

Meet Jesus: As He curses a Fig Tree

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Date: 16 July 2008

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 11 from verse 12. On the following day when they came from Bethany he was hungry and seeing in the distance of a fig tree and leaf he went to see if he could find anything on it.

When he came to it he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, may no one ever eat fruit from you again. And his disciples heard it.

And they came to Jerusalem and he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple. And he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, is it not written, my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers.

And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him. For they feared him because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.

[1 : 09] As they passed by in the morning they saw the fig tree withered away at its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed is withered.

And Jesus answered them, have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also, who is in heaven, may forgive your trespasses.

So chapter 11, well the Jews gave Jesus a joyous reception, didn't they, as he entered Jerusalem. You might remember they were shouting, Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. But many of them, well, they might be feeling short-changed by now.

[2 : 24] You know, Jesus didn't really match their expectations. Firstly, there was that donkey, wasn't there? And then secondly, well there was no confrontation with Rome.

That's what they were expecting. So maybe it's like the wind's been taken out of the sails. And then when evening came, Jesus wobbled back up that hill, didn't he, on his donkey, back to his digs in Bethany.

And as we come to our passage before us here, it's the morning after. And Jesus is on the scene again. And the question is, will this be the inauguration of his kingdom?

But I'd like us to begin, friends, by thinking about the temple and what the function of the temple was.

If you think about it, from Genesis chapter 3, sin has separated us from God, hasn't it? It's alienated us from a relationship with God.

[3 : 29] And that's the penalty of sin. It's spiritual alienation from God and also it's physical death. You remember Genesis chapter 3, verse 24, when God drives out Adam from his presence in the garden.

So it's separation and also death. You know, in our arrogance, we can think to ourselves, can't we, that sin isn't really very significant, can't we?

But death, friends, it reminds us otherwise, doesn't it? God won't allow us, think about it, to live forever on his creation here because we've rejected him, you see.

Yet in his love and mercy, friends, God provided, didn't he, a means of dealing with sin. People could present them, not themselves, but an animal, couldn't they, in the temple to be slaughtered

for sin.

Which would, think about it, represent the understanding of the gravity of sin, if you're with me. It was like starting afresh.

[4 : 44] God gave that system in the Old Testament. So they'd take an animal to be slaughtered and they'd watch, not as their own throat was cut, but as the animal's throat was cut.

Do you see? Friends, sin is more serious than we usually imagine. And the temple, think about it, was a massive visual aid to the gravity of sin.

So it's Passover time, as Jesus goes into Jerusalem. Let's just get a sense for the temple in that Passover time.

The construction of Herod's temple had begun in about 19 BC and it was still underway in our passage here. Perhaps it was like one of these holiday hotels. You know, you arrive there and the builders are still in, the cranes are still operating.

When you arrive in Spain or wherever it might be. And the pilgrims were arriving in Jerusalem from all over the known world. There's a writer named J. Jeremiah.

[5 : 51] And he said that there was something like 180,000 pilgrims in Jerusalem at this time. And literally hundreds of priests would be serving in the temple.

The atmosphere was like a massive carnival. My wife would say something like, it was jumping. I hope you get a sense for the atmosphere there.

So that's the atmosphere on this particular morning as Jesus strode towards the temple. And we've got three points. Firstly, the end of the fig tree. Secondly, the end of the temple.

And thirdly, the end of death. So firstly, you've been looking forward to this. The end of that fig tree. Someone mentioned on the stairs as they came up, they'd be interesting to see what's going on here.

And that's what we think, isn't it? We all think, well, what is going on? This isn't the meek, gentle Jesus that we know, is it? And Mark's saying to us, well, the fig tree, it didn't do anything wrong.

[6 : 54] It wasn't the season for figs. Do you remember verse 13? So what's happening? And Mark's conveying to us that there's more going on here than meets the eye, do you see?

Think about this, friends. If he wanted to, Jesus could have created a hundred figs, couldn't he? Am I right? If that's what he wanted. And so the reader's antennae goes up.

It's like when a detective comes across something that's quite interesting on a scene of crime investigation. You know, he'd get his notebook out and write, or he might take a photograph of it.

And that's what's happening here. The disciples are quite interested in what's going on. And the next morning, well, there it is, verse 20. Or more accurately, there it was.

And for Peter, well, he remembers, doesn't he? That photograph in his mind of Jesus cursing the fig tree. He's running through it in his thinking and comparing it to the words that he heard.

[7 : 57] What's happened, he asks himself, to those green leaves? If a plant had a pulse, the pulse of this plant had stopped like about 24 hours ago, do you see?

Is this the same Jesus that I know, thinks Peter? Think about this. Peter had seen miracles, hadn't he? Listen, of regeneration.

He'd seen storms calmed, the blind given sight, the lame walking. Those are the sorts of things that Peter had seen up until now. He even saw a little girl's eyes open from the dead.

It was like the whole room was lit up with everybody's smiles. And here he is, looking at this dead fig tree.

He'd never imagined that Jesus could perform a miracle of destruction. How can I broach the subject with Jesus? He must have thought to himself, what if he gets angry with me?

[9 : 01] Peter must be thinking. And diplomacy was never going to be Peter's gift, was it friends?

Verse 21. Just look there. And Peter remembered and said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed has withered.

Oops Jesus, might you just sort of water it back to life or something? Might you do something like that? And Mark's drawing our attention, isn't he, as he writes his gospel to something else going on here.

Do you see? The fig tree incident, it's like a couple of bookends. So we've got the fig tree, we've got the temple, and we've got the fig tree.

Does that make sense? The temple's in the middle. If, excuse the pun, it's like a fig tree sandwich, isn't it? So the temple is in the middle of this particular sandwich.

And so the fig tree, friends, it represents the temple, and its end is nigh, you see. So this incident, friends, it's like an acted out prophecy of Jesus, and the temple's days are numbered.

[10:17] And that's our second point, the end of the temple. Let's look at that in more detail. You remember we talked about this carnival atmosphere with about 180,000 people milling around, money being changed into the temple currency, the shekel, animals being traded for sacrifice.

It's a massive market, like the barrows, but about ten times the size, I would think. Put things, you know... But what was happening in the temple was that people were being ripped off.

I guess if the trading standards were in there, it would be a similar situation to the barrows on occasions. But today, Jesus is a trading standard, isn't he? People are being ripped off.

And that's what Jesus walks into. Just look there at verse 15. And they came to Jerusalem, and he entered the temple, and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple.

And he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them...

[11:26] This is from Isaiah 56. Is it not written, my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations? And here's the problem, friends. But you have made it into a den of robbers.

It's not a house of prayer, says Jesus, but what? Den of robbers, do you see? So Jesus had walked into the first court of the temple.

It's basically just walking through the outer walls, and you're into the Gentile court there in the temple. And it's massive. It's about 35 acres.

I think it's something like the acreage of the botanic gardens. And this was where foreigners could pray, you see. People who are not Jews, they could pray.

They could be there and pray in the court of the Gentiles. Think about this. I imagine the Ethiopian eunuch might have been there. Perhaps he's wandering around.

[12:24] You know, the chancellor from Ethiopia. Do you remember in Acts chapter 8? Perhaps he's there walking around, praying to God. And you can see under his arm, tucked under his arm, is that scroll of Isaiah that he's bought in one of the gift shops in Jerusalem.

There he is. And nearly everyone, suddenly, they hear Jesus shout, don't they? My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations. And all conversations stop.

It's absolute silence apart from the bleating of the sheep. All eyes are on the source of this voice.

And Jesus is angry. Soon it's not just the bleating of the animals you can hear, but the crashing of the tables onto the paved floor. He drives out, doesn't he, the corrupt traitors.

He overturns the tables of the money changers, the seats of those who sold pigeons. He stops the merchants, doesn't he, walking around, bringing their goods in. It's like a tornado going through the place.

[13:30] Tables, seats, coins scattered everywhere. People in disarray. You know, if this was the 21st century, people would be stood there, wouldn't they, filming it on their mobile phones?

Such an incident as this. A den of robbers, shouts Jesus. It wasn't wrong to trade, but it was wrong, friends, to exploit people. And that's what they were doing there in the temple.

Folk who'd been saving money for years to come and make this pilgrimage to the temple spent every penny getting there. And it was wrong, friends, to take advantage of them, to use their temple monopoly like that for deceitful profiteering.

And the Old Testament has a lot to say, doesn't it? About false weights and measures and deceitful trading. I personally don't like, you know, when you buy books from Christian publishers, I personally don't like that 99 pence ploy.

You know what I mean? Where it's 4.99 or 9.99. If they want a fiver or a tenner, why can't they have some integrity and ask for that instead of trying to deceive us?

[14:45] You know, they must think we're naive or easily manipulated or something. William Barclay says this. Here, just listen. He, that is Jesus, was angry at the exploitation of the pilgrims.

The temple authorities were treating them not as worshippers, not even as human beings, but as things to be exploited for their own ends. Man's exploitation of man always provokes the wrath of God and doubly so when it's made under the cloak of religion.

And friends, the Roman Catholic Church used to sell indulgences, didn't they? You know, pay the church money and you'll be able to shift someone around, shift them into heaven.

A den of robbers is what Jesus would say. And what did he do about that? 1517, Wittenberg in Germany. He rose up Martin Luther, didn't he? And the Reformation began. But what about our own church? Our own lives? You know, our own finances? Are we sufficiently outward looking?

[15 : 52] Do our personal finances, friends, do they resemble a love of the lost? Or do we spend too much of our money on ourselves?

Or is our own comfort our priority? What would Jesus say? Difficult, isn't it, these subjects? What would Jesus say if he was to look over our bank statements?

If he was to look at our wills, would they reflect our love for the lost? You say, well, this is painful. Just move on quickly, would you? But Jesus, friends, he expects a whole life commitment, doesn't he?

He says, take up your cross and follow me. He doesn't want a little compartment of our lives. He wants the whole lot. The religious, well, they were feathering the nest, weren't they?

They'd forgotten about Genesis chapter 12, about the good news of salvation going throughout the world to all nations. Paul Barnett says, it was all show but no substance.

[16 : 56] And there was this withered fig tree, wasn't there, waiting for the disciples. It looked shocking. The disciples would never forget it.

And friends, it's as if Jesus has walked through our lives as well when we read this passage. So, we've thought about the end of the fig tree, haven't we? We've thought about the end of the temple and finally we're going to think about the end of death.

Well, on this morning news about Jesus, it will have been spreading like wildfire, won't it? And the chief priests and the scribes, they're on the case.

And here's the thing, they're plotting, friends, now, think about this, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, aren't they? God's purposes are unfolding under their very noses.

Look there at verse 18, look down. And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way, what? To destroy him. For they feared him because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.

[18 : 04] And when Jesus dies, chapter 15 of Mark's Gospel, the curtain is torn, isn't it? In two. The temple system, finished.

So, think about this, verse 18 could read this, we could change it around a bit, it could read this, the priests and scribes began to plot the destruction of the temple.

Because that's what happened, isn't it, when they killed Jesus, when they plotted his destruction. You know, you have to be God, don't you, to pull such a thing off as that.

And here's the question, who thinks they're in control? And the answer is the religious, the priests. But who is in control? And as always, the answer, friends, is Jesus, isn't it?

The crowd are astonished at his teaching. And to the religious, Jesus, well, is a threat. Looks like the end of their monopoly, doesn't it? And so, there's only violence, that's the only resort they've got left.

[19 : 06] They're going to kill him. The devil loves to kill, doesn't he? Genesis chapter 3. You will not surely die, he said, as he deceived Adam and Eve.

They died, didn't they? We die, friends, don't we? We die. And now the evil one, he wants, doesn't he?

The death of someone else. The one who'd given life to the dead, he wants to destroy him. Yet, friends, think about this, as he dies, he gives life, doesn't he?

As he dies, the curtain is torn, the temple is finished. As he dies, all nations can pray. Here he is, Jesus, in the temple.

And Philip, he baptises that Ethiopian eunuch, doesn't he? And here we are, a bunch of Christians, in Glasgow City Centre, 2008, from all over the place, all nations.

[20 : 08] Just listen to this. After this, I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples, and languages, standing before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

Shall we pray? Dear Heavenly Father, as we consider your son's day in the temple, we cannot avoid his dramatic actions.

They have a shock factor that reminds us afresh of the radical nature of belonging to him. And so, Father, we think of his love for this lost world, and we realise that it has a cutting edge in our own lives.

We pray that, through your spirit, you would help us to love as he loves. To have in mind all nations, and all those currently outside the kingdom.

And Father, we want to radiate this love in all aspects of our lives. So we pray that you'd go with us now. And to that end, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us this day, and forevermore.

[21 : 33] Amen. Amen.