

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 7: “Ears to Hear”

Tensions continue to build along with Jesus’ growing popularity in this episode, a dramatic development that mirrors both the gospel presentations (especially in Mark) and the actual historical situation in the life of Jesus. We see those tensions in the conflicts between Jews and Gentiles, between the Pharisees and Jesus, and even among the disciples themselves.

The episode begins with a scene picturing the celebration of Purim. This two-day festival celebrates the events recorded in the book of Esther: the rise of Esther to become queen of Persia, her intercession on behalf of her people, the wicked Haman’s attempts to exterminate the Jewish people, and God’s intervention through Esther to vindicate the Jews, condemn Haman to death, and allow the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies. The annual telling of the story includes stereotyped reading, responses, and gestures. For instance, every time Haman’s name is mentioned, everyone stamps their feet or twirls noisemakers to symbolize the eradication of his name.¹ The theme of victory over a hated oppressor provides an unspoken connection with Esther for the disciples and the Jewish people of the first century.

There are three primary subplots in this episode. (1) The first continues the story of the mission of Andrew and Philip to the Decapolis. We learn a little more about the reasons for the conflict that has exploded there between the Jews and the Gentiles, principally over a parable of Jesus which they repeated. (You can read the parable in Luke 14:16-24.) (2) The second concerns an event in Matthew’s back story—an older man who came to Matthew in his tax booth, having purchased the debts of his children and grandchildren to free them from Roman prosecution. He himself would be sent to a labor camp for his inability to pay his debts, but they would be exempt. This both mystifies and disturbs Matthew. (3) The third concerns Simon’s rage over the loss of his unborn child and his continued wrestling with the question of why Jesus did not prevent it from happening.

While it is not really a subplot *per se*, a fourth important aspect of this episode is the reminder that there were many in Israel who did not view Jesus positively. Some, like many of the Pharisees, viewed him as a false prophet, a sorcerer, and a con man. The Romans saw him either as a potential threat to public order or as a pitiful example of odd Jewish religious devotion, which they considered ridiculous and useless. Others, like Ramah’s father, simply didn’t believe Jesus.

Some things to look for:

1. Part of the story involves “prayer tassels” (Heb., *tzitzit*). These tassels were attached to the four corners of an inner cloak (Heb., *tallit*), worn by Jewish men once they reached the age of thirteen, when a boy became a “son of the commandment” (*bar Mitzvah*) and took upon himself the obligation to live according to *Torah*. The tassels had 613 fringes, representing the 613

commandments in the *Torah* (according to the rabbis), and were intended to remind a man of his obligation to both remember and keep all of the commandments.²

2. Matthew shows extreme modesty when he must undress at one point. While this may represent another of his character's unusual aversions to various aspects of social interaction, we should take note of the fact that modesty for both sexes was a feature of Jewish culture in the first century. The extent to which they went to guard personal modesty was something that distinguished them from many other cultures at the time. Among the Essenes (an extremely legalistic Jewish sect), for instance, a male was forbidden to even glance at another man who was urinating beside him; men were required to shield their genitals from the view of anyone else.

3. Simon Peter and John are paired for a time; this anticipates later developments after the resurrection in the book of Acts when we see the two disciples together in several significant contexts. The two men became the chief figures from the Twelve in the Jewish church, and, with Paul, the premier apostles for the post-apostolic church. (James, the brother of Jesus and the primary leader of the Jerusalem church in the years after the resurrection, was not one of the Twelve.)

4. The Roman soldier, Gaius, has a servant who becomes ill. This might well be foreshadowing a healing like the one recorded in Luke 7:1-10.

Some questions to consider:

1. The older man who comes to Matthew tells him that “*symbolic self-sacrifice is not against the Law.*” Why is this statement important in the context of the man's actions to eliminate his children's debts? What is its importance in the larger context of New Testament theology?

2. Have you ever considered what it would mean for God to remove your shame and to heal you from the damage of that shame?

3. What does it mean to have “*ears to hear*”? Why is that so important for understanding the parables of Jesus?

Endnotes

1. To learn how contemporary Jews understand and celebrate Purim, see https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/1362/jewish/How-to-Celebrate-Purim.htm.

2. For more information, see <https://www.learnreligions.com/tzitzit-and-tallit-2076788>.