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Matthew 17:9 - 17:13



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg explores Matthew 17:9-13, where Jesus clarifies that John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecy of Elijah's return. While the scribes had expected the literal return of Elijah, Jesus explains that John came in the spirit and power of Elijah. Gregg suggests that the prophecy of the return of Elijah in Malachi may still occur in the last days, restoring hearts between fathers and children. Ultimately, Gregg emphasizes the need for trust in God's plan, as the disciples were surprised by John's treatment but should not question God's decisions.

Transcript

In our last session, we were talking about the transfiguration of Christ when he took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain, and Jesus' appearance changed so that he glowed, as it were. He was radiant like the sun at noonday. And there appeared with him Moses and Elijah, who were talking with him.

And then they faded away, and the disciples who were observing heard a voice from heaven say, This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear him. This was a very stunning vision, not only in that the disciples, who had seen Jesus every day for the previous few years as an ordinary looking person, had now seen him look like an angel, or like something more than an angel.

That alone would be stunning. But then to see these great men from the past, Moses and Elijah there, and to see them talking with Jesus, it was a bit overwhelming. And so as they were coming down from the mountain, I'm sure their thoughts were very much on this subject.

And we begin reading in Matthew 17, and verse 9. It says, Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead. And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first? Then Jesus answered and said to them, Elijah truly is coming first, and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and that they did not know him, but did to him whatever they wished.

Likewise, the Son of Man is also about to be suffering at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he spoke to them of John the Baptist. So here are the disciples contemplating the significance of what they have just seen.

Among the things they have seen was an appearance of Elijah the prophet from the Old Testament. This man lived, oh, probably close to 800 years before Christ. And he was a great prophet, and he had gone up in a whirlwind, in a flaming chariot, as his own disciple Elisha had watched him go up.

He was a great hero to the Jewish people. And he represented something very important, because Elijah was the forerunner of Elisha the prophet. And Elijah was a man who called the nation to repentance and spoke of judgment on the nation.

Whereas Elisha, who followed him, and to whom the mantle of Elijah fell, Elisha was a man who did kindly gracious works and miracles, and showed very much to be a foreglimpse of Christ himself. We find in the story of Elisha a man who loved his enemies, who did good to them, who persecuted him to a large extent. Now, not entirely, but I mean, when we hear of him cursing some people who mocked Elijah, and the bears coming down and tearing fortitude, that doesn't seem like he was very loving to them.

But later in his ministry, we find that Elisha was, some soldiers of Syria came to arrest him, and he had them at his mercy because he struck them blind and took them to a place where they could be taken captive. And the king of Israel said, what shall we do? Shall we slay them? Elisha said, no, give them food and send them home. I mean, here's these soldiers come to arrest him, and he feeds them and sends them home after showing them hospitality.

In this and in other respects, Elisha the prophet was a lot like Jesus. But Elijah was a lot like Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist. In fact, he was so much like the forerunner of Jesus that John the Baptist is referred to as Elijah when the Old Testament predicts his coming.

You see, the Old Testament prophets not only predicted that Jesus would come, but they also predicted that John the Baptist would come. Now, of course, they never mentioned the name of Jesus or the name of John the Baptist, because the prophets of the Old Testament didn't know what their names would be. But Isaiah predicted the coming of John the Baptist in Isaiah chapter 40, verses 3 through 5, where it says, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

And that is a reference to John the Baptist. Also, Malachi twice makes reference to the coming of John the Baptist. In Malachi 3.1, he says, behold, I will send my messenger before your face to prepare the way before you, a reference to John the Baptist.

And then, of course, in Malachi chapter 4, there's a reference to John the Baptist, who is

there called Elijah. In Malachi 4, verses 5 and 6, it says, behold, I will send Elijah, the prophet, before the great and notable day of the Lord, and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers, lest I smite the earth or the land with a curse. Now, because Malachi referred to John the Baptist as Elijah, the scribes of Israel made the mistake of thinking that this was a reference to the Old Testament Elijah.

Now, Malachi wrote these words a long time after the Old Testament character Elijah had disappeared from the earth. And therefore, the scribes thought that Elijah the Tishbite, the man who had lived in the days of Ahab and Jezebel, that that same man was going to come back before the Messiah would come. In fact, Jewish people, many of them, still believe this.

At Passover, it is traditional for Jewish people to set an extra place at the table for Elijah if he happens to show up, because the Jews believe that Elijah the prophet will come back before the Messiah comes. And, of course, the Jews do not believe the Messiah has come yet. They do not accept Jesus as the Messiah, so they're looking for another Messiah and for another Elijah.

But they expect it to be the Elijah of the Old Testament. John the Baptist was not the Elijah of the Old Testament, but he is called Elijah in Malachi for the simple reason that he resembled Elijah and that Malachi didn't know what the guy's real name would be. You know, in Ezekiel 37 and in a few other places in the Old Testament, the Messiah is spoken of as David.

It's actually spoken of as my servant David in passages that are talking about the Messiah. This is true in Ezekiel 37. I believe Jeremiah and Hosea also used the expression David to refer to the Messiah.

Now, again, the Messiah's name is not David, and it's not referring to the historical David who was dead long before these prophecies were uttered. The purpose of calling the Messiah David is to say, first of all, the prophets didn't know the real name of the Messiah, but they did know that he would be the one that David was a type and a shadow of. The Messiah would be so much like David and would indeed be from the loins of David and would occupy the throne of David.

And David himself was a type and a shadow of the Messiah. These things being so, the best name to give to the Messiah, if you don't know his real name, is just call him David. And likewise, if you don't know the name of the forerunner of the Messiah, but he resembles Elijah, and he will come in the spirit and the power of Elijah, you might as well just refer to him as Elijah.

And that's what they did. That's what Malachi did. And the scribes did not recognize this.

And so they taught that Elijah, the man Elijah, would come first before the Messiah would come. Now, John the Baptist actually encountered this sentiment among the Jews in John chapter 1, because the Jews said to him, Are you the Messiah? And he said, No. And then they said, Are you Elijah the prophet? He said, No.

Now, why did John the Baptist say that he was not Elijah the prophet? After all, Jesus in Matthew chapter 11 did say, If you can receive it, John is Elijah who is to come. So why did John say he wasn't? For the simple reason that he was not Elijah the Tishbite. He was not the man who had lived eight centuries earlier.

And that is what the Jews meant when they asked him, Are you Elijah? No, he was not Elijah. However, he was the Elijah who was to come, spoken of by Malachi. And that is what the disciples understood on this occasion.

And that's what Jesus made clear earlier in Matthew chapter 11. But on this occasion, the disciples had just seen Elijah on the mountaintop, and then he vanished. But he had not presented himself to the whole nation of Israel.

And he disappeared from view and from significance, because the voice from heaven said of Jesus, This is my son, hear him, suggesting Moses and Elijah are no longer the ones to be looking for or hearing. So it would seem that Elijah had made his appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration, and then had been dismissed from significance, and yet he had never been sent to face Israel. And so the disciples thought, Well, wait a minute.

I thought Elijah was supposed to come and appear to Israel before the Messiah. And they said, Lord, why did the scribes say that? And Jesus' answer is somewhat difficult to understand in some ways. There are some features that are difficult.

He said, Elijah truly does come first and will restore all things. But then he says, But I say to you, Elijah has come already. Now, of course, when he says Elijah has come already, he's referring to John the Baptist.

He's already made that clear on an earlier occasion. And in case we didn't know it ourselves, it says very specifically in verse 13, Then the disciples knew that he was speaking of John the Baptist. So we know that when Jesus said, Elijah has come already, he's referring to John.

But what about this statement that's not in the past tense? He says, Elijah surely does come first and restores all things. Now, that can't be a reference to John very readily, because it's in the present tense and maybe even a continuous tense looking to the future as well. So he says, Elijah has come, meaning John, but he says, Elijah does come and restores all things.

Now, how are we to understand that statement? There are a couple of ways that we could understand it. I'm not really sure which one is the correct one. So I'll give them to

you and you can make up your own mind.

Seen one way, Jesus might simply be paraphrasing Malachi chapter 4. Malachi chapter 4 says, Now, Jesus could have been paraphrasing that in these words. Elijah surely comes first and will restore all things. Now, that would not be a direct quote, but it could be his way of summarizing what Malachi said and therefore his own paraphrase of Malachi chapter 4 verses 5 and 6. If so, then what Jesus is simply doing is quoting Malachi or paraphrasing it.

So when the disciples said, why do the scribes say that Elijah comes first? Jesus would be answering by quoting the scripture or alluding to or paraphrasing the scripture upon which the scribes based their belief. Well, as it says in Malachi, Elijah comes first and restores all things. That's why they believe it.

That's why they teach that. But then he'd say, but I say to you, Elijah has come already. In other words, the scribes are missing it.

The scribes have seen that scripture, but they have not seen the fulfillment of that scripture. But he says, I'm telling you that it was fulfilled. And John the Baptist is the fulfillment.

That's one way to understand Jesus phrase there or his phraseology. And as far as I'm concerned, that could well satisfy all questions on the subject. But there is another possibility.

And that is this. We know that John the Baptist was not Elijah. But it does say of him in Luke chapter one that he came in the spirit and the power of Elijah.

And in so doing, he fulfilled the scripture that said Elijah would come. It was to be spiritually fulfilled. When Malachi said that Elijah would come, he did not mean that the literal man of history named Elijah would return again, but rather that another would come in the spirit and power of Elijah.

This would be a spiritual Elijah, as it were, a spiritual coming of Elijah. Not in the same man, but in another man coming in the same spirit and the same anointing and with the same task. Now, if that is true of John, it has been suggested by some that perhaps there is an Elijah task yet to be performed.

And that John was not the only one in history who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. But that there might be at other times men who come in the spirit and power of Elijah to their own generation. As Elijah had a certain impact and task and ministry to his generation, so did John the Baptist to his generation.

And so it may be have others to their own generation. This is not something that we could be dogmatic about, it seems to me. But it would explain why Jesus would say,

Elijah surely does come first.

And does come first is more or less a present tense thing. Present and continuous, more like perpetually. Elijah is always coming first and restoring things.

And then he says, of course, and he has come, meaning John the Baptist. This is at least one other way to consider the strange way that Jesus spoke on this subject. Because he would be saying in that case, there are many ways in which this prophecy of the coming of Elijah is true.

There are many who will and do come in the spirit and power of Elijah. Perhaps all the prophets did, John certainly did. Maybe there are people even in our day who are coming in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Sort of an Elijah ministry. I have known at least a few persons in the church who believe that Jesus is referring to an Elijah ministry of the last days. I don't know whether this is correct or not.

But some feel that there will be persons who will come in the last days in the spirit and power of Elijah. Who, as Malachi said, will come to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers. And that John the Baptist was that person in his generation.

And that in the end times there will be other persons, perhaps not one, maybe a group, maybe a whole class of persons. Prophetic persons that God raises up and sends to prepare the way of the Lord, as John did. Now, I cannot say for sure whether that would be a valid expectation.

I will say this, that the wording of Jesus leaves that possibility open, it seems to me. So, Jesus is saying to his disciples, Elijah does come first and restores all things. And it's interesting if he says, and restores all things.

What things? What things are going to be restored? In Acts chapter 3, Peter is preaching and he says that the heavens must receive Christ until the time of the restoration of all things. Spoken of by all the prophets. A time of the restoration of all things.

And Elijah comes and restores all things. Well, I don't know what things we're talking about here. Of course, there's a lot to be restored.

There's a lot that was lost in the fall. And we do know that the paradise that was lost is going to be restored. Because in Revelation chapters 21 and 22, we read of a new heaven and a new earth and a new Jerusalem.

Where there is no more curse and the effects of the fall no longer have any place. So that what was lost is restored in the ultimate workings of God in his final purposes. Now,

in what sense Elijah is involved in this restoration of all things? We really don't have any clear indication.

But we do see Jesus saying Elijah comes and restores all things. Now, it's possible that when Jesus said Elijah restores all things, he is really only referring, as I say paraphrasing, the words of Malachi. That Elijah would come and turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.

In other words, restoring relationships. Not so much restoring the world to its pristine, pre-fallen state. But rather, restoring all things as they should be in terms of human relationships.

Especially the example given would be in families. Restoring family solidarity. Restoring relationships as God wanted them in the beginning to be.

And so that may be the restoration of all things that Jesus is referring to. I'm going to have to say, having said everything that I have to say, I'm not really going to know for sure. I'm not going to be able to tell you for sure exactly the meaning that Jesus had.

Because it seems to me that there's more than one possibility. Certainly part of it is not difficult. The part where he said Elijah has already come and they did with him whatever they wanted to.

And so also shall the Son of Man be treated by them. And so he tells them that he's going to suffer again at the hands of the Jews. Just as John the Baptist did.

Jesus uses the example of John the Baptist's suffering as a springboard, as it were, to point out that he would suffer also. The disciples perhaps were surprised when John the Baptist was arrested and then when he died. John the Baptist himself seemed to have been surprised.

Because John expected that Jesus would do something, I think, to rescue him. That Jesus would stage a revolution or something to get him out of jail. And when he didn't, John actually sent messengers to Jesus from prison and said, Are you the one who we're expecting or not? Now, if John the Baptist himself was surprised that his relationship to Jesus did not give him immunity from martyrdom, then the disciples and others looking on must have been surprised as well.

And the disciples are now told that just as they were probably surprised at the way that John was treated, they are going to experience another surprise and that is the way Jesus himself is treated. But it should not be surprising. In view of what happened to John the Baptist, it should not be surprising to them what will happen to Jesus.

And he says, It's going to happen to me. He says, I'm going to be delivered into their hands. Now, the destruction of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod, the beheading of

him, was sort of an official rejection of the messenger, of Elijah the prophet, who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord.

And it said in Malachi that I will send Elijah and he'll turn the hearts of the fathers, the children, etc. lest I come and strike the land with a curse. That is to say, if Elijah cannot succeed in turning the hearts of the people back to where they should be, then the land itself will have to be smitten with a curse.

And it was, John the Baptist's mission was, we could argue, was a failure. The people did not turn. Their hearts were not turned.

It is true there appeared to be repentance, and great numbers of people professed repentance and came out to be baptized with him. But in general, the nation still rejected Jesus afterward, whom John had endorsed. And there is a sense in which John's mission did not accomplish what God hoped it might.

And therefore, there was nothing left for God to do but come and strike the land with a curse, which did happen. But before it did, the same people who rejected John the Baptist would reject Jesus and be rid of him also. They would think.

However, unlike John, Jesus would come back from the dead. And it would be Jesus who would come back from the dead who would eventually judge those who had crucified him. And so it happened.

In 70 AD, there was this judgment that came upon Jerusalem. When the Romans came in, brought there by God, it was a vindication of Jesus and of John the Baptist. Those who had rejected John the Baptist or Elijah found that their land was smitten with a curse.

And the curse came upon Israel initially through the invasion of the Romans and the destruction of their city. And that curse has continued upon the Jewish people in the form of their exile into many lands until this day. This is not an anti-Semitic statement.

This is simply a statement of historical fact. And so this prophecy of Malachi and its implied threat has come true. And John the Baptist was the man who came to give them a chance to repent that they did not.