

Notes for “The Chosen” series (Season 3) small groups Pastor Barry Foster

The following notes offer some background information, brief explanations related to Scriptural content and context, and suggestions for things to look for when viewing the episode. One practical note: you may find that it is easier to understand what is being said if the captions are turned on when viewing the show.

Episode 2: “Two by Two”

This season’s second episode is packed: we have multiple themes interwoven within the storyline, some important background elements emphasized, new insights or developments with several lesser characters, and one key plot development that ties us to a significant passage of Scripture and a crucial step in Jesus’ training of the twelve disciples.

Throughout this series, one of the most important aspects of the historical background is the looming presence of Roman power in the form of government officials and soldiers who are tasked with keeping the peace, eliminating all threats to Roman rule, seeing that Roman law is upheld, and ensuring the efficient collection of taxes. Tension between the Romans and the Jews, who resent Roman governance and all that it stands for (especially idolatry), is always in the background. We see this tension becoming a key concern for both the disciples and the Romans as the growing numbers of crowds who are coming to see Jesus raise two potential threats: the possibility of a disruption to commerce and the public order and the perception that Jesus could be raising an army, either of which would provoke a swift Roman response to quash anything resembling an uprising.

There is also tension for the governors, who must balance the need to keep order and the need to avoid antagonizing the Jewish population, lest they provoke a violent reaction. In 6 CE, complaints from the Jewish leadership to Augustus, the Roman emperor, about Herod’s son, Archelaus, whom they accused of great cruelty, led to Archelaus being deposed as ethnarch. His example was not lost on later governors. However, the rise of Sejanus to power, beginning with his assuming command of the Praetorian Guard in 14 CE and culminating in his administration of the empire under Tiberias (26-31 CE) shifted attitudes among the governors. Sejanus was fiercely opposed to the Jews and sought to eliminate their power, and possibly to eradicate them completely. Under his direction, Roman governors increased their hostile actions toward the Jews. But he overstepped his bounds when he attempted to wrest the crown from Tiberias, with the result that he, his family, and those who supported him, were all executed. Pontius Pilate, who had been appointed to his position by Sejanus (or with his help), found himself (and all of his subordinates) in the position of needing to back off from their earlier position of unrestrained brutality in subduing the Jewish population in Syrian Palestine.

Two other points of interest with regard to the tension between the Jews and Rome are portrayed in this episode. (1) In season 2, we met Simon, the Zealot (now referred to as “Z” by the others). The Zealots are portrayed almost like ninjas, training as part of a secret order dedicating themselves to holy war using the first century equivalent of modern day terrorist techniques and military special forces training. Most of that is dramatic license in the fullest degree. The Zealots were definitely dedicated to holy war, but it is unlikely that they constituted a secret order. It is also unclear whether they existed to any significant degree prior to the uprising in the 60's, about thirty years after Jesus’ death. What is true, however, is that some of them were

known for attacking, even assassinating Romans and those who collaborated with them. They carried long knives or daggers, known as *sicae*, which were concealed in their cloaks, giving rise to the name of these attackers: *sicarii*.

(2) Gaius, whom we met early on as Matthew's assigned guard, is showing signs of growing interest in Jesus. He is a good example of the Roman centurions we meet in the New Testament, who are generally portrayed as decent, even good men, including several who are sympathetic to the Jewish nation and/or to Christian faith.

Some things to look for:

1. The title refers to the key plot development: the sending out of the Twelve in pairs to preach in the cities where Jesus will later follow. (See Matthew 10:1-42, Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6.) Note that the listings of the Twelve in the gospels vary somewhat in the order in which the disciples are named. The order of the names, therefore, cannot give us a basis for assuming who was paired with whom; all attempts to determine these pairings are therefore speculative. It appears that the writers have paired the disciples for dramatic effect.

2. Note, however, what Jesus commands them to do, his reasons for sending them, and what assurances he gives them.

3. The Egyptian woman who has been following with the disciples is identified as a Gentile. While this fits with an important thrust of the gospels, especially in Luke's gospel, it is a stretch to think that Gentiles were included among the first disciples who followed Jesus. (Had Jesus allowed this, the Pharisees would certainly have made this part of their accusations.) We do have evidence that Jesus ministered in areas and cities with large Gentile populations, including some direct encounters with Gentiles (see Mark 7:24-30; Luke 7:2-10), plus the references to his ministry in Samaria in John 4 and Luke 9:51-56. The evidence from Acts (and John 12:20-22) would indicate that it isn't until after his resurrection that any Gentile believers were added to the church, with the exception of some proselytes to Judaism, such as Nicolas (Acts 6:7)—but they would have been considered Israelites by virtue of their conversion.

Some questions to consider:

1. What do you think made Matthew's reconciliation to his family possible (according to this telling of the story)? What changed in Matthew? What changed in his family?

2. "Little James" finally voices a serious dilemma, a question that could be construed as a crisis point in his faith. Have you ever had a similar question? What do you think about the answer that the writers put in the mouth of Jesus?

3. What challenges do you see for us today with regard to Jesus' statement to the disciples that "*none of you are what you were*"?