

MATTHEW-LEVI WHO DID NOT WISH TO FORGET HIS PAST

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And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him. And it came to pass as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples (Matt. 9:9-10).

And after these things he [Jesus] went forth, and saw a publican, named Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom; and he said unto him, Follow me . . . And Levi made him a great feast in his own house; and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them (Lake 5.27, 29).

The first three Gospels are known as "The Synoptic Gospels" because for the most part they describe the same events. The word synoptic is derived from two Greek words and means "giving or constituting a general view" or "presenting the same or similar point of view." It is the name given to the first three Gospels. All students know that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke basically describe identical events, and often the expressions of the three authors have a remarkable resemblance. It is true that each writer had a point to prove and an individualistic way of achieving his purpose. Matthew-Levi, a Jew, firmly believed Jesus to be the Messiah, and endeavored to prove this to his Hebrew readers. Mark set out to portray the Savior of Simon Peter, and consequently his gospel is one of continuing action. Luke, who obtained much of his material from Paul and other early Christians, set out to prove that Jesus was indeed the God-Man, perfect in every detail of His humanity. To repeat, each author had his own method of reaching his literary goal. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that only Matthew had been a traveling companion of the Lord. He alone of the three writers could claim to have been an eyewitness of the things described in his book.

It is interesting to note that the call of Matthew and the feast arranged for the Savior are mentioned in all the synoptic Gospels. Yet there is a subtle difference in the records, which may or may not be significant. Matthew is believed to have possessed two names. Matthew might have been the name given at his birth: Levi could have been given by the Savior. The Lord gave a second name to Simon, and it is possible He did the same for Matthew. It is fascinating that Mark and Luke never referred to their colleague as Matthew—the publican. When they spoke of their fellow worker, they used the name Levi (see Luke 5:27). When Matthew referred to himself, he was careful to emphasize that he collected taxes for the detestable Romans. That fact elicits questions.

To Produce Humility

Did Matthew persist in the use of this title so that he would be reminded constantly of his indebtedness to the Savior? Unfortunately some people advertise their misdeeds of former years. They magnify their sins to produce a sensational testimony, and draw attention to themselves! Matthew had no personal claim to fame. He was not an eloquent speaker such as Peter or John. He was a man of books, a collector of facts, a person accustomed to keeping records. There was nothing particularly glamorous about his work, but it needed patience and accuracy. While his brethren were busy working with people. Matthew wrote his manu-

MATTHEW-LEVI WHO DID NOT WISH TO FORGET HIS PAST script. Had he been less faithful, the world would not now possess Matthew's gospel. Did he ever become weary, feeling his work was unimportant? When he saw his writings increase, was he tempted to believe his efforts would be of more value than the preaching of his colleagues? The answers to these questions cannot be known, but Matthew was determined to be remembered as the publican. He who had been detestable had been brought into a glorious fellowship. Old things had passed away and everything had become new. He owed everything to Christ and wished his readers to be aware of that fact.

Mark and Luke referred to him as Levi. Is it possible that they were a little ashamed of Matthew's past? Many Jews remembered that he had collected taxes and, as it has often been said, "Give someone a bad name, and he has it forever." Were they afraid his former employment would prevent his success as a disciple of Christ, and for that reason, used his less provocative name? A comparison of the biblical records is interesting.

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To Prevent Haughtiness

It has been claimed there are two sides to every picture, and that applies to the present problem. Humility and pride do not belong in the same family. Matthew possessed a rare gift—he was a man of books.

Apart from John there was not another man capable of doing Matthew's work. John basically was a fisherman. He eventually wrote his gospel because he realized other writers had omitted facts essential in the story of Jesus. John became a book man. Matthew had always been one. The other disciples were interested in miracles, and it is doubtful whether they had sufficient patience to collect and tabulate the facts necessary to complete a book.

Perhaps as his fame increased, and his writings circulated among the churches, Matthew gained for himself a place of eminence in the esteem of his readers. This might have become a source of pride. Paul wrote: "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think: but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). Was Matthew aware of this danger and, to prevent its becoming a menace, reminding himself of what he was before he met the Savior?

Success is sometimes a temptation hard to overcome. Every man is susceptible to flattery, and unfortunately many people have failed to achieve their goals because they became self-made deities who worshiped at their own shrine. Some churches lost their effectiveness because they believed themselves to be the only authentic interpreters of theology. It is generally a safe rule that if a man claims to be God's only spokesman, avoid him. Arguments provide strife in which fellowship with other Christians becomes impossible. Paul said: "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3). The same idea was expressed by the Savior when He said:

When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room: lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him: And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee. Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee. Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalted himself shall be abased: and he

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that humbleth himself shall be exalted (Luke 14:8-11).

Matthew did what had been recommended by the Savior and demonstrated he was not only a talented writer, he was also an excellent listener.

To Provide Help

When Matthew insisted he had been a publican, was he thinking of others of his type? It was significant that his first act as a disciple was to arrange a feast to which he invited many publicans and sinners. Evidently he believed that what Christ had done for him could be done for others. He desired to introduce his associates to his new Friend. When the delivered demoniac of Gadara was refused permission to accompany Jesus on His journey, he was commissioned to go home and tell everybody what had happened to him (Luke 8:38-39). Matthew did not need to be told; he made arrangements that Jesus would have the opportunity to speak for Himself.

It has often been claimed that news travels fast, but its speed was never greater than on that memorable day when Matthew became host for folk considered to be untouchables! As was to be expected, the religious leaders criticized the Lord for associating with such people. A large party would not terminate within minutes; the meal was the best money could provide. When the guests had eaten, Matthew, the Master of Ceremonies, introduced his Guest, and responding, the Lord addressed the audience. It would be interesting to know what He said. If only someone had possessed a tape recorder! That gathering was a forerunner of all the evangelistic meetings for which the early church became famous. The host, whose eyes shone with delight, agreed with everything spoken and, when the opportunity presented itself, would exclaim to the listeners, "I told you. I knew that if the Lord could do this for me. He would do it for you."

There is no evidence that Matthew ever became a great preacher. It is said that on the Day of Pentecost the other disciples

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stood up with Simon Peter. At that time no one knew what the final result would be. The angry crowds had just crucified the Lord and would soon murder Stephen, but no one could have known that between those events thousands of people would enter the kingdom of God. Matthew and his brethren risked their lives when they stood with their colleague. Peter preached: they prayed! Matthew loved to help in any way possible and to that end dedicated his talents and money. He began placing his notes in order, and eventually his gospel made its appearance. Scribes made copies of the manuscript, and as the book began to circulate among the churches, people increasingly appreciated its author.

Did he ever imagine what his work would accomplish? Did he know that kings and queens, educated and illiterate, millionaires and paupers, and people from every level of society would admire Matthew the publican? If saints in heaven know what happens on earth, he must be proud that he was the man with a pen! He who supplied a meal for his publican friends has satisfied the spiritual hunger and thirst of all Christians. It would not be surprising if, when Matthew is introduced in heaven, he interrupts the proceedings to say. "Brother, don't forget to tell them I am Matthew, the publican."

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I. Ivor Powell. Matthew's Majestic Gospel (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1986), 13.

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