

The Triumphal Entry: Jesus Enters Jerusalem
Matthew 21:8-11
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Matthew 21 begins the movement of Jesus into Jerusalem for the final time before His death by preparing for His approach to the city. Depending on the exact path they traveled (cf. Luke 9:51-56), the trip from Galilee would have covered around roughly 100 miles. Jesus established a base for Himself and His disciples at the Mount of Olives where He would be able to go into the city daily over the coming few days.

Jesus took steps to plan His entry into Jerusalem. His plan to ride on a colt as He entered the city was to fulfil the prophecy from the Old Testament. It also served to demonstrate His royal entrance by coming in peace upon a donkey. The Lord's powerful authority was evident by riding a young male donkey, a colt, that had never been ridden before and doing so among an enormous crowd of very excited people.

Matthew 21:8-11 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 will now enter the capital city to the acclaim of the crowds.

The action by the crowd (21:8)

This crowd included people who had been following Him for years, like the Twelve (Matthew 4:25). A large crowd had followed Him from Jericho (Matthew 20:29). This word for crowd (PLEISTOS) is a superlative form of the word, meaning this was an even larger crowd than had followed Him prior. On the way to Jerusalem, He picked more and more followers.

The Gospel of John describes this large crowd as gathering the day before once they knew that Jesus was in Bethany, *"The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. 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. On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him"* (John 12:9-13).

Matthew 21:8 makes it clear that most of the people in the crowd honored Jesus by spreading *“their coats in the road”*, whereas *“Others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road.”* Therefore, the primary act by the crowds was the spreading of the coats, which was a custom in Israel (cf. 2 Kings 9:13), and signified honor and submission to a ruler. The imperfect tense used for the actions of those *“cutting branches from the trees and spreading them”* communicates excitement among the crowd.

Palm branches were used to honor the Jewish leadership upon their entrance into Jerusalem during the era of the Maccabean revolt in 166 B.C. (1 Maccabees 13:51; 2 Maccabees 10:6-7). With Jesus, these palm branches were laid down so the donkey carrying Jesus would walk on them. John includes the use of palm branches in Revelation 7:9, *“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands.”*

The announcement by the crowd (21:9)

The crowd that Matthew references in verse 9 are following Jesus and are also *“going ahead of Him.”* We learn from John 12:12-13 that some of this crowd came out to meet Him from Jerusalem, *“On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him.”* This would mean that the already large crowd that was following Jesus would have grown in size.

Putting Matthew’s description together with John, you have a mass of people following Jesus, along with another crowd of people who were ahead of Jesus, spreading their coats in the road, and a third large crowd that John refers to who came to Jesus from Jerusalem, with palm branches. The first two groups were not residents of Jerusalem but were traveling to the city for the Passover, either from Galilee, or from places along the way where they joined in with the followers of Jesus headed to Jerusalem for the feast.

Many assume that the crowd that was going ahead of Jesus were using the same type of palm branches from the fields as the crowd coming out from Jerusalem. However, both Matthew and Mark use different words for the branches, indicating they might have used other types of branches. This large crowd from Jerusalem had time to learn that Jesus was approaching Jerusalem from Bethany since He stopped at Bethany for the Sabbath, *“six days before the Passover”* (John 12:1).

The shouts of praise to Jesus originated from Psalm 118:25-26, “O LORD, do save, we beseech You; O LORD, we beseech You, do send prosperity! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD; We have blessed you from the house of the LORD.” The Jews used this Psalm as part of their Passover celebration, which may explain why “the crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting” the same thing, and why John described those coming out from Jerusalem as also shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD, even the King of Israel.”

The word “Hosanna” is a transliteration of the Hebrew expression that was a cry for help, loosely meaning “Save!” or “Save us now!” (cf. 2 Samuel 14:4; 2 Kings 6:26). It became an expression used of blessing or acclamation, which we find with its usage in verse 9. This acclamation is seen in the final verse of the quote, “Hosanna in the highest!” This exaltation is similar to what the angel who praised God at the announcement of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:13-14, “And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest””

This acclamation was given to “the Son of David.” This is a messianic term that particularly emphasizes the lineage of the Messiah to King David, and thus to Jesus as King of the Jews. Even the Pharisees understood that the Messiah would bear this title, “Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: ‘What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?’ They said to Him, ‘The son of David.’” Matthew began his Gospel by describing Jesus as “the Son of David” (Matthew 1:1) and those in need proclaim Him as the “Son of David” several times in this Gospel (Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:15).

The phrase the crowd shouts from Psalm 118:26, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,” is quoted by Jesus Himself about Jerusalem proclaiming this to Him in His second coming. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Matthew 23:37-38).

This is clearly a Messianic reference by the crowds. It is uncertain the degree with which they understood Psalm 118, but they certainly were proclaiming honor to Jesus with great hope for their deliverance as a nation. But none of them, even the disciples, understood His mission as the Suffering Servant to die for their sins.

The arrival by Jesus (20:10)

Jesus entered Jerusalem in verse 11 and *“all the city was stirred, saying ‘Who is this?’”* The most likely route from Bethany would have brought Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem from the east and through the sheep gate along the eastern wall of the city. This was the entrance closest to the temple, near the north entrance to the outer court, and the Jews would have brought sheep through this gate to be sacrificed in the temple. Therefore, *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29) entered through the same gate as the sheep that were about to be sacrificed in the temple.

While there were many residents of Jerusalem that went out to meet Him as He approached the city, the remaining residents were unaware of His arrival and responded to the large crowd of people surrounding Him by asking *“Who is this?”* This question ought not to be understood as Jesus was unknown to the residents of the city, but rather that they were unaware of the reason for the great excitement by the large crowd of people.

Jesus was not only well known throughout Galilee, news of Him was widespread from the very beginning of His public ministry, which led even residents of Jerusalem to leave the city to follow Him. *“Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan”* (Matthew 4:25).

Beyond the miracles of His public ministry, Jesus had been in Jerusalem many times before. Below is what we know about from the New Testament.

1. Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple in order to fulfill their obligation to present the child to God (Luke 2:22-23).
2. *“His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover”* (Luke 2:41), presumably bringing Jesus with them.
3. When Jesus was twelve years old He visited the Temple during Passover (Luke 2:42) with his family and was left behind, where He was later found *“sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions”* (Luke 2:46). At this time, Jesus made a distinct impression upon those religious leaders, *“And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers”* (Luke 2:47).

4. Jesus was in Jerusalem at His temptation by the devil, *“Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple”* (Matthew 4:5). However, the residents would not have seen this.

5. The book of John records at least five prior times that Jesus came to Jerusalem during His public ministry. He came for two different Passover Feasts (John 2:13; 11:55), an unnamed feast (John 5:1), one Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles (John 7:2), and a Festival of Dedication, or Hanukkah (John 10:22).

Therefore, Jesus was often in Jerusalem and at times, in a significant way. Amazing the teachers when He was only twelve years old would have caused them to take note of Him. Certainly the first cleansing of the temple in John 2:13-17 would have made many take note of Him only three years earlier. In other visits in John’s Gospel, He suffered opposition from the Jews.

Therefore, since it is apparent that He was well known by a large number of people, the question *“Who is this?”* is likely asked by people who are unaware that Jesus was the one arriving. This is further supported by the answer of the crowds, *“This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.”* There was no other description necessary.

The residents of Jerusalem were used to large crowds coming for the Passover. Jerusalem. The old city of Jerusalem was only slightly larger than one-third of a square mile in size, and the estimated total residents range from 30,000 to over 200,000 people. However, during the Passover there was certainly a large influx of travelers, at least five times the population of Jerusalem, and possibly over ten times the number. But it was not simply the number of people coming that captured the attention of the city, but it was the dramatic excitement of the crowds that brought their question.

Luke’s Gospel includes Jesus’ lament over this city at this moment, *“When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation’”* (Luke 19:41-44). He knew the people would reject Him and suffer greatly because they did not receive Him. This reception and acclamation was lacking understanding and genuine faith.

The answer by the crowd (20:11)

The crowd's answer to who was at the center of the commotion was *"This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee."* This was the generic view of Jesus by the Jews who followed Him, as *"they considered Him to be a prophet"* (Matthew 21:46; cf. 16:14). He was respected and honored as such, but this proved to be something short of genuine faith, or even that He was the Messiah. This is evident from the contrast that Jesus made in Matthew 16:13-16, *"He was asking His disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'"*

Not only do they view Him only as a prophet, but they note that He was from *"Nazareth in Galilee."* Coming from Nazareth did not add to the potential respect for Jesus. Galilee was considered to be where Gentiles lived (cf. Matthew 4:15) and Nazareth was not a noble place to be from, as noted by Nathaniel in John 1:46, *"Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"*

For Himself, Jesus did not refer to Nazareth as being where He was from. Rather, He represented Himself as having *"come down from heaven"* (John 6:38), and as *"from above"* (John 8:23). The Jews struggled with this greatly, saying, *"Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven'?"* (John 6:42).

Conclusion

So far in Matthew we have seen why Jesus came to Jerusalem and how Jesus came to Jerusalem. He came for the Passover to give His life as a ransom for many (20:17-19, 28) and He came riding a colt and sitting on the coats of the disciples. We also saw who He came with, and where He came from, as large crowds had been following Him from Galilee. But what is also significant is when He entered Jerusalem.

Some, such as Harold Hoehner, have dated the arrival of Jesus to Jerusalem to coincide with the exact day that the 69th week of Daniel's prophecy had concluded. This would then be the time when the Messiah would appear. *"So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks"* (Daniel 9:25).

While this understanding depends upon a correct date for the decree by Artaxerxes I to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, and a correct counting of days, there is compelling evidence that Hoehner is correct and the triumphal entry, that presented Jesus as the coming Messiah, was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel 9:25.

These events leading Jesus to Jerusalem were orchestrated by God for the fulfillment of prophecy and for the deliverance of the Lamb of God to be the sacrifice for the sin of the world. God's plan was fulfilled unknowingly by the entire nation, by both the Jews who opposed Jesus and the Jews that were following Him. The crowds were fulfilling the prophetic will of God without understanding what was occurring.

This is what happens so often with ourselves. The Lord works His good and perfect will among and through us without our full comprehension of what He is doing. Hopefully, in retrospect, we can see the blessing of the Lord in these things and praise Him. But in the present moment, we can so often be unaware of how God is working to serve His end and bless many.

This reality ought to move us to trust the Lord more and more as we move through the trials of life. In faith, we know that we ought to trust His love and power to accomplish His will, but as we read of the Lord's work in God's word and as we learn through our own personal experience of His goodness, we can grow in our ability to trust Him for His outcome. *"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose"* (Romans 8:28).