

## The Book of Matthew Study Guide

### Matthew 17-18

To understand what takes place in chapter 17, you have to start reading at the last verse of the previous chapter and anticipate its literal fulfillment: “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Mat 16:28).

#### 17:1-13

During the second temple period, a set of specific indicators of the presence of the kingdom of God/kingdom of heaven were identified.

- The ruler of this kingdom would be the Messiah – God’s Anointed One.
- According to God’s promise in Malachi 4:5, it would be preceded by the arrival of Elijah the prophet.
- The kingdom would be memorialized by *Sukkot* – the Feast of Tabernacles. The reason was in part because it was a memorial of the time when the Israelites dwelled with God in the wilderness, and it looked ahead to the ultimate day when God’s people would dwell together in *Olam Haba* – “the World to Come.” Plus, there is no mention of any other memorial in the millennial kingdom God except the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16-19).

So the Jewish people knew these associations in biblical times. What happened in chapter 16? Yeshua was declared to be the Messiah and Son of God by Peter, and Yeshua acknowledged it. Now in chapter 17 Yeshua takes Peter, James and John to an unnamed mountain, although since the third century it has been said to be Mt Tabor. Mt Hermon is a more likely site because it is the highest mountain in the region and is much closer to their previous location at Caesarea Philippi.

- v.2 – Yeshua is transfigured, meaning His appearance changes to a radiant, glorified appearance, which further confirms His supernatural identity.
- v. 3 – Elijah appears, along with Moses. The inclusion of Elijah is consistent with fulfilling the second indicator of the kingdom. But what about Moses? His inclusion is consistent with his prophecy that God would raise up a prophet like Moses (Dt 18:12). In addition, Moses plus Elijah plus Yeshua represents the complete canon of Scripture: Torah + Prophets + N.T.
- v. 4 – Peter’s response is to be expected. He is ready to follow through on the third and final indicator of the kingdom – they would observe *Sukkot*. And he enthusiastically offers to build a *sukkah* (tabernacle, booth, shelter) for Yeshua, Moses and Elijah. But the story of bringing about the Kingdom of God was not yet finished, as shown by His comments on the resurrection in v. 9. So the *Sukkot* aspect of the kingdom needed to be put off until the second coming of Messiah right before the physical millennial kingdom would begin.
- v. 5 – Then God the Father redirects the focus exclusively to Yeshua by confirming His identity as the Son of God. And He uses the exact same words when Yeshua was baptized (3:17).

In the last part of this episode (vv. 10-13), the disciples are confused by the appearance of

Elijah, and Yeshua confirms what He said previously in chapter 11 that John the Baptist fulfilled the Elijah ministry of preparing the way of the Lord. In a general sense, the transfiguration affirms that “there is none like Yeshua.

### 17:14-21

The healing described in this passage is informative for a couple of reasons. The man is mentally ill, but the reason is because he is demon-possessed, which raises the question of the association of some forms of mental illness and the spiritual realm.

The other thing we notice is that the disciples were successful in cast out demons previously, but they could not cast this one out. And we are told that they lacked sufficient faith to do it. That tells us that just as there are some wars that are more intense (worldwide) than others, there are degrees of spiritual warfare.

### 17:22-23

In these verses when Yeshua says that He will suffer to the point of death, Peter doesn't contradict Him and deny that it can happen like he did in 16:23. Instead, we are told that the disciples were deeply grieved (KJV: “sorry”). The Greek word is *lupeo*, which comes from a root meaning “sadness.” The Bible describes other characters as being sad. Most notably the same word is used in Mat 19:22 to describe the rich young man who went away sad when Yeshua told the man to sell all of his possessions and to follow Him. So sadness can be a good thing, but it does not describe a complete spiritual state of righteousness. Something more is needed. And just as we have seen previously, one episode links to another one, so we can expect to see what that need is shortly.

### 17:24-27

Yeshua and the disciples returned to Capernaum where they meet the Temple tax collectors. Their job was to receive the annual half-shekel tax from every adult male for the service of the Temple according to Torah (Ex 30:13-16). In Yeshua's day that amount was the equivalent of two Greek drachmas (two days' wages).

v. 26 – Yeshua states that “sons are exempt.” He is referring to the fact that in societies ruled by a king, the royal family is exempt from paying taxes. So, being the true king of Israel and the disciples being “sons” of the king, legally and technically they didn't have to pay. But He decides to pay anyway. By doing so, He avoided giving other people an excuse not to fulfill their obligations.

### 18:1-4

v. 1 – So now, having been compared to royalty, the disciples start *acting* like royalty, asking who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

v. 3 – That becomes another teachable moment and Yeshua describes the greatest persons as being those who are converted and become like children. The word translated as convert is *strepheo* (the Heb. equivalent is *shuv*) and both mean “to turn,” but also have the sense of “repentance.” Clearly turning from your sins is a key element for greatness in God's eyes. But what about becoming like children? What does that represent? This, then, describes the complete spiritual state of righteousness. It's not enough to feel sad about your sins, it's about turning from them and humbling yourself like a child before God. And that is true greatness according to Yeshua.

18:5-11

He then resumes His criticism of teachers who teach falsehood. In this metaphor, followers of Yeshua are like children and false teachers are like people who cause them to stumble.

- v. 7 – The Gr. word translated as “stumbling block” (KJV: “offence”) is *skandalon*. It literally refers to a root or a branch that sticks up from the ground and causes you to trip. That’s what false teachers do – they take new believers and trip them up. And Yeshua says there will be grave consequences for that.

18:12-14

In the metaphoric language used here, because God seeks out lost sheep and rejoices over them when they are found, it conveys His love for people in a powerful way.

18:15-20

This section focuses on dealing with discipline in the believing community. The model presented by Yeshua is based on the principle in the Torah that two witnesses are required when bringing a charge against an elder, and that foundation impacts each of the verses that follow here in Matthew.

- v. 18 – This verse is often applied incorrectly by saying that we have the power to bind evil and to loose God’s plans in any situation through prayer. But that is taking this verse out of context. Remember, it is about discipline within the body. When read in its *peshat* (plain, simple) sense, it teaches that the leaders of the community have the authority to literally bind or release people. In second temple times that practice was associated with the manner in which the law was administered. So “binding” was used in the sense of “prohibiting” any act, and “loosing” was used in the sense of “permitting it. Or to put it another way, doing a prohibited act led to some form of punishment like binding them, and permitting an act was like loosing or freeing the person. Thus in this case, Yeshua is saying that when we administer justice in the body the right way, according to vv. 15-17, it is exercising the authority that God has given to us. As His disciples, it will be compatible with His authority – “on earth and in heaven.”
- v. 20 – Likewise this verse is also frequently used incorrectly. It is not uncommon to hear the phrase “two or three gathered together in My name” as a reference to greater power in prayer in such situations. But that application ignores the context, which is about authority and discipline. It is a parallel statement to exercising authority concurrently on earth and in heaven. When we exercise authority and discipline within the body in the way Yeshua has described, it will be the same as if Yeshua is in our midst and has passed judgment Himself. That means He was giving His disciples *s’Mikeh* – the authority to interpret and apply God’s instructions just as He had. The key point is that we need to use Scripture accurately and with a faithfulness to its message in context.

18:21-35

The remainder of the chapter deals with the issue of forgiveness. Peter is the one who asks the question about the extent of forgiveness that Yeshua expects. Having been given the kind of authority Yeshua has described, that meant the disciples had the ability to extend forgiveness rather than discipline/punishment within the believing community.

Yeshua then changes the direction slightly by upholding the importance of forgiveness in our lives. Forgiving someone “seventy times seven” represents a number that practically cannot be

counted. In other words, we are called to never stop forgiving people. Yeshua then tells a parable about a king forgiving the debt of a slave, and then the slave not forgiving the debt owed to him by another slave. Then the king exercises His final authority by having the unforgiving slave punished. He gives the meaning of the parable in v. 35, linking our forgiveness by God to our willingness to forgive others. The reason is that having such a willingness is an indicator that we understand the true nature of forgiveness. When we forgive others, it shows that we have grasped the awesome significance of God's forgiveness of our sins.