

Gospel of Matthew 21:

The Grand Entrance!



In our journey through the Gospel of Matthew, things don't always fall on the appropriate dates as ideally they should, but we are going to be motoring this next section on our way to the climax of this story. We will try to get to the cross by Good Friday of this year. Not guaranteeing that we will make it in order, but as close as possible. But for today, Palm Sunday comes early because I don't want to depart from the text sequence. We have gone to Matthew's gospel now, 90 times. It looks like we will have certainly over 100 lessons in this gospel by the time we are through!



So, at the end of chapter 20, Jesus and His growing entourage of disciples were passing out of the town of Jericho on their way to Jerusalem when they encountered two blind men on the side of the road. One of them was named Bartimaeus, says Luke's gospel. They raised such a noise that Jesus stopped, talked to them, and upon their request, He healed them. Then, as you might expect after something so out-of-this-world happening to them, they left Jericho, following Jesus and His growing crowd of disciples on their way to a fateful appointment with Jerusalem! Jericho is 15-20 miles northeast of Jerusalem, so they were traveling southwest until they got to Bethphage – close enough to be a suburb of Jerusalem right near the famous Mount of Olives. We never hear from Bartimaeus or his friend again in the story line. They are with the disciples and an unseen part of the momentous events that transpire from then on, and that is how their particular story line ends. But the story of Jesus is just heating up, and in two weeks these formerly sightless men are going to witness with their own eyes - their new eyes - their hero crucified and writhing in pain! That is quite an introduction to the world of sight!

So, Jesus and His large group of disciples travel the road down to Jerusalem. I would think that normally, as Jesus walked, He taught, or answered questions. But I wonder if this trip was different. He knew what He was walking into and it had to weigh heavily upon His mind. He may have been quieter because of it. There were also desperate people with debilitating physical problems that would hunt down the whereabouts of Jesus and somehow determine where He was going, and they would wait for Him. This made every journey of Jesus' a slow affair. It made a day's journey into a two or three day journey. It seems that it got to the disciples at times, but it never seems to have bothered Jesus. His mission was to teach and He seemed to have an agreement within the Godhead that alleviating suffering was a part of His mission.



But finally, they had arrived on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Bethphage and the Mount of Olives lie just to the northeast side of the old Jerusalem. It is suggested that this area attracted Jesus for two reasons. First, it seems to have been an area where former Galileans settled – who had moved to Jerusalem. They formed their own little ethnic neighborhood. Secondly, it was also believed to have been an area reserved for helping the poor and the sick. The village of Bethany, (our very own church's namesake), would have been right there in this region. The most commonly held view of the meaning of the name “**Bethany**” is “*house of affliction/poverty*”. It is believed that this area had been set aside for caring for the poor and sick because it was obscured from a view of Jerusalem and thus the temple by the intervening bulk of the Mount of Olives. It was a place to keep the “undesirables” out of sight of the temple because it was believed that the the sick, infirm, the destitute were an offense to the sight of God. The man known as Simon the leper, someone it was likely that Jesus had healed in past journeys to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, had a home in this area. His friends, Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus also lived in this area. Jesus had resurrected Lazarus from the dead at one point. But we won't be introduced to them really until chapter 26. Yet, the point I'm making is that this is the first place in Jerusalem to which Jesus is drawn! What does that tell you about God and His heart toward the suffering?! It should tell you that the religious “authorities” were wrong about God!

Bethphage appears to be a small village on the western slope of the Mount of Olives but between Bethany and Jerusalem. The name means “House of Young/Unripe Figs”. There is a village there now, so archaeological evidence for the existence of a 2000 year-plus old village will be hard to come by for some time, and maybe it will never happen – unless, of course, something is uncovered by an accident of new construction. When that happens, the archaeologists usually get the green light to move in, apply their discovery techniques to see what is there and save it for posterity. But for that reason, I would think that new construction is a very risky business - anywhere in and around Jerusalem, actually. A new building project could be held up indefinitely if something of interest is unearthed, so I would think that puts a bit of a chill on the construction business there. Just too much Jewish history and beyond, underground.

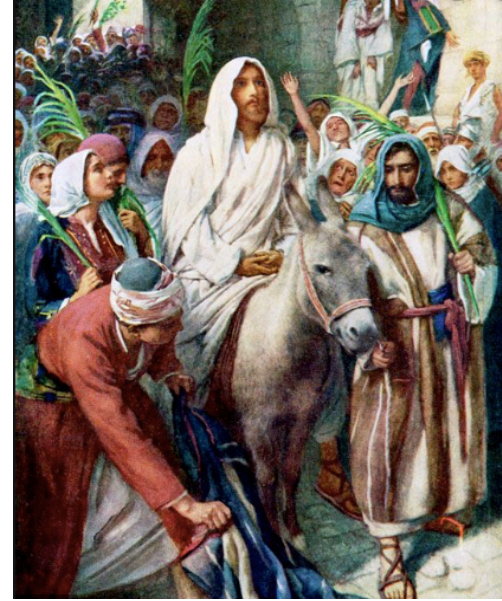


Anyway, you’ve heard the rather uneventful portrayal of the synoptic gospels accounting of the arrival of Jesus at Bethphage. John’s recollection of events during this time is quite different from that in the synoptic gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but there are a number of shared details running through the narratives of all four gospels that draw these two versions together. But John has Jesus staying at the home of His friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, whose father was Simon the Pharisee, perhaps also known as Simon the Leper as in the Synoptic Gospels. But according to John, it was shortly before this triumphal entry into Jerusalem that Lazarus had sickened and then had died unexpectedly. It was a shock to everyone except Jesus. Jesus had gone to his tomb about a long 2 days, or 3 days after Lazarus had expired,.. had the stone rolled back, and called him forth from the dead! But I really struggle with the tension between the two separate accounts. I’ll have to do some research when we actually come to that point in the story and let you know what I find out – if, or how well the stories can be reconciled.

It is at this place, Bethphage, on the side of the Mount of Olives, that Jesus makes preparations for his grand entrance into Jerusalem. Jesus knew it was going to be a spectacle because in God's careful timing, His reputation had finally been burgeoning out of control! He was often drawing really big crowds now! He caused a major commotion everywhere he went as hordes of people would turn out to catch a glimpse of Him, hoping they could see the famous rebel rabbi and healer doing some of the amazing things He was reputed to be doing! But knowing the symbolism of His grand entrance into Jerusalem and knowing the O.T. prophetic scriptures, he sends two disciples out to get a young donkey for Him to ride upon, so to fulfill the Messianic prophecy of **Zechariah 9:9**, which Matthew includes in the text. So the disciples did as they were told. They were confronted by the young donkey's owners (says Luke) when they went to untie and take the animal, but just as Jesus has said, when they answered "*the Master needs it*", they were allowed to take the animal. / They bring the colt to Jesus, a few of them put their coats on it's back for padding, and Jesus gets on it. Mounting a donkey is not like mounting a horse. They are a small animals, very strong though and durable. I would not think it would be a comfortable ride as one's legs would most likely touch the ground or very nearly, especially on a young animal. There would have been no stirrups to steady one's self with, but you could still steady yourself by touching the ground with your feet if you needed to. So Jesus rides this young beast that has not been broken, and just like the owners inexplicably let the donkey go to serve "*the Master*", the donkey itself let Jesus get on it's back and ride it as if it did this every day!! Except that it didn't! Anyone else and it would have heaved and bucked and protested in any way that it was physically capable of! But Jesus was demonstrating his Mastery even over the nature of an unbroken, untried, and in every way, an unpredictable and unreliable animal! 5



Imagine the risk Jesus would have/could have been taking at this point in the game. If he did actually have mastery He had nothing to worry about. If not, what if the animal started acting up, bucking and dodging when the crowds got loud and rowdy as they neared the city gate?! Imagine the crowd laughing uproariously at such a comical scene?! It would have made Jesus into a joke! But, this donkey knew who he was carrying. It was the Creator of the universe! He definitely was in charge. So the little donkey carried the King of Kings like he was a pro at it!



Meanwhile the crowd was gathering and they were wound up! They were shouting “Hosanna!” They were celebrating Him like he was a liberating hero! Aside from the large entourage of excited disciples, most of these people as they congregated from the street of Jerusalem, were pilgrims from all over the known world, who clogged the streets of Jerusalem every year as they waited to there to celebrate Passover. They actually knew little of what was actually going on or the significance of this great moment, but it sure was exciting, and they were really into it. By the time they were nearing the gates, people were laying their coats on the road for the donkey to walk on! Others were waving palm branches! John says the crowd of people that had been with Jesus when he raised Lazarus from the dead were busy spreading the word and hyping up the excitement in the crowd, saying that a great sign had been given. Everyone knew it was a Messianic sign! What else could it be?! In the background, in the shadows, the religious elite looked on... and seethed! But they were powerless to do anything. There would have been a riot if they touched Jesus! But they began conspiring in earnest to rid themselves of this upstart!

Many in the crowd, probably the vast majority, were greatly curious! “*Who is this man?!?*” And others were answering, some of them disciples of Jesus, and others of them had seen or heard of Him and knew who He was. “*It’s Jesus of Nazareth*”. The most common response to that from the out-of-country pilgrims had to have been “*Who is that?*” or from the in-country pilgrims, “*Oh - I’ve heard of Him! Really? That’s the guy?*” By the time this spectacle was over, this was the biggest deal in town! It had **EVERYONE** talking/speculating! It was exactly as Jesus had engineered the occasion! The road to the cross was begun in earnest and Jesus was attacking it and picking up speed for that final breathtaking mile – home stretch!



Luke adds an element to this story that none of the other gospels writers do. First Luke adds a sad prophecy by Jesus as He was nearing the city, as the commotion was beginning to pick up. But first, we find out there were some Pharisees mingled in with the boisterously enthusiastic crush of Jesus’ disciples. They were there to keep an eye on things, and they were particularly upset by the way the word “Hosanna” was being (in their venerable opinion) **abused**! Hosanna has no real meaning. It is just an utterance that expresses praise, worship, adoration! The disciples were directing these words meant for God **at Jesus**! It was highly inappropriate – blasphemous, they thought! They even complained to Jesus, trying to get Him to reign in His disciples by rebuking them! He basically says “*That’s impossible. The earth itself celebrates! Even the stones in this road want to celebrate!*” He does not stop them. Then Jesus launches into His dire prediction/prophecy. Bu this tells you the state of mind of Jesus. He was very sad! As people were celebrating, **He was weeping**! What a strange and poignant contrast here in this scene!

[Luke 19:41-44]

This doesn't seem to be spoken as a curse, but it might as well have been. Jerusalem *would pay dearly* for what they were about to do to Jesus, and it would happen just as Jesus foretold it here in 70 AD when the Roman empire brought the crushing weight of their military might to bear against the walls of Jerusalem and leveled them, and the city, AND the temple!



Remember, that it was not the Jews that killed their own Christ. Well, it's true, they *did exactly that*, but it was just as much our doing as theirs! This is imperative to understand! God has a special love for the Jews, enough for His Son to BE one! And Jesus loved His own people intensely! But the fact is that they were used by God to do a dirty job! They had been chosen for this from the beginning! *It tells me that God wanted His own Son killed by His friends rather than His avowed enemies!* But, listen, Jesus died for the sins of the whole world! That was a sovereign God's plan! When it comes right down to it, it was *your sins and mine* that were taking Him to the cross! Don't be too harsh on the Jews unless you are *doubly harsh upon yourself!* The Jews would not have been enlisted by God to do this if we ALL didn't need it done! We needed to be saved from the condemnation of God for our own sins, and only He could do in,.. and only in this way!

But what a moment here! During His greatest moment of acclamation, when just about everyone was proclaiming Him the Messiah, and rejoicing like madmen, Jesus wept over Jerusalem and His nation! He was in anguish over what was to happen to His own people in the future! But, listen - their ultimate rejection of Jesus was to give the gospel wings to fly away into the whole world! This rejection had to happen for the next stage in God's plan to happen! It wasn't even the fault of the Jews, although it also was!

He used evil men according to their own nature. He did not make them do anything against their own will. But they acted and reacted as He knew they would! It was the plan of God! So this was inevitable, because what God has planned He will do! Who stops Him!

Fortunately for us He is a God of Love not hate! In love, Jesus was going to the cross! In love He was beginning His church! He was sending His church out into the world! The demolition of Jerusalem and the banning of Jews from Palestine by the Romans would have God's desired effect of disbursing the Jewish Christians out into the nations of the world where they would tell people about Jesus and begin churches – not buildings, but local groups of believers distributed everywhere in the world, *organic* centers where people would worship and learn about Jesus, and be sent out to tell the others in their own worlds - in their own separate spheres of influence - of the gospel of Jesus and of His offer of reconciliation! **[2 Cor. 5:18-21]**



I have two questions for us! Is this what we are doing here at Bethany? I'll answer that for you - yes! That is our stated mission! It is in our church constitution in a *mission statement*. It says "*Go into the world and make disciples*"! But that begs one more question and then we are through for today. We have to ask it to ourselves, and I mean seriously! How am I purposefully going about doing this?!