

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **This Was the Week That Was**

SCRIPTURE: Matt 21:1-27

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A satirical television comedy program hosted by David Frost aired on BBC TV in 1962 and 1963. It was called *That Was the Week that Was*, or TW3. Ever since then the phrase “the week that was” has been used to refer to any week that is highly unusual. Sportscasters use it to refer to a week that has unusual upsets in the NFL, which means almost every week. Bob Schieffer used it as the headline of a news column he wrote the week Barack Obama beat Hilary Clinton for the Democratic nomination. Scores of writers used it following the Democratic convention and even more after the Republican convention. Economists employed it two weeks ago when Lehman Brothers went bankrupt and AIG received a bailout from the federal government to prevent its bankruptcy. And of course it found plenty of usage this week. Virtually anytime anything unusual happens someone will call it “the week that was.”

This morning we come in our study of the Life of Christ to the start of the *real* Week that Was, Passion Week, the last week of Jesus’ earthly life. So profound and earth-shattering were the events of this week that Matthew spends a full one-third of his Gospel talking about it, and John almost half of his. We’re going to spend the next six months on this final week of Christ’s life, and we will only be scratching the surface. Today we will examine four events that occurred on Sunday through Tuesday. *The Week that Was* opens with what I like to call . . .

### **The original Veiled Prophet Parade (21:1-11)**

Let’s read Matthew 21:1-11:

*As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."*

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

*"Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"*

*The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,*

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

*When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"*

*The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."*

From the time I was two years old until I was seven, my family lived in a six-flat tenement near downtown St. Louis. Next door to us was a Catholic convent, and next to that was a two-story brick building belonging to the little Bible College where my dad taught. Once a year the college would allow the neighbors to get up on the flat roof so we could watch the Veiled Prophet Parade as it made its way down Olive Street. Every child loves a parade, of course, and I remember the excitement, though just getting on the roof of that building was almost as much fun as the parade itself.

The Veiled Prophet Parade originated in St. Louis in 1878 as sort of a cross between a civic pride function and Mardi Gras (St. Louis is, after all, very French and very Catholic). Some of the wealthy movers and shakers in St. Louis society formed an organization whose primary task was to put on a magnificent ball where their daughters could be introduced to society—a debutante ball. The focal point of the ball, and of the parade, was the Veiled Prophet, a mystic, cultic figure supposedly from the Far East. In reality he was one of the leaders of the business community, but his identity was always hidden by a mask; thus he was called the Veiled Prophet.

The contrasts between St. Louis' Veiled Prophet Parade and the opening portion of our Scripture text today are greater than the similarities. Far from a gathering of the movers and shakers of society, the parade in Matthew consisted mostly of ordinary people. Far from bands and floats and horses and beautiful women, there was just a single float in this parade—a man on a donkey's colt. And far from ending in a magnificent ball with the prophet crowning the queen of his court, this parade ended with the Prophet weeping over the city, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, and with his execution a few days later.

Yet despite all these contrasts, the Veiled Prophet Parade comes to my mind as I read Matthew 21, for the greatest prophet who ever lived did indeed come to the Holy City of Jerusalem in a parade of sorts. And He, too, was veiled—not physically, but spiritually. That is, even His own followers could not see Him for who He was. They did not understand what He was up to.

This event in Matthew 21 is, of course, better known as *The Triumphal Entry*, but that may be one of the classic misnomers of all time. It conjures up images of a Roman Emperor riding a great stallion, clothed in full battle armor, leading his troops and thousands of prisoners into the city of Rome. This Triumphal Entry consisted of one unarmed Jew with no soldiers and no captives—just an enthusiastic band of pilgrims and little children shouting, “Hosanna!”

In a deeper sense, of course, there is something very triumphant about this parade, for it signals the beginning of the end for this One who came to give His life a ransom for many. Jesus is ready to triumph over the greatest of all enemies—death.

**The background of the parade.** During these last six months Jesus seems to have avoided Jerusalem for the most part so as to prevent direct confrontation with the religious leaders there. He has retreated frequently from the crowds, spending most of his time in the hill country of Judea and Perea, visiting many little towns, healing the sick, casting out demons, and

teaching his disciples by means of some of his most profound parables.

But now everything has changed. The time has come for Him to present Himself to the nation and to endure the consequences. The best way to see this change of approach is to notice the repetition in the book of John of the phrase, “His time had not yet come.” Five times those words are found in the early chapters of John. “His time had not yet come, His time had not yet come...” But then in chapter 12, immediately following John’s account of the Triumphal Entry, we read these words from the mouth of Jesus: “The hour *has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified . . . Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” History is about to reach its climax.

The Gospel of John gives us important background information for this event. I begin reading from John 11:55:

*When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, “What do you think? Isn’t he coming to the Feast at all?” But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him. Six days before the Passover (i.e. on Saturday, the day before what we call Palm Sunday), Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead (just six weeks earlier).*

*Now I skip down to verse 9: “Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. The next day (Palm Sunday) the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.*

This is the background and setting for this unusual parade.

**Preparation.** Jesus sends two of his disciples into a village between Bethany and Jerusalem named Bethphage, telling them that they will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. They are instructed to untie the donkey and colt and bring them to Him, and if anyone challenges them, they are simply to say, “The Lord needs them.” The owners may have heard enough about Jesus to know He was someone important and thus were willing to loan their donkey to Him. Perhaps they were even believers already. Because the colt had never been ridden, it was deemed suitable for sacred purposes.<sup>1</sup>

**Significance.** The significance is seen in Jesus’ willingness to approach Jerusalem in such a public fashion. The religious leaders had already put out the word that anyone who knew where He was should inform them so that He could be arrested. But far from hiding in fear, He enters Jerusalem publicly and with a great deal of fanfare. Doing so constitutes a deliberate claim on His part to be the Messiah, and many recognize Him as such, though they still fail to understand that Messiah must die before He can reign, that He must come in humility before He

comes in power. His goal is not to save them from the Romans, but from sin. Jesus views His approach to the City as one last appeal to the people of Israel to repent and turn in faith to Him as their Savior.

**Praise.** The disciples find the animals, just as Jesus said they would, and bring them to Jesus. They spread their garments on the colt and put Jesus on it. And as he rides over the crest of the Mount of Olives—the last hill between Bethany and the Holy City, the people spread their garments on the road, giving Him the true Red Carpet treatment. The people also lay branches in His path, and John identifies the branches as those of palm trees. There may have been some political significance to this, for Judas Maccabeus, the Zionist leader who fought so bravely for the Jews 150 years before (and whose revolt is memorialized in the Chanukah celebration), placed palm branches in his path when he recaptured the temple from the hated infidels. Many of these pilgrims undoubtedly view Jesus as a new Zionist leader who will help the nation regain its freedom once again.

They cry, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (9-10). Hosanna means “save now.” Clearly there is Messianic fervor exhibited in these words and the whole city is stirred. When people ask, “Who is this?” the crowds answer, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” (10-11).

**Resistance.** Luke tells us that the Pharisees are fit to be tied over this alleged blasphemy. In fact, they say to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” (Luke 19:39). But Jesus replies, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” In other words, if His disciples don’t praise Him, the Pharisees will have to put up with a rock concert (Get it? The stones will cry out—a rock concert!).

### **The cleansing of the temple (21:12-17)**

The chronology of Passion Week is problematic, but it is probably later the same day or the day after the Triumphal Entry when Jesus makes the visit to the Temple that we read about starting in verse 12 of Matthew 21:

*Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, " 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.' "*

*The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.*

*"Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him.*

*"Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read,*

*" 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise' ?"*

*And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.*

**Why is it necessary?** The religious leaders had allowed the temple to become a place of commerce and corruption. The principal issues involved currency exchange and the sale of sacrificial animals. Everyone who came to Passover had to pay a poll tax. Since many of these people were pilgrims from out of town, they had to exchange currency, since the temple would only accept local money. If you've done any foreign travel you know that a transaction fee always accompanies currency exchanges, and these can be quite large if you deal with an unscrupulous person. Historians tell us that the money-changers at the temple extracted a huge fee for this, and the money all went into the pockets of the religious leaders (some historians estimate 25%).

Furthermore, the only animals acceptable for sacrifice at the temple were animals deemed without defect or blemish. If a pilgrim brought one of his own animals to the temple, the inspectors (who were in cahoots with the religious leaders) always found something wrong with it. The worshipers then had to buy a sheep or a goat from the merchandisers at the temple, and those sheep always seemed to pass inspection. The price for these animals, however, was exorbitant. In other words, extortion of the poor was being practiced right in the temple precincts. Of course, those traveling from foreign countries couldn't bring animals with them, so they were susceptible to this rip-off as well.

So Jesus responds by taking out a whip and driving the merchandisers out of the temple, overturning their money tables in the process. He focuses not just on their extortion of the poor, but on an even more paramount issue: "My house will be a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers." Even today when churches sponsor bazaars and bingo parties and bake sales, there is the real danger that their primary functions—worship, prayer, Bible study, fellowship—will get lost in the commercial activity.

**What is the reaction?** There are several different ones. The blind and the lame take courage in seeing Jesus' boldness. They come to him at the temple and He heals them. But the religious leaders stand to lose a great deal of money through Jesus' actions, so they become all the more committed to getting rid of Him. Despite seeing the wonderful miracles He is performing, they are indignant and angry, especially at the children for singing "Hosanna!" They demand to know of Jesus, "Do you hear what these children are saying?" "Yes," He responds, "and do you hear what the Scriptures say: 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'" (Psalm 8:2). How many times have we seen in recent weeks the love and respect Jesus shows to children?

### **The cursing of the fig tree (21:18-22)**

There are few incidents in the life of Christ that have been held up to more ridicule and skepticism than the cursing of the fig tree, particularly today with tree huggers considering all life—animal and plant—as equivalent to human life. I heard this week that Ecuador is voting on a constitution that ascribes human rights to animals and plants, as well as humans. If it passes, one could theoretically be convicted of murder for killing a tree. I suspect California is upset because they didn't think of that first. Let's read starting in verse 18:

*Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.*

*When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" they asked.*

*Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can*

*you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."*

**Skepticism.** Here are some of the comments of unbelieving skeptics which I found online:

*Jesus shows his ignorance by bothering to go up to the fig tree and examine it. If he was an all-knowing God he would have already known the tree was figless. Is it reasonable to kill something because it fails to meet one's expectations? This is the behavior one might expect from a spoiled child not a reasonable man and certainly not from a supposed God. By killing the tree he destroyed an entire ecosystem that lived within its roots, branches and leaves. What of the small animals and birds that relied on it for shelter and food? What of the humans that did the same? Why curse and destroy rather than bless and make fruitful? Any reasonable person with such powers would have used them to nourish and enhance life not destroy it. The disciples were amazed at the quick death of the fig tree, but this makes no sense. According to the bible (sic) his disciples had heard Jesus tell a man he would find tax money in the mouth of the first fish he caught. They had watched him feed 4,000 people with only a few fish and loaves of bread. They had seen him make the lame walk and the blind see. Instead of being "amazed" at the death of a tree cursed by their Miracle Worker they should have expected it. No tree-hugger was Jesus who tells believers that they they (sic) too can destroy fig trees just like him!<sup>ii</sup>*

Instead of responding directly to all these charges, many of which are silly, let me try to explain briefly what I believe is happening in this unusual incident.

**Purpose.** Having spent the night at the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany, Jesus is on his way back to the city early in the morning (either Monday or Tuesday of Passion Week).<sup>iii</sup> He is hungry and spots a fig tree "by the road." He hasn't gone out into anyone's field to steal figs—the tree is right on the road and thus available to anyone who walks by.

Jesus finds leaves on the tree but no fruit. Fig trees, unlike most fruit trees, produce fruit simultaneously with their leaves, sometimes even before the leaves appear. The presence of leaves is supposed to be evidence that fruit is already there. Mark's comment to the effect that "it was not the season for figs" (Mark 11:13) is best explained as meaning "it was not the time for harvesting figs." But figs are edible even before they are ripe.

Jesus finds leaves but no figs. This tree was promising something but producing nothing, or as D. A. Carson puts it, "It's leaves advertised that it was bearing, but the advertisement was false." Coming where this does—right after the cleansing of the temple and the negative reaction of the religious leaders—it is almost certain that He is using the fig tree in an acted-out parable about Israel. Those who profess to be God's people are living painfully unfruitful lives. So Jesus pronounces a curse on the tree, saying it will no longer bear fruit, and immediately the tree withers. This is prophetic of what will happen to Israel as a nation, and indeed it happens when Rome comes and destroys it in A.D. 70.

The next sentence tells us that “when the disciples saw this, they were amazed.” Trees don’t die overnight. Even if you put Roundup on it, it’s going to take a week or two, but this one dies immediately. The disciples know *why* it withers, because they heard Jesus curse it. They don’t know *how* it withered so fast.

**Additional lesson.** So Jesus uses this as a teachable moment to convey an additional lesson about the power of faith joined with the purpose and will of God. Small minds, of course, tend to be much too literal here. When Jesus says to His disciples that if they have faith and don’t doubt they can not only curse fig trees but also move mountains He is clearly speaking metaphorically. There is no record of any disciple ever moving a literal physical mountain. For that matter, Jesus himself never did such a pointless thing. But certainly throughout history mountainous difficulties have often been removed when people have prayed earnestly in faith.<sup>iv</sup>

### **The challenge to Jesus’ authority (21:23-27)**

This event occurs either on Monday or Tuesday of Passion Week. Please follow in verse 23:

*Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"*

*Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?"*

*They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."*

*So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."*

*Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."*

**The religious leaders ask Jesus two questions.** The challenge comes from the chief priests, the teachers of the Law, and the elders (these are the three primary groups that make up the Jewish Sanhedrin, sort of the religious Supreme Court of Israel). They demand: “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. And who gave you this authority?” The things they are talking about are probably, first of all, His grand entry into Jerusalem, His cleansing of the temple, His healing of the blind and lame, and perhaps His audacity in coming to the temple for the second day in a row to teach. But undoubtedly their focus is on how He drove them out of the temple, *their* temple. They were so stunned at the authority He demonstrated that they hightailed it at the time. But now that they’ve had time to ruminate about it and talk among themselves, they are ready to demand answers.

**Jesus asks them one question.** He isn’t just playing games with them, for the answer to their question is found in the answer to His, if they will just be honest. His question is straightforward: “Tell me, John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men?” Immediately they realize they are caught on the horns of a dilemma. If they say “from heaven,” then Jesus will ask,

“Why didn’t you believe him?”

You see, John made it clear that He was only the forerunner of Messiah. He also clearly identified Jesus as the Lamb of God. In fact, as he was baptizing Jesus, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” So if they say John’s baptism was from heaven, they will have answered their own question—Jesus’ authority must also come from heaven.

But if they say John’s baptism was an earthly baptism, they’ll be in big trouble with the common people, who view John as a hero and a prophet from God. So their choice is to plead ignorance: “We don’t know where it was from.” Jesus knows they are being disingenuous, so He responds, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” Why should Jesus invest in explaining Himself to them if they have no intention of ever bowing to His authority.

**They are silenced.** If these guys were smart, they’d quit while they are behind. They are not smart.

**Conclusion:** I was struggling on Thursday to find the common thread that ties all these events at the beginning of the week that was together, and Pastor Dick came to the rescue. He pointed out that the authority of Jesus is the issue common to each event, and immediately it was obvious to me. Jesus, who said in Matthew 28:18, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me,” demonstrates that so clearly in this chapter.

In the Triumphal Entry we find the owners of the donkey bowing to the authority of Jesus when they are told, “the Lord needs of your animals.”

The animal kingdom itself recognizes His authority, as the colt allows Him to ride on its back though it had never been ridden before.

His authority is seen in the cleansing of the temple as He states, “My house will be called a house of prayer,” and the religious leaders do not even fight back, they only plot behind His back, because they recognize His inherent authority.

His authority is seen in his healing of the blind and lame.

His authority is seen over the plant kingdom as the fig tree dies at His command.

And finally in their direct challenge to His authority in the temple courts religious leaders of Israel are silenced. Tragically, that doesn’t result in their repentance or conversion. In fact, it just makes them all the more intent on putting Him to death. Why? Because though they know He has inherent authority, they refuse to bow to that authority. They don’t want God telling them how to live their lives.

I fear there are some who come to church here regularly, and as you hear the Word taught, you understand more and more about who Jesus is, why He came, who we are, why man is separated

from God, and how man can be made right with God. You may have come to believe many of the truths you have heard. But have you bowed the knee to Jesus? Have you acknowledged His Lordship, his authority?

Philippians 2:9-11 is the ultimate statement about the authority of Jesus:

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Every knee will bow, but friend, it makes every difference in the world whether you bow the knee willingly or are forced to bow when you face Him at the Judgment. Romans 10:9, 10 says, and with this I close,

*If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*

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- i. A number of times in the OT reference is made to the fact that animals used for sacred purposes must not be ridden or yoked. The red heifer in Numbers 19:2 was required to be without defect or blemish and never under a yoke. When the ark of the Covenant was seized by the Philistines during the time of the Judges, the Philistines experienced so much trouble they decided to send it back, and their own priests ordered that it be put on a new cart, with two cows never yoked.
  - ii. These comments were found in a Google search for "cursing of the fig tree." I printed it out but later could not find the site for attribution.
  - iii. Once again the chronology is difficult, because Mark puts the actual cursing of the fig tree before the cleansing of the temple and Jesus' teaching about it afterwards, while Matthew records the entire event afterward. Since Matthew gives scant attention to chronology one would be inclined to see Mark's order as the actual one.
  - iv. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 532.