
The Preview of the Kingdom

Matthew 16:21-17:13

Watching movie previews...

All the best clips...

Enough of the story to get you hooked...

Key in on the best characters...

We are going to back now to the centerpiece of the book of Matthew. If there is a chiasmic center of the book, this is it.

Twice, in the book of Matthew, God the Father declares that Jesus is the beloved Son.

- Baptism
 - Beginning of the Kingdom
- Transfiguration
 - Foretaste of Kingdom

Jesus and His Cross

(16:21-28)

Our story takes up with Jesus and his disciple, Peter. Now Jesus begins to talk about His coming death and resurrection.

Jesus will go to the Cross

(v.21-23)

²¹ 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 on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Jesus begins to talk about what is going to happen next. He is going to suffer, die and be raised from the dead. The next steps in the beginning of the kingdom will be the death and resurrection of the King. He is showing them how the transition in the kingdom is going to take place.

This is not lining up with the disciples expectations. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him. No way this is going to happen to Jesus. He clearly thinks that the disciples will prevent it and Jesus should not allow it. It would bring an end to all their hopes and dreams for the kind of kingdom they are expecting.

Jesus responds in a way that exposes Peter's words as being Satan's agenda. The great Enemy has sought over and over again to prevent the cross. Is it not striking that Peter's misguided hopes, informed by the Scriptures he has, are actually in line with Satan's thinking! The essence of the rebuke is that Peter's mind is taken up with human aims, agendas and aspirations, not God's.

Disciples must take up their Cross

(v. 24-28)

Not only will Jesus go to the cross, but the disciples must take up the cross.

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Here are the terms of the kingdom. The King's followers must be like their king. They must be willing to set aside their own hopes and take up his own scandalous, sin killing death and walk out in new life after Jesus. This is not talking about embracing some sort of ascetic or hard life. This is talking about entering the kingdom through the cross of Jesus. My cross is His. I identify with His cross. I take it up as the means to the kingdom. So I follow the King through His death and resurrection by faith. How do I know this? Because the rest of the New Testament is expositing and explaining the truths expressed in these paragraphs.

As Paul showed us in Galatians, there is an overlap in redemptive history and personal history. The disciples are experiencing that overlap in this text. They must be willing to deny the old realm, the old covenant, the old kingdom which they so strongly hoped for and embrace the new realm. The movement from the old into the new occurs in time through Jesus' own death on the cross and His resurrection. It occurs for them and for us when we embrace the cross having passed from the old to the new through a gracious work of the Spirit in regeneration.

What does life mean if you trade the only thing worthwhile, dying with Jesus, for the most worthless thing imaginable, living to keep my own identity and gain the world? What is acquiring this world, this fallen, fading and futile age in comparison to gaining the eternal, glorious and glad age that will reach its consummation when Jesus comes.

But the coming of the kingdom, through the cross and resurrection and return of the king is both an already and not yet. For a select few disciples, they would not experience death until they see Jesus' future glory finish the old and begin to fill the new. This is what the next chapter is all about.

Jesus and His Kingdom

(17:1-8)

What happens in the next paragraph is what Jesus predicted. Some of the disciples are now going to get a preview of the kingdom. They are going to see Jesus in His glory as not only a foretaste, but an actual beginning of the kingdom. This brief vignette shows what is going on in the transition we have been studying.

¹ And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

A Glorious Change

(v. 1-2)

After six days, Jesus takes His core three disciples, His leaders among equals, into a high mountain. We are not told which mountain but the allusion with Mt. Sinai should not be missed. Moses and elders of Israel went up into Mt. Sinai after the Law was given. They saw the throne of God, sat at the feet of God, ate and drank and were not slain (Exodus 24:1-11). Theirs was a foretaste of the fellowship with God before the Law was broken.

This is that event for the disciples. Jesus is on the mount and is transformed before their eyes. His earthly body is infused with His divine glory in such a way that He shines or glows. They see His glory, normally hidden in the incarnation, now revealed in and through His body. This is anticipating, this is a preview, of His glorified body after the resurrection.

An Ongoing Conversation

(v. 3)

Then, Moses and Elijah appear with Him. What an amazing sight! Here are what the Old Testament scriptures are named after – the law and the prophets. Moses represents the Law which points to Christ our righteousness and His redeeming work as the sacrificial lamb. Elijah point to Christ our revelation and His ruling authority as the sovereign Lord.

And they are conversing together. This is the nature of the change that is taking place. It is an ongoing conversation. The glorious Lord, the Messiah, the soon to be crucified and risen King is the One of whom both the Law and the prophets speak. All through Matthew, Jesus is the One who is speaking of and interpreting the Law and the prophets. It is a wonderful conversation. The transition from the old of Moses and Elijah to the new of Christ, risen and glorified, is the beginning of the kingdom. So, as we move forward through the New Testament, the apostles are still in kingdom building conversation with the Old as Christ through His Spirit and their writing speak of Christ.

A Humbling Correction

(v. 4-6)

As usual, Peter has something to say. He is already to speak. He thinks he knows what is going on. The kingdom is getting ready to unfold starting right here. So Elijah and Moses as well as Jesus are going to need tents to stay in. In other

words, he thinks now that Elijah and the Christ are both here, then all the pre-conditions for the Messiah announcing Himself are ready. I mean, imagine Jesus reentering (of course along with his star disciples) Jerusalem with Elijah and Moses in tow!

But God the Father interrupts him. How this sentence might have finished we will never know. While he was talking, a bright cloud appeared, enveloping them. The Father spoke from its bright depths. What wonderful words. What a stern rebuke. “This is my beloved Son. I am totally happy with Him. He has my full and unqualified approval and confidence. Stop talking and listen to Him.”

Stunning. Humiliating. On the face. Shut the mouth. Trembling limbs. Stuttering hearts. Fear, awful, paralyzing fear. God has spoken.

A Resulting Centrality

(v. 7-8)

Christ moves in love and grace to allay their fears. He does so with a personal touch and with a comforting word. How often Jesus moves to calm the disciples’ fears, particularly after the resurrection.

The disciples look up to see both a physical and a spiritual reality. They see only Jesus. Moses and Elijah have faded from view. Jesus alone is the focus of their gaze. But there is more here. The Father has approved Christ. Christ’s revealed and resplendent glory awaits a future day. Till then, His followers, having taken up the cross are to set their ears and eyes on Him as the central figure of God’s kingdom.

Jesus and His Forerunner

(17:9-13)

You can see them thrumming with news, right? Man, wait till we get with the rest of the guys. Do we have a story! But as they are coming down, Jesus halts them in their tracks.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” ¹⁰ And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” ¹¹ He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

The Scribal Teaching

(v. 9-10)

This is a secret. This is not to be discussed until after the resurrection. Again, he connects Himself to the messianic vision of Daniel. But this raises a question and points to why Peter said what he did. OK, the Messiah, Jesus, the Son of Man will bring His kingdom after the resurrection. “But our Bible teachers say that Elijah must come first. Why do they say that if you are entering your kingdom after the resurrection? Are the scribes, the Bible teachers, wrong?”

The Common Expectation

(v. 11)

Jesus responds by affirming that Elijah will come and will restore all things. In other words, their expectations are correct *in this regard*. Elijah will come before the King comes and the kingdom is established.

The Prophetic Fulfillment (v. 12-13)

But the prophecy concerning Elijah has already been fulfilled. He came. He preached repentance. He was rejected and eventually imprisoned and slaughtered. His fate anticipates Jesus' own impending death.

Ah, the disciples get it. John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Elijah. Jesus clearly says so. The disciples understand Him to be connecting the two. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Matthew records it as so.

Why is this significant? Well for at least the following reasons in our study of future things.

Jesus identifies Himself as the prophesied Messiah. Coming immediately after the transfiguration, it is clear that some great change in the nature of the kingdom is taking place. What we have seen in the parables that followed are explanations of the newness of the kingdom.

John the Baptist is Elijah. Now clearly, John the Baptist is not a reincarnation or resurrection of Elijah. But John the Baptist fulfilled what was predicted. He came in the spirit of power of Elijah (Luke 1:17; 7:27). He preached repentance and restoration. He is acknowledged and authenticated on numerous occasions by Jesus.

There is a principle of prophetic fulfillment. *Fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies do not have to be literally, exactly as predicted.* The disciples expected an exact, literal fulfillment in the reappearance in time and history of the very same Elijah as lived in the Old Testament. The words of the Old Testament texts could easily be understood that way. They were understood that way by the disciples. Jesus does not understand them that way. Elijah came as prophesied in the person of Elijah. He is content with the fulfillment not being literal in the way they thought of.

Prophetic fulfillments will do what the prophecy predicted, just in a different form or person. I am taking this separately but it is critical. Clearly, all through the gospels and the rest of the New Testament, they are interpreting and understanding that the Old Testament prophetic texts are and will be fulfilled, but through forms and persons that are different. Realize that the expectation because of numerous prophetic texts was that David himself would come and rule. Many believe this today in reference to a future kingdom age – that David will rule on the earth as king in Jerusalem with the Jews in their land. The Apostles, following Jesus' own lead, are understanding Jesus' life, death, resurrection and return in glory as fulfilling those prophecies.

Examples of this abound in the apostle's preaching as recorded for us in the book of Acts. Listen to clippings from Peter's sermons:

Acts 2:29–36

"Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the

promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, " 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Acts 3:17–26

"And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.' And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness."

Acts 4:8–12

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Acts 4:24–31

And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, " 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'— for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Reflect and Respond

In closing then I want to take us to Peter's own memory of this event and its significance for us. Listen to 2 Peter 1:12-2:1

¹² Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. ¹³ I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, ¹⁴ since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. ¹⁵ And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

¹⁶ 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 were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

¹⁹ And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

In Peter's day, there was an impending emergency: the apostles are dying off (v.12-15). Who will then give them the Word of God?

Yes, the apostles had personal experiences, even amazing dramatic ones like Peter's of the Transfiguration (v.16-18).

But, we have something even more sure than personal, eyewitness accounts: we have the prophetic Word and the apostolic deposit (v. 19-21). That, is we have the Word of God in the both the Old and New Covenants.

And we will need them for surely false teachers will arise just as false prophets came in the Old Testament (2:1).

May God grant us the grace we need to rely on the Word and the boldness to proclaim the gospel until Jesus comes. Then the glory in the transfiguration preview will all come to completion and all will be well.

Notes