

The Road to Glory

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Date: 06 November 2005

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn please with me, if you would, to Matthew chapter 17. This is our third study, really, on these central chapters in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus is teaching us to understand his church.

And today it's all about the road home to glory. It's a sad fact of history that the Church of Jesus Christ has so often found itself in a state of great confusion about all sorts of things.

And that mainly arises because we stop listening to Jesus and we start to make up our own ideas about what the Church is all about.

And so verse 5 of our passage today ought to ring in our ears, not just today, but always, as a rebuke and a reminder to us. This, and no one else, this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

Listen to him. And we need to listen to him today, just as Jesus' first disciples needed to listen to him, so that he may lead us out of our confusion and fog and misunderstanding and into the light of truth and the way of truth about all our thinking about the Church today.

[1 : 26] There are many correctives that Jesus has been giving us in these chapters. First of all, in chapter 15, we saw very clearly the scope of Christ's Church, that the family of Jesus, that his Church will be drawn from all nations and from all peoples, from the Gentiles as well as the Jews, not just from one culture, in other words.

Such an important corrective today, isn't it, to the many pluralist voices who are scandalized at the very thought that Christians might actually evangelize people from other cultures and other religions.

God knows, says Jesus, go into all the world and make disciples, make Christian believers, not into faith accommodations. My family will be drawn from all nations.

Then last time in chapter 16, we saw that Jesus makes it absolutely clear that the builder of the Church is Christ alone. The foundation of his Church is on the apostles and upon their apostolic witness, alone their unique and authoritative, historical, once-for-all witness delivered to the saints and preserved for us in Scripture.

It's not mutable and changeable by the authority of mere men. They have no authority to alter what Peter calls the commands of our Lord and Saviour through your apostles.

[2 : 54] 2 Peter 3, verse 2. You might have heard on the radio this week the American bishop, Gene Robinson, about whom there was all the furore when he was appointed bishop despite having an openly gay relationship.

Actually saying, we have the words of Jesus on certain things, but the Church has seen fit for pastoral reasons to depart from them in the past with regards to divorce and other things.

And that's simply what we're doing again with the gay and lesbian agenda. Not even to trying to defend what he said from Scripture, but quite happily saying, well, now we as the Church have the right to change it.

But no, says Jesus. It's not mutable and changeable. It is founded on the words of Jesus Christ and his commands through his apostles, the foundation of the Church.

And now in chapter 17, Jesus is teaching us and clearing up all confusion about the true home of his Church. His is a heavenly kingdom, a kingdom of glory.

[4 : 00] That is what he has come to inaugurate, not merely an earthly movement, not even an earthly empire. And therefore, listen, his Church will never be fully at home in this world.

This Church of Jesus Christ will never be able to share the glory of the world. It will always be at odds with this world. It will always be scorned by this world.

That's such a vital lesson for us to learn. You may have also read this week in the papers that the Church of Scotland welcomes gay and lesbian adoption of children.

It's always so tiresome when you hear that. The Church of Scotland recognises it. Who is the Church of Scotland that was speaking? It wasn't me. It wasn't you, was it? I'm sure it wasn't the vast majority of Christians in the Church of Scotland.

Probably some faceless bureaucrat somewhere. Perhaps also a faithless bureaucrat. But perhaps just somebody who was confused. Perhaps somebody who was well-meaning.

[5 : 06] Like Peter in chapter 16, verse 22. When he said to Jesus, No, no, no, you must never suffer and die. Well-meaning, but speaking with the assumptions of man.

The thoughts of man. Not the thoughts of God. But no, says Jesus, my Church will never be at home in this world. It's not of this world. It's a heavenly kingdom.

And unless you grasp that, you'll never understand what it means to follow me in this present world. You must understand this truth. It's absolutely vital.

Or else the Church will collapse and disappear. Lost and submerged in this present evil age. And what's more, your faith will likely collapse and disappear.

As you will inevitably face struggles and things in the Christian life. Unless you understand this, they will cripple your hope and you will give up.

[6 : 02] So Matthew 17 is a vital piece of teaching for the Church today. It teaches us the glory of our true home, the kingdom of heaven. And it also teaches us the road home to that glory.

And that's what the chapter is all about. We're going to look at it under two headings. And the first is this. There's only one true home of the Church of Jesus Christ. And it is sharing in the glory of Jesus.

Jesus' kingdom is not an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly one. And it certainly shall be ours when He comes in the glory of His Father. When He comes to judge the world.

Do you see back to chapter 16, verse 27 that we read? You see, this story of the transfiguration that immediately follows is an exposition of that verse. It's a glimpse of the promised glory that will be ours then when Jesus comes in final glory.

to reward those for what they have done. Whether they have followed Him and renounced the world or whether they have rejected Him and embraced the world. And immediately we have this unveiling of the glory of Christ to give a glimpse of the future, to give a glimpse of that real home and the real family that Jesus is gathering.

[7 : 21] And do you see what we're being told in these verses in the beginning of chapter 17? We're being told that this has been the clear goal of history right from the very beginning. This is what the story was all about right from the beginning with Abraham that Matthew began his gospel with.

It was all heading for this glorious future. That's the significance of the mountain and of Moses and of Elijah. If you know the Old Testament, as these three disciples would likely have known it almost back to front, we'll immediately recognize the parallels.

We've read about Moses in Exodus up Mount Sinai where he met God. Exodus 24 tells us he was there for six days. Matthew says after six days they went up the mountain.

Moses had three companions who went part of the way with him. So did Jesus. Moses heard God speaking from the cloud and that's exactly what we have here. Exodus 34 tells us that Moses' face used to shine brightly after he'd been in the presence of God.

And we're told here, Jesus' face shone like the sun. Do you see, we've already seen, haven't we, that Matthew is showing us again and again that Jesus' life was foreshadowed in so many ways in the Old Testament.

[8 : 33] In the story of Moses and of Israel as a whole. And that's what he's saying to us here again. Everything in the story of the law and the prophets has been pointing forward from the very beginning to this.

to Christ and his church to its glory as the goal of history. That's what the whole of the Old Testament story has been about. That's what Matthew is saying to us.

Moses and Elijah represent the whole of the law and the prophets. Moses, the great lawgiver, Elijah, the first of the great prophets. Do you remember Jesus said in Matthew 5, 16, I haven't come to abolish that story of the law and the prophets but to fulfill it.

Moses and Elijah were both preparing for me, for my coming. There's more significance also, I think, in the fact that it's these two figures especially.

Both of these men were men who met God on Mount Horeb, Mount Sinai. Elijah, remember, after the prophets of Baal, God takes him to Mount Sinai and speaks to him. Both of them were men who were persecuted on earth for their loyalty to the kingdom of heaven.

[9 : 42] Moses, remember, Hebrews 11 tells us, counted the reproach of Christ greater than the treasures of Egypt, of this world. Elijah stood alone in the face of all the prophets of Baal, in the face of the prevailing culture of his day.

That's very significant in terms of what Jesus is teaching in this chapter, isn't it, about the means of discipleship and the implications. But perhaps most significant of all, both of these figures are deeply associated with the promise of God's great redemption for his people.

Moses, right at the very beginning of the history of the people of God, when God's people are first defined as a company, as the household of Israel, and he leads them in the great exodus, the great deliverance, out of Egypt and towards the promised land, towards their final home.

And Elijah, although he lived quite early on in the time of the kings of Israel, Elijah was prophesied about by Malachi as the one who would somehow reappear.

He would reappear on the earth at the very end of God's story, just before the last ultimate end of the bondage of the people of God, just before the last great liberation, the day of the Lord, the day of his redemption.

[11 : 04] His ministry would signify the beginning of the new exodus, the ultimate salvation that all the prophets had pointed to, the new heavens and the new earth, the ultimate home of righteousness for God's people.

You might want to just flick back with me just to see that. It's a few pages back in Malachi, the very, very last book. In fact, these are the last words of the Old Testament. Malachi chapter 4, verse 5. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of destruction.

And so here in Matthew 17, you see, we have Moses who begun God's people's history with the exodus and Elijah who presages the final exodus, the final redemption of God's people.

We have them together talking with Jesus in the glory on the mountain. Talking with him about the work that Jesus was finally going to come and fulfill and accomplish to bring his people home forever.

[12 : 18] It must have been obvious to the disciples who were watching what was being said and who these people were. Otherwise, Peter couldn't have said what he says in verse 4 about making the tents. In Luke's account, in Luke chapter 9, you'll remember Eric Alexander spoke to us about that not long ago.

Luke says, specifically, they discussed the exodus that he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. Do you see, that is where all the history of God's people had been pointing from the very, very beginning. They've been preparing for that. They've been pointing to that all through the history, all through the story of the law and the prophets. All pointing to the fulfillment in Jesus and in his great ultimate work, his exodus, his redemption of his people out of the house of bondage, out of the world of sin and rebellion and at last to their true home, to sharing the glory of the kingdom of heaven.

And do you see verse 5? God himself speaks out of the glory and says, yes. It's all pointing to Jesus. In him all my promises come together.

It's the same words exactly. Do you remember that were spoken out of heaven at Jesus' baptism? Remember the significance? This is my son. Quoting Psalm 2 verse 7, declaring him to be the messianic son of God, the great king that was promised and that they looked for.

[13 : 53] And the one with whom I am well pleased, the one in whom I delight, quotes Isaiah 42 verse 1 about the servant of the Lord, the one who would suffer for his people, the one who would atone for their sin as the great priest.

And God here adds a third illusion. Listen to him. Echoing the words of Deuteronomy chapter 18 when God promises that he would raise up in the future a prophet like Moses but the prophet and you are to listen to him.

And you see what he's saying now in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. Everything is fulfilled. He alone is God's ultimate king to rule his people.

He is God's ultimate priest, the one who will save his people. And he is God's ultimate prophet, the teacher, the leader who will speak God's words to his people.

See, God is saying in verse 5, yes, this is not just a man, this is my son, he is God. And for a moment he's transfigured.

[15:08] We see a glimpse of his true glory. We see the glory of the mountain of the Lord. We see the glory of the home that God is bringing his household to. And it's a wonderful picture.

It's a wonderful glimpse of the reality of where God's story has been going from the very beginning for his people to share and bask in the glory of his son, the Christ. And yet, wonderful as it is, God's word in verse 5 to these three disciples, listen to him, is also a word of rebuke.

Because they hadn't been listening properly, had they? Even Peter in chapter 16, he'd got part of it, right, but he hadn't got the whole story. And in fact, there's a triple rebuke here in these words.

There's three things that they must get clear on that they haven't yet. The first is that they must see that Jesus and Jesus alone is the unique climax of God's promises.

See, there's an implied rebuke in Peter's idea in verse 4 of building three tents, one for each of them. And God says, no, never. Jesus is not just one of the prophets like them.

[16:25] That's what the people thought in chapter 16. He's one of the prophets. No, he's the one to whom all these great prophets were pointing. He's the goal. All the emphasis here is on Jesus' glory alone.

The others are just basking in his glory. It was Jesus who was transfigured. It was Jesus whose glory shone on the others. Verse 8, when they look up, they see only Jesus.

You see, Moses and Elijah have faded away because Jesus is here. Their work is done. Their work was preparatory. Now, Jesus alone in his person encapsulates all the glory of God, all the glory of God's covenant promises.

Jesus, at last, is God with us. He is Emmanuel, promised from the beginning. Do you remember at Sinai? Do you remember after the great revelation and Moses comes down the mountain and the people have heard God speaking the words of the Ten Commandments and they're trembling with fear just like the disciples were here.

And what do they say? We can't stand being this close to God. We need a mediator. Moses, you stand in the gap. You stand in as a go-between because there's a distance from the holiness of God and the sinfulness of his people.

[17:46] But you see here in verse 7, that fear is bridged by God himself in the flesh. Jesus comes and touches them and says, do not fear.

In Jesus, God is with us at last, bridging the gap. We do in our sin and the terrible holiness of God. And that's a powerful challenge today too, isn't it, in our pluralistic world where we're told again and again, well, there are many ways to God, there are many mediators.

No, says God out of the heavens. Jesus alone is my Son. He is unique. He alone is the one who brings God to us, who is Emmanuel.

No other. The second rebuke is that he has to teach them that his kingdom is not of this earth. Jesus didn't come to have a ministry of putting up tents on earth for himself and his people.

He came to bring them home to the heavenly kingdom. And that heavenly home still lies in the future. This is a glimpse of it, but it's not yet fully realized.

[18:58] And that's so important for the disciples to grasp. So important for us to grasp today. So many in the church think that the church is all about this world alone and they have a ministry of doing nothing more than putting up tents here.

That's the mistake of the social gospel. It sees Christianity as being no more than feeding the hungry. They haven't grasped that the true home of God's church is in heaven, not on the earth. My kingdom is not of this world, said Jesus in John 18. If it were, there would be armies fighting for me. But no, we don't fight with the weapons of this world to conquer earthly kingdoms.

That's where the crusaders got it wrong as well. But the social gospel is exactly the same error. Of course, of course it goes without saying that Christ's people and his church should be full of compassion and love for this world.

We're commanded to love our neighbors, of course. And being involved in all of these kinds of things is essential. But you see, when you have the slogan now of Christian aid, we believe in life before death, it's having a deliberate tilt at those who would focus on the heavenly kingdom of Jesus Christ.

[20 : 19] What that all too often comes to mean is we only focus on life before death. And that's wrong, says Jesus. My kingdom is a glorious, permanent reality.

It is a heavenly kingdom. That's what explains the story in verses 24 to 27. Just turn over and look at that at the end of chapter 17. It's all about tax.

Very interesting. Verse 25, the tax people come and they say to Peter, well, does your master Jesus pay tax? And Peter immediately says, of course he pays tax. He's a good citizen.

But verse 25 is a great surprise, isn't it? Jesus says to Peter, Peter, don't be so enthusiastic about paying taxes. Verse 26, do the sons of kings pay taxes?

Of course they don't. And since I'm the heir of the universe and you also are part of my royal family, in fact we own the cosmos, we are not subject to taxes. Do you see?

[21 : 22] That's what Jesus is saying there. Don't get too excited. But what he's saying is, we would be perfectly within our rights to write to Gordon Brown and say, dear Mr.

Brown, since I'm an heir of the whole earth and will one day inherit it all and judge men and angels at Jesus' sight, I have the right from God himself to claim exemption from all your taxes. That's what Jesus is saying here.

If you ever wanted an argument for gift aid, boy, this is it. Sandy MacDonald, I can see you're smiling. Jesus doesn't just want you to reclaim tax. He says you're not subject to the taxes of this world.

The sons of the kingdom, verse 27, are free. Free from all taxes on earth. You can sense a bit of excitement in that statement.

But before you go and run to uncork the champagne bottles, we better read verse 27, haven't we? But so as not to give offence, that is, so as not to cause others to stumble and fall in sin, Jesus commands Peter to pay the tax, while at the same time showing that he has indeed all the resources of the cosmos at his disposal, even coins out of fish's mouths.

[22 : 42] Now be clear. What Jesus is not suggesting here is that you and I will be able to pay our tax bills by taking up fishing. That would be foolish.

Although I suspect probably somewhere in the world there's some Christian church that's founded on that principle. Goodness knows you get all sorts of crazy things, don't you? Now what Jesus is saying, what his point is, is perfectly clear, isn't it?

Listen carefully. Jesus is saying that he is the Son of God. He is the King of Heaven. He is the Creator and the Lord of the universe. But, he has turned his back on all his God-given heavenly rights.

In order to be the one who opens the door of the heavenly kingdom to sinners on earth. In order to bring his people home to glory through his total submission to death, even death on a cross.

That's the way he leads his people home to glory. And that's the way he calls his followers to walk also. Peter and all of Christ's people have far more important priorities on earth than to be taken up with our rights and our privileges, whether they're tax breaks or anything else.

[24 : 02] Above all, Christ's desire is that no one should stumble. There should be no offense. That no one should stumble and sin and lose salvation. It's a word we'll come across several times in chapter 18.

And his people, too, should be willing to give up all earthly glory and privilege for the ultimate privilege of leading people on the way home to glory.

And that's the third rebuke that comes in the voice from the glory of heaven. That's the third reason that we need to listen to Jesus.

He's been telling it to us already in chapter 16, that our true home is to share in the glory of heaven, but not yet. Only when he comes in glory.

And that the only way home is the way of the cross. And that's the second main point today, and it covers really verses 9 to 23.

[25 : 08] And it's this, there is only one way on earth to our home in glory, and that is to share in Jesus' suffering. We shall see his glory then, chapter 16, verse 27, in heaven, only if we share his suffering now.

Chapter 16, verse 24, if we take up our cross and we follow him. See, these verses follow immediately on from the transfiguration. And Jesus is making it clear in his words and in his actions that this is his message.

That the only road to the glory of heaven is by the cross for Jesus and for all who would follow him into glory. And that the only way for the power and the glory of heaven to penetrate and touch the earth now to change and transform lives is by his people embracing the principle of the cross. First of all, in verses 9 to 13, you see we have Jesus playing words, don't we? Just look at the verses. All this talk of glory, all this vision of glory is again getting the disciples so excited. Yes, we want to see power and glory. We think this is marvelous, this transfiguration. Of course, it's wonderful. Well, who wouldn't have been overcome by that scene?

[26 : 30] Peter later in his letter calls it the majestic glory. He never forgot what he saw on that mountain. So Jesus has to speak so, so clearly, doesn't he?

We have to listen to him and what he says after that vision of glory. Look at verse 9. It's just as surprising as chapter 16, verse 20, isn't it?

Tell no one. After Peter's confession, remember, tell no one. You'd think he'd say, tell the world. After this experience, tell no one. You'd think he would say, go and tell the world.

But no. For the same reason as he forbid them to speak after Peter's confession. Because half the truth alone is not enough. A message of glory alone is not the whole truth.

And so first of all in words and then in an acted parable, Jesus spells it out. It is death first and then glory. Verse 9b, the Son of Man must be raised from the dead first.

[27 : 37] But again, you see, the disciples recoil. As soon as the word death is mentioned, they can't cope with it. That's the force of the question, verse 10.

Why then, why then does it say Elijah would come first before the great glory? We've read Malachi and the prophecy of Elijah coming.

Now we've seen Elijah in the glory on the mountain. Surely, surely this is the day of the Lord. Surely this is the glory of heaven. It's coming. It must be now. How then can there be room of the death for the death of the Messiah?

We can't have that. See, that's what that question implies. But Jesus says, no, you're wrong. And the scribe's idea is wrong. Scripture is right, verse 11.

Yes, Elijah does come and he does restore things. He will herald the way to glory, but not the way the scribes expected it.

[28 : 37] They were wrong. They were blind to the truth. They were so blind that they didn't recognize Elijah when he came. They rejected John the Baptist. They scorned him and killed him, verse 12.

And that is what they will do to the Son of Man also. But that's the road home to glory. That's God at work in power to restore all things to himself.

That is what will open the door of the kingdom of heaven. The home of righteousness. No other way. And that message, that gospel of a crucified and risen Savior will be your message.

It will be the key of the kingdom of heaven and will open it to all the world. And no other. The way to glory is the way of the cross. The way home to the glory of heaven for Jesus is to turn his back on glory and embrace shame.

As the hymn says, Jesus won the world through shame. And Jesus' words are echoed powerfully in his immediate actions in verses 14 to 21. Do you see? It's so graphic.

[29 : 46] Jesus turns his back on the majestic glory and he descends deliberately into the valley below which is full of disease and demons and darkness. Full of the impotence, the powerlessness of man.

Even his most devoted disciples. Because he must suffer in order to bring them home to glory.

Because, verse 22, the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill him and he will be raised.

He turned his back on his rightful glory, the King and Heir of heaven and all the glory that that was. Being found in the form of God, he made himself nothing.

He made himself a servant. The transfiguration, the word literally is, he was metamorphosed. He was shown as he truly is. And this is a reverse transfiguration. He takes the form of a servant.

All the glory of heaven was his and yet, not asserting his rightful status, he submits. Not just to pay taxes on earth, not just to be part of earthly society, but to be delivered over to death at the hands of men.

[31 : 04] Let me read to you from one writer. It will be difficult to find a more complete contrast than that between this passage and what precedes it. There, the majesty and the glory of Christ, here

the misery of man in this fallen world, represented by the demon-possessed boy and his distracted father.

And this is the strength and wonder of the gospel message. Over against the dark shadows and terrifying enigmas of life and the tragic plight of man, God has set the glory and sufficiency of his Christ, a Christ who comes down to share where men are in their need, to heal and to save them. What we are meant to see in this story is an enactment of the gospel of the divine condescension. Do you see, that alone is how the power of the kingdom of heaven comes to earth. Through the power of the cross of Jesus is the road home to glory. Heaven's gate is open wide only through the cross. And moreover, that is a principle and a pattern that is always at work. The power of the glory of heaven touches the darkness and the impotence of this world only where the pattern of the cross of Jesus has been truly embraced.

[32 : 26] Matthew's account here is greatly abbreviated. If you read Mark chapter 9, there's much, much more detail in the story of the healing. But he does so to make absolutely crystal clear his main point, which is the contrast between the impotence and the unbelief of the disciples and the power and the authority of Jesus.

They could not heal him. They couldn't cast out the demon. Verse 9. Why? Well, Jesus makes it clear in verse 20 because of their little faith.

That word in Matthew's gospel always implies unbelief. It's not excusable doubt. It's sinful. It's an attitude of unbelief that needs to be repented of. It's a mark of what he calls in verse 17 a bitter and twisted generation.

They should have been able to act. We've seen in chapter 10, verse 1, Jesus had given his disciples authority over sickness and disease and over demons. But you see, they had no real faith to do so because real faith is not just an intellectual thing.

It's not just an understanding. The disciples were growing in understanding slowly. But real faith means embracing the principle of the cross.

[33 : 47] Jesus had set his face towards Jerusalem to go to suffer that Christ must suffer. He must be delivered to death in this world. As one writer puts it, wherever he went, enactments of his gospel took place because his whole life was lived in obedience to the unvarying fundamental principle of obedience to the will of God.

He did not heal because he was God nor did his power derive from the fact that he was God but because he was God incarnate, the God-man come down in obedience to death.

Jesus, you see, from the very beginning of his ministry carried his cross. His disciples hadn't yet got that. They hadn't yet grasped that between the old world here of disease and demons in verses 14 to 21, between that and the new world of being sons of the kingdom, heirs of the cosmos, free of all the constraints of this world, they hadn't yet grasped that between those two things are verses 22 and 23, the way of the cross of Jesus.

And Jesus says embracing that is real faith. Real faith is not just intellectual, it's moral, it's existential, it involves everything of us.

Real faith is something you do. It is taking up your cross and following Jesus. It is living the pattern of life and walking the road of life marked out by Jesus.

[35 : 28] It's turning our back on all the glory and all the status and all the position that we might have in this world and walking the only road to glory. And that's the road of self-denial, of death, of carrying the cross.

So friends, let me ask us this this morning. Are we like the disciples in verse 19?

Are we asking why we lack the power in our Christian life, in our witness, in our influence on others, in our corporate life here together as a fellowship?

Don't we see the glory and the power of the gospel at work in us and through us that we would long to see? Well, Jesus' answer to all his disciples, to all his would-be followers, to you and to me and to us as a fellowship here, his answer is this.

Glory comes through the cross alone. It is cross-bearing disciples who know the secret of real spiritual power.

[36 : 47] Jesus turned his back on the majestic glory. All his personal status, all his rights, all his ego, all his own glory, he turned his back on all of that in order to bring others home to that glory.

and the power of heaven worked through him and touched lives and transformed them forever. So, have you done that and have we done that in our lives?

Have we said, as Jesus said, the Son of Man must suffer. The Son of Man must be delivered for the sake of others. We must take up our cross and turn our back on all personal glory and advancement and status in this world because that alone is the way of power. That alone is the truth. Either an individual is the solution of all divine or what is the right that, what