

## Looking at Jesus' Last Days Like This

Thomas Ward  
January 20, 2019



In Matthew 16 we find that Jesus was challenged by Pharisees who demanded that he provide them with a sign from Heaven (Matt 16:1). Yet Jesus, who had performed countless miracles, refused to do so on that occasion, saying that the Pharisees had failed to "interpret the signs of the times (Matt 16:3)." Jesus added that "A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah (Matt 17:4)."

Christianity typically connects "the sign of Jonah" with Jonah's three days inside the whale and later

Jesus' three days in the tomb.

Around the time of this encounter, Jesus began to reveal to his disciples that he needed to go to Jerusalem once again and that there he would face death. When Peter chastised Jesus for speaking of his death, Jesus called Peter "Satan" for daring to question what seemed to be a dramatic change in the plan. He admonished Peter for only seeing things from a human rather than a Divine perspective (Matt 16:23).

Six days later, Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus when he climbed "a high mountain." There, Moses and Elijah appeared to them and spoke to Jesus of the impending ordeal that awaited him in Jerusalem. Peter, James and John were the same three disciples who would later be chosen to accompany Jesus to Gethsemane.

What they experienced on the mountain that day rivaled even what John the Baptist had experienced at the River Jordan. Besides witnessing the presence of Moses and Elijah, they found themselves cloaked by a cloud, and a voice from Heaven said to them, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (Matt 3:16-17).

On this occasion, however, the Lord not only affirmed his love and faith in Jesus; he pleaded with them: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him! (Matt 17:5)" Unfortunately, a few days later Jesus' disciples would not be able to follow that exhortation. Just as John had failed to follow Jesus and become his disciple, even Jesus' closest disciple Peter would deny that he was not one of Jesus' followers (Matt 26:74).

### Final Days of Freedom

Jesus' ministry had been focused in Galilee, and he had faithfully gone the way of itinerant preacher there. But after the encounter on the mountain, Jesus, recognized the time had come for his final entry into Jerusalem.

Jesus entered Jerusalem astride a young donkey that his disciples had borrowed for him (Matt 21:3). This arrival was oddly reminiscent of three decades earlier when his very expectant mother Mary and his stepfather Joseph arrived by donkey to Bethlehem.

Humble crowds, soon to celebrate the Passover, enthusiastically welcomed Jesus. As he entered the city, "a very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road (Matt 21:8)." The crowd welcoming Jesus proclaimed:

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

Highest Heaven!" (Matt 21:9)

Yet Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was not welcomed by all. Jesus had grown increasingly frustrated with the rejection that he suffered at the hands of the religious leaders of Jerusalem. Scribes and Pharisees occasionally came to Galilee to observe and to challenge rather than support Jesus (Matt 15:1-8).

Following his "Palm Sunday" arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus headed directly to the Temple. When he entered the Temple courtyard, he began to scatter the wares of the merchants and the money changers. Referencing passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11), he scolded them: "My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers (Matt 21:13)."

By failing to recognize that the Temple had been built to host the one who stood before them in the courtyard on that day, the chief priests, the Pharisees, and the merchants had desecrated the House of God. After this unsettling incident, we are told that "near the temple, he then healed the sick and afflicted who came to him on that day (Matthew 21:14)."

Matthew tells us that on the next day, Jesus came across a fig tree that had borne no fruit. Jesus cursed it and it instantly withered; Jesus explained that his followers could do this as well if they had faith and, with faith, that one could even command a mountain to enter the sea (Matt 21:18-22). Was the fig tree a metaphor for Israel's failed response to Jesus?

\*\*\*\*

Jesus returned to teach once again in the Temple courtyard. It would be the last time that he would do so as a free man. The chief priests and Temple elders challenged him, "By what authority are you doing these things (Matt 21:23)?"

Even though John the Baptist had failed him, Jesus knew that the chief priests and elders had not only failed to accept him, they had also not followed John who had been chosen to make "straight the way of the Lord." The chief priests and Pharisees could not answer Jesus when he asked by what authority John had conducted Baptism. They finally responded by saying, "We do not know" and Jesus countered, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things (Matt 21:27)."

\*\*\*\*

Jesus' criticisms of the chief priests and Pharisees intensified in those final days in Jerusalem. All of Matthew 23 is a verbal castigation of the religious authorities of his time.

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. (Matt 23:1-15)

\*\*\*\*

Jesus had been crushed by those whom he most wished to embrace but who chose to reject him. Jesus had hoped to concentrate his love upon Judaism's leaders and raise them up so that, through them, his love for Israel and for all of humanity might be multiplied to every corner of Israel and conveyed to the world. In those final days, Jesus wept over Jerusalem, the capital of the people chosen to receive him:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord (Matt 23:37-39).