

The Triumphal Entry and the Fig Tree
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March 16, 2008

At the end of the day—that grand and glorious triumphal entry—it must have felt for those disciples like things had really fizzled. It must have felt like the fuse had been lit and it had been sparkling and flashing, and everything was ready to happen and it finally came to the firecracker...and it was a dud. I mean, they had seen Jesus coming into Jerusalem the way they dreamed it would be. Thousands of people, while Jesus rode in on a colt just the way the prophets had said He would—the great king coming on a colt with the crowds singing, and they thought ‘This must be it!’ And the crowds, the people...literally thousands of people at this time of year gathering for the celebration of Passover, and pilgrims coming from all over; and they were gathered around Jesus, some in front of Him and some behind Him, and they were coming out from the city, coming through the city gates out to meet Him. And they were shouting, and they were putting their coats on the ground, and they were putting leaves on the ground; they were literally paving the path for Him to enter the city.

And they were shouting at the top of the lungs, and they were shouting things like “Hosanna!” ‘Save us!’ is what it meant. It was a celebration word, when you knew the king was present, and you knew there was power on high, and you could shout with confidence ‘Save us!’ And they were shouting it. And as the thousands shouted it, they also sang out “Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the one who represents God!” And then they shouted “Blessed be the kingdom of the David”, the great, promised, messianic kingdom they had waited 900 years...this must be the moment!

And after all that, and the day was done, the triumphal entry must have felt like a fizzle, a fuse leading to a dud. The very next verse in the text reads like this. Verse 11 says Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowds shouting.

He came into the temple; and after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late.

Walks in, looks around the temple, and leaves with the twelve. You need to have a sense of where He went, what He was looking at. He went into the temple area—grand and glorious building; it had been built by King Herod. It was his greatest work. It took 80 years to build this. It was a glorious, beautiful building. There was gold, ornate gold, around it; and when the sun would rise it would hit it and would just shine like the glory of the sun rising. It was massive. If you want to get a sense of proportion here, it dominated the entire city. The temple compound had a footprint of 30 acres. And it stood above the city; they had literally leveled a mountaintop to put it there, and it just dominated the entire city.

[*Gesturing to a slide*] Over here in the corner was a...looks like a small building in comparison to the temple and the courtyard. This was a *fort*, a Roman fort that had a garrison and barracks for 600 Roman soldiers. The stairs over here were three stories. By the time you got to the top of those stairs it was like climbing three stories of the building.

I really wanted to get a sense of proportion here, so what I did was I sent some secret agents over to Jerusalem. I took these two, I said “Be sure and wear your sunglasses. We don’t want people to know you, and I won’t name their name here today, because if you know the name I might have to kill you.” (☺) But we sent ‘em to Jerusalem, and I said “Get me a sense of proportion.” And so what these two did...they scouted around and found an unlikely group of individuals that were on a tourist thing. And they didn’t want to do the tourist thing...they were gonna watch the tourists. And so they identified two individuals in there. And they began to stalk those two. And they waited until just the precise moment when they could find those two together in front of an archway, if you can see that. There’s a little archway there. That’s one of the gates, the doorways into the temple. And Jesus may have walked through that very one. This is a massive, massive building; dominant, dominant place.

And when Jesus walked in it that day, and when He walked there and began to look around, you need to understand it wasn't empty. The city of Jerusalem at that time had about 25,000 year-round residents. When the holy days came, when a week like Passover came, and the pilgrims began to come, it would swell to 25,000 to a hundred- or more thousand people. They would cram into every space they could within the city. There was hotels set up, and inns set up. They would...people would rent out their rooms. And then there would be tents set around the outside, or they'd go to the little villages surrounding...like Bethany, or Bethphage and these others. And it was just mammoth people! And the courtyard was the center of it all—that large area around the temple, inside the gated area. It was called the Court of the Gentiles, and they would pack that. And it was milling with people, thousands of people would come there. I mean, this was their high pilgrimage.

I mean, try to picture what would happen. Juneau is about 25-30,000 people. Imagine what it would be like in Juneau if 100,000 people showed up on one week. That's what it was like here. Only these weren't tourists. These were pilgrims come to worship, so they went to the temple. And that temple was filled with people. And there was vendors there selling things—you know, reminders of where they had been, and holy dress, and things like that that they would buy there.

And it was not only filled with people and vendors; it was filled with money changers, because what would happen is you would come and you would pay your temple tax. Every good Jew would come and they would pay their offering to maintain the temple. The only thing is, they would bring coins that were Roman or Greek or somethin' else. And they could only pay in Hebrew coinage. And so the priests would have to exchange whatever money you brought, they would put it into money that was receivable by the temple. And there was an exchange rate very favorable to the temple. In fact, this temple became like the Swiss bank of its day...the great treasure trove.

Not only that—it was packed with animals. See, every pilgrim needed to bring a sacrifice...a lamb; if they were really poor, maybe a bird, a dove. And they would bring them to the temple to be sacrificed. Now, these pilgrims traveled a long ways. They didn't want to drag the lamb the whole way, so they would leave their lamb at home and they would come to the temple and they would buy one there. And there would be suppliers who brought in flocks of sheep ready for the pilgrims to buy, to be sacrificed. They charged a premium rate. These are supposed to be premium sheep.

You need to understand, just to get a feel of the immensity of this—in one week they would sacrifice over 225,000 sheep in that place. I say this with reverence, but this was like a slaughterhouse, and a stockyard. And there were animals everywhere, being bartered over, being checked, and then being sacrificed in the temple.

Jesus came in and looked at this. He came in and looked at it. And nothin' stopped for Him. Nobody slowed down to pay attention. There may have been a shouting parade, but in these gates He's just anybody. 'We got sheep to take care of; we got money to change. We got trinkets to sell.' And He walked away. And you think, "Fizzle."

It wasn't a fizzle. It was more like a delayed explosion. It was more like lookin' at a firecracker, and it seems the fuse has gone out and nothing is gonna happen. And you go to reach for it, and suddenly...BOOM!! And that's what happened the next day.

You sense that things are different right at the beginning of the next day when you move on in the text. And we're told, as we move on in the text, that Jesus, when they had left Bethany...this is early in the morning after they had been out at Bethany over the night...and the next day when they had left Bethany they're headed back to the temple, Jesus and His twelve, we're told that He became hungry—verse 12 of Mark, chapter 11.

He became hungry. And 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. And He said to this fig tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!"

A little comment at that point says that the disciples were listening. 'Whoa! Did you hear that? Jesus just cursed that fig tree!' They'd never, ever, heard Him say something like this before.

My men's bible study on Wednesday, we're reading this passage. I mean, it's obvious—this is a Jesus we're not used to seein'. And one of the men in my group, tryin' to put the right word to describe Him in this instance, they came up with the word 'testy.' This is someone you don't want to mess with. And He's more than just a little testy. We pass that fig tree and we move on to the temple, and this is what happens. And I'll encourage you to have your bibles, you can open them and follow along with me—Mark, chapter 11.

It's at verse 15 that when they came to Jerusalem...after that they came to Jerusalem. The crowds aren't shouting now. There's no mob supporting Him here.

He entered the temple and He began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple. And He overturned the tables of the moneychangers 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 them 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."

Try to picture this. One man enters into that 30-acre compound. The day before, they had absolutely ignored Him. And this day, no one...no one could ignore Him. I mean, He took command of the compound. He took those that were sellin' the animals and He literally drove them out of there. He grabbed the tables where people were exchanging the money and He picked them up, and He just threw them over. And then He had people goin' by to bring fresh supplies to the vendors, and He said, 'No! Not another step. Get outta here!' Can you imagine the force of personality that could take over that place in such a way as that?

The men in my group said, "You know what? You kinda sit there, and it's like this man is just goin' off, and you don't even want to mess with Him; you don't even wanna discuss it with Him. You just back up." And that's what it was like. His complaint, His challenge, His attack...was this place was meant to be a place where people prayed. 'You've turned it into a place for robbers, for thieves; a place where people think they can do anything and everything they want during the week, and then they can come here, pay some money, and everything's ok.'

We're told that the chief priests and the scribes heard this, in verse 18, *and they began seeking how to destroy Him*. They decided, at that moment, He had to go.

They were afraid, however, of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching.

The crowd were actually listening to this man. *But as evening came they, He and His disciples, would go out of the city.*

The chief priests and scribes decided it was time to kill Him. He was not the Messiah they had expected. He was not the Messiah they wanted. I mean, they expected the Messiah to come to Jerusalem and chase the Gentiles away. They were looking for a messiah who would come and attack the Romans. Instead, this one came into the temple, cleared it out, and said 'This is a place for people of all nations to pray.' In other words, He criticized them; He attacked them for not making room for the nations in their temple!

I mean, He had to astound them. He came into their city and He attacked them right where they thought they were getting it right! Right where they thought they were finally doing what was supposed to be done. I mean, Jerusalem was getting a lot of things right, but they at least had the temple; they were at least worshipping. And that's exactly what He attacked. I mean, He didn't go to the Roman fort and attack it. He didn't go to King Herod's palace, that man who couldn't make up his mind whether he was devoted to God or devoted to pagan gods. He didn't go to that palace and critique this horrible ruler that was ruling at this time. He didn't go to the theater and critique 'em for their Greek theater that was going on that was so corrupt. He didn't go to the marketplace and attack 'em for the greed that was there. *He went to the temple where they thought they were getting it right, and He said, 'You're getting it wrong!'* That's the one place where they thought they were doing things right. He said, 'You're getting it wrong.' This was not the messiah they were looking for. And this is not the messiah they wanted.

Not really the messiah too many of us expect. And we're not even sure we want Him. For us, it's not really so much about that temple. I mean, in some ways you're sitting there saying, 'Go get 'em, Jesus!' What kinda bothers us is that fig tree. I read this with people, and when we're done that's what they want to discuss. 'What's goin' on with that?' We're told the next day, after He'd confronted the temple, that as they got up and they were headed back in they're walkin' down that same road out of Bethany, that Peter said to Him, 'Rabbi, look! You know, there's somethin' kinda interesting here. The fig tree You cursed, that tree You said something to yesterday? It's withered! Jesus, You smoked it! I mean, from the roots up it's dead!'

You oughta read the pages and pages that discuss this. One side of the argument usually goes something like this, quoting a theologian: “This is a tale; it’s not a true story, it’s not history. It’s a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of an ill temper.” The argument goes “How can you give any credence to this story? It had to be made up. I mean, for one, how did this person who knew there was a colt and that people would ask questions about it when they tried to take it, how this person knew there was a colt that His disciples could find, and just the right words to get him from...how this one who knew there was a colt didn’t know there weren’t figs on this tree? C’mon!”

You can answer that one to a certain degree. I mean, Jesus is the most unusual being in the universe. He was born fully God and fully man. And you try to find out how that works, and it’s mystery. But sometimes it was very much like a V8 engine that you could shut off four cylinders or operate on eight. And Jesus was like that. Often He operated as a man, and there were times there was all eight cylinders—He was fully acting in His divine power and omniscience. And He didn’t control the switch. He was fully dependent on what God would let Him do at any minute—what the Spirit was leading Him to do. And so there was things He knew simply because the Spirit showed Him in that moment what it was. The Spirit showed Him there was a donkey over there. He was operating on all eight. When it came to the fig tree, God said ‘Figure that one out on your own. You’re on four cylinders.’

And people say, ‘Ok, we can go with that. But you know what? He wasn’t operatin’ on four solid cylinders. I mean, He should have known it wasn’t the season for figs.’ The response comes back—ok. Maybe he was lookin’ for those ‘pre-figs’—there’s a name for ‘em but I can’t ever pronounce it—that would often come at this season of the year; and people would eat ‘em. They weren’t the most pleasant eating, but they would actually be eaten and even sold in the marketplace sometimes. And maybe that’s what He was lookin’ for, and this tree didn’t have those.

Or the other argument may be that ‘you know what? This tree had in some way leafed out so dramatically that it really did look—even though it was out of season, even though it was early—it maybe looked like there was something really unusual happening and there would be figs on it.’ But there weren’t.

There’s a couple of other explanations that run along those lines; and the usual line of theologians at this point say ‘What we have here is Jesus providing a parabolic miracle of judgment upon the temple. He was showing what was going to be happening to the temple—that just as that fig tree was cursed and withered, the temple was going to be cursed and someday was going to be torn apart, as it was in 70 AD...so much so that not one stone was left on top of another.’

You know what? I think this really happened. And I’m convinced that Jesus cursed that fig tree. And I think there was some parabolic meaning to it, but that wasn’t the primary point. The primary point comes when Jesus answers Peter, and He says to him, ‘Listen. *Have faith in God.*’ And then He goes on and says, the next statement after that, He says to them

“Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be take up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he is saying is going to happen, it will be granted to him.”

In other words, ‘You’re just seeing the power of faith in action. And this fig tree is nothin’’. He gives a teaching point from that, an application point to His disciples. He says,

“Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you’ve received them, and they will be granted for you.”

‘But listen...’

“Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you and your transgressions.”

He’s sayin’, ‘Listen guys, faith can do a lot of things. When you combine faith and forgiveness in prayer, and it is amazing... it’s unbe- ...it’s unlimited in what it can do.’ That’s the teaching point. But His primary answer? ‘That fig tree’s withered—just an action of faith. And if I wanted to I could move that mountain.’

I think the whole incident there is to give us an indication of our Lord’s destructive power. There was not a person in that leadership who had a clue about Who they were dealing with when they got together in their little meeting and said, ‘Let’s destroy him.’ Those disciples had never seen a glimmer of the intensity of His destructive power, if it was ever unleashed, until He said to that tree, ‘Wither up.’

You need to see that. You need to see it. 'Cause then you're ready to see the wonder, and the glory, and the mystery and the grace—that one who could wither a tree with a word, bring down a mountain with a command, chose to walk through the rest of that week without pronouncing a curse, and chose to go to the cross. Instead of calling down the fire of God on those who were doing it wrong, He went to the cross and He did the one thing that could make up for every wrong that was being done in that city, in that day, that has ever been done in the past, and will ever be done in the future. He could have pronounced a curse, and every person in that city would have withered like that tree. He chose, instead, the cross.

This whole chapter, this whole story—just one...it convicts me. Oh, it convicts me. See, when I read the story of the triumphal entry and that initial beginning, and that Easter week with Jesus, I recognize that you know what? If Jesus were to enter this city to confront it, He would start with the churches. And if you were to confront this city, He would be here, taking the measure of what we're doing right now. He wouldn't start with the political offices. He wouldn't go down to the local political station and decide if there's corruption here or not. He wouldn't go to the bars and saloons and decide if we have dissipation and drunkenness here. He wouldn't go to the video stores and the movies and see if we got pornography here. He wouldn't go to the stores and the malls and say 'Is there greed here?' He wouldn't do that. *He would come here.* And He would take the measure of what we're doin'. And that convicts me. Take one area of measure that He used—prayer. A person comes in this building, drops off their little kids, tucks 'em into Sunday school. On the way up they talk to this person, they greet that person, and this person they say 'Hello.' They come in...we're already about three songs into the service, we've already missed the first prayer, we're going and then we have the prayer for the offering, and oh yeah, we're gonna have a prayer at the end, but those are just kinda transition points...we're used to those. They've moved the service forward; we're done with the service; we've got people to see. If you're really desperate you may come up to the prayer zone where we sometimes have (sometimes don't have)... *You could go here for the entire day and walk away, feel very religious, and never once prayed!*

And that convicts me, 'cause I'm the pastor here. But I tell you what...when I read about that fig tree I'm renewed. Because I know He could have cursed us long ago, and He could have withered me from the roots up long ago. But Jesus has chosen not to curse us. He has chosen to die for us, to stand by us, and to work with us.

When you come back here next week for Easter Sunday, that's what I want you to know at the very core of your being. The One who could pronounce a curse on you has chosen to die for you.

Father in heaven,

As we leave this day to proceed through this week, Father, my prayer, my petition, my desire is that You would renew us, You would refresh us in the reality of Jesus who, instead of unleashing His destructive power, unleashed His love. And we stand here today by grace. Renew us in that, Father, by Your Spirit. Build on the words we've read, the truth we've grasped. Build on it, Father, with Your Spirit in ours.

In Jesus' name, amen.