
Why Did Jesus Curse a Fig Tree?

A small-group guide to episode 1 of The Bible's Strangest Moments. One session, about 45 minutes.

Jesus cursed the fig tree as an acted-out warning about the temple, not as a verdict on the tree. Mark tells the story in three parts (tree cursed, temple confronted, tree withered) so each explains the other: like the tree, the temple looked full of life but had no fruit, the prayer and justice it existed for.

Watch the episode together first: youtu.be/l_CF6ygrlXo

READ TOGETHER: MARK 11:12-21

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying 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 den of robbers." And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Read Mark 11:12-21 aloud. What happens, in order? Where does Mark put the temple scene?
2. What two passages does Jesus quote in the temple (verse 17)? What does each one say the temple was for, and what had it become?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Mark notes that it 'was not the season for figs.' Why would he include a detail that seems to make Jesus look unreasonable?
4. Jeremiah once smashed a clay jar as a warning (Jeremiah 19). How does that help you read what Jesus does to the fig tree?

5. Leaves made the tree look fruitful. What made the temple look faithful? What was missing underneath?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. What are 'leaves' in our lives or churches: things that look like faithfulness from a distance? Why are they easier than fruit?
7. Jesus' warning came while there was still time to listen. What would it look like to take that kind of warning seriously today?

FOR THE LEADER

- Groups often get stuck on whether Jesus was being unfair to the tree. Let that question breathe, then point to Jeremiah's jar: a sign-act uses an object to make a warning visible. The tree isn't on trial.
- Keep the focus on Mark's arrangement (the 'sandwich'). Once the group sees tree, temple, tree, the passage usually opens up on its own.
- The critique is a prophet speaking to his own people from the inside, like Jeremiah. Steer away from reading it as a verdict on Jewish worship or on sacrifice.
- Apply questions work best when people name their own 'leaves' rather than other people's.

SOURCES

Bible passages: Mark 11:12-25; Mark 13:1-2; Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:1-15; Jeremiah 19:10-11

Josephus, The Jewish War, Book 6, on the burning of the temple in AD 70

R. T. France, The Gospel of Mark (NIGTC); William Lane, The Gospel of Mark (NICNT); James Edwards, The Gospel according to Mark (Pillar); W. R. Telford, The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree



Protos

The full study, with the video and more questions like this one, is free at protos-app.com/bible-questions/why-did-jesus-curse-a-fig-tree. Protos is a Bible app for iPhone and Android that puts the history and context beside the passage you are reading.