

# Jerusalem Controversies



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Mark 11; 1 Kings 1:32–48; Zech. 9:9, 10; Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:11; Mark 12:1–34.*

**Memory Text:** “ ‘And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses’ ” (*Mark 11:25, NKJV*).

A series of five controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders are recorded in Mark 2 and 3 (see lesson 3). In this week's lesson, when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, He has a series of six controversies with the religious leaders. The two sets of controversies are like bookends of His earthly ministry. Each set deals with important issues in the Christian life. Jesus' instructions, even in these polemical situations, help guide believers both in fundamental issues of faith and in practical issues of everyday experience.

The religious leaders come to confront, confound, and defeat Jesus, but they never succeed. Part of this week's lesson will include analyzing just what it is that brings people into opposition to God and considering what Christians can do to break through prejudice and speak to the hearts of those resisting the Spirit's call.

In Mark 11, Jesus' ministry will be in Jerusalem for Passover (March to April). Mark 11–16 covers little more than one week; the narrative time has slowed down markedly. The first 10 chapters cover approximately three and a half years. This slowdown points to the importance of these closing scenes.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 31.

## The Triumphal Entry

**Read** Mark 11:1–11 and Zechariah 9:9, 10. What’s happening here?

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Half of this story involves Jesus sending two disciples to a nearby village to retrieve a donkey for Him to ride on into Jerusalem. Why is so much time spent on this account?

The answer is twofold. First, it demonstrates Jesus’ prophetic powers, enhancing the dignity of His arrival and linking it to the will of God. Second, this aspect of the story links to Zechariah 9:9, 10, which speaks of the king as riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. It is reminiscent of the entry of Solomon into Jerusalem on a donkey (*1 Kings 1:32–48*), when Adonijah tried to usurp the throne, and David commanded that Solomon be immediately crowned.

“Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, the prophet Zechariah thus foretold the coming of the King to Israel. This prophecy is now to be fulfilled. He who has so long refused royal honors now comes to Jerusalem as the promised heir to David’s throne.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 569.

Jerusalem is located in a hilly region at an elevation of about 2,400 feet (about 740 meters). In Jesus’ day its population was perhaps 40,000–50,000, but this swelled at Passover. The city covered only about 250 acres, but the temple mount covered about 37 of those acres. The beautiful temple complex dominated the city.

Jesus entered from the east, descending the Mount of Olives and likely entering through the Golden Gate onto the Temple Mount (a gate now bricked shut). The entire city was stirred by His entry, everyone recognizing the significance of His symbolic action. The crowd that accompanied Jesus shouted “hosanna,” a term originally meaning “save now” but eventually coming to mean “praise to God.”

The time for secrecy, which Jesus had insisted throughout most of Mark, has passed. Now Jesus openly enters Jerusalem using a well-known royal symbolic action. He enters the temple, but because it is late in the day, He simply looks around and then retires with the twelve disciples to Bethany. What could have turned into a riot or revolt instead ends with Him quietly retiring. But the next day will be different.

**The idea of riding on the donkey invokes the idea of humility. Why is that such an important trait, especially for Christians? What have we, in light of the Cross, to be proud about?**

## A Cursed Tree and a Cleansed Temple

**Read** Mark 11:12–26. What is the significance of the events depicted here?

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In the morning, coming from Bethany, only about two miles (a little more than three kilometers) from Jerusalem, Jesus was hungry. Seeing a fig tree in leaf, He went to it to find perhaps some early fruit. This action would not be considered stealing since according to Old Testament law, one could eat food from a neighbor's field or orchard to assuage hunger (*Lev. 19:9, Lev. 23:22, Deut. 23:25*). But He found no fruit and said to the tree, " 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again' " (*Mark 11:14, ESV*). It was a very strange and atypical action for Jesus, but what follows right after becomes even more striking.

What happens next likely occurs in the Court of the Gentiles, where selling of sacrifices took place (recently begun by Caiaphas). Jesus clears away the sellers from the courts so that quiet worship may return. His action is a direct affront to those in charge of the temple system.

Jesus links two Old Testament passages as a scathing rebuke of the unholy traffic. He insists the temple is to be a house of prayer for all people (*Isa. 56:7*), emphatically including the Gentiles. Then He says the leaders have made the temple a den of robbers (*Jer. 7:11*). Then, at the end of this amazing day, Jesus leaves the city with His disciples (*Mark 11:19*).

The next morning, going back to the city (*see Mark 11:20–26*), the disciples are astonished to see the fig tree withered from the roots. Jesus makes a lesson about prayer and forgiveness in His explanation of what has happened. What does all this mean?

These two stories are the fourth sandwich story in Mark (see lesson 3). In such stories, dramatized irony occurs with parallel characters doing opposite actions or opposite characters doing parallel actions. In this story the fig tree and the temple stand in parallel. Jesus curses the tree but cleanses the temple, opposite actions. But the irony is that the religious leaders will now plot to kill Jesus, and that action will spell the end of the significance of the temple services, which were fulfilled in Jesus.

**What things in your life do you need Jesus to clean? How does this happen?**

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## Who Said You Could Do That?

**Read** Mark 11:27–33. What challenge did the religious leaders bring to Jesus, and how did He respond?

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The day after Jesus cleanses the temple, the religious leaders confront Him in the temple courts, asking by what authority He acted the day before. They are not seeking truth but seeking to trap Him. If He says that His authority is from God, they will deny that a simple country carpenter could have such authority. If He admits that His authority is human, they will dismiss Him as a fool.

But Jesus sees through their trap and says He will answer their question if they will answer one He asks. What He asks is whether John the Baptist's baptism was from God or from men. Instantly, the leaders see that they are the ones trapped. If they say from God, Jesus will say, "Why did you not believe him?" If they say from men, they fear the people. So, they lie and say they do not know. This gives Jesus the opportunity to refuse to answer their question.

**Read** Mark 12:1–12. How did Jesus follow up His refusal to answer, and what effect did it have?

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Jesus tells a parable about a vineyard, an owner, and tenants to whom he rents the field. The story Jesus tells has great similarities to the parable of the vineyard found in Isaiah 5, where God brings a charge against unfaithful Israel. Everyone would recognize the parallel, especially the religious leaders.

The story unfolds in a most unusual way as the tenants refuse to give any of the fruits of the field to the owner. Instead, they mistreat and kill his servants. Finally, the owner sends his beloved son, whom he expects them to respect. But not so. They strangely reason that if they kill the son, the vineyard will be theirs. Their illogic is striking, and the judgment to be meted out on them is justified.

In this story, Jesus is giving the religious leaders a solemn warning as to where their steps are heading. Seen in this light, His parable is a loving forewarning. It is not too late for them to change and avoid certain judgment. Some will repent, change, and accept Jesus. Others will not.

## Earthly Duties and Heavenly Outcomes

**Read** Mark 12:13–27. What is going on here, and what truths does Jesus teach?

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The religious leaders were trying to catch Jesus in something they could use to condemn Him, either to the Roman governor or to the people. In this controversy, it was the question of paying taxes. In this time and place, refusing to pay taxes could be taken as rebellion against the Roman government, a serious offense.

Jesus' reply to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's kept Him out of a trap and also provided profound instruction on the believer's responsibility to the government. "He declared that since they were living under the protection of the Roman power, they should render to that power the support it claimed, so long as this did not conflict with a higher duty. But while peaceably subject to the laws of the land, they should at all times give their first allegiance to God."—Ellen. G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 602.

What follows next is a question about the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees were a priestly group that accepted only the five books of Moses as Scripture. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. The scenario they present to Jesus was probably hypothetical. It involved seven brothers and one woman. According to the law of Moses, when a man who died left no sons, his brother would marry the widow to maintain property in a family line, and any children born to that union would be legally those of the dead man (*Deut. 25:5–10*).

Seeking to throw discredit on the doctrine of the resurrection, the Sadducees point to a moral dilemma of whose wife the woman would be in the resurrection. Jesus counters their argument in two steps, referring to the Scriptures and to the power of God. First, He describes the power of God in the resurrection and indicates that there will not be marriage in heaven. Then He defends the doctrine of the resurrection by appealing to Exodus 3:1–22, where God indicates that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus implies that this means that they will be raised; they cannot remain dead if God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are, for now, dead.

**If someone were to ask you, "Do you know the power of God?" what would you reply, and why?**

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## The Greatest Commandment

**Read** Mark 12:28–34. What deep question did the friendly scribe ask, and what double response did Jesus give?

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Up to this point in the Gospel of Mark, most of the religious leaders, with few exceptions, are antagonistic to Jesus. This is particularly true in Jerusalem, where Jesus has confronted the leadership over temple worship—that which stands at the heart of Judaism. Thus, for a scribe to listen to the disputes and appreciate Jesus' responses displays both honesty and courage in face of the prevailing animosity toward Jesus. It would be easier to just stand back and watch, even if one were in sympathy with Jesus. But this man does not do that.

The scribe cuts to the heart of religion with his question as to which commandment is the most important. Jesus responds with simplicity and clarity, quoting the *Shema*, the confession of faith in Judaism from Deuteronomy 6:4, 5. The greatest commandment, says Jesus, is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength—that is, with the totality of who you are. Jesus gives the scribe a bonus by listing the second most important commandment, citing the Old Testament again, this time from Leviticus 19:18, to love your neighbor as yourself.

Sometimes people wonder how it is possible to command love. The cultural context of the command in Deuteronomy helps explain. The language comes from ancient treaties between parties, and the term for “love” refers to being faithful to the requirements of the treaty, faithfully fulfilling them. Thus, while it does not rule out the concept of deep affection between parties, it is much more focused on actions that demonstrate such loyalty.

The scribe was honest and saw the clarity and simplicity of Jesus' response and said so. One can imagine scowls from other religious leaders since the honest scribe has affirmed Jesus' reply as valid, something no one else was willing to do. Jesus also affirmed the scribe for his honest answer, saying he was not far from the kingdom of God. Not far does not mean inside. What the scribe still needed was to recognize who Jesus was and follow Him, a further step in the journey of faith.

**How do we learn to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves? Why is the Cross the key to following these commands?**

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**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “A Doomed People,” pp. 580–588; “The Temple Cleansed Again,” pp. 589–600; “Controversy,” pp. 601–609, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Christ’s act in cursing the tree which His own power had created stands as a warning to all churches and to all Christians. No one can live the law of God without ministering to others. But there are many who do not live out Christ’s merciful, unselfish life. Some who think themselves excellent Christians do not understand what constitutes service for God. They plan and study to please themselves. They act only in reference to self. Time is of value to them only as they can gather for themselves. In all the affairs of life this is their object. Not for others but for themselves do they minister. God created them to live in a world where unselfish service must be performed. He designed them to help their fellow men in every possible way. But self is so large that they cannot see anything else. They are not in touch with humanity. Those who thus live for self are like the fig tree, which made every pretension but was fruitless. They observe the forms of worship, but without repentance or faith. In profession they honor the law of God, but obedience is lacking. They say, but do not. In the sentence pronounced on the fig tree Christ demonstrates how hateful in His eyes is this vain pretense. He declares that the open sinner is less guilty than is he who professes to serve God, but who bears no fruit to His glory.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 584.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① Ponder the meaning of Christ’s cleansing the temple. How might that principle apply to our church today? How should such a cleansing take place?
- ② All through the Gospels, again and again, Jesus refers to the Scriptures and how they must be fulfilled. What does this tell us about just how central they are to the life of faith? Why must we fervently reject any attempt to downplay the authority of Scripture, especially the idea that the Scriptures are merely people’s own ideas about God, who God is, and how He operates?
- ③ Where is the proper line between church and state? How does Jesus’ teaching in Mark 12:13–17 guide this discussion?
- ④ Look up texts that talk about the resurrection. Why is this doctrine so central to our faith, especially considering the state of the dead?

## Dream Changes Father's Life

By Andrew McChesney

Anush had prayed for years for Father to come to God. After Father allowed her and Mother to return to church on Sabbaths, she began to pray even more earnestly, pleading with God to reveal Himself to Father.

"I don't want to be the center of this story. Ignore me," she prayed. "Speak to Father through dreams, visions, or friends. I just want his salvation."

She surrendered the matter to God. "It's about You and him," she said.

Then Father had a dream. In it, he saw fire raining down on a city located near their town in Armenia. He saw some people running and screaming and others who were peaceful and singing. Father was astonished. He told Anush and Mother about the dream.

About the same time, Anush watched an online sermon about the Holy Spirit, and she told Father about it. "The preacher said the fire of the Holy Spirit protects us from the fire of hell," she said. "When you get the fire of the Holy Spirit, you won't be scared of the fire at the end of the world."

Something clicked. Father understood that the frightened people in his dream didn't have the Holy Spirit and were afraid of hellfire, while the peaceful people were not afraid because they had received the fire of the Holy Spirit. He remembered reading that the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descended on Jesus at His baptism (*Matt. 3:16*).

"I need to get baptized," Father said.

But the words sounded strange to him even as they came out of his mouth. Armenia prides itself as the first country to adopt Christianity, in 301 A.D., and many Armenians consider it their duty to be Christian. They were baptized as infants, not as adults. Now, Father wasn't sure what to do.

"You have the Bible," Anush said. "Read it. Let the Bible answer your questions. Let the Bible lead you to the right church."

Father read the Bible even more earnestly. One day, a friend asked him why he was reading the Bible so intently. "Is it something to boast about?" the friend asked. "If Jesus came tomorrow, would you say, 'I have read the Bible?' Would that be enough?"

The questions shocked Father. His whole body trembled. A short time later, when he had left the friend's house and was alone in his car, he poured out his heart to God. "If Jesus came tomorrow, what would I say to Him?" he prayed. "If Jesus really came, what would I say to Him?"

He went home and told Mother, "I'll go to church with you next Sabbath."

But Father didn't want to go to the town's house church, which was comprised of seven women. "Let's go to the church in the next town," he said.

From that Sabbath, Father began to worship every week in church.

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*Part of last quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering went to open a center of influence for families like Anush's in Yerevan, Armenia. Thank you for helping spread the gospel with your offerings. Next week: Father is baptized.*