

The Cleansing of the Temple and the Cursing of the Fig Tree

Matthew 21:12-22

Matthew 21:12-22 - *"Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹³ And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"*

¹⁴ Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant ¹⁶ and said to Him, "Do You hear what these are saying?"

And Jesus said to them, "Yes. Have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise?'" ¹⁷ Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there.

¹⁸ Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away.

²⁰ And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?"

²¹ So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. ²² And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

Background Notes

The cleansing of the Temple and the cursing of the fig tree took place on Monday, the day after Palm Sunday.

In John 2 we have an account of the Lord cleansing the Temple. That cleansing was at the beginning of His public ministry. The cleansing of the Temple in Matthew 21 was at the end of the Lord's ministry. Is this a contradiction in the Bible? What's the answer? No, it's not a contradiction in the Bible! There were two cleansings of the Temple. One took place at the beginning of our Lord's public ministry, and one at the end. As you read the accounts you will notice that there are some significant differences in the details.

In the previous cleansing (recorded in John 2), the Lord made a small whip of cords and drove the sheep and oxen out of the Temple area. By the way, I think it's important to understand that He drove animals out with the whip. He wasn't making a whip of cords and beating people. He used the whip to drive animals out of the Temple area!

In the later cleansing of the Temple (recorded in Matthew 21, Mark 11 and Luke 19), we don't read of the Lord making a whip and driving out the animals. At Passover Jewish people came to Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire. In order to buy their sacrificial animals for Passover, they needed Israeli currency without the "graven image" of Caesar on the coins. The moneychangers were charging exorbitant rates of exchange for the Temple currency. In addition, the merchants had quite an operation going, selling sacrificial animals at great profits for themselves. And all of this was being done in the name of religion!

The Lord denounced these practices, and said that the Temple had been turned into a "den of thieves"! He overturned the tables of the moneychangers to drive the corrupt merchants out of the courts of the House of the Lord.

After He cleansed the Temple of this corrupt practice, the Lord graciously healed those people who were lame and the blind. He rebuked the chief priests and scribes for finding fault with the children who were praising Him for His wonderful works. He lodged that night in the town of Bethany - perhaps in the home of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha.

Doctrinal Points

1. The cleansing of the Temple prefigures the Lord's return in glory.

In the early part of Matthew 21 we mentioned that our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem foreshadowed the truly triumphal entry of His Second Coming. When the Lord returns, He will return with both blessing and judgment. There will be judgments at the end of the Tribulation period, and then there will be the blessings of His glorious kingdom that He will set up on earth after the judgments. Our Lord's cleansing of the Temple and His wonderful miracles that followed the cleansing of the Temple prefigure our Lord's return in glory - both in judgment and blessing.

In Malachi 3:1, we read a prophecy of the Lord coming suddenly to His Temple: "*Behold, I send My messenger, and the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,*" says the LORD of hosts." This prophecy was only partially fulfilled at our Lord's First Coming. Yes, John the Baptist prepared the way, and the Lord did come and cleanse the Temple, but the judgments that follow in Malachi 3 have not yet taken place.

"But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like launderers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness" (Malachi 3:2-3). The judgments mentioned in Malachi 3:2-3 have not yet been carried out, but they will take place when the Lord returns in judgment at His Second Coming. So the cleansing of the Temple prefigures, or pictures, our Lord's return in judgment.

But now look again at the blessing that follows the judgment phase of the cleansing of the Temple in Matthew 21:14-15, "*Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!"*" So the cleansing of the Temple prefigures the Lord's return in glory.

2. The cursing of the fig tree pictures the Lord's removal of Israel.

"Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away" (v18-19).

Did you ever feel sorry for the fig tree? What had the fig tree done to deserve such a fate? Was it fair for the Lord to curse the poor fig tree? Answer: It's not a matter of fairness! If a farmer decides to remove a fruit tree that's not producing fruit, we don't call a farmer unfair, do we? Of course not! If anything, we call the farmer smart and efficient, and a good manager of his resources.

But there's more to be seen here. Throughout the Bible, the fig tree is a symbol of the nation of Israel. In Hosea 9:10 we read, *"I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the first fruits on the fig tree in its first season..."* In Luke 13 the Lord Jesus gave a parable about a fig tree. In the parable the fig tree represented Israel. *"A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down" (Luke 13:6-9).*

So the cursing of the fig tree pictures the Lord's removal of Israel. In the parable, the "three years" obviously refers to our Lord's three years of ministry to the nation of Israel. The Lord gave Israel many opportunities to produce spiritual fruit - but Israel didn't receive her Messiah. Israel didn't produce spiritual fruit, so Israel was removed from the place of privilege in God's eyes. In 70AD, God allowed the Roman armies to conquer Jerusalem, destroy the Temple and scatter the Jewish people. All this is dramatized in the miracle of the cursing of the fig tree.

Just as all the miracles of the Lord Jesus were designed to teach spiritual truth, so the miracle of the cursing of the fig tree was designed to teach. The cursing of the fig tree pictures the removal of Israel. The good news here is that the removal of Israel from God's position of favor is not permanent. There will be a spiritual reawakening of Israel in the future (see Romans 11). But right now Israel is spiritually dead, except for a small "remnant." The cursing of the fig tree pictures the removal of Israel.

Practical Application

Let your mountains be turned into molehills!

"And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (v20-22).

In these verses our Lord gave His disciples a practical application from His miracle of the cursing of the fig tree. What's the connection between "fig trees" and "mountains"? The meaning of the miracle is very helpful here.

Returning from Bethany to Jerusalem, the Temple Mount would have been right in front of the Lord and His disciples as they descended the Mount of Olives. In fact, when the Lord said "*this mountain*" (v21), He may have been referring to the Temple Mount, where all the religious activity of Judaism was going on.

Like the fig tree, Judaism had lots of "religious leaves," but no spiritual fruit! Israel, and the practice of Judaism in particular, were barriers to the Lord's ongoing ministry.

So, in application - the Lord was teaching His disciples (both then and today) that if there's a "mountain" barrier that's blocking the work of the Lord - a problem or an obstacle that's preventing the work of the Lord from going forward - we can pray in faith and see it removed!

In this picture, a "mountain" is not a particular test of faith that the Lord may purposely allow to come into our lives. **In context** of this chapter, a "mountain" is rather a hindrance that **blocks the ongoing work of the Lord**. It could be a financial problem - it could be a personal problem - it could be a spiritual problem - any problem that hinders our work for the Lord from moving forward. And we can pray in faith and see those barriers removed.

Let your mountains be turned into molehills!