

taking action!

small group material



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Labourers

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE 3 • Jesus

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Mark 11:12-33

As we traced God's salvation plan, we saw that God promised three things to Abraham: that he would become a great nation, that he would inherit the land of Israel and that all of the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. The first two promises had come to pass, but as we saw in Jonah, the Jews had little desire to be the vehicle of salvation for the nations. This same hardness of heart leads them to reject their Messiah. As a result, God's plan takes a detour. A believing remnant of Israel is used to form a new vehicle of God's plan to advance His kingdom – the church. Or the church is the new Israel, depending on how you want to look at it. So, God does in fact bless the nations through Israel, but not in the way that anyone, particularly the Jews, had envisioned it.

Mark 11:12-14

In the last week of Jesus' life, He makes His final entry into Jerusalem. If the Jews had responded faithfully, it would have been a triumphant arrival, but it was anything but. On His way into the city, Jesus sees a fig tree – a symbol associated with the nation of Israel. Actually, when it is used in the Old Testament, it is often in the context of God's discipline and judgment upon Israel. Such is the case here.

Not finding fruit on the tree, Jesus curses the tree which seems a little bizarre if you don't realize that the Old Testament prophets often enacted judgment scenes or parables for dramatic effect and pointed commentary. For instance, the prophet Hosea is instructed to marry a prostitute, Gomer, to symbolize Israel's unfaithfulness to their covenant relationship with God. This is like that. Israel had not born fruit, and as Jesus was about to be rejected and cursed by Israel, the ramification would be that Israel would be rejected and cursed.

Mark 11:15-19

While the cursing of the fig tree was for the audience of His disciples, the clearing of the temple was the same message announced to the people. Jesus prophetically enacts a scene of judgment where the Jews would be driven from the temple. This was fulfilled in AD 70 when the Roman Empire leveled Jerusalem.

What is of significant interest is Jesus' words, "Is it not written, 'my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?'" When Jesus says, "Is it not written," He is appealing to the Old Testament. As we've seen in the last two studies, the Jews were clearly called in the Scripture to be the herald of God's salvation to the nations. Their disobedience on this account is the source of His rebuke and anger. Jesus was emphasizing that this was not a new message, but one they should have known.

What's the Big Idea?

God's plan to use Israel as the vehicle to bless the nations takes a tragic turn as Israel rejects her Messiah. In the cursing of the fig tree and the clearing of the Temple, Jesus symbolically enacts God's rejection and coming judgment upon Israel.

In Israel's place Jesus, inaugurates a new body of believers, a new Israel: the church. Jesus charges them with Israel's mission to bring the gospel to the nations.

What's the Problem?

When we twist God into our image (as Israel did), we are no longer able to recognize Him for who He truly is (just as the Jews failed to recognize Jesus).





Israel was to be a beacon of light to the nations, and the fruit they were to bear was people from all nations streaming to salvation. The passages in the study (Isaiah 56:6-8, 2 Chronicles 6:32-34 and Malachi 1:10-11) further tie the temple itself to this missionary purpose. In fact, the Temple had a special location where Gentiles could come and worship, called the Court of the Gentiles, and it was apparently here that the moneychangers were changing money.

Sacrifices had to be sold, and money did need to be exchanged. It seems the thrust of the problem was that they had turned the Court of the Gentiles into Walmart, making it impossible for them to worship and eliciting Jesus' rebuke that the temple was meant to be a house of prayer for all people.

Mark 11:20-23

Upon returning, they notice that the fig tree had withered. The verdict had been rendered. In proclaiming God's glory to the nations, Israel was as superfluous as a fig tree without figs. It would need to be abandoned. Jesus moves on to talk about faith, using the example of throwing a mountain into the sea. In this context, it is quite probable He was making one last prophetic statement: as the fig tree had in fact withered, so the Temple Mount would be cursed and cast into the sea, which, in fact, it was when Rome trampled the city in AD 70.

Matthew 28:18-20

If Israel would not repent, how would God fulfill His promise to Abraham and make His name known to the world? Jesus had, in fact, been constructing a plan B (which of course in God's foreknowledge was not an afterthought). He had gathered a believing remnant of loyal followers from within Israel. This group was headed by the 12 disciples – wait! Where have we heard that number before? Right, it happens to be the same number as in the 12 tribes of Israel. Through this less than subtle symbolism, Jesus was inaugurating a new Israel – one that *would* fulfill God's purposes and bring the message of salvation to the nations. Jesus was creating the 'church.'

Matthew 28:18-20 is Jesus' marching orders for the leaders of His new kingdom. This new kingdom would be comprised of people from every language and nation. It would not be a physical, geopolitical kingdom with a castle, moat and border guards, but a spiritual kingdom, with Christ reigning in the hearts of individual followers. The temple in Jerusalem, as the dwelling place of God, becomes a billion living temples, as God's Spirit will personally indwell every believer. And in light of all this kingdom expansion, Christ's followers are told to "go," to take His message to everyone outside the kingdom, or anyone who has never heard, and proclaim it to them.

The promise of Jesus to be with them and His charge to teach others to follow His commands, allude back to God's words to Joshua just before Israel took possession of the promised land (Joshua 1:6-9). The symbolism is striking, as Jesus commissions His leaders to take possession of the word, spiritually speaking, and make disciples of all nations, thus extending His kingdom throughout the world.

This does, in fact, fulfill what was promised to Abraham in a way that would never have been foreseen. This is why the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 3:1-13 that the church was a mystery that has now been disclosed – could not be seen from the Old Testament. Paul goes on to describe the church as Christ's body composed of both believing Jews and Gentiles.

What's Our Response?

It's important for the group to understand why the nation of Israel was cursed and abandoned as God's vehicle of salvation. The group should also see how the church sprung forth from a believing remnant of Israel – God truly did fulfill His promise to Abraham "that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him."

On a personal level, you want your group to wrestle with two things:

1. Having bent God into their own image, the Jews were unable to recognize Jesus. You want the group to see this tendency in themselves – to bend God into the way we want Him to be, not as He truly is.
2. Israel was apathetic to their evangelistic mandate, and it's important for the group to consider their own passion for God's mission.

What Are the Questions?

Mark 11:12-33

LAUNCH

Why do we equate 'niceness' with godliness? Do you think Jesus was always nice? Can you think of a time where either love or your commitment to truth caused you to not be 'nice' to someone else?

EXPLORE

1. Read Mark 11:12-23. Why do you think Jesus cursed the fig tree? Does this story in any way bother you?
2. Look up the following verses: Jeremiah 8:13 and Habakkuk 3:16-17. What do they tell you about what symbolism is in view with the fig tree?
3. How is the story of the fig tree related to what takes place in the temple? How does the fruit relate?
4. The following verses shed light on why Jesus was angry and what had gone wrong in the temple. Record what they say and any insight they give.

Isaiah 56:6-8. (This is the passage Jesus is quoting.)

2 Chronicles 6:32-34
Malachi 1:10-11
Genesis 12:1-3
5. From these verses, summarize what had been "written" concerning God's plan for Israel and the temple.
6. The temple court area was also called the Court of the Gentiles, designed so that any Gentile seeking to know God could worship there. How does this insight challenge why most people think Jesus was angry?
7. When the messiah came, what did the Jews believe would happen to: Israel, the temple, and the Gentiles? What happened instead?
8. Read Matthew 10:5-6. In light of Jesus' heart for the Gentiles, why does He say, "Do not go among the Gentiles...Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel"?
9. In Read 11:23. Why might this story fit in here?
10. Read Matthew 28:18-20. As we consider this next phase of God's salvation plan for the world, what is significant about Jesus choosing 12 disciples?
11. Summarize, in your own words, the mission given to the new Israel, the church. How would this plan look different from God's plan with Israel?
12. Read Joshua 1:6-9. What is similar between this situation and the instructions of Matthew 28?
13. So what is to become of ethnic Israel now that God has established a new Israel, the church?

APPLY

14. Having bent God into their own image, the Jews were unable to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. What of Jesus' character would have been hard for you to recognize as God? In what ways do we tend to bend God into our image?
15. Do you tend to see Jesus as more the gracious Shepherd or the coming Judge? How have you experienced the sterner side of Jesus? (His discipline, holiness, etc.)
16. While judgement eventually comes to Israel, God's patience had lasted 1,500 years. How has God been patient with you in your life before Christ and after?
17. As we saw in Jonah, Israel did not embrace God's heart for the lost (or anyone outside Israel). In what way does your life manifest God's heart for the lost? In what way does it manifest Israel's apathy?

What Are the Answers?

1. Allow the group to discuss.
2. The fig tree has reference to Israel but is often associated with imagery of judgment.
3. In both cases, Jesus is acting out, symbolically, the coming judgment upon Israel. True devotion to God, but also the fruit of bringing worshipers from all of the Gentile nations.
4. Give the group time to look up the verses and record what they say.
5. God's plan was to make His name known to all nations. Several of these verses bring out this plan as it was connected to the temple.
6. It's assumed that Jesus is angry with the money changing but in this context, He is angry they were blocking the Court of the Gentiles, keeping them from worshipping.
7. The Jews thought the Messiah would liberate the Jews from Roman oppression, judge and punish the nations and restore Israel and her temple to its former glory. Instead, Israel was judged, and the gospel went out to the Gentiles.
8. The redemption plan envisioned in the Old Testament had salvation first coming to Israel and from them, the nations. Jesus follows that script until Israel clearly rejects Him.
9. The mountain may refer to the Temple Mount and be one more prophetic statement of the coming judgment of Israel. The Temple Mount was thrown down in AD 70.
10. Symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel.
11. Allow group time to summarize. See notes on the passage.
12. Jesus promises to be with them and charges His disciples with the task of teaching others all that He had commanded.
13. Discuss. You might have the group read Romans 11.
- 14.-17. Allow the group to discuss.

Memorize

Have the group read through the gospel of Mark this week and take note of any of Jesus' teachings and interactions with Gentiles (including Samaritans).