



## The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Seventeen

### X. Matthew 16:21-17:27 - The Suffering of the Messiah Revealed (continues/concludes)

#### Summary of Chapter Seventeen

Jesus took three of his closest disciples with him up a mountain where Jesus was transfigured into a state of glorification before them. Elijah and Moses appeared with Jesus to talk with him and then God the Father spoke from within a cloud, affirming the work of his Son and instructing the disciples to heed his teaching. After this, Jesus provided further insight to these three disciples as to what this occasion represented and that they must reveal it to no one until after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

On their arrival back in Cæsarea Philippi, Jesus and the disciples found a man who had brought his demon possessed son to the other disciples for healing but they had not been able to achieve it. Jesus rebuked those present for their lack of faith and then healed the child by driving out the demon from him.

Jesus then revealed for a second time that he was to be executed but would rise from death after three days. This revelation built on the first by adding that Jesus was to be betrayed.

On their arrival back in Capernaum, Peter was challenged by some officials who thought that Jesus was avoiding paying the temple tax. Although Peter stated that Jesus did in fact pay his taxes, when he came back to Jesus a conversation ensued that showed Jesus and his disciples were exempted from such taxes as they were children of God. However, Peter was instructed to go to the lake to catch a fish, in the mouth of which he would find the exact amount required to pay both his and Jesus' tax.

#### X.b Matthew 17:1-13 - The Transfiguration

Jesus' divine glory is revealed in his transfiguration (vv.1-8), and he then explained how John the Baptist's ministry fulfilled the prophecy of Elijah's return (vv.9-13).

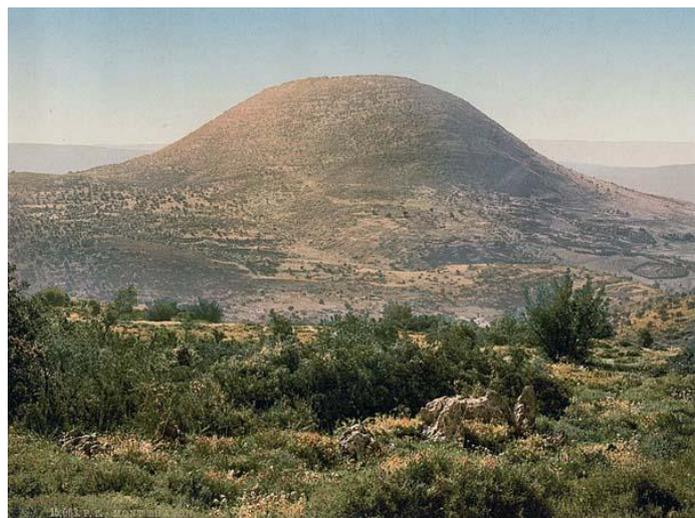
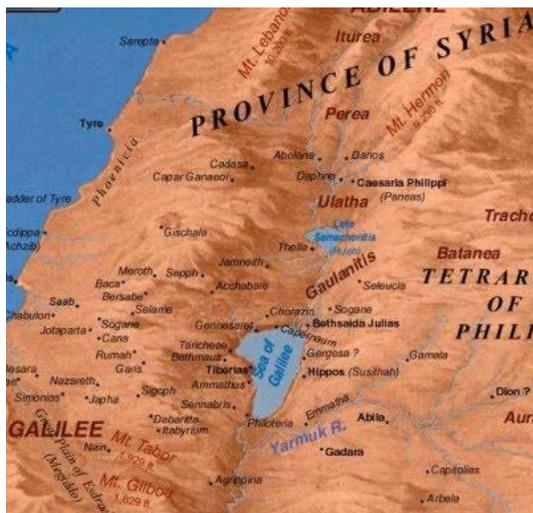
<sup>1</sup> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

### Matthew 17:1

Six days later probably indicates that they are still in Cæsarea Philippi, thus showing a continuation with the events of the previous chapter. Mark confirms the timeline: <<*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them*>> (Mark 9:2), however, Luke records it slightly differently: <<*Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray*>> (Luke 9:28). It seems likely that Matthew and Mark were reporting full days, whereas Luke used the standard of inclusive counting, so the evening is day one, followed by the six full days, then setting out on the morning of what would be day eight. It should also be noted that Luke did qualify it by using the word *about*.

Peter and James and his brother John were the inner circle of disciples: <<*He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated*>> (Matthew 26:37), and: <<*He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James*>> (Mark 5:37). This does not imply a hierarchical structure in the apostolic group, just that Jesus had chosen these men as special witnesses. Peter and John would become more prominent in their ministry than the rest in terms of recorded church history, and James was the first apostle to be martyred.

A high mountain. Church tradition identifies this as Mount Tabor, about 12 miles or 19km southwest from the Sea of Galilee, but most scholars favour Mount Hermon, outside of Galilee and close to Cæsarea Philippi. Rising to 9,166 feet or 2,794m above sea level, it is literally a mountain rather than some biblical mountains that should be classified as hills.



The map shows Mt Hermon to the north and Mt Tabor to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee

Mt Tabor is one of the possible locations for the Transfiguration of Jesus



Mt Hermon, at over 9,000 ft, is a popular destination for skiers

<sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

#### Matthew 17:2

He was transfigured. Jesus' physical transformation, Greek *metamorphothe* from which metamorphosis is derived, is a reminder of the glory he had before he became fully human: <<*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth*>> (John 1:14), <<*So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed*>> (John 17:5), and: <<*who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness*>> (Philippians 2:6-7a), which uses a derivative of the Greek *morphen doulou*, 'taking the form of a slave'. It provides a preview of his future exaltation: <<*For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain*>> (2 Peter 1:16-18), and: <<*In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force*>> (Revelation 1:16).

As discussed in the previous chapter, this is the event that most scholars believe Jesus was referring to when he said: <<*Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom*>> (Matthew 16:28).

His face shone like the sun. Moses had taken on a similar change of appearance after meeting with God and had to put on a veil for they feared to come to him otherwise: <<*Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know*

*that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him>> (Exodus 34:29-30). A good analogy would be that Moses' face shone like the moon; just a reflection of the brilliance of the sun: <<I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness>> (John 12:46).*

It was not just a change in his countenance for his clothes became dazzling white. The great truth which believers declare is that: <<**God is light**>> (1 John 1:5b), he: <<**dwells in unapproachable light**>> (1 Timothy 6:16b), and that he is: <<**wrapped in light**>> (Psalm 104:2a). Therefore, when Christ would appear in the form of God, he appeared enveloped in light, the most glorious of all visible beings, the first-born of God's creation and resembling the eternal Father.

<sup>3</sup> Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

### Matthew 17:3

The appearance of Moses and Elijah represents the Law and the Prophets respectively, bearing witness to Jesus as the Messiah, the one who fulfils the OT: <<**Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil**>> (Matthew 5:17). Elijah was considered the prophetic forerunner of the Messiah: <<**Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse**>> (Malachi 4:5-6), <<**In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judæa, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"'>> (Matthew 3:1-3), and: <<**As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you"'>> (Matthew 11:7-10).****

What it also demonstrated here is that, just as John the Baptist was the new Elijah, refer to vv.10-13, so too Jesus is the new Moses.

**Elijah did not die but was translated into heaven:** <<**As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven**>> (2 Kings 2:11), **but Moses did:** <<**Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command**>> (Deuteronomy 34:5). There are some who believe this passage indicates that Moses did not die, which cannot be the case for it was confirmed by God: <<**After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, 'My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites**>> (Joshua 1:1-2), and God only

New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Matthew17-4

ever speaks the truth: <<Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began>> (Titus 1:1-2). This shows that those who die in Christ continue to exist, probably in a different state or dimension, and some of them at least can be used by God before the general resurrection of the dead.

Talking with him. A complimentary account indicates that they were discussing Jesus' forthcoming death and resurrection in Jerusalem: <<They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem>> (Luke 9:31). In fact, Luke further indicates that the journey to Jerusalem started shortly after this event: <<When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem>> (Luke 9:51).

<sup>4</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'

#### Matthew 17:4

Lord, it is good for us to be here. Since Jesus was crucified in either late March or early April, and this event marked the start of Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem, then this meeting occurred either in late autumn or most likely during winter. Even on the lower slopes of the mountain it would have been cold and bleak, yet Peter recognised that something significant was occurring, even if he did not fully comprehend what was about to transpire at the time. How could he have known?

If you wish. Peter had a reputation for often acting or speaking without thinking things through but here he requests permission from Jesus before taking action.

Three dwellings or tents. Peter wished to prepare accommodation for the main participants in the meeting, although Mark records that Peter only said this as he was overwhelmed by the occasion: <<He did not know what to say, for they were terrified>> (Mark 9:6). Had he thought it through Peter would have realised that Moses and Elijah, in their heavenly state, had no need for such dwellings.

It is worthy of comment that Peter offered to build accommodation for the three principle men without mention of any protective shelters for the three disciples, who would have been content to remain out in the cold it seems.

<sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'

#### Matthew 17:5

A bright cloud is reminiscent of the *Shechinah*, or cloud of God's presence and glory, that appeared at various times in the OT. For example: <<The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left

*its place in front of the people>> (Exodus 13:21-22), <<The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, 'The Lord'>> (Exodus 34:5), <<Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again>> (Numbers 11:25), <<And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord>> (1 Kings 8:10-11).*

**A voice.** God the Father's public endorsement of Jesus as his **Beloved Son** echoes that given at Jesus' baptism: *<<And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'>> (Matthew 3:17).* Jesus is the incarnate Son of God: *<<I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you'>> (Psalm 2:7),* as well as his suffering servant: *<<Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations>> (Isaiah 42:1),* who is superior to both Moses and Elijah, so these and all other disciples must **listen to him** in order to understand his messianic purpose. They are then required to act upon what they have heard. God spoke for the benefit of those who were eye witnesses and would do so again toward the end of Jesus' ministry: *<<'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine'>> (John 12:27-30).*

**Listen to him!** Being devout Jews there would have been a natural desire for the men to know what Moses and Elijah had to say. However, all they said and did that needs to be revealed is already written down in Scripture. Disciples are now called to **listen to** and follow Jesus.

<sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

### **Matthew 17:6**

**The disciples heard this.** God's voice was announcing the best news since The Fall; through his only true Son he was reconciling his people back to himself. Moses and Elijah were sometimes instruments of reconciliation between God and Israel; Moses was a great intercessor, and Elijah a great reformer; but in Christ God is reconciling the entire world; his intercession is more prevalent than that of Moses, and his reformation more effectual than that of Elijah: *<<that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us>> (2 Corinthians 5:19).*

**Overcome by fear.** Reverential **fear** was a common experience for people in the OT who witnessed the awesome reality of God's presence, for example: *<<On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled>> (Exodus 19:16),* and: *<<At that time I was*

*standing between the Lord and you to declare to you the words of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain>> (Deuteronomy 5:5a).*

John the Baptist's father, the priest Zechariah, had prophesied that a time would come when they would serve the Messiah without fear: <<*that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days*>> (Luke 1:74-75).

<sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'

#### Matthew 17:7

Get up and do not be afraid. Jesus was not rebuking his disciples for their natural fear in the presence of God but was giving them reassurance for, as he often does, Jesus crosses barriers and communicates his kindness by touching. John would again know the reassuring touch of his Lord in the latter days of his life while in exile on Patmos: <<*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades*>> (Revelation 1:17-18). Paul too would know his reassuring presence: <<*That night the Lord stood near him and said, 'Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome'*>> (Acts 23:11), something many other Christians have come to know in their times of testing.

<sup>8</sup> And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

#### Matthew 17:8

They saw no one except Jesus. Elijah and Moses had disappeared as quickly as they had come for their work was complete: <<*Your ancestors, where are they? And the prophets, do they live for ever?*>> (Zechariah 1:5), leaving the disciples alone with their Lord once again.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

#### Matthew 17:9

As they were coming down the mountain. It does not matter how amazing the time is that disciples spend alone with God, there comes a time when they must return to the world in order to fulfil the calling on their lives.

Tell no one the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. Jesus did not want to publicise his ministry in this way as it could cause adverse political problems with the Romans ahead of the right time and also draw people to him for the wrong reasons. The Jews expected that the Messiah would set up a temporal kingdom to oppose the Romans and restore Israel to the status it had

under David and Solomon: <<So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?>> (Acts 1:6), a misunderstanding Jesus sought to avoid: <<When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself>> (John 6:15). His Kingdom was always intended to be spiritual and set in another realm: <<Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'>> (John 18:36-37), although elements of it can be manifested in the present world and within believers themselves. Following his death and resurrection the disciples would be free to proclaim everything about the Messiah for the full facts would then be available as to why he had come and who he truly is.

<sup>10</sup> And the disciples asked him, 'Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' <sup>11</sup> He replied, 'Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; <sup>12</sup> but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.' <sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

### Matthew 17:10-13

Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first? This question was probably prompted by the presence of Elijah on the mountain and the disciples had perhaps interpreted this brief appearance as the fulfilment of that prophecy. Jesus would go on to clarify the reality of the Scripture. They had at least accepted the Scripture for what it truly is - the Word of God: <<We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers>> (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

A good lesson to learn is that, when they could not reconcile what they had read or been taught from the OT, they asked Jesus for clarification. The same should be true today. When believers are not sure what the bible teaches they should either ask those in their church who have a better understanding of Scripture, ideally their pastor/teacher, or they should ask God for personal revelation on issues that appear to speak directly to themselves.

Will restore all things here refers to the spiritual changes that are required in order for people to repent and return to God.

Elijah has already come. The disciples wanted some clarification on what had always been taught about the coming of the Christ. Jesus indicated that the ministry of John the Baptist had indeed fulfilled Malachi's prophecy.

Then the disciples understood. Understanding is a key theme in Matthew's Gospel, and it comes here as a result of Jesus' teaching. What his Gospel shows is that understanding came slowly to the first disciples, as was seen with the teaching of the Kingdom parables: <<'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes'>> (Matthew 13:51), followed shortly by: <<But Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.' Then he said, 'Are you also still without understanding?'>> (Matthew 15:15-16), and so it has been throughout history. No one should think they know all there is to know about Jesus but should continue to study Scripture and remain in communion with God, seeking further revelation from him through prayer.

John the Baptist was not explicitly named by Jesus but his description was clear enough for them to conclude who he was referring to without them having to ask him any further questions.

#### X.c Matthew 17:14-27 - Sons of the Kingdom

Through the healing and exorcism of an epileptic boy, Jesus shows the contrast between defective and effective faith (vv.14-20). Jesus also teaches that his impending death will come through betrayal (vv.22-23), and that the OT law has no claim on him or his disciples (vv.24-27).

#### X.c.i Matthew 17:14-21 - Jesus Cures a Boy with a Demon

On their return from the mountain, Jesus found that his other disciples had become embroiled in a dispute when they, in the absence of their teacher, had been asked to cure a child possessed by an evil spirit. Jesus healed the boy before explaining to his disciples why they had been unsuccessful; they had lacked sufficient faith in what they were able to achieve in Jesus' name.

**<sup>14</sup> When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, <sup>15</sup> and said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water.**

#### Matthew 17:14-15

When they came to the crowd. Mark indicates that a dispute had arisen when the disciples could not cure this child, and that some of the religious leaders had taken the opportunity to speak out against Jesus: <<When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them>> (Mark 9:14).

By calling him Lord, the man showed respect for Jesus as an esteemed, righteous teacher, but he went beyond that by believing that Jesus would show mercy and heal his son.

He is an epileptic. Evil spirits seem to be able to take possession of different parts of the human body and mind. On this occasion, it had taken over the central nervous system, producing symptoms similar to epileptic episodes. Readers should be careful not to make assumptions that epilepsy generally is a sign of demonic

possession and great care is needed when praying for such an afflicted person not to make unwarranted inferences.

He often falls into the fire and often into the water. There are some church traditions that point to this verse as supporting infant baptism, whereas those who support baptism by confession of faith are not convinced. Since the father clearly states he suffers terribly it seems unlikely that any reference to baptism is intended by Matthew.

**<sup>16</sup> And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.'**

#### Matthew 17:16

Your disciples could not cure him. It had probably become known that Jesus had sent his disciples out on a healing ministry in Galilee: <<***Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness***>> (Matthew 10:1), something that even the main body of his disciples had been successful in undertaking: <<***The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'***>> (Luke 10:17). In any case, disciples were supposed to faithfully represent their teacher in his absence and implement his teachings in a very practical way.

**<sup>17</sup> Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.'**

#### Matthew 17:17

You faithless and perverse generation. In spite of the miracles and teachings of Jesus, the majority of people did not place their faith in him as the Messiah. Perverse or twisted indicates people's distorted perception of Jesus and the spiritual truth that he came proclaiming. Israel had earned a reputation for being faithless: <<***He said: I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness***>> (Deuteronomy 32:20).

How much longer must I put up with you? It may appear that Jesus was rebuking his disciples especially, or showing his exasperation at them at least, for not understanding the ways of the Spirit. How long should the child be carried before it is mature enough to walk by itself: <<***For about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness***>> (Acts 13:18)? However, it may have been more of a way of gaining their attention to the fact that he would not be with them much longer, and that they would have to learn how to deal with these situations without him; although they would have received the Holy Spirit by that time, leaving them exceptionally well equipped for ministry: <<***Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father***>> (John 14:12).

Bring him here to me is a reminder that Jesus does not impose himself but everyone must go to him, whether it be for healing, rest, equipping for his service or to receive eternal life!

<sup>18</sup> And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly.

#### Matthew 17:18

Jesus rebuked the demon. Jesus once again demonstrates his authority over the spiritual realm, just as he has authority of all other things: <<*They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, 'What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!'*>> (Luke 4:36), <<*And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'*>> (Matthew 28:18).

<sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' <sup>20</sup> He said to them, 'Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'

#### Matthew 17:19-20

The disciples came to Jesus privately. Jesus frequently gives additional instruction to private groups or individuals when what he wishes to say is not for general dissemination: <<*Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field'*>> (Matthew 13:36). That it has been recorded in the Gospel accounts does not change this for there are still only a select few who read his words and take them to heart.

Why could we not cast it out? Jesus would show that it is a matter of faith for such works to be honoured by the Holy Spirit, although it is not as simple as that. Mark adds Jesus saying: <<*He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer'*>> (Mark 9:29), which some manuscripts have in v.21 here that appends fasting as well, although this is not included in the NRSVA translation. It would seem that Jesus did not specifically pray or fast on this occasion. Therefore, the conclusion is that there is a need for continuous prayer, not just for specific requests, but to generally maintain good communion with God in order to be attuned to his will. Only then will a believer start to pray according to the will of the Spirit, leading to such prayers being answered and spiritual gifts being bestowed on disciples, for it is the Spirit that knows what to pray for and followers of Jesus are to submit to him in such matters: <<*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words*>> (Romans 8:26).

Little faith. The disciples were not, of course, devoid of faith, but their faith was not functioning properly. Faith can be stronger or weaker, such as the occasion they thought they might drown in a storm: <<*And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm*>> (Matthew 8:26), or when Peter started to sink after initially walking towards Jesus on the lake: <<*Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'*>> (Matthew 14:31). Paul would later call on the church to be fully

accepting of those whose faith was lacking but with a clear proviso: <<**Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions**>> (Romans 14:1).

**Little faith** is the Greek *oligopistos* and is not ‘no faith’, the Greek *apistos*, but is ineffective, defective, or deficient faith. Paul often teaches on the need for a strong faith: <<**So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight**>> (2 Corinthians 5:6-7), yet he also acknowledges the need to possess an abundance of another key quality of Jesus: <<**And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing**>> (1 Corinthians 13:2), for: <<**Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love**>> (1 John 4:8).

**Faith the size of a mustard seed.** Jesus had already used the analogy of a **mustard seed** to show how the Kingdom can grow from the smallest of seeds to become something of significance: <<**He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches’**>> (Matthew 13:31-32). The analogy here is similar in that the presence of even the smallest amount of faith can become something of significance for it gives the Holy Spirit something to work with.

Moving a **mountain** was a common metaphor in Jewish literature for doing what was seemingly impossible: <<**Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain**>> (Isaiah 40:4), <<**And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up**>> (Isaiah 49:11), <<**For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you**>> (Isaiah 54:10), and: <<**Jesus answered them, ‘Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, “Be lifted up and thrown into the sea”, it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive’**>> (Matthew 21:21-22).

Faith means willingness to go where God leads, not power to avert all unpleasant circumstances. Believers mature as the Lord leads them through hard tests for his name’s sake, forcing them to actively trust his provision and power.

[[Some ancient authorities add v.21 although it does not appear in the main body of the NRSVA translation]]

[[<sup>21</sup> But this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting]]

## X.c.ii Matthew 17:22-23 - Jesus Again Foretells His Death and Resurrection

The time had now come for Jesus to start his final journey south to Jerusalem where he would embrace the Cross and all that it entailed for him and subsequently for all of humanity.

**<sup>22</sup> As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, <sup>23</sup> and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.’ And they were greatly distressed.**

### Matthew 17:22-23

As they were gathering in Galilee. A large group of disciples, many more than the twelve apostles, would accompany Jesus all the way to Jerusalem.

For comments on the Son of Man refer to Matthew 16:13 and 16:27.

To be betrayed. This is second prediction of Jesus’ passion, refer to Matthew 16:21, 20:17-19, and 26:2. However, this occurrence contains an ominous new detail - Jesus will not only be handed over to his enemies, he will be betrayed by one of his own. He was, of course, betrayed by his own disciple Judas Iscariot: *<<While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people>>* (Matthew 26:47), but with the authority and foreknowledge of God that it should be so: *<<You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law>>* (Acts 2:22-23), and: *<<He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?>>* (Romans 8:32).

It does not say betrayed to the Jewish authorities or to the Romans but into human hands, for ultimately all of humanity is responsible for the death of Jesus. Had it not been for the sin of all mankind: past, present and future, their apostasy towards God the Father, there would never have been a need for Jesus to come and die in the way that he did. That is the guilt and shame that should be laid on all people but no one need bear that burden because Jesus did that for them!

They will kill him. Nothing else would satisfy the anger of his opponents: *<<When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’>>* (John 19:6a); nothing but the blood of this ultimate sacrifice could satisfy the righteous wrath of God.

On the third day he will be raised. Jesus would no doubt have been aware of the physical and emotional agony that his death held for him, for it was a crushing burden he would bear, and he clearly did not look forward to it: *<<And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want’>>* (Matthew 26:39). Yet he always looked beyond his death to the power of God in his

resurrection and the hope that it would bring to all who would subsequently follow him. Most people will die but those that are true disciples shall be raised to new life in the fullness of time: <<***This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day***>> (John 6:40).

**They were greatly distressed.** The disciples could not comprehend what it would be like to be without their esteemed teacher and leader. They enjoyed the limelight of being by his side and seeing people healed and nature tamed; they were amazed at the way he could defeat the Pharisees and scribes in debate on theological matters. What would life hold for them once he was gone? Jesus understood this natural emotion and would teach them on his last evening about many things, including: <<***Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy***>> (John 16:20). Solomon concludes: <<***Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad***>> (Ecclesiastes 7:3).

### X.c.iii Matthew 17:24-27 - Jesus and the Temple Tax

Jesus teaches a principle here that, although his authority exempted him and his true followers from the rules of civil or church government, he would still comply with them rather than cause offence or risk bringing disrepute to the Gospel message by providing ammunition for his opponents to use against him. However, his method of compliance is novel and is not one that is available to many of his disciples. They will have to make their own provision for honestly paying taxes.

**<sup>24</sup> When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, ‘Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?’**

#### **Matthew 17:24**

**When they reached Capernaum.** Although this was his main base in Galilee, it also lay on the natural route he was taking from Cæsarea Philippi to Jerusalem via Samaria.

**The temple tax.** At the annual census, each person over the age of 20 was to give a half-shekel offering for the support of the tabernacle as required by the law written in Exodus 30:11-16, which was later applied to the temple in Jerusalem. God had actually declared it to be a ransom for their souls: <<***When you take a census of the Israelites to register them, at registration all of them shall give a ransom for their lives to the Lord, so that no plague may come upon them for being registered***>> (Exodus 30:12). Jesus would pay the ultimate ransom, not just his temple tax but a price that would reconcile all of mankind to their God.

Adult Jewish males throughout the Roman Empire paid an annual two-drachma tax for the upkeep of the Jerusalem temple. From the time of Julius Cæsar, Diaspora Jews had privileges such as paying the annual temple tax rather than local taxation. This was a privilege withdrawn by the time of the Emperor Nero. In fact, after the destruction of the temple in AD70 the Roman authorities required the Jews to continue to pay the tax to support and maintain the Roman Empire and its ongoing expansion.

The religious tax collectors, probably Levites, approached Peter, the disciples' spokesman, rather than Jesus himself, perhaps in deference to Jesus' esteem as a popular rabbi, or perhaps in an attempt to undermine confidence in Peter's Lord.

<sup>25</sup> He said, 'Yes, he does.' And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?'

<sup>26</sup> When Peter said, 'From others', Jesus said to him, 'Then the children are free.'

### Matthew 17:25-26

Yes, he does. Peter's response is emphatic, indicating that he had personally witnessed Jesus paying the tax or had perhaps paid it on his behalf. All disciples are called to follow Jesus' example and pay their due where appropriate: <<*Pay to all what is due to them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due*>> (Romans 13:7).

When he came home. Jesus was frequently a guest in the home of Peter and Andrew when they were in Capernaum: <<*After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her*>> (Luke 4:38).

Jesus spoke of it first. Jesus once again demonstrated his omniscience for, rather than waiting for Peter to pose the question, he already knew of the conversation.

Then the children are free. Because the temple is God the Father's own house, the Son and those he has brought into the Father's family are exempt from the temple tax, signalling that, with the coming of the Kingdom, believers are no longer under the OT law but the law of Christ: <<*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ*>> (Galatians 6:2). Peter may have had this incident in mind when he later wrote: <<*As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor*>> (1 Peter 2:16-17).

However, the principle here would be about the individual rights of Jesus and his disciples rather than about advancing the truths of the Kingdom of God. The temple belonged to Jesus: <<*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts*>> (Malachi 3:1). The writer to the Hebrews puts it very eloquently: <<*Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope*>> (Hebrews 3:6). Jesus is therefore not obliged to pay the temple tax, but he would not uphold his own rights that might risk sending out the wrong message about the Gospel.

<sup>27</sup> However, so that we do not give offence to them, go to the lake and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you

open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.'

### Matthew 17:27

So that we do not give offence to them. What the tax collectors were requesting was not contrary to the Gospel message so Jesus was content to comply with their request, thus avoiding any confrontation, for this was an occasion when the law was being applied in a way deemed appropriate. Jesus would oppose such people when their traditions had been superimposed on the requirements of the law: <<*He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?'*>> (Matthew 15:3).

For the sake of maintaining public identification with their Jewish heritage, Jewish Christians should join non-Christian Jews in paying the tax, promoting social harmony and good order: <<*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*>> (Romans 12:18). The principle is that modern day disciples must sometimes engage in otherwise unprofitable pursuits for the sake of upholding their witness as citizens of the communities where God has placed them.

Cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up indicates Jesus knew of a specific fish.

You will find a coin. Perhaps he had placed the coin there by his omnipotence, or knew what would happen due to his omniscience. Another translation specifies the value of the coin as being exactly that required for the two men's tax: <<*But so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours*>> (v.27 NIV). The four-drachma coin was probably a Tyrian stater, precisely enough to pay their temple dues.

Following an old Greek tale, some Jewish stories of uncertain date speak of God blessing pious people by leading them to find precious objects in fish. If Peter knew of such stories, the moral of Jesus' causing him to find money in a fish would not be lost on him. This is irony of a sort: the King's children can pay the tax to the King because the King gives them the money to do so. Jesus can and does take care of those people who walk close to him.

Take that and give it to them for you and me. There is no mention of a requirement for the other eleven apostles to pay the temple tax, further supporting the claims of many commentators that the majority were under the age of twenty. Typically, *talmid*, the disciples of a Rabbi, would be called from the age of 14. This was the age that many believe John was when he was called. Peter was clearly 20 or older and was the only one that is recorded as being married in the Gospel accounts: <<*Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once*>> (Mark 1:30). However, it is clear that some of them would marry later: <<*Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?*>> (1 Corinthians 9:5).