Matthew 17

The Glory of the Greater Moses

Key Verse

“This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!” — Matthew 17:5

Big Idea

The glorious Messiah is the Prophet like Moses whom Israel must hear. His divine authority is revealed on the mountain and exercised in the valley, yet He chooses the path of suffering and humble service.

Introduction

Matthew has repeatedly presented Yeshua as the fulfilment of Israel's story. He is the promised Son of David, the true Israel who succeeds where the nation failed, and the greater Moses who teaches God's people with divine authority. Those themes have appeared throughout the Gospel, but nowhere do they converge more beautifully than in chapter 17.

The chapter follows immediately after Yeshua's promise that some standing before Him would not taste death until they had seen the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom (16:28). Matthew wastes no time showing that fulfilment. Before the disciples witness their Master's suffering and death, they are granted a glimpse of His heavenly glory. The Transfiguration is not an isolated miracle but a preview of the coming Kingdom and a reassurance that the path to the cross will ultimately lead to glory.

Matthew also invites his readers to remember another mountain. The similarities between the Transfiguration and Moses' experience on Mount Sinai are too numerous to ignore. Both accounts involve a mountain, a cloud, six days, chosen companions, divine glory, and the voice of God. Yet the similarities ultimately highlight a profound difference. Moses reflected God's glory after meeting with the Lord; Yeshua radiates that glory because it belongs to Him. Moses descended the mountain carrying God's Law; Yeshua descends the mountain committed to fulfilling the Law through His coming death and resurrection.

The pattern continues after the mountain. Moses descended to find Israel in rebellion before the golden calf (Exodus 32). Yeshua descends to find His disciples unable to help a demonised boy because of their lack of faith. In both cases the mountain reveals God's glory while the valley exposes humanity's weakness. Matthew reminds us that even the greatest revelations do not eliminate our need for God's personal presence and saving grace.

Throughout this chapter, Matthew therefore holds together two truths that must never be separated. The Messiah is glorious beyond anything the disciples had imagined, yet He willingly chooses the road that leads to suffering. The One whose face shines like the sun is the very One who will soon set His face toward Jerusalem. His glory is real, but it will be revealed through obedience, humility, sacrifice, and ultimately the cross.

MATTHEW

Opening Prayer

Father in heaven, open my ears to hear Your beloved Son. Help me recognise His glory without turning away from His suffering, and teach me to trust Him in the valley as well as on the mountain. Give me faith that depends upon Your power and humility that serves others. Amen.

Commentary

A Preview of the Kingdom (Matthew 17:1–8)

Matthew deliberately connects this event with the closing promise of the previous chapter. Six days earlier, Yeshua had declared that some standing before Him would not taste death before seeing the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom (16:28). Now Peter, James, and John are taken up a high mountain where they receive precisely that privilege. Before they witness the suffering of the Messiah, they are granted a glimpse of His majesty. The Transfiguration is therefore not an interruption to the Gospel story but a confirmation that the One who will soon be rejected and crucified is, in fact, the glorious King.

I approach this scene through Deuteronomy 18:15–19, where Moses promises that God will raise up a prophet like him and commands Israel to listen. The Father's words on the mountain are therefore more than a general invitation to pay attention. "Listen to Him" recalls a covenantal responsibility to hear and obey the prophet whom God sends. This voice also recalls Yeshua's baptism, when the Father declared Him His beloved Son, in whom He was well pleased (Matthew 3:17). The declaration brings together the royal sonship of Psalm 2:7 and the LORD's delight in His chosen servant in Isaiah 42:1. The comparison with Moses is illuminating, but the voice from the cloud identifies Yeshua as the beloved Son, whose authority surpasses that of any earlier messenger.

The similarities with Moses' experience on Mount Sinai are striking. Matthew mentions the six-day interval, just as Exodus records that the cloud covered Sinai for six days before God called Moses into His presence (Exodus 24:15–16). A high mountain, selected companions, the overshadowing cloud, the divine voice, and the visible manifestation of God's glory all recall Israel's greatest covenant event. Matthew wants his readers to recognise these echoes. Yet every similarity points to an even greater reality. Moses entered God's presence and later reflected the divine glory; Yeshua needs no reflected glory because the glory belongs to Him. His face shines like the sun, and His garments become dazzling white because His divine nature is briefly unveiled before the eyes of the three disciples.

The Greek verb translated transfigured is metamorphoō, from which we derive the English word metamorphosis. The change was not that Yeshua became someone different, but that the glory normally veiled by His humanity became visible for a brief moment. Throughout His earthly ministry He willingly laid aside the visible splendour of heaven, yet here the three disciples are allowed to see Him as He truly is. It is a foretaste of the glory that will one day belong to the risen and reigning Messiah.

Suddenly Moses and Elijah appear, speaking with Yeshua. Together they represent the Law and the Prophets, the two great witnesses of Israel's Scriptures. Their presence is not intended to place them alongside Yeshua as equals, but to testify that everything they wrote and proclaimed finds its fulfilment in Him. Luke tells us that they were discussing His coming "exodus" (Luke 9:31). The word is profoundly significant. Moses once led Israel out of slavery in Egypt; now he stands with the Messiah who will accomplish the greater Exodus through His death and resurrection. The first Exodus brought national freedom from Pharaoh; the second will bring personal freedom from sin and death. How fitting that Moses himself should speak with the One who will complete the redemption to which his own ministry had always pointed.

Peter’s response has often been dismissed as another example of his impulsiveness, but I believe there is more to his suggestion than first appears. He has just seen Yeshua revealed in glory, accompanied by Moses and Elijah. The Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot, was not merely a remembrance of Israel’s wilderness journey; it also carried expectations of God’s future reign. Zechariah 14:16–19 associates the celebration of Sukkot with the nations coming to Jerusalem to worship the King. I think Peter may be reasoning along these lines: The King is here in His glory. Therefore, the Kingdom has arrived. Why not build the sukkot and begin the celebration? His suggestion may not have been foolish at all. He recognised something genuinely significant, but he misunderstood the timing. The Kingdom would indeed be revealed in glory, yet the Messiah must first accomplish His mission through suffering, death, and resurrection.

Deuteronomy 13 also warns Israel not to follow a prophet merely because of impressive signs. Faithfulness to the LORD is the decisive test. On the mountain, the Father does not ask the disciples to admire a spectacle or to place Moses, Elijah, and Yeshua on the same level. He directs them to His Son. This is the heart of the prophetic emphasis I explored in that earlier sermon: true revelation is given so that God’s people will listen and obey.

Before Peter can finish speaking, a bright cloud overshadows them, recalling the cloud of God's presence that filled both the Tabernacle and later Solomon's Temple. Then the Father's voice declares, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him." The first part of the declaration repeats the words spoken at Yeshua's baptism, affirming Him as the beloved Son. The added command, "Listen to Him," echoes Moses' prophecy that God would one day raise up a prophet like himself to whom Israel must listen (Deuteronomy 18:15). Standing beside Moses in this scene, Yeshua is identified as the One greater than Moses. The Lawgiver now yields the stage to the Son.

Overwhelmed, the disciples fall face down in fear. Once again Yeshua's response reveals both His authority and His compassion. He touches them, tells them not to be afraid, and when they lift up their eyes they see no one except Yeshua alone. The scene ends exactly as it should. Moses disappears. Elijah disappears. Only the Messiah remains. Matthew's point could scarcely be clearer. The Law and the Prophets bear faithful witness, but the final authority belongs to the Son. Everything in Israel's Scriptures ultimately leads to Him. (Luke 24:27, 44)

MATTHEW

From Glory to the Cross (Matthew 17:9–13)

As Peter, James, and John descend the mountain with Yeshua, the dazzling vision has scarcely faded from their minds when He gives them an unexpected command: "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Once again, the glory they have witnessed cannot yet be proclaimed because it cannot be understood apart from the cross and the resurrection. A triumphant Messiah without suffering would only reinforce the mistaken expectations already widespread in Israel. The disciples themselves still have much to learn.

Matthew's honesty is striking. Even after hearing repeated predictions of Yeshua's death, the disciples still struggle to understand what He means by rising from the dead. Far from presenting themselves as men of exceptional spiritual insight, the Gospel writers repeatedly expose their own confusion and slow understanding. Their transparency lends credibility to their witness. They are not inventing heroic stories about themselves; they are faithfully recording how gradually they came to understand God's purposes.

The disciples then raise a question that naturally follows the Transfiguration: "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" (Matthew 17:10). Their question is rooted in Malachi's prophecy that Elijah would return before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5–6). Having just seen Elijah on the mountain, they wonder how this prophecy fits into God's unfolding plan.

Yeshua agrees with the scribes that Elijah must come, but He explains that the prophecy has already begun to be fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptiser. John was not Elijah reincarnated, nor did he literally descend from heaven. Rather, as the angel Gabriel had announced before John's birth, he came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). Like Elijah, John called Israel to repentance, confronted corrupt leadership, and prepared the way for God's intervention.

Tragically, however, those who should have recognised God's messenger rejected him. Just as John suffered at the hands of Herod and the religious establishment failed to receive his message, so the Messiah Himself will soon suffer rejection. Matthew deliberately links the destinies of the forerunner and the King. The rejection of John foreshadows the rejection of Yeshua.

There is also a subtle but important movement in the narrative. On the mountain the disciples glimpsed the splendour of the coming Kingdom. As they descend, the conversation returns immediately to suffering and death. Glory has not replaced the cross; rather, the vision has prepared them to endure it. The Father has allowed them to see the end of the story before they walk through its darkest chapters. As Yeshua later explained on the Emmaus road, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter His glory?" (Luke 24:26). One day the glory will be fully revealed, but first the Messiah must accomplish the redemption that Moses and Elijah had been discussing on the mountain.

MATTHEW

Faith in the Valley (Matthew 17:14–21)

No sooner has Yeshua descended the mountain than He is confronted by human suffering. A desperate father kneels before Him, pleading for mercy on behalf of his son, who is severely afflicted by a demon. The contrast with the previous scene could hardly be greater. Moments earlier, the disciples had witnessed the unveiled glory of the Son of God; now they stand before the misery of a tormented child and the disappointment of a family whose hopes have been dashed.

The father explains that he first brought his son to the disciples, but they were unable to heal him. This is surprising, for Matthew has already recorded that Yeshua had given the Twelve authority over unclean spirits and every kind of disease (Matthew 10:1). Their failure was not due to a lack of authority but to a lack of dependence upon the One who had given it.

Yeshua's response is both sorrowful and searching: "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" His words echo the language of Deuteronomy, where Moses in his swan song lamented Israel's unbelief during the wilderness years (Deuteronomy 32:5, 20). Once again Matthew subtly invites us to compare Moses and Yeshua. Yet while Moses could only grieve over Israel's unbelief, Yeshua immediately confronts the evil itself. With a word of command, the demon departs, and the boy is instantly restored.

The prophetic dimension continues when Yeshua descends from the mountain. Moses had come down from Sinai to find Israel in spiritual crisis; Yeshua comes down to find suffering and disciples who cannot help. The Prophet like Moses does more than diagnose the problem: He acts with divine authority to restore the child. The lesson is not that disciples can command miraculous results at will, but that those who represent the Messiah must remain dependent upon Him.

The disciples are puzzled. When they are alone with Yeshua, they ask the obvious question: "Why could we not cast it out?" They are not questioning His power but their own failure. His answer is simple and penetrating: "Because of your little faith."

This is one of several occasions in Matthew where Yeshua speaks of the disciples as those of "little faith." The issue is not that they possessed no faith at all, but that their confidence in God was inconsistent. They had seen remarkable miracles, participated in Yeshua's ministry, and even exercised authority over evil spirits before. Yet spiritual victories in the past do not guarantee present dependence upon God. Faith is not stored up like a reservoir; it is a continuing trust in the Lord. Faith is renewed as we continue walking with Messiah. Spiritual life is never intended to be lived on yesterday's experiences. The disciples discovered that previous victories could not replace present dependence upon the Lord, and neither can we.

Yeshua then uses the familiar illustration of the mustard seed. The emphasis is often misunderstood, as though the point were that believers simply need to generate enough faith to accomplish extraordinary things. In reality, the comparison highlights how even genuine faith, though seemingly small and insignificant, can become the means through which God accomplishes what appears impossible. The power lies not in faith itself, and certainly not in

the quantity of it, but in the God in whom faith is placed. Mountains are not moved because faith possesses magical qualities, but because nothing is impossible for the Lord.

Some later manuscripts add the statement, "This kind only comes out by prayer and fasting." While those words are familiar to many readers, they are absent from the earliest and most reliable Greek manuscripts of Matthew, though a similar statement appears in Mark's account (Mark 9:29). Whether or not Matthew originally included the phrase, the principle remains entirely consistent with the lesson Yeshua is teaching. Victory over evil is never the result of self-confidence or spiritual technique, but of humble dependence upon God.

There is an important lesson in Matthew's placement of this account. The disciples have just witnessed the glory of the Kingdom on the mountain, yet they fail in the valley because they attempt to minister without sufficient faith. Perhaps one helpful way to think about faith is as surrender: sufficient faith means increased yielding to the One who can do it all. Moments of spiritual privilege do not exempt God's people from daily dependence upon Him. In fact, the greater the revelation, the greater the responsibility to trust and obey. The mountain prepared the disciples for the valley, but it did not remove the necessity of faith. That lesson remains as relevant for believers today as it was for the Twelve.

The Cross Remains Central (Matthew 17:22–23)

As the disciples continue their journey through Galilee, Yeshua again speaks plainly about what lies ahead. For the second time He predicts His betrayal, death, and resurrection. There is no ambiguity in His words. The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, they will kill Him, and on the third day He will be raised.

Matthew's placement of this prediction is significant. The disciples have just witnessed Yeshua's glory on the mountain and His authority over demonic powers in the valley. They have every reason to expect the Kingdom to arrive in power. Yet Yeshua repeatedly redirects their attention to Jerusalem and the cross. His miracles reveal who He is; His predictions reveal why He came.

The title "Son of Man" is especially appropriate here. Drawn from Daniel 7, it speaks of the One who receives everlasting dominion, glory, and a Kingdom that will never end. Yet the glorious Son of Man first submits Himself to betrayal and death. Matthew continually holds these two truths together. The King is indeed coming in glory, but His path to the throne passes through suffering.

The disciples' reaction is telling. Matthew simply records that "they were greatly distressed." They do not argue with Yeshua as Peter had done previously, nor do they ask for further explanation. Instead, grief overwhelms them. They have seen enough to know that Yeshua means exactly what He says, yet they cannot reconcile His words with their expectations of the Messiah. Like many faithful Jews of their day—and, dare I say, in our day as well—they anticipated a conquering Redeemer but struggled to comprehend a suffering one, especially one who would die.

Only after the resurrection would these predictions become fully clear. Looking back, the disciples recognised that the cross had never been an interruption to God's plan but its very fulfilment. The glory revealed on the mountain was genuine, but it would be reached through the obedience of the cross. Matthew wants his readers to understand the same truth. Whenever we are tempted to separate the Messiah's majesty from His sacrifice, we have misunderstood both. The radiant King of the Transfiguration is the crucified Saviour of Calvary, and His glory is revealed most fully through His willing obedience to the Father's will.

Sons of the King (Matthew 17:24–27)

When Yeshua and His disciples arrive in Capernaum, collectors of the Temple tax approach Peter with a straightforward question: "Doesn't your teacher pay the Temple tax?" Peter answers immediately that He does. Whether Peter is speaking from knowledge or simply assuming the answer, Matthew does not say. What follows, however, reveals that Yeshua understands the issue far more deeply than anyone else present.

The Temple tax was not a Roman tax but a Jewish one. Its origins lay in the Torah (Exodus 30:11–16), where every adult Israelite male contributed a half-shekel for the service of the Tabernacle. In later generations the same contribution helped maintain the Temple in Jerusalem. Most devout Jews regarded it as an ordinary expression of their covenant responsibility.

Before Peter can even explain the conversation, Yeshua asks him a question. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?" Peter replies, "From others." Yeshua then draws the obvious conclusion: "Then the sons are free."

Those simple words carry remarkable theological weight. Yeshua is not merely making an observation about taxation. He is making a declaration about His identity. If the Temple belongs to His Father, then He, as the Father's Son, is under no obligation to pay a tax for its upkeep. The servants contribute to the house; the Son belongs in the house.

Matthew has already established this truth repeatedly. At His baptism the Father declared, "This is My beloved Son." On the mountain of Transfiguration the same heavenly voice affirmed His unique sonship once again. Now, in an ordinary conversation in Capernaum, Yeshua quietly applies that truth. He is greater than the Temple because He is the Son to whom the Temple ultimately belongs.

Yet, having established His freedom, Yeshua voluntarily sets it aside. "However, so that we may not cause offence..." He chooses to pay the tax after all. This is not an admission of obligation but an act of gracious humility. The issue is no longer what He has the right to do, but what will best serve others and avoid creating an unnecessary obstacle to His mission.

There is an important distinction here. Throughout His ministry Yeshua never compromised truth to gain acceptance. He confronted hypocrisy, challenged false teaching, and exposed empty religion without hesitation. Yet where no principle of truth was at stake, He willingly surrendered His personal rights for the sake of peace and the progress of the Gospel. There is

a lesson here for every believer. A believer's liberty is not simply the freedom to insist upon our rights; it is the freedom to lay them aside when love seems to require it.

I notice the prophetic character of this final scene. Yeshua knows what Peter has been asked and directs him to cast a line into the lake, where the first fish will have a coin in its mouth sufficient to pay the Temple tax for both of them. Matthew does not explain how the coin came to be there or explicitly narrate Peter's catch, so we should not press the mechanics beyond what is written. The account is wonderfully understated, offering neither a dramatic description nor a reaction from the crowd. Yet Yeshua's extraordinary knowledge and provision are clear, alongside His deliberate decision not to give needless offence.

Yet the miracle quietly reveals the authority of the King. The One who created the fish of the sea knows precisely where one particular fish is swimming and what lies in its mouth. Creation itself responds to its Creator. The Son who is free from the Temple tax nevertheless provides its payment from the resources of His Father's world.

Matthew could hardly have chosen a more fitting conclusion to the chapter. It began with the Father's declaration, "This is My beloved Son." It ends with the Son quietly demonstrating what that relationship means. He possesses complete freedom, complete authority, and complete confidence in His Father's provision. Yet He uses none of these for His own advantage. Instead, He willingly chooses the path of humility, just as He will soon choose the path that leads to the cross.

Matthew 17 is more than a sequence of remarkable events in the life of Yeshua. It is also a pattern for every disciple. We begin by seeing Him in His glory, but we are soon called into a world marked by suffering, unbelief, and spiritual conflict. Along the way we learn that the path to glory always passes through a cross, and that true sonship is expressed not by insisting upon our rights but by willingly serving others. In many ways, Matthew 17 is a preview not only of the remainder of this Gospel, but of the faith-filled life itself.

The disciple follows the same Lord from the mountain into the valley, from glory to sacrifice, confident that the One who calls us to take up our cross will one day bring us safely into His Kingdom.

Takeaways

In all circumstances, I would be smart to listen to God's beloved Son.

The glory of the Messiah does not bypass the cross.

Past spiritual victories cannot replace present dependence on God.

The Prophet like Moses speaks with the authority of the beloved Son.

Freedom in Messiah can be expressed by willingly serving others.

Memory Verse

Matthew 17:5 — "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!"

MATTHEW
What's Next?

In Matthew 18, Yeshua turns to life within the community of His disciples. Questions of greatness, care for the vulnerable, reconciliation, and forgiveness will show what listening to the Son looks like in our relationships with one another.

Sources and Further Reading

Matthew 17 Draft 1.0, supplied working manuscript; Bob Mendelsohn, "The Prophet/King," sermon at Beth Messiah, Sydney, 27 October 2001; Exodus 24 and 32; Deuteronomy 13 and 18; Malachi 4; Luke 9.