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Cleansing the Temple, Fig Tree, Grain of Wheat (Part 1)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this lecture, Steve Gregg discusses the events leading up to Jesus cleansing the temple in Matthew 21. Gregg suggests that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree was a symbolic representation of Israel's state, as he found it barren and unfruitful. Additionally, Gregg notes that there may be indications in scripture that Jesus encouraged his disciples to pray for vengeance, citing a passage in Luke 18 where he says that God will avenge his elect who cry to him day and night. Ultimately, Gregg proposes that these events serve as examples of how Jesus' ministry was not solely about display of miracles, but also about addressing social and political issues.

Transcript

Let's turn to Matthew chapter 21, please. Matthew chapter 21, and verse 12. Then Jesus went into the temple of God.

Now, last time we read about his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the last thing we read was that after he went into Jerusalem on the donkey, he actually went into the temple, looked around, and it says because it was late in the day, he didn't do anything. He just went on back to Bethany. Now, we are in the final week of Jesus' life on earth, and during that week he had a regular procedure.

He would come into Jerusalem, apparently every day, and teach there in the temple. That seems to be the main thing he was occupied with the final week, usually called the Passion Week. Passion being an older word for suffering, the week of his suffering.

Although really, I wouldn't say that he suffered more during most of that week than he did during the rest of his ministry. His sufferings began, obviously, on Good Friday or maybe Thursday night. But the whole week, from the Sunday of his triumphal entry, which we call Palm Sunday, until Good Friday when he died is called the Passion Week.

So that's what we're reading about. Now, every day of that week, it would appear that Jesus spent the majority of his time teaching in the temple. But at night, he went to Bethany, which was on the Mount of Olives, two miles out of Jerusalem.

And he and his disciples apparently were lodging there, probably in the house of their friends, whom we know lived there, Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Or possibly they had other friends there with whom they stayed. We read in one place of a man of Bethany named Simon the Leper, at whose house Mary came in and anointed Jesus' head with ointment.

We haven't read that story yet, but there was apparently another friend of that family in Bethany who also hosted Jesus and his disciples. We are not told specifically whose home the disciples and Jesus stayed in, but we are told that they went back to Bethany every night and made the two-mile walk into Jerusalem every day. It certainly wouldn't be two hours.

Probably about a half hour to 40 minutes walk. Now, this would, I presume, be Monday we're now reading about. He rode into Jerusalem on Sunday.

And so the next day 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. And he said to them, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, that you have made it a den of thieves. 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, they were indignant 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. Then he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and he lodged there. So it would appear to be the principle, or maybe the only thing he did in Jerusalem that particular day, was to cleanse the temple.

Though we don't know whether he had done any teaching earlier in the temple that day before he cleansed it, but it would appear that he probably did not. Now, he drove out those who sold in the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. We read of Jesus doing something like that considerably earlier in his ministry.

In fact, in John chapter 2, at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he did almost the identical thing. John chapter 2 is the only place that records this earlier cleansing of the temple, and John does not mention the one in the Passion Week. And similarly, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all mention the cleansing of the temple in the Passion Week, but do not mention the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

This fact has given some occasion to feel that maybe Jesus only did it once, and John has accidentally put it early in the week, or early in the ministry of Jesus, and the other Gospels have placed it late. I don't know of any evangelical who takes that position. I

personally think that the two events are two events.

He cleansed the temple at the beginning of his ministry, he cleansed it again at the end of his ministry on earth. His statement of what he did was a little bit different on each occasion. In John chapter 2, in verse 15, it says, When he had made a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables.

And he said to those who sold doves, Take these things away, do not make my Father's house a house of merchandise. Now, that was John's version, John 2, verses 15 through 16, which was the earlier occasion. Notice that in both cases, there were two classes of people that Jesus interfered with.

One was the money changers, the other were those who sold doves. And on the occasion in John chapter 2, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his objection was simply to making the house of God a place of merchandise. Now, merchandise is not necessarily something that's immoral in itself.

And therefore, his objection was not to any dishonesty necessarily, at least he didn't mention it on that first occasion. He just didn't think the temple was the right place to be making money in general, even if it was honest money. However, at the end of his ministry, when he did the same thing, he indicated that they'd made God's house a den of thieves, suggesting that it's not just that they're making money, but they're making dishonest money.

Now, the money changers, we don't know very much about the rate of exchange they were charging, but presumably they were able to charge whatever they wanted to, and this may be why Jesus called it a den of thieves, because they were a little bit like the tax collectors. They were able to extort money from people who had no choice, but to pay whatever they were told to pay. A little bit like we are in our society, you know.

The government tells us how much to pay, and you really don't have any choice about the matter. They could raise it twice as much, and you'd still have to pay it. And the money changers were the ones who took all the foreign currencies, the foreign monies that were brought by pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for the feast, and put it into temple currency, which could be used for the things relative to offering their sacrifices, even for buying animals and so forth.

But the rate of exchange, we don't know what it was, but there's a fair inference that these people may have just charged on the exchange of money for buying whatever the market would bear, and that could be why they were accused of being thieves. Now, there's also those who sold doves. In both cases, in the first and in the second cleansing of the temple, Jesus turned over the tables to the money changers, which presumably would send their money flying every which way across the floor.

In John's version, as far as those who were selling doves, Jesus told them to take these things away. Don't make my father's house a house of merchandise, John 2, verse 16 says. But he was more physical with the people who sold doves in this second occasion, because he not only overturned the tables of the money changers, but he also overturned the seats of those who sold doves.

So you just picture Jesus coming and pulling the chairs out from under people, and they fall right on the floor. That's kind of rude, I guess you'd have to say, pulling the chair out from under someone. But he turned over their seats, apparently knocked them off on the floor.

Now, we don't read of Jesus physically striking anybody, and both of these occasions have been pointed to often by people who like to say, well, Jesus, you know, he was violent sometimes. And usually this is brought up, at least in my experience, it's been brought up by people who are trying to justify Christians going to war. And when you say, well, can you picture Jesus carrying an Uzi? They say, well, yeah, I can.

If you think Jesus wasn't very violent, you should ask the money changers whether Jesus was violent or not, because he showed violent behavior toward them. Well, I mean, there's no question about the fact that Jesus' actions here were forceful, and that he was no wimp. But we don't read of him striking or injuring any human being.

And even if he did, which I frankly can't imagine that he did, I mean, he wasn't the type to go around hitting people and hurting people, I think. But even if he did, the parallel between that and going and killing people is very different. I mean, I can't really see any parallels there.

But it is often brought up out of desperation by those who wish somehow to justify aggressive, warlike behavior in light of the example of Jesus. And this is about the best they can do is find something where Jesus seemed to behave in a violent manner. But again, while Jesus did rudely, one might say, and forcibly turn over their money tables and pull the chairs out from under people, and in the case of John's gospel, he took a little whip of small cords and probably lashed the animals with it to get them moving.

And yet we don't know that he... he certainly didn't injure anybody, and we don't have any reason to believe that he would have or that it was his intention to do so. Now, his objection to what they were doing is stated in Matthew 21, 13. He says, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer.

Actually, one of the gospels quotes it a little bit more at length, just adding the phrase, for all nations. The quote is from Isaiah 56 and verse 7, where actually the prophecy in Isaiah is about God's final purpose in the church in having his new temple, the spiritual temple, be a place where all nations participate in the worship of God, all Gentiles as well as Jews. And Jesus here is quoting partially that verse, My house shall be called a

house of prayer for all nations.

Some have felt that the objection Jesus was insinuating here is that these money changers and the sellers of doves had set up their business in what was called the court of the Gentiles. Since there weren't very many Gentiles who came to the temple, relatively few Gentiles were involved in the worship of Jehovah in the Jewish temple, it may have been that the merchants felt like, Well, there's plenty of space here in the court of the Gentiles where the Gentiles could come but aren't coming in great numbers. We can set up here.

And it's possible, we don't know for sure because the Bible doesn't give us enough detail, but it's possible that merchants may have multiplied to the place where the entire court of the Gentiles was occupied like a flea market and there really was no worshipful atmosphere there at all. If any Gentiles did come to worship in the temple, they would just have heard the noise of a third world marketplace there in the court of the temple, which is the only part that the Gentiles were allowed to go into, is the court of the Gentiles. There was actually a sign on a wall that went into the court of the Jews that said any Gentile that proceeds past here will have his own blood on his head because if he put to death, it was only in an outer section of the temple that Gentiles could go and it was probable that this is where all these merchants were located.

So Jesus, in Jesus saying, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations, or for the Gentiles. He may have been objecting to the fact that there was no place for the Gentiles here. If they would come, they would find no worship experience here in this marketplace.

And then he quotes from Jeremiah in the latter part of verse 13 here. He says, But you have made it a den of thieves. The expression, den of thieves, is taken from Jeremiah 7 and verse 11.

That chapter contains Jeremiah's temple sermon, as it is sometimes called, where he preached that the Jews were thinking that their city would be secure from Babylonian invasion simply for no other reason but that the temple was there. And God was saying, Well, the temple, this is not my house. This is a lair, a den of thieves.

And Jesus is saying that's essentially what the temple had become under the leadership of the present priesthood and the people that were there. So that's how he justified what he did. Now, only Matthew gives us the information that's found in verses 14 through 17.

The other Gospels do not contain it. It says, And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. Nothing particularly extraordinary about that in view of what we've been reading throughout the Gospels.

Blind and lame people have been healed on many occasions. It's simply that only

Matthew tells us that this happened after he cleansed the temple. Apparently, having cleansed it, it became a place of ministry where people could come to receive from God.

But the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did and the children crying out in the temple and saying, Hosanna to the son of David. And they were indignant. Now, this hosanna to the son of David, we were told earlier in verse 9, that that's what all the people were crying when Jesus rode in on the donkey.

This was now the next day, and apparently some of the children who probably had participated in that song of the triumphal entry, they were still singing the chorus. You know how children are. They hear a song, and it catches on with them, and they'll sing it for weeks afterwards.

And so the children were still echoing the words of those who had done homage to him as he was riding into town the previous day. And the chief priests were indignant that Jesus would be corrupting the children like this. Remember that over in Luke, I think it was, it said the Pharisees had objected even during the triumphal entry and said, Lord, I mean not Lord, but Teacher, rebuke your disciples.

That's Luke 19 and verse 39. It said, Teacher, rebuke your disciples. And Jesus had said on that occasion, I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.

On this occasion, it's the chief priests, not the Pharisees, but likewise his enemies who are saying, you know, this is not good. He said, do you hear what these people are saying? These children, do you see how you've corrupted the children? And Jesus said to them, this is Matthew 21, 16, Have you never read? Now, of course, the chief priests had read everything in the Old Testament, so he's implying that they're acting as if they had never read it, even though they have. They've apparently been reading without learning.

And he quotes here from Psalm 8, Psalm 8, 2. He quotes, Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants you have perfected praise, suggesting that the praise of God is most pure and most perfect from little children. Now, it's interesting because in Psalm 8 and verse 2 in the Hebrew Bible, it doesn't read that way. It says in that place, which you could see if you turn to Psalm 8 and verse 2, which in our Bible is translated right from the Hebrew.

It actually says, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings you have ordained strength because of your enemies, which suggests that whatever is coming out of the mouths of these children is God's way of establishing a strong resistance to his enemies. You have ordained strength because of your enemies, which says Psalm 8, 2. Now, here instead of ordained strength, Jesus quotes it as perfected praise, so that perfecting praise is treated as synonymous with ordaining strength against God's enemies. It's one of those places in the Bible that suggests that the praise of God is a weapon of spiritual warfare.

We know that when Saul was tormented by demons, David came and played music. We're not told what he played, but judging from the Psalms he wrote, he almost certainly played music of praise and worship to God. And as he did so, it caused the demons to go away.

In the presence of David's worshipping of God, the demons fled from Saul, or he was relieved briefly of his demonic problems. We know that when Jerusalem was surrounded by many armies in the days of Jehoshaphat, God, through a prophet, instructed Jehoshaphat to send the singers and the musicians out to praise God. And the beauty of holiness.

And as they did so, it would appear the armies themselves didn't have to do any fighting because the enemies were thrown into confusion by God and killed each other. And basically God fought the battle and he had told them they wouldn't have to. So there's a number of places where the worship of God is seen as being a weapon that God uses against his enemies.

Even way back in the 17th chapter of Exodus, when the children of Israel had just come out of Egypt and they were attacked from the rear by the Amalekites and they had a warfare going on there. Moses and Aaron and Hur went up on the mountain. And Moses, as he had his hands lifted in the air, was able to establish victory for the Israelites because as his hands were in the air, in a posture of either prayer or praise, the Jews would win.

And as his hands would come down in weariness, the Amalekites would win. And so the fate of the battle depended on Moses' hands being in the air or not. And that's why Aaron and Hur stood at his side and held his hands up beyond the point that he would be able to do so in his own strength so that the battle was completely won.

Again and again in the scripture we find indicators that praise and worship and prayer are means by which God overcomes his enemies or his people's enemies. And so also Jesus quotes that statement out of Psalm 82, which in the psalm says, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings you have ordained strength because of your enemies or against your enemies. Jesus has, instead of ordained strength, perfected praise.

The praise of children is acceptable to God because of their lack of guile, no doubt, and their lack of hypocrisy. Then he left them and went out of the city to Bethany and he lodged there. Now, in verses 18 through 22 we have the story of the withering of the fig tree.

This story does not occur in Luke, but it is found in Mark and there's a bit of a difference between the way it's rendered here and in Mark. And that is that as we read it here, it looks as if Jesus encountered the fig tree, cursed it, it withered on the spot, and the disciples commented on it and Jesus commented and so forth. In Mark's gospel, the only

other gospel that records this miracle, it gives us more detail.

What happens is Matthew again compresses the material. Actually, Jesus and his disciples, it would appear, encountered the fig tree as they were going into Jerusalem before he cleansed the temple. And then the next morning as they were going into Jerusalem again, they found the fig tree withered and a conversation arose between Jesus and his disciples about it.

We'll take a look in just a moment at Mark's gospel, but let's read it here in Matthew. Now, in the morning as he returned to the city, he was hungry and seen 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.

And immediately the fig tree withered away. Now, 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 is done to this fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, be removed and be cast into the sea, it will be done. And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.

Now, as you can see, particularly in verse 19, when Jesus cursed the fig tree, it says at the end of verse 19, and immediately the fig tree withered away. And verse 20 says, now when the disciples saw it, they marveled. You get the impression that the fig tree withered right on the spot before they even left the spot.

And the disciples just watched it wilt right before their eyes. And then they commented at how quickly it had wilted and withered. If you look at Mark chapter 11, verses 12 through 14, Mark 11, 12 through 14 says, Now the next day when they had come out of Bethany, he was hungry.

And seen from afar a fig tree having leaves, he went to see if perhaps he would find something on it. And when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response, Jesus said to it, let no one eat fruit from you ever again.

And his disciples heard it. Then we read of Jesus going into the temple and cleansing the temple in verses 15 through 19, which we've already first studied in Matthew. Then at verse 20, Mark 11, 20, Now in the morning, apparently the next day, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots.

And Peter, remembering, said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree which you cursed has withered away. So Jesus answered and said to them, have faith in God. For surely I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be removed and be cast into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things that he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says.

Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. Now, as you can see, Mark has it that Jesus cursed the fig tree as he was going into Jerusalem, probably Monday morning, from Bethany. He cursed the fig tree, and there was no visible evidence of it withering immediately, but they went on in, he cleansed the temple, and then he went back to Bethany.

And then in verse 20, Mark 11, 20, the next morning, that would be Tuesday morning, as they were going again from Bethany into Jerusalem, they found the tree withered, and then this conversation about it arose between Jesus and his disciples. Now, there's many objections to this story that have been raised. The first one we need to consider is, is there a contradiction between Mark and Matthew? Now, if we had not talked on many occasions before about the way that the different gospels treat material, you might find more difficulty in it than you probably do now.

In all likelihood, the ways that we've shown in the past, how the gospels differ in the way they record a thing, and explain why they do and why there's nothing wrong with their doing so, probably you don't have any serious problem with this difference. But just in case some do, and there are occasions when people do raise this objection, I might as well point it out to you. The objection is resolved, I think, if you look at Matthew 21 again.

And that last line in verse 19 says, And immediately the fig tree withered away. That's where it makes it look like, in Matthew, that it withered as they stood there on the spot. But that's not necessarily what it's saying.

If the tree withered up within 24 hours, which is what Mark would suggest, that's still fairly immediate when you consider it. I mean, a tree that gets sick and dies and eventually withers, usually takes, no doubt, weeks or months to wither away. And it was not an unhealthy tree when they encountered it on Monday morning, but it was a dead tree on Tuesday morning.

And therefore we could say its withering was immediate. Immediate is a relative term. If my son, who is now 10 years old, tomorrow morning woke up with a beard, I would say he immediately grew a beard after his 10th birthday.

Well, his 10th birthday was a few weeks ago, but still that's pretty quick. Between then and now, I'd say that's pretty immediate, just because it's much quicker than would ever happen naturally. In fact, if I grew a beard even in a week or two, that would be worthy of being called immediate, because my beard takes much longer than that.

But the point is that the tree withered overnight. And there's certainly no reason why someone telling the story couldn't say that that was an immediate withering. Furthermore, the next verse, verse 20, Matthew 21, 20, says, Now when the disciples saw it, it doesn't say that they saw it the same day.

We're told in Mark, in more detail, it's the next morning that they saw it. In Mark it tells us that when Jesus cursed it, they heard it, but it wasn't until the next day that they saw it. So you've got a passage of 24 hours between verse 19 and 20.

And that's no problem if you allow for the fact that Matthew and each gospel writer has grouped the things the way they want to. Obviously, the two parts of this story about the fig tree happened two successive days, with the cleansing of the temple in between. But Matthew, for reasons that are not hard to imagine, wanted to put the fig tree's curse and its sequel together so you could see the whole story, the cause and the result, in a glance.

And he put the cleansing of the temple prior to telling that story. Now, by the way, Luke doesn't even tell the story of the cursing of the fig tree. In addition to the difference between Matthew and Mark's way of telling the story, there are people who object to it on other terms.

For example, there are those who say, well, this kind of miracle is really unworthy of someone like Jesus. For one thing, he seems very unreasonable to curse this fig tree. A fig tree can't help it that it doesn't have figs.

And to make matters worse, Mark's gospel tells us that it wasn't even the season for figs yet. So how could Jesus hold it against the fig tree that it had no figs? Well, it is known that although in early spring it is not the time for ripe figs, there are some trees, individual fig trees, that are known to get figs earlier than the general orchards do. I mean, there's just an occasional tree that gets early figs.

And usually the fact that there are early figs would be advertised by the foliage on the tree. This tree had foliage. It had leaves.

And therefore there was reason to suspect that it could have figs. Now, of course, it was early in the season. And it's not really the tree's fault that it didn't have figs, obviously.

A tree can't help anything. But people have felt that Jesus showed himself to be a little bit peevish here, a little bit angry because he was hungry and he didn't get figs when he wanted them. And so he just took it out on this poor, innocent, defenseless tree.

Now, it's funny because critics of the Bible have been criticizing this story for a very long time. I mean, Bertrand Russell, in his essay, *Why He's Not a Christian*, was trying to point out some of the moral flaws in the character of Jesus according to the Gospels. Although Bertrand Russell said he thought it very unlikely that Jesus even existed.

It's interesting that on the one hand he can say Jesus didn't even exist. On the other hand, he can object to Jesus because he cursed a fig tree. But he felt that this was a good example of Jesus not being such a good guy.

After all, I mean, look at how quick-tempered he was. That he cursed this fig tree for no better reason than that he was hungry and he couldn't wait until he got into town to get something to eat. Now, we know for a fact that Jesus was not the type to be overly concerned about eating.

Often he wouldn't eat just because he was busy ministering. He'd go two or three days without eating. We were told once in Mark chapter 3. He went 40 days and 40 nights without eating on one occasion.

And there were other occasions when he was involved in a conversation with somebody like the woman at the well at lunchtime or breakfast time. And he was offered food and he just wouldn't take time out. He'd rather talk than eat.

Rather minister than eat. So it hardly seems like Jesus to be angry and cantankerous just because he happens to be hungry and he's got a 40-minute walk to town and he can't wait until he gets to town to get something to eat and this fig tree, not providing for him, it just gets his goat. This is a very uncharitable way to interpret the story.

But of course, persons who are always looking for faults in Jesus, they don't care how uncharitable their judgments are or how unnecessary they are to reach those conclusions. The whole cursing of the fig tree, I think, is best understood as a symbolic gesture. By the way, it doesn't say so.

And this is one of the difficulties with it. There's no place where Jesus explains the symbolism of his actions. There's no place that says that this fig tree symbolized something and that Jesus' cursing symbolized anything in particular.

However, Christians have almost throughout history recognized a symbolism in his actions. And a very clear one. It has been thought, and I believe this is correct, that Jesus coming to the fig tree and seeing all of its foliage, as it were, it was advertising that it had figs because it had foliage.

And yet Jesus looking up more closely under the leaves and finding no fruit and therefore cursing it, saying, you're never going to bear fruit again, is a symbol and a picture of God's coming to Israel at that very time. And they have all this foliage, all this religious activity, all of the evidence of being God's religious people. They're busy about the temple.

The Pharisees are very, very meticulous in their religious activities. But when he looks closer under all the leaves, there's no fruit. God's been looking for fruit from Israel for a long time, from the days of Isaiah and before.

Isaiah complained of it and Jesus complained of it too. And by the way, in this final week of Jesus' ministry, probably more than any other single subject, Jesus spent his time talking about the destruction that was going to come on Jerusalem because they didn't

produce fruit. Many of his parables and many of his predictions that occurred during this Passion Week focused on the destruction of Jerusalem that was going to come as a result of their rejection of him.

He had already, well, we read last time in Luke chapter 19 how he wept over the city and said because they didn't recognize the day of their visitation, their enemies would come and lay them to the ground with their children in them and not one stone be left standing on another. That was only one of many times that Jesus was going to, in this final week, make comments about the destruction of Jerusalem. And therefore, it is not too difficult to see this as a symbolic gesture where Jesus is, like God, coming to Israel.

Here's a fig tree. God's been looking for fruit. He's hungry.

He's looking for justice. He's looking for righteousness. These are the fruits that he was looking for from his vineyard Israel.

And in this case, a fig tree would stand in for the vineyard. A fruit-bearing plant should have fruit on it. And it wouldn't be so bad if it didn't have leaves.

If it was a tree that had not yet refoliated after the winter, Jesus would have not expected anything from it. And if Israel wasn't pretending to be religious and pretending to be devoted to God, God would not expect to find justice or righteousness. But their external hypocritical religiosity advertised as if they had the fruit that God was looking for.

But when Jesus came up close to look at them, he could see that they didn't have any such fruit. There was no justice in their dealings. There was no righteousness in their lives.

There was no love. And therefore, his pronouncement on the fig tree was, you'll never bear fruit again. No one's ever going to eat fruit from you again.

Now, I want to say this. That sounds like a very non-dispensational interpretation, doesn't it? I mean, dispensationalists believe that Israel is bearing fruit in these days and is going to bear fruit again and that there's a great future for Israel. Therefore, you'd expect dispensationalists not to agree with this interpretation of this miracle.

However, I think you'll find virtually every dispensational commentator in dealing with the fig tree cursing that they would say this is symbolic of Israel. They just don't take it to its logical conclusion. Most dispensationalists, as well as others, agree that this act of cursing the fig tree was symbolic of Israel's being cursed because of their lack of fruitfulness when Jesus came to them.

The difference is that the dispensationalist thinks that this curse is temporary and that someday everything's going to turn around and that Israel's going to be God's fruitful

vineyard again, God's fruitful fig tree. The problem is they're not paying very careful attention to what Jesus said. Jesus said to the fig tree, let no fruit grow on you ever again.

The idea is that the fig tree is no longer ever going to have another chance to bear fruit. It withers and dies suddenly. Now, as I say, even though the passage itself, neither Mark nor Matthew make a reference to this being symbolic of Israel, it's been virtually all evangelical commentators, regardless of their eschatology, have understood this action on Jesus' part to represent the cursing of Israel.

When the disciples called Jesus' attention to it, though, the next day, Jesus did say something about it, but he didn't say anything about its symbolic meaning, which perhaps gives good occasion to question whether the symbolic meaning that I've suggested really is present, whether it's really intended or not. I believe it is, and in saying so, I'm with virtually all commentators on this. It seems right to everybody, but Jesus' comments do not mention this.

Instead, he says to them in verse 21, Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to this fig tree, but also you will say to this mountain, Be removed and be cast into the sea, and it will be done. Now, is this just a teaching about faith and prayer? It looks as if it might be. Jesus seems to use it just as an occasion to say to the disciples, Well, you know, you can do miracles too if you pray.

I just did a miracle because I have faith. If you have faith like that, you can do miracles like that. The thing is, though, why would the disciples ever be called on to do this particular kind of miracle? Of all the miracles Jesus did, this is probably the least practical miracle.

I mean, it's not like feeding multitudes who are hungry or healing sick people who can really use it. Just go around destroying trees with words is not exactly something that Jesus did on a regular basis. As far as we know, it's the only time he did it.

And it's hard to know why Jesus would encourage his disciples to do this particular thing. And yet, he says, if you have faith and don't doubt, you will not only do what is done to this fig tree, which implies they will do this to the fig tree, but they will also cast mountains into the sea with their words. And he says in verse 21, All things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing you will receive.

Now, throwing mountains into the sea and cursing fig trees are just the kinds of miracles that it's hard to imagine why God would ever want anyone to ever do. I think it's safe to presume that if God created the mountains, he put them where he wanted them. It's hard to imagine a situation where God would want one of them removed to somewhere else.

And if he did, there's always earthquakes and volcanic action and things like that that sometimes remove mountains. But what possible advantage could there be to the kingdom of God in a Christian saying to a mountain, be cast in the sea? Now, I would like to suggest to you that even his comments here are continuing the symbolism that's inherent in the miracle. I'm making an assumption, and you certainly are not required to go with me in it.

But let me give you some thoughts, and you can decide what you want to do with them. I am of the opinion, as I said, that the cursing of the fig tree was symbolic of Israel being cursed, that they will never bear fruit again for God. He came looking one time too many and found them barren.

And he finally said, this is the last straw. The kingdom of God is taken from you and given to someone who will bring forth the fruits of it. And that is a comment he makes later in the week.

Actually, later in this chapter, after another parable about the fruitlessness of Israel. But what about his comment to his disciples that if they pray with sufficient faith, they will do this to the fig tree. They will cast this mountain into the sea.

Well, we studied Isaiah not very long ago. And Mount Zion, the mountain of the Lord, where Jerusalem was situated and the temple was built, it was frequently referred to as something that was going to be judged by God. And in Isaiah, on a number of occasions, we don't have time to look at them now, because I have other material I have to cover after this.

The sea was a symbol of the Gentile world. It's that way in Daniel also, in Daniel chapter 7. The churning of the sea brings forth four kingdoms, Babylon, Mediapersia, Greece and Rome. The sea being the Gentile world.

And I don't have time to go into all the Old Testament passages to defend this point, but you, having been through Isaiah recently with me, you will recall that we read across passages where I pointed that out. Isaiah 60 is a good example. It says that the abundance of the sea will be converted to you.

The multitude of the Gentiles shall come to you. It says the sea and the Gentiles, the sea is a symbol of that. Maybe not here, but maybe so.

Suppose this mountain refers to Mount Zion, and the sea represents the Gentile world. The cursing of the fig tree, if that speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem, certainly what happened was the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Jewish state itself, came to an end and it was dispersed in the sea. It was cast into the sea.

The Jews have been scattered throughout the Gentile world ever since. Now, one of the problems that arises with this suggestion is that it sounds as if the destruction of

Jerusalem and the scattering of the Jews throughout the world might be a result of the disciples' prayers, or as if Jesus is even encouraging them to pray for that. And that seems to go against our brain.

Why in the world would God ever encourage the disciples to pray for such a horrible thing like that to happen? Well, actually, I think there are some indications in Scripture that Jesus did encourage his disciples to pray for that kind of a thing. Look over at Luke 18, I believe. Luke 18, verses 1 through 8. Then he spoke a parable to them that men ought always to pray and not to lose heart, saying, There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man.

Now there was a widow in that city, and she came to him saying, Avenge me of my adversary. And he would not do it for a while, but afterward he said within himself, Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. Then the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge said, And shall God not avenge his own elect who cry out day and night to him, though he bears long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily.

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he really find faith on the earth or possibly in the land, on the land of Israel? We don't know whether earth is a better translation or land in this case because the word in the Greek can be translated either way. Now, the thing about this is it's not only just a prayer about faith and prayer, it's about praying for vengeance. Now we wouldn't have to assume that if we had only the parable without his explanation.

Even though the widow comes and says, Avenge me against my adversary, and the judge says, Okay, I'll avenge her of her adversary. We would not have to assume that Jesus, in applying it to our prayer lives, requires that we pray for vengeance against our adversaries just because the widow in the parable was praying about something like that. This could be more of a general teaching about prayer for anything.

However, when Jesus explains the parable, in verse 7 he says, And shall not God avenge his own elect who cry out day and night to him, though he bears long with them? It sounds as if he's saying his elect are supposedly praying day and night to him, that he will avenge them. Now, the disciples were persecuted, as was Jesus, by the Jews and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. In fact, the very first persecutors of the church, and the only persecutors of the church up through about 60-something A.D., were the Jews.

The Romans didn't persecute the Christians initially, but for the first 30 years or so, the Jews did, continuously. And Paul expressed his frustration with them sometimes in his epistles. But, if Jesus said that his elect should pray for vengeance against their adversaries day and night, then it may be that we're to understand that they were to pray for God's ultimate purpose in judging Jerusalem, because that was actually what the prophet had said would happen, and it would result in the vindication of his people, the

church.

Look over at Revelation chapter 6. Revelation 6, verses 9-11. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth, or on the land? And a white robe was given to each of them, and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, or was accomplished, or was completed.

Okay? Now, these martyrs are seen in heaven praying. And what are they praying for? They're praying for God to avenge their blood on those who dwell on the land, or on the earth. Now, since we have not studied Revelation yet, I have not been able to make a case for what you know my opinions to be about it.

My opinion is that at least this portion of Revelation is about God's judgment on Jerusalem. And everything in the breaking of the seven seals, actually, is related to the Jewish war and that great holocaust that occurred within a generation of Jesus' death. And it was God's vengeance upon Jerusalem for the blood of all the prophets, Jesus said, and also for the blood of his son.

Now, if that context be true, and I don't expect that I've defended that adequately to convince you, but let me just let you know where I'm coming from. If that is a true setting of these visions, then we have an interesting situation here because those who have been slain by the Sanhedrin, maybe even all the, perhaps all the martyrs throughout history, because Jesus said all the blood of all the martyrs who were slain is going to be on this generation, going to come on this generation. These martyrs who are under the throne, who died for the word of God and for their testimony, all the prophets from Abel up until whoever the last one was, actually, as it turns out, because even Stephen was killed by the Jews and James was killed at the urging of the Jews and there are many others.

Paul was persecuted from city to city and there are plots against his life by the Jews. He happened to escape them. But the Jews were the great persecutors and martyr-makers of the early church.

And if we have in these chapters of Revelation a description that is predicting the judgment upon Jerusalem, then these souls under the altar are those who maybe throughout history have been slain for their testimony, it says, which they held and for the word of God, that includes the martyrs and early Christians. And they are saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell in the land?