

Matthew 21, 22, 23

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Section 7 of: **Musings on Scripture, Volume 3**

Table of Contents

THE ROYAL VISITATION. — Matt. 21: 1-14.....	1
ISRAEL'S REJECTION OF THEIR KING. — Matt. 21: 15-22.....	2
THE CONVICTION OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL. — Matt. 21: 23 - 22.....	3
THE SENTENCE OF JUDGMENT. — Matt. 23.....	4

That the Lord came to deliver the house of Israel out of the hand of their enemies, and then to reign over them, appears from the promises, generally, of God to His people by the prophets. But most especially and distinctly is this the subject of that noble strain of prophecy which commences with the 7th chapter, and closes with the 7th verse of the 9th chapter of Isaiah. At the time when that prophecy was delivered, Syria and Ephraim were confederated against Judah, and Isaiah was commissioned to sustain the courage of the house of David by an assurance that the confederacy should not prevail. In token of this, the prophet's two children, as well as the promised Immanuel, are set up as signs; and the discomfiture of the then present confederacy was the pledge of the discomfiture of every confederacy that might be formed against the house and throne of David, so as to secure to it in the end (though for a long, dreary, and dark season it might lie in ruins and dishonour) rest and glory, when "the Child" should be "born" and the "Son given," Whose right it was on that throne to sit, and to "order and establish it for ever." The parable of "the wicked husbandmen," in like manner, distinctly instructs us in the same doctrine — that the mission of the Son of God, was, as to one of its purposes, to keep the Jewish nation still in the possession of the vineyard, under the care and government of Him Whose inheritance it was, and for disallowing Whose title to which, and for this only, it has been taken from them.

Thus the day of the redemption and kingdom of Israel has been delayed because of their unbelief; for they could not discern the glory of the kingdom in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Before, however, the Lord Jesus would formally pronounce upon their present loss of the kingdom, it appears to me that He would call forth, from the nation of Israel, a formal rejection of Him in the fully manifested character of their King, so that they might be left without excuse. Hence arises the scene of — His last solemn entry into their city, which was transacted, as we shall see, in the style and with the actions of the true Son of David, the rightful King of Israel. In connection with this solemn entry will be found all the scenes recorded in Matt. 21 - 23, which I distribute and interpret as follows:

THE ROYAL VISITATION. — Matt. 21: 1-14.

We learn that, in the purest days of the Jewish government, the principal men in Israel used no animals but asses (Judges 5: 10; Judges 10: 4; Judges 12: 14), horses not being introduced till the corrupt times of Solomon. The Lord, then, when assuming the style of "King of Israel," of course took every feature, however minute, which belonged to the only pure and true form of such a character, and

therefore orders His disciples to bring an ass's colt to Him. And, besides, this was Messiah's exhibiting Himself as King, just as the prophet had before presented Him (Zech. 9: 9), and His being "meek and lowly" was as kingly a feature as any other. For Moses had, provided, that the king, who should hereafter be appointed to rule over Israel, should not surround himself with such circumstances and pomp as might lift up his head in pride above his brethren, and Christ, the King, would doubtless conform Himself to the model thus furnished by Moses (Deut. 17: 14).

The actions of spreading their garments and strewing branches of trees in the way were expressive of the honour in which the multitude held Him, and the joy with which they saluted Him. His garments were now, as it were, smelling of myrrh, aloes, and cassia. The people hailed Him as King (Luke 19: 38), called Him "the Son of David," and thus recognised His title to the throne of David (Mark 11: 10). The palmy multitude, as it were, was keeping the feast of Tabernacles. They took their triumphant acclamations from Psalm 118, that place of the scriptures which represents the nation of Israel bringing into His glory the Head Stone, which had been previously rejected by the builders; so were they doing now, welcoming Messiah to His kingdom, and, as said by the prophet, "the shout of a King was among them" (Num. 23: 21). All this, it may be, they neither understood nor intended, but they were divinely moved to take the part which they did, in order that the whole scene might be the presentation of their King, in full form, to the city and nation of the Jews, in the person of Him who was just coming among them. On the Lord's entry into the city, Jerusalem was moved with wonder at the sight, saying, "Who is this?" But when they learnt that this was "Jesus, the Prophet of Nazareth, of Galilee," we may presume that many began to despise the Galilean King. The Lord at once goes up to the temple, and there performs a solemn action, strikingly characteristic of "King of Israel, He purifies the house of God.

Such had been one of the functions, and was properly alone within the due exercise of the royal authority. We find the best kings of Judah reforming the religion of the people in their days, — witness Hezekiah and Josiah; and here, in virtue of the same kingly authority, the Lord takes upon Him the same action.

There, too, in the temple, He heals the lame and the blind, thus giving further evidence that He was exhibiting, in His person, the virtues which the prophet had pointed at as belonging to Messiah, and to Messiah in His kingdom (Isa. 35: 5, 6). Nothing then was now wanting — the decisive moment was come, and inquisition was now in making, "would they reverence the Son? "

ISRAEL'S REJECTION OF THEIR KING. — Matt. 21: 15-22.

The enmity of the principal men, who were the organs and representatives of the people, now declared itself; and they formally disallow their rightful Lord and King. They were "sore displeased" in the Son of David, and cast out the Heir of the vineyard. Thus they counted themselves unworthy of the kingdom. The Lord rebuked them by a passage taken from the with Psalm, which on this occasion was most seasonable, being calculated both to rebuke the Jews, by giving them, for the present, the place of the enemy and the avenger, and also to present Him, the rejected Messiah, in His full and proper glories before them (see Heb. 2: 8).

Having then shut them up under the rebuke and condemnation of this Psalm, the Lord "left them and went out of the city;" thus formally disclaiming it, at least for the present, as the place of His throne.

On His return, the next morning, by a very significant symbolical action He warns His disciples

of the judgment which was now, in consequence of His own having thus refused to receive Him, soon to be executed on the Jewish church and nation. He performs the act of the Lord of the vineyard, described before by Isaiah, which clearly was designed to represent the judgment of the apostate Jewish system under the hand of Messiah. He then further instructs His disciples in the important truth, that the Jewish system was about to be superseded by a dispensation among them as His disciples, the characteristic energy or virtue of which, was to be faith; to which, and not to the temple, was to be committed the exercise of God's power upon earth. The mountain of the Lord's house was now to be cast into a troubled sea; the kingdom to be taken from the Jews of that day and given to a nation, the holy nation of that elect remnant of the last days, who shall have faith in Him, the rejected Stone (1 Peter 2: 6-9), bringing forth the fruits thereof.

THE CONVICTION OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL. — Matt. 21: 23 - 22.

The insolence of the chief priests and elders increasing, and their enmity being set more in work, they come forward and make their first challenge of the Lord. They call upon Him to produce His credentials, — "By what authority," say they, "doest Thou these things?" In reply, He puts it upon them to decide as to the authority of John's baptism, whether it was "from heaven or of men." This He did, not so much with the design of hazarding their safety with the multitude, as their evil he" suggested, but of leading them, in God's own appointed way, to the answer of their own inquiry; for as they ought to have felt no hesitation in deciding John's baptism to have been "from heaven," this would have at once shown by what authority. He was acting; for John's ministry was God's testimony to Him, the Christ. And then, in order to show them that they should have no hesitation in deciding that John's baptism was from heaven, He constructs the parable of "The two sons," the purpose of which most plainly was to show them on their own principles of righteousness, which John practised and taught, that it had been "from heaven," and thus to convict them of sin in rejecting this counsel of God against themselves.

In the parable of "The wicked husbandmen," the Lord after this presents to them a view of their transgressions as a nation, the full measure of which they were now awfully filling up, and, according to a similar parable in their prophet, He leads these "inhabitants of Jerusalem," these "men of Judah," to judge themselves in the controversy between Him the Householder, and His vineyard. He then confirms the fact of their being ripe for judgment, by citing two passages, one from Psalm 118 and another from Isaiah 8, which together showed them that they had rejected Him, the sure foundation Stone, and must therefore suffer the judgment written. The enmity of the Pharisees was now worked up to a still greater heat, and they were only hindered by their fears of the multitude from seizing on Him, and killing this blessed Heir of the vineyard.

The Lord then delivers the parable of "The marriage of the King's Son," which, in drawing out the character and history of the kingdom of heaven, pointedly and advisably (as did the former parable) exhibits the refusal of the Jews, though bidden again and again, to enter into that kingdom, and also their awful destruction which followed thereon.

The Pharisees now took solemn counsel, and laid their plans for ensnaring the Lord. Finding as they had just done, that because of the multitude they had no hope of getting Him into their power simply as a Jew, they seek occasion against Him as a subject of Caesar in order to deliver Him over into the power and authority of the Romans. Thus minded, they formally enter upon their second challenge of the blessed Jesus. They send a few of their disciples with certain Herodians, a political

sect of Jews that were slaves to the Roman interests, who insidiously asked Him, "Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar or not?" The Lord, knowing their hypocrisy, so prepared His reply as not only to prove that "before the king innocency should be found in Him," but also to show them, that they were now slaves to Caesar, a heathen oppressor, only because they had not rendered due service to God, their only rightful and gracious King. Thus He designed again to convict their consciences, and prove to them, as a nation or political body, that they were now lost, that there was no life in them, and that they were ready to be dissolved. The arrow appears to be sharp in the hearts of the King's enemies, for "they marvelled, and left Him, and went their way."

The nation being thus judged, religion advances to the controversy. It was at this time distracted between the two principal sects of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the former having departed from the truth in the way of formalism, the latter in the way of infidelity. Representatives of each of these parties now present themselves successively before the Lord, with separate enquiries suitable to their respective errors, and these thus constitute the third and fourth challenge by this deeply revolted nation, of Him who was their rightful King, and Whom they should have rather revered and received as the heir of all their nation's glory. The Sadducees hoped to disprove certain divine doctrines by insinuating their apparent absurdity. The Pharisees designed to magnify the law, of which they were the teachers. The former He convicts by showing them their ignorance of the word which they were blaspheming; the latter, by evincing the end of the law, and thus intimating, that while they were desiring to be teachers of it, they understood neither what they said nor whereof they affirmed.

He then, at the end, having answered all these challenges, makes one enquiry of them touching the person of Messiah. But they had no word of wisdom or of knowledge among them: night was upon the prophets; and thus, as a religious or ecclesiastical body, they were found to have become apostate from the truth, and no light to be remaining in them.

Thus then, as a nation and a religion, they were adjudged to be as reprobate silver.

THE SENTENCE OF JUDGMENT. — Matt. 23.

The pleadings were now closed — the Jews convicted and silenced — there was no counsellor among them, who, when asked, could answer a word: as a religion and a nation, they stood condemned. The Lord then, as in the place of judgment, proceeds to array the matters which were in evidence against them, and to pronounce the solemn sentence.

He takes occasion, however by the way, to instruct both His disciples, and those of the multitude who still apparently heard Him gladly in their respective duties in this state of apostacy. He then pronounces the religion and nation to be guilty of oppression and pride — of having awfully corrupted the truth of God — of having substituted religiousness for righteousness — of deep hypocrisy — of pretending veneration for the prophets of old, and yet doing the deeds of those who persecuted and killed them. He next warns them that they were soon to fill up the measure of their sins, and that, the long-suffering of their much offended God having been continued through the appointed day of grace, they should answer to Him, and the penalty of all the righteous blood which had been shed on the earth be required of this generation.

The Lord closes this sentence with a lamentation over His long and well beloved Jerusalem. He remembered how He had at first chosen it for His rest, and would so often have repaired it with goodly pleasant stones; but He now sees it as lost to Him, and soon to be laid even with the ground, because she had not known this the time of her visitation! The holy and beautiful house, where the fathers had

praised Him, was to be left unto their apostate children desolate; nor should the people again see Him thus among them — thus again offering Himself as their King, until by repentance and faith they learn to join with His disciples in calling Him "Blessed." Then will they take up the words which the prophet has prepared for that glorious and triumphant day, that day of all days for Israel, when the Head Stone is to be brought in with shoutings of the restored and obedient people. See Ps. 118.

Here the Lord's public ministry ended. He now went out and departed from the temple (Matt. 24: 1), nor did He return to the city, save in the character of a Lamb prepared for the slaughter.