

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

Kings in those days needed a herald to introduce them. The herald of King Jesus was His cousin, John, known for obvious reasons as ‘the Baptist’. Luke, in telling the human aspect of the story, related the events leading to his birth. Matthew moved straight into describing John’s work. John was no well-dressed televangelist. His clothes and food were the meagre resources of the desert. His home was the Judean wilderness in the south-east of the country, a semi-desert of sand, rock, sparse vegetation, and riddled with caves. A thousand years before, David had taken refuge from King Saul with some of his men in one of those caves.(I Sam.24) In 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls, which included copies from around the time of Jesus of most of the books of the Old Testament, were found in caves in the same area. They were the library of the Qumran monastic community with whom John may have had contact, although there were important differences between his teaching and theirs.(3:1)

Despite his unsophisticated appearance and the inhospitable setting the whole population of Judea was drawn to John as to a magnet. The attraction was his simple, powerful message, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ God was commanding His people to change their minds and be ready for a new king to reign in their lives. John’s role had been promised in the book of Isaiah.(40:3) He was just the voice; Jesus would be the Word.(Jn.1:1) He was to prepare people for Jesus to come into their lives as we, today, are to do the same by our message and our lives. He used a new picture, baptism, to illustrate the meaning of what they had just done in acknowledging and turning from their sin. The practice of baptism by immersion in water, though not in the Old Testament, had been used by the Jews and others to represent cleansing from sin. Elisha had employed a similar picture in the cleansing of Naaman, the leper.(II Kgs.5). John, later Jesus, and then Paul would develop the symbolism of baptism to describe sharing Jesus’ death and resurrection.(Lk.12:50; Matt.28:19; Acts 1:5; Rom.6:3-11) The River Jordan was an ordinary little river with immense significance for the Jews. Here they had miraculously entered the Promised Land,(Josh.3) seen Elijah and Elisha part the waters,(II Kgs.2) and watched Elisha raise the borrowed axe-head.(II Kgs.6; Matt.3:2-6)

Among the crowds responding to John’s preaching were religious people whose motives in seeking baptism were doubtful. He recognised that their hearts had not changed because the fruit of repentance,(Gal.5:22,23) was not yet apparent in their lives. Religious practices and physical descent from Abraham were not evidence of repentance. Church going and a Christian family are not proof of new life in Christ. With the good news of the coming of the King, John was delivering a warning of the consequence, in a fiery judgement, of refusing to welcome Him. He contrasted his own human insignificance with the greatness of the one who was coming. He compared own humble practice of baptism in water with the awe-inspiring baptism in the Spirit that the King would carry out.(I Cor.12:13) The coming of the Spirit into our lives would bring a fire of determination to be His witnesses.(Acts 1:8; Matt.3:7-12)

The herald’s great moment finally arrived. The King came to meet John beside the Jordan. But instead of being asked to introduce Him to the waiting crowds, John was faced with a request which left him totally confused. Jesus asked John to baptise Him

too. John had been assuming that he would proclaim the sinless King to his repentant subjects. If anything Jesus should baptise him, not the other way round. Jesus explained that for Him, baptism would represent 'all righteousness'. He had come into the world not to rule His subjects yet, but to die for them and then to rise again to live in them as His Spirit. Baptism for Him was an outward symbol, not of sin being washed away, but of His righteousness, His perfect willingness to follow the Father's plan in sending Him to earth, by dying and rising again.(3:13-15)

The introduction eventually came, not from John, but from God in heaven. The Holy Spirit was sent from heaven to empower Him for His work.(Acts 10:38) 'Christ' or 'Messiah' means 'the Anointed One'. Old Testament kings, high priests and sometimes prophets had been anointed with oil which foreshadowed this day in history when Jesus would be anointed not with oil but with the Spirit. The Spirit was represented as a dove just as He had been when Noah sent out from the ark the dove who would return with the good news of a new world waiting to be possessed and enjoyed.(Gen.8:8-11) The Palestinian dove of mourning was famous for its faithfulness even beyond death to its mate. The voice of the Spirit from heaven identified Jesus to the waiting crowd as 'My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. It was God who verified who He was, not just the opinion of John. The confirmation that His Father was pleased with Him must have played over and over again in the mind of Jesus as He was disapproved of, at times, by His family, His disciples and the crowd to say nothing of the religious people and the Romans. It liberated Him to be who He was called to be. The same knowledge can liberate us from trying to please those around us when we are confident that God is pleased with us, not because of our performance but because of Jesus.(3:16,17)

The work of the King on earth was immediately attacked by the Prince of this world.

4:1-4 Q.1 What was the first temptation by the Devil? What kind of situation does it represent in our lives? Why would this temptation have seemed almost overwhelming? What else had happened previously in the Bible for 40 days and 40 nights? How does it link to this story? How was this temptation similar to the Devil's temptation of Eve in Gen.3? What secret was Jesus revealing by His answer?

4:5-7 Q.2 What does the second temptation correspond to in our lives today? How is it similar to the temptation of Eve? What was wrong with the Devil's quotation from Psalm 91:11,12? What did Jesus' response mean? How did it answer the question?

4:8-11 Q.3 How again is the third temptation like the Devil's technique in Gen.3? How might we fall for the same approach? What weapon did Jesus use to deal with all three temptations? Does the Devil really leave us alone?

4:12-17 Q.4 Why did Jesus' ministry begin in Galilee rather than in Jerusalem? What was the key point of Isaiah's prophecy in Isa.9:1,2? Why did Jesus begin with exactly the same message as John?

4:18-25 Q.5 What was so impressive about the response of Jesus' first four disciples to His call? To what did He call them? What different aspects were there to Jesus' ministry? Why did He draw such big crowds? Should we expect to be doing the same? And should we expect the same response?

