

Matthew 17:1-13

Introduction

Last week, Jesus told the disciples: “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (16:28). Almost six hundred years earlier, the prophet Daniel had seen a vision of one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven to be presented before the Ancient of Days. Judgment was passed in favor of this one like a son of man and He was given a royal authority, so that all peoples, nations, and languages might serve Him. When Jesus ascended into heaven He came with the clouds of heaven and was presented before the Ancient of Days. “Judgment” was passed in His favor, and He was given all authority in heaven and on earth so that “all nations” might come to serve Him. It was given to Jesus (the son of *man*) to sit down on God’s throne (Rev. 3:21)!

But what are the signs *here on earth* of this royal authority that the Son of Man has received from the Ancient of Days? They are (among others) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33-36), the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (Mat. 10:23), the spread of the Gospel of the kingdom throughout all the world (Mat. 28:18-20; cf. 16:28), and ultimately, Jesus final return to this earth at the end of this age (Mat. 25:31-32; cf. 19:28; 16:27). And so the coming of the Son of Man to the Ancient of Days becomes this flexible expression that can be used for all of the earthly manifestations of His royal authority. The enthronement of Jesus at His ascension is the seal and the guarantee of the triumph of the Gospel and of His final victorious return to this earth!

So much depends on the coming of the Son of Man to the Ancient of Days! So much depends on the royal authority and kingdom that Jesus has received! That’s why the disciples *must be able to see* the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (in His royal authority) – *and so must we!* If we are ever to take up our cross and lose our lives, then we must be able to *see* Jesus kingdom authority today, and so be **assured** of his final return when we who have lost our lives for His sake will find our lives and keep them to life eternal!

Now the very next thing that we come to in Matthew is the account of the transfiguration of Jesus which was witnessed only by Peter, James, and John. So couldn’t this be the “coming” of the Son of Man in His kingdom which Jesus said only some of the disciples would see? This seems unlikely for several reasons.¹ But the most important reason is that it’s very hard to see how the transfiguration can fulfill all of what Jesus actually promised. In Luke, Jesus says: “There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see **the kingdom of God**” (9:27). In Mark, Jesus is even more specific: “There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see *the kingdom of God AFTER it has come with power*” (9:1). The

¹ Jesus didn’t say: “There are *some* standing here who will *see* the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” What Jesus actually said was this: “There are *some* standing here *who will not taste death* until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” *All* of the disciples will ultimately see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom, but *some* of the disciples will actually see this coming before they die! This implies that others of the disciples will die before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. But, of course, none of the disciples died within the next six days. It also seems strange to solemnly predict that some of the disciples will see the Son of Man coming *even within their lifetime*, and then find this prediction fulfilled less than a week later.

transfiguration is a *preview* of what is to come, but some of the disciples, Jesus says, will see the kingdom *after* it has *already* come with power. So the transfiguration is not the fulfillment of Jesus promise, but it *is* an amazing preview of the awesome glory and divine authority that will be Jesus' when He has come with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days! And maybe it was because Matthew wanted to make this connection more explicit that he added the reference to seeing "*the Son of Man* coming in His kingdom." So we read in verses 1-2:

I. Matthew 17:1-2 – And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

We don't know for sure which mountain this was, but Matthew tells us that it was a "*high*" mountain. I think that the "high mountain" adds to the sense of loftiness and grandeur of what we are about to see. Jesus led Peter, James, and John up a high mountain *by themselves*. There were no crowds. Not even the other disciples were there. They were alone on a high and lofty mountain with Jesus. "And He was transfigured before them." *Jesus* was transformed and changed before their very eyes. He is still Jesus, but this is no "root out of dry ground." It cannot be said of this Jesus that he has "no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2). To the contrary! There was a radiant, and brilliant, and glorious *light* that so pervaded even the *body* of Jesus that His physical *face* was shining like the sun, and even His *clothes* became white as light. Jesus was literally ablaze in His own glory! Can this be the one of whom Isaiah said that men would hide their faces from Him, and despise Him, and esteem Him not (53:3)? But no man in all the world, no matter how wicked, could ever esteem lightly *this Jesus* revealed now in power and in glory! And this vision of power and glory is a *preview* of the power and glory that Jesus will receive when He comes with the clouds of heaven and is presented before the Ancient of Days (Revelation 1:12-18; 2:26-27; 3:21; cf. 3:7). Can we ever begin to fathom the love of God the Son, that He would humble Himself to walk among men with no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him?

II. Matthew 17:3 – And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

Why Moses and Elijah? Some say that Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets (which sums up the entire Old Testament). This may very well be part of the significance, but it seems to me that there is more going on here. Moses and Elijah were both "eschatological" figures. Moses and Elijah were both associated with the *end times* and the *last days* when the Messiah and His kingdom would come. Listen to what Moses said to the Israelites:

✓ Deuteronomy 18:15 (cf. 17-19; Acts 3:22-24; 7:37; Jn. 1:21) – The LORD your God will raise up for you *a prophet like me* from among you, from your brothers—*it is to him you shall listen*.

And so people came to expect another great prophet like Moses who would arise in the last days in connection with the Messiah and the ushering in of His kingdom. And we can say the same thing about Elijah!

- ✓ Malachi 4:5–6 – Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

So when the religious leaders asked John the Baptist who he was, John answered:

- ✓ John 1:20–21 – “I am not the Christ.” And they asked him, “What then? *Are you Elijah?*” He said, “I am not.” “*Are you the Prophet?*” And he answered, “No.”

John is announcing the *kingdom*, but he is *not* the Messiah. So then, is he Elijah? Is he the prophet? Which “eschatological”, end times, figure is he claiming to be? And now it is Moses and Elijah themselves who appear with Jesus as He is revealed in power and glory on the high and lofty mountain! The obvious significance of this is certainly not lost on Peter!

III. Matthew 17:4 – And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

Luke tells us that Peter said this just as Moses and Elijah were departing (9:33). So in other words, this is what Peter was saying: “Lord, it is good that we *stay* here. If you wish, I will make three tents/tabernacles here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” This was much more to Peter’s liking than predictions of suffering and death! At the Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites would live in booths or tents in celebration of their deliverance from Egypt and in anticipation of their future eschatological (end times) deliverance. So it seems that in Peter’s mind, that final deliverance is now here and so it’s now time for the Messiah to take up His rule. But it also seems that Peter still doesn’t fully understand *who* Jesus really is! Peter respectfully calls Him “Lord”, but he also suggests that there be *three* tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah! In the transfiguration Peter sees the chance for glory without suffering, even as he continues to miss who Jesus really is. And so this time, Peter is actually interrupted by God Himself (cf. 16:22-23).

IV. Matthew 17:5 – He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

“Listen to *Him!*” And so we’re reminded of Moses words in Deuteronomy: “The LORD your God will raise up for you *a prophet like me* from among you, from your brothers—*it is to him you shall listen*” (18:15). Jesus *is* the prophet like Moses, and so it is to *Him* that Peter must listen. Moses himself has *already fulfilled* his role, and we’ll find out in a moment that *so has Elijah!* So there will certainly not be any need for three tabernacles! But what about just *one* – for Jesus? Why shouldn’t *He*, at least, stay here, permanently revealed in all of His power and glory?

The voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son”, and there is an echo in these words of God’s command to Abraham over 2000 years earlier:

- ✓ Genesis 22:2 (LXX) – Take *your son, your beloved son Isaac, whom you love*, and go to the land of Moriah, and *offer him there as a burnt offering* on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.

The voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, *with whom I am well pleased*”, and here we are reminded of the words of Isaiah:

- ✓ Isaiah 42:1 (cf. 11:2; 61:1) – Behold my servant [my *suffering* servant; Isaiah 53], whom I uphold, my chosen, *in whom my soul delights*.

When God the Father speaks these words—“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”—they are full of the overtones of *suffering*. And if the disciples are truly to listen to Jesus, then that *must include* the words that Jesus has just spoken about His suffering and His death – *and* the suffering and death of those who follow Him. Peter, you do not yet know who Jesus is... and you do not yet understand what Jesus has come to do. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; *listen to Him*.”

- V. Matthew 17:6–8 – When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

Jesus, as they had always known Him. Jesus, no longer revealed in power and in glory, but now simply a man like any other, with “no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2). Where the transfigured Jesus was untouchable in His glory, here, once again, is the Jesus who can suffer and die.

- VI. Matthew 17:9 – And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”

Moses and Elijah have gone away. Jesus is no longer revealed in power and glory, but rather as a man like any other. And now Peter, James, and John must keep all that they have seen a *secret*. They can’t even tell the other disciples – not, at least, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. And there’s that word *again*. Death. The disciples still don’t understand the part about being “raised” (cf. Mk. 9:10), but the part about death is consuming their minds. Why couldn’t the vision have lasted longer? Why couldn’t the vision have been permanent? Why shouldn’t Jesus from that moment on be everlastingly revealed in power and in glory? How can the Jesus whom they have just seen transfigured before their very eyes be talking about death?

- VII. Matthew 17:10 – And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?”

Remember the prophecy in Malachi:

- ✓ Malachi 4:5–6 – Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

If Elijah is to bring about the spiritual restoration of Israel, and if Elijah is to come *first before* the Messiah, then how can the Messiah be killed by the Israel that Elijah has already restored? Where is Elijah? Where is the restoration? How can the Messiah, who has just been revealed in awesome power and glory, be talking about *death*?

VIII. Matthew 17:11–13 – He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things [the scribes are right on this point]. But *I* tell you that Elijah has already come, and they [the scribes] did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist [cf. Mat. 3:4; 11:14].

So even the “Elijah” prophesied in Malachi has suffered at the hands of Israel’s leaders. But his mission was not a failure.

✓ Matthew 3:5–6 – Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Some of those baptized by John were the disciples of Jesus, upon whom Jesus declared that He would build His new assembly – His new and *restored* Israel. So even in the very fulfillment of His mission, “Elijah” suffered and was killed. “Elijah” had already come. And now the Messiah, too, must suffer at their hands and be killed. *It is only after* they have seen the Son of Man suffering and dying that the disciples can then see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. *It is only after* the Son of Man has suffered and died that He may be permanently and everlastingly revealed in power and glory as He comes with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days.

Peter, James, and John still don’t understand. But one day they will, after Jesus has risen from the dead. And so until then, they must not tell a soul about what they have seen. But when that day *does* come, they will *tell the world*. They will tell the world that the Jesus they had seen in the transfiguration is now revealed everlastingly in the *same* power and glory as He sits now on the very throne of God Himself. Thirty-five years later, Peter would take up his pen and write these words:

✓ 2 Peter 1:16–18 – We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you ***the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ***, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

What Peter saw prefigured for a moment is now an unceasing reality as Jesus sits enthroned at the right hand of God.

✓ Revelation 1:12-18; 2:26-27; 3:21 (cf. 3:7) – Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw... ***one like a son of man***, clothed with a long robe and with a

golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades... The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations... ***even as I myself have received authority from my Father...*** I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, ***as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.***”

Conclusion

Can we ever begin to fathom the humiliation of the Son of Man, that He would come to us with no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him? Can we ever begin to fathom the power, and glory, and majesty of the Son of Man, who has come with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days? He is Jesus Christ, our *Savior*, and our *King*! Let us love and adore Him, and worship and praise Him! And let us *listen* to Him in true humility and obedience. Let us keep His works until the end so that when we go to be with Him, we may share in His authority over the nations, and sit down with Him on His throne.

- ✓ Colossians 3:1–4 – If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, *then you also will appear with him in glory.*
- ✓ Colossians 3:5, 8–10, 12-14, 17 – Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry... you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth... Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony... And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.