

“On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again!” And His disciples were listening. Then they *came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. And He *began* to teach and say 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 ROBBERS’ DEN.” The chief priests and the scribes heard *this*, and *began* seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching. When evening came, they would go out of the city. As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots *up*. Being reminded, Peter *said to Him, “Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.”” Mark 11:12-21, NAS95.

One prominent question naturally arises from a straightforward reading of the text. Why would Jesus curse a fig tree that did not have figs on it, especially since the text says that “it was not the season for figs”? In response to this puzzling question, skeptical minds have let themselves run wild with accusations regarding the passage. Steve Wells, the author of *The Skeptics’ Annotated Bible*, labeled this story as an absurdity and said in a sarcastic tone: “Jesus kills a fig tree for not bearing figs, even though it was out of season. He did this to show the world just how much God hates figs” (2006, emp. added). Louis Cable, another skeptic, responded to the story with this statement: “Now to curse a fig tree for not bearing fruit in March is not unlike kicking a dog because it can not speak English thereby punishing it for the inability to do the impossible” (n.d.).

Is it the case that Jesus capriciously, out of anger, cursed the fig tree for not bearing fruit, even though the tree was incapable of producing? With a little research, one quickly concludes that such is not the case.

When Jesus approached the fig tree, the text indicates that the tree had plenty of leaves. R.K. Harrison, writing in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, explains that various kinds of figs grew in Palestine during the first century. One very important aspect of fig growth has to do with the relationship between the leaf and the fruit.

Harrison notes that the tiny figs, known to the Arabs as taksh, “appear simultaneously in the leaf axils” (1982, 2:302) This taksh is edible and “is often gathered for sale in the markets” (2:302). Furthermore, the text notes: “When the young leaves are appearing in spring, every fertile fig will have some taksh on it.... But if a tree with leaves has no fruit, it will be barren for the entire season” (2:301-302).

Thus, when Jesus approached the leafy fig tree, He had every reason to suspect that something edible would be on it. However, after inspecting the tree, Mark records that “He found nothing but leaves.” No taksh were budding as they should have been if the tree was going to produce edible figs that year. The tree appeared to be fruitful, but it only had outward signs of bearing fruit (leaves) and in truth offered nothing of value to weary travelers.

In addition, anyone even slightly familiar with the character of Jesus knows that He did not spend His time on this Earth eradicating barren fig trees as an ecological service to Palestinian farmers. What, then, was the point of such abrupt action against the tree?

“Then they *came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. And He *began* to teach and say 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 ROBBERS’ DEN.” The chief priests and the scribes heard *this*, and *began* seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching. When evening came, they would go out of the city.” Mark 11:15-19, NAS95.

If you were an Israelite or proselyte to Judaism then you would regularly go to Jerusalem for the stated feasts. Let’s make one thing clear here. There were two kinds of Israelites Old Covenant believers and non-believers. All were required by the Law to partake in these events. You would take with you your family and these boys and girls especially would be overwhelmed when they looked at the Temple.

Herod's temple was the third temple to be erected on this site. There was Solomon's temple erected about a thousand years earlier, and then there was Zerubbabel's temple

built 500 years later, which lasted for about 500 years, and finally, twenty years before Christ was born, work was begun on Herod's temple, and it was still being completed when Jesus preached there. It did not last a century. It was immense; it was the fulfillment of Herod's dream. He thought that a building of grandiose proportions would help reconcile the people to himself being their king. The Court of the Gentiles which surrounded the main sanctuary was there. Much of it was covered by a roof supported by rows of columns. It took three persons with their hands outstretched to surround a column at its base. The ceiling was covered with wood carvings. It was here that merchants sold sheep and doves for sacrifice and exchanged foreign currency into the shekels they used in the temple.

There was the sanctuary itself set within the Court of the Gentiles. There was a surrounding wall between the Court of the Gentiles and the sanctuary, and warnings were placed on the wall prohibiting foreigners from entering.

In the sanctuary there was the Court of the Women (where there were the offering boxes), the Court of Israel for circumcised men, the open air altar which was the size of a small house, and then the Holy Place which was modeled on the tabernacle in the wilderness with a curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the remainder of the sanctuary which contained the table with the show bread, and the lamp, and the small altar where fragrant offerings were made. The ark was no longer in the Holy of Holies. It had disappeared at the time of the Exile and no one knows what happened to it. The Holy of Holies was a small empty room. Only the priests ever entered the Holy Place.

The Temple was a pattern of being at home with God, and if you were one of the remnant in Israel waiting for the Messiah and longing for the promised redemption then you would understand some of the types, and shadows, and pictures, and models of the real home where God and his people could live happily together. There used to be a home called Eden inhabited by God and man, but that communion had ended and now man lived estranged from God. The temple could be a great teaching aid. A father might say to his children, "After this feast is over at the end of the week we have to

return to where we live, but those birds can build their nests in the roof and at the top of the pillars and they can always stay here. I wish I were one of those birds." Your children would say to you, "What's the meaning of those huge pillars?" "Our God is so great that he upholds the heavens and the earth.

"Why is that altar there?" "We are sinners and the only way we can come to God is by the sacrifice of a lamb that has no defects at all; God requires that. Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. Its life is taken that we might live. One day the Servant of God will come and the Lord will lay on him the iniquity of us all."

"Can I offer a sacrifice at home for my sins, Daddy?" "No. Nobody can. You have to take your offering to a priest and he offers it for you. There is only one appointed way to God." "What is behind the curtain in the Holy Place?" "That is the Holy of Holies which is God's own room, and only on one day a year can the High Priest pull the curtain aside and he enters the presence of God for an hour on our behalf. He takes the blood of the sacrifice with him as an offering for his own sin and also for our sin. But a day will come when through the Messiah we are going to be able to enter the presence of God by night or day." In such ways one could explain that those types and patterns the reality that had not yet come of living in the presence of God as a forgiven sinner.

It was to this temple that the Lord Jesus Christ came, and the extraordinary fact was that the temple was all about him, but only he knew that. He could say to the crowd, "You destroy this temple and I can rebuild it in three days." They were amazed at such a claim. They thought he was mad, but he was talking about the true temple of his body. The temple of stones was pointing forward to him. He was the fulfillment of this building. Jesus told the woman of Samaria that by his coming death and exaltation that true worshippers will no longer worship at the copy or the model of the real temple, rather they would now be worshipping God at the true temple. Herod had this temple erected in Jerusalem, but the real temple was the God-man, Christ. In other words, men may worship God in Jesus only who is the real temple, the living high priest and the true sacrifice. There, in Christ, God seeks our worship, not on the top of Gerizim in Samaria, nor at the end of the long dusty climb up to Jerusalem, but at the feet of

Mark 11:v12-21 New Covenant Baptist Fellowship Pastor Joseph Krygier Nov.30, 2008, 5
Jesus. Worship is in the Spirit that Jesus gives. Worship is in the truth that Jesus has revealed. No-one comes to the Father but by him. It's the presence of Jesus in the lives of his people that makes us God's real temple. We are living stones, and we are joined to God; Jesus Christ is the true corner stone. So don't go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship, or to anywhere else. God's presence is no longer in a special building or a holy city. Come to Jesus in faith and he will give you his Spirit, and he will place you in God's true temple, the people of God, and together with them you have direct access to God. By Christ you can say, Abba Father.

Why did Jesus cleanse and denunciate the Temple?

It was not a message of political revolution. Jesus was not striking the first blow in what he hoped would spark an armed uprising against corruption in church and state.

It was not an attempt to reform the temple. Jesus did not try to reform the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the chief priests, the Sanhedrin and all the structures of the old covenant. They had all run their course and their end was nigh. Jesus had come to bury the paraphernalia of the old covenant. He was not going to establish a religion in Israel based on the ecumenical coming together of himself with the priests and the lawyers. Israel was all over. Its faith was not intended to be a permanent religion for mankind. Old Covenant religion was a temporary system preparing the world for the coming of the Son of God. There were to be no more prophets, and priests, and kings, and judges. There was no longer going to be one geographical area in the world which would be dubbed a holy nation with a holy city in which was a holy building. It is all over.

It was not a protest about commercialism or capitalism. There is little evidence that that large outer court was regarded as a sacred space. It had been built with this sort of activity in mind. A place where pilgrims who had travelled a long distance could buy animals and birds for their sacrifices was vital for the operation of the temple. If you brought a lamb from Dan or Beersheba there was a good chance that it might be attacked by the time you reached Jerusalem and so no longer be a perfect specimen for sacrifice. Such commercialism was necessary; it did not desecrate the place. You

Mark 11:v12-21 New Covenant Baptist Fellowship Pastor Joseph Krygier Nov.30, 2008, must remember the huge crowds that were present in the temple during Passover.

6

Thirty years later Josephus the historian tells us that 255,600 lambs were sacrificed during the Passover in 65 AD - not in the temple, but one for every family who had come to Jerusalem for the feast.

It was not an objection to the way the financial side of the temple was being run. Ananias the high priest loved money as much as any medieval pope. He did get a share of all the transactions that took place in the temple courts, and a lot of underhand buying and selling took place there. It was a den of robbers. There was indeed religious exploitation, but it was still necessary for the temple offerings to be gathered. In Exodus 33 God prescribed that for every male worshipper over the age of twenty one half-shekel should be paid to the priests. The tribe of Levi had no land and so they survived by this money being given them by the other tribes. That money couldn't be paid in any of the currencies of the ancient world. Their coinage often had images of idols and gods. It had to be exchanged into shekels, and the chief priests did make their money from the exchange rates, but that was not an infamous abuse.

What was it then?

Jesus was demolishing the whole financial foundation of the temple when he overthrew the tables of the money-changers (v.15). It was a very violent action on his part wasn't it? Have you ever had someone in your home overthrowing a table on which all the food has been set out? No. Have you seen this being done in a restaurant as a guest explodes in fury with the way he has been served or with the quality of the food? No, you have never seen such behaviour and you hope you never will. Me too; I hate that sort of thing. It was a violent action to move from table to table - maybe twenty or forty such tables - and send cascading into the dust all that money. What was Jesus saying? No more temple shekels; no more half-shekels. All that was coming to an end. The people could protest, "But we need the money in order to survive as levites and priests." "No!" says Jesus. "It's all over. No more priests and levites. The whole tribal system of Israel has had its day. This is not going to be the structure of the kingdom of

Mark 11:v12-21 New Covenant Baptist Fellowship Pastor Joseph Krygier Nov.30, 2008, 7
God from this day on." There is going to be a new High Priest, and he is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven. He serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by men (Hebs. 8:1&2).

Jesus was putting an end to the selling and purchase of sacrificial animals (v.15). When he first cleansed the temple three years earlier he then drove the animals out of the temple with his whip, and released the doves. Here he overturns the tables of those who sold the doves. No more animals could be purchased. So no more sacrifices could be made. "But how can we worship the holy Lord? God says that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin." The Son of Man has come to give his life a ransom for many. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. No longer is the guilt of the Jews exclusively to be dealt with in Jerusalem, but the sin of the world is going to be dealt with by the Son of God. The Passover lamb was simply the type, and now behold the great anti-type, Jesus Christ. The days of types and shadows has ended.

Jesus forbade the carrying of merchandise through the temple courts (v.16). The word 'merchandise' often refers to materials used in the temple - the firewood for the altars, the oil for the lamps, the bread for the table, sharpened knives for the priests, clean linen for them, the animals, the dung buckets, the water to wash away all the blood shed. "Go back!" cried the Lord. "Don't bring that material in here!" "But it is essential!" "Not any longer. Its end has come," the Lord Jesus was saying in his actions. He was closing down the temple. Henceforth God's presence in us and with us makes us his people. We become his temple.

Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

And then He refers to Jeremiah when He speaks of a den of robbers.

"The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, "Stand in the gate of the LORD'S house and proclaim there this word and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah, who enter by these gates to worship the LORD!" Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. "Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'" "For if you truly amend your ways

and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. "Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail. "Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered!'--that you may do all these abominations? "Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen *it*," declares the LORD. "But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I made My name dwell at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel. "And now, because you have done all these things," declares the LORD, "and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you but you did not answer, therefore, I will do to the house which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to the place which I gave you and your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. "I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brothers, all the offspring of Ephraim." Jeremiah 7:1-15, NAS95.

We cannot imagine the impact this action made on Jerusalem and on the events that closed the last week in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. He was deemed to have gone one step too far and had to be dealt with swiftly. There is nothing today that can compare with the place of the Jerusalem temple in the thinking of Israel. It was utterly sacrosanct, but Jesus Christ had been turning the focus of his disciples for three years onto himself. Away from institutions and away from shadows to the reality of the person of Christ. That is the new covenant and its new life. It is centred on him. For me to live is Christ, said Paul.

The temple was the heart of Israel. In the temple heaven and earth came together.

But Jesus found none of that fruit there, only leaves.

This is the institution that Jesus attacked all by himself. It was the center of power for those who dominated and indoctrinated all those who were under them. To be forgiven people had to offer sacrifices, and the money lined the pockets of those who were primarily responsible for the oppression of the poor.

When one notices the context of the event of the cursed fig tree, Jesus' intention seems to become apparent. In context, the barren fig tree applies to the pretentious religion of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Following Jesus' curse upon the fig tree, the

Mark 11:v12-21 New Covenant Baptist Fellowship Pastor Joseph Krygier Nov.30, 2008, 9
text says that Jesus went to Jerusalem and began to drive the money changers out of
the temple (Mark 11:15-19). The activities in the temple that once had been fruitful
and wholesome had become empty of value and useless.

“Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.” And Jesus *answered saying
to them, “Have faith in God Mark 11:21-22