

The Final Week: Into Jerusalem & the Temple Districts

In the final week of His life before the cross, Jesus blends triumph and tragedy. We see Him both accepting claims of royalty and in His own way, denying claims of royalty. The first events of the last week, including the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple, set the tone, a tone of immense conflict. In Matthew 20:17 Jesus has predicted for the third time in the Gospel that He is going to Jerusalem, where He will be betrayed, flogged, crucified, and raised to life. His disciples did not really quite understand what He was saying and asked for seats of authority. Again Jesus said that He came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many, so He is constantly keeping His sacrifice in mind. Then Jesus travels from Jericho to Jerusalem. As He goes He sees two blind men who cry out to Him above the crowd, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us.” Everybody tries to shush to them, but they cry all the more, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us.” He asks simply, “What do you want?” again showing His divine power and His ability to heal on His own. They say simply, “We want to receive our sight,” and He gives it to them. Here is another miracle that attests to His life as the Messiah and as the Almighty One.

By Matthew 21, they are approaching Jerusalem via Bethphage and the Mount of Olives. Matthew places tremendous stress on these events of the last week. The first of them is what we call ‘the triumphal entry,’ which provides a couple of riddles to be sorted out. One of them that bothered me for a long time was how it could be that the same crowds that said “Hosanna to the Son of David, Hosanna in the highest!” could call out “Crucify Him!” a week later. The first part of the solution to that riddle is that it was not the same crowds. Some of the same people were there but not by any means all of the same people. Pious Jews who were traveling to Jerusalem at that time would not have traveled through the land of Samaria. They despised the Samaritans and did not want to have to eat their food or even get their dust on their sandals. So if they were traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, these Jews would take a detour around Samaria along the Sea of Galilee and then the Jordan River, eventually coming to Jericho. Then they would walk the 20 miles from Jericho to Jerusalem. So it can be surmised that the people who were praising Jesus on His entry into Jerusalem were Jews from Galilee who knew His ministry best since He had spent most His ministry in that region.

The Jews who were crying out for His blood in the last week were those from all over the world—Rome, Carthage, and Phrygia. Many of them would not have known Jesus at all and they would have been relatively easily influenced by the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees because they were used to respecting them. There would be some overlap between the two crowds, the earlier and the later, but they would not be identical crowds and there probably were not even that many people who cried out “Hosanna!” After all, no troops come by to break it up which they would have if they had seen it as a demonstration for a potential king. And when Jesus is charged during the last week, no one brings up that demonstration as a significant event. It was certainly important from the perspective of the Gospel writers, but there were probably not that many people and it did not last long enough to get the attention of the Jewish authorities.

Another interesting aspect about the triumphal entry is the way it is similar and the way it is different from most triumphal entries of the day. Ordinarily triumphal entries were associated with a military victory. There would have been a formal entry into the city with a welcome, acclamation, and invocations by officials from the city. Usually they would have an entry into the temple where there would be some kind of religious activity. Commonly, the victor would offer a sacrifice to the local gods or there would be an act of purifying the temple. When you look at these typical components, you see that Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is close but not exactly the same. For instance, there is no military

victory, and no official group greeting Him. There are more dissimilarities than similarities to a typical triumphal entry.

Another thing that is noticeable is how much attention is paid to the fact that Jesus rode on a donkey. In our day, you can tell some things about a person by what kind of car he drives. If you saw a man driving a minivan with two car-seats in the back, you would know he was a father. On the other hand, if you saw a young man in a small, rusted, old car, you might assume he was a poor student. Matthew includes more information about the donkey than about the praise Jesus receives, which means that Matthew wants us to pay attention to this. Jesus did not enter on a horse; He did not enter on a charger or a stallion. If you enter on a stallion, that symbolizes war, power, might, and military victory. You do not wage war against your enemies while riding on a donkey. A donkey is an animal for labor; it is an animal for helping somebody who does not want to walk or cannot walk. It is an animal of peace. Of course there is a prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 which says, "Your king comes to you, humble and riding on a donkey." Kings did sometimes ride donkeys in times of peace. So when Jesus enters on a donkey, He is saying, "I am entering in peace." It is, further, a sign of humility because the donkey does not even belong to Jesus. He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey He has borrowed from one of His disciples.

When Jesus and His disciples enter the city, people praise Him and say, "Hosanna to the Son of David, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest." Now again, we need to think about the meaning of these words. The word 'Hosanna' means "praise God." But it was actually something that people said when they wanted to praise the king, in kind of a nationalistic sense and it was like, "God save the Queen of England." You do not have to believe in God to say, "God save the Queen of England." You just mean that you are an Englishman or an Englishwoman. In the same way, the people who said "Hosanna" did not necessarily understand what they were saying. They did not necessarily understand that they were praising Jesus as the Christ who is coming to win His victory through His sacrifice. And when you pair that with, "Son of David, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," it sounds even more like a nationalistic hope because their outlook was that the Messiah would be a Son of David who would give them a military and social victory, as David gave Israel, defeating the enemies with a sword. That is what they expected their Messiah to do and that is at least part of what they have in mind when Jesus enters and they praise Him. They want someone who will deliver them from the oppression of the Roman Gentile rulers.

Another point about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that should be noticed is from Luke 19:41-44. After giving the account of Jesus' entry and the crowd's response, Luke tells us:

"As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.'"

What this means is that the city has missed its chance for peace so now war is coming. Their chance for peace was to receive the salvation of Christ and to receive peace, spiritual peace, which leads to other kinds of peace too. Certainly, if people live out their faith, there will be social and economic peace as well, but first of all, spiritual peace. But because they looked to Jesus as a Messianic king to deliver with armies and soldiers and all the rest, He would not give it to them. They looked for peace somewhere else so the Roman armies were going to come and tear their city apart and kill their people by the thousands. Jesus wept over the city because He knew the defective nature of their praise for Him.

What does Jesus mean by the phrase “it is hidden from your eyes”? This is a classically difficult question, because it is related to the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. They were not compelled—no one forced them to misconstrue Jesus’ ministry. That was of their own free will. The unregenerate mind looks at Jesus in an unregenerate way and so we might say they hide it from themselves. But on the other hand when someone refuses to heed the light that God gives them, God commonly withdraws the light; He withdraws the Word. God is God, and He is finally in control. But most of the time when these questions come up it is probably that they blinded themselves and God blinded them too, or hid it from them. They hid it from themselves; they did not want to listen to those parts of Jesus’ teaching that pointed in the spiritual direction. Jesus also hid it from them and God also hid it from them because, ultimately, His purpose is for Christ to die.

Jesus does enter the city as a king, but a king of peace not a king of war. He also enters the city as a priest and we see that by His temple action. The first thing He does when He enters the city is to go to the temple. When Jesus enters the temple area, He drives out those who are buying and selling. What is Jesus doing? What does it all mean? The first thing that He is doing is taking responsibility for God’s house. He is not an ordained priest, but He is the Son of God and therefore He has the right to care for God’s house. He is removing that which should not be present at the house of God. This commerce would have been taking place in the court of the Gentiles. It had some legitimate purpose to it. People who traveled from Rome or Spain would not have wanted to travel with doves and bowls and sheep and all the rest. So they would buy these things at the temple.

But while there was some legitimacy to the temple commerce, it was very problematic too. For one thing, the Gentiles did not have much room in the temple in the first place, and now their area for prayer was taken up by a marketplace. With all the money changing and bleating of animals it would have been nearly impossible to worship God. Another problem was bad exchange rates. They were probably charging too much for the animals, or at least they were accused of this in some literature of the day. The main problem was that they did it right in the temple districts. There was no reason to have it right in the temple when it could have been outside or in the commercial district. In fact, in earlier years the money changing and the buying and selling of animals for the sacrifices was done elsewhere. People are not exactly sure when the priests moved these services into the temple, maybe just a couple of years before this scene. So Jesus throws those things out of where they do not belong, out of the temple district. And when He does He says, “My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.” These statements are taken from the prophets. Isaiah 56:3-8 says the temple is to be a house of prayer for the nations. “Den of thieves” is a phrase from Jeremiah 7, which also includes Jeremiah’s prediction of judgment against Israel. So by this reference Jesus is alluding to the fact that the temple in Old Testament times was corrupt and judged, and now again it is corrupt and must be judged.

Once the temple has been cleansed, it can be dedicated to its proper use. “The blind and the lame came to Him at the temple, and He healed them,” Matthew says. In Mark and Luke, it says that He closed down the temple; He would not let anybody go in or out for a while and He was teaching them. So He is healing and teaching and the temple is now being used for its proper, godly purposes. But the Jewish leaders did not appreciate that. They were angry that Jesus was treading on their turf. And they asked Him, “By what authority are you doing these things?” They are seeking to maintain their authority around the temple, and they want to know why Jesus thinks He has the right to act the way He does. Do you see how wrong that question is? They should have asked, “What is the significance of what you are doing?” But instead they ask: “Who gave you the right to step in our territory?” showing their lack of concern for the things of God.

This is a very significant event in Jesus' life because this is probably the first time that He began to oppose those who had the real power. Up to this time, it has been the Pharisees and the scribes who have been opposed to Jesus. Their power is mainly in the influence they have through spiritual leadership over the masses. Now Jesus is coming into contact with those who are well connected to the Sadducees and the Herodians in Jerusalem, where the power lies. Jesus is now offending those who have the power to kill. The Pharisees and scribes might have wanted to kill Him, at least some of them, but they could not pull it off. Now He has offended those who do have the power to kill. Therefore this is a crucial event on a historical basis and on a human level of Jesus' life and the arousal of the wrath of His opponents that is going to cause them eventually to execute Him.

Mark 11 recounts the events of the final week just a little differently from Matthew. The withering of the fig tree is one such place. Matthew had a habit of simplifying events or accounts and he makes the withering of the fig tree take place all at once. Mark tells us that the fig tree withered rapidly but it did not happen just in one minute. In Mark 11 we read that as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. He saw a fig tree in leaf, and went to see if it had any fruit, but when He reached it, He found nothing but leaves because it was not the season for figs. Jesus said to the tree, "May no one ever eat from you again," and His disciples heard Him say it; then He proceeded to cleanse the temple. The next morning they saw the fig tree withered and they said, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered." This is the first of Jesus' miracles that was not positive, did not bring healing or restoration. But there were negative miracles in the Old Testament, such as the plagues, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Miriam's leprosy, among several others. This is not simply an example of Jesus getting angry because He cannot eat a fig. Instead, the cleansing of the temple is represented by the fig tree and the destruction of the fig tree represents the coming destruction of Israel.

In Hosea 9:9-10 God came to Israel looking for early fruit on the fig tree but He found none. In that context, early figs represent righteousness, good deeds, and holiness. God looked to Israel, but He found none of these things. God is seeking and searching for spiritual fruit. This is a symbolic act of judgment. It is just like when Jeremiah took a pot and smashed it, saying, "So shall Israel be smashed." It is just like when Jeremiah took a brand new decorative garment and deliberately stuck it in a rock so it would be ruined by dirt and worms and then said, "So Israel shall be ruined." Jesus curses a fig tree to say Israel is under judgment because like this fig tree they are all show and no fruit. The leaves were there, and even if it wasn't the season for figs, there should have been some buds at least; but there was nothing. The first buds, like the buds of an apple, or a peach, should have been there. But there was nothing. It was all beauty, all show, and no fruit. In that way it was like the temple, a beautiful, magnificent building, but with no fruit. Therefore, judgment is coming.