

## A GLIMPSE OF HIS GLORY MATTHEW 21:1-11

It is interesting to me that there are only a few occasions in the Gospel narratives where Jesus was given the honor that He deserved while He lived on earth. The day we call Palm Sunday is one of them. Ironically, it occurred only a few days before He was rejected by the public and crucified on a cross.

We typically refer this event as “The Triumphal Entry,” though theologians more precisely call it “Jesus’ formal presentation to Israel.” It is a familiar story, and one of the only stories that is recorded in all four Gospels, each with a slightly different angle or emphasis. Matthew’s account begins in verse 1 of chapter 21.

*“Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.” <sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,*

*<sup>5</sup> “Say to the daughter of Zion,  
‘Behold, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”*

Pilgrimages to Jerusalem were an integral part of Hebrew community life in the ancient world. The law prescribed that Jewish citizens gather in Jerusalem for three great festivals every year—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. They came to remember and celebrate God’s mighty acts of salvation in their long and storied history as the covenant people of God. They came to acknowledge their dependence on God and to renew their commitment to Him.

The passage we just read occurs at the very beginning of Passover—the celebration of God’s miraculous deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Tens of thousands of Jews from all over the world had converged upon Jerusalem. There was a festive mood; people were renewing acquaintances; children were playing; adults were engaged in lively discussion. And no doubt one of the hot topics of conversation was of another kind of deliverance—not from the tyranny of Egypt, but from Rome.

Jews were living in anticipation of the Messiah—God’s Anointed One, the Great Emancipator, the One whom they thought would overthrow the Roman Empire and establish an unrivaled kingdom in which righteousness and justice and peace would prevail and in which God’s covenant people, the Jews, would assume their rightful position of privilege and honor.

And the talk in Jerusalem during this particular Passover would have, undoubtedly, come around to a man named Jesus. There would be talk of His teaching, for He spoke with authority unlike the other rabbis of that day. There would be talk of His supernatural powers - His ability to cast out demons, walk on water, and turn a few fragments of food into a feast for thousands. Surely some of these pilgrims had actually seen Him heal the lame, the blind, and the sick, and were eager to share their stories. But the miracle they were talking most about on this day was something that had just occurred a few days earlier in a village near the Mount of Olives. Jesus had raised His friend Lazarus from the dead after he had been buried for four days, and some of them had seen Him do it.

Indeed, Jesus was the talk of the town on this particular Passover. But it wasn’t all

positive, some were skeptical of Him and some were adamantly opposed to Him. After all, Jesus was from Nazareth, a backwater military outpost in Galilee with no historical significance. He was homeless and penniless and was followed by a ragtag band of disciples, most of whom were uneducated and uncouth. What is more, He was often at odds with their esteemed Bible scholars and religious leaders, which made people wonder how He could be authentic, for surely, these Bible experts would know.

And then there were those outlandish comments Jesus had made, like when He told a paralytic that His sins were forgiven (Mark 2:5), or when He said, “Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19), or when He declared that He and the Father were one (John 10:30), and “Before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58).

These things were astonishing and confounding to a lot of people. Consequently, there was more than a little ambivalence about Jesus. Some were not sure He was credible. Some suspected He was a cult leader. Maybe, said a few, He was demonic.

This is the context for the event that Matthew describes in chapter 21. Before we look at what Jesus did and the reception He received, I want to call your attention to a couple of details in Matthew’s account that will help clarify the prophetic and historical significance of what Jesus is about to do.

First, Matthew mentions a small village named Bethphage which is just to the east of Jerusalem on the slopes of a large hill known as the Mount of Olives. Luke tells us that Jesus was near Bethphage *and* Bethany, which was the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, where Jesus often stayed and where He had just raised Lazarus from the dead. The reason the location of these villages is significant is that Zechariah prophesied that the anticipated Messiah would one day stand on the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem (14:4). Second, Zechariah had predicted that Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey (9:9). Jesus is consciously preparing to fulfill this familiar prophecy.

Now look at **verses 6-7**. <sup>6</sup> *The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them.* <sup>7</sup> *They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and He sat on them.*

Only Matthew’s Gospel indicates that there are two animals—the donkey and the colt. Presumably, the donkey is the colt’s mother, which had probably been brought along to keep its foal calm, for Mark and Luke tell us that this was a colt that had never been ridden before. It is the colt that Jesus mounted after the disciples had draped it with their cloaks.

But the important point in the story is that Jesus fulfills Zechariah’s prophecy, and the significance of Him riding a colt is that Messiah’s procession to the capital city completely contrasted with the typical processions of kings in the ancient world with all their pomp and glory. “Jesus wasn’t riding in a gold chariot, with stallions straining at the reins and wheel spikes flashing in the sunlight. He wasn’t surrounded by officers in polished armor displaying banners captured from vanquished armies. He wasn’t followed by a...procession of slaves and prisoners in chains, a symbol of His sovereignty and power” (Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p.190).

Jesus came riding in on a lowly donkey that had never been ridden before. Picture this small, spindly legged beast of burden with cloaks draped over its back carrying a grown man, gingerly walking down a steep slope on a dusty path, then straining to come up the other side of the valley. It is almost laughable, especially when considering that this was Almighty God’s method of introducing His long-anticipated King to His people, the One who would ultimately rule the world.

Why the colt of a donkey? Yes, it was to fulfill Zechariah’s prophecy, but this was God’s pre-determined plan because of its symbolic significance. Riding on a lowly, unbroken colt

represented Messiah's character and purpose. This is an upside-down kingdom, and God's King is *humble* and gentle, and He comes in *peace*.

Whether the pilgrims understood this symbolism is uncertain. However, **verses 8-9**.  
<sup>8</sup> *Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.* <sup>9</sup> *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!"*

Who were these people lining the paths? They were pilgrims from Galilee who knew of Jesus and had seen Him at work. They were the peasants from Bethany who saw what He did for Lazarus. They were children who stopped their playing, the blind and the lame who stopped their begging. And most of them were spreading their coats and palm branches things on the path for the colt to walk on which was the ancient equivalent to what we call "the red-carpet treatment," a sign of honor and respect reserved for royalty and VIPs.

The crowd was shouting and singing, making all kinds of commotion, and they were getting louder and louder as more and more people joined in. The excitement built, and the fervor escalated.

Of course, it was not at all uncommon for people to come riding into Jerusalem on donkeys. Nor was it uncommon for large groups of pilgrims, when they arrived at the gates of the city, to be loud and celebratory, elated at their long journey's end. But this was different. This was special. And it brought to mind Zechariah's prophecy with which all of these Jews would have been familiar. And many were wondering, "Is this prophecy being fulfilled right before our eyes?"

And apparently, a lot of them thought it was, for they erupted into outbursts of praise. "Hosanna!" which means "save us," something they expected Messiah to do. "Son of David!" a clear reference to the kingly role Messiah would have. And "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" an affirmation that Jesus was, indeed, the King who had arrived in the royal city to take His throne. This was coronation day, or so they thought.

Keep in mind that up until this time Jesus had, more often than not, *eluded* the praise of men. He often instructed the beneficiaries of His miracles not to tell others about what He had done for them, for, in His words, His time had not yet come.

But in this instance Jesus did not try to stop people from celebrating Him and praising His name. Not surprisingly, according to Luke's account, this upset the religious leaders who opposed Jesus. When they saw and heard the praise, they were indignant, and said to Him, "Rebuke your disciples!" The implication being these people are out of line. They are proclaiming things that aren't true!

But Jesus replied, **verse 40**, *"I tell you," He replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."*

In other words, "What these people are doing is perfectly appropriate. I am the Savior! I am the Son of David! I am coming in the name of the Lord! And those who know who I am cannot help but praise Me. And if *people* do not ascribe to Me the glory that is due Me because they have not grasped who I am and that what I'm doing is the fulfillment of a centuries-old prophecy, then the things I have created who *do* know Me *will*, including inanimate objects like these rocks!"

Don't forget that while human beings are the most intelligent creatures on the planet, we are not always the most perceptive. The Bible says that Satan has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that, in our natural state, we cannot understand the truth about Jesus. And you can imagine how frustrating that must be to the rest of creation who *do* know the truth

about Jesus, and who cannot believe that we could be so dimwitted.

The Apostle Peter, in His first letter, when describing God's plan of salvation, declares that even angels eagerly study that plan to see how it will unfold (1:12). I can picture angels looking down from heaven at this earth, observing people who are oblivious to the King of heaven—people who ignore His message, who reject His invitation, who construct their own delusional system of reality—I can imagine angels shaking their heads and saying, “What’s wrong with those creatures? If they only knew! This is the One around whom the universe revolves; this is the One who has the undivided attention and unceasing praise of heavenly beings who have never been tainted with sin, who have never been redeemed by Him or adopted as His children. Yet they cannot take their eyes off of Him. If only they could see Him as we see Him!”

Here, in this event we call the *Triumphal Entry*, God took the veil off the eyes of some of these pilgrims and let them see Jesus for who He really was. These were spontaneous, involuntary outbursts of praise from people whose eyes had been opened to see the Lord, and who could not help themselves. They were compelled to shout and sing and make noise because they *had* to call attention to Him. This was the King! This was Messiah! He was worthy of their praise!

Look now at **verses 10-11**. <sup>10</sup> *And when He entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?”* <sup>11</sup> *And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”*

According to John’s Gospel, Jesus had been in Jerusalem a number of times. But He was not as well-known there as He was among the Galilean pilgrims. Those who made their homes in the city would tend to take little notice of a “prophet” from the remote countryside even if He visited from time to time (Morris, PNTC). Thus, it would be natural to ask, “Who is this?”

The crowds of pilgrims responded to their question by calling Jesus “*the prophet Jesus*.” In so doing, they may have been recalling Moses’ prophecy that one day a great prophet like Him would arise in the last days (Deut. 18:15) and concluded that this prophet was Jesus. Regardless, *prophet* was the highest accolade they could give, and they gave it enthusiastically.

And probably with a bit of local pride they added that He was “*from Nazareth of Galilee*.” Most pilgrims did not come from Nazareth, but most did come from Galilee, and for them this Galilean prophet was a most important figure. Even though Jesus had left Nazareth and moved to Capernaum, the place of one’s birth is always important, and clearly the crowd associated Jesus with Nazareth (Morris).

So, what is the significance of this story as we contemplate Jesus’ life and ministry in relation to us? First, it is important that we not minimize Jesus’ purpose for doing what He did. Matthew tells us plainly in verse 4 that “*This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet...*” Never mind that the typical Jew who read the prophecy in Zechariah thought that Messiah would ride into Jerusalem, be crowned king, and immediately start ruling. That, of course, did not happen with Jesus, and He knew it *would* not happen, for He had been telling His disciples for months that He must go up to Jerusalem, not to be celebrated, but to suffer at the hands of the chief priests and elders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised from the dead.

Yes, Jesus was going up to Jerusalem to save His people and secure His kingdom, but it wasn’t going to happen on the day He rode into town on a donkey. No, coronation day for Jesus was the following Sunday, the day He rose from the dead. That’s when He finished

defeating the ultimate enemies of mankind—sin, Satan, and death. And that's when all of heaven went wild with celebration.

The triumphal entry was important, insofar as it fulfilled prophecy that Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey. And Jesus *is* the Messiah! It was important insofar as many people did ascribe to Jesus the glory that He deserves. But when people went crazy about Him that day, Jesus was not thinking to Himself, "Wow, isn't this great! I'm having so much fun! What a day!"

I'm guessing He was somewhat subdued in His spirit. Because He knew what was going to happen in the next few days. He would be betrayed by one of His Twelve, denied by another, mocked by jeering crowds, spit at, flogged, taunted, beaten, crucified, and, worst of all, abandoned by His heavenly Father. No, there was nothing about Jesus' approach to Jerusalem that gave Him pleasant thoughts.

But praise His name, He did it anyway. He followed the Father's script. And as uncomfortable and difficult as it was, He did it because He was determined to do His Father's will, which was to save us from our sin, reconcile us to God, and give us eternal life. And I will tell you that if the people who lauded Him on Palm Sunday did so even though they only anticipated a political kingdom, how much more ought we to laud Him for securing for us an eternal kingdom?

*Our* enthusiastic praise and worship is the only logical thing to do. He's the King of kings! He's the Lord of lords! He's the epitome of beauty! He's the author of life! He's the essence of love! He's the Alpha and Omega! He's the Savior of mankind! He's the Son of God! He's the Servant of all! He's the Light of the world! He's the Living Water! He's the Bread of Life! He's the way, the truth, and the life!

The climax of our existence is seeing the face of Jesus. And when that day comes, we will be so absorbed with Him, so enthralled with Him and so captivated by Him that we will not be able to think about anything else, including ourselves. We will not be able to take our eyes off of Him. We won't want to.

We will see Jesus as He is, in all His beauty, majesty, and splendor. And we will probably wonder why in the world we did not pay more attention to Him earlier; how we could have ever been so easily distracted and preoccupied by the comparatively dull, meaningless things of this earth that consume so much of our attention right now.

So why not give Him more of our attention right now? Why not ask Him to open our spiritual eyes right now and let us see Jesus for who He really is, and then begin praising Him right now?

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**Main Idea:** To fulfill prophecy, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and is enthusiastically lauded as Messiah by Passover pilgrims

### **Jerusalem during Passover**

A Festive Mood

Speculation about Jesus of Nazareth

### **The Triumphal Entry**

A Thoroughly Un-Roman Processional

People Lining the Path

The Red-carpet Treatment

### **Responses to Jesus**

“This is Ludicrous!” (religious leaders)

“We can’t Help it!” (the ones praising Jesus)

“If They Don’t, Rocks Will!” (Jesus)

### **The Truth about Jesus**

Our Perceptions

Our Response