

The Healings at the Temple
Matthew 21:14-17
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Matthew 21 records the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. This is the climax of the section of Matthew that began in 19:1 with His departure from Galilee and will conclude with the Olivet Discourse at the end of Matthew 25. The King of the Jews entered the capital city on a donkey, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and with the acclaim of the crowds, who 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 the city through the sheep gate, He went to the temple. Three years earlier, at the outset of His public ministry, Jesus had cleansed the temple (John 2:13-17). Now, at the conclusion of His public ministry, Jesus cleansed the temple again. By overturning the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of those who were selling doves, and driving out those who were buying and selling, Jesus made a dramatic statement, *“It is written, ‘MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER’; but you are making it a ROBBERS’ DEN.”*

This condemnation of the merchandising of the temple by the religious leaders must have produced a disturbance. Yet Jesus was not seized by the Jews because of His popularity. *“The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching”* (Mark 11:18).

The restoration of the blind and the lame (21:14)

The story of Jesus healing the blind and the lame at the temple occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew. Since Matthew did not always arrange his report in exact chronological order, we should compare Matthew’s account with the other synoptic Gospels to understand this event in the sequence of the events during the final week of Christ’s ministry on earth.

We know that Jesus first arrived at Bethany from Jericho to stay at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus *“six days before the Passover,”* according to John 12:1. Since the Passover was on Friday, the day of the crucifixion, then Jesus and His disciples arrived at Bethany on a Saturday, which would be the Sabbath. They would eat supper together (John 12:2) and Mary would anoint His feet with expensive perfume.

The next day, the large crowd would learn that Jesus was at Bethany and sought to see Him, along with Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. The chief priests sought to kill Lazarus, in order to indirectly oppose the popularity of Jesus (John 12:9-11). The following day after that, the crowds gathered to honor Jesus and He approached Jerusalem. Thus the triumphal entry into Jerusalem was on Monday.

According to Mark 11:11, *“Jesus entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late.”* Mark tells us that Jesus returned the next day, Tuesday, to cleanse the temple (Mark 11:12-17). Also, following the cleansing of the temple, Mark adds *“The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching”* (Mark 11:18), which appears to generally correspond with Matthew 12:14-17. Therefore, this account of Jesus healing the blind and the lame at the temple would have occurred after the cleansing of the temple on Tuesday.

It is expected that those who were lame and blind would be at the temple, for there was much financial activity and many people able to give alms to assist them in their needs. A couple of months later, we find Peter and John healing a man lame from birth in Acts 3:1-10. This shows that it was not only at Passover when the lame would beg at the temple. This also tells us that Jesus did not heal every lame person in the city.

The blind and lame would have been at the outer court of the Gentiles, as Jewish tradition had restricted them from participating in any activities inside the temple area (cf. Leviticus 21:18-19; 2 Samuel 5:6-8). This was the area where the moneychangers and those buying and selling animals had set up their tables.

This was the final healing account recorded in the Gospels. It is significant that these miracles occur in the temple area, since those who were healed would then be able to gain access to the temple areas that were forbidden to them previously. Jesus did not only cleanse the temple, He also cleansed the people who were prohibited from entering the worship of God in the temple. In the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:6, *“But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here.”*

These final healings at the center of religious life of Jerusalem testified to the authority of Jesus, in parallel to His authority to cleanse the temple. These miracles proved that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, as Jesus noted to John’s disciples, who asked if He was the Expected One, or if they should look for someone else, when He told them, *“Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk”* (Matthew 11:2-5).

The response of the children (21:15)

Matthew records a group of onlookers, *“the children who were shouting in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’.*” These children literally refer to “boys” who were probably those who had turned twelve years old and were able to celebrate their first Passover at the temple. Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem for Passover when He turned twelve, *“And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast”* (Luke 2:42).

At least some of these children had likely joined with their parents, who either followed Jesus to Jerusalem or who came out from Jerusalem to see Him. In Matthew 21:9, we find the crowds shouting the exact same thing, *“Hosanna to the Son of David.”* They shouted in the present tense, continually and they shouted the words of their parents. This acclamation of Jesus with the messianic term *“Son of David,”* with a cry for salvation, *“Hosanna,”* led to the leaders of the temple to respond negatively to these words.

The response of the chief priests and scribes (21:15-16a)

The chief priests and scribes saw the healing of the blind and lame but discounted these *“wonderful things”* in the same way as the Pharisees, who said of Christ’s miracles, *“This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons”* (Matthew 12:24). Not even the clear demonstration of miraculous deeds could enlighten their minds.

It was one thing to dismiss the wonderful works of Christ in healing the blind and the lame, but the larger difficulty for the chief priests and scribes was the effect this had upon the Jews. Both the chief priests, who controlled the temple worship, and the scribes, who were the experts of the Old Testament Law, saw Jesus as a threat to their power. John 12:10-11 describes the intense concern the chief priest had for the loss of their following, *“But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.”*

Now they saw even children crying out loudly, in recognition of Jesus as the Son of David. This was done in the temple area, the home of the chief priests, and at a time where a great number of Jews from faraway places would be gathered to hear such praise. This only increased their concern about Jews leaving their influence to follow Jesus and explains why they became so indignant with this situation and addressed Jesus about it.

By asking Jesus, “*Do You hear what these children are saying?*,” the chief priests and scribes were acknowledging the fact that the children’s words of praise were messianic. They did not doubt the words, “*Hosanna to the Son of David,*” was a statement of such significance because their question presumed that Jesus ought to be disavowing this exaltation since, from their perspective, He was not the Messiah. This ends up as the very opponents of Jesus serving to help us understand what Jesus claimed. This is one of many ways those who oppose Jesus are used by God to serve the very ends that God desires, unbeknownst to them.

There is a distinct contrast between the physically blind who come to Jesus to be healed and the spiritually blind who are antagonistic to Jesus. The physically blind are able to see, while the spiritually blind chief priests and scribes remain in spiritual darkness.

The reply of Jesus (20:16b)

And Jesus spoke to them by affirming that He did indeed hear what the children were saying and also by highlighting their ignorance of the Scripture, “*Yes; have you never read...*” Jesus had earlier asked this same question of the Pharisees (Matthew 12:3-5; 19:4-5) and later would ask this question of the Sadducees (Matthew 21:42; 22:31-32). Jesus expected all the religious leaders of Israel to be familiar with the Old Testament text.

The specific passage that Jesus expected the chief priests and scribes to have read was Psalm 8:2, “*From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength because of Your adversaries, to make the enemy and the revengeful cease.*” While the quotation in Matthew 21:16, “*OUT OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABIES YOU HAVE PREPARED PRAISE FOR YOURSELF?*” may appear to be a loose translation of Psalm 8:2, it agrees verbatim in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. While Jesus did not speak Greek to the chief priests and scribes, Matthew quotes from the widely read Greek translation, as is frequently the case whenever the New Testament quotes the Old Testament.

The reason the Greek translation of Psalm 8:2 was translated as such is because of God establishing strength and making the enemy and the revengeful cease, which was necessarily resulting in God producing praise for Himself. Praise for God’s strength can be seen in other Psalms as well (Psalm 29:1; 59:17; 68:34; 96:7). Exodus 15:2 also connects God’s strength with God’s praise through His deliverance of the nation from Egypt.

Clearly, the children that were praising Jesus by shouting “*Hosanna to the Son of David*” were not nursing babies and infants, even if one supposes that Jewish children were weaned longer than babies are today. The point of the statement is that if even children who were much younger than these children at the temple would be prepared by God to give praise, then certainly it is no surprise that older children were praising Jesus.

This is very similar to what Jesus said to the Pharisees about the praise given to Him during the triumphal entry into Jerusalem the day before. “*As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, shouting: ‘BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!’ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, ‘Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.’ But Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!’*” (Luke 19:37-40). Nothing can prevent praise to God.

Jesus' reply to the chief priests and scribes validated the praise of the children, and thus the earlier praise of the crowds. By not rejecting this praise, He affirmed that He was the Messiah, the Son of David. By accepting praise, He accepted what belonged to God alone. By referencing Psalm 8:2, He rebuked their understanding of the Scripture that the scribes in particular prided themselves in.

An additional unstated, but implied, rebuke of the religious leaders opposing Jesus can be seen in the complete verse of Psalm 8:2. “*You have established strength because of Your adversaries, to make the enemy and the revengeful cease.*” The chief priests and scribes were adversaries, and this praise of the children was for the divine purpose of making these enemies cease, or come to an end. God would bring an end to them when He would send the Holy Spirit to establish the church (Acts 2) as His people to reach the ends of the earth with the good news of the Messiah.

Psalm 8 would be used by other New Testament writers when teaching about Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:27; Hebrews 2:6-9; cf. Ephesians 1:22; Philippians 3:21; 1 Peter 3:22). The main concept throughout these verses from Psalm 8:6, “*You have put all things under his feet.*” In Christ, God has “*put all things in subjection under His feet*” (Hebrews 2:8). These religious leaders will be subject to the authority of Christ, who not only judged them by His words while He was on earth, as will be seen in the coming chapters, but He will bring them to eternal destruction in the final judgment.

The return of Jesus to Bethany (20:17)

Matthew informs His readers that Jesus would spend the night in the city of Bethany. Bethany was the area where Jesus sent the disciples to acquire the donkeys for the triumphal entry (cf. Luke 19:29). Evidently, Jesus would spend each night in Bethany, beginning with His arrival to Bethany on Saturday (John 12:1) until His betrayal and arrest on Thursday.

The reason that He spent these nights in Bethany was because Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived there and He, along with the disciples, stayed with them (cf. Mark 11:19; Luke 21:37; John 12). Bethany was at the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives and only about a two mile walk from Jerusalem. Accommodations in Jerusalem would have been difficult to come by with the large swell of visitors during the Passover week.

“He left them” abruptly for the chief priests and scribes were opposed to Him. He would return to the temple the next day, only to be confronted once again by the chief priests, this time with the elders of the people (Matthew 21:23), and again He would refuse to engage them due to their insincerity. His departure from them was a precursor to their coming judgment.

Conclusion

After cleansing the temple, Jesus healed the blind and the lame as an expression of compassion and a testimony of His authority. But the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful works that He had done, and the corresponding praise from the children at the temple, as a threat to their authority and a reason to become indignant. This occasion was included in Matthew’s Gospel to further show the condemnation of the leaders of the Jews.

In between the account of the cleansing of the temple in 21:12-13 and the account of the cursing of the fig tree in 21:18-19, we find the chief priests and scribes criticizing Jesus for allowing the children to worship Him. Following the leaders’ corruption of the worship of God in the temple is their criticism of the worship of Jesus in the temple. Following their criticism of the worship of Jesus is cursing of the fig tree, which represented the nation of Israel. The unfaithfulness of the Jewish people, as manifested by their leaders, would result in the end of God’s fruitful work through them. Jesus reserved His condemnation for these evil religious leaders who led the Jewish people into the sinful rejection of their Messiah.

Likewise, the greatest threat to the work of the Lord today is not the unbelieving world or the unhelpful government, but the ungodly religious leaders. The early church grew dramatically, in spite of suffering much greater persecution by the governing authorities and being a miniscule number in light of the vast Roman Empire. Throughout the history of the Church, it has been those in positions of religious authority who have caused the most damage to those who they have been appointed to serve.

Christ sent us into the world as His ambassadors to bring salvation to the lost. *“I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world”* (John 17:15-18). Anyone undermining this mission, either through the corruption of God’s word, or frustrating those who are seeking God, is opposing the will of God.