

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 17:1-13
“My Beloved Son”

Prepared by Charles H. Jensen, Pastor, Cornerstone Fellowship
101 Kylies Road, Coatesville, PA 19329
610-384-1375
charleshjensen@aol.com

Matthew 17:1-13

Verse 1

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

- Throughout the Gospels and the Book of Acts, the disciples, when listed, are always divided into four groups of three persons each. The first group is always Peter, James, and John. (See Mark 3:16-18) While we do not know the exact reasoning behind these divisions, they seem to imply an organizational structure among the group of disciples. Those Jesus takes with him on this occasion are always listed among the group as the first of the groups.
- There are several sets of brothers among the group of disciples. These include James and John who were members of this group.
- The fact that Jesus took only these three and not the entire group of twelve implies that there was some special reason for taking these three. However, any guess at that reason is just that, a guess. Acting in his role as sovereign Lord, Jesus chooses these three for this experience, excluding the others.
- The exact spot where this event occurred, the “high mountain,” is unknown to us. Because Matthew 16:13 mentions Caesarea Philippi some scholars conclude that the mountain was Mt. Hermon because it is near that town.

Verse 2

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

- This is what was promised by Jesus in Matthew 16:28.
- What the disciples saw was Jesus on earth in the glory that he will have in the kingdom of God. A fuller description of Jesus’ kingdom

appearance is found in Revelation 1:12-16. The description in Revelation agrees completely with the description in Matthew even though different people wrote them. John, the author of Revelation, was one of those present on the occasion described by this passage.

Verse 3

Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

- Moses was the greatest of Israel's prophets. He was the one God used to establish the old covenant. Jesus is the one through whom the new covenant comes.
- Israel believed that Elijah would come before the Messiah to prepare things for the Messiah. See Malachi 4:5-6.
- These two ancient figures know Jesus. This is illustrated in the fact that they talk with him. The three have an intimate relation. Luke tells us that they talked about Jesus' death (see Matthew 16:21 and Luke 9:30).

Verse 4

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters --- one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

- The three men become legal witnesses to the event that they just witnessed. In a Jewish court two witnesses were required to verify a fact. These three will be more than enough to bear witness to Jesus' transfiguration into his divine appearance.
- Peter wants to build three temporary shelters or booths to commemorate the experience. We do not know exactly what Peter had in mind or why he wanted to erect these shelters. It would seem that he wanted to prolong the memory of the experience, perhaps long enough to share it with the other disciples who were not present. He did not want to build booths that would last forever. The word used implies the temporary nature of the structures.

Verse 5

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

- The disciples who were present heard the voice (see verse 6).

- The voice repeated the words which were spoken at Jesus' baptism (see Matthew 3:17).
- This is the kind of sign that the Pharisees requested of Jesus in Matthew 16:1 Jesus told them that no such sign would be given them. However, the requested sign is given to those who believe to confirm their belief.

Verse 6

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified.

- The cloud and the voice overwhelm the disciples. They fall down in reverence and respect, knowing whose voice they hear.

Verse 7

But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid."

- Jesus tells them that they need not be afraid or terrified even though they have heard the very voice of God.

Verse 8

When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

- With the sounding of the divine proclamation, Moses and Elijah were gone.

Verse 9

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man, has been raised from the dead."

- Jesus' instructions were clear. The three disciples were not to tell anyone about the event they had witnessed until after he was raised from the dead. The reason for this concern is not made clear. However, the instruction is very clear.

Verse 10

The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

- The rabbis taught that the prophet Elijah would appear before the Messiah's coming to prepare his way. They based this teaching on Malachi 4:5-6.

- Peter is probably confused. Since the presence of Elijah would clearly establish that Jesus was the Messiah, according to the rabbinic expectations and teachings, why not tell what they have seen.

Verse 11-13

Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

- Jesus acknowledges that one like Elijah has already come to prepare the way for the Messiah. This person was John the Baptist (see Matthew 3:1-6).
- Jesus said that those who should have recognized the role that John played in God’s plan did not recognize him. Instead they abused him and eventually executed him. Jesus’ point was that they would not believe that Elijah had come either.
- Instead, they would abuse him as they had John regardless of what testimony might be given.

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