

Matthew Round / General

Matthew: Christ The Promised King / Suffering; Love of God; Grace; Atonement / Matthew 17:1–13

In a mountaintop moment with the good and the great, the Father singles out Jesus as the Son, the beloved - the one we are to listen to. But what is it that we need to hear from him?

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### **Listen to God's love story: The Son comes to serve, suffer and save**

Intro me

Today we're back in the Gospel of Matthew, his telling of the story of Jesus, and we're looking at a key moment - extraordinary even in Jesus' extraordinary life. But before we do, I want us to remember what's going on around this key event, what the mood music is.

Who here has been on a long road-trip with a group? Who's taken a multi-day journey to get somewhere? A few summers back, my family took an amazing road trip around northern Europe. And one of the things every road-trip really needs is a backing track: a playlist, right? A mix tape for us oldies.

We had a shared playlist for our trip, and some rules about how many tracks each of us could add to it. How much of Iain's shouty midwest emo, how much of Cam's ska-punk, Lizza's very very Eurovision tracks, and my country - yep going through a country phase.

Well, Jesus is taking his key followers on a road trip - of course there's no car, and he's often going places where there's not even a road. So, more of a path trip, really. And although there's no shared playlist for this trip - there is a sort of mood music on in the background. A tone, a vibe for the journey in the conversations along the way.

And for this part of the journey, it's like there's one type of music dominating, one person slipping a few too many tracks from their favourite band into the playlist, pushing it in a particular direction. It's Jesus: **he keeps putting suffering and death songs in.**

#### **Matthew 16:21 NIV**

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

"from that time on" - but that's not what the disciples want to listen to, not the vibe they are going for. And they tell Jesus they're not into it, show him they're not into it. But Jesus keeps on all the same: it's suffering and death, all the way, all the time. Just after today's passage we get **the same thing**:

### **Matthew 17:22–23 NIV**

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.” And the disciples were filled with grief.

This is the mood music in the background as we come to today’s passage, as Jesus takes his innermost three, his closest companions, off on a special side-trip. So with that in mind, let’s listen together to this extraordinary story and see what we can learn from it. Liz/Cammy is reading for us today and we’re taking on Matthew chapter 17 - page 984 and look for the big 17.

### **Matthew 17:1–13 NIV**

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. 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.” Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

Now, as we get started, let’s be honest: this is a pretty **weird story**. If you’re new to church or just exploring with us, it probably sounds pretty far out there. A glowing Jesus. Two of the standout characters from Jewish history, Moses and Elijah, appearing out of nowhere for a chat. A self-propelled cloud. A disembodied voice. That’s quite a lot of weird for one short story.

This is clearly an extraordinary event, and it’s clearly important as it’s recorded for us in Luke and Mark’s gospels too, parallel accounts of the life of Jesus. I guess it’s the sort of thing that would stick to you if you were there, right? And a very weird thing to just make up - if you were one of those disciples, why would you make up such a wild story? And one which doesn’t show you in the best light, either: Peter’s motor mouth has to be interrupted by God himself!

It’s a weird story and it raises lots of questions. But as we’ve said before, we believe the Bible tells us everything we *need* to know, not everything we *want* to know!

What’s going on with a glowing Jesus? **Mt 17:2** There are various theories but it’s not explained for us. Is this the glory of God revealed where it’s normally hidden

under Jesus' skin? Is this the glory of the world to come breaking into the present? Is this Jesus literally being the light of the world? Certainly it marks him out as extraordinary.

#### **Matthew 17:2 NIV**

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

And what of these two characters meeting with Jesus? **Mt 17:3** Well, Moses is right at the top of the Jewish hall of fame. Heard of the ten plagues, the Exodus, the ten commandments? All on his watch. A Jewish child raised in the home of the Pharaoh as a prince - one who God calls to lead his people out of Egypt, through the middle of the sea, and into the promised land. Moses, the bible tells us, speaks to God face to face, as a man speaks to his friend Ex 33:11. Kinda' makes sense that if anyone was going to be here, it'd be Moses. And Elijah? Another one from the Jewish hall of fame: a key prophet at the centre of amazing stories, challenging an Israel which had turned away from God.

#### **Matthew 17:3 NIV**

Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

There are various theories about why it's these two rather than any of the other key figures who could have shown up - think of David, Abraham, Daniel, Isaiah.. Perhaps these two represent the Law and the Prophets, the two key parts of Israel's holy writings, our Old Testament, with Jesus representing the Gospel, our New Testament. And this encounter shows continuity not conflict between old and new - along with the priority of the new? That's a very theologically attractive idea and lots of the great leaders of the early church took it that way.

But I think most likely it's because they're two bookends of the Jewish hope for a saviour, a messiah, a promised deliverer. See, Moses points forward to a coming "prophet like me" **Deut 18:15** - someone God's people must wait for, then listen to. And Elijah is expected to show up again right before the "day of the Lord" when God will call "time" on everything - **Malachi 4:5**. And both these ideas of someone who must be listened to, and an Elijah who "must come first" were echoed in our reading.

#### **Deuteronomy 18:15 NIV**

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.

#### **Malachi 4:5 NIV**

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

But it's not critical we understand exactly why it's these two characters - because we're never told. That's not the main point our author or our passage wants to make today. The main point, the emphasis, is on **the words of the Father** coming from the bright cloud:

#### **Matthew 17:5 NIV**

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Why do I say this is the voice of God the Father? Because an extraordinary cloud is repeatedly how people experience the presence of God in the bible - for example, in Moses' story, there's a cloud on the mountaintop where he speaks with God (**Exodus 24:15-16**). Deja vu! But there's also the cloud over the tabernacle in the wilderness; and the cloud filling Solomon's temple at its dedication.

#### **Exodus 24:15-16 NIV**

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud.

God the Father speaks over Jesus - and he's speaking not for Jesus' benefit, but for those disciples. What does he want them to know? **Mt 17:5** That Jesus is the one and only Son, profoundly loved, fully pleasing to his Father. Now, if you have good memory you might remember God spoke *exactly* the same words over Jesus already way back at the start of our gospel story, at Jesus' baptism. **Mt 3:17**

#### **Matthew 17:5 NIV**

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

#### **Matthew 3:17 NIV**

And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

As it turns out, these are the only words we hear directly from the Father in the whole gospel - and they are repeated. How's that for bold, underlined, 124pt font. We might say there's literally nothing more emphasised in the whole gospel. This is what God wants us to know: Jesus is His Son. The loved one. The pleasing one.

But here, the Father adds what they, and we, are do in response to that: **listen to him**. That's the one command delivered directly by the Father. Jesus has all authority - if you've been with us a while, remember our theme song: all authority - so we are to listen to him. And if Moses and Elijah do represent the Law and the Prophets, notice the Father doesn't say "listen to them", to all of them, but to *him*, placing Jesus higher still.

Why does the Father need to command this? Well, evidently because the disciples *aren't* listening. Back to where we began, think about the playlist, the mood music Jesus has been putting on: his coming suffering and death. You can hear the same music even in today's passage - look at verse 12: "the Son of Man is going to suffer". But if you were with us a few weeks back, perhaps you'll remember what Peter the disciple had to say about that? **Mt 16:22**

#### **Matthew 16:22 NIV**

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Peter is absolutely not listening to Jesus. Peter wants different music on. He has a different vibe, a different plan in mind for Jesus. And Peter's not alone in that - he's the spokesperson for all the disciples. They are not listening. Next week we'll get to hear the voice of the rest of the disciples who haven't been up this mountain: when Jesus declares again that suffering and death are ahead, **they're grieved**, we're told. Mt 17:22-23 Not listening, not liking it - they want different music on.

### **Matthew 17:22-23 NIV**

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.

Why are those disciples not listening? Because they have a different plan for Jesus. And here's the thing: they have a different plan because they're set on solving a different problem. This is where today's passage begins to come home for us, too.

Those disciples have still not got their heads around the real problem in their world. See, they think the biggest issue, the main problem is **out there**. It's the Romans, crushing and ruling over the God's people. It's the authorities, twisting God's ways and lording it over his people. That's what they think the problem is - and Jesus suffering and dying isn't going to do anything about that. They need him living, speaking, leading, fighting instead. He needs to go to Jerusalem and win, not go there and lose.

And I think so often the truth is we have the same view, believe it's the same problem at bottom. It's the government - in Holyrood, in Westminster. It's big boss way above you. It's the super rich and their jets. It's your teacher and their rules. It's the crook and their schemes. The problem's out there. If we could just get them out of the way, out of power, replace those bad apples with some good ones, it'd all be solved. We'd all live happily ever after. I think if we dig down in our hearts, we'll find that's most of what we think God needs to do: fix *them*. Out there.

But that's not the true problem. So that's no real solution. We have to **listen to Jesus** like these disciples had to listen to Jesus. He has to go to Jerusalem, has to suffer, has to die. Why? Because that's the only way to solve our true and greatest problem. I've used **this quote** before - but it's bang on the nail here:

"the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart"  
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

The problem isn't just out there - it's *in here*, too. And it's so much more serious than we dare imagine. You, me, we're not basically pretty good, pretty nice, only making the occasional slip - but nothing too serious, nothing which really matters. That's what a lot of people would say without thinking too much but that's just nonsense. We're desperately broken. You know what goes on inside your own head - you know how far away you are from always loving, always good. And maybe for you it doesn't slip out much - but still you know it's there.

This is the hard truth we need to grasp to understand Jesus' mood music. Our problem is deeply deeply rooted within us, and desperately serious. Now I think if we're honest, even if you're a Christian here today, it's hard to truly grasp, to truly believe that. But the problems in here can't just be swept under the rug or wished away. They can't be *willed* out or *trained* out.

We have to **listen to Jesus**. It will take nothing less than the death of the Son to fix this. That is the only way. The only solution is death - and he will take it for us...

Once we start to truly listen, start to hear and take on board what Jesus has to say, we can begin to appreciate this mood music, begin to discover that it isn't the tuneless discordant noise we thought, but the most beautiful love song. Remember what the Father underlined for us in his repeated words: Jesus is God's Son, the one and only, the beloved, the pleasing. Jesus is number one, preeminent over all.

And it is this same Jesus who will lay down his life for us - obedient to the Father's will all the way to death, even death on a cross. Why does the Father send the beloved? Why does Jesus go? **Because God loves us.** 1 Jn 3:16 This is how we know what love is.

| 1 John 3:16 (NIV)

| This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

We're going to share bread and wine a little later this morning to remember Jesus' body and blood given in our place at the cross. This is the story Jesus is telling his disciples if they would only listen - Jesus is putting on the greatest love song ever as mood music. See the love of God displayed. This is the heart of the Gospel.

But there's one last thing I want to show you this morning before we're done. Peter's suggestion of putting up three shelters **Mt 17:4** seems totally random at first: mouth ahead of brain disorder. "days since last motor-mouth incident" sign goes from six back to zero. But if we unpack it a bit, it's just another demonstration that Peter's not listening to Jesus. Peter is rejecting Jesus' declared plan, Jesus' solution: no need for Jerusalem, no need for the cross, no need for death, Jesus. Let's just set up camp here: a shortcut direct to the endgame.

#### **Matthew 17:4 NIV**

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

I bet in hindsight he's glad he was interrupted and didn't have the chance to say more! He and the others fall facedown at the heavenly voice, terrified at the Father's words. They must feel it as an accusation: they have not been listening. But I want to show you **Jesus' gentle grace** for his disciples even as they've misunderstood, failed to listen, opposed him.

#### **Matthew 17:7 NIV**

But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid."

This is how the Lord deals with them. He comes to them. He touches them. He

stands them back up. He takes away their fears. What a picture of grace. What a picture of the grace God extends towards us. Do you see it?

He comes to them, doesn't wait for them to come to him, doesn't leave them wallowing in their fears and failures. He touches them - the beloved Son, all authority, God himself. He physically reaches out and touches them, communicating the great truth of his incarnation: this God, Lord of all, has made himself flesh and dwells among us. He calls them to stand back up, releasing them from under the crushing shame of their failures. And then tells them they do not need to fear - because their failings have been forgiven.

Can you feel Jesus' kindness, his gentleness, his love for them? Now, do you know this same gentle love extends towards you? Jesus in his great love wants to come to you. touch you. stand you up. tell you that you do not need to fear. Now that's good news.

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At Hope City, we always like to ask the question **"so what?"**. Well, we've heard what Jesus has to say. So what?

Perhaps today the thing you need to hear is this clear declaration by God that Jesus is not one among many, just another key figure to add to your collection of influencers, another flavour for your pick-n-mix.

Listen to the Father. **Jesus is the one.** The Son. The beloved. The pleasing. The greatest figures from Israel's history testify to him and fade away. The greatest leaders of his church fall down silenced before him. Jesus is the one above all - no equals, no rivals. And yeah that's anathema to our world's naive "all roads lead to God" mantra, it's offensively exclusive. But that's the Jesus of the bible if you want to know him.

Or perhaps for you the big thing today is truth that **the problem isn't just out there - it's in here** - inside you, too?

our culture's very good at telling us we're victims, not responsible; that it's someone else's problem, someone else's fault - and we can use that to camouflage this truth, blame everything on someone else, something outside, our situation, our surroundings. Like the child who threw the first punch: "but miss, he made me do it".

Christians believe that each and every one of us is profoundly broken, simply unable to do what's right, to think, act, live out goodness. That the true reason there's such a problem out there is the problem each of us have in here. Not just a few bad apples but every one of us.

And perhaps today is the day you are ready to be honest with yourself and with God that you are not a-ok; that you are part of the problem too. That you know you need to be different - that you wish you were. That is a good place to be. It's humbling. It's hard to admit. But that's the attitude that lets you begin to approach God.

In love, He offers grace to the humble through Jesus, suffering and dying in your place. He promises us a path to having all that's wrong in here finally undone through his renewing, his rewiring of us. The resurrection of Jesus is just the beginning: he's rooting out the rottenness in our hearts by His Spirit - and one day he'll be done.

Perhaps you're getting this, and today's the day you're ready to take a first humble step towards God? Come and speak to me afterwards. If you're online, use the 'request prayer' button and talk privately to our team. If you're watching a recording, send us an email. Take a step today. ...

Or perhaps you've never really believed deep down that **there's a God, a being, a person, who actually loves you**? Maybe you're a Christian, even, but still you struggle to believe that God truly loves you, fears and failings, warts and all.

Maybe you've only ever pictured God as some sort of amorphous force. A great but distant power that has no real interest in you. Or maybe you've only ever imagined him as a fierce, angry power: furious whenever you mess up, ready to crush you.

But here's the truth: God loves you - you, personally - he loves you enough that he will send his Son, the one he loves and treasures, the one he is well pleased with, willingly into the furnace of suffering, willingly even to death in your place. These are the lengths he's willing to go to for you. This is how big, how strong his love for you is.

Why not pray now that God would open your mind, your heart, to grasp this? Like the apostle Paul prays: **Eph 3:17-19**

| Ephesians 3:17-19 (NIV)

| ... And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Or perhaps you've messed up again, like Peter? Misunderstood God's path - perhaps willingly - wanting something easier where less people make fun of you. Wanting to skip the hard road of following Jesus and take a shortcut?

Well I want you to **see Jesus once more reach out in grace and love** today. Those disciples were terrified, faces to the floor; they knew they'd failed, not listened to Jesus in the way the Father requires. And yet this mighty Jesus, the preeminent one above all so gently comes to them, touches them, calls them back to their feet, tells them once more not to be afraid.

Maybe that's exactly what you need from Jesus today - and exactly what he stands ready to do for you if you will only ask. Jesus, come to me. Jesus touch me. Jesus lift me up. Jesus take my fear, let me know your love. Yes maybe that should be your prayer today.



We're going to sing now in response. If you're praying, just keep on praying. Or maybe today you just want to sit and listen and think? Or maybe you need to stand and sing and declare what you believe. We have such a fitting song: Son of Suffering.