

MATTHEW 21-25

JESUS'S FINAL TEACHINGS IN JERUSALEM

The following is based on John W. Welch and Brent J. Schmidt, The Gospel of Matthew, BYU New Testament Commentary (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, forthcoming).

Matthew 21:1–11. Event 13: Jesus's Entry into Jerusalem the First Day of His Final Week

The event in this chapter is known as the triumphal entry. It describes Jesus's coming formally and officially into Jerusalem, where the people effectively acknowledged Him as the Messiah, the son of David, and their King. Though it had similar elements, it was not a victory parade for a conquering king, as a Roman triumph would have it, but rather a humble and grateful acknowledgment of who Jesus was.

Nine times Matthew includes texts referring to Jesus as the Son of David,¹ with six of those occurrences now concentrated at this time when Jesus began His final teaching and entrance into Jerusalem. For His faithful followers, this designation strongly affirmed His kingly and divine mission, but for others, especially the chief priests, it was very threatening. As Jesus prophesied, this issue triggered what can be called the beginning of the end of Jesus's ministry. Final events happened very quickly after this point.

The celebration of this event occurred on what is called Palm Sunday because as Jesus entered the city, the people took their outer garments and palm fronds or other branches and set them in His path to welcome Him.

All the city was moved (Matthew 21:10). With large crowds ahead of and behind Him, all were alerted. At the Passover preparation time, people shouted "Hosanna," meaning "save now," as they welcomed Jesus as the Messiah. He rode in on a young donkey, coming in humility, submission, and peace but also as a king.

Matthew and John point to the fulfillment of a prophecy by Zechariah which reads, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass” (Zechariah 9:9). Whether the text is referring to two animals—an ass and the foal of an ass—is debated. Matthew repeated the phrase from the prophecy, whereas the other Gospel writers refer only to one colt. It is possible that the word “and” was being used in the sense of “mounted upon a beast of burden, *even* a young foal.” Joseph Smith cleared the matter up. In the Joseph Smith Translation, he wrote: “And brought the *colt* and put on it their clothes and Jesus took the *colt* and sat thereon.” He made it clear that the Lord was riding only on one colt.

The whole world will welcome the Savior again someday on a much grander scale. What an exciting day that will be. While some may be found running for cover, let us strive to be found on the front lines.

Matthew 21:12–17. Event 14: Jesus Cleanses the Temple

What should be made of the cleansing of the temple? This event is often mentioned when Jesus and anger are discussed, for Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that one should not get angry: “Whoever is angry with his brother is in danger of the judgment” (Matthew 5:22). Some people try to justify their anger using this event by saying, “Well, Jesus got angry.” Is anger then justified? Not necessarily.

First, nothing in Matthew 21:12–14 actually says that Jesus lost His temper here. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, He went first to the temple. There, He cast out “all them that sold and bought in the temple.” Interestingly, the word here for “cast out” (*exebalen*) is the same word that Jesus used to describe what would happen to salt that had lost its usefulness; it is tossed out and walked on (5:13). When Jesus “turned upside down” (*katastrepsen*) what might have been a few small tables and chairs, He could have been very deliberate and firm without necessarily yelling. He simply but poignantly explained, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called the house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers” (21:13). Jesus made it clear here that coin exchange transactions should be handled outside the temple.

And second, what Jesus did here did not set off any disruptive retaliation or offend the people who were worshipping in the temple. Matthew’s next statement is simply, “And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple and he healed them” (21:14). Neither Jesus nor those who asked to be healed spiritually or physically seem to have been impacted by any great uproar. Instead, there were children shouting in the temple courts and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” and, apparently, they were not scared or shocked by what Jesus had done. “Reproving betimes with sharpness” should not and does not necessarily involve anger (see Doctrine and Covenants 121:43).

Matthew 21:18–22. Event 15: Jesus Curses the Fruitless Fig Tree and Affirms the Power of Faith

Next, Jesus taught a lesson both on faith and on the seriousness of hypocrisy. On His way from Bethany to Jerusalem the next day (Monday), Jesus was hungry. Some scholars have suggested that Jesus should not have expected to find edible fruit at the time of the Passover in the early spring. Others claim that Christ, seeing the fig tree, went to it with the obvious expectation of finding fruit. According to modern fig experts, the flavor of early figs is a delicacy to some but inedible to others.

Moreover, fig trees normally give two crops each year: a spring crop grown on the previous year's growth, and a second, fall-maturing crop borne on the new growth.² Gustav Eisen adds, "A third or later crop is found in some varieties, forming in August and ripening in winter. Sometimes the last figs of the third crop do not fall in the autumn, but winter over and ripen early in the next spring, just as the first crop, and are thus hardly distinguishable from it."³

In any event, Jesus found no fruit on this tree and cursed it, and it shriveled. Elder Bruce R. McConkie suggested that we can learn the following five lessons from this experience: (1) Jesus was testifying that He was Lord of all by demonstrating His power over nature. (2) Jesus demonstrated His ability to curse and cause destruction as prophesied. "The fact that he chose not a person, but a tree," says McConkie, "is an evident act of mercy." (3) The fig tree is a type and shadow of "what shall befall hypocrites." The tree, which would normally produce fruit before the leaves appeared, was deceptively barren. (4) The fig tree was a symbol of Judaism. The emptiness of the tree illustrated the limited value of the Judaic religious and cultural system of that day to the Lord's purposes. (5) This demonstration of divine power illustrated that with faith, all things are possible.⁴ Jesus had acted and spoken in faith, and it was done. "All things, whatsoever you shall ask [*aitēsēte*] in prayer, believing, you shall receive" (Matthew 21:22). This reassuring promise to the disciples builds upon and adds strengthening clarification to the simple formulation given earlier in the Sermon on the Mount: "Ask [*aiteite*], and it shall be given you" (7:7).

Matthew 21:23–27. Challenge 9: Who Gave You Your Authority?

After seeing Jesus healing many blind, lame, and sick people at the temple, the chief priests and scribes were "very displeased" (Matthew 21:15), so when He returned the next day, they were ready to question His authority. As He often did, Jesus answered with a return challenge. If they could answer His question, He would tell them where His authority came from. "From where did John's baptism originate? Was it from heaven, or from men?" (21:25).

Jesus's critics decided not to answer that question. If they had said it was from Heaven, then they were remiss in not having accepted John the Baptist and his teachings. However, if they had said that John did not have authority except from man, they would have deeply offended the people, "for all hold John as a prophet."

Actually, they feared the people (21:26). Notice the word “fear.” These powerful leaders were starting to get really scared, and forms of the word “fear” (*phobeo*) will occur over and over again in the account of the buildup to the crucifixion of Jesus. When people become scared, they do not always act rationally. Thus, the leaders simply answered Jesus’s question by balking, “We don’t know [*ouk oidamen*],” to which Jesus replied that He would not answer them either (21:27). While He did not answer their question about His authority straight out, He instead went on to tell them a parable that, to the cognizant, explained where His authority came from.

Matthew 21:28–32. Parable 13: The Willing and Unwilling Two Sons of the Father

This parable had its roots in the Council in Heaven, when the Father’s plan of salvation was formalized. The chief priests and elders had asked Jesus, “By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?” (Matthew 21:24). The origin of Jesus’s authority is evident in this parable, but like the other parables, its meaning had several layers. It answered their question only to a degree for the Jewish leaders.

The parable begins: A father had two sons. He went to the first and asked him to work today in his vineyard. The King James Version says that the first son responded, “I will not,” but the Greek says that he said, “*Ou thelō*,” which is more like “I prefer not to” or “It is not my will.” However, that first son then reconciled himself to the task and carried out the daunting responsibility. Meanwhile, the second or other son was asked the same: “Will you go this day to work in the vineyard?” In the King James Version, the immediate response from this son was, “I go.” But the Greek says only “*Egō*,” which simply means “I.” But then that son did not go.

The father in this story readily stands for Heavenly Father. In the character of the first son, Jesus represented Himself. The second son, representing Lucifer, was the one who said that he would go but only on the condition that he would be given the glory (compare Moses 4:1). This parable affirmed that Jesus was called and authorized by God to come down to earth to work in His Father’s vineyard. This parable is not out of place or randomly inserted here, as many have thought. Seen this way, it gave a perfect answer to the question asked by the high priests. Clearly, they understood that the first son had done the will of the father (Matthew 21:31), but whether or not they understood how thoroughly it answered their question is not so clear. Having next made His point, however, that at least publicans and harlots repent when their sins are pointed out, Jesus does not let the chief priests off easily but goes on with His brutally honest next parable, that of the wicked tenants.

A clear lesson about integrity is taught here that all people can apply in their lives. In the context of the plan of salvation, it also calls to mind the pre-earth life and the Council in Heaven, or the “determinant counsel [or council]” as mentioned by Peter (Acts 2:23), in which the Savior Himself was called to go to the earth to do the will of the Father.⁵

Matthew 21:33–46. Parable 14: The Killing of the Lord’s Son by the Tenants of the Vineyard

Jesus followed the parable of the two sons with another that responded to that situation with the chief priests even more directly. It cast light on the final shady interactions of those leaders with Jesus.

There was a certain man who had a large piece of agricultural property. He improved it (as God had established Israel in Isaiah 5:1–2) and then went far away, leaving the land to some tenants, or sharecroppers, who were supposed to work the land and then pay him or give him part of the harvest. However, when the time came, they did not pay.

Consequently, the man sent some of his servants to collect his share of the fruits of the land. The sharecroppers had no intention of paying what they owed, so they beat some of the servants and stoned and killed others. The property owner decided to send a larger group of servants, but the tenants did likewise to them. Finally, the owner decided to send his son, hoping that the tenants would listen to him. They saw the son—the heir—coming from a distance, and decided that if he were dead, they would inherit the land (because they were “in possession” of it), and so they killed the son (Matthew 21:39).

Jesus asked the chief priests and elders what they thought the lord of the vineyard would do when he arrived. They answered that he would “miserably destroy” the wicked tenants and let more righteous ones take over. In reply, Jesus quoted Psalm 118:22–23, about a kingdom that will be taken away and a stone that will fall and grind the previous occupants to powder (Matthew 21:43–42). For good reasons, Matthew commented that the chief priests knew that Jesus was talking about them. They had already rejected the earlier messengers (the prophets) and now would kill God’s own Son. This parable was a direct prophecy about the death of Jesus, who hammered it home by saying, “The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.”⁶

The chief priests clearly understood that Jesus was speaking of them. However, they did not seize Jesus and kill Him right then, for “they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet” (21:46). In addition, they needed a day or two in order to make plans, to notify Pilate, to alert Caiaphas, and to arrange for an early morning arrest of Jesus by their own temple guards but under the oversight of the Roman soldiers in the nearby Antonia Fortress.

Matthew 22:1–14. Parable 15: Rejection of Invitations to the Marriage Feast of the King’s Son

Jesus seized the moment to tell the chief priests and the people yet another parable, now likening the kingdom of heaven to the wedding feast of a king’s son. Joseph Smith pointed out, “That this son was the Messiah will not be disputed, since it was the *kingdom of heaven* that was represented in the parable.”⁷ In this setting, the people who were invited first could represent the Jewish leadership, along with all their

followers who were not interested in Jesus's invitations. This opened the prospect for the invitation to be offered to others, including the rest of the world.

In this parable, the important people in town were invited to a wedding feast for the king's son, but none of them came as they continued attending to their business. A few even killed some of the servants issuing the invitations. The king evaluated the situation and declared that "they which were bidden were not worthy" and invited anyone his servants could find even in "the highways" (Matthew 22:8–9).

The king's servants found many guests, but one of them attending the feast was not wearing the appropriate wedding garment (*enduma gamou*), and he was cast out. Why would Jesus have excluded someone who came to be a part of the feast but for some reason failed or refused to wear the wedding garment? What kind of garment was the man required to have? Jesus's audience was familiar with strict wedding protocol. Even today, some Orthodox, Conservative, and even Reformed Jews wear the traditional white *kittel* for weddings and on important ceremonial temple days. In a wedding, the white color symbolized a couple's rebirth as they began their new life together with a clean slate. Thus, the breach was not only a serious social error but also a statement of defiance and religious non-conformity.

A small addition by Joseph Smith highlights the phrase "Many are called but few are chosen" at the end of this parable. He added, "Wherefore all do not have on the wedding garments," emphasizing that the lack of a wedding garment for the "called" makes them ineligible to be "chosen" (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 22:14). At the minimum, it teaches that to be prepared for the coming of the Savior, all should be and do all that is required for celestial glory.

22:15–22 Challenge 10: Is It Lawful to Pay Taxes to Caesar?

The Pharisees, not having succeeded in discrediting Jesus, tried to find a way to entangle Him and decided to use other groups of people to ask thorny questions.

The Herodians' question. First the Pharisees enlisted the aid of the Herodians, the descendants and supporters of King Herod. They owned land, were wealthy, and were established politicians. They asked if it was legitimate and proper to pay taxes to Rome. The Herodians supported Rome and wanted to put Jesus in a bind, realizing that it would be hard for Him to say anything negative about the Romans. But in their day, paying Roman taxes indicated loyalty toward the emperor, whereas Jesus taught that people cannot serve two masters and thus must choose between serving God and any other (Matthew 6:24).

In the end, Jesus handled the question with little trouble. Knowing that the Herodians probably carried with them a coin that bore an image of Tiberias Caesar (who was worshipped as a god in the Roman Empire), Jesus asked the Herodians to show Him such a coin and asked whose picture was on it. When it was obvious that the image was that of Caesar, Jesus said, "Then render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (22:21). His statement can mean either "*render* unto Caesar," as in the King James Version, or "*give back* [the Greek word here is *apodidōmi*] to Caesar that which is his." Clearly, the coin

belonged to Caesar, so returning it to him raised no moral or religious problem. Jesus thus defused the political debate by raising a deeper theological question—namely, what belongs to God (all else?) that should be returned to Him?

Matthew 22:23–33. Challenge 11: Whose Wife Will a Remarried Woman Be in the Resurrection?

The Sadducees' question. The same day, the Sadducees raised a challenging question about a childless woman who had been widowed seven times. Each time she had remarried, as required by the law of Moses, the next of her first husband's brothers. While the probability that a woman would outlast seven brothers is slim, the Sadducees saw this as a chance to question the idea of resurrection since this would create an impossible situation if couples were still going to be married in the afterlife.

However, their understanding of levirate marriage was flawed. When the second brother stepped in to raise up seed *for his brother*, he was not taking his brother's wife as his own eternal companion. Her first deceased husband still had his eternal inheritance and his place in Israel. The purposes of the next brother stepping in were to raise up eternal posterity unto the deceased and to preserve his inheritance in the tribal lands as eternal blessings under the Abrahamic covenant. Jesus reminded the Sadducees that God was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matthew 22:32). Those divine words contradict the Sadducees' disbelief in resurrection and a future life. Thus, Jesus clarified that the covenantal promises given to Abraham and Sarah are tied to the reality of the resurrection, to the covenant of eternal marriage, and to the promise of endless progeny. None of this is contradicted by the law of levirate marriage.

The Savior's answer here to the Sadducees was conceptually different from His earlier response to the Pharisees on a similar topic related to marriage (see 19:3–12). But because Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, Jesus there was able to teach them more about the doctrine of marriage for eternity.

Matthew 22:34–40. Challenge 12: Which Is the Greatest Commandment in the Law?

The Pharisees' question. Since the Sadducees had been silenced and the Herodians had been no help at all, the Pharisees came up with their own hard-hitting challenge. One of them asked, "Which is the greatest of the commandments?" The Greek word translated as "the greatest" (*megale*) here means "the most important." All of the commandments, of course, are important. Jesus had even told people to keep the least of them (Matthew 5:19). Maybe they then felt justified in asking, "If some commandments are least, which one is biggest?" Jewish teachers of the law gave primacy to one law or another.

Jesus's answer drew directly from the law of Moses. He quoted: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (see Deuteronomy 6:5–7). He called this the first and greatest commandment and then added that the second was like unto it: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (see Leviticus 19:18). Significantly, Jesus did not pick just one law. In effect, He replied, "It must be both." When He said that the second was "like unto it," the Greek word used here, *homoia*, means "essentially the same." He had taken the two and homogenized them. He concluded here with the summation, "All the books in the Torah and of the Prophets are developments of these two commandments" (Matthew 22:40).

In this conclusion, we see yet another prominent reference to the Sermon on the Mount, in which the summation, "For this is the law and the prophets," comes right after the presentation of the Golden Rule (in Matthew 7:12). Here also this section of instructions given by Jesus to His Apostles ends with these same words being used with distinctive all-inclusiveness: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (22:40). The Pharisees were apparently left speechless, as Jesus again had answered brilliantly.

Matthew 22:41–46. Challenge 13: Jesus Asks, Whose Son Is the Christ?

Jesus's question. As Jesus often did, He returned the favor by asking the Pharisees a hard question. He asked them what they knew about Christ, a title they knew that Jesus used. The Greek title Christ and the Hebrew title Messiah are synonymous, meaning "Anointed One." "Whose son is Christ?" He asked. They answered, as expected according to the Old Testament prophets, that the Messiah (Christ) was the son of David.⁸

Matthew had introduced his Gospel with a genealogy of Jesus beginning with Him as the son of David (Matthew 1:1). Already, the people who had seen Jesus casting out an evil spirit and restoring speech and sight exclaimed, "Is not this the son of David?" (12:23). When the two blind men were begging for help, they addressed Jesus, "Thou Son of David" (20:30). Again, the Canaanite woman, asking help for her daughter, addressed Jesus, "O Lord, thou Son of David" (15:22). These people had acknowledged the messiahship of Jesus, which must have annoyed the Pharisees.

While the Pharisees obliged with the immediate and obvious answer, Jesus then offered a conundrum. If Christ is the Son of David, why did David, in spirit, address Christ as "Lord"? "The Lord said unto my Lord, sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool" (Psalm 110:1; Matthew 22:44). How, to these literally minded Pharisees, could the Messiah be David's son when David himself spoke of the Messiah as his Lord? Jesus—not unexpectedly—was able to tangle them in their own kind of snare. This was the last straw for the Pharisees. They had no answer, and they concluded to ask no more.

Matthew 23:1–12. Instruction 25: Do Not Do as the Scribes and Pharisees Do

This chapter contains a long list of unbecoming behaviors that Jesus warned against. He denounced the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites, advising the multitude and His disciples that because the scribes and Pharisees sat in Moses’s seat— a chair of judgment and instruction—the people should *do* what the law required, but added, “Do not practice their actions, for they do not do what they say” (Matthew 23:3).

It is well to ask ourselves, Are we ever guilty of any of these same kinds of things? When Jesus spoke openly at the Last Supper about His pending betrayal, the disciples immediately asked, “Lord, is it I?” This is a good question to ask ourselves about our own behaviors in the following regard.

Jesus taught the people to behave in a manner that would protect them. The Pharisees, on the other hand, did things to enhance themselves and to be seen of men. Jesus had already addressed this topic. In Matthew 6:3–6, in the Sermon on the Mount, He said, “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand does. Do not stand on the street corners and pray where you will be seen of men.” The Pharisees indeed outwardly enhanced their phylacteries and prayer shawls, and they pridefully took the best seats so as to be seen as dignitaries.

23:8. *One is your teacher.* Jesus advised the people not to use honorific titles created by people, such as *rabbi*. Jesus was called many things by those around Him, but He preferred the rather ambiguous and self-deprecating title “Son of man.” As the disciples’ only teacher, He and His followers were then equals as brothers and sisters. Such God-ordained titles of authority, rather than empty titles without authority, may be discreetly and respectfully used to indicate the responsibility a person holds.

23:9. *Call no one your creator upon the earth.* Jesus’s guidance to call no man “Father” carried a little irony as Jesus did not have a literal biological father here on earth. He did not mean for people to deny their earthly fathers appropriate respect and love since the law requires all to “honor thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:12). Jesus’s intent here is clarified by Joseph Smith: “Call no one your creator upon the earth, or your heavenly Father; for one is your creator and heavenly Father, even he who is in heaven” (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 23:7).

23:11–12. *The greatest among you will be your servant.* To combat the sin of exalting oneself, Jesus said here, “Whoever will exalt himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” He, the greatest among all, considered Himself a servant of all. He washed the Apostles’ feet. It is possible, though not easy, to be a humble ministering servant.

Matthew 23:13–33. Event 16: With Seven Woes, Jesus Lamented the Behaviors of Hypocrites

Jesus then voiced seven woes upon the Pharisees:

23:13. *Woe 1: Do not make it seem hard for people to attain their heavenly blessings.* Evidently in order to feel superior, the Pharisees made rules so hard to follow that people felt unable to

qualify for the kingdom. At the same time, the Pharisees were not meeting all those requirements themselves. They were omitting the more important laws, such as loving God and loving their neighbors.

Note that Matthew 23:14 speaks of their “devouring widows’ houses” and offering up long prayers “for a pretense” to enlarge their reputation. This verse does not have strong manuscript support and thus may not have been in the original reading. Still, the point is certainly applicable here. Jesus spoke against verbose prayers, as reported in many of the Greek manuscripts. Jesus had advised against such prayers in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:7.

23:15. Woe 2. The Pharisees discouraged new converts. They kept others out of the kingdom of heaven, excluding rather than loving, helping, inviting, and including.

23:16. Woe 3. Jesus called these Pharisees blind guides. Not knowing the covenant path and the way to eternal life, they made and taught detailed and unnecessary rules. Those who see by the Holy Spirit are helpful guides who humbly strive to know what they are speaking of before they teach the will of the Lord.

23:23–24. Woe 4. Hypocrites make detailed regulations for everything, including tithe-paying on herbs gathered from the countryside. Mint, dill, and cumin were herbs that grew wild, and they typified things that could be gathered freely. As a show of excessive piety, the Pharisees then paid tithing on these wild herbs but neglected the more important issues of the law: “Judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”

Jesus added a vivid figurative example: Camels and gnats were both unclean animals to the Jewish people. If a tiny gnat flew into a drink, the liquid and container would have become unclean, but Jesus said that the Pharisees metaphorically would swallow a whole camel. People sometimes struggle with tiny details but overlook the bigger laws and more fundamental issues.

23:25. Woe 5. The Pharisees were especially meticulous about external laws that showed attention to the appearance of purity. Jesus’s allegorical woe explained that they would carefully clean the outside of a cup, attending to its outward appearance, but all the while would neglect cleaning the inside of the cup that was full of “greed and self-indulgence.”

23:27. Woe 6. Similarly, Jesus compared the Pharisees to “whitewashed tombs” that look pure on the outside but are full of unclean bones on the inside.

23:29. Woe 7. Finally, He admonished these people for paying great attention to the tombs of the murdered prophets while overconfidently claiming that they would never have taken part in the death of those prophets if they had lived back in the days of their ancestors. See also verses 34–36. Jesus called the Pharisees snakes, a generation of vipers, who live in holes and avoid the light. In these sharp warnings, Jesus gave these people one last chance to look at themselves and repent. He knew the time was short. He spoke boldly, but some of them were involved already in scheming to put Him to death.

Matthew 23:34–36. Instruction 26: Do Not Reject Prophets Who Help Prepare for the Lord’s Coming

The Pharisees took no heed of Jesus’s blunt warnings. Like their predecessors, they had rejected the prophets, wise men, and scribes whom Jesus Himself had sent to prepare for His coming but whom the Pharisees had killed, scourged, and persecuted from city to city (Matthew 23:34). He warned them, to no immediate avail, that the bloodshed from those previous generations would be added upon their heads. Their behavior was no different, and they were about to do something far more wicked than killing the prophets.

Matthew 23:37–39. Event 17: Jesus Laments and Weeps over Jerusalem

As He has asked us to do, Jesus Himself showed forth an increase of love even after He had reproved these individuals. His lamenting over Jerusalem is a wonderful example to all who want to become like Jesus. Here, on the hillside just east of the temple, Jesus famously sorrows over the condition of the people in Jerusalem: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37). Eternally compassionate, Jesus had always been willing to gather them, was still then willing to do so, and would always remain open, with sheltering wings to protect His people, as a hen gathers her chicks (see also 3 Nephi 10:4–6).

Matthew 24:1–2. Event 18: Jesus Prophesies the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem

Jesus revealed a long list of signs of future events from the time of His death to the time of His Second Coming. Where on this list of developments are we today? Because of the way this text has come down to us, the events are all there, but they are rather scrambled. Joseph Smith received an enlightening series of revelations that clarified their sequence. It is in the Pearl of Great Price, as will be noted in the following insights.

The first point of prophecy here was that not one stone of the temple would be left standing on another. That destruction happened in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple.

Matthew 24:3–14. Sign 6: Jesus Tells the Signs of the Coming of the End of the World

Following that prophecy, the disciples asked Jesus what the specific signs of His Second Coming would be. As is common with prophecy, one sign can point to events in more than one era. Although many of

these prophecies have clearly come to pass, some may reoccur. Jesus's signs are given here in the order that they are given in Joseph Smith's inspired translation of Matthew 24.

First, the disciples would be hated and killed. Then false prophets would start appearing. That clearly occurred in early Christianity. Latter-day Saints believe that God has reestablished authorized prophets, but false prophets continue to appear.

Iniquity would then abound, and love would become cold. This is the essence of the Apostasy in the second century, and we are warned that iniquity will reappear. Then Jerusalem would be destroyed. This destruction also happened in the second century when the Jews revolted again under Bar Kokhba. The Romans were so angry that they banished all Jews from Jerusalem. This would be part of the "abomination of desolation," an expression from the book of Daniel describing the time (or times) when Satan would have full reign over the affairs of the kingdom. Everything sacred became deserted.

False messiahs and false prophets would appear and show miracles.

Roman legal materials make it clear that in the second and third centuries, wonderworkers and miracle performers increased in number and wanted to be paid to read palms, decipher horoscopes, and issue curses. The Romans tried to counter these popular diviners by enhancing the worship of past and living emperors.

Wars and rumors of wars would then follow, which may refer to the collapse of the Roman Empire and to the eventual complete collapse of all world order at that time. There would be wars, invasions, and great instability, but the end is not yet. Some of this continues in our day.

People would then start saying that Jesus had returned. He warned us not to follow these people: "For as the light of the morning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west, and covereth the whole earth, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be."

The list then jumps over a long period of spiritual desolation to a time when the elect would begin to be gathered from the four quarters of the earth. That began to happen with the Restoration when the power of the priesthood was restored and the gathering of Israel began around the world. The expansion of missionary programs and the dedication of temples all over the world are indicators of the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Nation will fight against nation and kingdom against kingdom. It used to be that only kings fought kings until the early modern period. So, this prophecy seems to describe the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when nationalism, which still continues today, became the main impetus of war for the first time. Then there will be famines, pestilences, earthquakes, and instabilities—all familiar to today's readers.

The gospel of the kingdom will at that point be preached in all the world. Not everyone in every country will become part of the covenant immediately, but priesthood ordinances are now in almost every country, and teaching the gospel is also continuing in the spirit world after death.

Matthew 24:15–28. Instruction 27: Stand in Holy Places to Withstand the Final Tribulations

After Jesus had given the harsh woes and condemnations, He reached out, and not only did He show forth an increase of love but He also shared a list of instructions of what all people can do to withstand these challenging and evil times. Jesus said that when we see the “abomination of desolation” we should “stand in the holy place.” The holy place is the temple. One needs to be worthy and present in the temple. Jesus’s enabling list is as follows:

- Avoid iniquity.
- Do not let love in the form of charity wax cold.
- Endure to the end; remain steadfast and be not overcome.
- Read and understand the scriptures
- Flee from wickedness and do not return to it at all.
- Pray to the Lord so you will not need to flee on the Sabbath.
- Pray that you will be able to do what is necessary without violating the law.
- Keep the covenant.
- See that you are not troubled.
- Gather the elect.
- Do not be overcome.
- Preach to all the world.
- Treasure up my words.
- Be not deceived.
- Know when the end time is near.
- Gather up the remainder.
- Be watchful.
- Be faithful like a wise serpent.
- Be doing your duty when the Master comes.

Matthew 24:29–31. Sign 7: Jesus Gives the Signs of the Final Coming of the Son of Man

Sadly, in the end time, the abomination of desolation will return. While it will not be victorious, there will be great evils in the world. The faithful will be few, but those who endure to the end will be saved.

After the terrible days of desolation, the sun, the moon, and the stars will be darkened and the powers of heaven will be shaken. All the tribes of the earth will mourn because of the suffering and cataclysms coming upon them. Then, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky.

The Lord refers here specifically to “the sign of the Son of man in heaven” rather than the sequence of the “signs of the times.” Jesus says no more than that the sign will appear. Whereas the final sign may be the actual appearance of the Lord in His glory, several Christians today still believe that it will be the sign of the cross. According to Dummelow, this interpretation was already found in the Didache in the second century.⁹ In the eleventh century, it was believed that “the Cross will then be seen in heaven shining more brightly than the sun as a reproof to the Jews, for when the Lord comes, He will display the Cross as the strongest evidence against the Jews, like one who shows the stone with which he was struck.”¹⁰ However, if the Savior explained this sign further, that knowledge was not passed down.

In any event, Jesus will come in power and glory, as has been taught repeatedly in modern revelation. For example:

- “From heaven with power and great glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 29:11)
- “Coming in power and great glory unto their deliverance” (Doctrine and Covenants 56:18)
- “Come down in heaven, clothed in the brightness of his glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 65:5)
- “In my glory in the clouds of heaven” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:16)
- “They shall see me in the clouds of heaven, clothed with power and great glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:43–44)

Joseph Smith said in his inspired text, “The Son of man shall come, and he shall send his angels before him with the great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together the remainder of his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:37). And in this dispensation the Lord advised, “Wherefore, be not deceived, but continue in steadfastness, looking forth for the heavens to be shaken, and the earth to tremble and to reel to and fro as a drunken man, and for the valleys to be exalted, and for the mountains to be made low, and for the rough places to become smooth—and all this when the angel shall sound his trumpet” (Doctrine and Covenants 49:23).

For close comparative analyses of Matthew 24 and its related texts, see Richard Draper, *The Savior’s Prophecies: From the Fall of Jerusalem to the Second Coming* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2001).

Matthew 24:32–42. Parable 16: The Budding Fig Tree as a Harbinger of the Coming Season

Now trying to impress upon His disciples the urgency of preparing for the coming season, Jesus turned again to a nearby fig tree that apparently was ready to produce fruit. He had previously listed circumstances that would indicate that His coming was approaching (Matthew 21:18–19), and here He likens these signs to the tender early leaves of the fig tree that appear in what we call early spring. As Leon Morris

says, “Anyone who has grown trees knows how satisfying it is to see the new leaves make their appearance. Then there is no doubt that the harsh days of winter are gone and that summer is near.”¹¹ Likewise, signs let us know that the time of His coming is approaching. This comment by Jesus is recorded not only in Matthew but also in Mark 13:28–32 and Luke 21:29–33.

Matthew 24:43–51. Parable 17: The Watchful and Unwatchful Servants

Knowing that important events are coming, Jesus admonished His disciples and all His Saints to be prepared at any time. “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come,” He said (Matthew 24:42). To further His point, He related a parable about two servants who were given responsibilities over a household, particularly to see that everyone was fed while the master was gone. When the master arrived home, one servant was busily working and doing what he was expected to, which was a happy occasion, for which the master would give him greater opportunities and blessings. A careless servant thought to himself that the master would not be back for a long time, so he was unkind to the other servants and gave in to eating and drinking with the drunken. When the master came, this unruly servant, the parable goes, would be cut asunder. Whatever that might mean, it would surely not be happy or pleasant.

Similar advice is found in Doctrine and Covenants 107:99–100: “Wherefore, now let every man learn his duty, and to act in the office in which he is appointed, in all diligence. He that is slothful shall not be counted worthy to stand, and he that learns not his duty and shows himself not approved shall not be counted worthy to stand. Even so. Amen.”

Matthew 25:1–13. Parable 18: The Wise Bridesmaids and the Coming of the Bridegroom

In Matthew 25, three concluding parables are shared: the ten virgins, the talents, and the sheep and goats. These are exclusively found in Matthew. All three teach lessons about being prepared for the coming of the Lord: the wise bridesmaids, the prudent asset managers, and the disciples who serve the needy as their Master would have them do.

In the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the words “wise” and “foolish” are the same terms in the Sermon on the Mount pertaining to the wise man who built his house on the rock and the foolish man who heard but did nothing to prepare for the storms ahead. Then Jesus had said, “Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man” (Matthew 7:24). Being wise is being prepared, and being foolish is hearing and knowing what was needed but not acting upon it.

In a revelation given to Joseph Smith in 1831, the Lord said, “And at that day, when I shall come in my glory, shall the parable be fulfilled which I spake concerning the ten virgins. For they that are wise and have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide, and have not been deceived—verily

I say unto you, they shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire, but shall abide the day” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:56–57).

The five foolish bridesmaids brought their lamps and their wicks, and they probably even had oil in their lamps, but they did not have any extra oil. Their lamps had no doubt been burning from dusk, while they “slumbered and slept,” so when the bridegroom came at midnight, their oil was running low. In allegorical terms, the five foolish bridesmaids did not come with a reservoir of spiritual strength; they did not have the Holy Ghost in abundance, and as the night wore on, their spiritual reservoirs emptied. When the bridegroom came, those five left to get oil from a shopkeeper, but when they returned it was too late and they were not allowed to enter (Matthew 25:12; compare 7:23).

It may sound unkind that the five with resources did not share. But once the bridegroom was there, the five wise bridesmaids had obligations to fulfill. Metaphorically, one cannot simply download spiritual stamina from another person. We cannot live on someone else’s testimony nor on borrowed light. Through our own preparations and efforts to become righteous, we build our own spiritual reservoir, being sure that we are keeping our spiritual memories and reservoirs full by keeping our covenants, studying the scriptures, going to sacrament meeting, loving our neighbor, and performing our ministering activities or church callings. Each adds a drop of oil to our reservoir. And each person must develop their own.

In a revelation through Joseph Smith in 1830, the Lord said, “Wherefore, be faithful, praying always, having your lamps trimmed and burning, and oil with you, that you may be ready at the coming of the bridegroom—For behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, that I come quickly” (Doctrine and Covenants 33:17–18). Spencer W. Kimball said, “I believe that the Ten Virgins represent the people of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and not the rank and file of the world. They have accepted an invitation and received a warning of the important day to come.”¹²

25:11–12. The five unprepared bridesmaids represent those who will say, “Lord, Lord, open to us,” but to whom He must answer, “I know you not.” The words here, “*kurie kurie*” (“Lord, Lord”), are the same as are found in Matthew 7:22–23; and the Lord’s frightful answer here, “I *do not* know you” (*ouk oida hymas*) is similar to the even stronger words in 7:23, “I *never* knew you” (*oudepote egnōn hymas*).

Matthew 25:14–30. Parable 19: The Talents and the Rewarding of Successful Asset Managers

The second parable in this chapter is about accountability at the Final Judgment. A talent was a large amount, between seventy-five to ninety pounds of metal such as gold, silver, or copper. The lord entrusted his servants with huge responsibilities, and they were given great resources. Two of the servants used their great financial means to yield more, and because they had wisely put their resources to use for the master, they were entrusted and rewarded with even more. However, one servant who buried his one talent because he was afraid to lose it had it taken from him, and it was given to someone else.

The lord had given five talents to one servant, two to another, and one to the third, “to every man according to his *several ability*” (Matthew 25:15; emphasis added). The Greek word translated as “several” in the King James Version is a singular word meaning “separate ability, unique ability, or his own personal ability.” The lord gave to each investment manager the amount that he was capable of managing, each according to his unique ability. That is why it is fair for him to say, in effect, to the one who had the least, “You had the ability and resources. You did not need to go and bury it. I did not give you more than you could handle.”¹³

Note also that the reward was proportionately the same for the servant who received five talents as for the one who received two. The master said the same thing to both of them: “Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (25:23). They both did well with what they had. In the latter days, the Savior has said: “It is required of the Lord, at the hand of every steward, to render an account of his stewardship, both in time and in eternity. For he who is faithful and wise in time is accounted worthy to inherit the mansions prepared for him of my Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 72:3–5).

Of this parable, Joseph Smith said, “Men not unfrequently forget that they are dependent upon heaven for every blessing which they are permitted to enjoy, and that for every opportunity granted them they are to give an account. You know, brethren, that when the master in the Savior’s parable of the stewards called his servants before him, he gave them several talents to improve on while he should tarry abroad for a little season, and when he returned, he called for an accounting. So it is now. Our master is only absent for a little season, and at the end of it, He will call each to render an account; and where the five talents were bestowed, ten will be required; and he that has made no improvement will be cast out as an unprofitable servant, while the faithful will enjoy everlasting honors.”¹⁴

Matthew 25:31–46. Parable 20: Separating the Sheep and the Goats, Rewarding the Compassionate

Finally, Jesus spoke of another aspect of the Final Judgment: “When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him” (Matthew 25:31). Speaking of the Final Judgment facing all disciples, Jesus states plainly that the Son of Man will come and gather all people before Him and will divide them in the same manner that a shepherd might separate his sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right-hand side and the goats on the left. In many cultures, the right side is considered clean and righteous, and the left, unclean and wicked.¹⁵

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with goats as animals; their separation to the left side here is symbolic. Indeed, goats are less obedient, less useful, and more stubborn than sheep, and in ancient Greek mythology, the goat was associated with Dionysus, the god of the grape harvest, winemaking, ritual madness, and excesses. So, Jesus’s use of goats here leaves a strong impression in the minds of Jesus’s disciples, who after all, are charged by Jesus to care for and even seek after the lost sheep.

How can we be found among the sheep and not the goats? Jesus gave the answer with one specific instruction: “I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me, . . . inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (25:35–40). It is by ministering to other people that one serves God. To those who so serve will He say, “Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (25:34).

Notes

- 1 See Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9; 22:42, 45.
- 2 Ira J. Condit, *Fig Culture in California* (Berkeley, CA: College of Agriculture, University of California, 1933).
- 3 Gustav Eisen, *The Fig: Its History, Culture, and Curing* (Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, 1901), 78.
- 4 Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1965), 1:582–583.
- 5 John W. Welch and Jeannie S. Welch, *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2019), 44–49.
- 6 Matthew 21:43; Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 132–139.
- 7 “Letter to the Church, circa March 1834,” p. 144, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-circa-march-1834/3>.
- 8 See Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15.
- 9 J. R. Dummelow, ed., *Commentary on The Holy Bible* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1920), 704.
- 10 Theophylact of Ochrida, *The Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew*.
- 11 Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 611.
- 12 Spencer W. Kimball, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 253; see further Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 140–147.
- 13 See Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 164–171.
- 14 “Letter to the Church, circa April 1834,” p. 152, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-circa-april-1834/1>.
- 15 See Welch and Welch, *Parables of Jesus*, 172–177.

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