

# A DONKEY, A FIG TREE AND A NATION

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*By the Book™* A Chapter by  
Chapter Bible Study Series  
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## Let's Begin

*The title of today's lesson is A Donkey, a Fig Tree and a Nation. What could these things possibly have in common? That's a good question. One thing all three have in common is the one lesson each teaches us about God. After all, God is able to use any means He wishes to communicate to us. For example, Balaam was taught to fear God through the voice of a donkey (Numbers 22:21-31). Someone quipped that if God could use a donkey to speak the truth, He could certainly use us! As we push forward through chapter twenty-one, let's follow the outline below:*

- I. The Sacred Prophecy is Effectuated in Jesus (vv 1-16)**
- II. The Sinful Problem is Exposed in Jerusalem (vv. 17-32)**
- III. The Sacrificial Provision is Explained in Parable (vv. 33-46)**

## I. The Sacred Prophecy is Effectuated in Jesus (vv. 1-16)

Passover was a chaotic time in the city. Tens of thousands of people made their way to Jerusalem that week, creating a different feel in the city. And this was different for Jesus. Not only was Jesus to be the sacrificial lamb to be slain as we noted above, but also, in doing so, He could not keep the low public profile that characterized His earlier trips.

This time, He was out in the open square mingling with the people on the crowded streets. It is estimated that up to 2 million people were there, choking the narrow streets. What Jesus did was like throwing a match into a keg of gunpowder. Why did He do such? To fulfill the sacred prophecies of course!

*Let's follow along, first of all, with the preparation Jesus made (vv. 1-7).* As the day began, Jesus sent two disciples ahead of Him to prepare the way (v. 1). This did two things. First it *completed Scripture* (vv. 4-6). This was done, Mathew insists, "that it might be fulfilled" (v. 4). The Old Testament was about to be completed. Jesus dressed in the mirror of prophecy that day! (cp. Zechariah 9:9). Not only did it complete scripture, it also *controlled* the nature of what was going on (vv. 1-3, 7). Christ entered the city on His own terms.

Note, second, the *presentation Jesus gave* (vv. 8-11). He entered the city (vv. 8-9). It was almost like a parade with the crowds shouting and the women singing, as He moved along Main Street.

But, it was not the parade one would expect. There was an obvious absence of pomp and dignity. Kings were normally dressed in exquisite attire. Not Jesus. His clothing was that of an ordinary Galilean, a carpenter riding a donkey. What a lesson we gain from our Lord's humility here.

The people, however, seemed to know that the One who rode before them was special: "Hosanna" they shouted, "Hosanna to the son of David" (v. 9). If one looked closely enough, a glistening tear from those magnificent eyes may have been spotted on His cheek (cp. Luke 19:41). Rather than being filled with glee that the crowds rightly identified Him, Jesus' spirit sank in sadness for He knew that only a short time remained before *the same crowd that called Him Christ would curse Him and call for His crucifixion.*

Thus, as Jesus entered the city, the city's excitement swelled (vv. 10-11). "All the city was moved," Matthew records (v. 10). The term "moved" was the very

### Reflection Connection

*Prophecy teaches us God prepared for the coming of His Messiah into the world. The cross was not "Plan-B" since "Plan-A" backfired. Could any of the prophecies have failed and Jesus still have been the Messiah? Why or why not?*



### Reflection Connection

*The Bible makes clear that Jesus cast out the money-changers from the temple. Is there a legitimate comparison between the money-changers then and today's selling of CDs and other materials in the Worship Center? Be specific. Is it ever legitimate to "sell" goods on church property? Why or why not?*

### Reflection Connection

*Jesus seemed to make a big thing out of His house being a house of prayer. How has the focus on prayer been lost in today's church? Assuming it has been lost, name some specific ways to regain the focus.*

word used for an earthquake (cp. 2:3). Some inquired "Who is this?" That's a question no man can escape. Who is this Jesus? It is life's ultimate question.

*Third, let's observe the proclamation Jesus made (vv. 12-17).* Jesus first makes clear that the temple was *corrupted* (vv. 12-13). As He entered the temple area where people gathered to worship God, what a sorry spectacle awaited Him. The courtyard was a booming economic business! They "sold and bought" oxen and sheep (v. 12). Moreover, the only animals that could be brought into the temple were those purchased in the official temple stalls. Otherwise the temple inspectors would not accept them. The scenario is similar to the policy today at movie theaters where the only snacks and soda allowed in the theater are the products they sell with their tremendous markup! Think of the offense that gave to God.

The "money changers" were there as well. Normally, there was a 25% charge to change the currency. Doves cost the equivalent of \$4.00 a pair in today's money. Comparatively, the same pair could be bought outside the temple for about a nickel. God's house had become a money-making scheme. No wonder what comes next seems to throw people a curve.

Jesus said, "It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves" (v. 13). Jesus acted with righteous indignation, overthrowing tables and running the money changers out of the temple area. As we noted earlier, there was no keeping a low profile this trip to Jerusalem.

Next, Jesus informs us what the temple was to be about (vv. 14-16). *The temple is for prayer* (v. 13). And God's place of worship and prayer is also a place for people (v. 14). It is not just for a certain kind of people. The religious elite tended to make the temple area off-limits for undesirables. Remember the Pharisee and the publican about whom Jesus taught in Luke 18:9-11? God's temple is for all people, especially those who are blind and lame.

Furthermore, *His house is a house of praise* (v. 15). Even the children were singing out "Hosanna, to the son of David." Some questioned the children's words, but Jesus once again revealed that they were only fulfilling prophecy (v.16; cp. Psalm 8:2).

Chapter 21 begins with the last week of Jesus' life on earth. The exclusive reason for going up to Jerusalem this time was not to observe the Passover as He had done before. Rather, on this trip *Jesus was to be the Passover*.

## II. The Sinful Problem is Exposed in Jerusalem (vv. 17-32)

After leaving the temple area, Jesus headed out to Bethany and spent the night there (v. 17). Having a night's rest, He and his disciples travelled toward Jerusalem, becoming very hungry along the way (v. 18). It is here we learn from a fig tree as we learned from a donkey earlier. Basically, there are *three truths* we learn.

*First, we learn about reality* (vv. 18-22). Normally, fig trees bore abundant harvest. In fact, if the trees did not bear, they soon would be cut down so others could grow in their place.



### Reflection Connection

*Some have seen a lack of sensitivity for creation in Jesus' cursing the fig tree. How do you respond to such a concern?*

Jesus saw a fig tree from a distance. Upon closer examination, the tree had nothing but leaves. Almost always, leaves on the fig tree were a dead giveaway that it also had fruit. Actually, leaves many times came after the fruit was heavy. Advertising itself as a productive fig tree, it had an outward show of life and the harvester would expect to find fruit. However, there was nothing to show but an outward profusion of leaves. Upon this, Jesus made a pronouncement, "Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward forever" (v. 19).

The fig tree was an object lesson. It represented the nation of Israel. Israel was a nation highly favored by God (Genesis 12:1-3). Yet it had no spiritual fruit. Israel possessed outward leaves of religion but no spiritual fruit. It advertised a magnificent temple for worship, yet its worship was spiritually barren. It offered no grace, no humility, no faith, and no love! Upon Jesus' words, the tree "withered away" (v. 19-20). Jesus was actually predicting the downfall of both nation and temple which occurred in 70 A.D.

This object lesson becomes a lesson for every Christian. To *profess faith* but *posses no fruit* is a warning to us—we are in danger of *withering away*. Fruit is always the evidence of salvation. In fact, the only way we can be known is by our fruit (cp. 7:16). Thus, Jesus teaches us a lesson about reality through the fig tree.

*Fruit is always the evidence of salvation.*

*Second, we're taught a lesson about authority* (vv. 23-27). Jesus reached the temple area again only to be met by the officials in charge (v. 23). Being the authorities over temple matters, their concern pertained to Jesus' action the day before. Thus, "these things" about which they inquired obviously referred to His cleansing of the temple. Their specific question was "by what authority" or, on whose authority did Jesus act.

Christ countered their inquiry with one of His own, also having to do with authority: "I also will ask you one thing... The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?" (vv. 24-26). Through His question, they were on the horns of a dilemma—between the proverbial rock and hard place. No matter what they said, they could not win.

For they would not dare say they believed John was sent from God. If they did, they knew Jesus' follow up question would be, "Why didn't you believe him, then?" and stand self-condemned. They also knew if they so much as hinted that John wasn't of God, that the people would riot. Being the skilled politicians they were, they decided to duck the question altogether.

Jesus replied that since they wouldn't answer His question, He felt no obligation to answer theirs (v. 27). By evading the question, they demonstrated they had no business being spiritual authorities.

*The third lesson we learn is sincerity* (vv. 28-32). Jesus followed up the encounter He had with the religious leaders with a parable about a man and his two sons (v. 28). Jesus always knew when to appropriately teach others.

The story begins with a father who had two sons whom he instructed to go into the vineyard to work. Each son had a different response. The first son was

### Reflection Connection

*Is there a problem in the church with authority? Do you think the anti-authoritarian attitude that was so prevalent in the 60's is still with us today?*



rebellious immediately. After thinking more carefully about it, he regretted his rebellion and went to work as his father had wished (v. 29).

The second son showed no visible signs of rebellion. To the contrary, he told his father, “I go sir” (v. 30). Yet he did not go. The point of the parable was obvious, even to the religious leaders whom Jesus quizzed concerning which son did the father’s wishes (v. 31). *Doing is more important than saying. It’s about sincerity.* Since the leaders answered the question correctly, they condemned themselves and Jesus mixed no words in saying so, “The publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you” (v. 31).

Jesus’ listeners were no doubt stunned. The two most notorious public sinners imaginable will get into the Kingdom before those known for their religious fervor! The teaching again is the same—it’s about *sincerity*.

### III. The Sacrificial Provision is Explained by Parable (vv. 33-46)

As the chapter opened, we noted the *sacred prophecy that was revealed in Jesus* (vv. 1-16). In addition, we saw how Jesus publicly exposed the *sinful problem in Jerusalem* (vv. 17-32). The problem began at the top, with a corrupted leadership. Jesus now reveals the *sacrificial provision heaven gave to remedy the sinful situation*. This may be the most passionate parable Jesus ever taught.

Clearly, Jesus shows the kind of God the Bible reveals. In this text, He used a series of pictures to get His point across. *First, Jesus shows the people a picture of provision* (v. 33). The parable is about a land owner who planted a vineyard and took all the necessary precautions to both protect it and assure a great productive harvest. He assigned stewards to watch it and left on a journey. He did not spare any expense or take risky shortcuts.

The application, as earlier with the fig tree, applies to Israel. God is the householder and Israel is the vineyard (cp. Isaiah 5:1-5). In addition, the husbandmen are the Jewish leaders, and the householder’s servants are the prophets.

The time came for giving account of their care of the landowner’s vineyard (v. 34). What the landowner found, however, was that the stewards had hijacked his vineyard and taken control.

The servants (prophets) that the landowner sent to get the produce were captured and beaten (v. 35). That is precisely what the religious leaders had done with the blessings God had given them. They hijacked the faith and refused to hear God’s messengers, the prophets.

There is personal application for us as well. Think of all God does for us, giving us freedoms in our own lives. Yet we end up squeezing out the Word of God, living lives of selfishness.

*The second picture Jesus shows them is a picture of pleading* (vv. 34-39). God sent His prophets to plead with His people, always patiently taking the initiative to allow repentance and turning to Him. How were they received? At first, they were beaten and let go. As time progressed, unfortunately, the treatment became more and more harsh. Note this: *when we reject God’s Word to us, it becomes not only easier to do so the next time, but also we often become hardened in the process.*

#### Reflection Connection

*Why do you think it was so important for God to supply the sacrifice? Please explain thoroughly.*





Finally, the landowner sent his son to collect (vv. 37-39). He thought they would receive his son's authority. They did not. Instead, they captured him and killed him! In spite of the earlier rejection the stewards gave, the landowner continued trying to win their favor. When he sent his son, it was the last arrow in his quiver. Oh, how that applies to God sending Jesus to die on a cross for us! The cross was the last arrow in God's quiver of love for us. The opportunity exists for you today to accept God's love in Jesus Christ.

### Reflection Connection

*Why would the landowner think the men would receive his son after they had rejected all of the servants?*

*The third and final picture Jesus shows was a picture of punishment (vv. 40-46). Jesus asked a question, the answer to which was obvious—"When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?" (v. 40).*

*They knew the answer: "He will miserably destroy those wicked men" (v. 41). The judgment would be both swift (v. 41) and sure (vv. 42-46). What was Jesus saying? They would kill Him on a cross. That would not be the end of the matter, however, because God would raise Him from the dead!*

*When the chief priests and Pharisees considered what Jesus said, they knew He spoke about them and would have taken Him then and there. However, true to their insincere hearts, they feared the people and decided to wait for a better time (vv. 45-46).*

### Golden Greek Nugget

In verse 13, Jesus quotes from Isaiah that while His house should be a house of prayer, they had made it into a den of "lestes"—"thieves" (56:7). The moneychangers charged enormous fees to the people to change for the proper currency; a virtual monopoly was fixed in place. The common people could do nothing to change it. Therefore, Jesus charged the moneychangers of robbing God of His prayers while picking the people's pockets of their money.

### Wrap Up

*You see, we can learn a lot from a donkey, a fig tree and a nation. Jesus rode into Jerusalem humbly but when He returns a second time, He'll be riding a great white horse as conquering King (Revelation 19:11-16). Though like the fig tree, our life may be completely barren, Jesus promises that with Him, our life bears much fruit.*

*Israel rejected their Messiah. We should not judge them so harshly, however. Neither have we been overly receptive as we selfishly attempt to live our lives free from any direction from God. But we know the promise stands sure that one day Israel will embrace Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. You and I must do the same today.*

