

Why God Curses the Fig Tree and Creates the World

A Study of Mark 11:12-25

By Jason Bilbrey

For the last several months here at New City, we've been going through the Gospel of Mark systematically in a series called, The Real Jesus. But I think we could just as well title the series, "Jesus Saying Some Weird Cryptic Stuff." Today's passage is no exception. I invite you all to turn to Mark 11:12-25. You may also follow along on the screen.

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 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. 14 Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, 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.'"

18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

19 When evening came, they went out of the city.

20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

22 "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. 23 "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. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

I've heard a lot of testimonies that start something like this: "I had hit rock bottom. I didn't know what to do or where to turn. I just opened my bible randomly and started reading such and such a verse. And, boy, when I read that, the truth of it was like a kick in the chest and I fell to my knees and prayed for forgiveness right then and there."

I think God must ordain those moments, because, let me tell you, if someone were to turn to today's passage on such an occasion, they would just sell their bible on eBay and give up on Christianity for good.

What is Jesus doing? Is he just having a bad day? Cursing fig trees and throwing a tantrum in the temple? This is not exactly instant Christian material. Yet it is these moments, when God acts in ways that we find incredibly confusing and un-Godlike, that we ought to pay special attention to. Why? Because these moments hint at some deep mysteries about God's character. I knew a guy who used to underline all the Bible verses he hated. Then he spent his energy figuring out what God was trying to say about himself through those verses.

So here's our plan for tackling this scripture this morning: Have you every seen one of those PBS specials on the universe, where they try to communicate how small we are? They start by saying how small we are compared to the size of the earth, how small the earth is compared to our Solar system, how small our solar system is compared to our galaxy. And then they explain what a light-year is, and how many light-years we are distanced from other galaxies. It's mind-blowing, right?

We're going to do something similar today. See, we can't understand what Jesus is doing with the fig tree unless we place it in the context of his visit to the temple in Jerusalem. But we don't know the significance of the temple without knowing a bit of history about Jerusalem. Yet, we won't comprehend the story of Israel without understanding God's purpose in choosing and blessing them as missionaries. But we still need to take a step back. We can't properly understand missions without seeing how it relates to worship. And, finally, we can't understand worship without beginning to comprehend what God's glory means.

I know this is kind of intimidating and that the "longwinded sermon alarm" is going off in your heads right now. Let me draw your attention to the outline in your bulletin and you will see how quickly we can whip through this. And the whole point of this, the whole point of my sermon, is to show you this, my thesis this morning: *God's glory both explains our purpose as humans and motivates our actions as a church.*

So let's begin. What does it mean that God has glory? What is glory, and what does it mean to glorify God?

Let's say that I wake up in the morning, look in the mirror, and, for the first time, I notice the effects of this new whitening toothpaste I've been using. I look at my shiny white teeth and I think, "That's beautiful." Then my wife and I pack a lunch and go for a hike in the mountains. We come across this beautiful vista overlooking the ocean and I think, "Now that's beautiful." My teeth being white just pales in comparison to this sight. But just then, my wife goes into labor and we rush to the hospital, and 13 agonizing hours later I'm holding my daughter in my arms and saying, "Wow! You are so beautiful!" I don't even remember my teeth or the ocean view. My daughter has eclipsed everything else.

See we tend to quantify things like beauty, wisdom, power, and love. But God exhibits each of these qualities to an immeasurable degree. He is so compassionate, that you cannot quantify it. To say “God’s glory” is a shorthand way of referencing all of his characteristics—his justice, strength, love, beauty—in their infinite proportions. God’s glory is the essence of who he is.

Perhaps the best way to capture what this means is to see the effect that God’s glory has on people throughout the scriptures. One of the encounters happens at the end of the book of Job, one of the most intense stories in the bible. Job is a man who the story’s narration tells us over and over is a blameless man. Yet what happens to him is awful. In one day he lost his ten children and all his possessions. Soon after, he was afflicted with painful boils all over his body. He dresses himself in sackcloth, sits in a pile of ashes and mourns. He grows alienated with his wife and closest friends. He sits for months just crying out to God in anguish. He is confused and God is silent.

And in the final chapters, God does speak. But what he says is so surprising. He doesn’t offer an explanation or apology. He doesn’t even talk about Job’s situation. Rather he starts in on a four-chapter monologue, detailing in beautiful poetry and a staggering intensity how he created the universe and sustains every living thing. In other words, God unveils himself to Job. He gives Job a taste of his glory.

And this is Job’s response: “Surely I spoke of things of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

When standing in the presence of Almighty God, Job is just embarrassed at his own smallness. His goodness is totally dwarfed by God’s goodness.

The Prophet Isaiah receives a vision of the Lord and cries out, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

John writes in Revelation that when God comes at the end of the world to restore justice, people will run into caves and beg the rocks to fall on them and hide them from his presence.

God’s glory is a beauty so ferocious that it hurts to behold it, a righteousness so pure that it makes the blameless repent, a wisdom so profound that cannot fully be comprehended. It is no wonder that God told Moses that no one can see his face and still live. This is who God is: love, power, wisdom, beauty, and truth magnified to infinity.

So that’s God’s glory. Now what is worship?

Worship is saying, “Wow!” –the same way that you come away from eating at your favorite restaurant or seeing the best movie you’ve ever seen. You just can’t help but communicate your appreciation for it. Did you know that that is what we do every Sunday morning before Kevin speaks? We’re trying to put words and music to our

“wow.” The words and music are nothing in and of themselves. The words and music are just tools that we try to use to express this sentiment. We are not done with worship when we’re done singing. Worship is an activity of the heart, and the body cannot help but follow.

And do you know what God’s reaction is to himself? He also worships. In fact, he is head over heels in love with himself. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always existed in an intimate fellowship of love for one another, delighting in each other’s presence and in the awesomeness of being God. God knows that he is awesome.

I suspect that for some of you, this picture of God as egotistical sounds totally wrong. So let me address what I suspect are two big objections to this thought. First, egotism seems to imply someone bloated with pride, someone who thinks of himself as bigger than what he really is. But for God, this is impossible. Remember that he is infinite in all his attributes. God is every bit as great as he thinks he is. It is only we who are finite and messed up who may be egotistical. God is the only one who thinks he is the center of the universe and is actually right.

But another objection is that God’s self-love means that he loves only himself. And that is not true either. God’s worships himself, but he is not selfish. He is the definition, the perfect embodiment of love and generosity. These virtues originated with him.

What does God do with all of this delight in himself? He shares it. This is why God created the world. He wants to bestow upon others the joy of his presence. “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” That’s the first article of the Westminster Confession. If this is the purpose for our existence, it will also bring us the most satisfaction we could ever have in life. We were created to delight in him. Creation was an act of love, giving others the greatest gift he could ever give them: himself. It was also the first act of missions.

Missions is inviting others to share in the delight of God. Missions is saying, “I have found peace and purpose in life knowing that it isn’t about me or you. It’s about someone way better.” Missions is one way that your worship of God overflows. Missions is spreading the joy. Missions is sharing the “wow.”

It’s just natural for us, when we truly enjoy something, to want to share it. You should see my wife and I eat at a nice restaurant. We’ll order different dishes and end up saying, “Oh my goodness. You need to try this.”

God’s design for us as his children today is, not just to enjoy his company, but to invite others to enjoy it as well. The Christian who is not excited about missions cannot be excited about God.

This is Israel in a nutshell. **Israel** was a people whom God chose to enjoy his presence and display his supremacy before the nations. They were missionaries. The original promise, made to Abraham, whose descendants would become the

people of Israel, was that God would bless them, so that they might be a blessing to the nations. In other words, God would give them the joy of his presence not to be hoarded, but to be shared. This was not to bolster Israel's reputation in the world, but God's.

That was the plan. But it didn't work out that way. Virtually the entire Old Testament account details the up-and-down rollercoaster ride of Israel's devotion to the Lord. Many of you know how the story goes as the Israelites leave Egypt and enter the Promised Land. Let me give you the short version: Every time Israel trusts God, they have huge success and the surrounding nations are amazed and interested in Israel's God. Every time they follow their own inclinations, they flounder terribly and the surrounding nations mock Israel's God. Finally, as they establish their claim in the Promised Land, God commissions Solomon to build a temple.

The temple was God's house, and it was a pretty cool crib. He had Solomon build it with incredible detail and using the finest material. The goal was to outshine every other monument to every other God. God wanted his name to be the greatest.

I have an artist's rendition of it on the screen. This is actually the second temple, but it'll work. Here you see the outer courts where the Gentiles worshipped, the interior courts where the Jews worshipped, and the Holy place. You can't see it here, but inside the Holy Place a large curtain separated the Holy of Holies, where God's glory dwelt.

The **Temple** represented God's glory in its craftsmanship, his presence among the people of Israel, and his invitation for all people to worship him. In telling Solomon to build the temple, God was reiterating Israel's calling to worship him and make a way for the nations to do the same.

Listen to Solomon's prayer as he dedicates the temple: "As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name—for men will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name." Now this was a guy who, at least in this moment, knew God's heart and worshipped him.

Fast forward a thousand years, and imagine Jesus entering the outer court of the temple. Instead of the sounds of prayers, he hears the clamor of commerce. Moneychangers are exchanging currency for all the Gentile travelers at unfair rates. Then travelers are supposed to buy animals from cages to give as offerings. And all of this is happening in the place where the Gentiles are supposed to worship. The temple is no longer about inviting the nations to delight in God, but merely about capitalizing on the painfully empty routine that worshipping God has become. It's just a machine.

Jesus sees this and is heartbroken and angry. He overturns tables, releases caged animals and makes a huge scene. The whole court stares at him in stunned silence. Some are fuming; others are just bewildered. Then in a loud voice he reminds them what the temple was meant for:

"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.'"

Remember the fig tree that Jesus passes on the way to the temple? This is a perfect metaphor for what was happening with the temple, with Israel, with their call to be worshippers and missionaries. **The fig tree**, with leaves but no fruit, represented Israel's heart before God. They were going through the motions without any meaning behind it. The passion, the romance, was gone. They were creating an allusion. Their lips praised God, but their hearts sought satisfaction from other things. His cursing of the tree is an acted-out parable. The tree itself did nothing wrong; it was a metaphor. Jesus comes to the fig tree hungry, just as he comes to Israel hungry, desiring their true worship.

Less than a week later, Jesus would be nailed to a tree. I want to close this morning with this image of Christ on the cross. We cannot understand the significance of this moment without realizing that this is the same God whose glory burns with more intensity than the sun. The one who is ferociously beautiful was born as an ordinary Palestinian man. The one whose wisdom cannot be comprehended taught the mysteries of God to the simpleminded. The one who spoke the heavens into existence was mocked and ridiculed. The one who deserved everyone's service became a servant.

"Jesus Christ, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil 2)

Why? Why did Jesus set aside his rightful glory? Why did Jesus take on our shame upon the cross? Perhaps the best way to understand it is this. As Jesus drew his last breath, the earth shook and something powerfully significant happened at the temple: the curtain, separating the Holy of Hollies, tore in two. Through Christ's work, God glory became approachable. His beautiful and terrible presence now dwells within us. "Don't you know," Paul writes to the Church in Corinth, "that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" He is here. And by his Spirit, he allows us to taste his glory.

Let's pray.