

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

MATTHEW 21:1-17

WITH this chapter we reach the second section of the final division of the Gospel.

The first section revealed the King as specially devoting Himself to His own disciples in view of His coming Cross. In this section, which occupies three chapters, we really begin this study of the last week in the life of our Lord. The time covered was brief, but filled with solemnity. The King is seen deliberately passing back to Jerusalem for the express purpose of definitely and officially rejecting the Hebrew nation. It is the story of the rejection of the Hebrew nation by the King, not that of the rejection of the King by the nation.

In this paragraph the subject is that of the coming of the King to Jerusalem.

- In the first seven verses we have an account of His preparation for entering the city.
- In verses eight to eleven we have an account of the actual entry.
- In verses twelve to seventeen we have the story of the first act of the King in the city, His executive cleansing of the Temple of God.

First, let us observe carefully this story of the preparations; how He acted when they drew nigh to Jerusalem. There are three very simple and yet important points to be noticed.

First, He acted deliberately and with evident intention. His going into Jerusalem as He did, was not a result of accident. He rode in by His own will and upon His own initiative. This action of Jesus was an extraordinary one for Him: He had always seemed to avoid anything which would provoke enthusiasm; but upon this occasion He definitely did so. There have not been wanting those who have questioned the authenticity of the narrative, because it seems to be out of harmony with that unobtrusiveness of spirit, which fulfilled the prophetic word concerning Him, **“He will not cry, nor lift up, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.”**

It is our business to interpret these actions of Jesus by the King Himself; and to remember that, if for a moment He departed from the ordinary course of the exercise of His ministry, there must have been some reason for it; and it is good for us to seek that reason. He did not yield Himself to the popular clamour, but He evoked the popular clamour, and that of set and deliberate purpose.

It is evident also that He acted with knowledge. This is manifested in the detailed instructions. If we read the story quite naturally and simply, we cannot escape from this view. He knew where they would find the colt. He knew the frame of mind in which the people would be, to whom He sent them. This is another of the simple and yet complex stories, which we must change in some way if we are to think of Jesus as a man within the limitations of other men. As He hastened His disciples down and across the ravine to prepare for His coming, He choosing to travel round with the rest of the people along the highway, there was manifest an accurate knowledge which none of them shared, **“Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find”** and He told them exactly what they would find **“And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them: and straightway he will send them.”**

And finally He acted with unquestioned authority. A great deal has been written about the fact that Jesus said, **“And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them: and straightway he will send them.”** There are those who have interpreted the word Lord there as referring simply to the local association between Jesus and His disciples. It is more in harmony with the facts of the incident to say that He used the word as indicating His universal authority, His Chief Proprietorship of all things the Lord hath need of them. Matthew’s interpretation of what our Lord said warrants us in this conclusion.

Referring not merely to the sending of the colt, but to everything that happened afterwards, Matthew wrote; **“This is come to pass, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet, saying,**

**“Tell ye the daughter of Sion,
Behold, thy King cometh unto thee,
Meek, and sitting upon an ass,
And a colt the foal of an ass.”**

That quotation is from the ninth chapter of Zechariah. It occurs in that portion of the prophecy of Zechariah which is called, **“The burden of the word of the Lord upon the land of Hadrach and Damascus.”** If we pass on to the twelfth chapter we read, **“The burden of the word of the Lord concerning Israel.”**

These are the beginnings of two consecutive messages, and yet two separate ones.

“The burden of the word of the Lord upon the land of Hadrach,” occupies chapters nine to eleven, and consists of the message of the prophet concerning an anointed King Who would be rejected.

If we take the next burden, **“The burden of the word of the Lord concerning Israel,”** chapters twelve to fourteen, we find that the message is that of the rejected King enthroned.

Out of the prophecy then which deals with the rejection of the anointed King, Matthew quoted; and he affirmed that this sending for the colt, this riding into Jerusalem, this cleansing of the Temple, all was in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah, and of that part of it which foretold the rejection of the anointed King.

So that according to Matthew, we see this action of Jesus set in relation to the ancient prophecies; and we see how He Who inspired the prophecy, Himself came to fulfil it; He Who fore-arranged all things, and gave men visions of things to come, moved into human history with set purpose, and fulfilled the things according to His own interpretation by the spirit of prophecy in the past. That is the value of the quotation.

Now that quotation emphasized two things according to Matthew's interpretation of the ancient prophecy:

- First, the coming of the King, "**Behold, thy King cometh unto thee;**"
- Secondly, the meekness of the King,

**"Meek, and sitting upon an ass,
And a colt the foal of an ass."**

Two things were intended by the coming of Jesus to Jerusalem in this way.

The first was that of official kingly entry. That is one reason why He provoked this demonstration, riding into Jerusalem in such a way as to attract attention. He had often passed into Jerusalem quietly. Men had often crowded to Him. He had spoken kingly words and phrases, and had exerted kingly power in benefits conferred; and men had listened, criticizing, admiring, rejecting, believing. But here, once, and once only, He went in such a way as to manifest the fact of His Kingship to the crowds of Jerusalem, "**Behold, thy King cometh.**"

And yet Jesus went in this way to exhibit not merely His Kingliness, but His meekness. And if Jerusalem, in that last hour of her dying day, had known Him, there would have been not judgment, but mercy. He never closes the door in the face of a sinner. He waits only until the sinner closes that door for himself. Thus they found the colt, and brought it to Him. His own disciples yielded Him homage as they spread their garments on the colt, and He accepted the homage as He sat thereon.

And so we pass to the second stage of the story, that which records the actual entry. Notice the things material, and the things essential in this story.

The things material. If it were possible for us to imagine ourselves back in Jerusalem, not among the Galilean crowds coming up with Jesus, but among the dwellers in Jerusalem; if we could imagine that we were Romans in Jerusalem on the day of that triumphal entry, we should find ourselves saying; Who is this that is coming? If we asked the multitudes they would say, Jesus of Nazareth.

That would mean nothing to us, for Nazareth was obscure; or if we knew anything of it our attitude would be one of contempt. The Central Figure in the strange procession was riding upon a beast of burden. Kings never ride upon beasts of burden. There was a race of swift asses in those eastern countries, the peculiar animals of Kings, but the word describing this one is the word showing that it was a beast of burden picked up by the wayside.

- Who were those people all about Him? An unorganized mob.
- What were the signs of loyalty and rejoicing? Old clothes and broken trees.

Imagine how a Roman, familiar with imperial Rome having perhaps seen one of those triumphal entries, when some emperor or general returned from war, was led in triumph through the streets of the city, that imperial city on the seven hills would have looked upon this scene.

What the Romans really thought of it all we can gather by noticing their attitude toward the movement.

Pilate's attitude was one of absolute indifference from the beginning. All the gathering of this mob of Galileans around some man that they thought was a prophet, did not affect Rome. Rome could afford to ignore it. She said; There are no arms amongst them, there is not a scowl upon a face, they are all full of laughter and song; it is perfectly harmless; it is amusing; they think it is a triumphal entry; they are shouting about a King; let them shout.

Remember, that notwithstanding all our popular interpretation of the text, when presently Pilate said, "**I find no crime in Him**" he did not mean that He was sinless; but that He was not guilty of sedition; He had not plotted against Rome.

If we look back upon the triumphal entry from the standpoint of earthly kingship it was indeed characterized by weakness and poverty. A beast of burden, an obscure man, a shouting mob, mainly of Galilee. Metropolitan Jerusalem despised them. We know the current contemptuous phraseology of Jerusalem concerning Galilee - "**Galilee of the Gentiles.**"

But let us look again, "**Behold, thy King.**"

Nineteen centuries vindicate the truth of the prophetic message. He was a King; royal without trappings. His garment was a home-made garment. Presently they would cast lots for it, perhaps because it was preeminently comfortable, woven from the top throughout without a seam, which simply means woven by the deft fingers of some loving woman. A King in a home-made garment!

His steed was a beast of burden not yet broken to harness, "**Whereon yet never man sat.**"

His courtiers were fisher-folk, His cavalcade a mob of Galileans. And yet no pageant that ever passed through the streets of imperial Rome has so impressed the centuries as that. The triumphal entries of Roman emperors are almost forgotten, but of that entry of Jesus to Jerusalem, every detail recorded is known by the common people everywhere.

As they moved into the city, "**All the city was moved.**" The Greek word translated "**stirred**" is the one from which we obtain our word *seismic*. There was an earthquake, not materially, but mentally. His coming made an earthquake, it shook the metropolis to its very center. The wildest excitement prevailed. A man, a mob of shouting Galileans, old clothes, and palm branches; and the city was stirred to its very center.

That was His intention; He would attract the attention of Jerusalem to the fact of His coming. He was compelling Jerusalem to recognize Him at least for an hour, at least till it should have heard His voice again, and have seen His authority once more. As she would not listen, He would stir her as by an earthquake, and attract her to Himself, if only to pronounce that final doom upon her.

But now we come to the last part of this paragraph.

This was the second time Jesus had cleansed the Temple.

He did so at the commencement of His ministry. John tells the story of that. But now again at the close of that public ministry, the King, Who had thus come deliberately to attract men and to make them see and hear Him once again, Who had come in all the symbolism of Kingship, a symbolism suggestive of meekness and poverty in material things, went immediately and directly to the Temple of God.

How many things He passed on the way which needed attention. His eyes must have seen many things out of harmony with the Kingdom of heaven, contrary to the will of God His Father. There were many things waiting for the activity of the social reformer, but He passed the whole of them and went to the Temple. Do not misinterpret this. It does not mean that He had nothing to do with the social conditions through which He rode, but He knew the best way to touch them. **“Judgment”** must **“begin at the House of God.”**

That is the meaning of His passing through to the center, of His going to the Temple. As long as the Temple was wrong the city was bound to be wrong. Presently there will be a CITY WITHOUT A TEMPLE. As the Seer in Patmos said, **“I saw no Temple therein.”** Why not? Because the whole city will have become a Temple. All the streets will be courts in which men worship, and all the civic authorities will be ministers of the Most High. So long as the Temple at the heart of the city is wrong, the city cannot be saved.

The King came to the city Jerusalem, beautiful for situation. How He loved it! At the end of this section we shall hear the tears in His voice as He said; **“Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered thy children, and ye would not!”**

The ancient King-Psalmist never loved Jerusalem as He loved Jerusalem; and He went to the city, the center of the nation, and He went to the Temple, the center of the city. Now what did He do? We love the tender pictures of Jesus, but we need such as these also. He **“cast out,”** He **“overthrew.”**

- There is more than gentleness in that.
- There is more than sentiment in that He **“cast out all them that sold and bought in the Temple.”**
- There was a magnificence in His roughness.

He **“overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves.”**

Why did He do these things? Notice very carefully His own words; **“It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer, but ye make it a den of thieves.”**

Two quotations from the Old Testament prophecies are brought together here Isaiah, chapter fifty-six, verse seven, and Jeremiah, chapter seven, verse eleven. Let them be read in connection with their context.

The King, having come to the city, and come to the Temple, cast out and overthrew; and He vindicated His action by quotation from the ancient writings of Scripture, one descriptive of what the house should be - a house of prayer; the other descriptive of what the house had become - a den of robbers.

Taking a word from Isaiah, the prophet of vision and hope; and capturing a word from Jeremiah, the prophet of vision and of tears, He put them together. The house ought to be a house of prayer. They had made it a den of robbers. Those were great moments for Jerusalem. Oh if Jerusalem had but known!

There, at the center of the city, not because He did not love the city, but because He did love it, He stood in the Temple and said in effect, If the city is ever to be seasoned with salt, the Temple must be right;

“Let the priests themselves believe
And put salvation on.”

Then for one brief moment, so brief a moment that if we are not careful we miss it in our reading we find the Temple made beautiful indeed; **“The blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them.”** That was one brief moment of restoration. For one brief moment the house was no longer a den of robbers, it was a house of prayer.

What a picture! The Temple was not tidy. There were overturned tables, and money scattered everywhere, the debris of a great reconstruction. But there were the blind and the lame; and the face that a moment before had flamed with indignation was soft with the radiance of a great pity.

That is one of the greatest pictures in the Gospel according to Matthew. He casts out, but He takes in; He overthrows, but He builds up.

Let us go back to Isaiah. In that fifty-sixth chapter we read, **“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.”** That is what the King quoted. He stayed His quotation there; but what follows? **“The Lord God Which gathereth the outcasts of Israel, saith, Yet will I gather others to Him, besides those that are gathered unto him.”**

He did not quote that, but He did it! He rebuked them for the desecration of the house. He cast out, and He overthrew; and then He gathered the outcasts of Israel; and He gathered others besides His own. We know there is a wider significance. We know that this was one of the greatest prophetic words of Isaiah; but there was the first fulfillment of it.

Thank God for that vision of the King. We could not live in the midst of all the iniquity that prevails if we did not believe in a King Who can overthrow and cast out. And thank God, that before the rearrangement of details, before we have put the house in order; with the tables still upset, the money scattered, and the men of affairs driven forth, He gathers the outcasts, and heals them.

We know the rest of the story - priests; and as surely as we hear the word, we know that mischief is brewing.

They heard of the wonderful things, and they heard children singing, and were moved with indignation! Think of it! They saw the wonderful things that He did, and they heard the bairns singing, and they were angry.

We do not want to know anything more about them; that is their condemnation. These children were practically proclaiming the Messiah.

Dost thou hear it? they asked. “**Yea,**” said Jesus, I do hear it, and “**have ye never read, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings Thou hast perfected praise?**”

It was an uproarious day in Jerusalem. The Galileans had been shouting, and Jerusalem had been shaken. He had turned out money-changers, and the crash and the flash of it all was about Him. Then the children sang, and He said, That is perfected praise. God help us, what a King He is!

~ end of chapter 56 ~

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