

## Jerusalem's Last Chance

*Matthew 21:1–26:56, Mark 11:1–14:52,  
Luke 19:1–22:53, John 11:1–18:11*

### **To Jerusalem**

It was a loyal but motley band who followed Jesus on His last trip to Jerusalem. He had spent most of His ministry in back-water Galilee, but He had visited Jerusalem enough to be known and detested by the leading Pharisees there. He still hadn't done anything to raise the hackles of the Sadducees. Yet.

The apostles knew Jesus was the Messiah; they just didn't have a clue what that meant. Knowing they could only make things worse, Jesus strictly forbade them to discuss His title in public. Peter got into an argument with Him about predicting betrayal and death instead of victory. And one of the apostles' favorite pastimes was debating the pecking order that would go into effect among them once they took charge of the nation. All Jesus needed was these guys explaining His kingship to people.

The way they saw it, Jesus was spiritualizing the whole thing. He fed five thousand leaderless insurgents with bread, then instead of accepting their offer to follow Him in a march on Jerusalem, He alienated everybody by calling Himself "the bread of life." He showed up at the temple at the end of the biggest feast of the year, after the priests had spent a week doing rites to seek

rain, and announced at the top of His lungs, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37).

"I am the light of the world." "I am the good shepherd." I am . . . I am . . . I am. He drove the Jews nuts by constantly alluding to Exodus 3:14 — "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'" But direct questions like, "If you are the Anointed One, tell us plainly," He would always sidestep. *Look at My actions, He'd say. What do you think?*

After all, what good would it have done to claim the title? It was the same as in the garden with mad Adam: the Lord wanted His people to see Him clearly and choose Him for who He was.

Yet after three years of nonstop contact with Jesus, the Twelve still didn't get it. They had watched Him heal and teach and drive out demons. They had thrilled to actually do these things themselves. They had been part of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. They had asked Him endless questions. They knew more than anybody, and they knew almost nothing.

### Royal Parade

So if even the Twelve were blinded by their preconceptions of who the Son of David ought to be, it was no surprise that the crowds approaching Jerusalem for the Passover were entirely in the dark. And for maybe the first and last time, Jesus did exactly what they expected.

About two miles from Jerusalem, the summit of the Mount of Olives reaches 2700 feet above sea level, some 300 feet above Jerusalem. (See map, page 345.) The road from Jericho crests that peak, then descends steeply toward Jerusalem. Near the top lay the towns of Bethany and Bethphage. In one of those villages, Jesus told His disciples to fetch an unriden donkey colt. Such a mount was ritually clean, suitable for sacred or royal use. An unriden colt might be kept in a village for an important visitor, and Jesus was held in awe in this region. Just a few months earlier He had rocked Bethany by raising one of its citizens from the dead after three days in his tomb.

Jesus' disciples knew at once what He was saying by mounting this colt. He was claiming to be the fulfillment of Zechariah

9:9; He was announcing that He was coming to the capital as its king.

The disciples were ecstatic. They could see it all: Jesus would ride in amid popular acclaim, ascend the temple steps, march into the inner court, and grasp the horns at the corners of the altar. That would signify that He was declaring His kingship. All the people would rise against the Romans, and with the power of God behind them they would quickly oust the pagans and institute the Kingdom.

The disciples' job was to get the crowd behind their nominee. So they started shouting royal acclamations from Psalm 118, such as "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Luke 19:38). They threw their cloaks on the ground in front of the donkey in the manner of a proper regal welcome.

The local villagers and probably lots of pilgrims from Galilee who had seen Jesus' miracles soon responded to the revelry. They cut branches from the trees to add to the royal carpet, and joined in shouting "Hosanna" — a cry from Psalm 118 for God to save His people through the king. By the time the entourage reached Jerusalem, it had swelled to a rollicking mob ready to follow their king into battle.

Some Pharisees in the crowd rebuked Jesus for encouraging this riot, but He retorted, "If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40).

### Last Chance

Then, with the crowd in His grasp, Jesus let them drop. As He gazed down over Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, He wept. He knew what her choice today was going to cost her. He knew how she would look forty years hence, surrounded by Roman armies quelling a rebellion. The citizens would be slaughtered and their temple burned because they would not yield their demand for a military deliverance. They wanted liberty on their terms, under their control. They would not humble themselves before a God who wanted their hearts and the tough choices of self-sacrifice and love. And therefore, although they could quote every scripture about the Lord coming to His temple, they did not recognize Him when He came.

For He did ride up the temple steps and enter the outer court, the one called the Court of the Gentiles because it was supposed to be set aside for Gentiles to pray and perhaps encounter the true God. But He did not proceed to the altar to claim His throne. Instead, He stopped and grimaced at what had happened to the Gentiles' place of prayer. It was mobbed with people buying and selling animals for sacrifice (at stiff prices because it was a cartel), or changing common currency for the coinage in which offerings had to be made (another monopoly). Only someone blind and deaf could pray in this bedlam. Jesus assessed the situation, returned to Bethany for the night, and the next morning returned prepared to take action. He pushed over the money changers' tables and single-handedly drove the whole throng out the front door. Then He sat down to teach a stunned audience about God.

Until now, Jesus had clashed mainly with the "lay" leaders of Judaism—the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. But now He had challenged the chief priests, whose families probably owned the businesses Jesus had just shut down. And the money aside, Jesus was dangerously close to bringing the wrath of Rome down on the Jews' heads. Yet the chief priests couldn't do a thing about Him because the people applauded His behavior as a bold prophetic deed. The crowd was probably a little disappointed that Jesus hadn't claimed His crown, but they still doted on Him and were convinced He had something up His sleeve. So the priests decided to lay aside their animosity toward the Pharisees in the face of a common enemy. Passover was only a few days away; they were determined to find a way to arrest Jesus as a political activist before He did whatever further intolerable prophetic antics He was planning.

### Farewells

For three days Jesus taught as an ordinary rabbi in the temple courts, while the Pharisees and Sadducees tried to trap Him with trick questions. But He was a master at turning their questions back on them and making them look like fools. Eventually they left Him alone, grinding their teeth.

When their frustration was at its zenith, their golden oppor-

tunity dropped from Heaven—or rose from hell. Jesus' finance man, Judas, appeared in the chief-priestly offices with a proposal. He had followed Jesus for three years, convincing himself that he had hitched his wagon to a rising star. But now it was clear that Jesus was throwing it all away in political blunders and spiritual nonsense, and Judas had had enough. For a price, he would reveal where they could find Jesus apart from the adoring crowds and arrest Him. It was a deal.

That same Wednesday afternoon, Jesus announced a veiled farewell to His gawking audience. He bore no ill will toward the many who had heard His words and disregarded them. Their indifference would be its own judge when those words returned to them on the Day of the Lord.

On Thursday Jesus did not go to the temple. He spent a quiet day apart, then celebrated a Passover meal with His apostles in the evening, a day early. This would be their last night together, and He had an intense session planned to brief them for His departure.

As usual, the lesson was full of theater. At some point, He stripped like a slave and washed His followers' feet. His point: "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14-15). They had bickered and competed long enough. As Jesus' sent ones, they had to represent His character, and He wanted to be known as one who would submit to the lowest self-abasement and sacrifice Himself for the good of those He loved.

His other drama involved the food at the meal. The fare at a Passover supper was already symbolic: the unleavened bread represented the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt; the bitter herbs recalled their bondage; cups of wine punctuated the dinner at intervals. There was supposed to be a roast lamb to signify the sacrifice whose blood protected Jewish homes from the destroyer. But the official lambs would not be sacrificed until Friday afternoon, and only by the temple priests.

Jesus added two more symbols to this paramount meal of the Old Covenant. A Jewish dinner commenced when the host blessed and broke the bread. When Jesus did this, He added,

"This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Then He made each man eat a piece of the bread and remember His bizarre words about eating His flesh. Human sacrifice was unthinkable; this was too close for comfort.

The meal ended with the last Passover cup, over which Jesus declared, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20). Here was Jeremiah's new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34), not ratified by the blood of bulls, as was the old covenant at Sinai, but by — what? — this rabbi's blood? Surely the meal ended in confusion, as each man sipped the cup and wondered.

Between the bread and cup came a disquieting lecture.<sup>1</sup> Jesus tried to explain that He was leaving and that in His absence the apostles would face fierce opposition from the world around them. But they needn't feel fearful or abandoned, because someone called the *Parakletos* — the Comforter, Counselor, Helper — would come to their aid. This was the Spirit who had inspired the prophets and who had been enabling Jesus to do His works of power. All the disciples had to do was to remain connected to Jesus like branches to a vine, and everything would be fine. Exactly how one could remain connected to a man who was leaving was left unclear, but somehow it involved obeying His commands, especially the one to love each other.

The disciples were in no way encouraged by these promises and pressed for a better explanation. Where was Jesus going, and why couldn't they go, too? Jesus replied with oriental ambiguity, and the Twelve were left vaguely uneasy.

Jesus knew His men were still woefully ill-equipped to face the next twenty-four hours, let alone the rest of their lives, so He closed the feast with a magnificent prayer for them and for those whose lives they would touch. Then He led them back to their camping site in a garden on the Mount of Olives.

### Arrest

Judas had left the dinner early to summon the temple guards to that site. Jesus knew His betrayer's errand, so while His disciples fell asleep, still baffled, He kept vigil and steeled Himself for the ordeal ahead. It was time to fulfill Isaiah's words: "He was

despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering." It was time to do for real what Ezekiel did symbolically when he bore the sin of Jerusalem. It was time to give meaning to the death of every bull and goat whose throat had ever been slit on the bronze altar in fifteen hundred years. For none of that blood and burning flesh had ever paid the cost for God's grief at His children's rejection of Him. It had always been God absorbing the price into Himself, paying the terrible cost in His own suffering. Now He was going to do before all the cosmos what He had really been doing all along. And if human sacrifice was unthinkable because of the exquisite value of human life, what of God sacrifice?

Yet Jesus was human, too, and His every nerve cried out against the coming torture. He had faced His entrance exams in the wilderness of Judah; this was His final exam. In utter frankness, He acknowledged that His will was to walk away from this ordeal. But what Adam had been unable to say, Jesus said to His Father: "Yet not my will, but yours be done."

On the Day of Atonement each year, the high priest sprinkled the blood of one goat on the throne of God as the price of the people's crimes for that year. Then he would lay his hands on a live goat and confess those crimes over it, transferring the guilt to this innocent substitute. Then the scapegoat would be driven into the desert. Here in this garden, Jesus began to live out what fifteen hundred years of goats had symbolized. As high priest and victim in one, He took into Himself the crimes of a planet. He had never before experienced evil within Himself; the weight of it alone nearly killed Him.

The soldiers arrived soon thereafter. It was a farce: They, armed to the teeth and quaking; He, defenseless yet in total control. They were expecting a dangerous revolutionary with an armed band and possibly miraculous powers. They were utterly unprepared for a calm, commanding presence who used the divine name "I AM" to identify Himself. Peter tried to satisfy their expectations by launching the war of liberation, but Jesus squelched him and healed the man he attacked. All in all, it was more a matter of Jesus giving Himself to the soldiers than of them actually arresting Him.

## NOTE

1. The Gospel accounts don't make it entirely clear in what order the bread, the cup, the footwashing, and the lecture occurred. This is one possible reconstruction. In general, the Gospel writers seem less concerned about including precise chronology than a modern historian might wish.

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## The Death of Death

*Matthew 26:57–28:20, Mark 14:53–16:20,  
Luke 22:54–24:53, John 18:12–21:25*

**Jewish Trials**

The trial, too, was a charade. Roman soldiers had shared in Jesus' arrest on the grounds that He was a political revolutionary. Because such revolutionaries were a severe threat to order in the province, the governor's mandate was to maintain order even if it meant ruthless suppression. The Sanhedrin – the Jewish leaders – honestly feared Jesus might spark an uprising, perhaps unintentionally, but they knew perfectly well He was no guerrilla leader.

The trouble was that they needed Rome to believe otherwise. Their real motive for getting rid of Jesus was that, like every prophet before Him, He was a pain in the neck for men like them. He was making them laughingstocks among the people and jeopardizing their lucrative businesses. But they couldn't execute Him for being a prophet. They might possibly convict Him for blasphemy – claiming to be the Son of God. But if they had Him stoned for blasphemy, He might become something even worse than a live prophet: a martyred one. His disciples might launch a whole movement around Him.

No, the only sensible move was to have Rome execute Jesus