

Matthew

Chapter 17

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MATTHEW CHAPTER 17

All three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) preserve the following order of events:

- (1) The confession at Caesarea Philippi,
- (2) The announcement of Jesus suffering and death with the following statement about true discipleship
- (3) The transfiguration immediately after that (Matthew, Mark only)
- (4) A repetition of the prophecy about the suffering of the Son of Man

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS (17:1-9)

Jesus is transfigured before a small group of His disciples. Moses and Elijah appear with Him on the mountain.

Matt. 17:1 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them into a high mountain by themselves.

Note on variant readings: Some manuscripts have *it came about* before *after six days*. Instead of *by themselves* one manuscript and one church father has *exceedingly high*.

And after six days Matthew gives an exceptionally precise time as to this event. It may allude to Exodus 24:12-18 where Moses sees the glory of the Lord on the mountain and on the seventh day hears the voice of God.

Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them into a high mountain by themselves. Jesus takes the inner circles of His disciples with Him. These three are again privileged to accompany Jesus at Gethsemane (26:37). The fact that Jesus restricts this event to a special core of disciples points to its special character and the need to keep it secret (cf. v. 9). These three witnessed the glory of Jesus alone. In the same manner Jesus had given the special knowledge that He was going to die only to the twelve disciples and not to the multitudes. We also have a comparison to Moses (see Exodus 24:1,9 where Moses took three close co-workers with him (Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu).

Matt. 17:2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

Note on a variant reading: Some manuscripts read *Jesus was transfigured* instead of *He was transfigured*. Some manuscripts read *as snow* instead of *as the light*.

And he was transfigured before them, His physical appearance was dramatically altered or transformed (Greek *metamorphis*). The term occurs in the physical sense only here and in the parallel in Mark; in a spiritual sense in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 (which has a possible connection to the transfiguration story). What happened to Jesus is spelled out only in partial detail.

and his face shone like the sun, The same expression is used of the righteous in the kingdom following

judgment (13:43). See also the account of Moses' face in Exodus 34:29-35.

and his clothes became as white as the light. The whiteness of the angel's clothing in 28:3, white as snow. The disciples see Jesus as they had never seen Him before and it must have reminded them of the stories they had read about Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24).

Matt. 17:3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him.

And behold, Moses Now another remarkable thing occurs. Two of the most important figures in the Old Testament appear and converse with Jesus. Moses, who represents the law, appears with Jesus.

and Elijah Also Elijah, the one who represented the prophets.

appeared to them, The fact of their appearance is given, what they looked like is not. Neither are we told how these two men, long passed from the scene were able to appear in this present world.

talking with him. Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets and perhaps the end of the age (cf. vs. 10). Both Moses and Elijah were both associated with Mount Sinai, the mountain of revelation (for Elijah 1 Kings 19:8, "Horeb the mountain of God"). Luke tells us their discussion centered around Jesus upcoming death in Jerusalem.

Matt. 17:4 And Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will make here three tabernacles, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Note on variant readings: Some manuscripts read *do you wish* instead of *if you wish*. Instead *I will make here* some manuscripts read *let us make*.

And Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. Peter's suggestion, for whatever reason, was a serious mistake. Apparently he felt some response was called for. He began with a lame statement about it being good or advantageous for them to be there.

If you wish, I will make here three tabernacles, Peter makes the mistake of focusing on all three participants rather than Jesus, who was the object of this divine splendor. He proposed to put up three tents—probably little huts made of branches, the purpose of which is unknown.

one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Some have thought they were for hospitality, or overnight lodging. It is also possible that they would be some type of shrine similar to the Old Testament tent of meeting or tabernacle. The shrine would represent the communion of heaven and earth. There is no indication, as some have suggested, that this happened in the autumn harvest festival in commemoration of the wilderness wanderings. No time of the year is given. Furthermore, it is difficult to suppose that Jesus would have traveled with His disciples to the mountain during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Matt. 17:5 While he was still speaking, behold, 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."

While he was still speaking, As Peter was speaking another remarkable event occurred.

behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; The cloud spoke of the Shekinah glory, the very presence of God. The same Greek words are used in the LXX to describe the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35).

and behold, a voice out of the cloud A third startling occurrence, the voice from the cloud. **said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him.”** The words of the Father are the exact same as 3:17 when Jesus was being baptized, with one addition—listen to Him. The point is that Peter should listen to Jesus— Moses and Elijah are His attendants. Jesus Himself is going to accomplish God’s saving purpose by dying for the sins of the world. In the parallel passage in Luke (9:31) we are told that they were discussing Jesus’ upcoming death in Jerusalem. Therefore in the midst of the supreme exaltation of Jesus the divine voice alludes to the fact of His upcoming suffering.

Matt. 17:6 And when the disciples heard this, they fell upon their faces and were greatly afraid.

And when the disciples heard this, they fell upon their faces They fell upon their faces, probably partly from fear, and partly as a sign of worship.

and were greatly afraid. Note the disciples were terrified when they heard the divine voice—not when they saw Jesus transfigured, not when Moses and Elijah appeared with Him. It was the voice of God the Father that caused them to fear greatly.

Matt. 17:7 And Jesus came and touched them and said, “Rise up, and do not be afraid.”

And Jesus came and touched them and said, “Rise up, and do not be afraid.” As always, Jesus tells His fearful disciples not to be afraid. The purpose of Him touching them reinforces the fact that they actually saw a real event, rather than they experiencing some illusion or hallucination.

Matt. 17:8 When they looked up, they saw no one, except Jesus himself alone.

Note on a variant reading: Many manuscripts do not read *Himself*.

When they looked up, they saw no one, The final verse again brings the emphasis to Jesus.

except Jesus himself alone. *Himself* is emphatic in the Greek. Moses and Elijah had played their respective roles in the history of salvation, but now they must yield to Jesus.

Matt. 17:9 And as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

And as they were coming down from the mountain, Now as they are leaving the scene of this unknown mountain, Jesus will have something to say to them.

Jesus commanded them, He now ordered them to be silent concerning this event.

saying, “Tell the vision The commanded is again for secrecy. The word *vision* has the idea of a supernatural event, not in the sense of something they just imagined.

to no one This includes the other disciples.

until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” Why did He tell them to keep silent until after the resurrection?

THE DISCUSSION ABOUT ELIJAH (17:10-13)

After the appearance of Elijah with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, the discussion turns to Elijah's coming to the earth.

Matt. 17:10 And the disciples asked him, saying, "Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?"

Note on a variant reading: Many manuscripts read *His disciples*.

And the disciples asked him, saying, "Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" With the sight of Moses and Elijah fresh in their minds, they ask why must Elijah come back before the Day of the Lord (Malachi 3:22).

Matt. 17:11 And he answered and said, "Elijah is indeed coming, and will restore all things.

Note on variant readings: Many manuscripts have *Jesus answered*. After *coming* many manuscripts read *first*.

And He answered and said, "Elijah is indeed coming, and will restore all things. Jesus responds by alluding to the same passage. He agrees with the scribes that Elijah must come first. The restoration is probably referring to the repentance of the people before the time of the Messiah.

Matt. 17:12 But I say to you, that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they wished. In the same way, the Son of Man also is about to suffer at their hands.

But I say to you, that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, The scribes were correct in thinking Elijah had to come but Jesus flatly states that Elijah as already come (John the Baptist) but they did not recognize him (see question at the end of the chapter concerning the relationship between John the Baptist and Elijah).

but they did to him whatever they wished. In the same way, the Son of Man also is about to suffer at their hands. The fate of John and the fate of Jesus is now linked. John and Jesus was largely unrecognized by the people and they both will suffer at the people's hands. John had already suffered and Jesus, at this juncture, makes another prediction of His own suffering. If they did not recognize John the forerunner of the Messiah, they certainly were not going to recognize the Messiah Himself.

Matt. 17:13 Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist. This jogged their memory. If John was Elijah who was to come, then Jesus is the one whom John prepared the way. The proper identification of John leads to the proper identification of Jesus.

THE EPILEPTIC BOY AND THE DISCIPLES LACK OF FAITH (17:14-21)

As they return from the mountain, Jesus and His small band of disciples encounter a man who had brought his son to the remaining disciples, yet they were unable to heal him. This brings about a discussion of faith.

Matt. 17:14 And when they came toward the crowd, a man came up, falling on his knees before him, and saying,

Note on a variant reading: A few manuscripts read *He came*.

And when they came toward the crowd, a man came up, falling on his knees before him, and saying, When Jesus and His three disciples come down from the mountain they encounter a crowd. The same man who approached Jesus disciples for a healing miracle is now going to approach Jesus.

Matt. 17:15 “Lord, have mercy upon my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often times he falls into the fire, and often times into the water.

Note on a variant reading: Instead of *he suffers terribly* some manuscripts read *He is sick* (literally *he has it badly*).

“Lord, have mercy upon my son, for he is an epileptic The word translated *epileptic* is literally “moonstruck.” We are going to discover that the actual cause of his problem was demon possession.

and he suffers terribly; for often times he falls into the fire, and often times into the water. Obviously the boy had a serious lack of control of his motor functions which would repeatedly put his life in danger.

Matt. 17:16 And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.

And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him. The disciples were unable to help.

Matt. 17:17 Jesus answered and said, “O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to me.”

Note on a variant reading: Some manuscripts have *evil* instead of *unbelieving*.

Jesus answered and said, “O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” Jesus’ lament is not with the man, for he certainly had faith, or even with His disciples but more with the unbelieving crowd who had become involved. The disciples appear to have been affected by the unbelief of the crowd. The disciples will receive their own rebuke (vs. 20).

Matt. 17:18 And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out from him, and the child was healed from that moment.

And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out from him. and the child was healed from that moment. Note the cause of the problem was demon possession. The object of Jesus’ rebuke is ambiguous: it could be the boy or the demon. Mark makes it clear that Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit (9:25).

Matt. 17:19 Then the disciples came to him privately and said, “Why could we not drive it out?”

Then the disciples came to him privately and said, “Why could we not drive it out?” The *we* is emphasized in the Greek text. Jesus had undoubtedly given them authority over the demons (10:1,8) and they had undoubtedly performed numerous exorcisms. Why not this time?

Matt. 17:20 And he said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I say to you, if you have faith as

a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there, and it will be move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Note on variant readings: Many manuscripts have *Jesus said*. Instead of *little faith* some manuscripts read *unbelief*.

And He said to them, “Because of your little faith. The problem was not a total lack of faith, but rather a small amount of faith. In this case, with the doubting crowd and the extreme symptoms displayed by the boy, the disciples had their confidence shaken.

For truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, Again the mustard seed is used to represent the smallest of all seeds

you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there, and it will be move; A small amount of faith has unlimited potential when that faith is directed toward God.

and nothing will be impossible for you.” In this context it refers to the signs of the kingdom that the disciples were commissioned to perform in chapter 10.

Matt. 17:21 But this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting.

Note on a variant reading: Verse 21 is omitted in some manuscripts. Many translations do not put it in the text or they place it in the text with brackets around it.

THE SECOND PREDICTION OF JESUS’ DEATH AND RESURRECTION (17:22-23)

Jesus again predicts His passion and His resurrection.

Matt. 17:22 And as they were gathering around him in the Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men.

Note on a variant reading: Some manuscripts read *were staying* instead of *were gathering around Him*.

And as they were gathering around him in the Galilee, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. Here we have another prediction of His upcoming death.

Matt. 17:23 And they will kill him, and he will be raised upon the third day.” And they were exceedingly sad.

Note on variant readings: Instead of *upon the third day* a few manuscripts have *after three days*. A few manuscripts do not have *and they were exceedingly sad*.

And they will kill him, and he will be raised upon the third day.” The third day is mentioned again as the day in which He will be raised.

And they were exceedingly sad. Though they were very sad, they do not seem to grasp the idea of what He is saying. “They could understand Jesus being put to death, but apparently they were incapable of grasping the promise of resurrection” (Mounce, p. 170).

THE QUESTION OF THE POLL TAX (17:24-27)

As they reach Capernaum, Jesus is confronted with the issue of the hated poll-tax.

Matt. 17:24 And when they had come into Capernaum, the ones receiving the temple tax came to Peter and said, “Your teacher pays the temple tax, doesn’t he?”

And when they had come into Capernaum, This is the last visit to Capernaum and again the group is apparently living at Peter’s home.

the ones receiving the temple tax came to Peter and said, Consequently the tax collectors come to Peter as the head of the house although they recognize Jesus as the teacher.

“Your teacher pays the temple tax, doesn’t he?” The temple tax was an annual half shekel tax (based upon Exodus 30:11-16, though it was not commanded as a regular payment) which was paid for the upkeep of worship in the temple by most adult male Jews, whether they lived in Israel or not. Unlike Roman taxes, it was a matter of patriotic pride. It was also a matter of controversy, as the Sadducees disapproved of the tax, and the men who lived at Qumran (where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found) paid it only once in a lifetime. So they wanted to know Jesus’ attitude toward this issue. Would He take an independent line and thus alienate the majority of patriotic Jews? Rabbi’s were exempt from paying the temple tax and so were the priests in Jerusalem. Would Jesus claim a similar exemption?

Matt. 17:25 He said, “Yes.” And when they had come into the house Jesus spoke of it first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth receive tax or tribute? From their sons or from the foreigners?”

Note on a variant reading: Many manuscripts read *and when He had come*.

He said, “Yes.” And when they had come into the house Jesus spoke of it first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth receive tax or tribute? From their sons or from the foreigners?” Jesus must have overheard the previous conversation. His analogy does not equate the temple tax with the toll or tribute exacted by the imperial power, but simply explores the basis of any taxation.

Matt. 17:26 And when he said, “From the foreigners,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are exempt.

Note on a variant reading: Many manuscripts read *and Peter said* rather than *and when He said*.

And when he said, “From the foreigners,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are exempt. The point is that kings don’t tax their own family, they tax all the others. This, however, is God’s tax so God’s Son is not obligated in paying it. This seems to be the logic here though it is not directly stated. However, the underlying principle has already been stated, “One greater than the temple is here” (12:5,6). Temple worship will soon be abandoned with the worship of Christ who fulfilled what the temple services were all about.

Matt. 17:27 But lest we offend them, go unto the sea and throw out a fish hook; and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater. Take it and give to them for me and for you.”

Note on a variant reading: After *stater* a few manuscripts have *there*.

But lest we offend them, Jesus response to the issue will not be offensive to the patriotic Jews. He asserts that He is not obliged to pay it, but is prepared to do so to avoid giving offense which might unnecessarily prejudice His mission.

go unto the sea and throw out a fish hook; and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater. Take it and give to them for me and for you.” This episode has caused a lot of interesting interpretations among Bible commentators. Peter is told to go find the money in the mouth of the fish! But we are not told that he did so. Some commentators assume that Jesus was making a playful comment on the lack of money of Himself and His disciples. The point of the story is that Jesus did indeed pay the tax although He made it clear that He did not have to. The miracle of the coin in the mouth of the fish is not the main point of the story. Jesus is teaching us that He was willing to comply with the rules of society rather than causing an unnecessary offense, a principle that has wider application than the specific issue of the temple tax.

After the year A.D. 70 when the temple was destroyed the Romans diverted the tax to the temple of Jupiter in Rome, after which it ceased to be a matter of patriotism and became a symbol of their subjection to pagan power; the fact that the story is recorded is one of the incidental indications that Matthew's gospel should be dated before A.D. 70.

SUMMARY TO CHAPTER 17

Chapter 17 begins with the Transfiguration of Jesus. Moses and Elijah appear with Him on the mountain viewed by a few selected disciples of Jesus. When the disciples look up they see Jesus only. Jesus warns these disciples not to tell anyone of this event until after His resurrection.

When they return they find a epileptic child whom the remaining disciples are unable to heal. Jesus criticizes the faith of His disciples for not being able to heal the child.

Jesus, for the second time, predicts His death and resurrection. As was true with the first prediction, He told only His disciples not the crowds.

The chapter ends with the miracle of the coin in the mouth of the fish.