

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

After Jesus had spent many chapters preparing His followers for the work of His kingdom, they were ready for a dramatic demonstration of what it meant that the King of Heaven had, for thirty three years, taken on a human body. Just six days after Peter had been rebuked for letting the Devil use him to try to entice Jesus to avoid the cross, Jesus gave Peter and two other disciples, James and John, the thundering brothers,(Mk.3:17) an immense privilege they would never forget. Together they climbed yet another mountain.(5:1; 14:23; 15:29) Before their eyes He was transfigured by a light which came from within so that His face shone and His clothes glowed brilliantly. The Greek word for transfigure or transform, ‘metamorphoo’, is used today in our English word, metamorphosis, to describe the miracle of inner change by which a caterpillar becomes, first, a chrysalis and then a beautiful butterfly with power to rise above the world it once crawled across. The same word is used to encourage us to let God change, first our minds, and then our behaviour, when we present our bodies to Him.(Rom.12:1,2; II Cor.3:18) This is not intended to be just a once in a lifetime event but a normal, daily, Christian experience.(17:1,2)

Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus about His coming crucifixion. (Lk.9:31) When the Holy Spirit is allowed to transform our thinking, the Bible and its characters come alive for us also. Moses had been up a mountain in the presence of God and come back down glowing.(Exod.34:29) Elijah had known the power of God to show Himself to His people on another mountain.(I Kgs.18) Both had many opportunities in their teaching and lives to foreshadow the future cross of Jesus. Now at last what they had promised was about to happen. Peter, thinking perhaps that this was the fulfilment of the feast of Tabernacles,(Lev.23:33-44) wanted to build huts for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, hoping to perpetuate the experience or even create a tourist attraction. God corrected him from heaven in words very similar to those spoken at Jesus’ baptism,(3:17) “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!” The Father was confirming the identity of His Son to the disciples and at the same time confirming to the Lord Jesus His pleasure with His constant trust in Him. In the trials to come in which almost no-one, family, disciples, Jews or Romans would approve of what He was doing, it was so important to know that the Father was pleased. The same confidence liberates us from the dead hand of public disapproval.(17:3-5)

This was all too much for Jesus’ 3 friends who collapsed in terror. As usual He was there to touch and reassure them. When they looked up again it was all over. As they walked down the mountain, He told them to keep quiet about what they had seen until after the resurrection. Until it made sense, a description of the events of that day would only confuse others. One day it would be something to shout about.(II Pet.1:16-18) We are also better remaining silent about what does not yet make sense in the gospel, but when it is clear we should let everyone know.(17:6-9)

The three disciples were still struggling with the question raised by their public opinion poll in 16:14, provoked again by meeting Elijah in person on the mountain. Just where did Malachi’s promise of the coming again of Elijah fit into the plan?(Mal.4:5) Finally they got it! The promise of Elijah coming before the Messiah referred to John the Baptist of whom Elijah was a picture.(17:10-13)

From a glimpse of heaven on the mountain, they came down to a touch of hell on earth, a much loved son, demon-possessed, and probably badly scarred and brain damaged by the resulting fits. The remaining disciples had been unable to fix him. Jesus' response suggested that they had failed because in unbelief they had followed Jesus' healing formula but without Jesus. The Lord's presence and authority immediately removed the demon. How, the disciples wanted to know, could it be that simple? The problem was with their faith. It was not the size of their expectation but the direction of their faith. Seemingly they had trusted a method rather than Him. Tiny faith in the right direction has immense potential like the mustard seed, the smallest object with which they could make comparison. Prayer means we are listening to Him; fasting means nothing, not even food, is more important.(17:14-21)

Once again Jesus tried to prepare His disciples for what was coming,(12:40;16:21) and once again they heard only half of what He said. Their reaction of grief indicated they still could not believe in the resurrection.(17:22,23)

The Inland Revenue Department arrived looking for the two drachma tax from Peter and Jesus. Peter played for time with his evasive 'Yes' to a negative question. Jesus taught him an interesting paradox for handling the secular authorities. As sons of the King of heaven we are not bound by the rule of governments but nevertheless He wants us to respect them at least in their demands for money because the gospel, not tax reform, is our message. To show Peter that the IRD is a light matter for God, Jesus sent Peter fishing, this time with a line. The mouth of the first fish contained a stater, a coin worth exactly four drachma. God's intention is that out of the mouths of His people should come something of value to those around, exactly what is needed at that moment with nothing wasted.(17:24-27)

What hinders us being transformed with a touch of heaven, able to go among those already tasting hell and open our mouths with exactly what is needed? Chapter 18 explores the attitudes which get in the way.

18:1-6 Q.1 Who, according to Jesus, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? What hinders us from having the attitude Jesus described? What did He mean in practical terms by 'receiving one such child'? What would be the consequence of causing children to stumble? How do we do such things?

18:7-14 Q.2 A 'stumbling block' was the stick which held a trap open. How do our hands, feet or eyes cause others to become trapped? What did Jesus mean by cutting them off or plucking them out? How would this help children? How did His illustration about the 100 sheep explain His message?

18:15-17 Q.3 What common problem in others, and underlying attitude in us, which hinders transformation, was Jesus discussing in this next section? What three steps to dealing with both did He give? What positive attitude will be needed to make each step work? What is the real purpose of the process Jesus described? What practical problems result when we fail to solve problems with others in Jesus' way?

18:18-20 Q.4 These verses have often been used to encourage us to pray together. What however was the context in which Jesus first said them? How does this passage help to explain what Jesus meant in 16:19?

18:21-35 Q.5 How did Peter's question explain the real issue behind the sins of others against us? Did Jesus mean us to count the same offence 490 times? What is going to happen on the 491st occasion? What was the point of the story Jesus told Peter? How did it illustrate Matt.6:12?