

The Bible: Our True Story
Act Four—
“Jesus Brings a Challenge to All”

Passages: 2 Thessalonians 2:7–17
Matthew 21:1–22

Pick up a Bible. Hold it in your hand like this. Now, open to Malachi, chapter 4, (the last chapter of the Old Testament). What do you notice? How much of the Bible is made up of the Old Testament?

Over the past 7 weeks, we’ve primarily looked at this Old Testament part of the Bible—that’s because this **Old Testament story** is the necessary background for the **New Testament story**. The things that happen in the **Old Testament** set the stage for what will happen in the **New Testament**! What God’s people did in the **Old Testament** helps us to understand what Jesus comes to do in the **New Testament**, particularly in the establishment of His church.

So, let’s do a quick revision of what we have learned from the Old Testament.

First, the OT tells us of a Triune God...a God of life... who, from before the creation of the world, has always been essentially relational. This God, therefore, establishes the universe for the multiplication of relationships... good, wholesome relationships... that there might be an expansion of His life through families, communities and cultures. “**Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth**”, says God. Our story has a beautiful beginning!

What happens next is also beautiful! In anticipation of the Fall and the coming of Satan, this God of life establishes His Kingdom on earth—a place where His people (His children) might live under His good rule and protection. Indeed, God’s Kingdom is the only place to prosper and be defended from the wiles of the devil! It is

also the best position from which to fight Satan and, thus, expand God's life throughout the world.

The sad fact of the Old Testament, however, is that Satan regularly seemed to be the winner! He was constantly able to destroy God's Kingdom on earth! **How?** Sometimes he attacked God's people through physical sickness, or poverty, or demonization, or death. Sometimes he attacked God's place with drought and famine, flood and storm. But the most destructive attack the devil has ever launched was when he undermined God's rule by getting human beings to doubt, question, and even resist God's good Word.

Indeed, all throughout the Old Testament, we see the same story-- God's people, in God's place, but instead of living by faith, they questioned and defied God's rule. Every time it happened, the devil had won another battle!

In fact, Satan's repeated attacks on God's rule proved to be such a successful strategy that, by the end of the Old Testament era, even Jesus had to admit that Satan had, indeed, become the ruler of this world! The Kingdom of God was in complete shambles while the Kingdoms of this world were expanding.

And that, my friends, is the reason why the **Old Testament** had to come to an end, to be redeemed by a **New Testament**—a new promise. You see, although God must have certainly felt like abandoning His people; although He may have felt like allowing His chosen place, Zion, to be totally overrun and His rule to repealed until chaos overtook the earth again, God's own nature would not allow it! God's nature is to love, not to abandon...and that's why He initiated a **New Testament**...a new covenant or promise...which would redeem the **Old Testament** by taking it to a new and glorious height!

How would this be possible? Well, this time, instead of relying on fallen human beings to rise up and defeat Satan, **God would personally come down**; He would personally deal with Satan!

Listen to what God had already said through the prophet Isaiah, 700 years before Jesus appeared:

“The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice.

¹⁶ He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.

¹⁷ He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.

¹⁸ According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands their due.

¹⁹ From the west, people will fear the name of the LORD, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory. For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the LORD drives along.

²⁰ ‘The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,’ declares the LORD.

It’s no wonder why, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the angel gave Him the name **“Immanuel”**, meaning God is now with us! As the prophets had predicted, God was finally here to fight for us and save us from the real enemy, Satan!

Stop and think about this for a moment: **What were some of Jesus’ greatest victories over the Evil One?** He healed God’s people of their sickness and disease and cast out demons from them. He even raised the dead! As far as God’s place was concerned, Jesus calmed the storm on Lake Galilee, multiplied bread and fish in the wilderness, and turned water into wine at Cana! The Land was becoming like the Garden of Eden again! All these were a display of God’s victory over Satan!

But, of course, there was one area of victory that became the most important of them all! **Jesus, you see, came to battle for our hearts**—that we might no longer doubt God’s Word or

dismiss God's rule! As I said earlier, the chief strategy of Satan has always been to get a stranglehold over the hearts of God's people until they were no longer able to trust God and voluntarily submit to His rule! **Jesus, the Redeemer, came to restore our hearts and rebuild our confidence in God's Word!**

And that's what today's passage (and this liturgical event called Palm Sunday) is all about! Turn with me to **Matthew 21**.

As you know, Jesus spent most of His three-year ministry in the northern part of Israel called Galilee. In other words, His ministry was primarily in small villages, amongst simple peasants and working class people. And, by and large, the people welcomed His ministry! Jesus openly taught God's Word, healed the sick and cast out demons. As you can imagine, He had a huge following!

There was, however, one place where Jesus wasn't welcomed, and that was in the capital city, Jerusalem. (At least, He wasn't welcomed by the people who were in power!) They had too much to lose! You see, Israel had a centralised government-- all of her religious, political and legal systems were centralised in the Temple of Jerusalem. Furthermore, the centralised government only had one Law Book by which to govern—the Torah! This meant that, not only were Israel's leaders (the Chief Priests, the High Priest, the Levites, the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Teachers of the Law, etc.) responsible for Israel's religion—they were also in charge of Israel's legal and political systems as well!

Now, you may think that Eddie Abeid and Ian McDonald have been acting corruptly!? Yes, they may have used their positions in the government to enrich themselves and their friends, but, in the days of Jesus, Israel's government was far worse than this! Because these leaders controlled the Torah, they could easily make it work to their benefit, twisting and distorting it to say what they wanted it to say! (Look at Matthew 23:23!)

That's why Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey! He, the humble king, comes to challenge the arrogant leadership of the

nation...single-handedly! He comes to the centre of Israel...to the place from which God's Word...God's Law... was meant to flow in its unadulterated beauty to God's people, bring them life, and assuring them that God's Word is good and holy and that God can be trusted!... Jesus comes to the Temple and what does he do? **He begins to pull it down, one stone at a time!**

What you may not remember is that back in John 2, in an earlier visit to Jerusalem, Jesus had already promised that He would pull down the Temple and, in three days, to rebuild it. (Indeed, these would be words that would later come back to haunt Him at His trial and assure His crucifixion-- See Matthew 26:61.) The reason why Jesus said these words was because the Temple (and the religious, legal and political institutions found within it) was standing as an obstacle...blocking the true glory and goodness of God's rule. It had, in other words, become an instrument of Satan, obscuring the true beauty of God's Word and causing God's people to doubt God's love and promises!

This is the reason behind Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his attack on the money-changers in the Temple! He was beginning the tearing-down process!

If you keep this in mind, you'll be able to understand Jesus (otherwise bizarre) action and comments found in verses 18-22.

¹⁸ Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. ¹⁹ Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered. ²⁰ When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" they asked. ²¹ Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. ²² If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

This cursing of the fig tree can only be explained by looking at the wider context of Jesus' intentions to tear down the Temple and rebuild it! Most people look at it and think, "He's nuts! What would He do that for? Surely the fig tree didn't merit that sort of treatment!" (One of the other gospels points out that it wasn't even the season for figs!) **But, you've missed the point!** One of Israel's national symbols was the Fig Tree (similar to the Waratah being the symbol of NSW). Jesus' curse of this Jerusalem fig tree because it bore no fruit for Him was offered as a symbolic parallel for (what He perceived to be) God's curse on Israel's leadership because they bore no fruit for God!

Jesus' seemingly bizarre comments flow from this action. As Jesus walks His disciples past this withered fig tree, He tells them that, if they have faith, they, too, will be able to curse fig trees! In other words, they will be able to stand with Him in opposition to the corrupting influences of power and greed that have filled the nation!

Not only that, but they will be able to cast this mountain into the sea! Now, what mountain is Jesus talking about? It's not any old mountain (nor is it your personal problems or difficult life situation)! Jesus is clearly talking about only one mountain and that's Mt. Zion! Just like the fig tree, Mt. Zion was also a national symbol (used repeatedly in the Psalms), a shorthand way of speaking about Jerusalem. But, because Jerusalem was now so corrupted, Jesus not only comes to stand against it, but he calls on His disciples to stand with Him—to have faith that God will destroy the power-broking, corrupt practices of this city... figuratively "casting this mountain", Mt. Zion, into the Dead Sea, some 15miles away!

I love renovating– I've done it twice now, on our 1904 Post Office in Catherine Hill Bay and on our 1890's house in Pittsburgh. In both cases, seriously ugly 'accretions' (things that were thought, at the time, to be improvements) had been added to the original houses and **diminished their beauty!** The 1904 Post Office had

dark, fake panelling added in the 70's and the 1890's house in Pittsburgh had drop ceilings installed, probably about that same time. **Both of these additions hid the original character of these houses and had to be stripped out!**

Jesus came to Jerusalem as God's heaven-sent renovator...to **demolish and destroy** everything that detracted from the original beauty of God and His good Word...everything that hindered or obscured people's vision of God's true goodness and love. In fact, if you hold up your Bibles and look at the OT section again, just imagine how many accretions were added over the course of these thousands of years...things that were added to God's good Word... which needed to be torn down! These things had become instruments of Satan by distracting God's people away from the big story of God's love. As a result, they began to **doubt, question, and even resist God's good and righteous rule**. That's why the **Old Testament** had to come to an end! That's why the institutions in Israel that promoted this doubt and uncertainty had to be destroyed! As Jesus would later tell His disciples as they marvelled at the great stones of the Temple, ² **"Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."**

Before we begin to think that Jesus came simply to **tear things down**, let me reassure you—He also came to **rebuild!** (Indeed, that's the real story of the New Testament and, of course, the hardest part of any renovation!) How was Jesus going to rebuild? Well, the fact is that He had already started by choosing 12 common men (fishermen, farmers, small business owners, even tax collectors) and shaping them into God's new people. The only requirement was that they be fruitful! At the end of the Parable of the Tenants (also found in Matthew 21) Jesus first delivers a stinging attacks against the corruption of Israel's leadership in Jerusalem. However, in verse 43, Jesus concludes the parable by making it absolutely clear what He and His Father are now going

to do! **"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you (the power-brokers in Jerusalem) and given to a people who will produce its fruit."** Jesus, of course, is talking about His disciples...humble men and women from all walks of life, all cultures, and all nations...who He is turning into the new Israel!

And not only would Jesus make them God's new people (thus replacing Israel), but he would lead them into God's new place; a place without political boundaries or borders, passports or visas...wherever two or more were gathered together in Jesus' name, for He would be there in their midst, establishing that place as "holy to the Lord". And so, God's people would be in God's place.

Most importantly, however, this new people would now know God's rule in the fullness of its true beauty! That's because, through Jesus death and resurrection, the Spirit of Jesus (the Spirit of God) would finally be set free to inhabit the hearts of all God's people, internally convicting them of God's goodness and love, giving them an unshakable confidence to believe, to trust, to submit to God's good rule! Only then would God's people finally stand firm against the devil's schemes, willingly bowing their knees in love and submission to our bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ!

This is why I chose Paul's **2nd letter to the Thessalonians** as our second reading for today! You see, Jesus is still rebuilding His Kingdom, and He has enlisted **us** in that rebuilding process. But we must never become complacent, for, as Paul says, the devil is the "lawless one" who forever entices the world (just as he has always done) to throw off the yoke of God's rule.

7 For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.

Paul warns God's people in every age to stay alert and not to fall for the devil's tricks for the Kingdom of god can only grow and

expand as God's people remain submitted to God's good rule. Indeed, Paul is convinced that, as time goes on, Satan will grow increasingly desperate to destroy God's Kingdom on earth found in the church, putting all his efforts into undermining our faith in God's Word! Indeed, the sad fact is that some of us, says Paul, will perish "**...because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.**"

The point is that we must love the truth, for that is the only way we can stand in the battle with Satan, by submitting ourselves to God's rule by His Word! As always, Satan wants to undermine our confidence—"Did God really say?"

So, let's go back to today's story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. When Jesus came into Jerusalem 2000 years ago, He came to destroy those institutions that corrupted God's Word and led people astray. Is there something in your life that needs to be destroyed? Are there false views of God (false concepts that have been added that now distort or obstruct a clear vision of his love) that need to be knocked down? Have you allowed something to be added to your understanding of God that essentially covers up the original beauty of God's Word?

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians concludes with positive words about holding onto God's Word:

13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14 He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. 16 May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, 17 encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Amen!