

Matthew Chapter 14-17 – Evidence of Jesus’ Messiahship and More Opposition – Part 13 Matthew 17:9-27 – John/Elijah; Littleness of Faith; Temple Tax/Fishing

Introduction

Matthew is an evangelical book to Israel. The purpose of Matthew is:

- **To demonstrate that Jesus is Christ (the Messiah)**
- **To reveal that Jesus is the Son of God – God in the flesh**
- **To introduce, offer, and prepare the Jews for the Kingdom of Heaven**
 - The Transfiguration further substantiates these three points to Peter, James, and John.
- To write an account of the life and times of Jesus Christ
- To prepare the Remnant of Israel to survive the Time of Jacob’s Trouble
- To validate both this testimony and the testimony of all the apostles
- If Israel were to believe in Jesus and accept Jesus as their King, then He will bring the Kingdom of Heaven to fruition.

Review

The last two lessons focused on the Transfiguration and the interaction of apostles with Jesus and the Father. This action fulfills the statements in verse 28. Three of them saw His glory, the glory that would also be seen in the Kingdom.

This is a preview of Jesus’ true identity and will be seen in the coming of the Son of Man when He comes to establish the Kingdom of Heaven.

Peter and the others stated that they wanted to build three tents or booths. This is stated based on their anticipation of the Millennial Kingdom and the Feast of Booths, where the Messiah will live permanently on earth in His Kingdom.

These booths would have been memorials; there is no indication that Peter was suggesting that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah would stay there.

Peter did misspeak by, once again, denying the fact that Jesus would depart (die, resurrect, and ascend). Jesus had been telling Peter that the Kingdom was not yet, but Peter was still insisting that it was.

Therefore, the Father interrupted Peter, telling him to listen to Jesus the beloved Son.

Matthew 17:9-13 – Elijah/John the Baptist

Coming down from the mountain, Jesus first told them to tell no one the vision “until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” This has been explained in 16:20 - This is because His purpose was not yet to rule. His glory comes after suffering, and He will not rule until after He dies for the sins of the nation and the world.

The disciples’ next question is, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” Examining Mark 9:9-11, the disciples referenced here are the three that saw the vision.

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Elijah must come before what? It is the Messianic Kingdom. They just saw the preview, and now they expect an immediate Kingdom reality. The idea comes from Malachi 4:5-6.

Elijah will be sent before the great and terrible Day of the Lord. This event is the seven-year period we call the Great Tribulation (Jacob’s Trouble, Daniel’s 70th week).

Elijah’s purpose is to prepare the Remnant to survive the Day of the Lord. What is confusing the disciples is that the scribes give them a chronology of eschatology that is not matching up with reality. (Show Larkin)

The scribes taught the next events are:

1. Elijah
2. Messianic Kingdom inauguration
 - a. Within the inauguration, the Messiah defeats all of Israel’s enemies
 - b. Evil Jews will be judged

The scribes ignore the Suffering Servant, the seven years of wrath, and that only a small remnant would be saved. Because the three saw a preview of the Kingdom, they ask where Elijah is.

Jesus responded, “Elijah is coming and will restore all things,” then stated, “Elijah already came.” In verses 11-12, we have a “men/de” construction. This is better translated as “on one hand, Elijah is coming, but on the other hand, Elijah already came.”

The concept of Elijah and John the Baptizer is always debated. Jesus has said that John is the prophesied one in regard to Elijah. Or at least, John could have been that prophesied one.

What we know is this: Elijah is not to be re-incarnated. Whoever fulfills this will come in the spirit of Elijah (Luke 1:17). John could have fulfilled this had Israel accepted him, and the Kingdom of Heaven would have been inaugurated soon after Jesus was crucified.

Since John was rejected and the Messiah is being rejected, the prophecy of Elijah coming to restore all things will happen again. Will one of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 be in the spirit of Elijah? Maybe, but I have reservations.

Matthew 17:14-21 – Casting Out Demons/Littleness of Your Faith

A man comes to Jesus pleading for mercy for his son. The translations say that the boy is a *lunatic*. The word means to be caused to have seizures. This is portrayed by falling into fire and water.

Very ill – “severely suffering (being physically punished).” Later it is revealed that this was a demon torturing the boy.

Remember, Jesus left the other nine disciples, and they were in the vicinity of a crowd; they were probably continuing the task that Jesus gave them in Matthew 10, but they had a problem with this particular demon-possessed boy (Mark 9:14-27). Jesus responds to the crowds; the disciples get their own rebuke later.

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This demon-possessed boy is representative of the *unbelieving* (apistos) and perverted “group of people.”

It is important to understand what is happening in the parallel passage. The father of the boy comes to Jesus. The father comes to the proper source, even after Jesus’ disciples were not able to deal with the demon. Jesus takes time to teach the crowds, specifically the father, before healing the boy.

The father states to Jesus, “if you can.” In English, we use “if you can” as either able or willing. In Greek, the father says, “if you are able.” Jesus rebukes the father saying, “if you are able? Everything is able to the believing one.”

The father responded, “I believe.” Then the father continued, “help my ‘*ho apistia*’.” The father believed that Jesus was capable of helping but pleaded with Jesus to help his lack of understanding of the doctrines of God. The father did not know what he needed to know; I suspect that Jesus later gave the father everything he needed.

Jesus then cast the demon out of the boy, providing the confirmation that the father and the crowds needed. Later and privately, the disciples ask Jesus about their inability. Jesus responds to them by saying that they have “ὀλιγόπιστος *oligopistos*.” Notice that they are not “*apistia*.” They are believers, but they do not understand what to do in this situation.

In the Bible, we do not have the instructions that Jesus gave to the disciples for healing or casting out demons. Evidently, there were instructions given to the disciples, but they did not remember, follow, or believe the instructions Jesus gave them.

Jesus tells them that, even with the small amount of doctrine they believed, they would have authority over nature (as long as they are acting in the will of God).

Back in Matthew, verse 21 is not part of the original text. It is possible that copyists added this verse much later in light of the Mark text. Also in Mark, the phrase “with fasting” is not in the text and should be disregarded. We are left with, “This kind only goes out with prayer.”

Strange things are happening. Also, we are left with gaps. We do not have any of the original instructions to the disciples, and we do not have any instructions later. We are getting a glimpse into their ministry.

Matthew 17:22-23 – Reiteration

As we have seen in Matthew 16:21, Jesus tells the disciples many times that He is going to be killed and resurrected three days later. The statement “they were deeply grieved” indicates more than sadness; it also means they lacked understanding (Mark 9:32).

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Matthew 17:24-27 – Temple Tax/Fishing

This little account is only found in Matthew. The practice of having a temple tax is found in Exodus 30:11-16. Based on Jesus’ discussion, this was not really what was happening, and the practice was now a perpetual tax for coming in and out of areas controlled by Israel. This is why it was called a custom or a poll tax.

Simon Peter, believing this was part of the Law, said yes to the demands of the tax collectors. Jesus took this opportunity to teach Peter about the true nature of the Law. Jesus, however, did not want to give the tax collectors an avenue for rebuke. When Jesus goes on trial, there is no accusation that Jesus did not pay the prescribed Jewish taxes. Jesus told Peter to go fishing, and the first fish he would draw out would have a shackle in its mouth, and with that sheckle, pay the tax.

The miracle is mundane at this point. The focus should not remain on the fishing miracle; rather the point is a lesson He gave Peter about having proper priorities. For God, taxes are easy, and the mission that Peter is going on is much more important than a demand for a sheckle.

Jesus makes this point to the crowds later in regard to taxes to Caesar. Why create problems that have no effect on the truth? A discussion about taxes for the disciples distracts from the more important teaching about Jesus.

Eternal Truth

The last two accounts in Chapter 17 have lessons in principle, but we must be very careful about trying to apply this text to our lives.

The disciples were given authority and instruction to demonstrate the connection of Jesus as the Messiah. Later in Acts, they demonstrate this authority without any problems, and they magnify Jesus through their actions.

We have not been given that authority, and we have no instruction to deal with demons. I believe the specific instructions were not written down so that there can be no impersonators.

The principle of the temple tax is understandable. There are more important doctrines in Scripture. No reason to fight a small point of doctrine at the cost of not discussing the bigger issue. Also, no reason to give the enemy a possible accusation over taxes.