

Matthew 21:1-22 • Three Signs For Israel

Introduction

As discussed in other Walk with the Word lessons, by Jesus' time the Hebrew scholars had determined from Scripture that there were two great pictures of the Messiah to come which they called "The Suffering Servant" in the character of Joseph and "The Conquering King" in the character of David. They recognized that in the first picture of "The Suffering Servant" the Messiah addresses the issue of sin and in the second picture of "The Conquering King" He comes to establish His reign on earth. Their main difficulty, however, was reconciling how He could possibly do this simultaneously at one coming, something we now understand as "One Messiah, Two Comings". We now see these to be Christ's distinct roles in His First and Second Comings. This is an important distinction because Christ establishes that He is indeed the King of the Jews, but not according to their desires. Today as it was then, Jesus must be accepted first as "The Suffering Servant" through His work on the cross and resurrection before we can realize the benefits of His work to come as "The Conquering King" at His Second Coming.

¹When they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. ³If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them."

⁴This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵"SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION,
'BEHOLD YOUR KING IS COMING TO
YOU,
GENTLE, AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY,
EVEN ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A BEAST
OF BURDEN.'"

⁶The disciples went and did just as Jesus had instructed them, ⁷and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them; and He sat on the coats. ⁸Most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. ⁹The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David;
BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE
NAME OF THE LORD;
HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST!"

¹⁰When He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?"

¹¹And the crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee."

[Read v.1-11]

Q: What might be the significance of riding on a donkey? What is the greater spiritual representation?

A: A willful person who continues to live according to their own ways rather than in subjection to God's Word and ways is often portrayed in Scripture as a donkey or ass. Both donkeys and willful man is repeatedly identified in Scripture as "stiff-necked" and must be broken either in the process of becoming subservient or in judgment for continued disobedience. Jesus riding on the donkey is a very powerful testimony that only those truly spiritually obedient on terms with God's Word and ways and not their own can accept Him.

Q: Why is this a particularly powerful statement where the Gospel of Matthew is concerned?

A: The primary purpose and theme of Matthew's Gospel is establishing Jesus as the Messiah and King of the Jews. This is not just a sign that Jesus is literally fulfilling the Scriptures but providing a clear indication of who exactly will accept or reject Him. Will they continue stiff-necked in their own ways or submit to His?

Q: What is the clearest evidence that He is not being accepted on His terms?

A: The use of the palm branches.

Q: Why would that prove anything about the people's attitude and expectations concerning Jesus?

A: This is Passover, representative of Christ's First Coming as the Passover Lamb to be sacrificed for sin. The custom at this ceremony was for the people to wave their hands. At the Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles) representative of Christ's Second Coming to conquer the earth and usher in His Millennial Kingdom, the custom of the people was to wave palm branches. In other words, they are not recognizing the Messiah at His First Coming but wanting Him to be the King of the Second Coming. They are putting the work of the Messiah's Second Coming in front of the work of His First Coming.

Point: Churches to this day reinforce this wrong teaching by celebrating "Palm Sunday", a day which was actually a day of rejection and willful blindness rather than legitimate celebration.

Q: What is another contradiction in the crowd's testimony as to the identity of Jesus?

A: Some proclaim Him to be "*the Son of David*" (v.9) which is directly points to Jesus as the Messiah, but others call Him "*the prophet Jesus*", which identifies Him as someone spiritually important but falling short of being the actual Messiah.

Q: How is this issue of recognizing Jesus as the "Suffering Servant" of His First Coming vs. the "Conquering King" of His Second Coming reinforced by Matthew's quote from Zechariah?

A: Matthew only quotes that portion speaking of His First Coming; Matthew omits the part which speaks of His Second Coming.

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
He is just and endowed with salvation, [This is omitted.]
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
— Zechariah 9:9*

Q: How does Scripture contrast Jesus the Messiah, the Conquering King at His Second Coming to His First Coming?

A: Instead of a donkey, He comes on a white horse with justice and salvation (victory) for Israel. (Rev. 19:11-21)

Application: Christ's first sign to Israel is to present Himself as King in literal fulfillment of Scripture. But because He came in the character of "The Suffering Servant", someone meek and humble and willing to sacrifice Himself for sin, He was rejected because they wanted Him to jump ahead to being "The Conquering King" and establish His Millennial Reign. The ultimate work of Christ at His Second Coming cannot be realized until we first accept His work on the cross at His First Coming.

¹²And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves.

¹³And He said to them, "IT IS WRITTEN, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER'; but you are making it a ROBBERS' DEN."

¹⁴And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.

¹⁵But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant ¹⁶and said to Him, "Do You hear what these children 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 FOR YOURSELF'?"

[Read v.12-16]

Q: Why is the sign of purifying the Temple a particular powerful one to Jews at this time?

A: The Passover custom is to remove all leaven from one's house, leaven being the biblical symbol of sin and false teaching.

Q: Is this the same Temple cleansing as recorded in John 2?

A: No, the cleansing in John 2 came at the beginning of Christ's ministry and His command was to "*stop making My Father's house a place of business*". As their hearts remained unchanged and since they continued in their practices, in this instance He now calls it "*My house*" – a very clear indication at the time that He was indeed God – and calls it "*a robbers' den*", indicating it had grown even more corrupt than the original "*place of business*" He called it more than 3 years earlier.

Q: How would Jesus later ultimately characterize the Temple?

A: He would tell them, "*Behold, your house is left to you desolate!*" (Mt. 23:38) for having rejected their King. Israel would have an empty Temple.

Q: Why is the interjection in v.14 that He healed the blind and lame while still inside the Temple important to Christ's message?

A: The signs confirm the authenticity of His message. Miracles serve as a follow-up to confirm the Word of God.

Q: How is the way Jesus was rejected a complete and thorough repudiation by the leaders?

A: They not only rejected His personal message, but the confirming signs ("the wonderful things He had done" in v.15) and the testimony, "Hosanna to the Son of David" (v.15) which in Jewish terms was a proclamation of Jesus being the Messiah.

Q: Why is it particularly powerful that Jesus responds to the leaders with a quote from Psalm 8?

A: Psalm 8 was known then and still known today to be a Messianic Psalm teaching about the Messiah, in particular pointing to the time when He will reign on earth as the King the crowds at the Triumphal Entry so vigorously endorsed. It is heavily quoted in Hebrews 2:5-9.

Application: Judgment always begins first with God's House. Removing the leaven of sin and false teaching parallels the primary work of the cross and the fact that no one can accept the Conquering King without first fully embracing the Suffering Servant.

¹⁷And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

¹⁸Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry. ¹⁹Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered.

²⁰Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?"

²¹And Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. ²²And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

[Read v.17-22]

Note: A full and proper study to understand the meaning of the fig tree is a much deeper undertaking than can be provided here. It is highly encouraged to study not just fig trees but all trees throughout Scripture.

Q: What is the basic meaning of this teaching in this particular instance?

A: Combined with the parallel accounts in Mt. 24:32-22 and Lk. 13:6-10, this is mainly a picture of Israel having an outward "show of religion" as expressed by a fruit tree with all leaves and no fruit. It is an illustration of faith or the lack of it.

Q Is this the first time Christ expressed this teaching in this way? In the course of Christ's earthly ministry, did this teaching come as a complete surprise?

A: In Luke 13:6-10 Jesus provided a parable indicating God gave Israel three years in which to bring forth fruit but failed. In reality this brings to conclusion something established much earlier in Jesus' ministry.

Q: Given what we know of Israel's spiritual condition at the time, what is being expressed here?

A: It is what Paul called, "a form of godliness, although they have denied its power" (2 Ti. 3:5). It is works which do not actually bear spiritual fruit as represented as having "nothing on it except leaves only". (v.19)

Q: Is there another group of people to which this might be applied?

A: The principle may be applied to those Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount in the opening chapters of Matthew's Gospel, those who claim to prophesy and do miracles in Christ's name but are rejected by Him. They may have leaves, but no fruit. (Mt. 7:21-23)

Q: Many commentators have noted that this was not the season when fruit would have been expected to be available on the tree. If so, what is the greater teaching Christ is illustrating?

A: That He “will come on day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know”. (Mt. 24:50)

Application: Christ must be accepted on His terms, not ours. It is the difference between being religious versus entering into a personal, spiritual relationship.

Overall Application

Where Israel is concerned, these three signs revealed her true character at His First Coming:

- Their rejection of Him as the Suffering Servant at what we call “The Triumphal Entry” revealed Israel’s blindness.
- His final work in the Temple revealed Israel’s inward corruption.
- His cursing of the fig tree revealed Israel’s outward fruitlessness.

Where everyone is concerned, the requirement is to not just accept Christ the King on His terms and particularly through the work of the cross, but to then live a completely change life thereafter, bearing fruit in accordance with His Word and ways. Faith is proven by following it up with exclusive obedience to God’s Word and ways which not only changes us on the inside (like the work in the Temple), but producing visible fruit for the Kingdom (like the fig tree).