

Matthew 9:35-10:23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 9 verse 35 to chapter 10 verse 23. Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.

And he called to him his twelve disciples, and gave them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these.

First, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother. James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother. Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew the tax collector.

James the son of Alphaeus and Thaddeus. Simon the zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans.

But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse lepers.

[1 : 27] Cast out demons. You receive without paying. Give without pay. Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts. No bag for your journey.

Or two tunics or sandals or a staff. For the labourer deserves his food. In whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay there until you depart.

As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.

Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.

So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.

[2 : 34] When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak, or what you are to say. For what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the spirit of your father speaking through you.

Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake.

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. For truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

At the end of Matthew chapter 9, our passage is introduced by the fact that Jesus is going through all the cities and the villages, teaching in the synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, healing diseases, and afflictions.

The good news is that God is establishing his reign. The crowds, however, are like sheep without a shepherd. This description is one that can be found in the Old Testament. In 1 Kings chapter 22 verse 17, as a result of a rout in battle, Israel is described as like sheep without shepherds on the mountains.

[3 : 50] A more significant parallel can be found in Numbers chapter 27 verses 16 to 18, where Moses says to the Lord, Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.

So the Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him. In a similar way, Christ will go on to appoint 12 disciples to ensure that Israel is not left as sheep without a shepherd.

He will send out under-shepherds to guide these cities and these villages that he's been going through. A further important piece of Old Testament background can be found in Ezekiel chapter 34, verses 2 to 6, and then verses 11 to 16.

There God condemns the false shepherds of Israel, the ones who have not been faithful, who have left the people as if they are without a shepherd. And then he says that he will be their shepherd.

He will search for and restore the lost sheep. And he will bring them out and gather them from the various countries and bring them into their own land. He's going to feed them. He's going to heal those that are injured.

[5 : 08] He's going to protect them from predators. And he's going to judge the unfaithful. Having gone through the cities and towns, Jesus has seen the spiritual state of Israel. And in one respect, they're like sheep without a shepherd.

On the other hand, there's a plentiful harvest, but not enough people to go out and to reap and labour within it. And so Jesus is preparing people as shepherds, but also people to do the work of harvesters.

Moses gave authority to Joshua to lead the people, and Jesus now gives authority to the twelve to carry out a mission throughout the land. All that Jesus has just demonstrated in his actions in the last two chapters, which arguably restored a group of twelve people, he is commissioning his twelve disciples to perform.

The harvest is ready. It's time for division to occur. It's time for shepherds to be given to the lost sheep, to restore them, to heal them, to rescue them. And the twelve are labourers for the harvest and shepherds for the flock.

They are to continue the work that Jesus has started, according to the pattern that he has shown. The description that he gives them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal every disease and every affliction draws our mind back to chapter 4, verse 23, where it says, And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

[6 : 34] This is the same thing that Christ has done. Now he's commissioning his disciples to do the same. It's important that he chooses twelve. They are twelve patriarchs for a restored Israel.

At the beginning of the book of Numbers, in Numbers chapter 1, verses 1 to 16, there is the choice of twelve men to assist Moses, one from each of the tribes. Now the twelve here are not a substitute for, or a replacement for Israel.

Rather, they are the seed of a new Israel within the life of the old. And there's going to be a new Israel gathered around them, as Israel is reformed and revitalised.

The twelve are listed here. They're also listed in Mark chapter 3, 16 to 18, in Luke 6, 14 to 16, and in Acts 1, verse 13.

The ordering of the twelve is worth paying attention to. Peter has primacy. Peter, we're told, is first. And that first is not merely that he's the first to be called, or that he is the first to be listed in an arbitrary ordering.

[7 : 42] Rather, in the listings of the apostles, he is always the first. He is the one that has the most significant and honoured role. He's the one that leads the apostles. On the day of Pentecost, in the mission to the Gentiles, he also leads the way on the Council of Jerusalem, and on a number of other occasions.

He is the most prominent apostle, and he's the one who leads the church in a particular way. Now, this doesn't mean that we have to hold a Roman Catholic view of the primacy of Peter as the first pope, but I do think it means that we should accept that Peter was the leader of the apostles.

He was the first among them. The last of the apostles is always listed in the same way. It's the one with the least honour. It's Judas, who, spoiler alert, would betray him.

Maybe worth noting at this point that scripture has no problem whatsoever spoiling the narrative ahead, telling us what's about to come. We may be used to reading stories for the first time, but scripture is not written for the first time reader.

It's written primarily for people who are reading it again and again and again, and as a result, it's constantly calling forward to events that will happen in the future. It's presuming knowledge of the end of the story, even in the middle of the story, because most people who are reading it are expected to be reading it for the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, hundredth time.

[9 : 05] Matthew is the only one whose vocation is given here, and there are differences in the way that the apostles are treated in different gospels. Thomas and Philip are prominent within the Gospel of John in a way that they're not within the synoptics.

Simon the Zealot probably is a reference not to some sort of political revolutionary work that he was involved in, or had previously been involved in, but to the fact that he was a man characterised by zeal.

Perhaps we should see in those cases where some other name is attached to the apostle, or there is some relation or some vocation that's attached to them. Just the commonality of that particular name that they had.

So Simon was a common name, so he needed to be distinguished from others by being a zealot, or by being called Peter. James had to be distinguished by being the son of Alphaeus, and there are other sorts of distinctions that needed to be made, not just within the group of the apostles themselves, like there's two Jameses, and there's two Simons, but also within the larger group of disciples and within people of those days.

That can be one of the things that helps us to realise the authenticity of the Gospels, the fact that the names that are common within the Gospels were also common within the other records that we have from that period and that location.

[10 : 24] One interesting feature of this particular list that we do not find in the other lists in Luke and Mark is that they're ordered in twos. This, presumably, was because the apostles were sent out in twos.

We see that in the other Gospels. It's not mentioned here, but they're ordered in twos before they're being sent out. It might also explain why Andrew occurs in parallel with Peter, his brother, whereas in others, he might seem to come in the fourth position, after James and John, who, with Peter, comprised the three at the heart of the disciples.

Jesus sends the disciples out to the towns and cities of Israel. In some respects, what he's doing is not dissimilar from a politician on a campaign trail. He's raising grassroots support.

He's making people aware of his larger mission. And when the time comes, there will be a people ready to receive it. However, we could also compare what he's doing to the sending out of the spies who go throughout the land in twos preparing for a future conquest.

We see that in Numbers chapter 13. And as they go throughout the land, they present a test of hospitality. They must depend upon the generosity of others.

[11 : 37] And this will be the test. We see that they do not have supplies for the journey. They do not have the means to protect themselves. They do not have the means to clothe themselves and house themselves.

They're dependent upon other people. And in the same way as Rahab was tested and blessed as a result of her reception of the spies, so the people of Israel are being tested in preparation for a new conquest.

We see this test of hospitality in the book of Genesis. In Genesis chapter 18, three angels, one of them being the Lord, come incognito to Abraham.

And he greets them and welcomes them and shows them great hospitality and is blessed as a result of it. On the other hand, the next chapter, in chapter 19, those two angels come to Sodom and Sodom is judged as a result of their failure to receive them in the right way.

And so this testing of the land through a test of hospitality is an important theme within scripture and Christ uses it on various occasions. We see it again in chapter 25 when Christ comes incognito in his brothers and those who do not receive them are judged.

[12 : 48] Those who do receive them are blessed. Beyond the fact that they must depend upon other people's hospitality, they must be confident in God's generous provision. God is the one that's going to provide everything that they need for this journey.

They don't have enough of their own resources. They're being sent out into the most dangerous circumstances without provision and they must depend wholly upon God's goodness towards them.

They are told that it would be worse for the cities that reject them than for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment. And again, this draws our mind back to the test of hospitality that was presented to Sodom and Gomorrah.

They are presenting another test of hospitality and the judgment that follows this is going to be even more severe. They're sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, not to the Gentiles yet, but to the flock of the firstborn nation of Israel, the nation that's supposed to lead the others.

They are to be shepherds, but they are also themselves sheep. Sheep sent out in the midst of wolves, but sent out in the midst of wolves under the rule of a greater shepherd, the shepherd that is promised in Ezekiel chapter 34 where God says that he himself will shepherd his people.

[13 : 59] Their defenselessness and their dependence is a sign of their sheep-like character and the success of their mission is a sign of the greater shepherd that's overseeing it, their reliance upon the good shepherd.

They are sheep sent out in the midst of wolves, but under the rule of a shepherd who will snatch them away from any that will try and harm them. They need to be shrewd, but innocent. They will have to use their cunning, trickery, wit and deception to survive and escape from oppressors and opponents.

You can maybe think about David fleeing from Saul. They will be persecuted, hated, abused and brought before rulers and kings. They will live in treacherous times where even those closest family members and friends might turn on them.

It's important to remember that the group of disciples aren't just random individuals. Many of them are closely related. Probably at least three of them are first cousins of Jesus. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and James, the son of Alphaeus.

James, the son of Alphaeus, according to tradition, and James and John, according to piecing together some of the details concerning the women who are at the cross. other disciples like Simon, Peter and Andrew are brothers themselves.

[15 : 11] And within the group of the apostles we can probably expect that there were further first cousins or second cousins and people who had grown up around each other or worked together. James and John and Peter and Andrew presumably knew each other very well, working alongside each other.

And so this was a tight-knit group of people with a tight-knit family network around them. And so when family started to turn on them, it would be an incredibly difficult thing, something that would strike at the very dynamics at the heart of their group.

Their group was developed out of the life of families and the sort of connections that exist between young males who work together and associate together within a particular region.

This is not just isolated people. These are people who are tied together by familial and friendship and kinship bonds. Perhaps the nearest modern analogy we have for it is something like a mafia family where within a mafia family there are interplays between the biological family and the family that is the fictive kinship of the criminal group.

In these sorts of relationships there is an intertwining of the two in complicated ways and betrayal has a particular force within contexts like that where the tensions between the fictive family group, the larger family group and the more intimate biological family group can be felt incredibly keenly and can be very bitter.

[16 : 37] They are told that even when they are brought before kings and rulers they are not to worry about their defence. Just as God will provide them with provisions on the way he will provide them with the words that they need for their defence and these words will be given to them by the spirit.

Once again this is presumably anticipating events later on in the story when the spirit will be given in the events of the day of Pentecost. They will still be going through the cities of Israel when the Son of Man returns.

Now this return of the Son of Man is presumably at the end of that particular period of time in AD 70 when there will be judgement upon Israel and they are leading up to that judgement preparing the people.

There is an event of judgement and harvest on the horizon and they need to get the people prepared. They need to lead the sheep away from danger and they need to prepare the division of this nation into those who are faithful and those who are unfaithful.

A question to consider. Christians can talk a lot about hospitality evangelism about the importance of opening our homes to others and showing them generous hospitality and giving them good food a place to stay these sorts of things.

[17 : 51] These things are very good but we don't talk very much about a test of hospitality about the importance of requesting other people's hospitality or putting ourselves at the mercy of other people's hospitality.

Reading this passage and the associated passage in Matthew 25 concerning the sheep and the goats can you think of any ways in which Christ might be calling us to practice tests of hospitality in our context?

