

## Chapter 21

### Opening events of Passion Week (21:1–23:39)

#### ***Jesus' First Day in Jerusalem (21:1-21:17***

(Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:29-38; John 12:12-15)

Daniel describes the historic moment that is fast approaching, “an anointed one” that “shall be cut off” with the destruction of “the city and sanctuary” soon to follow.

*“And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed.”* (Daniel 9:26, ESV)

***Matthew 21:1 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples,***

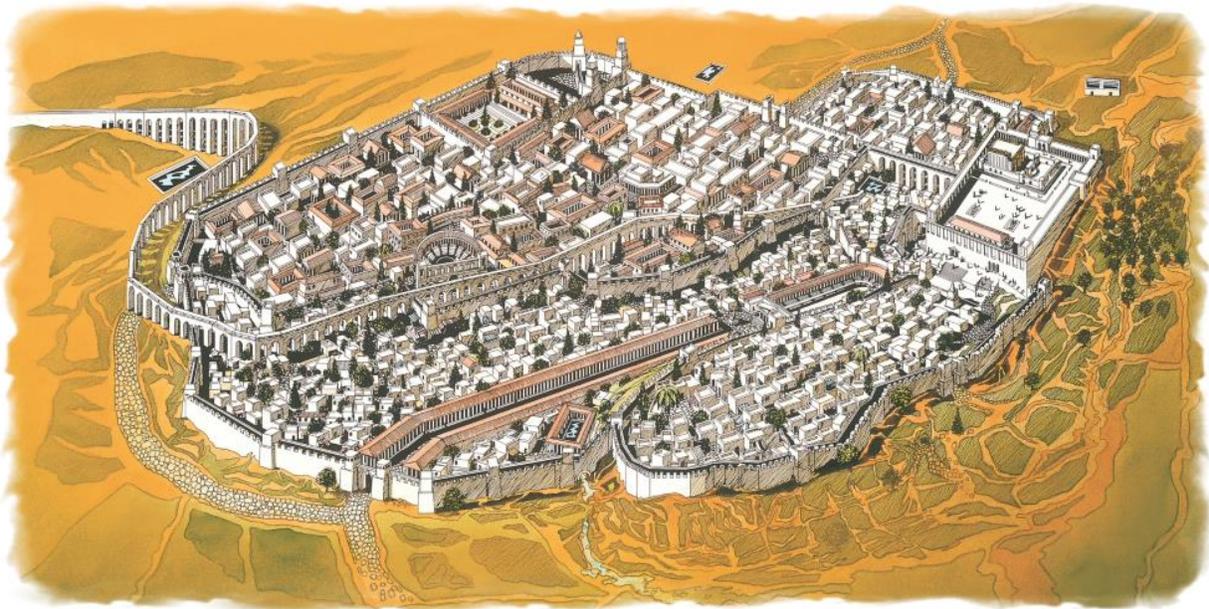
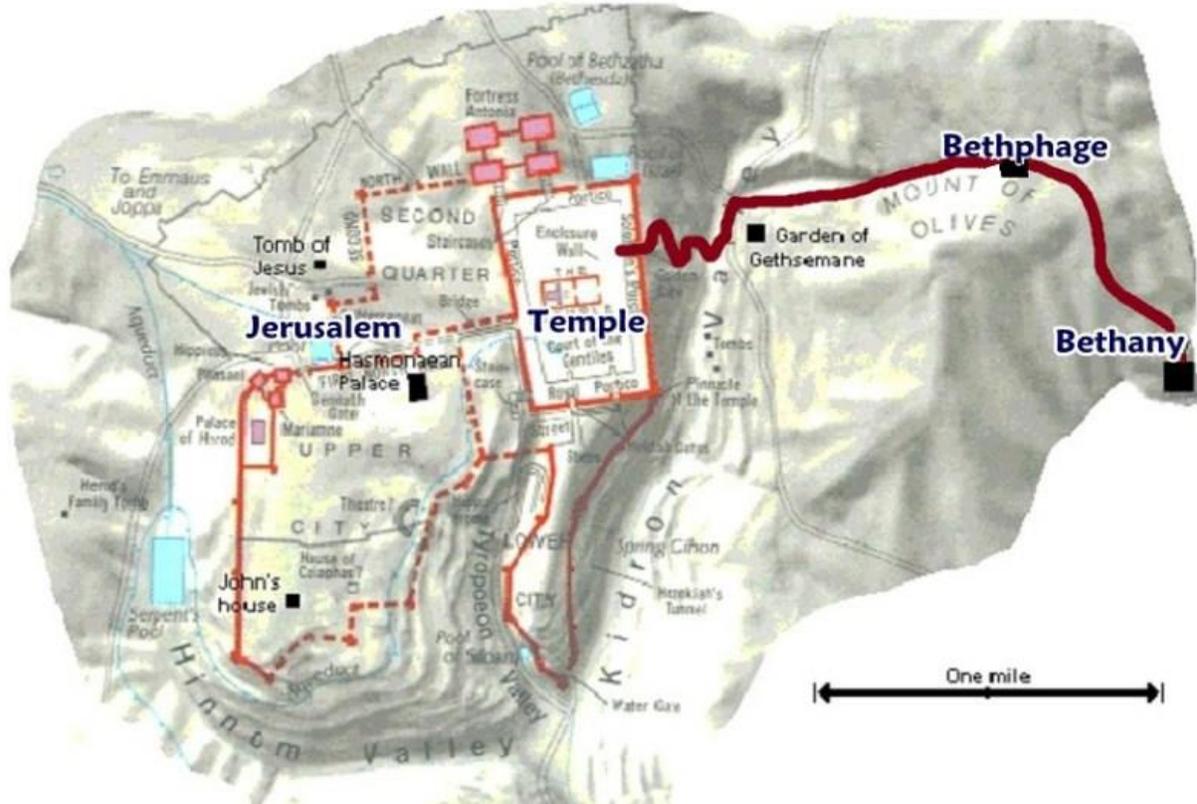
John gives us some additional background information on Jesus' trip to Jerusalem. He first stops at Bethany “where Jesus arrived “six days before Passover,” probably Friday evening (at the beginning of the Sabbath) before the Passion Week, and stayed there for Sabbath, entering Jerusalem on Sunday.”<sup>1</sup> The following Sunday he will be raised from the dead.

*“Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.”* (John 12:1, ESV)

*“When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.”* (John 12:9, ESV)

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 436). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.



**Reconstruction of Jerusalem**

“The Roman military road from Jericho to Jerusalem was about seventeen miles long and climbed three thousand feet. It passed through Bethany and nearby Bethphage (“house of [unripe] figs”), which lay on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives, then crossed over the mount and the Kidron Valley and entered Jerusalem (Mt 21:1).”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 437). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

**Bethphage....** “A village on the Mount of Olives, close to Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1) and near Bethany (Mark 11:1; Luke 19:29). ... east of Jerusalem on a mountain overlooking the city....”<sup>3</sup>

“At Bethphage Jesus makes arrangements to stage a royal entry into Jerusalem. This speaks as much of his humble situation as of his royal status and aspirations. In an act of prophetic symbolism, he stakes out his claims. The accompanying crowds acclaim him ‘Son of David’ and celebrate his approach to the throne city.”<sup>4</sup>

**Mount of Olives....** “The mile-long Mount of Olives proper is approximately 2,700 feet above sea level; it stands about 300 feet over the city, past the edge of the Temple Mount where the terrain dips into the Kidron Valley. From this perspective, the Mount seems much higher than it actually is. From the top, there is an impressive panoramic view. ... To the west lies the city of Jerusalem with the Temple Mount. ... Josephus records the distance from the Mount to Jerusalem as approximately 3,300 feet in Ant. 20.169, and as approximately 3,960 feet in J.W. 5.70.”<sup>5</sup>



The Mount of Olives viewed from the Temple Mount.

**Jesus sent two disciples....**

*“Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples” (Mark 11:1, ESV)*

<sup>3</sup> Negev, A. (1990). In *The Archaeological encyclopedia of the Holy Land*. New York: Prentice Hall Press.

<sup>4</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>5</sup> Brasfield, N. (2012). Mount of Olives. In (J. D. Barry & L. Wentz, Eds.) *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

**Matthew 21:2 saying 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.**

**the village in front of you....** Coming from Bethany, this would be Bethphage.

**colt**<sup>6</sup>.... “...the ride on a colt, because it was planned, could only be an acted parable, a deliberate act of symbolic self-disclosure for those with eyes to see or after the Resurrection, with memories by which to remember and integrate the events of the preceding weeks and years.”<sup>7</sup> See verse 5 below.

“and said to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it.” (Mark 11:2, ESV)

**Matthew 21:3 If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.”**

**The Lord needs them....** “They were to untie the animals and **bring them to** Jesus. If challenged, they were to explain that **the Lord** needed the beasts. Then the owner would consent. Perhaps the owner knew Jesus and had previously offered to help Him. Or this incident may demonstrate the omniscience and supreme authority of the Lord. Everything happened just as Jesus had predicted.”<sup>8</sup>

**Matthew 21:4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,**

“After quite a long gap (the last was in 13:35), Matthew provides the ninth of ten formula quotations that are found scattered through the Gospel....”<sup>9</sup> The intent of all are to demonstrate the prophetic and supernatural nature of Jesus life.

**Matthew 21:5 “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, [even] on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’ ”**

**a donkey, [even] on a colt....** “But the important point in the prophecy is that this King is *meek*. When the prophet says that he comes riding on *an ass*, he is contrasting him with “the chariot,” “the war horse,” and “the battle bow” (Zech. 9:10). It is the fact that the King is a man of peace that is distinctive. In antiquity a king would not normally enter his capital riding on a donkey. He would ride in proudly, on a war-horse, or perhaps he would march in at the head of his troops. An ass was the animal of a man of peace....”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *colt* πῶλος “A foal. Generally, a young animal ..., especially of the horse, a colt. In the NT used of a donkey, foal, colt; joined with *ónos* ..., a donkey (Matt. 21:2, 5, 7; John 12:15).” Zodiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 437). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>8</sup> MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer’s Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*. (A. Farstad, Ed.) (p. 1281). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>9</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>10</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 520–521.

Matthew combines the words of Isaiah with those of Zechariah.

*“Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: **Say to the daughter of Zion, “Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.”**”* (Isaiah 62:11, ESV)

*“<sup>9</sup> Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! **Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.** <sup>10</sup> I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”* (Zechariah 9:9–10, ESV)

Cutting off “*the chariot from Ephraim*”, Israel, and cutting off “*the war horse from Jerusalem*,” and cutting off the “*battle bow*” was the opposite of what Israel was looking for in a Messiah. And worse, “*he shall speak peace to the nations*,” Gentiles, and he is not ruling in Israel but instead, world-wide, “*to the ends of the earth*.”

This was not the kind of Messiah they expected or were interested in.

“...the ass Jesus rode was no well-bred animal meant for the convenience of the wealthy (cf. Judg. 5:10). It is specifically called a *beast of burden*; it was a lowly animal. .... That Jesus rode into the city in the way he did was a significant affirmation of his character and his purpose. The pilgrims might shout their acclaims and think of a king who would fight against the Romans and throw them out of the country, but Jesus viewed himself as the King of peace. He had accepted the salutation “Son of David,” and there is no doubt that he agreed that he was the messianic King. But he did not interpret messianic kingship as most of his contemporaries did. He did not view it in terms of armies and battles and conquests. He saw it in terms of peace and love and compassion.”<sup>11</sup>

“Therefore for those with eyes to see, Jesus was not only proclaiming his messiahship and his fulfillment of Scripture but showing the kind of peace-loving approach he was now making to the city.”<sup>12</sup>

***Matthew 21:6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them.***

Mark gives us added detail including the promise to return the animals.

*“If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.’” And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. And some of those standing there said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go.”* (Mark 11:3–6, ESV)

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 521). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>12</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 437). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

**Matthew 21:7 They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them.**

**put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them.** The word **them** is used twice here. The first **them** refers to the donkey and colt. The second **them** refers to the cloaks, Jesus sat on the cloaks. “*He sat on them* means, of course, that he sat on the cloaks, not the animals....”<sup>13</sup>

Yet, it is possible that Jesus sat on both animals in turn, one after the other— **and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them.** Perhaps he sat on the older and stronger animal for most of the trip but then switched to the younger one just before the entry into Jerusalem. However, **he sat on them** probably refers to **their cloaks.**

“Mark tells us that the animal had never been ridden (Mark 11:2), and Matthew may be indicating that it was still with its mother; if so, it would explain the two animals, for the mother’s presence would help to calm the colt being ridden for the first time, and that in the middle of a noisy demonstration.”<sup>14</sup>

**Matthew 21:8 Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.**

There is Old Testament precedent in spreading cloaks before a king and it would seem that Matthew want’s his readers to note them.

“... “*Thus and so he spoke to me, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD, I anoint you king over Israel.’ ” Then in haste every man of them took his garment and put it under him on the bare steps, and they blew the trumpet and proclaimed, “Jehu is king.”*” (2 Kings 9:12–13, ESV)

**branches from the trees....** John tells us that those branches were from palm trees.

“*So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”*” (John 12:13, ESV)

The purpose to all this would correspond to our modern day “rolling out the red carpet” due to dignitaries. “...clearly to make a kind of ceremonial carpet over which the King should ride....”<sup>15</sup> “The modern equivalent of the cloak-and-branch road is the red carpet ... or the ticker-tape parade.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 522). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 522). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 522). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 356.

**Matthew 21:9 And 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!”**

**the crowds that went before him....** These are those that had gathered with Jesus at Bethany. Some had been traveling with Jesus from Galilee and others had just come to see Jesus and Lazarus. They now provide the welcome to Jerusalem.

“When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.” (John 12:9, ESV)

**Hosanna....** “... (an Aramaic expression meaning ‘help, I pray’ or ‘save, I pray,’ but which had become a strictly liturgical formula of praise) a shout of praise or adoration—‘hosanna.’”<sup>17</sup> “In time it became an invocation of blessing and even an acclamation,<sup>18</sup> the latter being the meaning here....”<sup>19</sup>

“Save us, we pray [Hosanna], O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.” (Psalm 118:25–26, ESV)

“...it can be heard as an acclamation like “God save the Queen!””<sup>20</sup>

**Hosanna in the highest....** ““Hosanna in the highest” is probably equivalent to “Glory to God in the highest” ....”<sup>21</sup> Because Hosanna means “save” we might understand this as “*God save in the highest places!*” “In saving Jesus by resurrection, the “highest” resource of all, God saved all who trust Jesus from the terror of death. The people’s prayer for the best salvation was answered.”<sup>22</sup>

**comes**<sup>23</sup>.... Although we don’t generally view this use of “**comes**” in this passage as an eschatological coming of Jesus in the last days—in fact that is exactly what this is. The context “makes the entry ‘a type of the Parousia’.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>18</sup> “...a loud shout or other demonstration of welcome, goodwill, or approval.”

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/acclamation?s=t>

<sup>19</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 439). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>20</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 356.

<sup>21</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 439). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>22</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 357.

<sup>23</sup> *comes* ἐρχομαι “...to move toward or up to the reference point of the viewpoint character or event—to come, coming.” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 192.

<sup>24</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 3; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 125.

Peter in his sermon on Pentecost, citing Joel, says, “*And in the last days it shall be, God declares....*” The New Testament ministry of Jesus was in the last days of the Jewish era and in this era Jesus came fulfilling the promise of God that a savior would come and save his people.

Although Jesus said nothing during this entrance into the city, his actions symbolically spoke volumes. “The message conveyed to the city’s inhabitants is unmistakable: **the long-awaited messiah—the true King of the Jews—has come to free Israel from its bondage.**”<sup>25</sup>

### ***Arrival in Jerusalem (21:10–11)***

But first, Luke adds this information.

*“And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41–44, ESV)*

This passage in Luke will see its fulfillment in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroy the city.

***Matthew 21:10 And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?”***

***“Who is this?”*** Those asking this question had not gone out to meet Jesus in Bethany, so, they don’t know what the commotion is all about.

***Matthew 21:11 And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”***

***the crowds said....*** These are Jesus’ followers from Galilee and those that came to Bethany to see Jesus and Lazarus. It appears that many in this crowd are in some sense “believers” for they identify Jesus as “*the prophet.*”

***the prophet....*** ““The prophet,” with the definite article “the” ... inclines most commentators to see Jesus here as the fulfillment of the prediction of the near-messianic “Prophet like Moses” ....”<sup>26</sup>

*“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—” (Deuteronomy 18:15, ESV)*

This crowd may have eventually formed the nucleus of the early church.

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<sup>25</sup> Aslan, Reza (2013). *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (p. 74). New York, NY: Random House.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 357.

*“Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15:6, ESV)*

### **Activity in the Temple (21:12–17)**

(Mark 11:11-19, Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-22)

***Matthew 21:12 And Jesus entered the temple [of God] 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.***

***Jesus entered the temple....*** “...which, of course, means that he entered the temple precincts. The temple contained the court of the Gentiles (that area beyond which Gentiles could not go), the court of the women (beyond which women could not go), the court of Israel (beyond which laymen could not go), the sanctuary (beyond which priests could not go), and the holy of holies. The traders would have been at work in the outermost court.”<sup>27</sup> That was the court of the Gentiles.



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<sup>27</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 526). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.



**drove out all who sold and bought....** “Jesus encountered the money changers in the temple courtyard when he “cleansed the temple” (Mt 21:12, 13; Mk 11:15, 16; Lk 19:45, 46; Jn 2:13–22). The reason for this action has been a matter of debate. Worshipers needed to procure the half-shekel to pay their tax. But they needed also to purchase birds, animals, or cake offerings in some cases. This wholesale activity in buying and money-changing seemed inappropriate in the temple precincts, which constituted a sacred area (cf. Mk 11:16) .... There is also the possibility that the charge made by money changers and by those who sold sacrificial birds and animals was exorbitant whether for their own profit or for the profit of the temple authorities. Such operations could be carried on at a suitable distance from the sacred area so that the haggling and noise associated with such activities in an eastern setting did not unnecessarily disturb the prayer and the offering of sacrifices carried on in the temple courts (cf. Jer 7:11).”<sup>28</sup>

*“In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”” (John 2:14–16, ESV)*

**sold and bought....** It is interesting that Jesus drove out not only those that **sold**, but those that **bought** as well. The buyers may have found the practice most convenient and to their liking notwithstanding the premium that they paid the money changers and

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<sup>28</sup> Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

the sellers of sacrificial animals. Jesus is uninterested in how convenient it was to them. The Temple is not about them, it is about God.

“Animals bought in this way could be guaranteed to be blemish free and therefore valid for sacrifice. The possibility of buying sacrificial animals in the temple itself offered hassle-free sacrificial arrangements....”<sup>29</sup> Zechariah prophesied,

*“And every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader [traveling merchant] in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.”* (Zechariah 14:21, ESV)

**and he overturned the tables of the money-changers....** Only proper temple coin was allowed, they were exchanging Roman money for Temple coin. One can only imagine the scrambling that went on after this.

At this point John says:

*“His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”*” (John 2:17, ESV)

They were remembering Psalm 69:9.

*“For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.”* (Psalm 69:9, ESV)

The first half of the Psalm referred to the cleansing of the Temple, the second half to the crucifixion.

## **Prophetic Theater**

The cleansing of the Temple appears to be a one-man event of short duration in a corner of the Temple and probably not noticed on the other side of the Temple complex—which was about 35 acres in size.<sup>30</sup> “...the lack of immediate practical response from either the temple police or the Roman authorities suggests something relatively small-scale. Within the large and crowded Court of the Gentiles it is possible that many would have been unaware of such a disturbance in one corner.”<sup>31</sup> Even if Jesus had enlisted all his disciples to help, and he did not, it is unlikely that they would have cleansed the whole Temple; most likely, they would have simply ended up in jail.

By contrast, we see a response by the Jews and Romans when they discover Paul in the Temple, and thinking he was defiling the temple became agitated.

*“Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all*

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<sup>29</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>30</sup> [http://www.bible-history.com/jewishtemple/Jewish\\_TempleOverview.htm](http://www.bible-history.com/jewishtemple/Jewish_TempleOverview.htm)

<sup>31</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 786.

*Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.” (Acts 21:30–32, ESV)*

Again, by contrast, Jesus, who was cleansing the Temple is not even noticed by the Temple police or Roman guards. Why? Mostly likely because it occurred in one obscure corner of the Temple and was what scholars call “**prophetic theater**,”<sup>32</sup> **an acted-out prophecy for the benefit of a specific audience—his disciples**. One example of prophetic theater is Isaiah 20:2:

*“at that time the LORD spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, “Go, and loose the sackcloth from your waist and take off your sandals from your feet,” and he did so, walking naked and barefoot.” (Isaiah 20:2, ESV)*

“It was bad enough that Isaiah, son of a leading family in Israel, had become a radically zealous preacher of the law of God. The “church” of his day did not want to hear all this talk about law and judgment; they wanted to hear about grace and love, and to feel “joy, joy, joy” down in their hearts. Then Isaiah started going around wearing sackcloth, as if in poverty and mourning. Finally, in the people’s opinion, he went too far; roaming the streets barefoot and naked—for three years (Isa. 20:4).

The liberals of his day laughed at Isaiah; after all, they said, Isaiah was representative of all Bible-believing fanatics. Those who were the most offended by Isaiah were the respectable conservatives who felt that his weird behavior compromised their witness. But in fact, God had told Isaiah to do these things.

Isaiah’s action was an example of “prophetic theater,” a symbolic action designed to drive home a point. The prophets sometimes did bizarre things to dramatize the fact that God meant business. Ezekiel refused to speak for several years, except to shake his fist and yell denunciations at a picture he had drawn of Jerusalem (Ezek. 3:24–4:8). .... Jesus Christ made a whip and drove thieves out of God’s house.”<sup>33</sup> These are all examples of prophetic theater.

***Matthew 21:13 He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”***

***house of prayer....*** Matthew quotes Isaiah 56:7 which includes the statement “*for all peoples*” which meant the Gentiles. All this was taking place in the court of the peoples or the gentiles.

*“these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Isaiah 56:7, ESV)*

The significance of the phrase *for all peoples* or nations was found in where this animal sale and money changing was taking place. This sale took place in the outer court or the court of the Gentiles.

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<sup>32</sup> Isaiah 20; Jeremiah 13:1-11; 19; 27:1-15; 32; 43:8-13; Ezekiel 4:1-3; 4:4-8; 4:9-17; 5:1-54; 12:1-16; 12:17-20; 37:15-28.

<sup>33</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Before the Face of God: Book 3: A Daily Guide for Living from the Old Testament* (electronic ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; Ligonier Ministries, 1994).

“But using the outer court for trading meant that if a Gentile came to the temple to pray, the only place he could do it was in the middle of a busy bazaar. And while Israelites could go into the inner courts, they had to pass through the trading section there, and there is little doubt that the noise from the traders would penetrate the inner courts enough to interfere with quiet worship. The traders had put profit above worship....”<sup>34</sup>

**den of robbers....** “And when Jesus speaks of a *robbers’ cave*, he indicates not only that they were trading in the wrong place, but that they were trading dishonestly. They were bringing their sharp practices into the holy precincts.”<sup>35</sup>

“The temple was not fulfilling its God-ordained role as witness to the nations but had become, like the first temple, the premier symbol of a superstitious belief that God would protect and rally his people irrespective of their conformity to his will.”<sup>36</sup>

*“Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? 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.”* (Jeremiah 7:9–11, ESV)

“So for those with eyes to see, Jesus’ action was one of self-disclosure and an implicit claim to eschatological authority over the Holy Place.”<sup>37</sup> Again Jesus’ actions are pregnant with symbol.

*“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.”* (Malachi 3:1–3, ESV)

“The Lord’s cleansing of the temple was an acted-out prophecy (called “prophetic theater” by Biblical scholars) of the overthrow of the temple which had become a den of robbers (Matt. 21:12–13), as was his cursing of the barren fig tree, which represented Israel (Matt. 21:18–20).”<sup>38</sup>

### **Leaders Angered by Healing and Acclamation (21:14–17)**

<sup>34</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 527). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>35</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 527). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>36</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 442). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>37</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 442). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *The Book of Revelation Made Easy: You Can Understand Bible Prophecy* (Second Edition.; Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2010), 142.

**Matthew 21:14 And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them.**

“...he healed them. He restored their health to them in the temple and in so doing offered a sign that the gathering of the people of God for the coming age had begun.”<sup>39</sup>

The healings take place in the outer court or the court of the Gentiles, **the blind and the lame** would be allowed to go this far but would not be allowed to go beyond this point.

*“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;” (Isaiah 35:3–6, ESV)*

The words, “*your God will come with vengeance*” was understood as how the Messiah would come upon Israel’s enemies, not how he would come upon Israel! But soon Jesus will say to the inhabitants of Jerusalem:

*“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written.” (Luke 21:20–22, ESV)*

**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,**

It is interesting that the chief priests and scribes have nothing to say about the cleansing of the Temple. It is not clear that they were even aware of it.

These men saw two things that made them angry.

**wonderful things**<sup>40</sup>.... This word “...is widely used in the LXX of the marvelous deeds of God, and especially of the Exodus wonders.”<sup>41</sup> Jesus’ life is a recapitulation of the Exodus so it is not surprising that Matthew would make this illusion.

The wonderful things he did was heal the lame and blind as he had been doing in Galilee.

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<sup>39</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 13.

<sup>40</sup> *wonderful things* θαυμάσιος “...pertaining to that which causes or is worthy of amazement and wonder—‘wonderful, remarkable, marvelous.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>41</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

**Hosanna to the Son of David!** First it was the blind that recognized Jesus as the Son of David now it is children. The guardians of his temple, the chief priests, had no praise on their lips.

**Matthew 21:16 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’?”**

**Do you hear what these are saying?** “The assumption standing behind the question is that on hearing such acclamation the only responsible thing for Jesus to do would be to deny it forcefully.”<sup>42</sup> Of course, that is true—if he were not the Messiah. But he does not now, nor has he ever denied that he was the Messiah—Mt. 9:27; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15.

**have you never read....** Instead Jesus quotes Psalm 8:2 in response to their criticism.

*“O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.”*  
(Psalm 8:1–2, ESV)

The phrase in Psalm 8, “O LORD, our Lord” is Jesus’ own testimony that he is authorized by God to receive this praise. “I am not only the *Son* of David, as these children shout, I am the *Lord* of David....”<sup>43</sup>

**“They had no criticism of the unholy traders who defiled the sacred place, but they objected to the praises of children.”<sup>44</sup>**

“The pericope tells of the meek king who heals those without status (the blind and the lame), the meek king who is praised by those without power (children). Opposed to him are Jerusalem, the great and glorious center of the nation, and the chief priests and scribes, men of authority, prestige, and influence. So things are upside-down. Those who appear to be in charge truly are not, and judgement will soon overtake them, whereas those who appear to be powerless are welcomed by the Messiah, and they will inherit the earth.”<sup>45</sup>

“In a great “eschatological reversal,” Jesus heals the Little People and rebukes the Big People....”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>43</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 363.

<sup>44</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (pp. 528–529). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>45</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 3; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 144.

<sup>46</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 364.

**Matthew 21:17 And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.**

“During the festivals Jerusalem was crowded. So Jesus spent his last nights at Bethany, on a spur of the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives (cf. Mark 11:19; Luke 21:37). The home where he stayed was probably that of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.”<sup>47</sup>

**Jesus' Second Day in Jerusalem – The Polemical Parables (21:18–22:14)**

(Mark 11:12-14; 20-26; Luke 13:6-9)

**Matthew 21:18 In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry.**

On Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem it was a very public affair. Now on Monday, it is early before breakfast that they make their journey to Jerusalem from Bethany (Mark 11:12).

**Matthew 21:19 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.**

Let us note the context of the story of the fig tree: “...the reader is invited to compare the fate of the fruitless tree with the denunciation of the failed temple.”<sup>48</sup> As the religious observance of the Jewish temple worship was found wanting and demanding correction, so here as there *the correction is acted out in parable*. John the Baptist anticipated this moment:

*“Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* (Matthew 3:8–10, ESV)

**a fig tree by the wayside....** “...the fig tree in leaf gave promise of fruit but produced none. The result was that it was accursed. Those who profess to be God’s people but live unfruitful lives are warned. This will have special relevance to the Jews of Jesus’ day, who viewed themselves as the chosen people, as those to whom God had committed his law and as the servants of God in a way people of no other nation were. But they were not bringing forth fruit worthy of such a position.”<sup>49</sup> *This miracle is a visual prophecy, or prophetic theater, illustrating God’s coming judgment on Israel.*

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<sup>47</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 443). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>48</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 791). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>49</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 530). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.



**nothing on it but only leaves....** “If a fig tree is in leaf, it is to be expected that it will be bearing figs. Until they are ripe the taste may not delight the gourmet, but the fruit is edible....”<sup>50</sup> Mark’s comment that “*he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs*” (Mark 11:13) reflects the fact that the fruit was not yet mature, but nevertheless fruit should have been on the tree. “*From seeing the tree in foliage*, Jesus expected, of course (for it was well known that the fig-tree put forth its fruit before coming into leaf), to find fruit upon it as well....”<sup>51</sup>

Mark has told us that “*it was not the season for figs.*” So, why would Jesus condemn a tree that was not supposed to bear figs in the first place? “That it was not the season for figs explains why Jesus went to this particular tree, which stood out because it was in leaf. Its leaves advertised that it was bearing, but the advertisement was false.”<sup>52</sup> “Jesus is thus reported to have come by the tree at a time when, to judge by its show of leaves (11:13a), it should have been in fruit; and, inasmuch as the harvest had not yet been gathered, the figs should have still been on the branches.”<sup>53</sup>

In Jesus’ story, he is explaining how Israel has the outward indicators of true religion but not the substance and work. The leaves suggest the propriety of expecting true and visible faith, the lack of fruit demonstrates the hypocrisy of a nation playing religion.

**May no fruit ever come from you again!** This judgment upon the tree is *symbolic* of God’s judgment on Israel. Jesus speaks this judgement out loud so that his disciples will hear him. He is making a point that he does not want them to miss. “...what is imaged can hardly be anything else than the prospect of judgment on unfruitful Israel.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 530). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>51</sup> Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (ed. William Stewart; trans. Peter Christie; vol. 2; Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1884), 65.

<sup>52</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 445). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>53</sup> Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 393.

<sup>54</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

“Jesus’ behavior was an *acted parable* in which the withering of the fig tree represents the destruction that Jerusalem is soon to experience....”<sup>55</sup>

*“Ephraim is stricken; their root is dried up; they shall bear no fruit. Even though they give birth, I will put their beloved children to death.”* (Hosea 9:16, ESV)

“Here is the raw material for understanding the symbolism. A crucial moment has come in the divine timetable when the fig tree will be seen to have or not to have produced the fruit to which it was obligated.”<sup>56</sup>

Dispensationalist would do well to consider this judgment. It would seem that they spend much time and money trying to make this tree (Israel) bear fruit in the face of Jesus’ statement, ***may no fruit ever come from you again***. By A.D. 70 the age of Old Testament Israel will be over. The age of the new Israel of God, the church of Jesus Christ, has begun *and of his kingdom there will be no end* (Luke 1:33). The New Covenant Kingdom age will not one day stop so that God can get back to his real plan, the glory of biological Israel. It is the New Covenant and the eternal kingdom Christ brings that is his “real plan.”

“The cursing of the fig tree is ... an integral part of the symbolic acts of Jesus’ final visit to Jerusalem. It symbolizes judgment on the nation for its barren state and is of a piece with the cleansing of the temple, an event that occurred about the same time.”<sup>57</sup>

*“And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up **a kingdom that shall never be destroyed**, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and **it shall stand forever**,”* (Daniel 2:44, ESV)

***Matthew 21:20 When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?”***

*“As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.”* (Mark 11:20, ESV)

In Mark, the fig tree withers overnight and the disciples see the tree the next morning, Tuesday. While in Matthew we read it withered “*at once*.” Matthew often telescopes events to tell the whole story in one setting. He has done that here. He is more interested in discussing content and meaning than in placing that story into a specific chronology.

The short time between the curse and the fulfillment, 24 hours, suggests that this coming judgment on Israel will not be long in coming—beginning at the resurrection of Jesus and ending at his judgment coming 40 years later.

Why didn’t the disciples see the dried-up tree going back to Bethany that prior evening? Perhaps it was dark, the tree was not close but was “by the wayside.” Perhaps it didn’t

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<sup>55</sup> Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 393.

<sup>56</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

<sup>57</sup> Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 394.

even begin to dry up until the evening hours were fully come. Either way, they only became aware of it the next morning.

***Matthew 21:21 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.***

“Instead of telling the disciples, in reply to their question, by what means *He* (in the exercise of His divine power) caused the tree to wither, He informs them how *they* too might perform similar and even greater wonders (John 14:12) ....”<sup>58</sup>

***if (ἐάν) you have faith....*** Grammatically the “if” is a third-class condition. “The more probable future condition ... indicating an expected result based on the present general or particular circumstances.”<sup>59</sup> ***In other words, Jesus expected his disciples to one day have this faith and pray this prayer.***

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<sup>58</sup> Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (ed. William Stewart; trans. Peter Christie; vol. 2; Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1884), 66.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, J. H. (1992). *The new treasury of scripture knowledge: The most complete listing of cross references available anywhere- every verse, every theme, every important word* (p. 1036). Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson.

**faith<sup>60</sup> and do not doubt<sup>61 62</sup>....** The Greek word used here translated “doubt” has a variety of possible translations. Some include, *to make distinctions, to judge, to discriminate.*<sup>63 64</sup> And there are other options.

In the LXX: “Altogether, διακρίνω in any form occurs less than thirty times in the LXX, and is almost always used of *judging, judging between, or separating people.*”<sup>65</sup> So, we can see that in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, LXX, the translation “doubt” does not serve well there either.

Looking at how the Greek word is used in the New Testament, we see that it is found 19 times in 18 different verses. Understanding this word is important, we need to carefully look at each one. I’ve inserted the options “judge, make a distinction or discriminate” in each verse to allow us to consider these translation options as well.

*Matthew 16:3 And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret [judge, make a distinction or discriminate] the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*

*“And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt [judge, make a distinction or discriminate], you will not only do what has*

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<sup>60</sup> *faith πίστις* “...to believe to the extent of complete trust and reliance—‘to believe in, to have confidence in, to have faith in, to trust, faith, trust.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>61</sup> *doubt διακρίνω* “...from δια meaning through and κρίνω meaning to separate or split apart. In time κρίνω came to mean “to judge.” Διακρίνω was an intense form of judging. To hesitate, waver, to dispute with oneself, the opposite of confidently. To be in strife with oneself.” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (369). New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>62</sup> Doubt:

*verb* (used with object)

1. to be uncertain about; consider questionable or unlikely; hesitate to believe.
2. to distrust.
3. Archaic. to fear; be apprehensive about.

*verb* (used without object)

4. to be uncertain about something; be undecided in opinion or belief.

*noun*

5. a feeling of uncertainty about the truth, reality, or nature of something.

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/doubt>

<sup>63</sup> *discriminate--*

- intransitive v. To make a clear distinction; distinguish: discriminate among the options available.
- intransitive v. To make sensible decisions; judge wisely.
- intransitive v. To make distinctions on the basis of class or category without regard to individual merit; show preference or prejudice: was accused of discriminating against women; discriminated in favor of his cronies.
- transitive v. To perceive the distinguishing features of; recognize as distinct: discriminate right from wrong.
- transitive v. To distinguish by noting differences; differentiate: unable to discriminate colors.
- transitive v. To make or constitute a distinction in or between: methods that discriminate science from pseudoscience

<http://www.wordnik.com/words/discriminate>

<sup>64</sup> “To make a distinction between persons, Ac. 15:9: God has made no distinction between (us) Jews and the Gentiles; also 11:12.” *Vol. 3: Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964- (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (946). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

<sup>65</sup> *JETS* 48/4 (December 2005) 733!55, Some Doubts About Doubt: The New Testament Use Of Διακρίνω, David Degraaf.

*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."* (Matthew 21:21, ESV)

*"Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt [judge, make a distinction or discriminate] in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him."* (Mark 11:23, ESV)

*Acts 10:20 Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation [judge, make a distinction or discriminate], for I have sent them.*

*Acts 11:2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized [judge, make a distinction or discriminate] him, saying,*

*Acts 11:12 And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction [judge, make a distinction or discriminate (middle voice)]. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.*

*Acts 15:9 and he made no distinction [judge, make a distinction or discriminate] between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.*

*Romans 4:20 No unbelief made him waver [judge, make a distinction or discriminate (passive voice)] concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,*

*Romans 14:23 But whoever has doubts [judge, make a distinction or discriminate (middle or passive voice)] is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.*

*1 Corinthians 4:7 For who sees [judge, make a distinction or discriminate] anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?*

*1 Corinthians 6:5 I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute [judge, make a distinction or discriminate] between the brothers,*

*1 Corinthians 11:29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning [judge, make a distinction or discriminate] the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

*1 Corinthians 11:31 But if we judged [judge, make a distinction or discriminate] ourselves truly, we would not be judged.*

*1 Corinthians 14:29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh [judge, make a distinction or discriminate] what is said.*

*Jude 9 But when the archangel Michael, contending [judge, make a distinction or discriminate (middle or passive voice)] with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."*

*Jude 22 And have mercy on those who doubt [judge, make a distinction or discriminate (middle or passive voice)];*

*James 1:6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.*

*James 2:4 have you not then made distinctions [judge, make a distinction or discriminate (passive voice)] among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

As you can see, in most of these verses the English translators do not use the word “doubt” as a translation. In fact, “doubt” is a rather poor translation for most of them, although possible in some cases. And there are actually four other Greek words that do a better job in conveying the idea of *doubt*, if that’s what you were going for, than does this one (διστακνίω).<sup>66</sup> One must ask, if doubt was really what you wanted to convey, then why not one of these other Greek words that *clearly* convey doubt? Our word here does not.

So, based on this research we must entertain additional meanings for this Greek word other than “doubt” for this passage. The most common translations used in the various verses in the New Testament are: interpret, hesitation, criticized, distinction, waver, doubt, see, dispute, discerning, judged, weigh, contending and distinctions. One could add “discriminate” to this list as well.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest another translation for this passage: ***if you have faith and do not discriminate*** (or ***make distinctions***). Of course, that brings up the question, discriminate or make distinctions about what? And what does faith have to do with discrimination? Let’s see.

***you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree....*** Jesus’ statement here is a follow up to what he did to the fig tree. And what was that about? *It was symbolic prophetic theater depicting judgment on Israel.* Jesus is here saying that they can, in fact will, act in faith exactly as Jesus has done and pronounce judgment on Israel. Indeed, the mountain he was looking at from the Mount of Olives, during this pronouncement, was Mount Mariah, the Temple Mount, and the mountain upon which Jerusalem sat.

This is where discrimination challenged their faith. They were Jews. The sun rose and set upon the temple, Jerusalem and Israel. Everything good was said about Jerusalem and everything bad said about the gentile world (the sea). How could they every say such things about their nation, their religion and their family? They definitely discriminated *against* the gentiles and *for* their beloved Jerusalem. But, if they are to do what Jesus did in judging the fig tree—Israel, then their faith would need to be without discrimination.

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<sup>66</sup> Doubt:

διστακνίω “...to think that something may not be true or certain—‘to doubt, to be uncertain about, doubt.’”  
ἀσφαλῶς “...pertaining to being certain and thus completely believable—‘worthy of being believed, certainly true, completely believable.’”

ἐξαπορέω “...to be in extreme despair, implying both anxiety and fear—‘to be in utter despair, to despair completely.’”

διαλογισμός “...to think that something may not be true or certain—‘to doubt, to be uncertain about, doubt.’”

**say to this mountain....** “Through the centuries pious souls have never been conspicuous for transferring physical objects such as literal mountains, but there are many instances on record where mountainous difficulties have been removed by the exercise of faith.”<sup>67</sup>

But he was not addressing just any mountain but, **this mountain**. “He envisages a disciple telling a mountain to move and says that it will happen. The moving of mountains was proverbial among the Jews for accomplishing something of very great difficulty....”<sup>68</sup>

““Moving mountains” was a Jewish metaphor for accomplishing what was difficult or virtually impossible.... Like the prophets of old, Jesus’ disciples could do whatever God called them to do (compare 7:7–11; 10:8; 17:20).”<sup>69</sup>

*“He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20, ESV)*

*“And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” (Luke 17:6, ESV)*

*“And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:2, ESV)*

Let’s give attention to “*mountain*” in Revelation 8:8 from the book *Back to the Future* as we continue to consider the word mountain in Matthew 21:21.

*“The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood.” (Revelation 8:8, ESV)*

Referring to Matthew 21:22, “This is a passage that has made little sense to many Christians, for certainly none of us have every known a believer who prayed such a prayer. But wait, notice the context in which it was spoken: *first* we have the Triumphant Entry, *next* we see the Cleansing of the Temple, and *last*, we have the story of the Barren Fig Tree. In this context, Christ is presenting Himself to Israel as their Messiah. In that capacity, He is cleansing his own temple. He then illustrates Israel’s rejection of His rule in the story of the barren fig tree. It is at this point He mentions prayer and casting **this mountain (8:8)**; not mountains in general, but **this mountain (8:8)**, as He looked at Jerusalem, into the sea, the Gentile world. And so, we see it here fulfilled in A.D. 70. The prayers of the saints and the prayers of the martyrs for vengeance on

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<sup>67</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 449). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>68</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 449). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>69</sup> Keener, C. S. (1997). *Matthew* (Vol. 1). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Jerusalem have been heard. Fire from the Altar is mixed with these prayers and cast to the land, putting Israel under the ban.

....

This mountain, this new Babylon, is now to be destroyed, as was old Babylon earlier. It is to be **thrown into the sea (8:8)**. “Sea” in Scripture, when used metaphorically, speaks of the Gentile world. Israel, the new “*destroying mountain*” is to be set ablaze by fire from God’s altar and its survivors are to be cast into the sea, or amongst the Gentile world. They would no longer have a country of their own. “Jesus was instructing His disciples to pray imprecatory prayers, beseeching God to destroy Israel, to wither the fig tree, to cast the apostate mountain into the sea.”<sup>70</sup>

On another occasion Jesus said this:

*“And the Lord said, ‘If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”*  
(Luke 17:6, ESV)

It is interesting that although the mulberry is a different tree than the fig tree, yet both are of *the same family of trees*. In both cases we have a tree that is destroyed and something cast into the “sea.” In both case this action is a result of a prayer of faith. The similarities are striking.

***Matthew 21:22 And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”***

When looking at a hard verse, and this is a hard one, it is essential to remember its context with all the background material found there. If you don’t consider the context, the passage is in danger of becoming a pretext to say whatever you want it to say or simply what you have heard all your life. Context often limits your options so severely that the difficulty fades to only one or two options. This is a tough passage; let’s see if context helps cut through the difficulty.

***whatever (πάντα ὅσα ἂν) ....*** “There is no specific restriction on the scope of prayer here, **but the link with 21:21 suggests that the focus of prayer should be in line with the priorities of the mission of Jesus in relation to the coming of the kingdom.**”<sup>71</sup> The “*whatever*” and “*if you have faith*” of verse 22 addresses the call to judgment of verse 21. By that I am saying that this verse is a promise by God to respond to the faith addressed in verse 21—to the judgment determined by God on Israel.

***if you have faith....*** Have faith in what? In Jesus statement in verse 21. Do you really *believe* that *this mountain* will be thrown into the sea? They could if....

## **Conclusions:**

We should note that Matthew 21:22 has resulted in a great deal of naïve optimism or foolish confidence by Christians which, with the failure of the prayer request, often

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<sup>70</sup> Bass, R. E. (2004). *Back to the Future: a study in the book of Revelation* (pp. 223–224). Greenville, SC: Living Hope Press.

<sup>71</sup> Nolland John. (2005). Preface. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

results in cynicism toward prayer and the Christian faith.<sup>72</sup> Why? Because naïve optimism is not a sure knowledge as to what God is doing or wants to do in our lives or on this earth, it is simply a vague opinion. Under what circumstances can we pray with certainty (the opposite of naïve optimism) that a given prayer request is God's sure will? Well, one would be based on the divine revelation of God's will revealed in the Bible—if the Bible says it, we can pray for it with certainty (as long as we don't misunderstand what the Bible is saying), the other would be Jesus' direct communication, such as what the disciples were receiving in this passage, if Jesus says it, we can pray for it with certainty. But, because neither of these are common to us, we tend to end our prayers with the phrase "if it be thy will" finding this in James: "*Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'*" (James 4:15, ESV).

Returning to Matthew 21:21, the problems we face are the phrases "***whatever you ask***" and "***if you have faith.***" Is there a limitation to "***whatever you ask?***" There is, it is found in the phrase "***if you have faith.***" **Under what circumstances can you pray for a given subject *certain* it is God's will that this thing be done and therefore have the trust to ask with certain faith?** I can't think of anything beyond what I mentioned earlier. One, divine revelation of God's revealed will in the Bible or two, Jesus' direct communication to you. Beyond this, **I don't see that this passage guarantees me a certain answer to any prayer that may be nothing more than a product of my naïve optimism or foolish confidence.**

So, we can only pray with this kind of certainty if we know with certainty what God's will is in a given situation. The disciples could pray with certainty '***Be taken up and thrown into the sea***' because Jesus had just demonstrated in the parable of the cursing of the fig tree the certainty that this indeed was God's will. Some 40 years later their prayers and those of others in the church are now answered as Revelation 8:8 and the Book of Revelation makes clear. They could pray without **doubting or discriminating** in favor of Jerusalem simply because they now recognize with certainty that Jerusalem is "*the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.*" (Revelation 11:8, ESV). And is therefore, under the curse of God.

And so it happened:

*"The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood."*  
(Revelation 8:8, ESV)

### **Problem:**

There is a problem here, however. The way I've explained this verse leaves us in danger of receiving from this passage no specific promise in our prayers—because we normally can't pray with certainty that we know that a request is exactly what God is doing in our world. So, does this verse have application for our prayer life today? Or, was it only for Jesus' disciples in that day? If that is the case, this is a prayer that only the disciples could pray, simply because they were the only ones to see Jesus curse the fig tree and pronounce a curse on Jerusalem. But if that is the case, then why bother to put it in the Bible for us to read? One could argue that with this interpretation, it has no relevance to us! But remember, **it did have relevance beyond those original disciples to**

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<sup>72</sup> Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life*, (2009) Colorado Springs, Co; NavPress, 80.

those that lived from that day until the destruction of Jerusalem some 40 years later. It did have relevance to those who cried out:

*“They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”*” (Revelation 6:10, ESV)

*“for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”*” (Revelation 19:2, ESV)

So, it had relevance for the first 40 years of the New Testament era, but, from the destruction of Jerusalem to our day, does it still have relevance? This much is certain, if God has given you faith to ask for great things, then yes, pray that prayer.

And while on the subject of prayer, let’s also remember that Jesus gave us extensive instructions of great importance on prayer:

How to Pray: Matthew 6:5-6

What to Pray: Matthew 6:7-15

Topics for Prayer:

Two Treasures: 6:19-23

Two Masters: 6:24-34

But in none of these critical passages on prayer does Jesus say anything about the certainty of answered prayer—if you have faith. Although, later in Matthew 7:7-8 Jesus does seem to suggest a certainty in prayer and in fact that is exactly how this passage is generally taught.

*“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”* (Matthew 7:7–8, ESV)

Yet, even here, there is a probability that these verses are **limited to prayer requests that address verse 7:6.**

*“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”* (Matthew 7:6, ESV)

In Jesus’ day, the Jews were tempted to sell out their faith for the riches, power, glory, and sex that the major cultural and power players of that day could offer—just like what Hollywood, Wall Street and Washington offer today. “Don’t do this, don’t sell out your faith to the dogs and pigs (Greeks and Romans) but instead ask, seek, knock from God. He will give you these things, but in a holy, God honoring way.” As a result, this passage is on asking, seeking and knocking for God to provide the good things of live and not seeking these from the world.

If that is the way this passage is to be understood, then it does not support the traditional interpretation of Matthew 21:22—ask in faith *for anything* you want and presto, you will get it!

But what about prayer in the rest of Scripture? Is there anything else in the Bible that would support this idea that whatever you ask for in prayer, you get it?

*“But on taking leave of them he said, “I will return to you if God wills,” and he set sail from Ephesus.” (Acts 18:21, ESV)*

*“But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power.” (1 Corinthians 4:19, ESV)*

*“And this we will do if God permits.” (Hebrews 6:3, ESV)*

*“For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.” (1 Peter 3:17, ESV)*

*“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.” (1 John 5:14, ESV)*

Jesus prayed this way:

*“Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”” (Matthew 26:42, ESV)*

And he taught us to pray:

*“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:10, ESV)*

It is the certainty of “*whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive*” that challenges me. Without divine revelation as to what God’s will is, how can I pray this with certainty? Am I not just hoping or wishing?

*“Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”” (James 4:15, ESV)*