

## SM042 Slashing Swords, Crashing Buildings

Pressure was mounting on Jesus, but this was nothing new for him. Ever since those glorious moments when he was baptized in the Jordan River, and the Spirit of God filled him, pressure was upon him. It came from six sources. First, there was the pressure from evil one. When Jesus left the Jordan River where he was baptized, he immediately went on a 40-day fast. He was alone with His Father in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry in Israel. Jesus would need supernatural strength from God to carry out the seemingly impossible mission to bring Israel back to God and to be a light to the nations. He would need supernatural strength for another reason – forces in the spiritual world would do everything within their power to stop him. The first battle with these forces was in the wilderness during the fast and even though Jesus won the initial battle, it was only the first of many for the tempter would come to him at different times and in different guises to steer him off course.

Second was the pressure from the crowds. The crowds wanted a conquering Messiah. They wanted a revolutionary figure who would lead them against the Romans, cleanse the land of pagan pollution, and bring peace and prosperity to Israel in its present condition – every man beneath his vine and fig tree. Once they tried to take him by force and make him king, right after he had fed the multitudes with bread in the wilderness, just as Moses had done. They knew this was a sign from God that Jesus was the King, but their idea of a king and God's idea of a king were different. Jesus had to be on his guard from out of control crowds that would try to start a revolution in his name.

Third was the pressure from his family. On one occasion they thought he had lost his mind and they went to his home in Capernaum to bring him back home to Nazareth. But they were not prepared for what they saw – multitudes of people around him listening to him, sinners being forgiven and the sick healed. There was something to these stories they were hearing after all. Why take him home? If Jesus really did have such power from God, there was only one thing he should do, they thought. He should go to Jerusalem and proclaim himself King! And so his brothers pushed him in that direction, but Jesus refused.

Fourth was the pressure from his own disciples. His disciples! How he loved them. They were with him in so many trials and difficulties. They had shown loyalty, but they had also shown a slowness to perceive the kind of kingdom he was bringing. When Jesus began to show them that he must go to Jerusalem to die, Peter rebuked Jesus and told him that certainly that was not going to happen. But Jesus rebuked Peter and told him to get behind him and that he was talking and thinking like the evil one and like the crowds. Peter was setting his interests on the things of man and not the heart of God. The other disciples often misunderstood Jesus as well.

Fifth was the pressure from the religious leaders. They dogged his every step. They scrutinized his every action. They tested him with questions that were designed to trick him and cause him to say something they could use against him in a court hearing. It's not that they were opposed to wandering teachers who would help people find a new start in life. It's not that they were opposed to his healing people. They were opposed to Jesus because he was doing these things outside the official boundaries the

leaders had set. They were opposed to Jesus because he was claiming to be the center of Israel and calling the nation to give its loyalty to him. Jerusalem and the temple were no longer the center. Jesus was the center. The Torah was no longer the center. Jesus was telling people to follow him. The rulers were not going to let those claims by without a challenge, and so they applied pressure on Jesus whenever and wherever they could.

Finally, there was the pressure of the political leaders. Herod had arrested John and beheaded him. He would likely do the same to this new prophet Jesus. Pilate was a ruthless and merciless leader who put down any sign of uprising with brutal force. The Romans were everywhere and Caesar proclaimed himself as Lord of the world. Jesus came to proclaim His Father as Lord of the world, and the Romans would not take a liking to that!

The evil one, the crowds, his family, the disciples, the religious authorities, the political authorities – all were applying pressure and it came at Jesus in different combinations and in different ways. One day, it came to Jesus in this way.

Jesus was surrounded by the people and teaching them. In the distance he saw a group of men approaching him. By the look on their faces, he could see that they had a story of great sorrow to tell. But he could also see a grim determination in their eyes to do something, to act, to take revenge.

“Jesus,” they said, “we have some terrible news to tell you. Some of our kinsmen, people from Galilee, went peacefully to Jerusalem, to the temple, to offer sacrifices to God. They had entered the courts and given their animals to the priests. The priests took the animals, killed them, and were sprinkling the blood upon the altar when we heard a great commotion. People were screaming. Some were saying, ‘run for your life.’ Others were yelling curses and I knew then that Roman soldiers were coming into the temple.”

The man paused. He expected Jesus to show disgust that a Roman would enter into the courts of the people of God. But Jesus showed no expression on his face. He just stood and listened to the report without giving any sign of approval or disapproval.

The men, surprised that Jesus had shown no emotion over this intrusion into God’s holy place, continued the story. They knew what they had to share next would surely cause great anger in Jesus and perhaps cause him, finally, to take action against these impious and polluted Gentiles.

“Jesus, it’s bad enough that Pilate would order his soldiers to come into the place where only we should be, but what he did next was an abomination. He ordered his soldiers to cut down our brethren. Our brethren were defenseless. He mowed them down with the sword and their blood was mingled on the altar with the blood of the animals. Our friends, our brothers, have been slain at the hands of Governor Pilate!”

It was clear what the men were after, and it was much more than sympathy! They were after blood. It was time for revenge! For too long Pilate had committed atrocities like this against the people. For too long the Romans had proclaimed their lordship over the world. Did not the world belong to the God of

Israel? And had not God acted in behalf of his people when they took up the sword in faith? Two hundred years previous, an old priest by the name of Mattathias had picked up the sword against the Greek ruler Antiochus IV and started a revolution that swept the land clean of the Greeks. Antiochus had defiled the Temple with his presence and spilled Jewish blood in its courts. Pilate had now done the same. It was time to act again. It was time to rally the people. It was time to act with courage and faith.

Jesus looked upon the men who had come with this report. He looked at the crowds who were waiting with great anticipation and great anxiety for his words. Would Jesus respond with courage? Would Jesus tell them it was finally time to act?

But no one could have anticipated the reply that Jesus would give. Jesus looked upon them all and with great sorrow in his voice he said, "Unless you repent, you will all perish, in the same way." The words hung in the air for a moment and then came crashing down upon the heads of all who listened.

"These brothers of ours, Galileans you say, who were cut down by Roman swords. They were the sinners! But do you think they were greater sinners than you or all of you? No, they were not greater sinners than you. Yet they were cut down and you will be cut down too by Roman swords unless you repent of your sins."

The men backed away from Jesus, mouths dropped open, astonishment and incredulity in their faces. How could Jesus say such a thing about their kinsmen? The Romans were the sinners, not the Jews. The Romans were the oppressors and his people were suffering at their hands. Justice must be done in the land. The sword must be taken up and action must be swift and decisive.

But Jesus refused to yield to the pressure point from these men in the crowd. For too long and in too many places the sword had been met with the sword with the result that only more blood was spilled and nothing resolved. Yes, obviously Pilate was wrong to do this. Yes, obviously, God's people had suffered. But what was not so obvious to the people at that time was that they were just as full of sin as the Romans. The oppressed were just as wrong as their oppressors, and Jesus had come to his people Israel to open their eyes to their own sin so that they could help the world open its eyes to its sin.

Was not this why John the prophet had preached repentance and a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. He was preparing a holy people for the Lord. Was not this why Jesus had repeatedly spoken to the people of their need for repentance and getting their hearts right with God. Jesus was on a mission to purify the nation from its own sin and in purifying itself from its sin, then they would be prepared to go to the nations, to the Romans, to Pilate and help them purify themselves from their sin. Unless the people of God took the lead in getting their lives right with God, what hope was there for the world to get its life right with God. Jesus had come for a revolution, yes, but not a revolution of the sword. There had been enough of that. That had been tried and found wanting for millennia. It was time for a revolution of repentance.

Jesus pressed his point home further. "All of you heard, I am sure, about the tower in Siloam, falling upon 18 men and killing them." The people nodded their heads. They had heard of this terrible accident

in this building program, and they believed that when that tower fell, it was an act of God to bring judgment upon them. Things like this just don't happen. Those men were involved in a building project they should not have been involved in. Some believed that the money came from Pilate who had stolen it from the Temple treasury and that the building project was a Roman aqueduct. It was wrong for Pilate to take that money and use it for his his own purposes. It was wrong for those men to help him with his building project. They got what they deserved.

But when Jesus continued his story, he did not focus on the eighteen who were killed. He focused on the crowds, and he said, "Unless you repent, you will die like those eighteen. Buildings will come crashing down upon you in another Roman project. The Romans will come and you will perish at their hands unless you repent. Those eighteen who died. You think they got what they deserved when the buildings fell upon them. They were not greater sinners than you. Your sin is just as great and unless you repent you will perish in the same way."

Courage. That is what the people thought was needed. And courage is what Jesus gave them, but not the kind of courage they wanted. He showed them the courage to tell them the truth, to tell them that the real problem was not the Romans. The real problem was their sin. The real problem was not the oppression they faced. The real problem was the lack of fruit they had borne for God.

When we come back, we will what else Jesus said to them. He told them a story about a fig tree that would not bear fruit for its owner.

#### Interlude

"A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. <sup>7</sup> And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' <sup>8</sup> And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; <sup>9</sup> and if it bears fruit next year, *fine*; but if not, cut it down.'"

Jesus finished the story. He looked at the crowds and let the words sink in to their hearts. But would they get it? What was it that Jesus wanted the people to learn from this story?

The man in the story was somewhat well to do. He had enough for his own vineyard. He had enough to hire a vineyard keeper who is probably also the man who planted the fig tree in the vineyard. While there were groves of fig trees, no doubt, sometimes fig trees would be planted in vineyards for the pleasure of the owner. While his grapes would be tended and cared for and carefully harvested, he could enjoy the sweet fruit of the figs for ten months out of the year. The ancient stories in the Bible show us that fig trees in vineyards were common. The prophet Joel, when announcing the devastating plague of locusts, said,

"It has made my vine a waste  
And my fig tree splinters.

It has stripped them bare and cast *them* away;  
Their branches have become white.

The vine dries up  
And the fig tree fails;

In Jesus' story another fig tree was failing. But it was not from locusts. The fig tree and the vineyard represented Israel, the people of God. Together they were a symbol for peace and prosperity within the land. The prophet Micah, when speaking of the coming kingdom of God said, "Each of them will sit under his vine And under his fig tree, With no one to make *them* afraid, For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken." The prophet Zechariah said the same thing, "<sup>10</sup> 'In that day,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'every one of you will invite his neighbor to *sit* under *his* vine and under *his* fig tree.'"

But a man would not invite his neighbor to sit under the kind of fig tree Jesus described. It was barren. And it had been barren for years. The fig tree was now in its tenth year, and still there was no fruit! How do we know the fig tree was this old? It would take three years for the fig tree to grow and become strong enough to produce fruit. But for the next three years, the fruit would be consecrated to God. The master would not come looking for fruit in years 4-6 according to the Law of Moses. He would only be allowed to partake of the fruit during the seventh year. And when the story tells us that for three years he came looking for fruit – that would be years seven, eight, and nine! Now it was in its tenth year, and still there was nothing to show for all the labor that had gone into this one tree!

The master was disgusted. The tree should easily be producing fruit by this time, but nothing came from it. It was taking from the rich resources of the soil but not giving anything back, and so he said, "Destroy this tree." In our modern times we would think of a man taking an axe to a tree, or a chain saw and cutting it to the ground. But in that time, after chopping it down, they would dig it up, roots and all. They would completely destroy it and not allow any of their limited and precious land to be wasted on such a worthless thing.

But the vineyard keeper asked for time, for one more year. He would put fertilizer on it. He would give it even more care. He would give it one more chance to bear fruit, and if it did, great! But if not, then he would cut it down and dig it up as the owner had requested.

In the story, who was the owner? Who was the vineyard keeper? Who was the fig tree? In ancient Jewish stories, the rabbis would often tell tales where they would have the different attributes of God speak to each other. The love of God would speak to the holiness of God. The truth of God might carry on a conversation with the justice of God, and so on. And in this tale, the owner and the vineyard keeper represent two characteristics of God – his justice and his mercy.

Justice says, "cut it down. It has had enough time to do its job. Use the space for something else." Mercy says, "Wait. One more year. Let's give it one more year." And thus we have a picture of a holy God who is committed to do what is right and to execute his judgment upon sinful people, but also a picture of a

loving God who is great in compassion and suffers long with sinful men, giving every chance for them to turn from their sin and find life in him.

The prophets often pictured God in this way. In the book of Hosea, we find God comparing Israel to a vine and a fig tree. In chapter 9 and verse 10 God said,

“I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness;  
I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree in its first *season*.  
*But* they came to the place of idolatry and devoted themselves to shame,  
And they became as detestable as that which they loved.

Yes, God loved his people dearly and compared them to the sweet fruit of the vine and fig tree, but they did not love him in return, and in spite of years, decades, even centuries of bearing with them, they only become more corrupt and their fruit rotten. Finally, through the prophet Hosea, he said,

“The Assyrians—they will rule over them  
Because they refused to return *to Me*.  
<sup>6</sup>The sword will whirl against their cities,  
And will demolish their gate bars  
And consume *them* because of their counsels.  
<sup>7</sup>My people are bent on turning from Me.  
Though the prophets call them to *the One* on high,  
None at all exalts *God*.

But then, after announcing this judgment, God, in a burst of compassion and emotion, said:

“How can I give you up, O Ephraim?  
How can I surrender you, O Israel?  
My heart is turned over within Me,  
All My compassions are kindled.”

The justice and the mercy of God! Justice said, “cut it down and dig it up. It’s a waste of good land.”  
Mercy said, “Wait one more year. Let me give it extra care for one more year.”

Why did Jesus tell this story? For years God had labored in his vineyard and with his fig tree Israel, but Israel was not bearing fruit for God. And at last he had come to his people to lead them in a new revolution of the heart that would free them from their real enemy, their sin, and in this new revolution of the heart, a revolution of repentance, he would lead them to help the whole world find it – including the Romans who only knew how to cut people down with swords when things threatened them. The Romans must learn a new lesson. The whole world must learn a new lesson. Taking revenge would not solve the problems of the world. Shedding more blood would accomplish nothing. Yes, it was sad that Pilate had cut down those Jews in the Temple. It was sad that about the eighteen who had perished from falling buildings.

But what would be sadder would be the continuing loss of life from slashing swords and crashing buildings if they did not turn from their sin and follow Jesus in the way of peace. Israel was the fig tree. If the fig tree did not produce fruit in Jesus' last year of ministry, then, it would be good for nothing and would be cut down and dug up by Roman swords and Roman shovels.

Ending