

The Church of the Servant King

Thursday Night Bible Study

The Gospel of Matthew

(Thurs_Matthew 17)

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS (17:1-13)

1 Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. 7 And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead." 10 And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" 11 And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; 12 but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." 13 Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

The chapter break in our Bibles is unfortunate for it causes some to make a mental disconnect between Jesus' statement in 16:28 ("*Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom*") and the transfiguration recorded in chapter 17. Chapter 17 continues six days after Jesus' statement in 16:28.¹

The high mountain was probably one of the spurs of Mount Hermon (9,400 feet) – perhaps Mount Miron (3,926 feet) which lies between Caesarea Philippi and Capernaum (17:24). At any rate, it evidently took Jesus and His disciples about six days to travel from Caesarea Philippi to this mountain.

Only Peter, James, and John went with Jesus to the high mountain. On this mountain, Jesus was transfigured. The Greek word for "transfigured" is from the verb μεταμορφω and means *metamorphosis* or *to change in form*. These disciples were witnesses to a manifestation of Jesus' preincarnate glory (Jn 1:14; 17:5; Phil 2:6-7) and His post-resurrection exaltation (2 Pet 1:16-18).

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)

Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. (Jn 17:5)

¹ Luke records that there were eight days that passed (Lu 9:28). This is likely due to Luke having included the beginning and ending days as well as the six days in between.

Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. (Phil 2:6-7)

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 17 For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased"—18 and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. (2 Pet 1:16-18)

Moses and Elijah appeared also and they were speaking with Jesus. There are a number of observations and explanations associated with Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus at the transfiguration that have been proffered by theologians and commentators. For instance:

- No one witnessed the death of Moses. And Elijah was immediately translated from earth to heaven (Deut 1:37-38; 3:23-28; 34:1-8; 2 Ki 2:11-14).
- Both Moses and Elijah had eschatological prophecies connected with their ministries.
 - Moses was a type of the Prophet to come, i.e. Jesus (Deut 18:15-18).

15 "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. 16" This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.' 17 "The LORD said to me, 'They have spoken well. 18 'I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. (Deut 18:15-18)

- Elijah was prophesied to be a forerunner of the Messiah (Mal 4:5-6).

5 "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." (Mal 4:5-6)

- John the Baptist served in an Elijah-like role as a predecessor to Jesus in association with His 1st Advent (Matt 11:14).

13 "For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. 14 "And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. 15 "He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (Matt 11:13-15)

- An Elijah-type figure in the Tribulation will precede Jesus' 2nd Advent and will fulfill Malachi's prophecy. (Mal 4:5-6)

- Both experienced a vision of God's glory.

- Moses at Sinai (Exod 19:18-20; 31:18).

18 Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. 19 When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. 20 The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the

mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. (Exod 19:18-20)

18 When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God. (Exod 31:18)

▪ Elijah at Horeb (1 Ki 19:8-18).

8 So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. 9 Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." 11 So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD " And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." 15 The LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; 16 and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. 17 "It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. 18 "Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him." (1 Ki 19:8-18)

- Moses represented the Law and Elijah represented the Prophets, therefore together on the Mount of Transfiguration, they symbolized the Law and the Prophets which Jesus fulfilled (*Matt 5:17 – "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill"*).
- Finally, two witnesses of the Messiah will prophesy during the Tribulation for a three and one-half year period. These two witnesses have long been identified as resuscitated Moses and Elijah due to the linkage between the miracles that they perform and those performed by Moses and Elijah of antiquity (Re 11:3-14)
 - They can prevent rain (Rev 11:6) like Elijah whose prayer caused it not to rain for three and one-half years (1 Ki 17:1, 7 cf. Lu 4:25; James 5:17).
 - They can turn water into blood (Rev 11:6) like Moses did with the plagues upon Egypt (Exod 7:17-21).

In verse 4, Peter expresses a desire to build three tabernacles – one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Peter's suggestion is not as ridiculous as some have suggested. The idea of a tabernacle was associated with the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles when Jews built shelters for themselves and lived in them for seven days (Lev 23:42-43). The Feast of

Tabernacles (Booths) was designed to be prophetic of Israel's Sabbath rest whereby the kingdom of heaven is tabernacled (dwelling) among men on earth. What Peter desired, the dwelling of heavenly and earthly people on earth, was not possible at that time, but will be possible during the Messianic kingdom portrayed by Christ in the transfiguration.

The bright cloud of verse 5 is associated with the departure of the Jews from Egypt via Moses (Ex 13:21-22; 16:10; 19:16; 24:25-28; 40:34-38) and with the shekinah glory of God in the Holy of Holies (e.g. the glory of the Lord departing from the Temple in Ezek 10:3-5, 18-19; 11:22-23).

3Now the cherubim were standing on the right side of the temple when the man entered, and the cloud filled the inner court.

4Then the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the temple, and the temple was filled with the cloud and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD.

5Moreover, the sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when He speaks. (Ezek 10:3-5)

18 Then the glory of the LORD departed from the threshold of the temple and stood over the cherubim. 19 When the cherubim departed, they lifted their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight with the wheels beside them; and they stood still at the entrance of the east gate of the LORD'S house, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered over them. (Ezek 10:18-19)

22 Then the cherubim lifted up their wings with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered over them. 23 The glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood over the mountain which is east of the city. (Ezek 11:22-23)

The voice from heaven had a significant effect upon Peter. He referred to it in his epistle years later (2 Pe 1:17-18). Also, these are the identical words that were spoken at Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in Matthew 3.

17 For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased"—18 and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. (2 Pet 1:17-18)

In verse 9, Jesus knew that the crowds wanted a type of Messiah different from that portrayed in Jesus' public ministry. Jesus knew that the event would only stir up superficial and fleshly empowered attempts to enthrone Jesus. Furthermore, if Jesus' closest disciples found it hard to understand a suffering and dying Messiah, the crowds would have even more difficulty. After all, the message of John the Baptist had already been rejected (17:11-12).

11 And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; 12 but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." (Matt 17:11-12)

A BOY IS HEALED (17:14-21)

14 When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, 15 "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. 16 "I brought him to

Your disciples, and they could not cure him." 17 And Jesus answered and said, "You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me." 18 And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. 19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not drive it out?" 20 And He said to them, "Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. 21 ["But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."]

Mark's parallel account in 9:14-29 provides more detail. When Jesus, Peter, James and John returned from the Mount of Transfiguration, a crowd had evidently gathered around the other nine apostles. A man with a demon possessed son had sought healing help from the nine. They had not been able to cast out the demon. Note the following points of observation:

- The Greek word for "knelt" is used only four times in the NT (Matt 17:14; 27:29; Mk 1:40; 10:17) and has no overtones of worship. It simply suggests humility and entreaty.
- It is presumed that the disciples who were unable to heal him were the nine who were left behind when Jesus took Peter, James and John to the Mount of Transfiguration.
- The disciple's failure to trust is a recurring theme throughout this section (14:16-21, 26-27, 28-31; 15:16, 23, 33; 16:5, 22; 17:4, 10-11).
 - 14:16-21 – the feeding of the five thousand and the disciples failure to trust the Lord to provide (i.e. the five loaves and the two fishes)
 - 14:26-27 – Jesus walks on the water and the disciples fear a ghost
 - 14:28-31 – Peter tries to walk on the water
 - 15:16 – Jesus is forced to explain His statement that it isn't what goes into the mouth, but what proceeds from the mouth that defiles a man to his disciples because of the disciples lack of understanding
 - 15:23 – the disciples urge Jesus to send the Canaanite woman away instead of dealing with the situation as they had been commissioned in Matthew 10
 - 15:33 – the disciples fail to recognize Jesus as the source of the provision of the needs of the four thousand after the feeding of the five thousand had already occurred
 - 16:5 – the disciples forget to adequately prepare with food
 - 16:22 – Peter thinks he can prevent the Lord's Own prophecy regarding his manner of death from being fulfilled
 - 17:4 – Peter desires to construct a tabernacle in order to perpetuate the Transfiguration event
 - 17:10-11 – Jesus must explain the coming of Elijah that will precede His Coming in response to the disciples failure to understand the OT prophets
- Jesus had clearly given the disciples (apostles to Israel) the power to heal and cast out demons (10:1, 8)
- The failure of the disciples to exercise this authority and perform kingdom miracles was related to their own walk of faith.
- Jesus reinforces this principle in verse 20.
- Jesus' comments were directed to His disciples (not the Church Age believer) and must be understood in view of His commissioning of them in Matthew 10
- One of Matthew's themes: The contrast between the glory of the Transfiguration and Jesus' disciples' unbelief is part of the mounting tension that magnifies Jesus' uniqueness as he moves closer to his passion and resurrection.
- This theme of Matthew is emphasized by his omission of the statement made by the father of the demon possessed boy in Mark 9:23-24.

In verse 17, the juxtaposition of "perverse" with "faithless" or "unbelieving" implies that the failure to believe stems from failure to recognize the truth, not from a lack of evidence, but from a willful neglect of the evidence. The Greek word for "generation" is γενεα (*genea*) and in this context it refers to the "sum total of those born at the same time, expanded to include all those

living at a given time.” [See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 154]. Therefore, this word refers to the Jews first as the recipients of the offer of the kingdom and then to the Gentiles who also had the opportunity to accept Jesus as the Messiah of Israel (e.g. the Canaanite woman in 15:21-28 and the Roman centurion in 8:8-12).

In verse 20, Jesus says that it is because of the disciples' unbelief (actually – ολιγοπιστια - “little faith” in terms of quality in contrast to faith as a grain of mustard seed) that they were not able to cast out the demon. The disciples did have some faith for they had expected to be able to exorcise the demon, but they were unsuccessful. However, they were treating the authority that had been given to them like a gift of magic. In contrast to their understanding, Jesus tells them that a life bathed in prayer (even fasting to give time for more prayer) was needed (see verse 21).

Removal of mountains was proverbial for overcoming great difficulties (e.g. Is 40:4; 49:11; 54:10). In this context, Jesus is referring to the accomplishment of the works of the kingdom for which they had been given authority (Matt 10). There is a similarity between the power available to the Church Age believer (e.g. Phil 4:13) and that which was available to the apostles to Israel; however, the focus of that power is different, i.e. witnessing to Gentile and Jew alike for the former verses to the Jew first for the latter. Jesus is in effect telling his disciples that what they need is not giant faith, but a faith derived from personal trust.

Question for personal application: In your own personal ministry to others, can you say with Paul that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you? Or do you find yourself discouraged by adversity, distracted by self-centered thinking, and without focus in your spiritual life? God has given each CA believer a spiritual gift and places the *yielded* believer in a ministry with that gift. Have you learned to tap into the spiritual power that is available to you as a Church Age believer? (See 1 Cor 1:4-9; 2 Cor 1:3-7; Eph 1:3-23; Phil 1:3-11; Col 1:9-14; cf. 1 Cor 9:3-14; 2 Cor 10:4-5; 11:22-28; 1 Tim 1:18-20; and Phil 1:27-29 as examples of Paul's prayers for CA believers and his personal example of enduring in the midst of adversity because of a spiritual vision).

Principle: Without a spiritual vision for one's life that is built upon the truths pertinent to this dispensation of the Church and the concomitant appreciation and motivation derived therefrom, the believer will remain a slave to his/her own selfish interests and in a perpetual state of spiritual babyhood. This believer will be forever relegated to a system of thinking that focuses only upon his own self-interest much like the undisciplined child who never learns to set aside self in the interest of others or a greater cause.

This is the blindness that characterizes the world and is similar to the blindness from which the disciples who were apostles to Israel (Matt 10) had to escape. At this point, these disciples had not given proper attention to their spiritual lives (i.e. neglect of the truth presented to them and prayer), therefore they had no power to push through the spiritual adversity pertinent to their ministry to Israel, i.e. a demon possessed boy.

Jesus Predicts His Death and Resurrection (17:22-23)

22 And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; 23 and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day." And they were deeply grieved.

This is Jesus' second actual prediction of His death and resurrection (cf. 16:21-24) even though there have been earlier allusions to His death (9:15 – bridegroom to be taken away; 10:38 – those who do not take up their cross are not worthy of me; 12:40 – comparison to Jonah being three days and nights in the belly of the fish; 17:12 – the Son of Man is about to suffer at the

hands of the religious leaders). Jesus is about to end His ministry in the area of Galilee and begin His journey south to Jerusalem.

Both of the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke state that the disciples do not understand Jesus. Matthew alludes to this when he notes the disciples' grief. The disciples have begun to understand that He will die, but they still do not understand the resurrection.

THE TEMPLE TAX (17:24-27)

24 When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?" 25 He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?" 26 When Peter said, "From strangers," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are exempt. 27 "However, so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for you and Me."

This tax was not a civil tax levied by Rome, but a Jewish tax that was levied on every male Jew between the ages of twenty and fifty in support of the temple and its services. It was a two drachma (half shekel) tax collected annually (Ex 30:13-15; Neh 10:32) and is well attested by Josephus and the Mishnah (the first section of the Talmud, a collection of the early oral interpretations of scriptures compiled by 200 A.D.).

Jesus acknowledges the temple tax to be an obligation to God; but since He is God's Son, He is exempt (v. 26). This passage has nothing to do with their obligation to Caesar. Jesus was teaching Peter that in the same manner that kings do not collect taxes from family members neither should Jesus as King nor the disciples as true sons of the Kingdom be required to pay the tax. They had a privileged position as true sons of the Kingdom; however the Lord did not desire to make an issue (offend them, v. 27) over such a point regarding the Law and its fulfillment.

This is the only place in the NT where a fish is caught with a hook. Normally, nets were used.