

The New Temple

Jesus' Last Days (Mark): Part 3

Mark 11:11-24 (Mt.21:12-22; Lk.19:45-48) 9/12/2020

Summary: Jesus inspected the Temple, then inspected the fig tree. The fig tree failed and was cursed, as was the Temple (as seen in Jesus' actions). It was over for both the tree and the Temple. The missing fruit in the Temple was gentile prayer. The immediate withering of the tree pointed to imminent judgment on the Temple. But there is a new house of prayer—those who believe. And a new means of finding forgiveness from God: praying to God in faith while forgiving others.

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Mark 11:11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. **12** The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. **13** Seeing in the distance a fig-tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. **14** Then he said to the tree, "May no-one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. **15** On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves, **16** and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. **17** And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it `a den of robbers'." **18** The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. **19** When evening came, they went out of the city. **20** In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig-tree withered from the roots. **21** Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" ²² "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. ²³ "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Introduction

From the time you woke up this morning until now, how much fruit have you produced? In today's passage we're going to see Jesus kill a tree because it failed to produce fruit. And if you think that's because Jesus really cared a lot about figs, you're missing the point. It was a picture of what he will do to people when spiritual fruit is lacking. So it's an important question—how fruitful is your life?

The Inspection

In the first 10 verses of Mark 11 Jesus made his approach to Jerusalem as the exalted, messianic king. That's where we left off last time. If a king rides in to take over, where does he go? The capital. The seat of power. If you want to take control of the US, you take the White House and Congress. You want Russia, you take Moscow; you want China, you take Beijing.

Jesus is riding in as the new king—where does he go? He doesn't just go to Jerusalem.

Mark 11:11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple.

The Temple was God's throne room. The triumphant Davidic king blew right past Herod's palace in Jericho—wasn't interested in that—and goes into God's palace. He isn't taking over China or Russia or the US or Rome or even Israel. He's taking command of the entire Universe—nothing less than the kingdom of God.

Anticlimax?

So, what happens when Jesus shows up? A lot of people are really disappointed in verse 11. If you read the commentaries, the #1 word you'll see in every one of them is “anticlimactic.” It seems like such a dud of an ending to an otherwise very dramatic event. The spectacular triumphal entry, with all the shouts and praises and palm branches and fulfilled prophecy and all the rest. Then this:

Mark 11:11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

And that's how that day ends. At first glance, that does seem like an anticlimax. One famous pastor even says the whole triumphal entry was a “fake coronation.” And he says that because of how anticlimactic the ending is.¹

The only real problem I see with calling v.11 an anticlimactic ending is—actually, two problems:

- 1) It's not anticlimactic, and
- 2) It's not an ending.

It's not the conclusion of the Triumphal Entry; it's the starting point of this whole, long section from here through ch.13 where Jesus engages with the Temple.²

¹ That's part of his reasoning. Another part is the fickle nature of the crowd. But he fails to notice that the crowd is not portrayed by Mark as fickle. The crowd that praised Jesus and shouted the hosanna's was not the same crowd as the people of Jerusalem who shouted “crucify him” days later. Others have made the point that the crowd shouting praises must not have been sincere because they so quickly disbursed on entering Jerusalem, leaving Jesus alone in the Temple. But Mark never says this. The fact that he doesn't mention the crowd in the Temple doesn't mean they weren't there. It simply means they weren't material to the point he was making. But we know from Mt.21:15 that the hosanna's continued even in the Temple.

² This situation with the Temple is a very, very big deal. We normally think of Jesus' final week before his death as the story of his passion. But of the remaining chapters of Mark, half is devoted to Jesus dealing with this Temple situation. Mark devotes the same amount of space to this as to the entire passion narrative. All four Gospels follow the pattern of going into slow motion toward the end of Jesus' life. Like a sports replay, where they slow the action down at the most crucial moment, each gospel writer devotes a disproportionately large percentage of their book to the final week of Jesus. There are some clues Mark gives us that Jesus was actually in Jerusalem a longer period of time leading up to his death. During his trial, he mentions the fact that he was teaching every day in the Temple (11:19) which sounds a little odd if it only referred to four days. And the approach to Jerusalem sounds a lot more like the Feast of Tabernacles (in October) than Passover (in March). Tabernacles was

A Fruit Inspection

So verse 11 is not a throwaway verse. Every word is important.

11 ... He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

He looked around at everything—why does Mark tell us that? Is this a little tourist moment with Jesus snapping pictures and posting them on Instagram? What’s the significance of this? Do you think Mark will tell us? Let’s look at the context and see if we can spot anything about Jesus performing an inspection. Oh, looky there—the very next statement!

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig-tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves.

In v.11 Jesus inspects the Temple,³ then in vv.12-13 he’s inspecting a tree to see if it’s producing fruit. There can be no question that Mark is once again using his tactic of mixing two events together because each sheds light on the meaning of the other. That’s what Mark does here. We’ll look at each part as we go, but for now I just want us to understand what’s going on when Mark tells us that Jesus looked around at everything in the Temple. It’s a fruit inspection. He wants to know—is the Temple bearing fruit or not?

And when he does this, don’t picture Jesus glancing left then glancing right. This took place in the court of the Gentiles, which was massive. It was 5 football fields long and covered 35 acres. How long does it take to make a thorough inspection of the back 40?

And it’s not like 35 acres of farmland. At Passover time it was jammed full of people. We’re talking about 10’s of thousands of people in that court at a given time. Josephus recorded that one year a quarter million lambs were sacrificed during Passover week in the Temple. And the high priest had recently moved all the buying and selling of those hundreds of thousands of animals into the court of the Gentiles. If you want to know what that place was like, think of how chaotic our financial trading floors are—imgaine Wall Street on a busy day, then add livestock. And it’s the size of 9 Walmarts. How long would it take you to inspect 9 Walmarts?

And it’s an important inspection. If a building inspector fails the building, it can have significant ramifications for the builder. The verdict of Jesus’ judgment on the Temple inspection will have much, much greater ramifications, so Jesus wants us to see that he isn’t going to make hasty generalizations, or lump innocent people in with guilty people, or judge by mere appearances without knowing the facts.

Insightful Examination

The term translated “looked around” is a key term for Mark. He uses it 6 times⁴ while the whole rest of the Bible uses it only 1 time.⁵ Five of the six uses refer to Jesus and are in contexts of a commanding survey in which Jesus sees people’s hearts. That was the word back in 10:23 where the disciples were thinking something within themselves and Jesus “looked at them” and then responded to their thoughts. So this isn’t tourist Jesus. It’s x-ray vision, thought-reading, heart-examining, judge of all mankind Jesus.

when they waved palm branches and shouted Hosanna. Also, it seems like there are too many events in 11:27-14:11 to fit into a day and a half (Wednesday and Thursday morning). And we know from John’s gospel that Jesus did indeed spend several months in Judea prior to his death. Perhaps Mark took the key events related to the Temple during that period and compressed them into one section to make a point about Jesus and the Temple.

³ The statement that Jesus looked around at everything calls to mind the “I have been watching” of Jeremiah 7:11, which Jesus quotes the next day when he brings his judgment on the Temple.

Jeremiah 7:11 Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

⁴ 3:5,34, 5:32, 9:8, 10:23, 11:11.

⁵ Lk.6:10.

This is the Christ of Revelation 1:14 whose eyes were like blazing fire. Jesus enters the Temple and uses those burning, penetrating eyes to make a thorough, accurate examination of what's going on there.

Lateness of the Hour

So the looking around is important, and so is the lateness of the hour.

11 ... He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

What does that tell you? It could be that what Jesus planned to do in there he wanted to do during prime time where the most people were around. But it also implies that whatever it is Jesus had in mind was going to require some time—more time than was left in this day.

Inspecting the Tree

Okay, so Jesus performs the inspection, and we're on the edge of our seats to find out the verdict. "Mark, are you going to tell us?" "No, I'm not going to tell you; I'm going to show you." So Mark takes us to the next morning.

Symbolism: The Tree=Israel

I preached about vv.12-14 in the sermon IHOP and the Case of the Missing Figs, so I'm not going to go over that material again. But I will remind you of the fact that the OT prophets routinely used the fig tree as a symbol of Israel.⁶ The fig tree hyperlinks to all kinds of passages in the OT, especially Micah 7, where God says he was craving figs, but then when he examined Israel (which is the fig tree), there were no godly people left in the land. Jesus is reenacting that in real life. That's why it's significant that Jesus was hungry in v.12. By mentioning that Mark is calling to mind the time when God was really hungry for figs. He really wanted his people to bear fruit.

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig-tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit.

Jesus Seeks Fruit

That tells us something about how God examines us. If you find yourself under investigation by the police or a prosecutor, all their energy will go into finding evidence of your guilt. The gossip chain searches for evidence of your failures. God is just the opposite. When he examines us, he's searching for fruit—searching for something good. Searching for a reason *not* to judge us.

The Fruit=Gentiles Prayers

So we ask Jesus, "How did the inspection turn out, Jesus? Pass or fail?" Jesus says, "Let me show you ..." Then he inspects fig tree, which represents Israel, and it's an epic fail—not one single fig.

⁶ Fig trees play prominently in end-times prophecies. In some cases, Israel is portrayed as a fig tree (Jeremiah 29:17) which is judged for lack of fruit (Jeremiah 24:1-10, Hosea 9:10,16-17, Micah 7:1-2). That's the imagery Jesus is using in this parable. In fact, according to the NICNT, "A comparison of the Marcan text (ἐξηραμμένην ἐκ ῥιζῶν) with Hos. 9:16 LXX (τὰς ῥίζας αὐτοῦ ἐξηράνθη) suggests that the evangelist had in mind the text from Hosea." Other times, fig trees are used as an illustration of the effects of God's judgment. There will be devastation and famine, such that there will be no figs to eat. (Jeremiah 8:13, Hosea 2:12, Joel 1:6-8)

13 ... When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season⁷ for figs.

That's a living parable of the outcome of his inspection of the Temple the day before. Epic fail. No fruit. So now what? The Temple failed the inspection; what's the consequence? Jesus is going to show us that too—using this tree as an illustration.

The Curse

14 Then he said to the tree ...

There's something you don't see every day. Jesus is talking to a tree—I'm sure that got their attention.

14 Then he said to the tree, "May no-one ever eat fruit from you again."

In other words, "You're done as a fig tree." "Can I have another chance?" No. "Can I try again later in the year?" No—you're done as a fig tree.

The Disciples Heard Him Say It

14 ... And his disciples heard him say it.

Haven't they heard everything Jesus said all through the gospel? Yes, but this is the only time Mark stops and makes a point of it. Jesus didn't mumble this to the tree. He wasn't grouching about missing breakfast. He's saying something he wants his disciples to hear and understand. After examining the Temple the night before, now Jesus examines the tree. Maybe he had the same posture just to make sure they got the point. Stroking his chin, looking, examining the Temple. Then the same with this tree. Then he gets real loud. "Okay, fig tree ..." (Are you getting this Peter? Pay attention.) "Okay fig tree, you advertised fruit but didn't bear any, so now you're done as a fig tree." Then he turns—"Did you guys catch that?" "Yeah." "Okay good. Now hold that thought ... then he goes straight to the Temple and it all becomes clear.

Ransacking the Temple

Mark doesn't want you to lose that thought so he skips the journey and transports us right into the Temple in the very next verse.

14 Then he said to the tree, "May no-one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. 15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.

Mark mashes these event together so we can't miss the meaning. Fig tree—lots of leaves; no fruit—you're done as a fig tree. Temple—lot's of activity; no prayer—you're done as a Temple. This event is known as the cleansing of the Temple, but it's more of a condemning than a cleansing—like a fire marshal who inspects a building and says, "The problems can't be fixed. I'm just going to have to condemn the building altogether." Jesus isn't just saying, "If we can get these money changers out of here, then we'll be all set." He's not trying to cleanse it or reform it or fix it. It's too late for that. His purpose here isn't to destroy the money changers' tables so they can't exchange currency ever again. All they had to do (and, no doubt what they did do) was wait for Jesus to leave and turn the tables right side

⁷ NIVAC: "The word "season" (*kairos*) is not the botanical term for the growing season but the religious term found in 1:14–15 denoting the time of the kingdom of God (see 13:33)."

up again and resume business as usual. When Jesus overturned those tables, that was just as much a parable as when he killed that tree. It was symbolic of what was going to happen to the Temple.

If you want to stump your friends at a party with a Bible trivia question, ask them this: which parable in the Bible has a sequel? The answer is in Luke 13.

Luke 13:5 ... unless you repent, you too will all perish." ⁶ Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' ⁸ "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

He begins that parable by saying, "**Unless you repent, you will all perish.**" Then he goes on to tell a parable about a fig tree that will get one last chance to bear fruit. If it fails one more time, it will be destroyed.

So now, here in Mark 11, Jesus is saying, "Okay, I gave you that extra year, now I came back and inspected, and you're still just as barren as ever." So when Jesus says to this tree, "You're finished as a fig tree," the implication is—that building in Jerusalem was finished as a Temple. It's finished as the dwelling place of God, it's finished as the place where God answers the prayers of his people, it's finished as the place where sins are forgiven, it's finished as the heart of Judaism.

And he's doing this in a very public way. Jesus is not going to let them sit on their hands any longer. He's going to force a choice: the authorities are going to have to either crown him or kill him.

Prophesied

This shouldn't have come as a surprise to anyone. It was prophesied in the OT. If we go all the way back opening verses of the book of Gospel of Mark, we'll remember that Mark began with a quotation of Malachi 3.

Malachi 3:1 "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."

That's the part Mark quoted—listen to the rest of that verse.

Malachi 3:1 "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple ... 2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire ..."⁸

The Messiah would come suddenly to his Temple with refiner's fire and such force that the prophet says, "**Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand?**" The OT warned that when the Messiah comes, it's going to be brutal for the Temple. In fact, if you read Ezekiel 40-48 you find that it's not just a matter of the Temple being purified or reformed, but *replaced*. Zechariah 6:12-13 says the Davidic king will come and build the Temple of God.⁹

Fruit=Prayer

⁸ Among the actions expected of the Messiah was the purification of the temple's worship (Ezk. 37:26-28; Pss. Sol. 17:30-32). 'There shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD' (Zech. 14:21 – NIV "Canaanites").

⁹ In fact, that's part of the Davidic Covenant. David wanted to build a Temple building for God, and God said, "You're not the one to build my house, but how about this—I'm going to build a house for you. The house of David (referring to David's descendants) will be established as the royal line.

2 Samuel 7:12 ... I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his father, and he will be my son.

For this expectation of the Messiah in Jewish writings, see Tob. 14:5; Jub. 1:27-29; 1 Enoch 1:28-29.

So the King comes suddenly to his Temple, inspects it, and condemns it because it's got a whole lot of leaves but no fruit. But what does that mean? Exactly what kind of fruit was the Temple supposed to be producing? What's the Temple's job?

The first answer that pops into my mind would be sacrifice. It's where the altar was—and the priesthood. It's where you would go to get your sins forgiven by offering sacrifices.

That was one purpose, but it's not the one Jesus mentions. What was the primary fruit Jesus was looking for from the Temple? He told them while he was clearing the place. 15 He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said That's worth noticing, by the way—the fact that Jesus was teaching while he cleared the Temple. It's probably one reason why he didn't have enough time the day before. As always, he wanted to teach and preach. And of all the things he said in that sermon, Mark just gives us two lines. The first one was about prayer.

17 And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer ...?"

That's a quotation from Isaiah 56:7. The missing fruit was prayer. Fig trees are supposed to produce figs, and God's Temple is supposed to produce prayer. When Solomon built the first Temple, he prayed a prayer of dedication that went on and on for a whole chapter. And the whole dedication was all about how it would be a house of prayer. He runs through all the various situations in which they would come to the Temple to seek God in prayer.

- 1) When we have disputes and come to the Temple to pray, answer us.
- 2) When we're defeated by an enemy and come to the Temple to pray, answer us.
- 3) When we have a drought and come to this Temple to pray, answer us.
- 4) When we have a famine and we come here to pray, answer us.
- 5) When there is pestilence and we come to the Temple to pray, answer us.
- 6) When a non-Israelite comes to the Temple to pray, answer him.
- 7) When we're in exile and we can't come to the Temple, so we pray *toward* the Temple, give us credit for at least facing toward it and answer us.¹⁰

And if you were counting, you notice he describes 7 different situations they would pray about in the Temple—the number 7 representing completion, so the idea is all circumstances. Hannah's prayer was finally heard when she prayed it in the sanctuary.¹¹ Hezekiah's prayer was answered when he prayed it in the Temple.¹² Jonah prayed from the bottom of the sea, and it says his prayer was answered when the prayer came into the holy Temple.¹³

And the Jews understood this—so much so that when the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis wondered if prayer was even possible after that. Rabbi Eleazar said, "From the day on which the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer have been closed. ... Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, a wall of iron divides between Israel and their Father in Heaven."¹⁴

Gentile Prayer

It was supposed to be a house of prayer, especially Gentile prayer. Notice what Jesus says.

17 ... "Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'?"

(In the Bible, the word "nations" and the word "gentiles" are interchangeable—two different ways of translating the same word.) God's design for the Temple was for it to be a place where gentiles would

¹⁰ 1 Kings 8:27-30.

¹¹ 1 Samuel 1:1-29.

¹² 2 Kings 14:19-37.

¹³ Jonah 2:8.

¹⁴ Cited by Sharyn Echols Dowd, *Prayer, Power, and the Problem of Suffering*, p.48

come and worship the true God.¹⁵ It was supposed to be an *international* house of prayer (which is why I titled the sermon on this passage “IHOP and the Case of the Missing Figs”).

I learned something new this week. You’re probably familiar with the layout of the Temple in Jesus’ day—the outermost court was the Court of the Gentiles. That’s as close as gentiles could get to God. When you got to the end of the Court of the Gentiles, there was a sign that threatened the death penalty for any gentile that tried to pass. All my life I’ve just assumed that was God’s design. It wasn’t. There was no Court of the Gentiles in the original Temple. There’s no reason Gentiles should be kept from drawing as near to God as the Jews—even in the OT.¹⁶

So when God built his capital building, which doubles as his royal palace and throne room—his dwelling place from which he rules the world, the sign on the front said, “House of prayer for all nations.” Not house of sacrifice, but house of prayer (which makes sense when you read passages like Psalm 51 where we found out God is only pleased with a sacrifice if it is offered as a prayer from a sincere heart. Apart from prayer, the offering of the animal itself isn’t one bit pleasing to God.)¹⁷ It’s all about prayer. The Temple is there so human beings can communicate with God.

So when Jesus performed his inspection, what did he find? Gentiles immersed in deep, earnest prayer? No, he found a county fair. Buying, selling, commerce, people carrying merchandise, restocking inventory, wheeling and dealing, chattering, milling around. All that stuff used to take place over on the Mount of Olives, away from the Temple. But the high priest moved it into the Court of the Gentiles in 30 AD, which may have been this very year.

Conduciveness

Now, couldn’t the Gentiles still pray even with all the chaos? Yes. A group of them could have huddled up and prayed to God if they wanted. You can pray in any context. No doubt, millions of prayers have risen from Disneyland, despite all the distractions.

It can be done, but no one would call Disneyland a house of prayer. Why? Because even though it’s possible, it’s not easy. There are so many distractions, it would be next to impossible to concentrate on God. The fruit Jesus is talking about was prayer, and to produce that fruit required an environment conducive to prayer—a place where prayer would be easier instead of harder.

That’s a really good lesson for church leaders and worship leaders today. There is a lot to be said for an environment that makes prayer easier. Song leaders and pastors should consider that before they get up on stage and crack jokes or make small talk on the platform about sports or the weather or whatever in the middle of worship. A lot more prayers will be offered to God in a place that is quiet, free of distractions, the words that are spoken point to God, so every time your mind wanders someone is pointing you back to God. That’s a house of prayer. It’s a place where lots of prayer is offered because everything about the environment draws prayer out of you.

If you ever wonder how important the physical setup in a church is, just remember, when Jesus attacked the Temple for failing to be a house of prayer, he didn’t go after their doctrine. He went after their setup. There was nothing wrong with buying and selling lambs—that had to happen. The problem was the setup.

Den of Robbers

Well, if the Temple wasn’t functioning as a house of prayer, what was it functioning as?

¹⁵ Mark is the only one who includes the phrase “for all nations.” Mark was writing to Gentile Christians. In Isaiah it is this phrase which is the point of the sentence, which forms part of a series of promises that in the coming age foreigners and other outsiders will enjoy full rights in the worship of God in Jerusalem.

¹⁶ The same goes for the Court of the Women. Males and females were not segregated in Solomon’s Temple.

¹⁷ See also passages like Isaiah 1, where God hates the sacrifices the people were offering.

17 ... "Is it not written: "'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have¹⁸ made it `a den¹⁹ of robbers'."²⁰

I don't think that's a reference to the money changers ripping people off. Robbers don't do their robbing in their den. The word translated **den** refers to their hideout. Criminals go to their hideout to hide out—to hide from the law. They go there for safety, so they won't have to pay for their crimes. Jesus' line about the house of prayer was a quotation from Isaiah. This line about a den of robbers is a quotation from Jeremiah 7:11, where the people were committing all kinds of sins, and then running into the Temple for absolution even though they weren't repentant. They just thought if they went to the Temple, and performed all the religious stuff they were supposed to do, then they would be safe and God wouldn't punish them for their sins. This is like people today who just live however they want during the week with no intention of changing, and then go to church every Sunday to make sure they are on good terms with God. That's what **den of robbers** means.

Jesus performed his inspection, looked hard for the fruit of prayer, and instead he found a people who just sinned with impunity, lived how they wanted, then came to the Temple to pay their dues to God to keep him off their back. So Jesus goes in and ransacks the place. How do the people in charge respond?

They Feared Him

18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him.

Why? Because they thought he was desecrating a holy place? No. Was it because they thought he was blaspheming God? That's what they claimed, but it wasn't the real reason. Mark tells us the real reason.

18 ...they began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

The reason they killed Jesus wasn't because they thought he was blaspheming God. They didn't care about God. It wasn't because of blasphemy; it was because of fear. They were afraid of his influence **because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching**. Their true motive for killing Jesus was fear and envy, and it was so obvious that even Pilate understood it.

Mark 15:9 "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, 10 knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.

He knew it had nothing to do with doctrine.

People in charge tend to fear anyone who becomes popular outside of their little circle. Some lay teacher is especially gifted, and people started getting excited about his teaching, his Sunday school class keeps attracting more and more people, and insecure church leaders will actually go so far as to cancel his class. They don't even care if people are growing spiritually. They just don't want any threats. They do it in the name of church unity, but very often it's just plain old envy and fear of losing control.

¹⁸ The perfect tense in the Greek here implies that it's a done deal. A den of robbers is the "new normal" for this temple. And the term for robbers in Jeremiah refers to marauders, or raiders, who have a scorched earth approach to their attacks that leaves the place unrecoverable.

¹⁹ This is a quotation from Jeremiah (7:11), who condemns the people for sinning with impunity, then running into the Temple as a place of safety. Jeremiah goes on to foretell the destruction of that Temple (Jer. 7:12–15), which is the same thing Jesus does (13:2).

²⁰ The amount of money the Sadducees were making in the Temple was staggering. The result of this was that some of the richest people in the entire Roman Empire lived in Jerusalem. But the unfair trade doesn't seem to be the focus here. First, Jesus drives out both sellers and buyers. Second, he also keeps people from carrying things through the Temple. And third, he calls the Temple their "den," or hideout. Robbers don't do their robbing in their den. And fourth, the word translated "robbers" refers to marauders or raiders, not swindlers.

So they're racking their brains trying to figure out a way to kill Jesus, but they're afraid of the crowd, so when evening comes, Jesus just walks out unhindered.

The Dead Tree

19 When evening came, they went out of the city.

There's no room in the city limits during Passover week, so Jesus is staying in a suburb—Bethany. But each day he would wake up and go right back into the Temple. And the back and forth allowed Jesus to keep mixing the fig tree illustration with what he was doing in the Temple so the meaning would be unmistakable. Jesus has made it clear the Temple is doomed. It's done as a Temple. But when? Mark takes us back to the tree.

20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig-tree withered from the roots.

Peter is amazed at that because it's another miracle. It's a miracle to kill a tree with your words; it's another miracle to make that tree dry up overnight. That's not naturally possible. Even if you cut a tree down, it's not dried up the very next day. If it's full of green leaves when you cut it down, it will be full of green leaves the next morning. It takes months for a tree to dry up after it dies because of the sap. And for the roots to dry up—who knows how long that takes. This one is clearly dried up the next morning—where did all the sap go? Jesus miraculously removed it.

What are the implications for the Temple? This destruction is going to be total, and it's going to be soon.

The New Temple

So where does that leave God's people? God provided them a house of prayer—a gateway to heaven—all the way back to the time of Moses with the Tabernacle. For 1500 years this has been the center of Judaism. And now it's suddenly going to be gone? Then what? When the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis asked, "Is prayer even possible now? If the gate to heaven is gone—if the place where God said he will answer the prayers of his people is gone—then what? Jesus gives the answer in the next verse.

At first glance it sounds like these verses are out of context. But if you realize the whole point of the Temple is to serve as the place where God answers prayer, then the placement of these verses makes perfect sense.

21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" 22 "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. 23 "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

Is prayer still possible? Yes. But without the Temple, what will cause God to answer our prayers?

22 "Have faith in God,"

23 does not doubt ... but believes

24 Therefore ... believe

Four times in three verses: have faith, don't doubt, believe, believe. The implication is that there will still be a Temple, and the new Temple will be the believing people of God. The building would be cancelled and demolished, but the function of a house of prayer where God hears the cries of his people would still exist. The new Temple will be the believing community—followers of Christ. If you have faith, instead of going to the Temple, you will be the Temple.

That's implied here, and it becomes explicit in the epistles.

1 Corinthians 3:16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple

2 Corinthians 6:16 ...we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them

Ephesians 2:22 ... you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

We're the new Temple. We are the place where God answers prayers.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem he went straight into the Temple—straight into the heart of Judaism, the heart of Israel. He went to the heart of Israel because Israel was about to get a new heart. A new Temple. And new house of prayer.

What about forgiveness of sins? If there's no physical temple, no altar, no priests, no sacrifices—how are we supposed to get our sins forgiven?

25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

Have faith, forgive others, and your sins will be forgiven automatically because you are a brick in the new Temple which means you're always in the Temple and you are the new priesthood as well.

1 Peter 2:5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: The Fruit of the New Temple

Every pastor who preaches this passage ends up saying at some point, "If Jesus came in and inspected our church—or inspected your life—would he find fruit? Or only leaves? Just a whole lot of religious activity, or real spiritual fruit?" And you hear that and think, "Man, I've got to buckle down and produce some fruit." And so you walk out of the church and go off and do ... what? What comes to mind when you think of bearing more fruit? What did you think of at the beginning when I asked how much fruit you produced today?

Very often, the kinds of things that come to mind are more like leaves than fruit. We think about getting really busy for God. But do we think about praying more passionately? That's the fruit Jesus wants from his Temple. Did you know God will reward you for each time you pray?

Matthew 6:6 ... go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Sometimes we back off of prayer because we don't understand it theologically. Or because it seems like God isn't answering it. Or we don't know what to pray. Or we're just too lazy. Whatever the reason, it's good to stop and remind yourself once in a while just how important it is to God that we pray. Whether you understand it or not, whether it seems to work or not—do your best to figure all that out. But in the meantime, while you're working on figuring it out, pray.