

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART FIVE

The mission of the King to establish His kingdom in the hearts of men had begun but it was inevitable that He would immediately be opposed by the ‘ruler of this world’, the Devil.(Jn.12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph.2:2) He had entered enemy territory and declared war! It was interesting that the first battlefield would be the same wilderness where John had begun his campaign with the weapon with which this war is fought, the word of God.(Eph.6:17) There were no armies in the wilderness. The conflict was and always has been one to one, Christ and Satan. Jesus was led by the Spirit to the battle as He was led in every moment of His life by the Spirit. The secret of His victory was not in who He was but on whom He depended. The secret of victory for us is the same. Forty days and forty nights was a familiar time from many Bible stories with a common theme.(Gen.7:4; Ex.24:18; I Sam.17:16; I Kgs.19:8; Ezek.4:6; Jon.3:4; Acts.1:3)

The first temptation began with a doubt, ‘If...’, just as Eve’s temptation began with, ‘Has God said...?’(Gen.3:1) If the Devil can persuade us to doubt God’s word and our relationship with Him, we become dangerously vulnerable. We do not need to see the miraculous to be certain. The Spirit witnesses in our hearts to the truth of the whole Bible. Jesus answered in exactly this way. The word was His totally satisfying food.(4:1-4)

The second temptation was equally subtle. Again it began with ‘If...’ This time it was supported by an impressive quote from Psalm 91:11,12 that appeared to give Jesus a complete free hand to do spectacular stunts to impress an audience. But a vital line was missing, ‘to guard you in all your ways.’ Jesus’ ways were intended to be the ways in which the Father led Him as He depended entirely on His Father. (Lk.22:42) Omission or alteration of the word denies God’s inspiration of the whole Bible, just as surely as the Devil denied the truth in Gen.3:4. Again Jesus rebuked Satan from scripture for daring to tempt God.(4:5-7)

The final temptation offered Jesus an alternative to the cross as the easy route to ruling the world, just as the Devil had offered another way to Adam and Eve, ‘You will be like God, knowing good and evil.’(Gen.3:5) For the third time Jesus effectively used the ‘sword’, the word of God, to establish firmly that worship belongs only to God. For the moment the Devil left Him alone.(4:8-11) Satan attacks periodically rather than constantly to maintain the element of surprise, hoping to catch us off guard. Angels ministered to Jesus, presumably nourishing His body, as they did in the Garden of Gethsemane.(Lk.22:43)

The three attacks corresponded to the Devil’s three strategies described in I John 2:16, ‘the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life.’

After the battle in the desert, the next scene of conflict was Capernaum, a pleasant little town on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. One might have expected Jesus to have moved the war with Satan straight on to Jerusalem, the city from which David had reigned. He had important work to do first, selecting and training His cabinet, the apostles. This had been promised by Isaiah,(9:1,2) as the first place in which the light

of the world would be switched on. The King's message was exactly the same as His herald's, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'(4:12-17)

The reason for choosing Capernaum as His first base now became apparent. It was the home of His first four disciples, two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John. Jesus had already met the first pair when they came to listen to John the Baptist.(Jn.1:40-42) He now came looking for them in their place of work, the seashore, just as Jesus normally comes looking for us in our everyday lives. He commanded them to follow Him and they immediately obeyed just as Joseph had immediately obeyed the command to go to Egypt.(2:14) All four responded by leaving nets, boats and father – their work, their most valuable possessions and their families. They were called in future to catch men instead of fish.(4:18-22) Fishing would often be used in future as an illustration of evangelism.(Lk.5:10; Matt.13:47; 17:27)

From Capernaum, Jesus moved around Galilee going first to synagogues as Paul and Barnabas would do later.(Acts 13:5,14) As the places where the Bible was read and supposedly believed, they were the obvious starting point. He announced the good news that the restored kingdom promised in the Old Testament was about to begin. He demonstrated His authority as King by healing every kind of disease and sickness, including spiritual, mental and physical problems. Vast crowds were drawn not just from Israel but from further afield, again by the magnetism of a man through whom God was clearly speaking.(4:23-25)

After choosing His first cabinet members, the next priority was to announce the policy of His government. It was revolutionary!

5:1-9 Q.1 Why, when Jesus saw a crowd, did He take His disciples away up a mountain instead of speaking to the multitude? 'Blessed' means that God has given us what we need. Each 'blessed' links an attitude in us to a consequence from God. Explain and illustrate how each attitude leads to a given result.

5:10-16 Q.2 How will the people around us react when they see God's blessing shown in us? What two pictures did Jesus use to illustrate what being 'blessed' can mean in practical terms when we face opposition? How do these pictures work out in real life?

5:17-26 Q.3 Does being 'blessed' through Christ mean that the Old Testament Law no longer applies? How could our righteousness as Jesus' followers surpass that of religious people? What is the first example Jesus used of a greater righteousness than that required by the Law? What clue does this example give us regarding the policy of Jesus' government as the King in us?

5:27-48 Q.4 What five further examples did Jesus use of a greater righteousness than demanded by the Law? In each case note first what the Law said, then the new attitude in us which being 'blessed' will produce. What aspect of daily life is this new attitude going to affect? How would this solve human problems which the Law fails to solve? Is it realistic to expect people to behave in this new way? If not what revolutionary new policy was the King proposing? Can we be perfect? If not who can? How do you answer people who say, 'I live by the Sermon on the Mount.'?