learning of the Death of Lazarus (John 11:1–16), Jesus told the others to return to Judea. They tried to prevent Jesus from going to Lazarus because the people there were ready to stone Him. **“Then Thomas (also known as Didymus, which means twin) said to the rest of the disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’ John 11:16**

After predicting his betrayal and Peter’s eventual denial of him, Jesus comforts his disciples by telling them he is going to prepare a place for them, and that they know the way to the place he is going. Thomas said **“Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” John 14: 5**. Jesus replied **“I am**

the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him.” John 14: 6-7

The Apostle, Judas Iscariot is famously known as the traitor. He was the son of Simon who lived in Kerieth of Judah. Judas means ‘praise,’ and Iscariot means ‘man of Kerieth.’

Judas, was the most difficult to understand of all the characters of the New Testament. For most of us, it is inscrutable to see how anyone who was so close to Jesus, who saw so many miracles and heard so much of the Master's teaching could ever betray him into the hands of his enemies. We see the corruption in his heart in John 12:4-6 when he protested the use of expensive perfume to anoint Jesus. He betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver and afterwards hanged himself (Matthew 26:14,16).

Yet, we see the overwhelming tide of vicious treatment of Christians and are well warned that each of us has the potential to act as Judas did. Further, each time we regard sin in our heart, we are just as guilty as Judas. This Apostle serves as a lasting testimony to our need of a Savior!

His name appears in three lists of the 12 Apostles (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:19). It is said that Judas came from Judah near Jericho. He was a Judean and the rest of the disciples were Galileans. He was the treasurer of the band and among the outspoken leaders. No one can deny that Judas was a covetous man and at times he used his position as treasurer to pilfer from the common purse.

So, why did Jesus choose Judas? It was so that the Scriptures would be fulfilled. In Jesus’s prayer in **John 17**, Jesus says **“While I was with them, I kept them in Your name, which You have given me, I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.”**

Jesus was not surprised by Judas’s betrayal. As prophesied in **Zechariah 11:12-13** **“12 I told them, “If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.” So, they paid me thirty pieces of silver. 13 And the Lord said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—the handsome price at which they valued me! So, I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the Lord.”**

Jesus chose Judas knowing fully that he had a wicked and unbelieving heart that would lead to betrayal (John 6:64; 70-71) in fulfillment of the Scriptures. Matthew 27: 3-10 Gives us a vivid picture of the prophesy and fulfillment of Judas' role in the Father's grand plan to redeem humanity from sin.

Conclusion

When I look at the original Apostles, I see 12 rather average, everyday people. If our society had selected men to fulfill such influential roles, we'd have sought out those with great human capacity: wealth, power, connections, good looks, etc. Instead, they were from every walk of life; fishermen, a tax collector, a son of an important family, a political zealot; but Jesus saw one thing in each that caught His eye; COMMITMENT.

When Jesus called them, they dropped their way of life and "immediately" followed! Perhaps you know a missionary who has done the same. Maybe you've seen this unexplainable drive erupt in someone who MUST go to a far land to serve a people the rest of us can only know by consulting an encyclopedia. What caught Jesus' eye was their desire to carry the message of the risen Messiah to the far reaches of the known world.

Jeremiah 17:10 "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds."

When Jesus, surrounded by a multitude of 'faithful followers' said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me', many went away. They lacked the commitment. They loved the healings, the teachings, the bread and the fish, but did not care for the commitment part. Commitment is what was so extraordinary about these 12 men.

I wonder; what might God NOT be doing in the lives of Christians and Christian churches today because of the lack of commitment?