

## **Coming, Cursing and Cleansing: Jesus Visits Jerusalem**

The title of this sermon is “Coming, Cursing and Cleansing.” Does this sound like the theme of your last visit with relatives? Well, that’s not what this is about. This is about Jesus’ last visit to Jerusalem. Last week, we looked at the twelve hours before the cross. Now, we go back to the beginning of the week. The events we’re studying today took place on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. First, let’s examine Sunday...

### **I. The Day of His Coming.**

Sunday for us is a day off, a day set aside for worship, but not in Jesus’ day. The Sabbath for the Jews was (and still is) Saturday. So, the events of this day took place on the day after the Sabbath, like our Monday, the first day of the work week.

So, what happened? Well, Jesus sent the disciples into Jerusalem to borrow a donkey. To us, a donkey is a beast of burden, like sending them to borrow a truck. But that’s not the symbol in Jesus’ day. In Jesus’ day, in the Roman world, kings rode on donkeys. Army Generals who had just conquered the enemy rode on donkeys. In fact, the term “Triumphal Entry” had a technical meaning in the Roman world. A “Roman Triumph” or “Triumphal Parade” was truly a wonder to behold. When the conquering general returned, he was honored with a parade in which he exhibited his “trophies of war,” thousands of captured prisoners and carts filled with the “booty” they’d taken from the conquered land. Finally, at the end of the parade, which sometimes was days long, the general himself came riding on a donkey or in a golden chariot. The people would stand along the parade route and throw their coats and palm branches in the road for him to ride over. If the parade was in Rome, it often ended at the Coliseum where the people were entertained by watching the captives fight for their lives with wild beasts. The festivities of a “Roman Triumph” went on for days and hundreds of thousands of people participated. <sup>i</sup>

The words “Triumphal Entry” do not appear in any text of Scripture to describe Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem on that Sunday. That term was added as a chapter heading by some editor along the way. In terms of the number of people involved, well, it’s not clear. The normal population of Jerusalem in Jesus’ day was about 40,000. During festivals like Passover though, it swelled to around 250,000 or more. In describing who was waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna” along the road as Jesus entered Jerusalem, Luke calls them “disciples.” John says that they were the people who had heard that He had raised Lazarus from the dead. So, it’s mostly followers of Jesus who are shouting “Hosanna.” How many were there? John calls it a “great crowd.” But even if it was 25,000, that would’ve been only about 10% of the total population in Jerusalem during the Passover. So, by Roman standards, this was hardly a “Triumphal Entry.”

The question, however, isn’t what would the Romans call it but what did Jesus intend it to be? A better description of this event would be a “Public Presentation” because Jesus’ intention was to present Himself openly, publicly as

the Messiah. And who is He presenting Himself to, who's in the crowd? There are three types of people: first, there are devoted followers of Christ. They're the ones shouting "Hosanna."

Secondly, there are committed critics, committed to stopping or disrupting His mission. Luke records that the Pharisees came up to Jesus in the middle of the parade and demanded that He stop the people from calling Him the "*King who comes in the name of the Lord*," (Luke 19: 38, 39). But Jesus replies to them:

**I tell you... if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out. (Lk. 19:40)**

So, there were devoted disciples, committed critics and finally, there were curious tourists. The tourists were there for the Passover but they saw the commotion and went to have a look. They were neither disciples nor critics, just curious.

So, let me ask you this: which group would you have been in? Are you a disciple, a critic or a tourist? As I said, it was only the disciples who were shouting, "Hosanna." Hosanna means, "Save us!" Only the disciples were shouting that because only the disciples knew that they needed to be saved.

It's still the same today. Critics and spiritual tourists don't shout "Hosanna" because they don't think they NEED to be saved. They don't think that their souls are in any spiritual peril. They're confident of one of two things. First, that God will accept them into His heaven based on all the good things they've done on earth. Or, secondly, they're not sure that there even IS a God. If you're in one of those two camps today, let me share two passages with you. First, if you're confident of heaven because of your good works, Jesus says through the apostle Paul: (Rom. 9:31- 32)

**...Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.**

Good works do not erase your bad works. That's the problem.

To those of you who aren't sure if God even exists, hear this. In Rom. 1 the apostle Paul is describing people like himself before he acknowledged that God existed. He writes:

**...what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Rom. 1:19-20)**

Whether you admit it or not, you need to be saved. Saved from what? Saved from the coming wrath of God. Why is God sending His wrath? Because only His wrath can destroy evil. Where's the evil? It's inside of us! Well, then how can anyone be saved? We are saved by Christ's work on the cross. His blood pays for our sin so, when we cry, "Hosanna!" we are cleansed on the inside and the evil is removed.

Rom. 5:9:

**Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!**

So, which part of the crowd are you in today? If you weren't a disciple before you came in, you could become one right now by crying out, "Hosanna!" Do it now and make your soul safe in Christ forever!

But there's another fascinating event in this last week of Jesus' life that is depicted in this passage. It's...

## **II. The Cursing of the Fig Tree**

Verses 12 through 14 it say:

**The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 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. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. (Mark 11:12-14)**

What in the world is this about? It says that it wasn't the season for figs, so why does Jesus curse the tree? Is He being a tree bully? What's this about?

Mark 4:34 says that Jesus "*did not say anything to them without using a parable.*" So, I believe that Jesus is doing that here with this tree. He is creating a parable. But still, what's the point? Well, that's just what Peter asked the next day when they passed the tree again and it was withered. Peter said:

**...Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered! (Mark 11:21)**

And Jesus now explains the meaning of the parable:

**"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "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. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." (Mark 11:22-25)**

Now, don't get lost in His suggestion that you can move mountains. He's not suggesting that you start rearranging the topography of New England! His point is in the first four words, "*Have faith in God.*" This phrase is the action point of all of Jesus' teaching. "*Have faith in God.*" What is faith? Heb. 11:1:

**Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.**

And, it's not having faith in just anything; quite the opposite. It's having faith IN GOD ALONE!!! So, in God we are to be "*...sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see...*" This is Jesus' message over and over and over again. Jesus taught the centrality of faith:

*O you of little faith (Matt. 6:30)*

*According to your faith will it be done (Matt. 9:29)*

*Do you still have no faith? (Mark 4:40)*

*Where is your faith? (Luke 8:25)*

*Your faith has healed you (Luke 18:42)*

*If you have faith as small as a mustard seed (Matt. 17:20)*

*Your faith has saved you (Luke 7:50)*

*Your faith has made you well (Luke 17:19)*

*Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him (John 8:30)*

*Have faith in God (Mk. 11:22)*

The parable of the fig tree is about the centrality of faith – not about figs!!!

But, not to be difficult, then why did He do this out of season? Doesn't that seem odd? Unless the fig tree is symbolic of something - which it is.

Three times Jesus uses the fig tree as a symbol of Israel as a nation. We saw Him use it two weeks ago when He spoke about the "end of the age." In Mark 13:28-30 Jesus said, "*Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. I tell you the truth, this generation* (The Greek word is *genea* – race!) *will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.*" The fig tree today, the race that won't "pass away until all these things have happened," is re-established. Israel is back in their land.

The third use by Jesus of a fig tree as a symbol of Israel is in Luke 13:6-9. Jesus is speaking about the need for repentance in order to avoid punishment. He tells the story of an owner of a vineyard where a fig tree was planted. This is God who has planted Israel in her land. But the tree is not producing figs and the gardener wants to cut it down. Then the owner says, "We've been watching it for three years, give it one more year. If it still doesn't produce fruit, cut it down."

Now, combine all three of these passages and what do we have? We have the factual story of disobedient Israel (the fig tree) which should be producing spiritual fruit. But it isn't because it doesn't have faith in God. So, the owner sends His Son to tend it, to cultivate around it, to fertilize it for how long? Three and a half years. Jesus' ministry began in the fall of 26 AD and He was crucified in the spring of 30 AD – 3 ½ years! The problem with the fig tree wasn't that it was the wrong season for fruit, the problem was that it had NEVER produced fruit. So, the Son curses it and it withers. Is that it then, no more Israel? No, the prophet Ezekiel clearly prophesied:

**This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again. (Ezek. 11:17)**

This is not speaking of the Babylonian exile! That was only one country. This is prophesying what happened in 1948, the re-establishment of the state of Israel with Jews coming from many nations. So, when Jesus cursed the fig tree in that last week before the cross, He was predicting the scattering of the nation of Israel until their re-gathering in 1948. Jesus said that when the "*...twigs get tender... and the leaves come out,*" it will be a sign that the end is "*...near, right at the door.*" He was talking about the re-establishment of the fig tree of Israel in its land in 1948.

And while all that is fascinating and prophetically invigorating, the main point is still this, *DO WE HAVE FAITH IN GOD?* How about us as a church? Are all our ministries built upon faith in God or have we wandered off, as Israel did and put our faith in other things – our master plans, our budget, our talents, our intelligence, the faith of our forefathers and mothers?

And in this teaching, Jesus' practical example of faith is prayer. Not how often we pray or how loud we pray or how dramatically we pray but how sincerely we pray. Do we pray sincerely believing that God's answer will be best or do we demand to have it OUR way? And secondly, do we pray with a clean heart? (Mark 11:25)

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

The central issue is: *Have faith in God*. Do all of your life decisions orbit around that truth? Finally, we need to see also...

### **III. The Cleansing of the Temple**

On the same day that Jesus cursed the fig tree, He and the disciples also went to the Temple. In the outer courts, sometimes called the Court of the Gentiles because it was as far into the Temple area as non-Jews could go, Jesus found moneychangers changing money and selling animals to be sacrificed. It's not that these were illegal activities but Jesus' issue with them was that it wasn't conducive to prayer and worship, since this was the only place Gentiles could worship. So, Jesus took it upon Himself to throw the merchants out and quoted Isaiah and Jeremiah to them where God stated the overriding purpose of the whole Temple area. 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.'** (Mark 11:17b)

Dr. Robert Stein, formerly of Bethel Seminary, currently a senior professor at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, sees both Jesus' cursing of the fig tree and His cleansing of the temple as parables that announce that, "God is about to bring judgment on Israel... The Messiah comes to his temple and instead of the fruit of righteousness he finds nothing but the dry leaves of sterile formalism and hypocrisy, and he judges it. The cursing of the fig tree serves as a symbolic act by which the disciples are to interpret what Jesus is about to do in the temple." <sup>ii</sup>

Dr. Warren Wiersbe points out that these "moneychangers" set up in "...the one place where the Jews should have been busy doing serious missionary work. If a Gentile visited the temple and saw what the Jews were doing *in the name of the true God*, he would never want to believe what they taught... The court of the Gentiles should have been a place for praying, but it was instead a place for preying and paying." <sup>iii</sup>

If Jesus visited our church, would He be satisfied that this is a "house of prayer for all nations"? We have a room down the hallway that is dedicated exclusively to prayer. In that room you can literally pray for all nations in the section dedicated to the prayer requests of our missionaries from around the world. When's the last time you visited our Prayer Room? Have you ever gone in there? Jesus made it clear when He spoke with the Samaritan woman that WHERE you worshipped or prayed was not nearly as important as HOW you prayed and worshipped. He said:

**Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.** (John 4:23)

As far as I can see, the twigs of the fig tree (Israel) are tender and its leaves have come out. It's not "if" Jesus is coming and it's not even "when" He is coming. Israel is back in the land! Ezekiel 11:17 HAS been fulfilled! Jesus is coming and He's coming very soon. First, are you really ready to meet Him? And secondly, will He be pleased with how you are living out your faith when He comes? May we live in such a way that every day we would be thrilled to see Him before that day is over, because we're living with our full faith in God. Amen.

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- <sup>i</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1987), p. 133
- <sup>ii</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Passages in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 105, 106
- <sup>iii</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1987), p. 136