

# NO EASY PATH

*Matthew 17:9-13*

9 And as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” 10 And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” 11 And He answered and said, “Elijah is coming and will restore all things; 12 but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” 13 Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist. (Matthew 17:1-13)

## THE SETTING

We saw back in Matthew 16 that people were confused about Jesus’ identity:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, saying, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” (Matthew 16:13-14)

By the grace of God Peter and the others were granted the knowledge of who Jesus was:

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 16:15-17)

Now that they had that knowledge it was time that they understood more about the Father’s plan.

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 be raised up on

the third day. (Matthew 16:21)

Suffering and death didn't fit their idea of what the Messiah would do, and Peter dared to rebuke Jesus for getting it wrong:

And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." (Matthew 16:22)

Jesus wasn't about to let anyone, even a beloved disciple, get in the way of His obedience to the Father:

But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (Matthew 16:23)

Jesus then spoke to them about what it actually costs to be faithful to God.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24)

A few days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him to a high mountain. They saw Him in His glory, His face shining like the sun and His clothes as bright as light. They saw Moses and Elijah with Him, and heard them speak about Jesus' crucifixion:

And behold, two men were talking with Him, and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to fulfill at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:31)

Peter made the mistake of assuming that Moses and Elijah were equal to Jesus, but the Father instantly corrected Him:

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice

out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!”  
(Matthew 17:5)

They fell on their faces in terror, but Jesus comforted them and assured them. When they looked up they saw only Him. He began to lead them down the mountain. On the way He give them a serious instruction and they ask a question about the coming of Elijah. Jesus answers their question in an unexpected way.

## TELL NO ONE ...

*Matthew 17:9*

And as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” (Matthew 17:9)

Matthew writes that just a few days before the transfiguration

[Jesus] warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. (Matthew 16:20)

He repeats the command here. No one – not even the other nine – are to hear what happened on the holy mountain until after Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Why are they to remain silent? I think the Scripture tells us why. Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus. Luke 9 says they spoke about His crucifixion, obviously within the hearing of the three disciples. After dying on the cross Jesus would be buried, then raised on the third day. He would appear to the disciples and others for forty days, and then ascend to heaven. Ten days after that the Holy Spirit would come upon them at Pentecost. They could not preach Christ until there was something to say. As wonderful as the transfiguration was, it was not enough. No one is saved by the transfiguration. The transfiguration was never mentioned when the apostles preached the Gospel. Their focus was always on His crucifixion and

resurrection.

Jesus would not be glorified without suffering; in fact, the **fact** of His suffering revealed more of His glory than the **act** of the transfiguration itself. Do you remember how Yahweh introduces the Ten Commandments?

Then God spoke all these words, saying, “I am Yahweh your God, **who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.**” (Exodus 20:2)

God is not merely the God who IS, but the God who DOES. God is worthy of all glory, of course, because of who He is. But He frequently wants us to acknowledge what He does.

“And blessed be God Most High, **who has delivered your enemies into your hand.**” (Genesis 14:20)

He is your praise, and He is your God, **who has done these great and fearsome things for you which your eyes have seen.** (Deuteronomy 10:1)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ** (Ephesians 1:3)

Rightly speaking, God deserves all praise and glory just for being God, but He wants us to know not just who He is, but what He has done. His glory is magnified by His gracious and merciful works on behalf of His people, just as His glory is magnified by His righteous judgment and condemnation of the wicked.

If the only thing that mattered was recognizing Jesus Christ as God in human flesh, the transfiguration would have been the end of the Gospel. But we aren't saved by **our knowledge** of who Jesus is; we are saved by **His work** of atonement. Francis Schaffer wrote a book called “The God Who Is,” and it's a great book, but it's incomplete. It should have been called “The God Who Is And Does.”

If you think about it, Satan's final temptation of Jesus in Matthew 3 makes sense:

Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world **and their glory**; and he said to Him, "**All these things I will give You**, if You fall down and worship me." (Matthew 4:8-9)

Jesus rejected that temptation.

Peter's satanic rebuke of Jesus makes sense as well:

And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." (Matthew 16:22)

Jesus rebuked Peter as Satan and rejected that temptation.

There would be no glory without suffering. The glory of the risen Christ was a different quality from the glory of the transfiguration. The Gospel is not that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh, but that God **took** on human flesh, **lived** a sinless life, **died** on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners, **rose** from the dead in victory over sin and death, and **ascended** to heaven, where He now **intercedes** for His people, **rules** over them as Lord, and **prepares** a place for them. Do you see? The Son acts. He took on, lived, died, rose, ascended, and continues to intercede, rule, and prepare a place for us.

Until the Gospel was complete, the twelve were to remain silent about Jesus' identity. Until the Gospel was complete, Peter, James, and John were to remain silent about the transfiguration.

**TRANSITION:** Jesus' command to remain silent somehow raises a question in their minds. They had been taught all their lives that Elijah was spiritually present at the Passover

celebration.

## A GOOD QUESTION

*Matthew 17:10*

And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” (Matthew 17:10)

The people of Israel had been taught that Elijah would return to announce the arrival of the Messiah. And they had just seen Elijah! And not Elijah alone, but Elijah and Moses! Now that Elijah has come, isn't it time to announce that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God? Why would Elijah's restoration have to wait?

Do you notice how they word their question? It is not, “Why then do the PROPHETS say?” but “Why then do the SCRIBES say?” Their focus at this moment is not on the Scriptures but on their tradition.

According to their tradition, Elijah would personally return and do all of the necessary corrective work in Israel before the Messiah arrived. Elijah would so completely prepare all things that the Messiah would simply appear and take His throne.

This is basically the view of postmillennialism, which says that the whole world will become increasingly “Christianized” until Jesus returns to find the whole world ready and waiting for Him. The Bible teaches that the world will become worse and worse, and if Jesus didn't cut the end times short, no one would be left alive.

**TRANSITION:** If the scribes say that Elijah will return before the Messiah, and now Elijah has returned (apparently), why remain silent?

# TWO FAITHFUL ANSWERS

*Matthew 17:11-13*

And He answered and said, “Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished ...” Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist. (Matthew 17:11-13)

You’ll notice that I skipped a phrase there; we’ll come back to it.

To begin with, the scribes are right about this: Elijah will return and will restore all things. Malachi 4:5-6 is true:

“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of Yahweh. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land, devoting it to destruction.” (Malachi 4:5-6)

But there’s more to consider. Not only WILL Elijah return, Elijah DID return, not on the mount of transfiguration but in the person of John the Baptist. The angel Gabriel said to John’s father, Zechariah,

“He [John] will go before Him [Christ] **in the spirit and power of Elijah** [fulfilling Malachi 4:5-6], to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:17)

The irony is that Elijah DID come but was not recognized or known. The man the people were looking for went unrecognized. Their tradition did not leave room for God’s intended fulfillment. John came in the spirit and power of Elijah; that was always the intention of Malachi 4:5-6. Human tradition took that verse and insisted that it be Elijah himself who returned.

Because John was not recognized as coming in the spirit and power of Elijah, the people did to him whatever they wished. Many ignored him altogether. Others criticized him, challenged him, or vilified him.

Jesus says to the chief priests and elders of the people in Matthew 21:32,

For John came to you in the way of righteousness and YOU did not believe him; but THE TAX COLLECTORS AND PROSTITUTES did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even regret afterward so as to believe him. (Matthew 21:32)

And of course, Herod Antipas put him to death.

The scribes and Pharisees and many others were so committed to their tradition that they missed the very person they claimed to be looking for.

## SUFFERING BEFORE GLORY

*Matthew 17:12*

Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. **So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.** (Matthew 17:12)

Let's return to Jesus' statement at the end of Matthew 17:12: "so also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands."

John was ignored, criticized, vilified, and largely missed altogether. The same would be true for Jesus.

I can't help but feeling some emotion at Jesus' rejection. How could they reject Him? They were looking for the Messiah, and there He was! They could go to Him, hear Him, be healed

by Him!

So we have to remember that Jesus' suffering was not the unfortunate result of the unfaithfulness of people. The Bible doesn't tell us that God had a Plan A to be implemented if the people received their Messiah, and a Plan B if they didn't. Jesus made it clear on a number of occasions that He came to die on the cross. "Shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour?' But for this purpose I came to this hour!" (John 12:27).

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and He was that Lamb before the foundation, the creation, of the world.

From before creation it was always and only God's plan that His Son would take on human flesh, be rejected by sinners, die on the cross for the sins of His people, be raised from the dead, and be glorified as Savior and Lord. That's not just Plan A; it's THE Plan, the ONLY Plan. Acts 2:23 says that Jesus was crucified according to predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God. Acts 4:28 says that Herod, Pilate, the Romans, and the people of Israel did exactly what God's hand and purpose predestined to occur.

The resurrection was as predestined as the crucifixion. Jesus did not say, "Tell the vision to no one UNLESS the Son of Man has risen from the dead." He said, "Tell the vision to no one UNTIL the Son of Man has risen from the dead." There was no question in His mind about what was going to take place.

In His humanity Jesus dreaded the cross. He says that His soul was dismayed by the very idea of it. He prayed that the cross would be avoided if there was ANY other way to accomplish redemption. But He knew that there was no other way. And He knew, without question, that the cross was not the end. Even the empty tomb was not the end, or His ascension, or His intercessory work. What is the end point upon which Jesus has His eye? Revelation 22 gives us this picture of the eternal state:

In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, **that where I am, there you may be also.** (John 14:2-3)

From the moment of His incarnation, Jesus Christ had His eye on the day on which He will receive His people to Himself and dwell with them for all eternity. Everything else is just a necessary link in the chain.

## BRINGING IT HOME

As we bring this home, I'd like us to keep two things in mind.

**First, it is very possible to have a tradition that is so strong that it obscures the thing the tradition is about.** We see that with the Jews and Elijah. Many Jews today continue to look for and hope for Elijah. They set an empty chair for him at the Passover and sometimes the Sabbath. They believe that he is spiritually present with them at the end of the Passover and even whenever a baby boy is circumcised. They are so focused on their view of Elijah that they continue to miss the truth that he did come in the person of John the Baptist. There are many traditions that people have today that obscure the thing the tradition is about.

The best way to safeguard ourselves against that error is to remain humble and teachable to Scripture and Scripture alone. My own view is that if Scripture doesn't teach something, neither should I. If Scripture doesn't command something, I must not make it a command.

**And second, the Gospel is now complete!** We can proclaim it, preach it, teach it, share it, bear testimony to it, bear witness of Jesus Christ – however you want to put it, we can now share the full Gospel with sinners. There is no need to wait for Jesus to do something more. Some might call this the “church” age. Perhaps it would be better to call it the “Gospel” age.

There is nothing more meaningful to a Christian than knowing that the atoning work of Jesus Christ is complete. He is busy with His intercessory work, but He will finish that as perfectly as the atonement.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, let's come with gratitude that Jesus did not let the fear of suffering prevent Him from saving us. Let's acknowledge to the Lord in confession that we need a Savior today.