LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 17:1-27
To understand the Transfiguration, and the power of faith.

"I forgot!"

When I was a boy, maybe 5 or 6, I had a dreadfully bad memory. Looking back, I don't think it was a memory problem. I think I just got so excited to do whatever activity I was doing that I stopped paying attention to everything else. Let me give you an example. One evening, I was riding my bike up and down the street, and

then eventually around the block. My dad stood outside and watched me because I was pretty little. As the evening came to a close I was told I could go up and down the street one last time. I pleaded to go around the block again, but was denied. As I embarked on my last ride up and down my street, I got so excited about riding that I just forgot what I was doing and ended up riding around the block again! My dad was waiting for me when I made the last turn onto my street, and it suddenly dawned on me what I had done. "I forgot," I exclaimed, and understandably, my didn't believe me. How could I forget such clear instruction in such a short amount of time?

We could reasonably ask the same question of the disciples. Jesus gives clear instruction of His coming death and resurrection in Matthew 17:22-23, and we know they understood what He was saying because of their response: "They were deeply grieved." Why then, were they so shocked when Jesus did exactly what He said He would do? Perhaps faith is a more difficult action than we sometimes believe. Perhaps there is a little bit of the disciple in all of us, and perhaps there was a little bit of a forgetful boy in them.

Transfigured

Chapter 17 is packed with deep and sometimes difficult passages, and the Transfiguration is no exception. In verses

UP THE MOUNTAIN

Matthew tells us of a scene change in the way he introduces this narrative. “Six days after,” is slightly different than Luke’s, “about eight days,” but both are ways of communicating the idea that it has been roughly a week. Perhaps Matthew chose to say it the way he did as an allusion to Moses’ receiving the law on Sinai after six days of preparation in Exodus 24:16. Matthew often emphasizes the Mosaic fulfillment that Christ accomplishes. Going, “up the mountain,” is another example of this; an allusion to Moses on Sinai.

PHYSICALLY TRANSFIGURED

Generally this is referred to as the “Transfiguration,” however it might be more helpful to understand it as the, “Transformation.” The word in Greek is the word from which we derive our English word *metamorphosis.* In this event, we see Jesus’, “face shone like the sun” (Matt. 17:2). Similarly, after receiving the law, Moses travels back down from Sinai and his face was glowing (Ex. 34:29-35). This is what being in God’s presence does. This is what leads Paul to claim, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). Matthew also describes Jesus was having garments, “white as light.” It is typical of God to have this description, one that describes purity and holiness. The Ancient of Days is described as having clothing in Daniel 7:9, and Jesus is described almost identically in Revelation 1:12-16.

MOSES AND ELIJAH

The next aspect of this event is the appearance of two very prominent Old Testament prophets, Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah represent the miracle working prophets, as they did more miracles in their respective ministries than any of the other prophets. They also play a prominent role in ushering in the Messiah. Jesus is the prophet described in Deuteronomy 18:15, and an even greater one than Moses. Elijah is the forerunner to the Messiah, fulfilled in John the Baptist, as Jesus declares right after the Transfiguration while coming down the mountain in verse 13. Likewise, the two witness in Revelation 11:3-6 are modeled after them. The first two miracles in Revelation 11:5-6a are fire from heaven and the drought, which allude to Elijah, and the second two in 11:6b are water turning into blood and plagues, which alludes to Moses. Matthew intends us to understand that Moses and Elijah were not just metaphorical, but actually visibly there, as the three disciples all witnessed them (Matt. 17:4).

THE FATHER’S PRESENCE

The final moment comes in verse 5 when God the Father’s presence enters as a bright cloud and His voice booms out over them, declaring, “This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; Listen to Him!” Once again, Matthew uses Exodus imagery. The Father appears in a bright cloud similar to the cloud that covered the tabernacle and led them people of Israel through the wilderness (Ex. 40:34-38). Once again, the Father says what He said at Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3:17, but this time He adds an additional phrase, “Listen to Him!” God’s presence is often thought of as sweet and peaceful in the modern church, and certainly that can be said of the Holy Spirit. However, to be in the presence of God is a terrifying thing, and there is no exception for the disciples. They immediately fall face down and were scared. Jesus comforts them, and when they arise, there is no one there but Jesus. For a moment, they caught a glimpse of the glory of Christ. It is interesting, however, that even with this experience they still failed to keep faith after the crucifixion.

How Much Faith?

The next part of the narrative describes a boy who is a, “lunatic and very ill” (Matt. 17:15). The NASB translates it as such, borrowing from the KJV, and both miss the mark. The word for “lunatic” here is one that means, “one who is epileptic.” Literally, he suffers from seizures. The problem is that because of his seizures, he runs the risk of falling into he fire that heats their home or drowning perhaps in a nearby well. Of course, protective measures could be taken to fix this, which indicates that there is more going on here than just epilepsy. In verse 18, Matthew unveils the underly problem: demon possession. Apparently the demon was the cause of the sickness and was moving the boy to try and harm himself, and so the father pleads with Jesus to heal him after His disciples could not.

This passage has suffered tremendous abuse, namely by our more charismatic brothers. Jesus tells His disciples in verse 20, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed… nothing will be impossible for you.” Usually this verse is thrown out and followed by a statement like, “See! If you just had more faith, you could do any of the incredible things Jesus does.” But pay attention to the actual words of Jesus. Is that really what He is saying? It is true that the underlying issue of the disciples inability to cast out this demon is the littleness of their faith, but notice what Jesus says right after: “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed.” The mustard seed was already used in one of His parables in chapter 13, and the purpose of it as an illustration is not how big it is, but rather how small it is. Jesus is using hyperbole. It is not the littleness of their faith, but the fact that they don’t have any at all, for if they had even the tiniest mustard-seed-sized faith, it wouldn’t have been a problem.

The question then returns to the modern reader. Can we also, with mustard-seed-sized faith, cast out demons? What is the difference between us the disciples? Well, for one, they were given specific authority to cast out demons in Matthew 10:1. If faith is taking God at His word (and it is), then the disciples could truthfully take God at His word to cast out demons and thus would only need the tiniest of faith to see it come to pass. For modern believers, there is no such command, lest we prescribe to ourselves what was prescribed to the original disciples, and that would be overstepping interpretative bounds. Nowhere does Paul ever prescribe or even mention such things to any of the churches he writes to in his epistles. The narrative here in Matthew 17 is descriptive in nature, and shows that even the smallest of faith (not “enough” faith) is what is necessary to carry out what God has called us to do.

The Strange Miracle

The final portion of this chapter deals with a rather unusual miracle. Peter is asked about paying a temple tax, one that likely originates from Exodus 30:11-16 or perhaps Nehemiah 10:32-33. Jesus tells Peter to use a hook, catch a fish, and in the mouth of the fish will be a shekel (the equivalent of four drachmas, the exact amount needed for both Peter and Jesus). Two notable things, however, should be pointed out. One, this actual doesn’t record the miracle taking place, which casts doubt onto whether or not Peter followed through, and secondly, whether Jesus was speaking literally. The point of this, regardless, is that in order to not offend, there would be a way to pay the tax without using their own money.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 17:1-8. In your own words, describe the events of the Transfiguration and note anything that you don’t understand. Who is present at the Transfiguration, and why? (Hint: See above section)

2. Read Matthew 17:9-13. Who is Elijah that has already come? When does Jesus tell the disciples to begin telling others what they saw? Did they understand what Jesus was saying to them? How do you know?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 17:14-18. In your own words, describe what happens in this passage. How difficult is it for Jesus to heal the boy? What kind of authority does Jesus have according to this passage?
2. Read Mark 9:14-29. What details does Mark include that Matthew does not?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 17:19-21. What was the issue with the disciples? Why could they not cast out the demon? What did Jesus say they needed in order to do it?
2. Read Matthew 17:22-23. What did Jesus tell the disciples was going to happen? Did they understand Him? How do you know they understood Him, according to this passage?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 17:24-25. Where did this passage take place? What is asked of Peter by the tax collectors? What does Jesus ask Peter regarding this?
2. Read Matthew 17:26-27. What is Peter's response and what does Jesus say based on his answer? What is the dilemma here? How does Jesus propose Peter solve it?

Week 21 Discussion: You Gotta Have Faith

In Matthew 17, the disciples are confounded as to why they couldn't heal a man by casting out a demon. Jesus tells them that they lacked faith entirely, for if they had only had mustard-seed-sized faith, it would have been done. They were also given the authority to heal by Jesus, so literally, all they needed to do was trust His power through them, and they failed. Discuss the role faith plays today as a group.

1. Icebreaker: Do you consider yourself as someone who has great faith or little faith? Why?
2. Have you ever prayed for healing and seen God actually heal them? What was it like? How did it make you and everyone else feel?
3. Have you ever prayed for healing and the healing didn't come? What was that like? What were other people's responses like?
4. Has God given all believers the authority to heal just like the apostles? Use Scripture to support your answer.
5. How important is faith in following Jesus? What does it mean to have faith in following Jesus?
6. Read Matthew 6:5-15. When Jesus modeled prayer for us, what did it include? What did it not include? What's the easiest part of this prayer for you? What's the most difficult part of this prayer for you?

Takeaways:

1. The Transfiguration was a visibly glorious event that included two major prophets from the Old Testament and the voice of the Father, where Jesus was physically transformed.
2. Even the smallest amount of faith in what God has said is capable of great things.

PRAYER REQUESTS: