

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 8: “Sustenance”

Heads up! This episode is 1 hour and 40 minutes in length, and not easily broken up into two separate viewings, due to the loss of continuity and coherence. Some options you might consider: (a) viewing the entire episode while taking notes, then discussing the episode at a later meeting; (b) starting early and adding an intermission; (c) breaking in the middle, but reviewing well before resuming at your next meeting. Discuss with your group what would be the best way to handle this episode for your people/setting.

As is often the case, the episode begins with a scene from prior history. In this case, we are taken to the court of King David, where the temple musicians, led by Asaph, have prepared a new psalm for the king. This song, Psalm 77 in our Bible, becomes a repeated motif running throughout the episode, connecting the various scenes in subtle but significant ways. (Consider reading the psalm aloud prior to viewing the show.)

We return to the setting from the previous episode: the disciples and Jesus have come to the region of the Decapolis and are met by a mixed crowd of Gentiles and Jews. Tensions are high, and the contempt of each group for the others is clearly portrayed. The crowds are demanding that Jesus explain himself and resolve their differences. He takes a different approach, with the result that they are captivated by his teaching, which consists mostly of asking questions and telling parables.

As we noted when looking at episode six, though he did not seek them out or purposely set himself to reach the Gentiles, the gospels point out that Jesus occasionally did minister to Gentiles, usually individuals. There is even the reference in John 4 to his ministry to the residents in Samaria. So, it is not impossible that some Gentiles might be in a mixed crowd to whom Jesus spoke. Nevertheless, both his message and ministry were directed to Jews. But what was clear was that part of his message to the Jews included parables and sayings indicating that Gentiles would be welcomed by God in his kingdom (e.g., Matthew 8:10-12; Luke 13:28-30).

A secondary subplot involves Eden’s grieving for the loss of her child, and Simon’s continued anger over that loss. The resolution for each of them and the healing for their pain comes independently, though the two are dramatically connected.

Two major miracles conclude the episode. The first is one of the two feeding miracles recorded in the gospels: the feeding of the 5,000 and a second one, the feeding of 4,000. You can read about the first in Matthew 13:13-21/Mark 6:32-44/Luke 9:10-17/John 6:1-13. The second one is found in Matthew 15:29-39/Mark 8:1-10. For those who wonder about exactly how Jesus multiplied the bread and fish, the writers have devised a clever and plausible solution.

The second miracle is Jesus walking on the water, which can be found in Matthew 14:22-33. Both the gospel account and our episode portray the mixture of superstition and belief that characterized the disciples’ response to this extraordinary miracle.

Some things to look for:

1. In Jerusalem, Rabbi Shmuel receives a messenger from the Decapolis, who reports that the influence of Greek philosophy is polluting the faith of the Jewish community there. Pharisees and Essenes represented two groups with similar viewpoints on this matter: they saw the growing acceptance among Jews of Greek ideas and customs (known as “Hellenization”) as a dangerous threat to the nation. Both groups stressed that Israel needed to repent and return to strict adherence to Torah, with the hope that if this happened, God would send the Messiah to deliver them from the rule of Gentile oppressors. Others, like Philo of Alexandria and Josephus attempted to interpret the Law in a way that was comprehensible to Greeks and Romans, and looked for ways to accommodate Greek philosophy and Gentile customs where possible.

2. Note how Jesus used his disciples to assist him in teaching the crowds by repeating what he said, so that those who were far off could hear. This helps us understand one way in which Jesus instilled his teaching in them, and shows us how it was possible for the disciples to memorize much of Jesus’ teaching and so preserve it for the future.

3. Eden’s cleansing bath takes place in a ritual pool, known as a *mikveh* (or *mikvah*). These were special pools, often in the synagogue, where the required ritual cleansings could be completed (such as following childbirth, menstruation, handling a corpse, etc.) The person would be completely immersed; prayers or blessings would be recited over the person by the attendant.¹

4. Psalm 77:16-19 is powerfully linked with both Eden’s cleansing ritual and Jesus’ walking on the sea to reach the disciples. Note, for instance, the references to the storm, to the trembling (or convulsing) of the waters, and to God walking along a path through the sea, though his footprints were not seen. (The psalmist originally intended a reference to God’s act of bringing Israel through the Red Sea, though the secondary reference to Jesus’ miracle is at least arguably legitimate.)

Some questions to consider:

1. The symbolism of cleansing through baptism (immersion) is not unique to Christian faith, though its meaning is. Have you experienced a powerful or dramatic transformation that was connected to your baptism? When you think about baptism, does it strike you as something memorable because of your experience with God or because of the setting, or some other reason?

2. Do you believe the miracles recorded in the gospels actually happened? Why or why not? Does it trouble you to consider the place of miracles in the ministry of Jesus and the early church? What about in the church today?

3. How does Simon’s final response to Jesus in this episode bring about his healing? What does that suggest to you when you think about people you know (including yourself) who are desperately hurting for valid reasons?

Endnotes

1. For information about ritual cleansings using a *mikveh* in modern Judaism, see <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-mikveh/>.