

Matthew Chapter 17

Verses 1-9: (See Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36). "Peter, James, and John" represent the "inner circle" of leadership among the disciples (Luke 8:51; Matt. 26:37), and serve here as ample witnesses according to Mosaic Law.

They went into a "high mountain apart," meaning privately, by themselves. Tradition claims this took place at Mount Tabor, but a more probable location would be Mount Hermon, near Caesarea Philippi. Jesus was "transfigured" before them.

The verb (Greek metamorphoo), indicates a transformation of essential form, proceeding from within. (See Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18), where it is used of the spiritual transformation of the believer's new nature. The witness of Peter (in 2 Peter 1:17-18), verifies the testimony that this was a real experience, not a vision.

Matthew 17:1 "And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart,"

"After six days": The precise reference to the amount of time elapsed is unusual for Matthew. It seems he is carefully drawing the connection between Jesus' promise (in 16:28), and the event that immediately follows. Mark agrees on the figure of 6 days (Mark 9:2), but Luke, probably counting the day of Peter's confession and the day of Christ's Transfiguration separately at the start and end of this time period, says it was "some eight days" (Luke 9:28).

"Peter, James and John": These three, in the inner circle closest to Christ are often seen alone together with Jesus (26:37; Mark 5:37; 13:3).

Matthew 17:2 "And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light."

"Transfigured": Christ underwent a dramatic change in appearance, so the disciples could behold Him in His glory.

Matthew 17:3 "And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with him."

"Moses and Elias": Representing the law and the prophets respectively, both of which had foretold Christ's death, and that is what Luke says the three of them were discussing (Luke 9:31).

It was really interesting that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus at this transfiguration. Certainly, that was who they were. Moses received the law from God for the people, and Elijah was a very prominent prophet.

At the least, these two were their representatives of "gone-on" saints to encourage Jesus about His crucifixion. Perhaps, this all happened so later on, after looking back on this incident, these

special disciples would understand better the person of Jesus, and be able to share this with the others and with us.

Matthew 17:4 "Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

“Three tabernacles”: This is undoubtedly a reference to the booths that were used to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, when the Israelites dwelt in booths for 7 days (Lev. 23:34-42). Peter was expressing a wish to stay in that place.

Matthew 17:5 "While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him."

“Hear ye him”: Peter erred in placing Moses and Elijah on the same level as Christ. Christ was the very one to whom Elijah and Moses had pointed. The voice of the Father (verse 5), interrupted while Peter “was still speaking.” The words were the same as those spoken from heaven at Christ’s baptism (3:17).

Peter, in this statement, seemed to put Jesus in the category of Moses and Elijah. He had not brought Jesus down, he was just in awe of what he saw, and put Moses and Elijah up. God told him instantly the position of Jesus; that Jesus only was His Son. Peter, James, and John would never forget this incident.

They knew the voice from the bright cloud was God the Father, and they had seen Jesus step out of His earthliness and take on His heavenliness for a short time. The message from the voice was emphatic. "Hear ye him." In other words, do not question what He (Jesus), said, just do it.

Matthew 17:6 "And when the disciples heard [it], they fell on their face, and were sore afraid."

“Fell on their face”: A common response to the realization that the Holy God of the universe is present (Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; Rev.1:17).

This is the effect when anyone encounters God the Father in any way. The awesomeness of the Father instantly puts you on your face, and you are frightened overwhelmingly. I question anyone who says they have had an encounter with the Father, unless they were face down before Him and totally afraid.

Matthew 17:7 "And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid."

“And Jesus came and touched them”: The disciples were at some little distance from Christ, but he observing the fear and surprise they were in, came to their relief and assistance; which he did not disdain to give, notwithstanding the glory he was covered with; but acts the part of a

mediator between God and them, and lays hold on them to raise them up, whom the majesty of God's voice had cast down.

Matthew 17:8 "And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only."

“And when they had lift up their eyes” and "looked round about", as Mark says, to see whether the same objects still continued, as Moses and Elias; and the bright cloud, they saw no man, neither Moses nor Elijah, who were both gone.

Signifying, that though the law and the prophets were till this time, they were now finished and completed, and the Mosaic economy was to be no more; as these men appeared no more after, nor will they till the second coming of Christ. And Mark has it, "they saw no man any more"; that is, these men any more, neither then, nor afterwards, "save Jesus only".

Mark adds, "with themselves"; in the same form, as before his transfiguration. Christ is the only Mediator, Savior, and Redeemer; the only Prophet, Priest, and King; and who only is to be, and can be beheld as such. And who does, and will abide with his people; and helps, comforts, and saves them, when none else can.

Luke observes, that "when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone"; which was so ordered, that it might be a clear case, that this voice was only concerning Christ, and not either Moses or Elijah.

Jesus understood their fear and came, and touched them and comforted them. They had been so terrified, that they did not even look up after the bright cloud appeared, until Jesus told them to. Jesus now assumed His role for this earth and looked no different than He had before they came to this mountain.

These three disciples, for all their lives, would have a fuller understanding of Jesus than any of the others, because they were allowed to look into the heavenly for just a short time and see Jesus in His heavenly role.

Matthew 17:9 "And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead."

The other disciples were not supposed to know of this, or they would have gone to the mountain with Jesus. Jesus was willing for the events of His crucifixion to take place. This vision, if told, might alter that. It is difficult to understand after Peter had seen this that he would deny the Lord Jesus Christ.

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

Christ confirms the specific and still unfulfilled prophecy of (Mal 4:5-6): "Elijah shall truly first come and restore all things." Here, as in Malachi, the prediction fulfilled in John the Baptist, and that yet to be fulfilled in Elijah, are kept distinct.

But John the Baptist had come already, and with a ministry so completely in the spirit and power of Elijah's future ministry (Luke 1:17), that in a typical sense it could be said: "Elijah is come already" (Matthew 10:40 Phil. 1:12, 17), where the same thought of identification, while yet preserving personal distinction, occurs (John 1:27).

You see, even the disciples had listened to these Israelite laws and dogmas and believed a certain amount of all this. They knew that (Malachi 4:5), said Elijah would come before the Day of the Lord. Some translations say one like unto Elijah.

Matthew 17:11 "And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things."

“Elijah truly shall first come”: Not the Tishbite, as the Septuagint version wrongly inserts instead of prophet; not Elijah in person, who lived in the times of Ahab; but John the Baptist, who was to come in the power and spirit of Elijah (Luke 1:17).

Between whom there was a great likeness in their temper and disposition; in their manner of clothing, and austere way of living. In their courage and integrity in reproofing vice; and in their zeal and usefulness in the cause of God and true religion.

And in their famous piety and holiness of life; and in being both prophets (see Matthew 11:11), and that he is intended is clear from (Matthew 17:10).

“Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things”: He did not mean by this that Elijah was yet to come, for he tells them immediately (Matthew 17:12), that he had come; but he meant to affirm that it was a true doctrine which the scribes taught, that Elijah would appear before the coming of the Messiah. To "restore" means to put into the former situation (See Matthew 12:13).

Hence, it means to heal, to correct and to put in proper order. Here it means that Elijah would put things in a proper state. He would be the instrument of reforming the people, or of restoring them, in some measure, to proper notions about the Messiah and preparing them for his coming.

Before the coming of John the Baptist, the views of the Jewish leaders were erroneous, their expectations were worldly, and their conduct were exceedingly depraved. He corrected many of their notions about the Messiah (see Matthew 3), and he was the instrument of an extensive reformation, and thus restored them, in some degree, to correct views of their own system and of the Messiah, and to a preparation for his advent.

Matthew 17:12 "But I say unto you, That Elijah is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them."

“Elias is come already”: That is, John the Baptist has come, in the spirit and power of Elijah. (see Luke 1:17).

“But I say unto you”: A way of speaking used by Christ, when he opposes and contradicts any of the tenets of the Scribes and Pharisees (see Matthew 5:22), "that Elijah is come already". The person that was signified by, and prophesied of, under the name of Elijah: for Christ refers not to the late appearance of Elijah on the mount, but to the coming of a certain person some time ago; who came in the power and spirit of Elijah, and was the forerunner and harbinger of him, the Messiah.

“And they knew him not”: That is, the Scribes and Pharisees, who believed that Elijah would come before the Messiah; and yet when he who was designed by him was come, they knew him not, they did not know him to be the Elijah; they knew him under the name of John the Baptist, and seemed pleased with his ministry for a while, but afterwards rejected his doctrine and baptism.

They did not believe what he said, nor repent upon his preaching to them. They rejected the counsel of God he declared, not being baptized of him. They treated him with indignity and contempt, charging him with having a devil, and were well pleased when Herod put him to death.

“Likewise also shall the son of man suffer of them”: Christ takes this opportunity to confirm what he had said in the preceding chapter, concerning his sufferings and death. And his meaning is, that as sure as John the Baptist had suffered indignities, and death itself, so sure should the son of man suffer like things. If not from the same individual persons, yet from that generation of men.

Matthew 17:13 "Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist."

“Then the disciples understood”: By his saying that Elijah was come, and by the account he gave of his ill usage, it was clear to them, “that he spake unto them of John the Baptist”; and that he was the Elijah that was to come, and was come.

So that this observation, that according to prophecy Elijah was to come before the Messiah, was no objection to Jesus being the Messiah. But on the contrary, since he that was intended by Elijah was come, and had done his work and office, it was a confirmation of the truth of his Messiahship.

Matthew 17:14 "And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a [certain] man, kneeling down to him, and saying,"

Which was on the next day (as in Luke 9:37), when Christ and his three disciples, Peter, James, and John, came down from the mount to the other nine, with whom the multitude of the people were; during their stay on the mountain. “There came to him a certain man”; who was, as Mark says, "one of the multitude". And as Luke, "a man of the company" who had applied to the nine disciples on the behalf of his son, but without success, and was waiting till Christ came from the mount.

Who when he saw him, made up to him, and kneeling down to him in the manner of a suppliant, doing him homage and worship; hereby showing his great esteem of him, and veneration for him

Matthew 17:15 "Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatic, and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water."

And saying the following words: "Lord, have mercy": The word "Lord" here means "Sir," a title of civility, not implying divinity. My son, This was an only son (Luke). He was possessed with a devil. This calamity was attended with the following symptoms: he was lunatic and he was sore vexed; that is, he suffered greatly, or was greatly afflicted.

He fell often suddenly, in the manner of persons having epileptic fits; he was dumb, that is, he was mute except when the seizure was coming upon him, for Luke says that when the spirit took him he cried suddenly out; he foamed and gnashed with his teeth, and wasted away, or became poor and emaciated.

Luke (Luke 9:39), adds of the evil spirit, "it teareth him that he foameth again, and, bruising him, hardly departeth from him;" that is, scarcely departed from him, or he had only short intervals of reason. For so the passage in Luke, "bruising him, hardly departeth from him," should be translated.

Matthew 17:16 "And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him."

"And I brought him to thy disciples": To the nine, whilst Christ was with the other three upon the mountain: no doubt his idea was to bring him to Christ first; but He being absent, he applied to His disciples, and, desired them to make use of their power to heal the boy which they attempted, but without success:

"And they could not cure him": partly to show the malignity and stubbornness of the disease and partly to accuse the disciples of weakness due to their own unbelief and partly to the unbelief of the father of this child and others with him, as it is clear from Mark.

When he came to Christ, he had but little faith; and says to Him, "if thou canst do anything, help us"; and after Christ had talked with him about his faith, he could only say, "Lord, I believe, help mine unbelief".

Matthew 17:17 "Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me."

Jesus upbraided the disciples here, and also all who do not believe. Their lack of belief was overwhelming to Him. He was really saying, how long do I have to put up with your unbelief?

Matthew 17:18 "And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour."

Nothing is impossible with Jesus. He just spoke the Word and this boy was free.

Matthew 17:19 "Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out?"

“Why could not we cast him out?” When Christ sent the disciples out (10:6-8), He explicitly commissioned them to do these kinds of miracles. Less than a year later, they failed where they had once succeeded. Christ’s explanation for their failure was that their faith was deficient (verse 20).

The deficiency did not consist in a lack of confidence; they were surprised that they could not cast out this demon. The problem probably lay in a failure to make God, rather than their own gifts, the object of their confidence.

This would be the question of many ministers today. Most have no power to deliver anyone from anything. They do not ask in public, they do not want to admit to the people, that they do not have the power to do this.

Matthew 17:20 "And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you."

“Faith as a grain of mustard seed”: True faith, by Christ’s definition, always involves surrender to the will of God. What He was teaching here is nothing like positive-thinking psychology. He was saying that both the source and the object of all genuine faith, even the weak, mustard-seed variety, is God. And “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

“Nothing shall be impossible”: Here, Christ assumes the qualifying thought that is explicitly added by (1 John 5:14); what we ask for must be “according to His will.”

Matthew 17:21 "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting."

“But by prayer and fasting”: Again, this suggests that the underlying problem was the disciples’ failure to make God the object of their faith. But this verse is not found in the best manuscripts.

Jesus explained that faith is the ingredient that brings miracles. You can have a miracle just as big as your faith is. Sometimes however, our faith is not strong enough, and then we must tap in to the faith of God. This is done by fasting. During a fast, God feeds us of Himself and His power.

His faith operating in us brings tremendous miracles. Then you could say unto a mountain of problems, be removed, and it will have to move. I like the sentence "nothing shall be impossible unto you". Say that over and over, because with God you can do anything.

Matthew Chapter 17 Questions

1. What three disciples did Jesus take to the mountain with Him?

2. Which was James' brother?
3. Why did Jesus go to the mountain?
4. What shone as the sun?
5. How white was His raiment?
6. Who is the Light of the World?
7. What is the author's special belief that Peter, James, and John were allowed to see for a moment?
8. What two men appeared with Jesus?
9. What did they represent?
10. What would these three disciples realize later?
11. What mistake did Peter suggest?
12. God the Father appeared in what?
13. How did they know it was God?
14. What did He say "do", pertaining to Jesus?
15. Who straightened Peter out instantly about the difference in Jesus, Moses, and Elijah?
16. What effect did God's voice have on Peter, James, and John?
17. What two things always happen when you are in the presence of the Father?
18. How did Jesus comfort them?
19. Why would these three know more about Jesus than anyone else?
20. What did Jesus tell them to do about this?
21. Who was prophesied to come before the great and terrible day of the Lord?
22. What book in the Old Testament prophesied this?
23. Who did the disciples understand was the spirit of Elijah?
24. What happened to him?
25. What was wrong with the boy brought to Jesus for healing?
26. What did this spirit cause him to do?

27. Why did Jesus say the disciples could not heal him?
28. Jesus said if you had faith as a mustard seed, you could do what?
29. What is the limit of a Christian?
30. Why do we fast?