

Matthew 17:22-23 (cf. 16:13-17:20)

Introduction

This is now the third time in Matthew's Gospel (and the third time in only the last two chapters) that Jesus has very clearly foretold His own suffering and death, followed by resurrection. Jesus and His disciples are still in Galilee, but after their time to the north of Galilee (in Caesarea Philippi, 16:13; cf. 15:21) this will just be a brief "layover" as they prepare for the final journey to Jerusalem. You could say that over the last two chapters, we've been on something of an up and down roller coaster ride – along with the disciples. If these two chapters have seen the clearest predictions of suffering and death, then they have also seen some of the clearest predictions of power, and authority, and triumph.

I. Matthew 16:13-20 – Present Triumph

In Matthew sixteen, we saw Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah, the royal son of the living God. And then Jesus told Peter that he was going to build His messianic, kingdom assembly, and that the gates of hell would never prevail against this assembly. Indeed, Jesus went so far as to say that He would give to His disciples the keys of the kingdom of heaven so that whatever they bound on earth would be bound in heaven, and whatever they loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven. This is easily the high point in Matthew's Gospel thus far, and it was certainly a high point for the disciples! Can we really even imagine? The disciples must have been flying pretty high at this point, and who can blame them? The future looked rosy, the sky was the limit, and they must have been full of unbridled *optimism*.

But there was a danger in this optimism, and that danger was something that I'm going to call this morning "triumphalism". By that word I mean something a little different than what the dictionary says. I'm talking about an attitude that takes the wonderful certainty of *future triumph* and actually assumes that this triumph is no longer future, but *already here* and just waiting to be "*claimed*". It's basically an attitude that takes *too much* of the "not yet", and tries transferring it to the "already". And who wouldn't *want* to do this? It feels good. It's optimistic. It can *sound* very spiritual. So we could say that the triumphalist is someone who believes that every Christian should always be smiling because as a general rule every Christian should always be prospering. Since the *kingdom* is *here*, then most, if not all sickness, and pain, and tribulation, and suffering must be the result of personal sin, or a lack of faith. The extreme version of these ideas is the health and wealth prosperity "Gospel". But isn't our health and prosperity (physical, emotional, and spiritual), the ultimate result of our salvation? And so the triumphalist would say that every Christian should always be happy and smiling if he is really, truly experiencing the *triumph* of the *kingdom* in his own life through "the power of the keys", and the defeat of Satan and his demons, and the exercise of true faith. Now that may be a little extreme and stereotypical, but maybe it helps to get the point across. And we may not be as far away from this attitude as we may think.

But it was to guard against this triumphalism that Jesus followed the exhilarating rush of Peter's confession and His own promises of kingdom triumph with the very *first* prediction of His own suffering and death.

II. Matthew 16:21-26 – Present Suffering

Matthew writes: “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (16:21). Now if the disciples didn’t have any problem with predictions of victory and triumph, they had a serious problem with predictions that appeared to mean failure and defeat. And who wouldn’t? So Peter actually took Jesus aside and “began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you’” (16:22). The disciples completely missed the part about the resurrection because they couldn’t comprehend or process any thought of Jesus’ death. And so their initial response was simply one of denial.

But then you could say that Jesus “upped the ante” by warning Peter that he was not setting his mind on the things of God, but on the things of man (16:23). He went on to tell His disciples:

Matthew 16:24 — If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and *take up his cross* and follow me.

So not only is *Jesus* going to die, but those who would follow Jesus must be willing to die *with* Him. The exhilaration, and optimism, and triumph of a few verses ago would seem to be all but forgotten – replaced now with the news of suffering and of death. And *yet* Jesus would not have His disciples walking around with a “defeatist” attitude either! If Jesus doesn’t want His disciples transferring too much of the “not yet” into the “already”, neither does He want His disciples transferring too much of the “already” into the “not yet”, so that they walk around as those with nothing more than a death sentence hanging over their heads!

III. Matthew 16:27-17:8 – Present Triumph

And so Jesus went on to say to His disciples: “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father... 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” (16:27-28). So here again, the note of present *triumph* is sounded even in the midst of what can appear to be warnings of failure and defeat! Apparently, one can bear his cross *and* exercise the authority and power of the keys of the kingdom *both at the same time*. Apparently, one can experience the terrible realities of suffering and death *and* victory over death and Hades *both at the same time*.

And then came the power and glory of the transfiguration which was a preview of the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. And this “preview” was truly something to behold! Very quickly, Peter latched on to this vision of the transfigured Jesus. It was far more to his liking than all the talk about suffering and death.

✓ Matthew 17:4 — 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.”

Peter didn’t want to let this vision go. Here was the untouchable Jesus. Here was the final triumph of the kingdom. Here was the good news of undiminished bliss and happiness for all the

citizens of the kingdom. Peter was clinging to this mountain top experience. And after all, who wouldn't? But then the vision ended, and the disciples found themselves with no one, but Jesus only (17:8).

IV. Matthew 17:9-13 – Present Suffering

And Jesus' very next words to the disciples were these: "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead" (17:9). But once again, the disciples can't understand what Jesus says about resurrection because they can't process His talk about death. And so they question how it is that the Messiah can die, if Elijah must come first and restore all things. And Jesus responds: "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands" (17:11-12). And so *once again*, the exhilaration, and optimism and triumph of the transfiguration would seem to be all but forgotten – replaced *once again* with warnings of suffering and death. And oh how quickly the disciples could again have lapsed into a despondent and defeatist attitude. How easily their minds could have been filled with paralyzing thoughts of fear, and failure, and defeat. Can we identify with the disciples? Would we have been any different? But then what is the very next thing that happens?

V. Matthew 17:14-21 – Present Triumph

No sooner have the disciples come down from the mountain than they hear about the failure of the other disciples to heal a demon possessed boy.

- ✓ Matthew 17:17-21 — And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me." And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For *truly, I say to you*, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

What an amazing, and exhilarating, and thrilling thought! It almost defies comprehension! "*Truly, I say to you*, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." And so Jesus sounds yet again the note of *triumph* immediately following His talk about suffering and death. Here in the midst of what can *appear* to be warnings of failure and defeat, Jesus gives to His disciples the ultimate promise of present victory and triumph! "Nothing will be impossible for you." *Once again*, the sky is the limit and the disciples can very rightfully be filled with a joyful sense of confidence and optimism.

But *once again*, the danger of this optimism was that it could easily give way to triumphalism. Some people have assumed on the basis of this promise that the Christian life should be nothing less than a bed of roses, and that if it's not, it's simply the result of a sinful lack of faith and a failure to tap into the full authority and power of the kingdom. After all, Jesus did say that

nothing will be impossible for us – didn't He? *Nothing*. Right? And how many exceptions are there to "*nothing*." None. Right? *Wrong!* Remember Calvin's insight here:

"[Jesus] does not mean that God will give us every thing that we may mention, or that may strike our minds at random. On the contrary, as nothing is more at variance with *faith* than the foolish and irregular desires of our flesh, it follows that those in whom faith reigns do not desire every thing without discrimination, but only that which the Lord promises to give. Let us therefore maintain such moderation as to desire nothing beyond what he has promised to us, and to confine our prayers within that rule which he has laid down."

When Jesus says "nothing will be impossible for you", He means precisely this: "Of all the works and tasks of the *kingdom* that I have *authorized and commissioned* you to accomplish, *nothing* will be impossible for you." So then what about Jesus' predictions of His own suffering and death? How does suffering and death *fit* with the moving of mountains? How can suffering and death exist in the *same world* with the kind of faith for which nothing is impossible? Of course, the triumphalist would say that they *can't*, and so the very next thing we read in Matthew's Gospel is this:

VI. Matthew 17:22–23 — As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day."

Here is the third of Jesus' predictions of His own suffering and death. Luke says this:

✓ Luke 9:43–44 — And all were astonished at the majesty of God. ***But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing***, Jesus said to his disciples, "*Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.*"

Yes, it is true that "if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed... nothing will be impossible for you", but this does *not mean* an escape from trials and tribulations, and suffering, and even death. It won't be long now and Jesus will fall on His face in the Garden of Gethsemane and pray these words:

✓ Matthew 26:39 — My Father, if it be possible, let this cup [of suffering and death] pass from me.

But the cup did not pass, and Jesus drank it to the full. And we remember now what the suffering and death of Jesus must also mean for *His followers*. If Jesus must suffer and die, then all those who would come after Him must also deny themselves, and take up their own cross of suffering and death. But to the disciples, this can only mean one thing – *failure* and *defeat*. And so Matthew concludes with these words:

✓ Matthew 17:23 — And they were greatly distressed.

Now there is a proper place for distress, and sorrow, and anguish. Jesus will say to His disciples in the Garden:

✓ Matthew 26:38 — My soul is very sorrowful [distressed], even to death.

But *why* were the disciples so distressed? They were distressed at least in part because they could not harmonize these predictions of suffering and death with the authority and triumph of life in the kingdom. They could not accept the idea that they could bear a cross *and* exercise the authority of the keys of the kingdom *both at the same time*. They could not yet accept the idea that they could experience sorrow, and pain, and trials, and tribulations, *and* participate in the kingdom triumph and victory over Satan and His demons *both at the same time*. And so Mark says:

✓ Mark 9:32 (cf. Luke 9:45) — But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

They could not yet live with the tension between the full *enjoyment* of the “already” and the anxious *longing* for the “not yet”. What they longed for was the final triumph and consummation of all things, but if they couldn’t have that *now*, then the only option they saw was the despair of failure and defeat.

Conclusion

I wonder if we ever struggle in the same way? In the Christian life, it can be so easy for us to cling on the one hand to the false hope and assurance of triumphalism, or to resign ourselves on the other hand to the wrong thinking and attitudes of the defeatist. On the one hand, we can so emphasize the biblical teaching on trials, and tribulation, and suffering that we fail to rejoice in the triumph and victory of the kingdom that is *already ours*. We fail to exult in the power and authority of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, knowing that in *our* mouths the word of the kingdom is powerful to *do* and to *accomplish* all that it proclaims – to *open* the doors of the kingdom to those who believe and to *shut* the doors of the kingdom against those who refuse to believe! We fail to exult in the full reality of Christ’s present rule on the throne of God and the authority that He has received over all the earth so that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. We fail to exult in the *reality* that faith the size of a grain of mustard seed can move mountains so that nothing will be impossible for us! We fail to exult in the “already” of the kingdom!

But then on the other hand, we can so emphasize the *arrival* of the kingdom and Christ’s *present* rule that we *distort* these truths and leave ourselves with no ability to process the realities of trials, and tribulations, and sorrows, and suffering, and death – whether in our own lives, or in the lives of others. It’s *easier* to assume that the suffering in a brother’s life is the result of personal sin, than to reconcile this experience of suffering with the glorious triumph of kingdom living. It’s much *easier* to claim the ease and comforts of life in America as our Christian birthright than to reconcile the experience of persecution and martyrdom with a faith that moves mountains. And so we fail to live faithfully in the tension between the full enjoyment of the “already” and the anxious longing for the “not yet”. In the Christian life, there is no room for the

kind of triumphalism that stumbles over the reality of sorrow, and suffering, and death. But neither is there any room in the Christian life for the pessimism and defeatism that is blinded to the *full* reality of our *present* participation in the rule and reign of the Messiah! Every single day of our lives, we share *both* in Christ's sufferings and death, *and* in Christ's resurrection life – both *at the very same time*. This is a serious *tension* that all of us have resisted stumbled over at one time or another, but as we have seen over the last two chapters in Matthew, it's a tension that Christ calls us to *live in!* Listen to what the author of Hebrews says concerning even the Old Testament saints who lived before this present age of the kingdom:

- ✓ Hebrews 11:32–35a — And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection.
- ✓ Hebrews 11:35b–38 — Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

How do we reconcile the experience of those people in verses 32-35 with the experience of those in verses 35-38 – especially *now*, in the age of the *kingdom*? In humble faith, we embrace the tension of living in the full enjoyment of the “already” and in the anxious longing for the “not yet”, *both at the same time*, and without ever minimizing in the slightest bit the full reality of either one or the other. Or consider the experience of the Apostle Paul. On the one hand, he can write this:

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 11:23–27 — Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

And yet after all this, it was this same Paul who could testify:

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 12:2–4, 12 — I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven... this man was caught up into paradise... and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter... The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

So how do we reconcile the testimony of Paul in chapter eleven with the testimony of Paul in chapter 12? In humble faith, we embrace this tension of exultantly living in the kingdom *triumph* of the “already”, *and* patiently living in the *anguish, and sorrows, and tribulations* of the “not yet”, *both equally at the same time*. And it’s that last part that is by far the hardest part. It should be clear to us by now that we can only do this by grace alone, through faith alone.

- ✓ Hebrews 12:1-2 — Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and *is* seated [even *now*] at the right hand of the throne of God.