



## **Matthew 17:10–13**

10 The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” 11 Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. 12 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.” 13 Then the disciples understood

that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

## **Reflection**

With every step down that mountain Peter, James and John's fear subsided just a little more. Jesus had told them not to speak of what had just happened until after his resurrection, so with the few moments they have left before re-joining the others they ask Jesus a question that has been on their minds since their mountaintop experience. When Jesus was transfigured, alongside him had stood two of the greatest figures from the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. I'm sure they had many questions about the significance of these two men flanking Jesus but the one that Matthew records for us is this:

“Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”

To their credit this is a reasonably astute question given that they had just survived an encounter with the Living God. Not long before they were lying face down in the dirt in terror; now they’re beginning to think theologically about what they had just witnessed. They’d just witnessed Elijah returned and then God the Father pronounce Jesus as the Messiah. Perhaps it was the terror of the moment that recalled to them the passage of Scripture from Malachi 4:5–6, the very two last verses in the Old Testament (which was all the bible they had at that stage). These verses read:

5 “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

They’d just had a foretaste of the ‘great and dreadful day of the Lord’. They lay in the dirt terrified at the awesome power of God declaring his son rightful king and judge over the world. And they’d just seen Elijah returned. But they’d been with Jesus for some time now and according to this passage in Malachi wasn’t Elijah meant to come first? So they ask Jesus directly:

“Why then do the teachers of the

law say that Elijah must come first?”

But the question behind their question is more than one of timing. Not only was Elijah supposed to come first, but he was supposed to restore all things, or so said the teachers of the Law. If this was the case, then what was this talk of Jesus needing to suffer and die? If Elijah was supposed to restore all things then surely that wouldn't be necessary.

As Jesus often does, in verses 11 and 12, he answers not just their question but also the question behind their question:

“To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. 12 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.”

The teachers of the law were right and wrong. The final two verses of the Old Testament do say that Elijah will come before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. In fact, Malachi 3:1 speaks of his coming as a messenger, who will prepare the way for the Messiah. But where the teachers of the law have got it wrong is that Elijah's *intention* will be to restore all things, and he will try to 'turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents' (that is the 'restore all things' part). But the teachers of the law are mistaken in that they have left out the last part over Malachi 4:6. If the people don't respond in repentance

and faith then great judgment will come, which is how the prophecy in Malachi 4:6 ends. That's how the Old Testament ends – with Elijah-returned either accepted or rejected, the peoples' fate hanging in the balance depending on their decision.

And the bad news, Jesus continues, is that this has already played out. Not only has Elijah returned, in the form of John the Baptist, but the people didn't just reject him, they cut off his head as dinner party entertainment, sending a pretty clear message to God. And so, in preparing the way for the Messiah, as his forerunner, historically Elijah didn't come to prevent the Messiah's suffering and death but to foreshadow it in his own death. What they did to Elijah-returned, to John the Baptist, they will do to Jesus, and God's judgment

will follow accordingly.

This wasn't the first time Jesus had explained this to his disciples. He did so back in Matthew 11:14. But it appears that at least for these three, the message has finally sunk in, with our passage finishing in verse 13:

13 Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

## **Think**

What are we to take from today's passage of Scripture? I'd like you to think about a couple of things. Firstly, take some time now to think about the way the disciples responded to the transfiguration. Initially



they were confused, overwhelmed, and terrified. Peter said some silly, ill thought-out things, and they were all left reeling by the experience. But then as their emotions died down, and a little time passed, they began to think about the whole episode theologically. Is this how you respond to a crisis? Or to a major turning point in your life? Perhaps you're in the grips of a crisis right now or are weighing up a life changing decision. There is a strong and very important place for acknowledging and experiencing all the emotions involved in this moment. They're all part of God's good design when it comes to how he's made us. But as you do, are you also thinking theologically about what's going on? What parts of the bible can you turn to for wisdom and understanding? Who can you ask at your church for guidance

as to how to understand from a biblical perspective what's going on and how to come to a wise decision about how to move forward? Whether it be your health, or your marriage suddenly on the rocks, or an unexpected work opportunity that might take you overseas, the surest way forward will be found as you thinkly deeply over your situation using God's word as your guide.

Something else to consider from our passage is the certainty of God's judgment. The Old Testament ends with these words of warning,

‘... or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.’

In face of this warning, Jesus' generation

cut off John the Baptist's head and served it up on a dinner platter. Then they killed the author of life himself, God's very own Son. Judgement is coming. Only those who turn to Jesus in repentance and faith will be saved. Jesus will restore all things, there will be a new heavens and a new earth where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain and human-kind will relate to each other and to God and to our planet in the way that we were always meant to. But not before the earth is judged by fire. Consider the place of the certainty of this judgment in the makeup of your life. How is it affecting your prayer life? Your ministry? Your urgency in sharing the gospel? Your joy in your salvation? Your goals and priorities in life? Does it make any difference at all in the way you are going about life? If not, what small

changes can you make today?

## **Pray**

To close, take these thoughts to God in prayer. Whether it's thinking theologically about a major event in your life or seeing life in the context of Judgment Day, in the end it all boils down to the same thing. Pray that you would see life in this world increasingly through the eyes of Jesus. Pray that you would see your day today through the eyes of Jesus and act accordingly. And that others would see him clearly today as they see you living in this new light.