

**Jesus' Triumphal Entry & the Disturbance
at the Temple ~ Matthew 21:1-22**

Pastor Tom
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A Sunday School teacher asked her little preschool class what they knew about Easter. She had been working with the class for a while trying to explain what Easter was really all about. A little boy suggested Easter was when all the family came to the house and they ate a big turkey. The teacher wondered if the little boy was thinking of Thanksgiving. So she asked a girl next to the boy. She said that Easter was when you came down stairs in the morning and saw all the beautiful presents under the tree. The teacher felt discouraged and explained that the little girl was probably thinking of Christmas. But then she saw a little boy who tentatively raised his hand in the air.

"Yes," she called out. The boy said "Easter was the time when Jesus was crucified on the cross and buried". The teacher felt better finally assured that at least this little boy had grasped the true meaning of Easter. But then the little boy added "And when he comes out of the grave, if he sees his shadow, we have six more weeks of winter."

Maybe you have memories of what you thought Easter was all about growing up as a child. Maybe it was one of the only times your family went to church. Or you might remember when you got a green palm leaf and you thought Easter was all about everyone loving Jesus. But you might have only gotten about half the story and wondered where the Easter bunny fit in.

Well, over the next few weeks, we will dive deep into the Easter story. We will spend some serious time finding out how it all fits together. We will see how so many of the events that happened surrounding Jesus last week carried significance far beyond what those who experienced those events realized. Yet, because of that week, many of us experience God's presence in our lives today and walk in forgiveness of our sins.

The Gospel writer Matthew has prepared us very carefully for this final week of Jesus' life. Though we know from the other Gospels that Jesus and the disciples visited Jerusalem several times during Jesus' public ministry, Matthew has not included those stories in his Gospel. Instead, after the birth narratives, he follows Jesus' public ministry in the north region of Galilee. He presents Jesus to us through various miracles, encounters and teaching. But now he brings Jesus and the disciples to Jerusalem for that final week. Matthew thinks this so important that he devotes about 35% of his gospel to this. He will unveil to us the culmination of Jesus' ministry where He will secure redemption for His people. For this week ends with the central event in human history – Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection 3 days later.

Today, we will see Jesus begin this final week by boldly challenging the power structures in Jerusalem. In fact, **Jesus demonstrates His supremacy over Jerusalem.** This city was the center of Israel's national life, spiritual life and messianic hope. It contained the sacred temple; the holiest site in all of Judaism. The most powerful religious rulers of the nation, the Sadducees, lived in Jerusalem. The high priest, from the Sadducees, governed Jewish religious life from Jerusalem. The Jewish high council of the Sanhedrin met there. Jews from all over the world made pilgrimages to Jerusalem especially at Passover. This feast celebrated Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

Yet they were not a free people. The Romans occupied the land. The Roman Governor Pilate lived in Jerusalem from where he exercised political authority over the land. Yet the Jews had hope that one day a Messiah would arrive who would deliver them from these oppressors and reestablish their nation to greatness. During Passover when Jews from all over the world gathered together, the anticipation of Messiah and revolution grew to a fever pitch. This was Passover week.

Into this setting Jesus and the disciples arrived on that Sunday morning. Remember last week, they were on the outskirts of Jericho on the road to Jerusalem? Now they have arrived at the city's edge. From this moment, Jesus will move forward in a very deliberate way to bring God's plan to completion. As we travel through the first part of the story today, I pray God will reveal one character or group that interacts with Jesus who most portrays where you are currently at with Him. I pray that the Holy Spirit will stir in our hearts to glorify Jesus through what this text reveals to us.

Matthew 21:1-11 (ESV)

21 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." ⁴This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵"Say to the daughter of Zion,
'Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" ¹⁰And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" ¹¹And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

Jesus and the disciples reach the edge of Jerusalem near a village called Bethpage. The name of the village means “house of the early fig” which will become relevant a little later. Jesus instructs the disciples to go into the village and find a donkey with her colt. When they find them, they untie them and bring them to Jesus. This may seem pretty forward to us. We usually don’t prepare for a trip by sending friends to take the nearest car parked on the street and bring it for your trip. We call that stealing. But there are two possibilities for Jesus command.

He could have prearranged the use of this donkey. They had been to Jerusalem before and maybe the owner believed in Jesus so he told Jesus he could use the donkey any time. Or Jesus may have been claiming the privilege of a ruler. It was not unusual for the king or even for a rabbi to claim an animal for temporary use if they were on important business.

Either way, the disciples do bring back the donkey and her colt or baby donkey to Jesus. Then Matthew directs us to an Old Testament prophecy. “Say to the daughter of Zion – or the people of Israel – Behold, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.” This was written by the Old Testament prophet Zechariah who described the coming of the Messianic king on a donkey. So this is a very deliberate act on Jesus’ part to now reveal His identity.

If you’ve read the other Gospels or accounts of Jesus’ life, you might know that their Palm Sunday story only mentions one donkey, a foal or young donkey. Here, Matthew reveals to us that there was both a mother and young donkey. Jesus will ride the young donkey. So why would they bring another donkey? Think about what this young donkey will go through. It’s never been ridden. It will have to endure the shouting of crowds, the waving of palm branches and the press of people. Who better to calm the young donkey than its mother? Jesus rides this young donkey - the only time we see Jesus ride anything. In this act, Jesus demonstrates His supremacy over Jerusalem. **He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt fulfilling the prophecy that predicted the Messiah would do this. (21:1-11)** This was a claim of kingly authority.

The young donkey He rides depicts the humility of his kingdom. He does not arrive on a military war horse but a beast of burden perhaps symbolizing the burden he will bear for the nation. This Palm Sunday ride may not have even been noticed in the city if it was only Jesus and His disciples who came into the city. But a very great crowd went before him and some followed him. They demonstrated their homage to Jesus as king. Some laid their clothes on the road

indicating a willingness to submit to His rule. Many cut and waved palm branches. The palm became a national symbol for the Jews. Residents of Jerusalem waved palms at the Jewish Maccabean conquerors when they threw off Greek rule about 150 years previous. And now with the nation under the Roman oppressor, palm leaves again waved in expectation of deliverance.

They shouted words that clearly revealed their expectation that Jesus was the Messianic deliverer. They shouted Hosanna – meaning O save. O save us Son of David. The Messiah had to come from David’s line of kings. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. This one came as promised in their Scriptures. And it’s the Passover week when Messianic expectations rose up. Yet we will see as the story unfolds that most in the crowd expected Jesus to start a revolution. So though they hailed him at this moment, they actually praised their expectation of the Messiah, not the type of Messiah Jesus would soon reveal Himself to be.

Well, all this combines to make a deep impression on the city. Matthew tells us in verse 10 “And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up.” Does that remind you of another time when the whole of Jerusalem was disturbed about travelers arriving in the city? Way back in Matthew 2, wise men from the East arrive in Jerusalem asking “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” Matthew then tells us “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.” But here Matthew uses a different word to describe Jerusalem’s response to Jesus’ arrival. The whole city was stirred up or quakes. The word he uses is the root of our English word “seismic.” So it’s like Jesus’ ride causes an earthquake of stirring up through Jerusalem’s power structures and citizens. Remember, Jesus ministered in the far north country of Galilee. Many of Jerusalem’s citizens may never have even heard of Jesus. But the shouting crowd knows Him and many may have come from Galilee for Passover. So they declare “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.” Riding into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt with the crowds acclaim was a direct challenge to the authorities in Jerusalem. Why didn’t they stop Jesus? Maybe they were caught off guard. Maybe they waited to see if He would pose a bigger threat. But the ride finishes and Jesus accomplishes something many of them will never forget. But He’s just getting started. The next scene unfolds in Matthew 21:12-17.

Matthew 21:12-17 (ESV)

¹²And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹³He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”

¹⁴And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!”

they were indignant,¹⁶ and they 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 infants and nursing babies
you have prepared praise?’”

¹⁷ And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

Jesus will next demonstrate His supremacy over Jerusalem at Israel’s holiest site. He goes to the outer court of the temple. This court was reserved for Gentiles or non-Jews who had converted to Judaism. They feared the one true God. But the temple complex had a series of courtyards. Each one has greater restricting on who could enter it. This may have been done to symbolize levels ceremonial purity. The closer you got to the temple, the closer you got to God. But in a way, it catered to discrimination.

So the Gentiles could only worship the Lord from this outer courtyard. Then the women or female Jews could worship from the next courtyard. Then male Jews worshipped from their courtyard and the priest could go into the closest courtyard to the temple. To make matters worse, for the gentile converts, the temple authorities permitted some sellers and money changers to set up their tables in the courtyard of the Gentiles. The temple only accepted a certain currency for the temple tax. So if you came from another country with it’s money, you had to exchange it to the temple currency so you could pay our tax and offering. But you also might want to purchase an animal for sacrifice. So the animal sellers set up their stalls of animals in the Gentiles court.

So imagine you’re a Gentile convert to Judaism. You come to Jerusalem to pray near the temple. But in your prayer space there’s a money changer exchanging currency with travelers. There’s a merchant selling goats. Another sells doves. Further down another sells sheep. People barter for the best price. The animals squawk, coo, snort and baa. It’s a complete insult and disruption to your prayers and worship. Yet the temple authorities allowed this because it was convenient. People didn’t have to bring their own animals. People didn’t have to worry about exchanging currency somewhere else in the city. The system worked better with this set up.

What does Jesus do? Verse 12 – “And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. So Jesus displays His supremacy over Jerusalem again. **He goes into the temple and completely dismantles its trading business.**

(12) It would be like Jesus came to the St. Albert Farmer’s market on a nice summer holiday weekend. Then he starts overturning the tables of the sellers. He shouts at all the shoppers and doesn’t quit until the whole market is disrupted

and shut down. Talk about a challenge to the authorities. This is judgment upon the entire system and those who set it up. Some see in it a symbolic end to the sacrificial system. For in just a few days He will be the ultimate lamb and sacrifice Himself.

But He not only overturns tables. **He also proclaims the temple is HIS HOUSE but they have turned it into a den of robbers. (13)** He quotes Isaiah 56:7 where God speaks about his house being a house of prayer for all peoples. But Matthew doesn't include the "all peoples" part. He quotes Jesus as adding a piece of Jeremiah 7:11. Jeremiah was a prophet when the first temple of Israel still stood. But the nation's leaders had become corrupt. So Jeremiah, speaking for the Lord declares "Has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it declares the Lord." What is a den of robbers? Its place robbers plot their robberies. It's also the place they store all the money and treasures they've stolen. So Jesus charges the temple authorities with robbery against God and His people for using the temple for their activities.

The challenge to Jerusalem continues in the next verse 14. "And the blind and lame came to him *in the temple* and he healed them." How is that a challenge? ***He heals the blind and lame in the temple – where they were sometimes banned because of their disabilities. (14)*** Now back in the Old Testament there's a book called Leviticus. It contains laws for the priests. The Lord teaches Israel about the holiness and purity necessary to be in fellowship with Him. One way He chooses to teach this was to command that priests have no physical defects. So in Leviticus 21:17-21 – "Speak to Aaron saying, "None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. No one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long or man who has an injured foot or an injured hand or a hunchback or a dwarf" and some other disabilities that you can look up on your own. So the blind and lame could not serve as priests not because God didn't love them. It was because God wanted to teach Israel a visual lesson about the necessity of pure hearts in approaching God.

But there was never a command from God that those with physical abnormalities could not come to worship. Yet somehow this had gotten twisted around so that the lame and blind were at times excluded by the temple police. But here Jesus welcomes them and heals them. He's not doing anything unusual according to His pattern of ministry. But He is again challenging the order of things in Jerusalem.

Finally, the authorities respond. Matthew 21:15 – But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” They weren’t questioning whether Jesus needed hearing aids. They challenged Him to silence the children who repeated the shouts of Palm Sunday. “Hosanna to the Son of David.” That praise is reserved for the one true Messiah. Therefore you, Jesus, better stop them from shouting that falsehood or we will stop you. So Jesus has an opportunity to settle things down. Does Jesus back off and say, “Sorry guys. The heat of the moment and all the excitement of Passover got to me. Things got carried away. I’ll settle things down.” No.

He affirms the truthfulness of the cries of young children “Hosanna to the Son of David.” (16-17). Remember back in Matthew 16 where Jesus asks His disciples who he is? Peter responds you are the Christ or Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus blesses Peter but then warns them not to tell anyone because it was not yet time to reveal this. But now it’s time. Jesus affirms the children’s cry. So he answers the “do you hear what they’re saying” with “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?’” Yes I heard. Have you never read scribes, experts in the law, Psalm 8:2 which praises the Lord for the majesty of His name? The Psalmist praised the Lord. The children praise one as the Son of David who saves. He does not deny that He is the Lord. The encounter ends with Jesus and the disciples going back outside Jerusalem to the city of Bethany. It was common for travelers to lodge outside Jerusalem because the city was packed with pilgrims from around the world.

So we’ve seen Jesus display His supremacy over Jerusalem and its power in multiple ways through the Palm Sunday ride and the temple disturbance. I’m going to do just one more and we’ll be done.

Matthew 21:18-22 (ESV)

¹⁸In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry.¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once.

²⁰When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?”²¹ And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen.²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”

At first glance this is kind of a weird incident. If we don’t understand the context, it seems Jesus was hungry for breakfast one morning. Then he lost his temper when a fig tree had no fruit. So he performs some curse to teach that

tree a lesson. But in fact, this is a judgment miracle – a miracle of destruction for the purpose of announcing judgment. Remember Bethpage where this chapter started – town of the early fig? Figs were not fully ripened by the time of Passover. It was too early. But a flourishing fig tree would have some early figs that could be eaten for nourishment even though they didn't taste great. Jesus finds this tree which has leaves and should have had early fruit. But it has none. So he curses it and it withers or dies.

Well how does this displaying supremacy over Jerusalem? In the Old Testament, Israel had been compared to a fig tree with first fruits. Hosea 9:10 states "Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal-Peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame and became detestable like the thing they loved." Though Jesus does not mention the religious leadership and the temple by name, it was right before their eyes. They could see the temple mount from where they stood.

The disciples say "How did that fig tree wither?" Jesus answers, "If you have faith and do not doubt you can do what's done here but also say to this mountain "be taken up and thrown into the sea and it will happen." What mountain? It could be the mountains out towards the Dead Sea. Or it could be the mount on which the temple was built. I wonder if Jesus was saying in effect, "you need to place your faith in me – not the temple and its authorities because soon that won't be necessary and soon they won't even exist." We're not sure which mountain but we are sure he directs them to place their faith in Him and His name – not the temple and the name of those who run it – because though they look like they are full and vibrant and bearing fruit, when you get up close, there's no fruit there. It's dead.

Here we see another act of Jesus' supremacy. **He curses a fruitless fig tree which symbolized God's coming judgment on the religious leadership. (18-22)**

So Jesus has demonstrated supremacy and authority over Jerusalem and the most powerful structures and people in the nation by riding into the city on a donkey as the humble messianic deliverer; disrupting the entire economic system of the temple; claiming the temple as his house; welcoming and healing the blind and lame who had been excluded from the temple; affirming the cries of children that he was the Son of David who could save them and cursing a fruitless fig tree that symbolized the coming judgment on the religious leadership of the nation.

When given some historical, prophetic and cultural context, we begin to see how brazen and deliberate these acts were. These were the calculated actions of a man claiming supreme authority over the nation. I prayed to ask God to reveal who you were like in this story.

Are you like those in the Palm Sunday crowd who praised Jesus as Lord? Or are you like those in the crowd who praised Jesus for what they expected Him to be. If you find out that Jesus doesn't deliver what you want, will you abandon Him? Do you find yourself disturbed and maybe quaking that Jesus is much more than a sentimental teddy bear who you can clutch when you need a hug but put aside when you want to go your own way? Do you recognize that Jesus is the prophet sent from God and the King who humbly rode into the city?

Maybe you're living like the money changers and sellers who ignored the worship of the Lord from that court and got so wrapped up in their jobs that they had no time to see Jesus. Maybe you're blind and lame spiritually and wonder if God even sees you. But God waits for you to come to Him just like Jesus welcomed the blind and lame. Or maybe you're trying to shut down praise of Jesus because it makes you uncomfortable or you're more concerned about getting praise yourself? Or maybe you need to grow in putting your faith and approval in Him rather than in some system or yourself or some other person. Jesus does not allow us to remain neutral towards Him. That will become crystal clear as we move forward through those chapters. We will come upon some of Jesus' severest sayings in a last ditch attempt to awaken religious people with hard hearts towards Him. Will that be what it takes for you to submit to Jesus' supremacy over your life? Jesus' demonstration of His supremacy over Jerusalem requires our surrender to His supremacy over our lives. Please come to Him now and respond to what He's been saying to you.