

# **A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF MATTHEW, MARK & LUKE**

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## **SESSION FOUR DAYS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD**

### **1. Palm Sunday**

*Reading: Matthew 21:1-27, 33-46*

### **2. Maundy Thursday**

*Reading: Matthew 26:1-56*

### **3. Good Friday**

*Reading: Matthew 26:57-58, 62a, 63b-27:2; 27:11-16, 21-38; Luke 23:39-54*

### **4. Easter Day**

*Reading: Luke 24:1-35; Matthew 28:16-20*

#### **Discussion questions:**

In what ways might Jesus be considered 'a revolutionary'?

What is the significance of the Lord's Supper for Christians?

# 1. Palm Sunday

## Reading: Matthew 21:1-27, 33-46

Along with many other pilgrims Jesus had to journey from Galilee to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. A Roman military road from Jericho to Jerusalem passed through Bethany, the place where Jesus had so often stayed on the outskirts of Jerusalem. When Jesus rode into the city on a donkey, people may have recalled the words of the prophets (Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9). The shouts of praise came from the Psalms (118:25-26). 'Hosanna' is a Hebrew word that originally was a cry for help (save!) but by the time of Jesus was at most a call for God's blessing or even little more than 'hooray'. Many years earlier, Israel's great king, David, had also ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey. 'Son of David' is a title of the Messiah but it is clear that Jesus was not going to be a revolutionary, as Judas Maccabaeus had been centuries before. Jesus was coming in peace.

The branches of the trees (including palm branches) formed an improvised red-carpet to reduce the dust. Jesus probably entered the city through what is now St Stephen's gate near the north entrance to the outer court of the temple. The question asked by the citizens of Jerusalem 'Who is this?' does not imply that Jesus was unknown in Jerusalem but is a straightforward enquiry as to who it could be whose arrival has created such a commotion. Many of his contemporaries believed that Jesus was a prophet but it was a surprise that he was from Nazareth in Galilee, which did not have a tradition of producing prophets. Here is the Saviour, who would not only celebrate the Exodus from Egypt with the feast of the Passover Lamb but would himself be the sacrificial Lamb of God on the cross of Calvary. Because of his death Jesus is able to bring men and women to a state of forgiveness and peace and communion with God for he died to deal with the unbelief and disobedience of sin that has broken our relationship with God and separated us from him.

There are numerous differences between John's account of the cleansing of the temple, early in the ministry of Jesus, and Matthew's account (with parallels) at the end of his ministry, making the conclusion that there were two separate occasions quite reasonable. Temple service required that everything necessary for sacrifices was provided. The money-changers changed Greek and Roman currency into temple currency (shekels) so that the half-shekel temple tax could be paid. This money-changing encroached into the temple itself and was also open to corruption. Jesus used scripture (Isaiah 56:7, Jeremiah 7:11) to rebuke those who defiled the temple. When the chief priests and teachers of the law asked Jesus if he heard what the children were shouting ('Hosanna, to the Son of David'), Jesus supported the children with a quotation from the Psalms (8:2) in which he applied a scripture to himself that is applicable only to God. The humble, child-like acclamation of his messiahship is to be found on the lips of children rather than on the lips of the learned and the wise, who do not even seem to know their scriptures.

Like the cleansing of the temple, the withering of the fig tree appears to be an acted parable. Leaves on the fig tree promised fruit and though the figs did not normally ripen until later in the year (Mark) there could sometimes be green, and edible if not palatable, figs on the tree. A common interpretation is that the fig tree represents Israel, cursed for not bearing fruit. A better interpretation is that Jesus is cursing those who make a show of bearing much fruit but are spiritually barren. The figure of the mountain cast into the sea was common in Jesus' teaching. The meaning is that the smallest amount of pure faith can throw a mountain into the sea, though the mountain is nothing more than a dramatic overstatement of a miracle. Belief is not a matter of forcing ourselves to 'believe' what we cannot believe. It is related to trusting in God, discerning and obeying his will.

For quite some time, Jesus had been telling his disciples that the rulers at Jerusalem would be responsible for his death (16:21; 17:23; 20:18) and illustrated this with the story of the tenants. The father's hope that the tenants will respect the son is not as implausible as it might seem. It shows the landowner's forbearance with the wicked tenants and finally motivates his relentless wrath.

## 2. Maundy Thursday

### Reading: Matthew 26:1-56

Matthew is a Gospel about the coming of the Messiah. After a general introduction concerning his genealogy and nativity, Matthew records the ministry of Jesus, dividing his teaching into five sections, each beginning with a section of narrative, followed by a section of teaching and concluding with a verse bringing that section to a close. As there are five of these concluding verses (7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1) we deduce there are five blocks of teaching. Matthew 26:1 marks the end of this teaching and begins a long section on the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

As Chapter 26 begins, for the first time, Jesus tells his disciples that the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified (26:2). The issue of who is high priest needs some clarification for in Matthew and John (11:49) Caiaphas is named as high priest whereas Luke (3:2) says it is Annas. Annas had been deposed by the secular authorities in A.D. 15 and was replaced by his son-in-law, Caiaphas (who died in A.D. 36). As the high priest should have continued in office until he died, there were effectively two high priests. The city of Jerusalem was crowded at the time of the feast and so, to avoid a riot, the religious leaders plotted against Jesus, in order to arrest him secretly.

An anointing of Jesus is mentioned in several places (Mark 14:39; John 12:28; cf. Luke 7:36-50) so that it is not really clear how many times Jesus was anointed. Probably the best solution is that there were two anointings, one in Galilee (Luke 7:36-50) and one at Bethany. The perfume in the alabaster jar was possibly nard, which was kept in a flask with a thin neck that was then broken for use. No doubt, there were many poor people in the area and yet what the disciples call 'waste' Jesus calls a 'beautiful thing'. Jesus points out that his followers will always have the poor with them but they will not always have him to receive a gift which he entirely merits as the incarnate Son of God (see also Psalm 41). This action would be remembered wherever the gospel is proclaimed.

All the gospels speak of the role of Judas in the betrayal of the Lord Jesus but none gives a reason. Jealousy and greed are familiar motives for treachery but perhaps Judas was simply disappointed that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah that he thought that he should be. Money does not seem to be the motive as 30 pieces of silver was not a great sum.

The disciples enquire of Jesus about making extensive preparations for the Passover, particularly for the venue. At Passover, lambs were sacrificed on the Thursday afternoon, blood was poured out on the altar and fat was burned on the altar. The singing of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-18) accompanied these steps. This lamb, roasted and eaten with bitter herbs, after sunset, effectively a new day, was the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples. It would have been natural for the host to take bread and give thanks (e.g. 'Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth'). To break the bread and pass it around is also quite natural but the words, 'Take and eat; this is my body,' are new. The bread anticipated the sacrificial death of Jesus. There were several cups of wine at the meal. This is probably the third cup and would be shared with a thanksgiving (e.g. 'Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine'). Jesus told them, 'This is my blood of the (new) covenant'. 'Blood' and 'covenant' are found together in only two Old Testament passages (Exodus 24:8; Zechariah 9:11). If Jesus had the former reference in mind, which seems likely, he understands the violent and sacrificial nature of his death. Jesus would fulfil that pattern.

We should not pass over the anguish of Gethsemane, a sorrow that almost kills, too easily. Jesus is committed to the Father's will but, in his full humanity, naturally shrinks from the way of death. Jesus' sacrificial death redeems his people from their sins. Jesus was not a martyr but went to his death knowing that it was his Father's will that he face death completely alone (27:46) as the sacrificial, wrath-averting Passover Lamb.

### 3. Good Friday

Reading: Matthew 26:57-58, 62a, 63b-27:2; 27:11-16, 21-38; Luke 23:39-54

The detailed account of Peter's denial gives opportunity for Jesus to show grace and forgiveness even to those who fail him. After his arrest, the Sanhedrin went through the motions of securing evidence against Jesus but Jesus kept silent. In frustration, the high priest boldly charged Jesus 'under oath by the living God' (26:63), to say if he is the Christ the Son of God. The legally imposed oath required Jesus to answer. Jesus is the Messiah but he answers in a cautious way, alluding to two scripture passages (Psalm 110:1, Daniel 7:13). Tearing clothes was an expression of anger and grief. As one they adjudged Jesus to be a blasphemer and to be deserving of execution. Having decided that Jesus should be put to death, the religious authorities needed to take the case to Pilate, the Roman governor. Meanwhile, Judas recognised that he was not only guilty of betrayal but that Jesus whom he has betrayed was 'innocent'. In remorse, Judas attempted to return the blood money and killed himself.

Pilate obviously had the impression that the charge being levelled against Jesus was a claim to be 'king of the Jews'. The Roman governor was likely to be more interested in this charge with its rebellious overtones than one of blasphemy which had been the issue before the Sanhedrin. Although the accusations of the chief priests and elders continued, Jesus gave no response (Isaiah 53:7). This amazed the governor because, in the Roman system, the defence depended heavily on the defendant's response. An imperial magistrate could acquit or pardon a prisoner but Pilate also had the opportunity of using some kind of Passover amnesty. Barabbas might have been viewed as an imprisoned freedom fighter and hero. Similarly, the two criminals crucified with Jesus could have been insurrectionists (Gk *lestai*). The Jewish leaders, no friends of the occupying power, accused Jesus of being a traitor to Rome. No wonder Pilate knew they had other motives.

When Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, it was customary to confront authority with as large and noisy a crowd as possible. When the crowd came to demand that Barabbas be released, they were given the choice of Barabbas or Jesus, who were both popular. The matter is resolved by their leaders. Having repeatedly tried to release Jesus by sending him to Herod, by suggesting the paschal amnesty, by proposing a lesser punishment (scourging), by sending the case back to the Jewish authorities, Pilate (perhaps using a Jewish custom), observing the rising tension, washed his hands of the whole matter, telling the people, 'It is your responsibility' (27:24). Pilate then had Jesus flogged, which, under the Romans, was a very severe punishment, and handed him over to be crucified.

The 'Praetorium' was probably the old palace of Herod and the soldiers took Jesus into the palace courtyard. The vicious mockery depicts human nature at its worst. The plaited wreath of thorns imitated the circlet on the coins of Tiberius Caesar, the staff stood for the royal sceptre and the mocking 'Hail, King of the Jews!' corresponded to the Roman 'Ave, Caesar!' normally accompanied by kneeling. Crucifixion was an unspeakably painful and shameful method of execution. Among Jews the horror of the cross was greater still because of the scripture, 'Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse' (Deuteronomy 21:23). Although all four Gospels record the crucifixion, no Gospel goes into much detail. Executions normally took place outside the city walls (Leviticus 24:14; Numbers 15:35-36; 1 Kings 21:13; Acts 7:58) symbolising still further rejection (cf. Hebrews 13:13).

The site of Golgotha (an Aramaic word meaning 'skull') is uncertain. The English name 'Calvary' comes from the Latin word for skull (*calva*). Here they offered Jesus a bitter drink. The statement of the crime was often displayed on the cross as a warning to others. The charge against Jesus, written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (John 19:20), is highly ironic. Pilate, though desiring to offend the Jews (John 19:19-22), wrote more of the truth than he knew. Even here, Jesus showed compassion to a thief who asked, 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom' (Luke 23:42). After his death, the body of Jesus was buried and a guard posted at his tomb.

## 4. Easter Day

Reading: Luke 24:1-35; Matthew 28:16-20

By the Jewish way of counting the day after the Sabbath (our Sunday) was the third day. The women would not have walked far on the Sabbath so dawn on the first day of the new week represented their first opportunity to go to the tomb. When they arrived at the tomb, the stone was rolled back, leaving them confused and wondering what to do. The reassuring words of the angel are consistent with other angelic appearances. The empty tomb is capable of many interpretations but the correct one is given by the angel – ‘He is not here; he has risen! (Luke 24:6).

Each Gospel-writer brings a different dimension to the Easter story and while these are not always easy to harmonise they do have a ‘ring of truth’ about them. Luke gives a very full account of some appearances of the risen Jesus, including the walk with two disciples to Emmaus.

The opening words of the account, ‘Now that same day’ tie this narrative to Jesus’ death and resurrection. The two disciples were not two of the Eleven but were in the wider circle of followers and having been to Jerusalem for the Passover were now going home to Emmaus. The exact location of Emmaus is unknown. Leaving Jerusalem their thoughts were filled with all that had happened. As they were talking to each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them. Their bewilderment shows through the lines of their conversation. Even when Jesus approached his disheartened followers, they did not recognise him, Luke explaining that ‘they were kept from recognising him’ (Luke 24:16). However, when Jesus spoke, they stopped walking and stood still.

With a nice sense of irony, Luke records the two disciples accusing Jesus of being the one who *does not know*, when it is they who *do not know*, all that has happened, for they have yet to understand that the resurrection has taken place. As far as they were concerned their hopes were crushed by Jesus’ death but as far as Jesus was concerned their hopes have been fulfilled by his resurrection. Their record of events is similar to the preaching of the apostles. Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet powerful in word and deed before God and people. The chief priests and rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death and crucified but they had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel – now, the third day, some of the women had visited the tomb but did not find his body. They had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Some of their companions (other disciples, we know now it was Peter and John) went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said but they did not see Jesus.

That the two disciples were baffled by all that has happened is plain to see. They recognised Jesus was a prophet – a conclusion not so much invalid as incomplete – but their hopes were dashed because they did not recognise Jesus. In reply, Jesus directs them to the scriptures, explaining to them all that was said in the scriptures about him. It is foolish to speculate what the Lord Jesus said in his summarising of the scripture message but the fact he used the scriptures is important. It is of overwhelming importance that believers and enquirers engage with the Bible. When the three travellers arrived at Emmaus, Jesus was invited to stay. It is no accident that the true identity of the stranger is made known at the table for this was the place for such fellowship in the ancient world. When Jesus, though a guest, took the role of host by saying grace and breaking bread, they recognised him. Their faith was stirred by the scriptures and enlivened by meeting Jesus. They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’ (Luke 24:32).

Matthew concludes with an account of what is commonly called ‘the great commission’. The location of ‘the mountain’ is not clear. The followers of Jesus were still hesitant. *All* authority, *all* nations, *all* things (‘everything’, NIV) are the key themes of the closing verses. Although the imperative is not the word ‘go’ but ‘make disciples’ the sense of the phrase makes both ‘go’ and ‘make disciples’ the essence of the great commission. Disciples hear, understand and obey Jesus.