

Matthew 17 Commentary-C H Spurgeon

PREVIOUS

NEXT

MATTHEW 17:1-13 OUR KING TRANSFIGURED IN GLORY

Matthew 17:1,2. AND after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun and his raiment was white as the light

Were these “six days,” a week’s quiet interval, in which our Lord prepared himself for the singular transaction upon the “mountain apart”? Did the little company of three know from one Sabbath to another that such an amazing joy awaited them? The three were elect out of the elect, and favored to see what none else in all the world might behold. Doubtless our Lord had reasons for his choice, as he has for every choice he makes; but he does not unveil them to us. The same three beheld the agony in the garden; perhaps the first sight was necessary to sustain their faith under the second.

The name of the “high mountain” can never be known; for those who knew the locality have left no information. Tabor, if you please; Hermon, if you prefer it. No one can decide. It was a lone and lofty hill.

While in prayer, the splendor of the Lord shone out. His face, lit up with its own inner glory, became a sun; and all his dress, like clouds irradiated by that sun became white as the light itself “He was transfigured before them”: he alone was the center of what they saw. It was a marvelous unveiling of the hidden nature of the Lord Jesus. Then was, in one way, fulfilled the word of John: “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory.”

The transfiguration occurred but once: special views of the glory of Christ are not enjoyed every day. Our highest joy on earth is to see Jesus. There can be no greater bliss in heaven; but we shall be better able to endure the exceeding bliss when we have laid aside the burden of this flesh.

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

Thus the Law and the Prophets, “Moses and Elias”, communed with our Lord, “talking with him”; and entering into familiar conversation with their Lord. Saints long departed still live; live in their personality; are known by their names; and enjoy near access to Christ. It is a great joy to holy ones to be with Jesus: they find it heaven to be where they can talk with him.

The heads of former dispensations conversed with the Lord as to his decease, by which a new economy I would be ushered in. After condescending so long to his ignorant followers, it must have been a great relief to the human soul of Jesus to talk with two master-minds like those of Moses and Elijah. What a sight for the apostles, this glorious trio! They “appeared unto them”, but they “talked with him”: the object of the two holy ones was not to converse with apostles, but with their Master.

Although saints are seen of men, their fellowship is with Jesus.

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 Elias.

The sight spoke to the three beholders, and they felt bound to answer to it.

Peter must speak: “Then answered Peter.” That which is uppermost comes out: “Lord!, it is good for us to be here.” Everybody was of his opinion.

Who would not have been? Because it was so good, he would fain stay in this beatific state, and get still more good from it. But he has not lost his reverence, and therefore he would have the great ones sheltered suitably.

He submits the proposal to Jesus: “If thou wilt.” He offers that, with his brethren, he will plan and build shrines for the three holy ones: “Let us make here three tabernacles.” He does not propose to build for himself, and James, and John; but he says, “One for

thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. ” His talk sounds rather like that of a bewildered child. He wanders a little; yet his expression is a most natural one. Who would not wish to abide in such society as this? Moses, and Elias, and Jesus: what company! But yet how unpractical is Peter! How selfish the one thought, “It is good for us !” What was to be done for the rest of the twelve, and for the other disciples, and for the wide, wide world? A sip of such bliss might be good for the three, but to continue to drink thereof might not have been really good even for them. Peter knew not what he said. The like might be said of many another excited utterance of enthusiastic saints.

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.

“While he yet spake. ” Such wild talk might well be interrupted. What a blessed interruption! We may often thank the Lord for stopping our babbling. “A bright cloud overshadowed them .” It was bright, and cast a shadow. They felt that they were entering it, and feared as they did so. It was a singular experience; yet we have had it repeated in our own cases.

Do we not know what it is to get shadow out of brightness, and “a voice out of the cloud ”? This is after the frequent manner of the Lord in dealing with his favored ones.

The voice was clear and distinct. First came the divine attestation of the Sonship of our Lord, “This is my beloved Son, ” and the Father’s declaration of delight in him, — “in whom I am well pleased. ” What happiness for us that Jehovah is well pleased in Christ, and with all who are in him! Then followed the consequent divine requirement, “Hear ye him. ” It is better to hear the Son of God than to see saints, or to build tabernacles. This will please the Father more than all else that love can suggest.

The good pleasure of the Father in the Lord Jesus is a conspicuous part of his glory. The voice conveyed to the ear a greater glory than the luster of light could communicate through the eye. The audible part of the transfiguration was as wonderful as the visible; in fact, it would seem, from the next verse, to have been more so.

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

Yes, the voice overcame them. Deeper impression was produced by the words of the Lord than by the blinding light. “When the disciples hear it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. ” They were in the immediate presence of God, and listening to the Father’s voice: well might they lie prostrate and tremble. Too clear a manifestation of God, even though it related to Jesus, would rather overpower than empower us. The three disciples said no more about building tabernacles, but as one man, “They fell on their face. ” Awe is the end of talk: in this case it looked as if it were the end of consciousness; but this was only a temporary swoon, from which they would recover, and be all the more joyous.

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

Jesus had seemed to go away from them, lost in a cloud of brightness; but now he “came and touched them. ” His communings with pure spirits did not make him disdain the touch of feeble flesh. Oh, the sweet comfort of that gentle touch! It aroused, consoled, and strengthened his amazed and trembling disciples. The touch of the manhood is more reassuring to poor flesh and blood than the blaze of the Godhead. The voice from heaven casts down; but the word from Jesus is, “Arise .” The Father’s voice made them sore afraid, but Jesus says, “Be not afraid. ” Glorious God, how much we bless thee for the Mediator!

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

Closed were their eyes, because of “the too transporting light”; and they dared not open them till they felt the touch of Jesus. Then they lifted up their eyes. What did they see?

Moses, and Elias, and the exceeding brightness had all gone, and they had come back to the common-places of their life with Jesus. “They saw no man, ” but they had lost nothing, since Jesus remained. They had gained by the vanishing of the shining ones, since they could see Jesus all the better, and their attention was not divided. The vision of his transfiguration had blinded them, had

stupefied them; but to see “Jesus only ” was to come back to practical life, and to have the best of all sights still left to them. Oh, that we also may have the eye of our mind so fixed on the Lord as our one object, that HE may fill the whole field of our vision, and we may see Jesus only!

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.

What they had seen would confirm their own confidence, and remain a secret spring of delight to them; but as it would require great faith in others to believe it, they were to “tell the vision to no man .” The transfiguration would be as hard to believe as the incarnation itself; and there could be no practical use in making demands upon a faith which scarcely existed. Until the greatest confirmation of all was given in our Lord’s resurrection, the vision on the Holy Mount would be rather a tax upon faith than a support of it in the case of those who did not themselves personally see it, but only heard the apostle’s report of it. It is wise not to overload testimony. There is a time for making known the higher truths; for out of season these may burden, rather than assist, inquiring minds. What a secret these men had to keep! They did keep it; but they never forgot it, nor ceased to feel its influence. Now that the Son, of man is risen again from the dead, no doctrine needs to be kept back. In bringing life and immortality to light, our Lord has rent away the veil which had long concealed the higher mysteries of the gospel His coming out of the grave has set free all buried truth. It is idle, not to say sinful, to be silent about the deep things of God now that “the Lord is risen indeed.” Yet some preachers we could name never mention election, the covenant, or final perseverance by the year together.

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

One by one the difficulties of the disciples are stated to their Lord, and their solution is soon given. One of these concerned Elijah; and as he had been just now before them, they were led to mention it. “Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?” This is the report of men who have studied our Scriptures, that Elias comes before the Lord’s appearing. No doubt it staggered their minds when they had it put in some such logical fashion as this,— Messiah cannot come till Elijah has appeared; Elijah has not appeared; Therefore Jesus is not the Messiah.

Matthew 17:11, 12. And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias 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.

“Jesus answered ”: he has an answer for all questions, and we shall do well to bring our difficulties to him to hear his replies. Our Lord admits that Elias must come before the Messiah: “Elias truly shall first come ”; but he asserts that the person intended by the prophecy “is come already ” and that the evil ones “have done unto him whatsoever they listed. ” This cleared up the doubt at once. Then Jesus went on to say that what had been done to the true Elias would also be done to himself, the Messiah.

Jesus himself must die by a cruel death: “Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. ” How simple the explanation of the difficulty! How often has, it happened that we have been looking for that which has already come, or have been perplexed by a doctrine which, when it has been opened to us by the Holy Spirit, has proved full of instruction and comfort.

Without divine teaching we drown in the shadows; but with it we swim the fathomless deeps.

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

“Then the disciples understood ”: our Lord’s instructive word opened their understandings. When he teaches, the dullest scholars learn. Now they see that John the Baptist was Elijah redivivus. He was a stern admonisher of kings, and preached repentance to Israel. He had come to restore all things: and so the Messiah had not appeared without being preceded by the true Elias. This was plain enough, to them when once their Lord had made them understand. Lord, evermore, not only speak with us, but cause us to comprehend thy word!

MATTHEW 17:14-21 THE KING RETURNING TO THE FIELD OF CONFLICT 14-16.

Matthew 17:14, 15, 16 And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a certain man, kneeling down to him, and saying, 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 I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.

Down from communion with saints, and the confirmation of his claims by the Father's voice, our Lord comes to give battle to the devil. Our Moses descends from the mount, and finds evil exultant in the multitude below.

During his absence, the enemy had triumphed over his feeble followers. In the midst of jeering adversaries, the disciples had tried in vain to cast out an evil spirit from a youth who had been rendered lunatic by its horrible possession. The poor disappointed father appeals to the Lord at once most humbly, states the case clearly, and pleads most fittingly. His epileptic son was a lunatic, sore vexed with pain, and in grievous peril through sudden falls. The case was a shocking one to have in one's presence: the cries and contortions which attend epilepsy are frequently terrible to hear and see.

The disciples had evidently done their very best; and as they had on other occasions cast out devils, they were surprised to find themselves defeated; but defeated they were, for the despairing father truthfully cried, "I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him." Alas, poor man, thou didst but speak as all have done since, when they have trusted in disciples, and not alone in their Master! Wise was it on thy part to hasten to Jesus, kneeling down to him, and saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son."

How often does sin drive men to one extreme or the other! "Oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water." Certain men are moonstruck and pained at one time, yet hard and callous at another; for a season raving with excitement, and soon afterwards dead as a stone. When sin reveals itself in connection with wildness of mind, it is hard to deal with. How often have anxious soul-winners been obliged to confess concerning a certain individual that "they could not cure him"! We have been foiled by a person of a singular temperament, and the passion which possessed him has been peculiarly ungovernable. Possibly he had no link towards better things but all aged parent, whose pleadings piteously held us in deep anxiety for the half-lunatic and altogether depraved young man. Willing as we were to reform and restore the wretched rebel, we were altogether unable to help.

It needed in our case that Jesus should come, even as in the narrative before us. Lord, do not leave us; for if apostles could do nothing without thee, poor weaklings are we!

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.

The whole generation among whom he lived caused the Savior suffering by their want of faith, and the absence of that straightforward confidence in God which would have secured them the greatest blessings. His own disciples — he had been with them, and yet they had not learned to have faith in him. The scribes and Pharisees—he had suffered from them many times already, and now they must make a poor lunatic the center of conflict with him. He had been in fellowship with heaven, and it was a terrible jar to his heart to come down among such an unruly and unbelieving company.

They were both "faithless and, perverse" the two things commonly go together: those who will not believe will not obey.

What a trial was all this to our Lord's holy and gracious mind! "How long shall I suffer you?" Must I continue in such unworthy company? "How long shall I suffer you?" Must I always be thus tried by your ill manners? It was a moment when his triumphant foes and unbelieving friends alike deserved rebuke. But the word once spoken, Jesus will not leave the poor sufferer before him to endure the malicious attacks of the evil spirit.

See how our royal Captain turns the tide of battle with a word! He transferred the fight from the disciples to himself: "Bring him hither to me."

Once in the circle of our Lord's own power; all is done. "Bring him hither to me." Never let us forget this precept. When most self-despairing, let us be Christ-confiding.

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

“Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed.” One word from Christ, and Satan flees. Hark calls this evil spirit “dumb and deaf”, but he heard Jesus, and answered to his voice with a cry; and rending the child terribly, came out of him, never to return. “The child was cured from that very hour”; that is to say, at once and for ever. God grant us faith to bring our boys and girls to the Lord Jesus with confidence in his power to cure them, and cure them for all future life!

Even though young people may have become violent in temper, and precocious in vice, the Lord can at once subdue the evil power. There was no need for the boy to wait till he grew up. He was under the power of the devil while a child, and he was cured as a child. Let us seek the salvation of children as children.

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

This was a very proper question. When we make a failure, let us own that we have failed, take the blame of it to ourselves, and apply to our Lord for his gracious intervention. When we are beaten, let it be said of us, “Then came the disciples to Jesus.” Let us make a private, personal matter of it: “They, came to Jesus apart.” Let us sit humbly at our Lord’s feet to receive rebuke or instruction as he sees fit.

Matthew 17:20. And Jesus said unto them , Because of your unbelief : for verily I say unto you , It 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.

Want of faith is the great cause of failure among disciples, both as to themselves and their work for others. There may be other specific maladies in certain cases, but this is the great and main cause of all failure: “Because of your unbelief.” If there had been true faith, of the real and living kind, the disciples could have wrought any miracle, even to the moving of a mountain. Whatever faith we may have, we shall not work a miracle, for this is not the age of prodigies. Is our faith therefore limited in its sphere?

Far from it. We can now by faith accomplish that which is fit and right without miracles. Our faith may be small “as a grain of mustard seed,” but if it be living and true it links us with the Omnipotent One. Still is it true, “Ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and, it shall remove.” Mountains shall move before our faith by means as sure as if they were miraculous; by means even more wonderful than if the course of nature had been changed. Comparatively speaking, the suspension of natural law is a coarse expedient; but for the Lord to work the same result without violating any of his laws is an achievement not less divine than a miracle. This is what faith obtains of the Lord at the present hour: her prayer is heard, and things impossible to herself are wrought by divine power. Spiritually and symbolically, the mountain is removed. Literally, at this hour the mountain stands, but faith finds a way round it, through it, or over it; and so in effect removes it.

In the mission field, mountains of exclusiveness which shut out missionaries have been removed. In ordinary life, insurmountable difficulties are graciously dissolved. In a variety of ways, before real faith hindrances disappear, according to the word of the Lord Jesus — “Nothing shall be impossible”

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

Though want of faith was the chief hindrance to the healing of the poor lunatic child, yet the case was one in which special means were needed.

Faith would have suggested and supplied these special means: since they were absolutely necessary in the case if the disciples were to succeed in it, faith would have exercised herself in them. With God all things are equally possible; but to us, one devil may be harder to deal with than another. One kind will go at a word, but of others it may be said, “This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.” He that would overcome the devil in certain instances must first overcome heaven by prayer’ and conquer himself by self-denial. The drink-devil is one of the kind, which may surely be conquered by faith; and yet we must generally use much intercession God-ward, and total abstinence, as an example man-ward, before we can displace this demon. Our business in the world is to deliver men from the power of the devil, and we must go to Jesus to learn the way.

No amount either of prayer or self-denial must be spared if we can thereby deliver one soul from the power of evil; and true faith in God will enable us to put up the prayer and practice the self-denial. May be, some of us have failed because we are not yet well instructed in the right method of procedure. Either we are trying faith without using the appointed means, or we are using the means but not exercising simple faith in God; and in either case we shall make a failure of it. If we go to work by faith in God, in Christ's own way, we shall drive out the evil spirit.

MATTHEW 17:22, AGAIN THE KING SPEAKS OF HIS DEATH

Matthew 17:22, 23. And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: and they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. And they were exceeding sorry.

Our Lord returned often to the solemn subject of his death at the hands of men. It was on his own mind, and therefore he spoke of it to his disciples.

Their minds were far too receptive of other notions in reference to his kingdom, and therefore he set before them the truth again and again, almost in the same words. He would banish all dreams of a worldly monarchy from their souls. His death would be a grievous trial to them, and he would prepare them for it. He now speaks of his being betrayed: this was ever a bitter drop in his cup of gall. The Son of man comes to save men, and is, by a man, "betrayed into the hands of men." For man he lived, by man he is betrayed, and by man he died. Full well he foresaw that "they shall kill him." O suicidal world! Will nothing content thee but the blood of God's own Son?

Our Lord would have us preach much about his death now that it is accomplished, for he continually talked of it while yet in the future. No theme is so vital, so practical, so needful.

His penetrating mind realized death, and anticipated that third day, when the word would be fulfilled, — "He shall be raised again." This was the light of the morning which would have banished the darkness of despair from the minds of the disciples, if they had understood and believed. An old writer says, "He sugared the bitter pill of his death with the sweetness of his assured resurrection."

Our Lord well knew what he said, and he used plain terms; but speak as he might, his followers could only in part apprehend his meaning; and that part made them "exceeding sorry." Christ's words, half understood, may cause the heart great grief. Yet, it may be, this cooling cloud of fear calmed their minds, and kept them from that fanaticism which filled the air around them. He knew best what state of mind would be safest for them at that time; and he knows the same as to us at this moment.

MATTHEW 17:24-27 OUR KING AND THE TRIBUTE MONEY

Matthew 17:24. And when they were come to Capernaum,, they that received tribute money came to Peter, and said, Doth not your master pay tribute?

The half-shekel tribute was a religious payment, based originally on law, but enlarged by a custom which had no support in Scripture. It was ordained by the divine law to be paid for each person to the Lord when the people were counted. From this redemption money there was no exemption; but it was not a tax levied year by year. It had gradually grown into a fashion among professedly religious people to pay this "tribute money" every year; but the payment was entirely optional. Thus, it was established by custom, but it had not been appointed by law, and could not be enforced by it. It was a voluntary annual gift, and only persons who were professed devotees of the Jewish religion would pay it. Such religionists as these would be very particular, not only to pay the annual tribute, but to have it known that they paid it. The collectors of half-shekels did not apply at once to Jesus, of whom, it may be, they stood in salutary awe; but they addressed Peter with the somewhat ensnaring question, "Doth not your master pay tribute?" "As much as to say, "Surely he does so: we would not suspect him of neglecting to do so. A person of such eminence cannot fail to be peculiarly exact as to this customary fee."

Matthew 17:25, 26. He saith, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What thinkest

thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers?

Peter saith unto him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free.

Peter was in such a hurry to vindicate his Lord that he compromised him. "He saith, Yes." He might have asked his Lord's mind, or he might have referred the collectors to Jesus himself; but he was in a hurry, and thought himself safe enough in maintaining his Master's reputation. He was quite certain that his Lord would do all that good people did. Our Savior and his cause have often suffered from the zeal of friends. Christ is better known by what he says himself than by what his friends say for him.

Peter was out of doors at the time he gave his quick reply, and little did he think that the Lord Jesus would note what he had said, and tell him of it as soon as he was come into the house; but so it was.

Our Lord began with Peter upon the subject before he had time to state his action or defend it: "Jesus prevented him." He knew what his servant had been doing, and he hastened to set him right. As he had been but little of a Peter in this case, our Lord calls him "Simon." He questions him: "What thinkest thou, Simon?" He will make him judge in the case. Do kings take poll-tax of their own children, or of strangers? Of course, the family of the prince was always free from the levy. The king's subjects, and especially the aliens under his rule, must pay the capitation charge; but the princes of the blood royal were free. Should Jesus pay redemption-money for himself to God? Should he, who is himself the King's Son, come under poll-tax to his Father? If tribute money has become a tax to be levied in the kingdom of God, "then are the children free." Neither Jesus nor Peter was bound to pay. Peter had not seen the matter in this light.

Matthew 17:27. Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee.

Our Savior would not willingly give ground for offense. He was not bound to pay; but rather than raise a scandal, he would pay both for himself and for Peter. How gracious were his words: "Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them"! If the question had remained by itself, clear from other circumstances, our Lord might, on principle, have declined to pay the tribute-money; but Peter's rash declaration had compromised his Lord, and he would not seem to be false to the promise made by his follower.

Besides, Peter would be involved in a dispute, and Jesus will far rather pay than leave his servant in a difficulty. When the pocket is involved in a matter of principle, we must be careful that we do not even seem to be saving our money by a pretense. Usually, it will be wisest to pay under protest, lest it should appear that we are careful of conscience in a special degree when we can also be careful of our cash.

The manner of payment prevented the act from compromising our Lord.

Very interesting was the hooking of the fish which brought the silver in its mouth. "Take up fish that first cometh up and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money." Very remarkable the providence which caused the shekel to fall into the sea, and made the fish first to swallow it, and then to rise to the hook as soon as Peter began his angling.

Thus the great Son pays the tax levied for his Father's house; but he exercises his royal prerogative in the act, and takes the shekel out of the royal treasury. As man he pays, but first as God he causes the fish to bring him the shekel in its mouth.

The piece of money was enough to pay for Peter as well as for his Lord.

Thus did our Lord submit to be treated as one who had forfeited life, and must have a half-shekel paid as redemption-money for him. This he has done for our sake, and in association with us; and we are redeemed by his act, and in union with him: for he said of the piece of money, "That take, and go unto them for me and thee." There were not two half-shekels, but one piece of money, paid for Jesus and Peter: thus we see that his people are joined with him in the one redemption. "He bore on the tree the sentence for me, And now both the Surety and sinner are free." The obvious moral lesson is, — Pay rather than cause offense.

But far greater and deeper truths lie slumbering down below. They are such as these: the glorious freedom of the Son, his coming under tribute for our sakes, and the clearance of himself and us by the one payment which he himself provided.