

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 61, Chapter 17 Continued

Last week we concluded our study of the opening portion of Matthew chapter 17 that focused on The Transfiguration. Truly this nearly unfathomable event of an epiphany of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus together is one of the most mysterious in the entire Bible, and what makes it all the more confounding is that the point of it... just what it is meant to signify... is not stated. I can only assume that either the Gospel writers didn't know the point because their sources didn't know; or that it was assumed to be self-evident to Believers in the 1st century. So within the Jewish context, what might the disciples have taken from this?

To briefly review: my conclusion is that at least 2 different things were meant to be taken from The Transfiguration... perhaps even more. One thing for certain: death was a greatly feared thing because what happened afterward was an unsettled matter in the Hebrew faith. So the question of the possibility of life after death was an ongoing debate within the Jewish religious leadership, and therefore was also an unresolved matter within the minds of Christ's disciples. I imagine the appearance of the long-ago departed Moses and Elijah would likely have provided a welcome hope for them that there must be life after death. So the next question in their minds would have been: how does one attain it?

Without insisting on which view is correct, my own does differ from the traditional one within Christianity that there is but a single point to this epiphany and it is to inform the disciples about something concerning Yeshua. The first point of The Transfiguration, then, is that 2 different groups of people were meant to benefit from it: the 3 disciples that were present as witnesses, and Moses and Elijah themselves as participants. The disciples were intended to grasp that Moses as representative of the Law (or probably the entire Torah), and Elijah as

representative of the Prophets, and Yeshua as the God-man Redeemer that Moses and Elijah pointed towards, were clearly linked and worked together, and each are necessary milestones and participants in the long journey to redemption and restoration. And while what Moses and Elijah did and said were prophetic and (after a long wait) currently being fulfilled in Jesus, yet all remained alive and well and **relevant** (something Christ made abundantly clear in the Sermon on the Mount).

Admittedly this challenges the most predominant view of Christianity whereby the single point of the event of the 3 figures appearing together was essentially a passing of the torch. That is, The Transfiguration signified that Jesus was replacing Moses and Elijah, and therefore He was also superseding the Law of Moses. I maintain that nothing within this scenario implies or even hints of The Transfiguration as being a replacement ceremony. Some commentators point to the fact that Yeshua's face and clothes were glowing as the evidence of Him replacing Moses and Elijah. I say that of the 3 figures, He is the only one that was divine; so it is logical that His face and clothes would glow in such a way that indeed sets Him apart as divine. So in my view this idea of replacement is a much later Christian Church doctrine that is being read back into the story.

The second point of The Transfiguration comes from Christ's equally puzzling descent into the earth before He ascended to Heaven. Ephesians chapter 4 speaks of this. I interpret that event as something Yeshua did in association with Abraham's Bosom; a dwelling place for the departed souls of the righteous dead who died prior to the advent of the Redeemer. If I've been asked the question once, I've been asked a hundred times, what happened to the people who died in the Old Testament era? Well, Jesus descended to announce to these souls that they were now redeemed to an elevated state of righteousness that gave them access to Heaven, and so these long-time captives in Abraham's Bosom were set free. It seems to me that Moses and Elijah also had to be set free. As elevated as their status was, they were still strictly human beings, born with the same sin nature as Adam. Where they had been living in spirit, so to speak, during the many centuries that they had been gone is unclear. They had been set apart from all other humans by The Father and their departures were in mysterious circumstances. I suspect that neither resided in Abraham's Bosom, but of the 2, Moses may have.

Nonetheless, since their eras of activity and of leaving this earth took place long before the advent of the Redeemer.... Jesus the Messiah... they, just like the

captives of Abraham's Bosom, also had to be set free. So God set these 2 great icons of the Hebrew faith before Yeshua so that He could announce the end of their captivity as well, or perhaps it was an announcement of their redemption (as also symbolized by the captives of Abraham's Bosom being released) and so it was representative of what was soon to happen. Moses and Elijah seem to be **the first** of those departed from this earth and physical life to be set free (redeemed). Only a little later after His death and resurrection will Yeshua do the same for those thousands or millions of righteous souls that had remained safely for centuries in God's care in Abraham's Bosom.

Might I have this right? I'll ask Yeshua when He returns.

Let's move on now to the next section of Matthew chapter 17. We'll begin by reading the next few verses that tell the story.

RE-READ MATTHEW 17:14 - 21

This story is of the healing of a young man that most Bible scholars insist was not demon-possessed; rather he had epilepsy. But what it all actually boils down to this: the matter of miracle healing no longer involves whether Jesus will or is able to heal anyone of anything... that is now a given. Rather the matter is whether His disciples can as well. This same story is told in the Gospel of Mark and because the best information is the most complete information, we'll read Mark to add to what Matthew says.

READ MARK 9:14 - 29

Notice that Mark's account of the healing is virtually twice the length of Matthew's. The answer to why that might be is an open question. However, some Bible commentators think Mark's Gospel has been altered and lengthened by later Christian editors to make the focus of the story something more critical of Jesus's disciples that also implies a Jewish inferiority upon these "disciples of little faith" who failed to be able to do what Yeshua seems to indicate they ought to be able to do by now: heal people and exorcise demons. My response is that I just don't know if that is the case with Mark or not. There is simply no evidence for or against; it is just the opinions of a number of Bible scholars. Each Gospel writer tended to be either more wordy or less wordy about a common event they all report on, and they also each tended to highlight different aspects of any given event. Some Gospel writers included things about Yeshua that others chose not

to, and vice versa. So I'm inclined not to read too much into the shorter version in Matthew or in the longer version in Mark. I'll leave it that by combining the information provided in these two accounts, we get a more complete and well-rounded record of what occurred.

Having said that, it is hard to dispute that from the far view of the 3 Synoptic Gospels, my reading is that Mark's is the least Jewish oriented and also the most harsh in the assessment of Jews and Judaism in general... Believers or otherwise. Matthew's is the most Jewish oriented of the Gospel accounts and the least likely to point out the failures of the disciples or to assign too much blame to common Jews who are naive about their own Hebrew faith, therefore are easily misled, and also don't understand Yeshua: who He is or what He is about. Luke probably falls somewhere in the middle because this gentile Believer went on the road with the Jewish Apostle Paul to several gentile Roman provinces, visiting several synagogues, and so no doubt gained insight and understanding of Jewish culture and Tradition and therefore of the Jewish point of view. So he displays an obvious level of sympathy and affinity for the Jewish people even though it is presented from a predominately gentile worldview.

The opening words of yet another story of demon possession indicate that many of Yeshua's disciples had gone with Him to an area nearby wherever it was that the Transfiguration experience took place. Having come down from the high place, they almost immediately encounter a crowd (we find that Jesus has become so well known that crowds seek Him out or follow Him no matter where He goes). An unnamed father asks Yeshua to heal his son of something that resembles epilepsy. We need to notice that the crowds keep coming to Christ for the same reason they always have: for healing. They still view Yeshua primarily as a **Tzadik** (a Jewish miracle-working Holy Man). We must not read the concept of salvation as we think of it today back into any of these stories of miracle-working. I point this out because when we read nearly every English Bible version, we'll find that they have the father saying to Yeshua: "Lord have pity on my son..." That is, the word lord is capitalized thus making it a title. This capitalization is used by a translator to indicate when the person speaking that word means it in the religious/spiritual sense that Jesus is the divine Savior and Messiah (The Lord). This is simply not the case and there is no evidence in any of the Gospel accounts to this point in Yeshua's life that the crowds are approaching Him with this meaning and understanding. Rather the CJB translation handles this the best when instead of "Lord" it uses "sir". That is, the father is showing respect to Jesus, not the least of which reason is that he wants

something from Him. He holds Yeshua in high regard but he also wants Jesus to exorcize the demon from his son.

It is interesting that the father calls his son a lunatic and not demon-possessed. The Greek word used is ***solemiazomai*** and literally, it means moon-struck; but in modern English moon-struck means lunatic. It was a superstition in that era that the moon (the Luna) caused mental illnesses and abnormal behaviors. The father goes on to say that his son's behavior is so crazy that he'll even fall into fires or bodies of water. That is, he does things that can harm him.

Mark's Gospel starts this story a bit differently. He says that Yeshua and His disciples came upon a crowd of people who were loudly debating with some Scribes (synagogue authorities) about something. When the crowd noticed who it was that was approaching, several of them ran to Yeshua. Yeshua asked no one in particular what this noisy discussion was all about and a person answered; this person was the father of a son that was suffering with demon possession. Mark continues with more or less the same description about what goes on with the boy that we find in Matthew. However, he also adds that some of Yeshua's disciples tried healing the boy but couldn't. Back to Matthew.

Yeshua turns to His disciples and strongly rebukes them; at least that is the rather standard meaning assigned to Yeshua's words. But when we look more closely, the Greek has Yeshua say ***apistos kia diastrepho genea***. The KJV has the most literal translation that says "faithless and perverse generation". So unless He is calling ONLY His disciples a faithless and perverse generation, then He is using the term "perverse generation" as He has before: it refers in general to all those Jews living at that time that are blind to the signs of the Latter Days that John the Baptist showed them and that Yeshua's very presence is proof of. In other words, this harsh statement is directed at the entire crowd, including the Scribes and His own disciples... everybody present. He again implies that the amount of time that He'll be around (alive) to be able to continue to heal and restore people is limited. So what happens when He's gone? I have little doubt that similar words have been spoken by every frustrated mother and father to their children: what are you going to do when I'm not around anymore? The early Church Father Chrysostom saw it the same way.

After those harsh words, Yeshua says to the distressed father: "Bring him here to Me". The cure, according to Matthew, was for Yeshua to rebuke the demon in the boy. He did, the demon left, and the boy was cured. But Mark takes this another

direction.

^{CJB} **Mark 9:20-27** ²⁰ *They brought the boy to him; and as soon as the spirit saw him, it threw the boy into a convulsion.* ²¹ *Yeshua asked the boy's father, "How long has this been happening to him?" "Ever since childhood," he said;* ²² *"and it often tries to kill him by throwing him into the fire or into the water. But if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us!"* ²³ *Yeshua said to him, "What do you mean, 'if you can'? Everything is possible to someone who has trust!"* ²⁴ *Instantly the father of the child exclaimed, "I do trust- help my lack of trust!"* ²⁵ *When Yeshua saw that the crowd was closing in on them, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You deaf and dumb spirit! I command you: come out of him, and never go back into him again!"* ²⁶ *Shrieking and throwing the boy into a violent fit, it came out. The boy lay there like a corpse, so that most of the people said he was dead.* ²⁷ *But Yeshua took him by the hand and raised him to his feet, and he stood up.*

So Mark has Yeshua continuing to rebuke the crowd, including the father of the boy, and then we see a bit of a battle go on between Yeshua and the evil spirit that was possessing the boy; it wasn't going to be easily defeated. We even see doubt in the father that Jesus can do this miracle, and Jesus's turning the tables about the doubt directed towards Him towards the lack of trust in those who were asking for the miracle. The tone of Mark's narrative is really quite a different tone than in Matthew. Matthew has this same man falling to his knees before Jesus begging Him to cure his son because others of Christ's disciples couldn't. There is no hint of disbelief or lack of trust in the father. In Mark, the father admits to a lack of trust and even asks Christ to help him with this problem. Nothing further is said of it; there is no aha! moment of the father, and no hint that Yeshua helped the father to have a greater trust. Even so, Yeshua went ahead with the successful exorcism.

We are again faced with the question of what kind of trust Yeshua is saying people must have in Him; it is left unsaid. Trust that He is a **Tzadik** that cannot fail? It certainly cannot be about trust in Him as the divine Messiah (at least not now) because He has told His disciples not to whisper a word of it to anyone. Perhaps it is meant in the sense that the Jewish people are, like Peter, to have such trust in His person that He is whatever He says He is at any point in time. And that He can do whatever He says He can do.... in any capacity whatsoever. And in addition their this trust must be large enough that it never waivers and

thus responds properly to whatever He tells them to believe or to do, no matter the circumstances. I believe that the trust He demands is in the same sense that He expected of Peter.

Going back to Matthew's much shorter version of the story, in verse 19 the disciples ask Yeshua the reason that they couldn't heal the boy of his problem. Yeshua responds as He has on numerous occasions regarding the condition of His disciples: they have little faith. So while in Mark's Gospel Yeshua is telling the crowd and the father that is their lack of trust that stymied the disciples from healing the boy, in Matthew Yeshua is pinning it only on His disciples.

In verse 20 Jesus resurrects His previous use of the mustard seed metaphor and Parable and tells the disciples that if their faith and trust were even that tiny, they could move mountains. Folks, this is an expression that is not to be taken literally. It is also not a Parable so it can have more than one facet to its meaning. Let's also recall that Yeshua never moved massive geographic features that we're aware of and so such a thing is not in our future either, no matter our level of trust in Him. His illustration is a memorable exaggeration that contrasts a mustard seed that is a tiny physical object, with a mountain that is the largest physical object. While not a Parable, certainly the idea of moving mountains does take the form of a proverb. And from that standpoint, the idea of moving a mountain means to do the unlikely or, from a human view, to do the impossible. As Davies and Allison say: "A literal interpretation is ludicrous" so we can discard that as a possibility. Thus no doubt the point is that a small amount of trust can do big and improbable things; therefore it is inherently implied that a great amount of trust can do the impossible things... impossible from an apparent or earthly standpoint. It is simply an encouragement and call to trust Him fully.

Here when we set various English Bible versions side by side we run into an issue that I think goes well beyond a trivial nuance. It is this: depending on your Bible version you will see some combination or use of the words trust, faith, and belief. It seems that these words are meant to denote different things. And yet in the Greek, they all stem from the same word: **pistis** (in its various grammatical forms) and thus also stem from the same concept. I think that the CJB has it most correctly rendered by choosing the word "trust" to get at what Christ is saying. Why is that? It is because of what those words trust, faith, and belief mean in modern English and how they are used. Words have meaning; but it depends heavily on the era and the culture to define that meaning. In modern English-speaking cultures of the West there are important differences between

the meanings of trust, faith, and belief even if at first glance we haven't really thought about it. Perhaps a few hundred years ago, in European English-speaking society, these 3 words meant something different. Even so, whatever mental picture we draw today with the use of each of those words is what matters in order to correctly communicate the intended message.

Since the Greek is essentially the same for the 3 words, let's talk about what each of them means to us in our day, and we'll begin with the word trust. For us to trust is a positive term that means to firmly depend on something with conviction and without reservation. Failure or error is not conceivable. Trust, especially from the biblical standpoint, also revolves around morality. It is a thought of something that I can depend upon that is true and right regardless of world conditions, or as history progress, and what I trust in will not fail me. I can say that I trust, for example, that the sun will rise each day just as it always has. There is no doubt about it. Yet there is no moral element to it, so this is not so much trust as belief.

To believe is a conscious, intellectual decision to acknowledge that something is as we perceive it to be, or merely that it exists. Faith is an overriding hope in someone or something and it can or cannot include a moral element. So, back to the top of our list of words. To trust in Yeshua means to depend on Him and the morality He prescribes, without reservation. Trust cannot incorporate or tolerate the idea of doubt nor does trust allow for alternatives. Doubt and trust are (especially as it comes to a spiritual trust) very nearly opposites.

To say one believes in Yeshua means to acknowledge that He existed. Islam believes that Yeshua existed. Some Muslims I have met have respect for Him and the lifestyle He preached. But they don't trust in Him; they don't depend on Him without reservation. In fact, they worship another God and religion and rely on another and different holy book. Another example: I can believe that a chair exists, is present, and is something that is designed for me to sit upon. But I don't put my trust in it on a moral or absolute level... I don't make an intellectual decision that even adds some involvement of my soul, to depend on that chair without reservation. We know that it could fail us, even though that might be rare. But if it did, outside of our surprise, we wouldn't have a loss of belief in the existence and purpose of chairs.

Faith is a hope that something is so. Faith doesn't have to have an inherent moral element. But hope (and thus faith) does incorporate and tolerate doubt. I

can have hope that it will rain, yet also legitimately harbor an equal amount of doubt that it won't. Faith is the hope of something as yet unrealized, that may never be realized. Faith (hope) can also rise above mere intellectual belief or evidence and often does. I can have faith that mankind is inherently good, even if the evidence shows otherwise, and that mankind's goodness is the path that will eventually lead the human race to a better world. I can hope in science as our deliverer from all of our earth-bound problems that plague us, even though it certainly hasn't delivered and solved all things thus far and there is no firm evidence that it ever will. In fact, it was science that brought us the ultra-destructive atomic bomb. The hope we have in science, or what it currently says is fact, regularly turns out to be incorrect and must be revised so that we hope in something else. Faith (hope) allows room that we can switch our hope to something else if we need to. Trust does not; so trust that fails us is not merely disappointing, it is soul-destroying.

While you might not agree with all my definitions and examples, the point is that these are what these words predominately mean in the 21st century in Western culture. Thus we have to be very careful about what English words a Bible translator assigns to what Yeshua, or the Gospel writer, meant and therefore what He requires of us to be His disciples. Therefore when we look at the Greek *pistis* and its variations, the best English word to get across the proper meaning for our time is trust. Yeshua says we are to trust in Him. We are to depend upon Him without reservation or in regards to our circumstances. This, of course, is the ideal. "Be ye perfect even as I am perfect" says The Lord. I dare say no one will ever be perfect or have perfect trust in God. The Book of Revelation reveals that even many people that will be allowed entry into the Millennial Kingdom will not have perfect trust and some will fail so badly that they will not live an eternity with God. This fullness of trust, the ideal trust, will not come until the arrival of the new earth and heavens. But it is what we are to strive for, with Yeshua as the object of our trust, and the ideal of what it looks like.

Verse 21 is not present in all the ancient Greek manuscripts and the CJB doesn't use it even though most English Bibles do. It is therefore thought that because Matthew didn't use some words that Mark thought important, a later Christian editor added them.

^{CJB} **Mark 9:29** ²⁹ ***He said to them "This is the kind of spirit that can be driven out only by prayer."***

Whether this was an authentic saying of Christ or not, it is framed as having been said in response to Yeshua's disciples as a sort of instruction from Him to answer the question of how one can get rid of this particular kind of evil spirit (the one that was not willing to go without a fight). However, the way it has been inserted into Matthew's Gospel, it is framed as a continuing saying of Jesus over the issue of the volume of trust one must have. So, it has been slightly modified to fit each scenario. An original statement by Christ or not isn't a terribly important issue because, in the end, what it says is true: we can never attain the high level of trust in Yeshua that we need without prayer and fasting. That is, we must make an effort, take personal action, and beseech the Father in prayer and not just passively wait on Him to decide one day to give us greater trust.

Verses 22 and 23 are sometimes said to be misplaced and so must be a later addition by Christian editors. Let's read it.

READ MATTHEW 17:22 - 23

Perhaps these few words represent the work of a later editor, although I can easily see how this plays directly into what Yeshua said that is recorded not in Matthew but in Mark about how Jesus will not always be with them. On the other hand, Matthew moves the location entirely to the familiar area of the Galilee, so in Matthew's Gospel, it doesn't seem to be more words about His own demise as it appears in Mark 9. Rather, in Matthew, it is another scenario altogether. Why another statement about His impending death, when He has already made it clear enough that Peter got himself in some hot water by disputing it? Because it adds an important piece of information; Yeshua's execution will be precipitated by an element of betrayal. Thus the reason for the disciples' sadness is not only that He is soon to die, it is also the gut-wrenching circumstance that puts Him into the hands of those who mean Him harm. What must also be noticed is that the means of His execution has yet to be mentioned. The disciples certainly could have thought of stoning because that was often the way the Sanhedrin dealt with a Jew guilty of a religious matter (even though technically Rome outlawed it). So crucifixion is still not on the table... although because crucifixion was the usual method of execution used by the Romans for Jewish criminals, that, too, would have been easily imaginable by the 12 as the method of Christ's death.

Yeshua of course reminds His disciples that He will rise from the dead after 3 days. This fact doesn't seem to have cheered them up and largely for the reasons we've discussed before. Resurrection had a number of meanings in the

1st century, and which one their Master was predicting for Himself was quite unclear. But no matter which it might be, first He had to die. And from every angle a common Jew would think about it, the prophesied Messiah should NOT be dying... He should be killing others and freeing His countrymen. They were going to have to rethink this entire Messiah thing, and what Jesus's resurrection promise meant.

Let's move on to the final story of Matthew 17.

READ MATTHEW 17:24 - 27

This story is about the Temple tax and whether or not the disciples should pay it. This means that it likely took place in March (the Hebrew month of Adar), not long before Passover. That is because this was the traditional time that the Temple tax of 2 Roman drachmas was paid according to Josephus, and Philo more or less backs that up and adds that all adult Jews over the age of 20 were to pay it. The Temple tax story appears only in Matthew. Likely because Matthew was himself a Jew, and so the issue of paying the Temple tax was important to him. He was also a Believer, so what Yeshua had to say about the matter would have been his guide and the one he thinks all Jews ought to follow.

Yeshua and His disciples are now back in Capernaum where Jesus was staying... probably with Peter's family. There the representatives of the Temple come to the disciples and ask why their Master doesn't pay the Temple tax. Peter, as always, jumps into the fray and says: "Of course He does". One would have to ask why the tax collectors would even ask such a question? It is known that Galileans were none too keen to pay that tax because they considered those who ran the Temple as illegitimate and corrupt (and they were). The bulk of the money given simply found its way into the pockets of the High Priest and his family. Notice that the words of verse 25 say that when Peter got home, Yeshua spoke first (more or less cementing that Yeshua was still residing with Peter). And Jesus opens up what is essentially a discussion... in Jewish parlance a *midrash*, about who, among the Jews, ought to (and ought not to) pay that Temple tax. The first person He addresses is the one who spoke for Jesus and had said about Him paying the tax "of course He does". Yeshua frames His question this way:

^{CJB} **Matthew 17:25** *The kings of the earth- from whom do they collect duties and taxes? From their sons or from others?"*

Peter responds: "from others". So, says, Yeshua, then the sons are exempt. Please notice that I said this is about the Temple tax; but that is actually an assumption. The words "Temple tax" that we find in the CJB and many other English Bibles are not actually there in the Greek; that too is an assumption on the part of the translators. The predominance of Bible commentators assume it is the Temple tax that is in question, but there are others that do not and think this is about some kind of Roman taxation. There have been quite a number of points put forward to bolster each position; none of them conclusive in my opinion. Part of the reason I lean towards this being a Temple tax is that historians say that 2 Roman drachmas were the equivalent of 1/2 shekel; and 1/2 shekel was the annual contribution all Jews were expected to make to support the Temple. The coincidence is too large to overlook.

We'll stop here, and finish up this story next week that has a number of ramifications for us.