

Chapter 69: Elijah Must Come

Matthew 17:9–13

The conclusion of the transfiguration must have been disorienting. The three disciples had just seen their Master transformed magnificently, so that the veil of his humble servanthood did not obscure his glory for one brief moment. Not only that, but Moses and Elijah themselves had appeared to talk with Jesus. And then, as quickly as it began, all the glory vanished, and everything went back to normal. What had just happened? What sense could be made of what they had seen? While they may have imagined the vision as a signal of the beginning of Jesus' unimpeded glory, Jesus instead reminds them of the significance of his suffering and death. By this, Jesus teaches us that *we cannot see the glory of Jesus except through suffering.*

Resurrection from the Dead (Matt. 17:9–10)

Forcefully, Jesus tells his disciples to “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead” (v. 9). In this instruction, the word for “no one” is pulled to the front of the sentence for emphasis.¹ It would not be a stretch to paraphrase this instruction, then, as “No one may hear of the vision from you, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” While Jesus has previously told his various people not to tell about what he has done for them (see Matt. 8:4; 9:30; 12:16; 16:20), this passage marks the final moment when Jesus does so, which “highlights the fact that the true significance of Jesus can only be understood in light of the cross and the resurrection.”²

We may also learn a bit more about why Jesus needed took only three witnesses to the transfiguration. First, this prohibition suggests that Jesus did not take more than three people because he did not want too many witnesses.³ Jesus wanted to minimize the risks of someone spreading the information before the appropriate time, which would come after the resurrection: “Every danger of a premature public proclamation must be avoided....The very fact of the resurrection will shed the necessary light on it.”⁴ Second, it is also possible that Jesus recognized that the transfiguration had been so glorious that his other disciples (and any others whom they might have told about it) would not believe it until he had “given a more striking proof of his glory in his resurrection.”⁵

What exactly had they seen? Jesus calls the experience a “vision,” but that word does not refer to something “supernatural,” yet “not in the sense of something imagined but in the sense of something

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 442.

² Osborne, *Matthew*, 649.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 660.

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 669.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:317.

seen.”⁶ Indeed, this transfiguration provided explicit proof of Jesus’ divinity. As Lenski writes, “It established the fact that Jesus was the Son of God and did this, not by word alone, nor by an inference from deeds (miracles), but by withdrawing the veil from his divine glory.”⁷

Curiously, out of all the questions that the disciples might have asked after this event, Matthew records only one question that may strike us as a bit arcane: “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” (v. 10). Indeed, it is not only that the scribes said this, but that Scripture had prophesied the return of Elijah before the “great and awesome day of the LORD comes” (Mal. 4:5). The scribes, then, interpreted that prophesy by teaching that Elijah’s ministry would be all-encompassing to prepare the way for the Messiah. What, then, are the disciples really getting at in this question to Jesus?

One possibility is that, since Elijah had briefly appeared on the mountain, the disciples may be asking about what the prophet will do next.⁸ Note also that the disciples are reacting to Jesus’ prohibition, which is reflected in the word “then” (or, “therefore,” or “so”): “*Then* why do the scribes say....”⁹ Or, they may be expressing arguments raised by Jesus’ enemies, that Jesus could not be the Messiah, since Elijah has not come.¹⁰ Having now seen the glory of Jesus in the transfiguration, they are now wondering about the timeline as well.

In my opinion, however, the best answer comes in understanding their question as a response to Jesus’ statement that he must be “raised from the *dead*,” which reiterates that he must “suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed,” before he will “on the third day be raised” (Matt. 16:21). Jesus’ disciples (especially Peter) balked at the prediction of his sufferings, and the prediction becomes all the more extraordinary in light of the glory that they have seen revealed. As Carson writes, “Elijah was expected to restore all things—to bring about a state of justice and true worship. If that were so, how could it be that Messiah would be killed in such a restored environment...?”¹¹ It is this question that Jesus seems to take up in his response in the next verse.

Rejection by Wicked Men (Matt. 17:11–12)

To begin, Jesus acknowledges that the scribes and the disciples are partially correct: “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things” (v. 11). The word here for “restore” is the same Greek word used in the Greek translation of Malachi 4:6 (LXX Mal. 3:23), which predicts that Elijah will “restore the heart of the father to the son and the heart of a man to his neighbor” (cf. Hebrew: “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers”).¹² By using this specific word, Jesus seems not only to be affirming (in part) the teaching of the scribes, but also affirming (in full) the predictions of the Scriptures.

Yet, Jesus also insists that the scribes had misunderstood two key aspects of this prophecy. First,

⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 498.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 660–61.

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 442.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 662.

¹⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 670.

¹¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 441.

¹² Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 499.

they had misunderstood that Elijah would suffer when he came: “But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased” (v. 12a). Thus, the “restoration” of Elijah would not be visibly comprehensive, but, when Elijah came, “he conveyed and handed them over to Christ, who would complete the work which he had begun.”¹³ Thus, Elijah’s preparatory ministry before Jesus would be one of suffering. In this way, “Elijah, as forerunner, did not come to prevent the Messiah’s suffering and death but to foreshadow it.”¹⁴ Indeed, the first Elijah suffered deeply by his persecution and rejection by Jezebel after he had restored the true worship of the Lord by destroying the priests of Baal at Mount Carmel (1 Kgs. 19:1–8).

Because they had misunderstood the nature of Elijah’s ministry, so also they will misunderstand the nature of Jesus’ ministry: “So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands” (v. 12b). As Calvin observes, “it ought not to be reckoned strange, if, after having rejected the servant, they should, with equal disdain, reject his Master.”¹⁵ Yet, this connection presses deeper into the wider context by showing how the glory of Jesus’ at the transfiguration connects with Jesus’ predictions of his sufferings in Matt. 16:21ff. Just as the first prediction of Jesus’ sufferings (“he began to show his disciples that he must...suffer many things...”) followed the glorious confession of Peter (Matt. 16:16), so now Jesus’ second prediction of his sufferings follows the glorious revelation of Jesus’ transfiguration. Jesus insists on pairing these two seemingly contradictory images of himself: “The resplendent Son of God of the mountain is the same as the suffering Son of Man. The death and resurrection which he has so recently predicted remains his paradoxical destiny.”¹⁶

Remembering Jesus’ Forerunners (Matt. 17:13)

The second misunderstanding of the scribes comes in the identity of Elijah. The scribes had imagined that the prophecy in Elijah referred to an actual coming of Elijah. Importantly, Elijah *does* come to visit Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration. Yet, the fullest sense of the prophecy was fulfilled “literally but figuratively...in John the Baptist, who, because he went forth in the spirit and power of Elijah, deserved to be called ‘Elijah.’”¹⁷ So, after Jesus explains the meaning of the prophecy, the disciples understand what Jesus stops short of saying explicitly: “Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist” (v. 13). Thus, the new Elijah (John the Baptist) “did fulfill his mission, but he was killed doing it. In the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer...“at their hands” v.12b).”¹⁸

The understanding of the disciples is important to track. Here, they understand part of what Jesus is explaining about the fact that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the prophecy about Elijah. On this point, it may be that the disciples remember that Jesus had previously declared Jesus

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:319.

¹⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 266.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:319.

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 652.

¹⁷ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 671.

¹⁸ Carson, “Matthew,” 441.

to be Elijah: “and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Matt. 11:14).¹⁹ Yet, Lenski observes that the disciples’ understanding is limited here to the identification of John the Baptist *only*, which “intimates that as yet they did not understand and grasp what Jesus had added about himself.”²⁰ Yet, this seems to be the main significance of this conversation on the way down the mountain, for it brings our attention back to the sufferings of Jesus: “So the appearance of Elijah on the mountain, while it has testified to the heavenly glory and authority of the Messiah, is also (through the experience of John, the second Elijah) a pointer to the earthly fate of the Messiah which he has so graphically predicted in 16:21.”²¹ Jesus is continuing to teach his disciples that he is indeed infinitely glorious, but that it is not possible to separate his glory from his sufferings.

Discussion Questions

1. How forcefully does Jesus insist that the three disciples must tell no one about what they had seen? What is the connection to their vision and Jesus’ resurrection from the dead? What do you think that the disciples might have been asking when they inquired about the coming of Elijah? How does this conversation underscore the connection between Jesus’ glory and his sufferings and death?
2. To what degree were the scribes correct in their interpretation of the prophecy from Malachi 4:5–6? To what degree were the scribes incorrect? In what way, then, did Elijah “restore all things” at his first coming? In what way did Elijah suffer because of restoring all things? How does the suffering of Elijah foreshadow the sufferings that Jesus himself must undergo? How does this suggest a connection between suffering and glory in the whole Bible?
3. How precisely does John the Baptist fulfill the prophecy about Elijah from Malachi 4? If Jesus had already explained that John the Baptist was “Elijah who is to come” (Matt. 11:14), why do the disciples only now understand this (v. 13)? How does this connection help us to understand the way in which John the Baptist served as the forerunner to Jesus? What significance should we draw from the connection between John the Baptist and Jesus?
4. How often in Scripture does God demonstrate that he is neither limited, nor hindered, nor thwarted by suffering and death? How does God use the horrors of suffering and death (which come not by his creation, but only as a curse against sin) as a secret ingredient for our glory? Do you trust God to bring glory out of your suffering? If you did, how would your outlook change? How would your prayers change? Where do you need to trust him today?

¹⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 672.

²⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 664.

²¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 655.