In this section we see another an example of Mark's "sandwich" technique, with one story used as a frame for another, and both stories meant to interpret each other. But first we should stand back and see the big picture of what was taking place that week. Jesus arrived on the donkey as king fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy (Zechariah 9:9[i]). The crowd shouted His praises with the words from Psalm 118[ii], though most of those who were praising Him had wrong motives and expectations. Then He stopped and looked over the city and wept for the destruction He foresaw (Luke 19:41-44[iii]). He went into the temple's Court of the Gentiles, a massive court about the size of nine football fields. This was to be the House of Prayer for all Nations. It had once again been turned into a market (John 2:15,16[iv]). Our passage today begins the next morning. Jesus came across a fig tree all leafed out. He found no figs, which was normal for that time of year, cursed it, and headed on to Jerusalem. He went on into the temple and cleaned house, just as He had done the first year of His ministry. The next morning as they headed back to the temple they saw the tree was dried up from the roots. Jesus taught on prayer and forgiveness.

Mark is doing more than telling the story in a chronological order. As he has done before, he sandwiches one story inside another to make a point (3:20-25; 4:1-20; 6:6-13)[v] Here the fig tree account sandwiches the temple cleansing to bring out the connection.

12 On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Mark 11:12 The following day is the day after the Triumphal Entry. The human side of Jesus is on display in His hunger, but we should not extend that to what follows. Like the rest of humanity, Jesus experienced hunger, pain, and exhaustion. There are those who believe He endured every kind of sickness (Isaiah 53:4[vi]). I do not think that was necessary, but He surely endured some of the illnesses that are common to mankind. A virus would not know the difference from His human body and that of any other. Would He miraculously cure Himself? Not unless the Father directed it. But to fully relate to our human condition He must have endured some illnesses (Hebrews 4:15[vii]).

13 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. 14 And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it. Mark 11:13,14 Jesus saw a fig tree all leafed out. Some fig varieties have fruit form before the leaves so that when you see leaves it means the fruit is ripening. But that is not the case with many varieties, and was probably not with this tree for the text says it was not the season for figs. Perhaps Jesus was hoping it was the former variety. Or maybe Jesus search for fruit was simply to illustrate that this is what He was doing when two verses before *"He looked around on everything"* in the temple. I believe Mark ended the previous passage with that wording to lead us to understand what is happening in this account of the fig tree. He looked over both the temple and the fig tree and found no fruit. He was disgusted that the Sadducees had once again turned the House of Prayer for all nations into a marketplace. Jesus hungered and was thirsty for righteousness to spring up among His own people, but instead greed and power had corrupted the very heart of the place of worship.

The curse on the fig tree was the only destructive miracle of Jesus. I think we would be right in calling this a drama prophecy predicting God's impending judgment (Hebrews 1:1[viii]). This was not an act of petulance, a tantrum for not getting what He

wanted. If Jesus had that nature, He would simply miraculously produce fruit on that fig tree. His disciples took note of it because it was so unusual. Jesus had in the past pronounced future judgment on Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin for not repenting after hearing Jesus preach and seeing Him heal. Those three cities are in ruins today (Matthew 11:21-24[ix]).

The fig tree and the grape vine were symbols of the nation of Israel's spiritual health, peace, and prosperity (1 Kings 4:25[x]). I am convinced that Jesus is referring to Jeremiah chapters 7 and 8. I am certainly not the only one to see it.[xi]

15 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. 16 And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. Mark 11:15,16 Jesus repeated what He had done on the first year of His ministry but without a whip (John 2:14,15[iv]). Coins were scattered on the ground, animals would be running everywhere, pigeons and doves flying away, along with screaming vendors and cheering crowds. The temple priests were furious and wanted to destroy Him for doing it again. Jesus called their set up a den of robbers, and it was. He was accusing those priests and scribes of corruption. The scribes are the ones whose interpretations gave the priests cover for their greed. They probably would have stoned Jesus on the spot if it was not for the crowd cheering Him on shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Matthew 12:14,15[xii]). Mark says the crowd was astonished at His teaching. Luke says they clung to His words (Luke 19:48[xiii]). Matthew adds that He was healing the blind and the lame on the temple grounds. The Sadducees would not let the afflicted or disformed on to the temple platform. Their control had broken down. Jesus was in charge! What a picture of chaos and joy! But we must step back and remember that this is Jesus acting at His Father's direction which would assure the coming crucifixion.

17 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." 18 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. 19 And when evening came they went out of the city. Mark 11:17-19 There is no doubt in my mind that Jesus is referring to Jeremiah chapters 7 and 8. Keep in mind Jesus looking at what was going on in the temple and looking over the fig tree for fruit as you listen to Jeremiah 7:11. The verse is preceded by the Lord through Jeremiah telling the people not to trust in lying words that declare this is the temple of the Lord. He warned them to change their ways. They could not go on sinning and come to the temple and listen to the priests distort Scripture while robbing them.

Jesus' words came from Jeremiah 7:1, *11 Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.* Jeremiah chapter 7 ends with a prediction of a great slaughter that would take place. That is why the Lord wept over Jerusalem. He could see Jeremiah 7 was a parallel to what was taking place and therefore the same judgment was to fall on the city.

The prophecy continues in chapter 8 with a few key phrases I have underlined which connect with today's text. *8 "How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us'? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.9 The wise men shall be put to shame; they shall be dismayed and taken; behold, they have*

rejected the word of the LORD, so what wisdom is in them? 10 Therefore I will give their wives to others and their fields to conquerors, because from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. 11 They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. 12 Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen; when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the LORD. 13 When I would gather them, declares the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them." Jeremiah 8:8-13

I will just briefly draw a few connections. *"The lying pen of the scribes has turned God's Word into a lie"* is seen in many of the Oral Laws which Jesus said had nullified God's Word (7:11-13[xiv]). *"They have rejected the Word of the LORD,"* Jesus could see they were rejecting the Word made flesh because of their greed for money and power which is stated as "*everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest.*" Were they ashamed? Nicodemus declared they knew Jesus was from God because of the signs He performed (John 3:2[xv]). "*12 Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No,* And the final link which brings it all together; "*there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered,"*

Even though Jesus may not have explained it to the disciples, they should have seen it in Him weeping over the city (Matthew 23:37-39[xvi]). All that He did was at the direction of His Father in accord with the Word. Prophets often acted out their prophecies in dramatic action. Jesus was reinforcing His prediction that judgment was coming. A heading title in Jeremiah 7 reads The Valley of Slaughter. The passage tells us there will not be enough room to bury all the dead. Josephus tells us that there were over a million dead bodies when Rome defeated Jerusalem! Valley of Slaughter is a fitting description of the punishment Rome inflicted on Jerusalem in AD 70. It is no wonder that Jesus wept with loud sobs.[xvii]

"Den of robbers" was quite an accusation, and it hit home. They were making huge profits from the exchange of money and the selling of preapproved lambs. You could bring your own lamb, but the priests were sure to find a blemish and reject it. You had to pay an exorbitant price to buy a pre-approved lamb there in the temple. The exchange rate for the approved coin for temple tax was exorbitant. Recent excavations show the lavish way in which the priestly hierarchy lived.

The Roman fortress of Antonia was adjacent to the northwest corner of the temple. Romans were particularly careful to watch for signs of a messianic uprising during the Passover season. That is why Matthew tells us the priests were so upset when they heard the crowd shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David". That is a cry for the Messiah to save them, but not from sins, rather from Roman occupation. So, not only were they taking a big financial hit and losing control of the temple, but they feared Rome would step in at any moment and remove them from power for allowing an uprising.

20 As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. 21 And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." Mark 11:20,21 They must have stayed the night in Bethany for upon their return they passed the fig tree Jesus cursed. Peter called their attention to it. Did he get the point? Could Peter see it represented the nation that bore no fruit? Did he

hear Jesus' prediction of Jerusalem's destruction? Or would it take the crucifixion and being persecuted to get him to realize the true spiritual condition of his nation? Are we aware of the true condition of our nation in the eyes of God? Peter pointed it out to Jesus and seems surprised that the curse had come to pass so quickly. This gave Jesus an opportunity to teach another lesson they would soon need.

22 And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. 23 Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Mark 11:22,23 Jesus is not telling us to cause tsunamis by throwing mountains into oceans. At the time, moving a mountain was a common expression for removing an obstacle that seemed impossible. It was a common metaphor; for example, "This taxation by Rome is a mountain in our way." In Luke 3:5[xviii] John the Baptist used the leveling of mountains as a metaphor for the barriers in our hearts that hinder us from receiving the Messiah. Our attitudes and false beliefs can be obstacles that keep us from yielding to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was using the illustration of what happened to the fig tree, not that we might go about cursing things or throwing mountains around, but rather that we might speak God's will to our carnal nature to keep it in check. He previously told them to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him (8:34[xix]). Now He is telling them how to do that. We have to speak in faith to our old nature or whatever may hinder us from doing God's will. And if we believe and do not doubt, Jesus tells us it will be done. The mountain before Jesus that kept Him from claiming us as His bride was the sins of the world. He was about to through into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19[xx]).

We all have our particular weaknesses and temptations. People have told me they cannot shake a besetting sin. First, I ask if they really want to be free of it. If they do, then we have this promise. Command it to shrivel up and die without doubting and believe it will and just like the tree Jesus was using for an illustration, it will shrivel up and die from the roots. The roots are the carnal desires in our hearts. Those very roots will dry up.

24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Mark 11:24 This is one of the most misused verses in all of Scripture. "Lord, I am asking you for a Rolls Royce and to win the lottery. You said if I believe it I will receive it. It will be mine!" Now let us compare that interpretation with a few verses. *18 If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.* Psalm 66:18 *3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* James 4:3 *14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.* 1 John 5:14

The Bible does not contradict itself. We understand Scripture with Scripture. We can conclude that what Jesus is saying here is not that we name it and claim it, but rather that in the context of this passage, what is standing in our way of doing God's will, we can command to be removed and if we do not doubt and believe that it is done, then it will be done. This implies that we discern that an obstacle is meant to be overcome. It may be hindrance from our enemy, or it may be a battle with our old nature.

I take most things in the Bible literally, but we can see from this passage that there are metaphors that are meant to illustrate spiritual truth. The Hebrew people saw all created things as pictures of heavenly things. We see this clearly in the Tabernacle designed after what Moses saw in heaven (Hebrews 3:5[xxi]). We see it in the parables of Jesus using creation to teach about the heavenly Father (Matthew 6:26-30[xxii]). The

Apostle Paul states it clearly in Romans 1:20 *20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.* Nature is the secondary source of the revelation of God. The Bible is the first and clearest. This means that people everywhere see that secondary gospel which is enough to hold them accountable for accepting or rejecting God's grace.

25 And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." Mark 11:25 There are some preconditions to having our prayers heard. One is the contemplation of sin (Psalm 66:18[xxiii]), asking for things you are lusting after (James 4:3[xxiv]), not treating one's wife properly (1 Peter 3:7[xxv]), praying what is contrary to God's will (1 John 5:14[xxvi]) and harboring unforgiveness, as we see in this verse and in the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:15[xxvii]). Mark surely knew the Lord's prayer, *"forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"* (Matthew 6:12[xxviii]).

An expression I frequently use is that unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. The offender often does not realize what they did or does not care. Unforgiveness only harms the one who refuses to forgive. The reason God holds back His forgiveness from such persons is that it makes them even more accountable. It is like the parable of the man who owed and insurmountable debt to his master and was forgiven. He then went after someone who owed him a small amount and had them thrown in prison. When the master heard if it, he was furious that the man could have been forgiven so much and be so harsh toward someone who owed him a small amount (Matthew 18:32-35[xxix]). If we realize how much we have been forgiven and are not generous with forgiveness towards others, our sin is even greater. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. Be gracious to others as the Lord has been gracious to you. There are some acts that are so heinous that only the love of God in our hearts can enable us to truly forgive which in turn sets us free from the torment of unforgiveness.

Verse 26 is not in the earliest manuscripts and appears to be added to the passage in the fifth century. It is borrowed from Jesus' comment on the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:15[xxi].

John 15 tells us that God prunes His people so that they might bear more fruit. Just as Jesus looked for fruit in the temple and on the fig tree, He looks for fruit in our lives. Fruit comes from abiding in Him. It does not merit God's approval, but it is evidence that we are in Him and He is in us. If we remain in Him we will bear much fruit. That is Jesus' promise (John 15:5[xxx]). God will empower you to remove any obstacle that keeps you from being fruitful if you ask in faith and believe.

Questions:
1 Why does Mark use the sandwich technique?
2 What is the connection between verses 11 and 13?
3 What Scriptures should have come to the disciples' minds?
4 Describe the scene in verses 15 and 16.
5 List the connections with Jeremiah chapters 7 and 8.
6 What did this prophetic drama declare?
7 Why did Jesus call it a den of robbers?
8 Why were the religious leaders afraid?

9 What can hinder our prayers?
10 Review the verses that contradict "name it and claim it".

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[i] **Zechariah 9:9 (ESV)**
9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
[ii] **Psalm 118:25-26 (ESV)**
25 Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! 26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.
[iii] **Luke 19:41-44 (ESV)**
41 And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 44 and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."
[iv] **John 2:15-16 (ESV)**
15 And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.
16 And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."
[v] 1 Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 312.
[vi] **Isaiah 53:4 (ESV)**
4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
[vii] **Hebrews 4:15 (ESV)**
15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.
[viii] **Hebrews 1:1 (ESV)**
1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,
[ix] **Matthew 11:21-24 (ESV)**
21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24 But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."
[x] **1 Kings 4:25 (ESV)**
25 And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon.
[xi] One example is: Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness,* Baylor University Press 2016
[xii] **Matthew 12:14-15 (ESV)**
14 But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.
15 Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all
[xiii] **Luke 19:48 (ESV)**
48 but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words.
[xiv] **Mark 7:11-13 (ESV)**
11 But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)— 12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."
[xv] **John 3:2 (ESV)**
2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

[xvi] **Matthew 23:37-39 (ESV)**
37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38 See, your house is left to you desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”
[xvii] Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary definition of the word used in Luke 19:41, *Klaio*: to *sob*, i.e. *wail* aloud
[xviii] **Luke 3:5 (ESV)**
5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways,
[xix] **Mark 8:34 (ESV)**
34 And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.
[xx] **Micah 7:19 (ESV)**
19 He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.
[xxi] **Hebrews 8:5 (ESV)**
5 They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”
[xxii] **Matthew 6:26-30 (ESV)**
26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? 28 And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?
[xxiii] **Psalm 66:18 (ESV)**
18 If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.
[xxiv] **James 4:3 (ESV)**
3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.
[xxv] **1 Peter 3:7 (ESV)**
7 Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.
[xxvi] **1 John 5:14 (ESV)**
14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.
[xxvii] **Matthew 6:15 (ESV)**
15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
[xxviii] **Matthew 6:12 (ESV)**
12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
[xxix] **Matthew 18:32-35 (ESV)**
32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”
[xxx] **John 15:5 (ESV)**
5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.