

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Matthew's Gospel

Chapter 21, Jesus Enters Jerusalem

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

You may have seen – or even been at – one of those trophy parades which often occur after a sports team has had a great triumph. There was one recently when the rain poured down on the day chosen but it didn't seem to dampen the spirits of those attending, or those who had to endure the open top bus tour. These things are always planned soon after the triumph or victory to ensure maximum interest and impact after the event. Everybody gets together to celebrate and there is a general acceptance that this somewhat disruptive event is taking place.

I wonder what it would be like though if it was to be done at a completely different time after the victory? I think there would still be some interest from dedicated fans, but there would be a general sense of confusion by many as to why it was being done. For those disrupted by it, I would imagine there would be a considerable amount of annoyance at the inconvenience it caused. In general, if people are not ready for such an event, or not in the right mindset for it, then it is not likely to be successful and it could even end up cancelled or given up after a while.

But why am I making this comment regarding sporting success parades for a Bible teaching session? I suppose because of the latter thought which came to mind as I read the chapter that is under consideration. In Matthew chapter 21, we are presented with the Lord Jesus entering Jerusalem for the final week before His sacrifice at Calvary. It starts a little bit like some of those parades I have been talking about. But like the latter thought, we quickly see that the people were not ready to receive this event, and even less the person of the Lord Jesus.

Although much of the chapter provides a narrative of events that took place those two days, there is a lot for us to consider in this remarkable part of the life of the Lord Jesus. We can learn about Him as a person through it, as well as the natural mind and state of man when Jesus is presented to them. Happily, the chapter is broken down into five discrete occurrences, each of which I will look at briefly before going on to some of the key lessons that we can gain from this chapter.

Narrative – Triumphant Entry

I will read the first part of the narrative now. The triumphant entry of the Lord Jesus into Jerusalem which is captured in verses 1 to 11 of Matthew chapter 21:

'Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: "Tell the daughter of

Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: "Hosanna to the Son of David! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' Hosanna in the highest!" And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, "Who is this?" So the multitudes said, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee."

This section is a remarkable demonstration of the sovereignty and authority of the Lord Jesus. Just think for a moment what occurred here. He arrived at this great city, where so many great and dignified people had travelled to over the years. But this Man, who had nowhere to lay His head, walks up and initiates such a scene. There is no planning or pre-work to stir things up. Imagine someone trying to do this today in a place like London or Paris. It is unthinkable. I don't think we can say it was any easier back then either. But Jesus did it and there was nothing that could stop it. He walks up, obtains what he needs, fulfils all the necessary prophetic Scriptures, and enters the city as the Son of David. Although He took a lowly pathway in the life He walked on earth, Jesus was still able to excite this response. I think we see here something similar to the way that the men who came to arrest him in Gethsemane fell back. The people could not help but respond this way when He arrived.

The first few verses also demonstrate the perfect timing of this as well. This was no 'spur of the moment decision.' Jesus had set His path towards Jerusalem. Everything was waiting there for Him and He enters at exactly the moment He is supposed to. Even if the people were not ready, He was. Here is another reminder of how God's timing is perfect. We go through life with all sorts of plans and timelines for achieving things, but it is only really God's timing that we should be mindful of as He always acts in accordance with His plans and programmes.

Despite the scene that we are presented with, where the multitudes are shouting that He was the Son of David, we are shown what the people's mind was really like towards Him. In verse 10 we see that they are not ready. The Bible clearly prophesied this event in Zechariah chapter 9 and verse 9. It was obvious what was being said about Him. Yet still their question: "Who is this?" Even their answer is a little bit off the mark. They get the place where Jesus grew up correct. But that is about it! Jesus is relegated to a Prophet. The crowds did not understand that He was the Son of God, come down from Heaven. How different things may have been for them if they had realised this about the One who came humbly mounted on a donkey into Jerusalem.

Narrative – Temple Cleansing

The next six verses provide a description of Jesus 'cleansing' the temple.

'Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'" Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant and said to Him, "Do You hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes. Have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants you have perfected praise'?" Then He left them and

went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there' (Matthew 21:12-17).

This is the second occurrence of this nature in the Lord's ministry here on earth. He had cleansed the temple when He first started public work. Three years later the problem is still there. How much we see that the nation has not changed much from the times of the Judges when time and again they fell back into their old ways.

This action of the Lord is the first of two acts of judgement that He undertakes. It is an unusual action on His part given that He did not come to judge at this point in time, but to save. However, His entering Jerusalem was the entry of the Messiah into God's city and therefore there is a need for Him to demonstrate His position of King to judge the nation of Israel.

I suggest that this act was necessary to demonstrate the failure of Israel in the temple worship process that God had laid down for them. We remember from Ezra and Nehemiah all that God had done in bringing them back into the Promised Land and providing all that they needed to resume the temple sacrifices again. But here we see that the nation had failed to maintain it for that purpose, and it was merely a scheme for money making. Jesus in cleansing the temple acts in judgement on these corrupt old ways and demonstrates how it needed to be put aside for something new and better, especially given how much the people had failed to maintain it.

There are two things that are worth pointing out here. The first is that this act is a clear demonstration that the Gospel message is not just about preaching that God loves us. I do not deny that fact but let us never forget that God is righteous – He will judge. We see that here in this scene. What was going on was not OK, and it was dealt with swiftly and firmly. I am currently reading CS Lewis' Narnia books with some of my children. A regular point made in the books is that Aslan the lion is not a tame lion. I can see why the point is made. God is not some 'marshmallowey' bundle of love who doesn't mind what people do. He is awesome, holy, and righteous. Let us remember Job's response when he was face to face with God. He did not speak except to condemn himself. This is who God is and we can be glad that we are able to face Him in the light of what Jesus has done for us rather than on our own terms.

That being said, the second point is rather beautiful, and this comes in verses 14 and 15:

'Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant.'

I am not too concerned about the chief priests and scribes here. It is the lame and blind as well as the children I want to focus on. The forgotten and rejected ones in society. In the midst of the judgement of God there is blessing for those in need who come to Him. Children cry out in praise! This is what happens when God acts in righteousness. Is this not a picture of our salvation? Judgement was given out at Calvary, and then those who come to Him can be healed, blessed, and respond with joy and praise to Him who has done this wonderful thing.

Sadly, those in authority did not see this and only saw that their position and power was under threat. How sad to think that the response to such things was just to be indignant. The blind and lame were being healed in the temple, yet they wanted no part in it!

Narrative – Cursed Fig Tree

Following this, in verses 18 to 22, we have the second act of judgement in which Jesus curses the fig tree.

'Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they marvelled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.'"

On coming into the city the next morning, the Lord looks for food from a fig tree and finding none, He curses it. The tree immediately withers under His curse.

If we were to read this without any context or knowledge of the rest of Scripture and God's dealing with the nation of Israel over the years, we would perhaps be a bit surprised by this act. There may be some who would even say this was a little bit petulant of the Lord, the tree can't exactly be blamed for its lack of fruit in the end analysis. But we must look more closely to understand what this is a picture of. This is not Jesus randomly killing a tree. This was a lesson. Israel was a land flowing with milk and honey and Jerusalem was the political centre. It was not unreasonable to expect this tree to have fruit. Its leaves were there so there should have been fruit on it. So is this some strange horticultural phenomenon that is being dealt with? Not at all. It is a picture of the state of the nation of Israel. An outward show of religion but nothing truly for God. Jerusalem was the place where the most fruit should have been, but instead there is nothing. Now God is here and there is no more time for Him to wait for some. Where there is no fruit there is no purpose for its existence and it is dealt with accordingly.

Interestingly, the disciples were more concerned about the fact that the tree immediately withered. Even they struggled to understand who they were dealing with, perhaps being ignorant of the imminent judgement of the nation. Once again though, there is grace from the Lord as He provides some teaching on the nature of faith and its capabilities.

Narrative – Jesus' Authority Challenged

Verses 23 to 27 present us with the next event, and we are shown more of the mindset of the priests and elders of the people. As I mentioned at the beginning, they were not prepared for Jesus' arrival.

'Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.'"

Their question is actually a legitimate one, in that they were the ones who should be asking it if someone comes into the temple teaching and making bold claims. The role of the priests and elders was to ensure that wrong things were not presented to the people, particularly in the temple. However, in this case it is rather out of place. Jesus had been fulfilling Scriptures by his

arrival, demonstrating His authority in the temple and over the creation, as well as healing those in need. It really was quite clear as to who the Lord is.

The answer from Jesus about the baptism of John is not Him avoiding the issue, it is an attempt to go back to the starting period of the ministry of Jesus. Three years previously, John the Baptist was preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. He did come in the person of Jesus, and in those three years, there had been more than enough demonstrations of the power, authority, and grace of the Lord for them to know who He was. But still they wanted another sign!

The reluctance of the leaders to answer Jesus' question highlights the hypocrisy, immorality, and evil nature of these leaders. There is no acknowledgement of any of what had been going on, which they had witnessed with their own eyes. They were willing to lie, and they demonstrated their wilful determination not to be affected by the workings of God. Jesus refuses to waste time with their politics and games, all geared at maintaining their position and privilege. Any answer He gave, even the most compelling and convincing case, would only serve to give these men ammunition to falsely accuse him of blasphemy or of some other law.

Narrative – Jesus' Teaching on the state of the Nation – Two Parables

Following this, we have two of three parables about Israel's rejection of God. The last parable of the three is in chapter 22. There is an overriding feature in these three parables, which is the wholesale rejection of the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are represented in each of the three parables, and the rejection is complete.

[Jesus said] "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him. Hear another parable: "There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, And it is marvellous in our eyes'? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." Now when the chief priests and Pharisees

heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet' (Matthew 21:28-32 & 33-45).

The first parable is captured in verses 28 to 32 and presents the story of a father with two sons. I am sure we know the story in which the first refuses, but in the end goes to do the tasks asked of him. The second says the right words but does not actually follow up on the action. The morality of the lesson is simple but in addition to this there is the lesson about what the nation had become. There was a two-class system of the religious and the sinners, that is, those who thought they were righteous and those the self-righteous knew were not; and the former looked down on the latter. But how wrong they were! The outward appearance of holy living was prevalent in Israel but there was no actual desire to follow God's ways. It was actually those who were considered 'sinners' who recognised their need and turned to God through Jesus' preaching.

The remaining verses of chapter 21 present us with perhaps one of the most awful parables that the Lord Jesus gives. Here the wicked tenants of the vineyard are described in how they attack and kill the servants of the owner before killing his son with the intent of inheriting the land that they were supposed to be looking after for him. The thing that shocks me the most is their open acceptance of murder for their own gain. They think nothing of the actions that they undertake as they remove anything that gets in their way of financial gain. The behaviour of those in the parable is so bad that even these leaders of Israel acknowledge the punishment these servants received is deserved.

How sad then, that this is a parable which highlights the behaviour of God's earthly people. They had killed the prophets and it would not be long before the statement about them killing the Son of God would be fulfilled in the crucifixion of the Lord himself a few days later.

Although the nation is exposed here, the Lord reveals that this will not impact the plans and purposes of God. Verses 42 to 44 read:

'Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him'" (ESV).

As we read this, we can clearly see the folly of those who thought they could control the Lord. These leaders thought they could get rid of Him! But this work was going to make more glory and honour for God, and result in destruction and judgement for those doing the plotting against Him.

We see God's grace coming through here. The stone becomes the chief cornerstone. We learn from 1 Peter 2:4-10 that Christ of course is the cornerstone, the start of the building of His church which is the greatest blessing for followers of God that has been provided by Him.

Lessons about Jesus

As I have studied and considered this chapter, I have been amazed with how the Lord Jesus demonstrates His deity and holiness throughout. The behaviour of those around Him does not in any way affect the aims and behaviours of the Lord. His wisdom and righteousness are on display in dealing with the questions and challenges put his way, as well as the presentation of the parables which perfectly reveal the true nature of those around. He exercises perfect judgement on the real issues that the nation of Israel had in terms of righteousness and their attitude towards God as opposed to the outward appearance they put forward.

One of the things that I was really impressed with though is the timing of things and it does have a real bearing on how we should view things today in our Christian lives. In Matthew chapter 21, Jerusalem was both not ready, and certainly not willing to receive the Messiah as He arrived. Unlike things we might try to arrange, this had no impact on that occasion for it concerned the Lord's plans. It was the divinely appointed time for Him to arrive and everything was in place, and the response of many was appropriate to it. How much we can learn from this. We have our own timelines and ideas about when things should happen. Such as when we want God to do things for us, or it may even be our desire for the Lord to come. But God does things in His own time and that time is the most appropriate. Therefore, we should not look to dictate to God but to wait for Him, looking at how we may serve Him whilst He works His purposes out.

John's Gospel chapter 1 verse 14 states that the Lord Jesus came in grace and truth. Perhaps more of Matthew chapter 21 deals with the truth, but grace is still there. It shows how much control Jesus showed. He never fails to show this despite what is going on around him. How thankful we can be that grace is always present with the Lord Jesus, in all circumstances!

Lessons for Ourselves

In reading such a chapter as Matthew chapter 21, we should be challenged about our own attitude towards the ways of God and His plans for us. In our society today, we are constantly being bombarded with information about how we can plan everything to make sure we have time to do what we want so that we can be all we want to be. But that attitude does not really fit in with the things we have read today. If we follow this world's pattern, we leave no time to allow the One who really is above all things to have His rightful place in our lives. The worst outcome of this would be for us to not even acknowledge what He has done in His wonderful work of salvation so that we think that it does not really matter that He gave Himself at Calvary for us and rose again to confirm His victory over death and sin. If we are self-centred and only allowing time for ourselves, that is evidence we have not really accepted our condition properly before God.

But what if we have decided for Christ in our lives? Do we continue to live with the idea that He is all in all and we are going to follow Him and wait for His timing in things. One of the worst things that the leaders of Israel did in Matthew chapter 21 was to resent the teaching of the Lord, which showed them up for what they really were. But how often we can ignore or justify our behaviours despite clear Scriptures showing us our wrong. It comes down to the same problems of not allowing God to fully rule in our lives and such chapters as Matthew chapter 21 remind us of our need always to do this.

Conclusion

I remember receiving some advice on Bible study which was to always read the Gospels more regularly than other books of the Bible because they tell us of the teaching and life of the Lord. I really feel the benefit of such advice with respect to a chapter like ours today. How we are reminded of the wonder of the person of the Lord in this chapter, but we are also challenged by its teaching, which reveals to us how easily we can put aside the things of God for our own goals and profit. How good that today we can read these things to reset our thinking and to focus more on the One who alone is worthy of our full consideration.

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