

The Hard Sayings of Jesus

F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1983),

F.F. Bruce, former Rylands Professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester in England.

As Bruce views, 'he did not know where to find shelter' means his humiliation of the Son of man, which many disciples found it hard to accept. Suggestion made by T.W. Manson, is that 'the Son of man' is God's elect community, the true believing Israel. If 'the Son of man' has this corporate sense, then foxes and the birds might be expected to have a comparable sense; 'The birds of the air (the Roman overlords), the foxes (the Edomite interlopers), have made their position secure. The true Israel is disinherited by them: The Edomite interlopers were the Herod; Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, is described by Jesus as 'that fox' in Luke 13:32. But it is unlikely that the would-be disciple would have understood those allusions; it is best to take the words referring to Jesus himself. The saying refers to the continuing hardship and loneliness involved in *following* the Son of Man.

F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1983), 159-160.

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According to Bruce, this teaching was not given to one special individual; it was intended for Jesus' followers in general. He urged them to have the right priorities, to seek God's kingdom and righteousness above all else (Matt. 6:33). But it is very difficult to do this, he maintained, if one's attention is preoccupied by material wealth. Experience shows that some wealthy men and women have promoted the kingdom of God above their worldly concerns. Up to this point the rich man was not unwilling to become one of them. But the sticking point came when he was asked to unburden himself of his property. 176

Bruce comments that it is not merely difficult, it is impossible for a rich man to get into the kingdom of God, just as it is not merely difficult but impossible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle – even a needle of the largest size. 180.

The listeners were dismayed: 'Then who can be saved?' Bruce notes that 'being saved' in the Gospels is a further synonym for entering the kingdom of God and inheriting eternal life.) 180

The 'eye of a needle' is the reference to a small opening giving independent access or egress through a much larger city gate. Visitors are sometimes shown such a small entrance in one of the city gates of Jerusalem or another Eastern city and are told that this is what Jesus had in mind. If a man approaches the city gate on camel-back when it is closed, he can dismount and get through the small entrance on foot, but there is no way for a camel to do so, especially if it is loaded. It is ordinarily impossible for a camel to get through such a narrow opening. But this charming explanation is of relatively recent date; there is no evidence that such a subsidiary entrance was called the eye of a needle in biblical times. Others points out that there is a Greek word (*kamilos*) meaning 'cable' very similar in appearance and sound to the word (*kamelos*) meaning 'camel'. Some read 'it is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' In Jewish rabbinical literature an *elephant* passing through the eye of a needle is a figure of speech for sheer impossibility. 181-182.

Jesus was using the language of hyperbole, which was intended to drive the lesson home; it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God – humanly impossible, Jesus concedes, for God, with whom nothing is impossible, can even save a rich man. But if so, then the rich man's heart must be changed, by having its attachment to material riches

replaced by attachment to the true riches, 'treasure in heaven.' What was it about riches that made Jesus regard them as an obstacle to entrance into the kingdom? Simply the fact that those who had them relied on them, like the rich farmer in the parable (Luke 12:16-21), who encouraged himself with the thought of the great wealth which he had stored up for a long time to come, or his counterpart today whose investment are bringing in a comfortable, inflation-proof income. 182