

# Matthew 17:9-13

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*Jesus forbids Peter, James, and John to tell anyone about what they just saw until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. The disciples seem to think that He meant to not tell anyone until Elijah returns, and so they ask Jesus to explain how Elijah was to come before the Messiah and yet is still to come even though Jesus has arrived and is the Messiah. Jesus explains this to them.*

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 9:9-13 and Luke 9:36.

*As Jesus, Peter, James, and John were coming down from the mountain after His transfiguration Jesus commanded them to keep secret what they had just witnessed, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” They were not to tell the other disciples or anyone else what they had seen until Jesus had risen from the dead.*

After the Son or Man had risen they could tell anyone about this remarkable vision. But they did not tell anyone before then (Luke 9:36). The transfiguration was recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and none of those authors were present when it occurred (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). Peter and John who were both mention Christ’s transfiguration directly and indirectly in their later writings.

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”  
(John 1:14)

“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased”—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.”  
(2 Peter 1:16-18)

But Jesus’s transfiguration and what they witnessed was apparently on the disciples’ mind as they came down from the mountain. And they discussed these thoughts with Jesus while they were alone with Him. Interestingly, what appears to have been the foremost thought on the disciples’ mind concerned Elijah. By this point Peter, James, and John were fully convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. But it did not seem to register that Jesus, the Messiah, would be raised from the dead, even though He just told them plainly that He would be resurrected.

The reason for the disciples’ confusion seems to result from the compounding of two false assumptions.

The first erroneous assumption was that *the disciples* appear to have presumed that the Messiah would *come* only once—not twice. *They* believed that *He* would *come* to usher in *His* kingdom at the end of the age, so since the Messiah was present, *they* presumed the age was about to end, and a new age would be ushered in where the Messiah would reign on the throne of David (2 Samuel 7:13). *They* seemed to have maintained this error until *Jesus* ascended into Heaven (Acts 1:6-9).

*They* did not yet comprehend that the Messiah would:

- come once to call people to *His* spiritual kingdom (Matthew 4:17; John 18:36),
- be crucified (Matthew 27:26-50),
- die for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2),
- be buried for three days (Matthew 27:57-66),
- be raised *from the dead* (Matthew 28:6),
- bid *His* followers to make *disciples* of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8),
- ascend to Heaven (Acts 1:9), and then after a gap in time
- return to earth again at the end of this age (Matthew 24:27, Hebrews 9:28, Revelation 22:12).

*They* seemed to believe that *they* were already in or at least very near the end times, and that *Jesus* had appeared now, to set up His physical kingdom on earth.

In one sense *they* were right. If Israel had accepted *Jesus*, that was what would have occurred. *Jesus* made this clear when He answered:

“And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come”  
(Matthew 11:14)

This verse indicates that *John the Baptist* would have been a complete fulfillment of the ministry of *Elijah* as *Jesus*'s forerunner—IF Israel had accepted *Jesus* as its Messiah.

However, it was predicted that Israel would reject *Jesus* as Messiah, as *Jesus* pointed out (Matthew 13:13-14). After *Jesus* ascended to heaven, *Peter* promised the people that if they would repent and believe, then *Jesus* would return and set up His kingdom on earth (Acts 3:19-20). So the gap of time could have been fairly short, had Israel believed. But that is not what happened, and not what was prophesied (Romans 11:12).

The Jews had noticed that there were Messianic prophecies and types of the Messiah both as a suffering servant, as well as a conquering king. Some even thought there might be two Messiahs. What they did not seem to be able to grasp was that their Messiah would come twice, in two advents. Once to serve, and die for the sins of all people. Then again to reign on the earth as its king. Incidentally, this Messianic pattern is what *Jesus* calls His followers to do. Humbly love and serve people through the sufferings and trials of this life and then reign with Him as servant kings in the next life.

*The disciples* believed that *Elijah* must appear also at the end times and that *Elijah* would *come first*, that is, before the Messiah came. *They* appear to have believed both of these would be the same event. To them Jesus's phrase *until the Son of Man has risen from the dead* might have sounded like a vague reference to the end of the age—not *Jesus's* literal resurrection.

In addition to the assumption that Messiah would only come once, *the disciples* appear to have held a second false assumption, which was an erroneous conflation of *the Son of Man* with *Elijah*. When *Jesus* said "...until the Son of Man has risen from the dead," *the disciples* seemed to have mistakenly believed that *He* was in some way referring to *Elijah*—who *the disciples* just saw (Matthew 17:3). *Elijah* was strongly associated in Jewish minds with both the Messiah and the resurrection. It seems *they* believed it was *Elijah* who would rise *from the dead*.

We have already shown the link between *Elijah* and the Messiah (Matthew 11:10-14; 16:14; 17:3). Isaiah prophesied about a forerunner to announce the coming of the Messiah and to prepare for His arrival: "A voice is calling 'Clear the way of the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isaiah 40:3). *John the Baptist* said this prophecy from Isaiah applied to him, while simultaneously maintaining he was not *Elijah* (John 1:23). This was true because there would be two advents.

Malachi, too, spoke of this forerunning messenger and identified him as *Elijah*.

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the Lord of hosts."  
(Malachi 3:1)

"Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse."  
(Malachi 4:5-6)

Even today when the Jews celebrate Passover, as they have done for thousands of years, they set out a place, pour a special cup, and leave the door open for *Elijah* to enter in the hope that he will announce the immanency of the Messiah's arrival.

But in addition to being a Messianic forerunner, the first century Jews also strongly associated *Elijah* with the resurrection *from the dead*. This association was perhaps in part from the fact that *Elijah* never died (2 Kings 2:11). But more than that, this association came from what the oral traditions said about *Elijah* and the resurrection.

In addition to the Hebrew scriptures that we know as the Old Testament, there was an oral tradition called "The Mishnah." According to the oral tradition itself, the Mishnah dates all the way back to the time of Moses. But many believe it began during the post-exilic era sometime between the time of Ezra (450 B.C.) and the time of Maccabees (150 B.C.). Centuries later (350 AD) the oral Mishnah was written down and became part of the Jewish "Talmud." Many of the ideas of the Mishnah were very much in circulation during Jesus's day.

This oral tradition taught, “and the resurrection of *the dead* comes from *Elijah*, blessed be his memory, Amen” (Mishnah: Sotah 9). This resurrection was generally believed to occur at the end of the age.

And so, it is plausible that when Peter, James, and John heard *Jesus* forbid them to *tell no one* what *they* saw *until the Son of Man has risen from the dead* that *they* naturally and wrongly assumed *Jesus* was telling *them* not to speak of this *until* the end of the age when *Elijah* returns. *They* seemed to mistake *Jesus*’s expression as a figure of speech for the end times, when *Elijah* oversees “the resurrection of *the dead*”—not *Jesus*’s literal resurrection *from the dead*.

This might seem odd, but we have the benefit of now knowing *Jesus* died and was raised *from the dead*. So, looking back at what *Jesus* said it is easy for us (as it was later easy for *them*) to understand *His* actual meaning. There are numerous scriptures that tell us that *the disciples* only came to understand the scriptures, and what *Jesus* had told *them*, after *He* rose *from the dead* (Luke 24:24-34; Luke 24:44-45; John 2:22; Acts 1:16). But at the time, their false assumptions led *them* to wrongly interpret *His* meaning or prevented *them* from understanding some of the things *He* was teaching. We too carry assumptions, or perspectives, that can prevent us from understanding *Jesus*—that is why we must take every thought (including assumptions) captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

*The disciples*’ two false assumptions were 1.) the Messiah would only *come* once, not twice; and 2.) *Jesus* is talking about *Elijah*, not Himself. These wrong suppositions/perspectives/assumptions were a big part of the reason why *the disciples* asked *Jesus*, “*Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?*”

Peter, James, and John in asking “*Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?*” were asking:

“How can *Elijah* come before You [*Jesus*] if he has not already *come*? *The scribes* say from the scriptures and traditions *that Elijah must come* before the Messiah, and You are clearly the Messiah, and You are already among us, but *Elijah* did not *come first*. And now You are telling us to wait to say anything until *Elijah* returns at the end of the age at the resurrection *from the dead*. How can these *things* be? Please explain these *things* to us, *Jesus*.”

*Jesus* answered *them* by explaining that yes, *Elijah* is coming and will restore all things. In this statement *Jesus* affirmed the idea that *Elijah* would appear at the end times as the oral tradition and Malachi 4:5-6 suggested. It is possible that *Elijah* will be one of the two witnesses during the apocalypse (Revelation 11:3-13). *Jesus* assured *the disciples* that *Elijah* was still to *come*.

But in another very real sense, *Elijah* has *come already*. In making this claim, *Jesus* used *His* divine authority—*But I say to you that Elijah already came*. *Jesus* was speaking here of *John the Baptist*. The problem was, that *they* (the Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, Herodians, etc.) *did not recognize him* as *Elijah* when he *came*. *They* did to him whatever they wished. *They* interrogated him (John 1:19-28, Matthew 3:7), *they* dismissed him (Matthew 11:7-8), *they* unjustly criticized him (Matthew 11:18), *they* imprisoned him (Matthew 4:12; 11:2; 14:3), and *they* killed him (Matthew 14:10).

*Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about how Elijah was John the Baptist. John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah, but his message was rejected. Therefore, he did not fulfill the office, as John himself predicted would be the case (John 1:21).*

But even as the Peter, James, and John understood that *John the Baptist* had served the *Elijah*-like role as the Messianic forerunner and that *Elijah* would *come* again and help *restore all things* at the end of the age, *they* did not seem to pick up on something else that *Jesus* said to *them*. And that was this: just as *they* (Pharisees, *scribes*, Sadducees, Herodians, etc.) *did not recognize John the Baptist* and abused and executed *him*, *so also will they do to Jesus*.

*So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their (Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, Herodians, etc.) hands.*

*Jesus* was again telling *His disciples* that even though *He* was the Messiah, that *He* would *suffer* and be killed by the authorities (Matthew 10:38; 16:4; 16:21; 16:24). Matthew's silence about *the disciples'* reaction to this comment suggests that this comment did not register with Peter, James, and John at this time.

### **Biblical Text**

**17:9-13** As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead." And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist.