

The Life and Times of Jesus Christ

8

The Last Week of the Messiah

The last week of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ is recorded in amazing detail. In fact, these seven days have been called the most important week in history, and their importance to the Gospel is reflected in the percentage* of the Gospel record that focuses on the events of this one week.

- **Matthew** – 36%
- **Mark** – 36%
- **Luke** – 24%
- **John** – 34%

When all four accounts are combined, 33% of the entire Gospel narrative is devoted to just seven days in the life of Jesus. That's a total of one third of the entire Gospel record spent on just one week! As Philip Yancey points out:

“Of the biographies I have read, few devote more than ten percent of their pages to the subject's death – including biographies of men like Martin Luther King Jr and Mahatma Gandhi, who died violent and politically significant deaths. The Gospels, though, devote nearly a third of their length to the climactic last week of Jesus' life.”¹

The Gospel narratives “are not balanced biographies, in which an equal amount of space is given to Jesus' upbringing, the influences on his early thought, his

- A Portrait of the Messiah
- The Divinity of the Messiah
- The Birth of the Messiah
- The Childhood of the Messiah
- The People of the Messiah
- The Inauguration of the Messiah
- The Opposition to the Messiah
- ▶ **The Last Week of the Messiah** ◀
- The Trial of the Messiah
- The Death of the Messiah
- The Resurrection of the Messiah
- The Ascendancy of the Messiah

* Based on the number of verses in each book, with percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

† The term “Passion” comes from the Latin word *passio*, which means “suffering.” It was used early in Church history to describe the events from the time of the Last Supper until the death of Christ upon the Cross.

circle of friends, his ambitions, his relations with his family, his unfolding public life. They are all really Passion⁺ narratives, and the accounts of Jesus' life and teaching could be said to be so much prelude to accounts of the last week of his life, his trial, his death and his resurrection."² One might even say that each of the Gospel accounts is a chronicle of Jesus' last week, with a very long introduction.

The Approach to Jerusalem

Read Mark 10:32

This verse records a sudden change in the demeanor of Jesus, so sudden that it took the disciples by surprise. Over the last few months, he had been deliberately avoiding Jerusalem because of the controversy he had roused. But now he announced that they were heading for Passover in Jerusalem. Let's take a closer look at the wording of **Mark 10:32**:

“They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid...”

In this verse, we see three sets of people with three different types of emotion:

- **Jesus** – he is “leading the way.” The meaning of the original Greek implies that he was moving well ahead of them. “We get the picture of...Jesus, a great lonely figure striding on ahead, and the disciples following, awe-stricken, at a distance.”³
- **The disciples** – Their reaction was one of astonishment. As the *Amplified Bible* translates **Mark 10:32**, “[the disciples] were bewildered and perplexed and astonished” at Jesus' sudden decision to return to Jerusalem.
- **The crowd** – There were also many common people following Jesus at the time he suddenly announced he was heading to Jerusalem. The *Amplified Bible* reflects their emotion clearly: “...[those who were still] following were seized with alarm and were afraid.”

The disciples had every right to be “astonished,” and the crowd had good reason to be “seized with alarm.” For Jesus to enter Jerusalem at that time was to court arrest, punishment and death. He had already had two close brushes with a public stoning in Jerusalem (**John 8:59; John 10:31**) and word had reached them that the religious elite was determined to kill Jesus (note **John 11:16**), particularly after the resurrection of Lazarus (**John 11:45-53**).

So sudden and deliberate was his change in direction that he had to explain his course of action to his disciples. **Mark 10:32-34** goes on to say:

“...Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ‘We are going up to Jerusalem,’ he said, ‘and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.’”

In the parallel account of **Matthew 20:18-19**, Jesus states even more explicitly that “the chief priests and the teachers of the law...will turn [the Son of Man] over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and *crucified*.” This was not the first time the disciples had heard Jesus speak of his upcoming crucifixion, and the modern reader might wonder why the disciples didn’t get the hint. Why were the disciples shocked when Jesus was crucified, and so disbelieving when he rose from the dead? After all, how clear a prediction can you get? The fact is that the disciples were deafened to the very word “crucified.” Their messianic expectations simply could not allow the concept of Jesus being crucified (note **Luke 24:19-21**).

For the first century Jew, crucifixion was the most heinous of executions, not just for its torturous death but also for its public humiliation. For the Jew, to be hung on a cross was equal to being cursed by God (**Galatians 3:13**). Paul would later speak of the “offence of the cross” (**Galatians 5:11**), and **Hebrews 12:2** would refer to its shame. For the disciples, therefore, it was inconceivable that the Anointed of God could possibly undergo a death that symbolized the curse of God.* It was for this reason that when Peter first heard Jesus predict his death by crucifixion, he pulled his Messiah aside, in **Matthew 16:22**, and said:

“Never, Lord!...This shall never happen to you!”

It appears that on each occasion they heard Jesus speak of his death and resurrection, they somehow thought that he was still speaking in parables. On one of these occasions, **Mark 9:9-10** tells us:

“...Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what ‘rising from the dead’ meant.”

It is obvious that the disciples found many of Jesus’ teachings hard to fathom at the time (note **John 16:29**) and, to the disciples, this recurring prediction of being killed and rising back to life on the third day obviously fell into this category.

And so, about one month before Passover, the disciples find themselves following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, joining the swelling pilgrim crowds all traveling in the same direction. They would have felt great trepidation at what was to come, but also a growing anticipation that this was indeed the time of the “coming of the Son of Man” to his throne. For it was at this time that James and John, represented by their mother, came forward with the request of **Mark 10:37**:

“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left *in your glory*.”

In the parallel passage found in **Matthew 20:20-23**, their mother’s request is that her sons “may sit at your right and the other at your left *in your kingdom*.” What did “in your glory” and “in your kingdom” mean to the disciples? It meant the public inauguration of Jesus as Messiah, an event that they felt increasingly certain was going to happen when they entered Jerusalem. It was for this reason that the jockeying for positions of power began on this final trip to Jerusalem.

* And yet, as **Galatians 3:13** reveals, the Anointed One would become the Cursed One, as part of God’s redemptive plan.

The Messianic Expectation

In order to appreciate the events that unfolded in the days that followed Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, we must first understand clearly the expectation the disciples had. The disciples had two levels of messianic expectation.

Level #1 – An anointed king

This was the lowest level of messianic expectation, and the one shared by the majority of first-century Jews. The word “messiah” simply means anointed one, and for many of the people this meant nothing more than an anointed king. Saul had been called “messiah” – “the Lord’s anointed” (1 Samuel 24:6-7) – while upon the throne, as had David (2 Samuel 2:4; 22:51), Solomon (1 Kings 1:39) and many kings after him (2 Kings 11:12; 23:30; 2 Chronicles 22:7). Thus Psalm 18:50 says that God “shows unfailing kindness to his anointed, to David and his descendants forever.”

It’s important to understand this historic meaning of the term “messiah.” Let’s substitute the word “messiah” for “anointed one” in each of these verses:

- Psalm 20:6 – “Now I know that the Lord saves his [messiah]; he answers him from his holy heaven with the saving power of his right hand.”
- Psalm 84:9 – “Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your [messiah].”
- Psalm 89:38 – “But you have rejected, you have spurned, you have been very angry with your [messiah].”
- Psalm 132:10 – “For the sake of David your servant, do not reject your [messiah].”

None of these verses are messianic prophecies. They are all focused on the earthly “messiah” or “anointed one” – the then-reigning king of Judah or Israel. Even a foreign king – Cyrus – is called a “messiah” in Isaiah 45:1.

Level #2 – The Anointed One

There was also, however, a deeper expectation stirring within the people. Although most were quite happy to settle for a popularly anointed king, descended from David’s line, others saw within the apocalyptic prophecies of Scripture the rising of a One and Only Messiah, called *the Anointed One*.

Read Daniel 9:25

It was in this second sense that the disciples applied the term “messiah” to Jesus after his Resurrection. We can see this in Acts 4:26-27, where they identify Jesus as “the Anointed One” of Psalm 2:2 and declare in prayer:

“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, *whom you anointed.*”

The Anointing of Jesus

Read Acts 10:37-38

Jesus was anointed by God as Messiah at the time of his baptism, when the Spirit of God came down upon him in the form of a dove (see **Matthew 3:16-17**). But there was no time that Jesus was ever physically anointed with oil as king of Israel – except possibly once.

Read John 12:1-8

This event is so significant that Jesus said that “wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (**Matthew 26:13**). What was Mary doing that was so significant? She was enacting out her faith that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah. She poured precious ointment upon his head, just as the kings of David’s line had been anointed for the throne in the preceding centuries.

Read Mark 14:1-11

From the combined narratives, we discover that this incident acts as a turning point in the last days of Jesus’ earthly life.

- *From Mary’s perspective*, the anointing of Jesus was the ultimate act of devotion and love. Not only was this nard very expensive – “worth a year’s wages” (**John 12:5**) – it would normally have been saved for her wedding day. Thus Mary was pouring out upon Jesus her entire life – all her hopes and dreams. For this reason, Jesus calls it “a beautiful thing” (**Mark 14:6**).
- *From Jesus’ perspective*, this anointing had messianic significance – but not according to current Jewish understanding. Rather than declaring this to be his anointing as *king*, Jesus declared that this was an anointing for *burial* (**Mark 14:8**). You will note that when Jesus was entombed, they didn’t have time to anoint the body in ritual preparation for burial (**Mark 16:1**). Here, a week before the event, Jesus declared that his body was already anointed and ready for burial.
- *From Judas’ perspective*, this was the point when he decided to betray Jesus (**Mark 14:10-11**). His betrayal appears to have been motivated by a combination of greed and disillusionment with Jesus’ messianic views, sparked by indignation at a woman anointing Jesus.

To a great degree, Mary’s acting of anointing Christ sets the pace for the rest of the Gospel narrative. For from that time forward, it would be women, not men, who would play the most significant roles in the story of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection.*

* The high profile of women in the Passion narratives stands in such stark contrast to the prevailing attitudes of the day that one must conclude that it is significant. It was indeed the inauguration of a new covenant in which there is “neither...male nor female” (**Galatians 3:28**), and in which God declares “I will pour out my Spirit on *all* people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy...Even on my servants, *both men and women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days...” (**Acts 2:17-18**).

Countdown: 6 days to crucifixion

The Triumphal Entry

Read Matthew 21:1-17

The irony of the Gospel record is strong. Just six days before he was to face trial before the Roman governor against the shouts of “Crucify him! Crucify him!” we find Jesus riding into Jerusalem cheered by a different kind of shout:

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Have you ever wondered how in the space of just six days, the crowd could shift from messianic acclaim to calls for crucifixion? To understand why this happened, we must first investigate the dynamics of the triumphal entry. There were four groups of people interacting to cause such a rousing acclamation.

- **The disciples** – According to [Luke 19:37](#), it was the disciples who started the hosanna acclamation as they “began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.” And you have to remember, this was not just the Twelve. Jesus was also followed by at least seventy other disciples, and probably more. This is why [Luke 19:37](#) describes them as “the whole crowd of disciples.”
- **The entourage from Bethany** – The raising of Lazarus to life had gravitated a great crowd, both from the village of Bethany itself and also from Jerusalem ([John 11:45](#); [12:9-11](#)). As Jesus made his way toward Jerusalem, this crowd would have followed him. More than that, many of those who had personally witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus would have accompanied Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, for [John 12:17](#) records that “the crowd that was with [Jesus] when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word.”
- **The pilgrim crowd** – Apart from the disciples and the crowd that had deliberately come to see Jesus, there were also incidental throngs of pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. As [Matthew 21:9](#) records it: “The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted.” Furthermore, word had reached Jerusalem that Jesus was on his way, and [John 12:12-13](#) informs us that “the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna!’...”
- **The children** – Although there is no record of children joining in the festive acclamation at the time of the triumphal entry, [Matthew 21:15-16](#) points out that they later echoed this acclamation in the Temple courts. It

is likely that children would have been among the pilgrim crowds descending the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem, and there is no doubt that they would have made the most of the noise and excitement of this event.

Why did these four groups of people call out: “Hosanna! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord”? These shouts were part of the festive greeting normally extended by the priests to the pilgrims arriving for Passover. The words are drawn from **Psalm 118:25-27**:

“O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you. The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.”

But what about the exclamation “Hosanna” used so frequently on the lips of the crowd? The Hebrew word *hosana* had probably become a phrase of praise, but its original meaning was “save now,” drawn from **Psalm 118:25**. Yet the crowds had infused the festive greeting with messianic meaning. Why would they do that?

The entire image of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, mounted on a donkey colt, held a strong messianic resonance in the mind of the first century Jew. Not only was the donkey or mule used by David and his sons as their royal mount (**2 Samuel 13:29**), Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem was reminiscent of King Solomon’s ride into the city (see **1 Kings 1:32-34**). But most importantly, as Matthew records, this mode of transport was a direct fulfilment of a messianic prophecy found in **Zechariah 9:9**. **Matthew 21:5** quotes it in part, but let’s look at this prophecy in its full context:

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

The message was clear to all those who knew the prophecy of Zechariah. The prophesied king was making his entrance to Zion. But those with discernment would see within this prophecy the clue that this king would not come as a conqueror, upon a chariot drawn by a war-horse, but rather “gentle and riding on a donkey.” He would be “righteous and having salvation,” but would not come as a military deliverer. Rather, his message would be one of peace. He would “take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem,” and because of him “the battle bow will be broken.” His rule would indeed “extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth,” as a fulfilment of many messianic prophecies (**Daniel 2:45; 7:13-14**), but his method of victory would be to “proclaim peace to the nations” (note **Ephesians 2:14-17**). And so we see within the very prophecies of the Old Testament the foretelling of a very different Messiah from that expected by the people, and therefore we can see sown the seeds of disillusionment that would, in part, lead to his rejection by Israel.

But the disciples of Jesus, at this time, saw none of this (**John 12:16**). They were blinded by the “glory” they expected would be revealed in the coming days (note **Luke 9:26; Mark 10:37**), and caught up in the excitement of this event. This is what they had been waiting for. This was the time when their Messiah would be revealed to the world.* After all, there had been at least one time before when the common people of Galilee had sought to crown Jesus as king, but he had immediately slipped away from the public eye (**John 6:14-15**).

As the days passed, however, the disciples would begin to wonder when Jesus planned to reveal himself to the world (**John 14:22**). This was a natural reaction to the sudden let down after the triumphal entry. Their messianic worldview still could not accept a delayed revealing, despite the fact that Jesus had clearly prepared them for this. Immediately before his triumphal entry, in **Luke 19:11-28**, he had even told a parable to explain this, “because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.”

But none of this mattered at the time of the triumphal entry. The messianic procession progressed across the crest of the Mount of Olives into full view of Jerusalem, at which point Jesus wept and prophesied once again of the city’s destruction (**Luke 19:41-44**). And then, in the midst of great excitement and acclamation, palm branches laid before his course, Jesus crossed the Valley of Kidron and entered Jerusalem as her promised king. He passed through the eastern gate of the city, of which was prophesied in **Ezekiel 44:1-2**:

“Then the man brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, the one facing east, and it was shut. The Lord said to me, “This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered through it.”

Today, the Golden Gate (which was the gate through which Jesus entered Jerusalem) is permanently shut. In the sixteenth century, the Turkish rulers of Jerusalem feared a Jewish uprising that might occur if a messianic pretender entered through the Golden Gate on a donkey in fulfillment of **Zechariah 9:9**, and so they ordered the gate bricked up, inadvertently fulfilling another messianic prophecy – this time, **Ezekiel 44:1-2**. And so the east gate of the city remains shut to this day, for there is no other messiah than the one who rode through the gate on a donkey’s colt twenty centuries ago.

A City Astir

Read John 12:9-19

From John’s snapshot of the triumphal entry, we can clearly see the reasons for the antagonism against Jesus. John ties the triumphant entry closely with the resurrection of Lazarus, and shows that it was actually the raising of Lazarus which sparked the messianic fever that, in the eyes of the religious elite, threatened to engulf Jerusalem. Their exasperation and fear can be heard in their words:

“Look how the whole world has gone after him!”

Matthew 21:10-11 records the messianic undercurrents stirring within the city of Jerusalem at the time:

“When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds answered, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth...’”

Jesus was not arrested because he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, but without question, the stir he caused with his entry was one of the principal motivations for his arrest later in the week. For his triumphal entry caused a chain reaction of rumors that would reverberate throughout the city for days to come, and fear of the reaction of the pilgrim crowd that packed Jerusalem during Passover was the main motivation behind the action of the Sanhedrin at the end of the week.

Psalms 118 had set the pace for the Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, but it also held another hidden prophecy – one that Jesus himself would quote as being fulfilled in that last week of his life. Immediately preceding the Hosanna Declaration, **18:22-24** declares:

“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Read Matthew 21:42-46

Countdown: 5 days to crucifixion

The Cleansing of the Temple

Read Matthew 21:12-17

Although from Matthew’s account it appears that Jesus, upon arriving in Jerusalem, immediately cleansed the Temple, **Mark 11:11** discloses that there was a gap of one day between the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the Temple. From Mark’s account we read that Jesus “looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.” It was not until the next day that he entered the Temple and began to overturn money changers.

So let’s backtrack for a moment. What was it that Jesus saw when he “looked around at everything”? The Temple had a number of distinct courts and compartments, arranged like the layers of an onion, each layer more holy and with stricter prohibitions than the one before it. Here are the layers:

- ➔ **The Court of the Gentiles** – This was the outermost layer of the Temple precinct, and also the largest courtyard, covering a circuit of three-quarters of a mile. Here Jesus would see Solomon’s Colonnade (also called Solomon’s Porch) – a double set of colonnades with 27-foot high pillars and a roof of cedar, which ran along the inner side of the wall enclosing the Court of the Gentiles. Sections of the portico were still under construction,

evidenced by the scaffolding of the stonemasons and sculptors that would have been visible at intervals along the Colonnade. It was in the Colonnade that Jesus had preached many times to the people over the past three and a half years (**John 18:20**). Here, during the previous Feast of Dedication, the religious leaders had tried to stone him (**John 10:22-39**), and here also his Church, which would come into being forty days after his death, would meet regularly (**Acts 3:11; 5:12**) during the early days of its growth.

- **The Court of the Women** – Beyond the Court of the Gentiles lay a second court. Only Jews and Jewish proselytes (both male and female) were allowed to pass through into this smaller, inner court, for signs were posted which forbade entry to any Gentile. An inscription, unearthed in the last century, reads in both Greek and Latin: “No foreigner may enter inside the barrier and embankment. Whoever is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.” It was in the Court of the Women that rabbis gathered to discuss fine points of Jewish law, and it was here that Jews could bring their gifts to the Temple treasury (**Luke 21:1-4**). It was probably in the Court of the Women that the child Jesus discussed the Torah with the rabbis and learned men of that time. And it was in the Court of the Women where the Jews would speak openly of their longings for the Messiah, for it was just outside the entrance to the Court of the Women that Roman sentries were posted and could come no further.
- **The Court of the Israelites** – The next and innermost courtyard was the Court of the Israelites, which corresponded with the Outer Court of Moses’ Tabernacle and Solomon’s Temple. Here no woman could enter, but only a healthy and able Jewish man.
- **The Holy Place** – This was the area reserved for the priests of the Temple, prohibited to all others, Jew and Gentile alike.
- **The Holy of Holies** – This was the inner sanctum of the Temple, guarded by a thick double veil. This area was prohibited to all except the High Priest, and entry for him was allowed only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

When Jesus cleansed the Temple, it was actually the outermost court that he cleansed – the section called the Court of the Gentiles. It was here that the money changers had set up their tables and animals could be bought and sold for sacrifice. So why were money-changers allowed within the Temple courts? The reason lies in the nature of the sacrificial system. The Torah required that any animal sacrificed be unblemished, and although a pilgrim could bring his own animal, it would then need to be checked by the priest before it was approved for sacrifice. It was much easier to purchase an animal within the Temple courts that had been pre-approved by the priesthood.

But in order to purchase this animal, you needed money. Foreign currency defiled the Temple, since it was stamped with the idolatrous head of Caesar, contravening the most basic laws of the Torah (**Exodus 20:4**). It was necessary, there-

fore, to change Roman coinage into Temple currency – the sacred Tyrian shekel. “This was the system upon which Judaism depended, and if there had not been money-changers, it would not have been possible for the sacrificial routines to be operative.”⁴

Jesus didn’t overturn the tables of the money changers because they were exchanging money within the temple courts. He did so because they were extorting the people, who had no alternative but to pay inflated rates. His pronouncement of their guilt in **Matthew 21:13** makes it clear:

“It is written... ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers.’”

Here are the two passages that Jesus was quoting from:

- **Isaiah 56:7** – “...for my house will be called a house of prayer *for all nations*.” The Court of the Gentiles, declared Jesus, was built to be a “house of prayer” for the Gentiles. This was the closest they could come to the sanctuary of the God of Israel.
- **Jeremiah 7:9-11** – “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury... and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe’ – safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, *become a den of robbers* to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.” When Jesus pronounced the Court of the Gentiles to be a “den of robbers,” he invoked the prophecy of Jeremiah that had applied to the destruction of the first Temple (read the rest of **Jeremiah 7**).

Thus in spite of the sanctity of the Temple courts, dishonest trade was carried on, all under the protection of the priestly aristocracy. In fact, the wealth of the chief priests came from the Temple trade. And so, when Jesus spoke the words “you are making [the Temple into] a ‘den of robbers,’” this was directed not just at the money-changers and animal traders, but at the highest levels of the Temple leadership. It is no wonder, then, that the religious leaders challenged Jesus: “By what authority are you doing these things?”

Read Matthew 21:23-27

Countdown: 4 days to crucifixion

The Cursing of the Fig Tree

Read Mark 11:12-14

At first glance, the cursing of the fig tree seems impulsive, vindictive and out of character. In fact, Passover wasn’t even the season for figs, and Jesus knew this. So why did Jesus do it?

What we need to realize is that this “was not a thoughtless, angry act, but an acted-out parable.”⁵ The anger that Jesus displayed against the fruitless fig tree was the same anger he had displayed the day before* when he had cleansed the Temple. As the commentary of the *Life Application Bible* explains:

“Just as the fig tree looked good from a distance but was fruitless at close examination, so the Temple looked impressive at first glance, but its sacrifices and other activities were hollow because they were not done to worship God sincerely.”⁶

The fig tree was used on several occasions to represent the nation of Israel. In **Matthew 24:32-32**, he said:

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.”

But the cursing of the fig tree had another level of meaning, for Jesus used it as an object lesson to the disciples on the power of faith.

Read Matthew 21:20-22

Read Mark 11:20-24

The Final Parables

Read Luke 21:37-38

In the last week of Jesus’ earthly life, he spent a great amount of time teaching in the Temple courts. During these final days, he taught six parables:

- **The parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-32)**– This was directed at the chief priests and Pharisees who had challenged Jesus’ authority to cleanse the Temple and teach the people.
- **The parable of the wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33-41)** – This was also directed at the chief priests and Pharisees, who “knew he was talking about them” (21:45). They therefore conspired to kill Jesus, since they perceived him as a direct threat to their authority.
- **The parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14)** – This parable was probably also directed at the chief priests and Pharisees, since it flows

* Although Matthew records the cursing of the fig tree as taking place *after* the cleansing of the Temple, Mark records it as happening *before*. Some scholars have used such discrepancies in the Gospel accounts as proof that the biblical record is unreliable as historical evidence. However, unlike the modern biographer, the Gospel writers are not interested in the chronological sequence of the events as much as their theological significance. They therefore often group events together, sometimes out of chronological sequence. This is because the Gospel writers are less interested in the *when* of the event than in the *why* of the event. In the case of the fig tree, Matthew connects its cursing with the fruitlessness of the religious leadership (note **Matthew 21:43**), while Mark connects it with the cleansing of the Temple itself (note **Mark 11:12-15**). Another example of this chronological rearrangement is the timing of the anointing of Jesus by Mary. According to John, this took place before the triumphal entry, although Matthew indicates it took place later during the week (**Matthew 26:6-17**). Which is correct? In one sense, it doesn’t matter. John’s account connects the anointing with the triumphal entry, while Matthew places it just before the betrayal of Judas in order to clearly connect those two events.

on without a break from the parables in **Matthew 21**. Like the other parables, it overturned the conventional wisdom that every Jew was automatically qualified for the coming kingdom. The invitations have been sent out, says Jesus, but only a few will be chosen to participate in the coming age.

- **The parable of the ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13)** – Jesus directed this parable at his disciples, for it flows on uninterrupted from his discourse in **Matthew 24**. Jesus is now preparing them for a delayed “coming of the Son of Man” (**Matthew 24:27,37**) “because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (**Matthew 24:44**). What is the moral of this parable? “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”
- **The parable of the loaned money (Matthew 25:1-13)** – This parable is also directed at the disciples, for it starts with, “Again, [the coming of the Son of Man will be like...” The moral of this parable is very similar to the previous parable: Watchfulness and faithfulness, even though the master delays his return.
- **The parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:14-46)** – This parable follows on immediately from the parable of the loaned money and describes what happens when “the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him.” There will be a separating of those who genuinely belong to the Son of Man, and those who make only a pretense of belonging to him. In this parable, Jesus transfers service done directly to him into a responsibility to serve “one of the least of these.”

Attempts to Entrap Jesus

During these last countdown days, the religious elite – the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Herodians – attempted to trap Jesus in his own words by posing sly and complex questions. You must remember that the Pharisees and Sadducees were experienced in posing dilemmas in order to prove their points both to their disciples and to their opponents. The trick questions they posed to Jesus were of two kinds:

Political questions

Read Matthew 22:15-21

The Pharisees were first off the mark with a question designed to trap Jesus, but they enlisted the help of the Herodians to do this. The Pharisees were ardent nationalists, strongly opposed to Roman rule, while the Herodians (normally the staunch enemies of the Pharisees) were supporters of rule of the Herods and their Roman patrons. Whether Jesus answered yes or no, he was in trouble. If he answered, “Yes, you should pay taxes to Caesar,” the Pharisees would denounce him before the people. If he answered, “No, you should not pay taxes to Caesar,” the Herodians would report him to the Roman governor on a charge of sedition.

Jesus' answer, however, turned the tables on his questioners and placed the responsibility firmly back in their court. His accusers "were amazed" (**Matthew 22:22**), while "all the people hung on his words" (**Luke 19:48**).

Theological questions

Read Matthew 22:23-32

The Sadducees then posed a question to Jesus in an attempt to prove there was no resurrection. They did this because this was one of their main points of contention with the Pharisees (note **Acts 23:6-10**), but also because they knew that the resurrection was foundational to the teaching of Jesus. His answer even gained some praise from the local rabbis (**Luke 20:39**) and the listening crowd was "astonished at his teaching" (**Matthew 22:33**).

Read Matthew 22:34-40

One final question was then posed by an expert in the Law: "What is the greatest commandment?" The Torah had 613 distinct commandments, all carefully catalogued by the rabbis. This question had been posed many times over the previous three centuries, and the rabbis of Jerusalem wanted to hear Jesus' stand on the issue. Jesus' reply was a modified answer from the Pharisaic school of Hillel.*

In **Mark 12:28-34**, we discover that the man who asked Jesus this question was not trying to trap him, but was genuinely wanting to know Christ's answer. His response to Jesus' answer showed that this "expert in the Law" was probably won over to Jesus' side during this exchange. But Jesus then turned to his enemies and posed a question of his own.

Read Matthew 22:41-46

The question Jesus posed concerned the nature of the Messiah. To this question, his detractors had no answer and "from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions" (**Matthew 22:46**).

Christ's enemies had sought to entrap him through complex questions of politics and theology, hoping either to turn the people against him or to have the basis to bring a charge before the Roman governor. Jesus not only answered them, but also had posed two questions of his own, to which the religious authorities had no answer. These questions addressed:

- The source of John the Baptist's authority (**Matthew 21:24-27**)
- The nature of the Messiah (**Matthew 22:41-45**)

To both these questions, the Pharisees and Sadducees had no answer. In the eyes of the pilgrim crowd, this would have automatically disqualified them as a spiritual authority in either of these two matters – the recognition of prophets and the

* The school of Hillel taught that to love God with all your heart was the core of the Torah and "all the rest is commentary." However, although Jesus' teaching matched many of the teachings of Hillel, he also refuted many of the precepts of the Hillel school. For example, Jesus was once asked by the Pharisees: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (**Matthew 19:3-9**). It was the teaching of Hillel that a man could divorce his wife for any reason. Jesus strongly refuted this, taking a stand on divorce that was closer to the position of the Shammai school of the Pharisees.

recognition of the Messiah. The damage was done, and it was for fear that their authority would be further undermined that the religious leaders dared not challenge Jesus further on matters of the Torah.

“Frustrated in their aims by replies of such disarming wit, long-time enemies united against Jesus – Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians all came after him. The die was cast.”⁷

Countdown: 2 days to crucifixion

The Betrayal of the Messiah

Read Matthew 21:45-46

The presence of Jesus in Jerusalem during the Passover festivities was a thorn in the side of the Sanhedrin. For this reason, a secret meeting was held in the house of Caiaphas, the high priest, to decide what to do about this troublemaker. **Matthew 26:3-5** tells us:

“Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. ‘But not during the Feast,’ they said, ‘or there may be a riot among the people.’”

The Gospel record tells us that fear of the people created an intractable dilemma for the ruling class. While they feared what Jesus might do during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, they also didn’t want to instigate a riot. During the Feast, the population of Jerusalem swelled from around 50,000 to several hundred thousand. If the pilgrim crowds, many of whom were from Galilee, erupted in a riot over the arrest of Jesus, the results could be disastrous. Their fear is clearly stated in **John 11:48**:

“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

Richard Horsley explains the basis of the Sanhedrin’s fear of the people:

“Indeed, the Jewish ruling groups had good reason to be ‘afraid of the people,’ for the common people were not docile and passively resigned to their situation in life. They held ideals of what life should be like, and a memory which informed and buttressed those ideals. They remembered times when their forefathers had been free, and not under the control of domestic or foreign overlords; and they remembered previous conflicts in which their forebears had become subjected, but were able successfully to reassert their freedom.”⁸

And so we find, in the week leading up to Passover, this dilemma for the Sanhedrin, as shown so starkly in **Luke 19:47-48**:

“Every day [Jesus] was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.”

But the answer to this dilemma came from an unexpected source. Just two days before the Passover, one of Jesus’ own disciples approached the Sanhedrin.

Read Luke 22:1-6

The agreed price for the betrayal of Jesus was “thirty silver coins” (**Matthew 26:15**). This was the Torah’s value for compensating the death of a slave (**Exodus 21:32**), and was a direct fulfillment of a key messianic prophecy.

Read Zechariah 11:10-13

Many have speculated as to Judas’ motives for betraying Jesus. “Had he, perhaps like some in the joyful crowds that had welcomed Jesus into the city a few days earlier, become disillusioned because Jesus had not seized power?”⁹ Greed itself may have been a factor (note **John 12:4-6**), but hardly the main one, for the betrayal price was only enough to buy a new tunic.¹⁰ But whatever the natural motive, there was a clearly spiritual force at work, for **Luke 22:3** tells us: “Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot...” This shows that the “prince of this world,” whom Jesus considered his primary opponent (see **John 14:30-31**), was using a human being to orchestrate the death of the Messiah.

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Sydney: Strand Publishing, 1995), pp.187-188.

² A M Hunter, *The Works and Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p.112.

³ A M Hunter, *The Works and Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p.112.

⁴ A N Wilson, *Jesus* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), p.174.

⁵ *Life Application Bible* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1988), p.1374.

⁶ *Life Application Bible* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1988), p.1374.

⁷ *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.249.

⁸ Richard A Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p.3.

⁹ *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.250.

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