

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint James the Less

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint James the Less

Apostle of Christ, son of Alphaeus, whom Latin tradition identifies with James, the brother of the Lord.

Feast day	May 3
Died	c. 62, Jerusalem
Era	1st century
Patron saint of	fullers

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint James the Less

Saint James the Less is one of the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus. The Gospels call him "James, the son of Alphaeus," which distinguishes him from James the son of Zebedee, known as James the Greater. Latin tradition identifies him with James, "the brother of the Lord" and leader of the Church in Jerusalem, who died a martyr around the year 62, and attributes to him the Letter of James. His relics are venerated in Rome, in the Basilica of the Holy Apostles, together with those of Saint Philip. The two apostles share a feast on May 3.

Who was Saint James the Less?

The New Testament names James, son of Alphaeus, in all four lists of the Twelve (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). He always stands at the head of the last group of four apostles, alongside Jude (or Thaddeus), Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot. The Gospels attribute to him no words and no personal episode. He belongs to those who followed Jesus, listened to Him, were sent on mission and saw the risen Lord, without their names being attached to any particular scene.

The name "the Less" comes from the Gospel of Mark, which speaks of "James the Little" when listing the women present at the foot of the cross: among them stood "Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joseph" (Mark 15:40, Douay-Rheims). The word may refer to small stature, to youth, or simply serve to distinguish this apostle from the other James, who was called earlier. An ancient tradition also links him to Mary, the wife of Clopas, whom the Gospel of John places near the cross.

Key dates

- **c. 28-30**: Chosen by Jesus among the Twelve.

- **c. 30**: Witness of the Passion, at which his mother is present, and of the appearances of the risen Lord.
- **After Pentecost**: According to Latin tradition, he leads the Church of Jerusalem.
- **c. 49**: Council of Jerusalem, where the brother of the Lord speaks (Acts 15).
- **62**: Martyrdom in Jerusalem, reported by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.
- **Sixth century**: His relics are placed in Rome in the Basilica of the Holy Apostles.
- **1969**: The feast of Saints Philip and James is set on May 3.

One James or several?

The New Testament knows several men named James, a very common name among the Jews of the time (it is the same name as Jacob). Besides the son of Zebedee and the son of Alphaeus, it mentions James, "the brother of the Lord," who after Easter became a leading figure in the community of Jerusalem and whom Saint Paul met (Galatians 1:19).

Since Saint Jerome, at the end of the fourth century, the Western tradition has identified these last two: James, son of Alphaeus, would be the "brother," that is, the close relative or cousin, of Jesus. The Eastern Churches, on the other hand, distinguish them and celebrate them on different days. Many modern scholars lean toward two distinct people, but the question remains open. For most of what is known about the leader of the Church of Jerusalem, his letter and his martyrdom, see the page on Saint James the Just.

The apostle celebrated with Saint Philip

In the sixth century, relics of Saint James and Saint Philip were brought to Rome. Pope Pelagius I began building a basilica in honor of the apostles, which his successor John III completed and consecrated. This is the origin of their shared feast, long celebrated on May 1, the anniversary of that dedication.

In 1955, when Pius XII established the feast of Saint Joseph the Worker on May 1, their feast moved to May 11, and then, with the reform of the calendar in 1969, to May 3. The Basilica of the Holy Apostles, near Piazza Venezia, still keeps the relics of the two apostles in its confessio. Other churches around the world are placed under their joint patronage, such as the cathedral of Montevideo, in Uruguay.

What tradition remembers

Following the Western identification, tradition gave James the Less the features of the brother of the Lord: a man of prayer and great austerity, so often on his knees that they became as hard as a camel's, according to the account of Hegesippus preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea. The same account says that he was thrown down from the Temple, stoned and finally struck with a fuller's club, while praying for his executioners. In the Middle Ages, the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine took up these traditions and added that he looked so much like Jesus that people confused them.

Why is Saint James the Less the patron saint of fullers?

His patronage comes from the tradition of his martyrdom. A fuller was a worker who beat and cleaned woolen cloth with a heavy club, and according to the ancient account it was with such a club that James received the final blow. Fullers, and later other trades of the cloth industry, traditionally took him as their patron. He is also prayed to for perseverance in faith, for those whose service remains hidden, and for craftsmen and workers.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint James the Less in art

- **The fuller's club or staff**, his usual attribute, recalling his martyrdom.
- **A book**, for the Letter that bears his name.
- **A face resembling Christ's**, in some works inspired by the *Golden Legend*.
- In series of the twelve apostles, he is often paired with **Saint Philip**.

Where to pray to Saint James the Less

- **Rome**: the Basilica of the Holy Apostles (Santi Apostoli), where his relics rest with those of Saint Philip.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, where his statue belongs to the great series of apostles in the nave.
- **Jerusalem**: the Armenian Cathedral of Saint James, linked by tradition to the brother of the Lord.

Saint James the Less is an apostle without great stories: he followed Jesus, was sent, and held firm to the end. Whether one sees in him the discreet son of Alphaeus or the pastor of Jerusalem, his name stays linked to a concrete faith that shows itself in deeds. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint James the Less and the novena to Saint James the Less, from April 24 to May 2.



The confessio of the Basilica of the Holy Apostles in Rome.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint James the Less, Apostle

Saint James the Less is prayed to throughout the Church on May 3, together with Saint Philip. The liturgy of that day offers a prayer of very ancient form, and Latin tradition, which attributes the Letter of James to him, allows us to pray with his own words. Below you will find the prayer of the Mass, a passage from the Letter of James, and then an original prayer.

The prayer of the Mass of May 3

In the Roman Missal, the opening prayer (the Collect) of the feast of Saints Philip and James asks, in substance, that God, who gladdens us each year with the feast of these two apostles, would grant us through their prayers a share in the Passion and Resurrection of His only Son, so that we may one day behold His glory. It is a beautiful way to pray with them: to ask to follow Christ all the way, as they did.

A word from the Letter of James

> *"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."*

Source: Letter of James 1:22, Douay-Rheims translation. Latin tradition attributes this letter to James, the brother of the Lord, whom it identifies with the apostle son of Alphaeus.



Saint James the Less in prayer.

Prayer to Saint James the Less

Saint James, apostle of the Lord, you were chosen among the Twelve, yet the Gospel did not record your words: teach me the quiet faithfulness of those who follow Jesus day after day.

Your mother stood at the foot of the cross: help me not to run away when those I love are suffering, but to stay close to them in their trials.

Tradition honors you as the shepherd of Jerusalem, a man of prayer and justice: obtain for me a faith that shows itself in deeds, a tongue held in check and a heart open to the poor.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Present it to the Lord with Saint Philip, your companion on your feast day.

Keep me faithful to the end, as you were faithful even to martyrdom. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

- **On May 3**, the feast of Saints Philip and James.
- **When your faith feels tired** and you need the grace of perseverance.
- **For those whose service goes unnoticed**, at home, at work or in the parish.
- **For craftsmen and workers**, especially in the textile trades, which traditionally took him as patron.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint James the Less from April 24 to May 2, and read the life of Saint James the Less.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint James the Less

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by what the Gospels and tradition tell of Saint James the Less, apostle and son of Alphaeus. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on the eve of his feast, begin on April 24; it ends on May 2, the day before the feast of Saints Philip and James on May 3. It can also be prayed at any time of year, for perseverance in faith or for a hidden service you have been given.

The Gospels record no words of James the Less. His holiness is that of an apostle who simply stayed: he was called, he followed, he was sent, and he remained faithful to the end. These nine days walk with him from his call to his martyrdom.

Latin tradition identifies him with James, the brother of the Lord, who led the Church of Jerusalem; many scholars today see two different men. This novena follows the Western tradition celebrated in the liturgy of May 3, while remembering that the Gospels say little about him. What they do say is enough to pray with.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The suggested act helps you carry the prayer into your day. If you can, read the Gospel or Letter passage mentioned. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day.

Day 1: Called by name

Jesus went up the mountain, prayed and called the Twelve by name. James, son of Alphaeus, was among them (Mark 3:13-18). Before any mission, there is a call.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you know my name and you call me. Help me to hear your voice and to answer it.

Today: Remember a moment when you felt called by God, and thank Him for it.

Day 2: The last of the list

James always appears in the last group of the apostles, and the Gospels give him no scene of his own. Yet he was chosen just as much as Peter or John. In the eyes of Jesus, there is no second rank among those He calls.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the need to be noticed. Let it be enough for me to be yours.

Today: Do a good deed without anyone knowing.

Day 3: Listening to the Master

For months, James walked with Jesus, heard His parables and watched Him heal. Discipleship begins with listening.

Prayer: Lord, open my ears and my heart to your Word. Teach me to listen before I speak.

Today: Read one chapter of a Gospel slowly.

Day 4: Sent on mission

Jesus sent the Twelve two by two to proclaim the Kingdom and heal the sick. James went out with nothing but trust.

Prayer: Lord, send me to those you want to reach through me, and give me trust in your providence.

Today: Speak of your faith simply to someone, or invite someone to Mass.

Day 5: A mother at the cross

Mark tells us that "Mary the mother of James the Less" stood near the cross. A faithful mother kept watch when most disciples had fled.

Prayer: Lord, bless all mothers who stand by their children in suffering. Give me the courage to stay near those who suffer.

Today: Visit or call someone who is sick or grieving.

Day 6: Witness of the Resurrection

With the other apostles, James saw the risen Lord. From that moment, his life belonged to the good news of Easter.

Prayer: Risen Lord, strengthen my faith in your victory over death. Make me a witness of your joy.

Today: Pray for someone who has lost hope.

Day 7: A faith that acts

The Letter that tradition attributes to him says: "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22). Faith is shown by works, in the way we treat the poor, the sick and our neighbors.

Prayer: Lord, may my faith not remain words. Make it bear fruit in concrete charity.

Today: Help a person in need in a practical way.

Day 8: On his knees

Tradition says his knees became as hard as a camel's from long hours of prayer. His strength came from his prayer.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to pray with perseverance, even when I feel nothing.

Today: Kneel for a few minutes of prayer, at home or in a church.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

According to the ancient account, James died a martyr in Jerusalem, praying for those who struck him. He followed his Master to the very end.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint James, keep me faithful and teach me to forgive. Amen.

Today: Pray by name for someone who has hurt you.

Closing prayer

> *Saint James the Less, apostle of the Lord, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have carried. You followed Jesus without seeking to be seen, you stood firm in prayer and you gave your life for Him. Obtain for me a faith that acts, a persevering prayer and the grace to remain faithful to the end. With Saint Philip, pray for the whole Church. Amen.*

Read the life of Saint James the Less or the prayer to Saint James the Less.

Credits and sources

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