

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN MARK'S GOSPEL - CHAPTER NINE

Have you ever had the feeling, 'I have been here before!?' Jesus must have had the experience on this day but unfortunately His disciples did not.

In many respects the story which begins chapter 8 seems like a repeat of the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6 but there are some striking differences. Last time the crowd were listening to Jesus for one day. This crowd had stayed for three whole days apparently indifferent to hunger for food, their hunger for truth being so great. Last time the disciples pointed out their need of food. This time it was Jesus who told the disciples they needed help. His compassion compelled Him to action as it always does. No-one suggested buying food on this occasion. The disciples had no solution to the problem having apparently forgotten what Jesus had done only a few weeks or months before, as we, faced with a crisis, so often forget what Jesus has done in His word and in our lives on past occasions. As before, the Lord asked them what they had available. This time they were slightly better equipped with 7 loaves and a few fish to be divided among 4000. As at the last picnic Jesus told the crowd to sit down, thanked His Father for what He was about to provide, and divided the bread and fish. He handed the food to the disciples to pass to the people, again emphasising the principle that His purpose is to serve the nations through us, His followers. As on the last occasion everyone was well fed including the disciples but this time there were only 7 baskets left over. He remains the same. His promises do not change but each situation in which they are to be worked out is somewhat different. We should expect Him to be the same but not necessarily to do the same in the same way.(8:1-10)

Jesus' familiar opponents appeared again demanding a miracle to prove who He was. Where had they been when 5000 and then 4000 had been fed or the sick had been cured? Jesus did not do magic to impress. As God He can do supernatural acts whenever He chooses, but not for our entertainment. Beware those who seek miracles for thrills!(8:11-13)

There is a wonderful irony about the story which follows of another sea trip across Galilee. By an oversight on the part of the disciples there were twelve of them plus Jesus in a small boat with one loaf. In the light of the two stories of the crowds being fed what could be the problem? Jesus seized a teaching opportunity with His warning about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Herodians. He used leaven in bread to illustrate the problem of false teaching hidden among the truth in our thinking which quickly corrupts the whole of our understanding.(Matt.16:12; I Cor.5:6-8) Two kinds of wrong teaching, one legalistic religion and the other a political philosophy, would continue to challenge the gospel throughout history. When they failed to catch on, Jesus took them back to the two miracles of feeding. There were two messages He wanted them to grasp. On a personal level any problem that depends on the presence of Jesus will be solved. Wrong teaching destroys the spiritual food we have to offer the world. Again the presence of Jesus will be our safeguard. With hard hearts we too will be slow to catch on.(8:14-21)

There was only one miracle of Jesus which was partial. The blind man received enough sight to mistake men for walking trees. Again the Lord used His saliva and His touch as with the deaf and dumb man in Mark 7:33. His Spirit and His presence change the way we see the world. A second touch from Jesus made his vision clear. The continuing presence of Jesus in our lives will increasingly sharpen our God-view of the world we live in. Like the freed demoniac in 5:19 the no-longer-blind man's testimony was to begin at home.(8:22-26)

Jesus asked His disciples two questions, the first general which they could all answer and got wrong, and the second intensely personal when only Peter dared to open his mouth but got it right. The Lord took the opportunity of open hearts to share the secret of His coming death and resurrection. Peter presumably listened to only the first half of what Jesus said and rebuked Him for what Peter saw as His defeatist attitude. It must have been a huge shock to Peter to go from success to failure in minutes as Jesus rebuked him as an agent of Satan for trying to avoid the cross.(8:27-33)

Jesus turned Peter's confusion into another teachable moment. Not only must He go to the cross but we need to join Him there if we are to be His disciples. The word used here for 'life' is not the word for 'spiritual life' but the word for 'soul'. We have a simple choice. We can hang on to our earthly existence with all its status and possessions or we can die to all that with Jesus and truly live. If Jesus is an embarrassment to us then sadly we will be an embarrassment to Him when He returns.(8:34-38)

If we do deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him, what happens next? Read on into chapter 9 for the answer. It is getting exciting! But first review your titles for chapter 8. Did you find a continuity of idea throughout the chapter? I am sure it is always there. Once again let us divide and title chapter 9. My suggestions are verses 1-8; 9-13; 14-29; 30-32; 33-37 and 38-50. Now let us examine each section in detail.

9:1-8 Q.1 Does verse 1 belong with chapter 8, chapter 9 - or both? Where did the light come from, heaven or within Jesus?(Jn.9:5; Mt.5:14-16) In what sense are we also to be transformed?(Rom. 12:2; II Cor.3:18) What is the essential condition for this to happen?(Mark 8:34) And how does it fulfil Mk.9:1?

Q.2 What did Moses and Elijah particularly have in common with Jesus?(Exod.33:29; I Kgs.18:36-38) What did the three of them talk about?(Lk.9:31) What was unusual about the way Moses and Elijah departed from the earth?(Dt.34:6; II Kgs.2:11) Had you been Peter, James or John what would you especially have learned from witnessing this conversation? If Jesus is transfiguring us by living within us, how does this affect our Bible study?

Q.3 What do you think Peter had in mind when he suggested building 3 tabernacles (huts) for Jesus, Moses and Elijah? When did the Jews normally do such things?(Lev.23:42) When had God spoken from a cloud before?(Exod.19:9; 33:9) Why had He done it that way? Why did He not just show Himself to people?(Exod.33:20) What was God's purpose in speaking to Peter, James and John in this way this time?

9:9-13 Q.4 This is now the fourth time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus has ordered people to keep quiet about Him.(Mark 5:43; 7:36; 8:30; 9:9) What do they all have in common? Why is it sometimes better not to talk about Jesus? What did they have to wait for before they started witnessing of Him? Why was this? Last time Jesus told His disciples about His coming death and resurrection, Peter had told Jesus off and was himself rebuked.(Mk.8:33) Now He again told them that He would rise from the dead. What was their reaction this time?

Q.5 Why did they ask about Elijah coming first?(Mal.4:5) What had the scribes, the experts of those days, missed in their understanding of the coming of the Messiah and the end of history? With whom did Jesus identify the return of Elijah to earth?(Matt.17:13) What had they done to him?(Mk.6:17-29) What did Jesus now explain about the coming of the Son of Man, the Messiah, that the experts had missed?(Ps.22; Ps.69; Isa.53) How would understanding this part of the Old Testament have helped them to grasp the meaning of the Transfiguration?

9:14-29 Q.6 What would the boy's parents have experienced through the condition of their son over the years? Now what would their reaction be to the inability of Jesus' disciples to help? How would the disciples have felt when they tried to copy Jesus and it did not work? And what would be the response of the crowd who watched and the scribe who argued? When Jesus moved in on the crowd of people what was the first thing He did? Why is that always a good place to start when feelings are running high? Why did He call them 'unbelieving'? Which of them had shown a lack of faith and in what way?

Q.7 When Jesus said "bring him to me!", how did the evil spirit in the boy react to that command? Why did Jesus ask the father to give Him a case history? As God didn't He know already? What response did this question bring from the father?

Q.8 What did Jesus want of the father? Surely the father's answer was not enough was it?(Lk.17:6) What does Jesus want of us when our faith is weak and uncertain? What was the consequence of the father's weak faith? What was the outcome when Jesus finally exercised His authority over the evil spirit?(I Jn.4:4) Why was it important for Jesus to forbid the spirit to enter the boy again?(Mt.12:43-45) The disciples wanted to know how they had got it wrong. What was the answer? What did Jesus mean?

9:30-32 Q.9 Why when Jesus was back in His home territory did He not want the crowds to know, according to v.31? Why is it important in leadership sometimes to have such breaks away from the crowds and alone with Jesus?. What was their reaction to Jesus spelling out the future last time?(8:31) How did they handle His news this time?

9:33-37 Q.10 Why do you think the disciples were embarrassed to tell Jesus about their heated discussion? Why do those in leadership often not have time for children, or those who are young in Christ? What test might we then use on ourselves to discover if we are really servant leaders?

9:38-50 Q.11 What was the second situation Jesus used to show how we may be mistaken about the responsibility of leaders? What wrong view of the Christian church lay behind the efforts of the disciples to keep everyone in their organization? What according to Jesus would be a more appropriate question to ask when we are wondering whether someone is really a servant of His who does not belong to our group? How can we easily hinder those who seek to serve Christ in a way that seems to us unusual?

Q.12 What did He now say would be another way to test the genuineness of someone else's service? How can this verse, and Matt.12:30, both be true? What was the third way Jesus gave to recognize those who are truly His servants. When we meet someone from a totally different church and cultural background from us what should we expect of them - and what can they expect of us? How do all three of these tests,(v.39-41) reveal more of the real nature of Christian leadership?

Q.13 What was the terrible warning Jesus gave against harming the young and the young in the faith? How do we cause the young to stumble? What would the hand, the foot and the eye represent to the people of Jesus' day? How can their misuse create a spiritual problem for a young child or young believer? How can we actually 'cut it off'?

Q.14 What would be the Lord's purpose in saying the same thing three times over in verses 44,46 and 48? What is the context of Isaiah's solemn warning at the very end of his book?(Isa.66:24) What period of time is he talking about?

Q.15 How had Jesus previously used salt as an illustration?(Matt.5:13) If one throws salt on a fire what happens to the fire and to the salt? What therefore does the Christian need to fear regarding hell or persecution? What according to the last phrase of verse 50 is the secret of being able to handle the fieriest situation the world can throw at us?