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Lifting the Curse: Reflections on Retribution and Restoration

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SUMMARY

In cursing the fig-tree, Jesus expresses anger at Israel's failure in its devotion to God. This follows God's original curse after Adam and Eve's freewill disobedience, which extends through Cain and subsequent history. Contrastingly, the Greeks attributed the curse demonstrated in their drama to supernatural forces which work retributively through human nature, but beyond human control. The curse can be lifted through God's grace operating, despite the curse, from Adam's time throughout Old Testament history and fulfilled in Christ's love shown in forgiveness for inbred sin through his death and resurrection, enabling humankind to abandon retribution and to experience restoration to new life.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Jesus verflucht den Feigenbaum und bringt dadurch seinen Ärger über Israels Versagen zum Ausdruck, wenn es um dessen Hingabe an Gott geht. Dies steht in einer Linie mit Gottes ursprünglichem Fluch, der Adams und Evas selbstgewähltem Ungehorsam folgt und sich durch Kain und die spätere Geschichte hindurch fortpflanzt. Im Gegensatz dazu führen die Griechen den Fluch, wie er in ihren Dramen thematisiert wird, auf übernatürliche Kräfte zurück, die durch die menschliche Natur im Sinne von Vergeltung am Werk sind, sich aber jenseits menschlicher Kontrolle befinden. Der Fluch kann durch Gottes Gnade aufgehoben werden, die nichtsdestotrotz seit Adams Zeiten an durch die Geschichte des Alten Testamentes hindurch am Werk ist. Diese Gnade erfüllt sich in der Liebe Christi, die in der Vergebung der innewohnenden Sünde durch seinen Tod und seine Auferstehung sichtbar wird. Die Liebe Christi befähigt die Menschheit, von Vergeltung abzulassen und Wiederherstellung zu erfahren, die zu neuem Leben führt.

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RÉSUMÉ

En maudissant le figuier, Jésus voulait exprimer sa colère à l'égard de l'infidélité d'Israël envers Dieu. Cette malédiction s'inscrit dans la ligne de celle que Dieu a prononcée suite à la désobéissance volontaire d'Adam et d'Ève et qui a trouvé ses prolongements dans la vie de Caïn et dans l'histoire subséquente. Contrairement à cette conception, les Grecs attribuaient les malédictions à des forces surnaturelles opérant la rétribution dans la nature humaine tout en étant hors de portée d'un contrôle humain, comme cela apparaît dans leurs pièces de théâtre. Selon l'Écriture, la malédiction peut être levée en vertu de la grâce divine qui est opérante, en dépit de la malédiction, depuis l'époque d'Adam et tout au long de l'histoire couverte par l'Ancien Testament. Cette grâce découle de l'amour de Christ manifesté, en vertu de sa mort et de sa résurrection, par le pardon du péché inné en l'homme. Elle rend ensuite l'humanité capable d'abandonner la rétribution et d'expérimenter la restauration par une vie nouvelle.

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Introduction: The fig-tree

Jesus is hungry as he returns to the temple in Jerusalem that he had visited the day before. He sees a fig-tree that has nothing on it but leaves. When, according to Matthew, he says, 'May you never bear fruit again', the fig-tree immediately withers (Mt 21:18-22).[1] The original account in Mark's Gospel has Jesus saying the same thing to the tree and returning the next day to find that it has withered. At this point his disciples believe that Jesus has cursed the tree (Mk 11:12-14, 20-21).

Jesus has already visited the temple and ejected those who were trading there. While in both gospels the cursing of the fig-tree occurs after the

incident in the temple, in Mark the clearing of the temple is sandwiched between the moment of cursing and the following day's discovery by the disciples that the tree has withered. Both gospels offer the same sequence of events, but there are some differences in emphasis in the actions and words of Jesus.

My intention in this article is to examine the importance of the curse not only in this incident but through the Old Testament and in literature written before the coming of Christ, and to suggest how Jesus lifts the curse of vengeance and retribution.

The failure of Israel

The cursing and withering of the fig-tree have given rise to many different reactions, among them the serious doubt whether Jesus would ever have wanted the fig-tree to be cursed to bear no more fruit. The feeling of sceptics is: why blame the fig-tree when 'it wasn't yet time for figs; surely Jesus was being petty and petulant, cursing the tree for doing what fig-trees always do, putting out leaves in the spring, but not yet bearing fruit'?[2] But many agree that the incident is inextricably linked with the cleansing of the temple and with Jesus' condemnation of the traders and money-changers. One commentator points out that 'since Mark's custom is faithfully to report what he received and to tell stories as they happened, … we are justified … in seeing in its starkness and destructiveness a solemn warning of what was in fact to happen in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.'[3] When Jesus, on leaving the temple, is recorded by Mark as saying 'Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down' (Mk 13:2), it is as if our Lord is making a factual statement about the future, as well as a judgement on Israel's past and present. Dennis E. Nineham also makes the point that the fate of the fig-tree symbolises the fate awaiting Jerusalem and the Jewish people and religion. 'Like the fig-tree with its leaves, the Jewish people made a fine show with their numerous ceremonies and outward observances, but when the Messiah came looking for the fruit of righteousness he found none, and the result was condemnation and destruction for Judaism, as it was for the tree.'[4]

According to Alan Cole, 'this withering of the tree is only a perpetuation of its present fruitless condition'. Extending the withering of the fig-tree to the withering of the temple as a symbol of the fruitless religion of Israel, Cole says that 'henceforth Israel was to be withered and fruitless; the physical judgement of AD 70 was only an outward sign of this'.[5] Recalling the words of Jesus in quoting from Isaiah 56:7, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations', Cole says that for Jesus 'the supreme blasphemy was that this place, which was to have been in God's purpose a place of prayer for non-Jewish people of every nation, instead of being an exclusively Jewish national sanctuary, should have become a business-house, and for dishonest business at that'.[6]

While the emphasis in Mark has been shown to be on the importance of taking the news of salvation to the Gentiles, Matthew does not forget the mission to the Jews. Stanley Hauerwas points out that 'Jesus' cleansing of the temple is not a rejection of the significance of the temple, rather it is an indication of its importance'. He continues:

> The God of Israel, the God worshipped in the temple, is the same God who is the Father of Jesus, the Son. The people of Israel, the Jews, can never be 'left behind' because if they are left behind Christians discover that we can make no sense of Jesus.[7]

The people of Israel have had to learn their lesson and heed the warning. This is expressed strongly by Tom Wright when he considers the significance of Jesus' words on faith, visualising Jesus standing next to the mountain on which the temple stands and comparing the fate of the temple with that of the mountain which is thrown into the sea. The promise to the disciples, he says,

> is not a general comment about the power of prayer to do extraordinary things. … The promise is far more focused than that. Saying to 'this mountain' that it should be 'lifted up and thrown into the sea' when you are standing right beside the temple mountain, was bound to be taken as another coded warning about what would happen to the temple as God's judgment fell upon his rebellious people.[8]

Such a warning certainly would increase the hostility of the authorities towards Jesus.

The warning to the Jews of their failure to live up to Jesus' mission to them has already been signalled in our Lord's commission to his disciples to go to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 10:5-6) and in his encounter with the Canaanite woman when he tells her that his mission is 'only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel', though it is very probable that she is able to remind him of

the needs of those other than the people of Israel (Mt 15:24). Both Mark and Matthew record that at the time of the visit to the temple, Jesus tells a parable about tenants who kill the son of the owner of the vineyard in their desperate attempt to get control of the vineyard. The strong implication is that the words Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22-23, that 'the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone', are a direct reference to the forthcoming rejection of Jesus by the Jews at whom his mission was originally directed (Mt 21:42; Mk 11:10). Matthew has a further brief parable at this point telling of two sons, one of whom rejects his father's commission to work in the vineyard, but then accepts, whereas the second does the exact opposite, indicating the failure of the Israelite people to carry out the covenant they had previously made with God (Mt 21:28-31). Matthew's later parable of the wedding banquet further illustrates the way in which the favoured people fail to live up to the privilege of their invitation into the Kingdom: 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come' (Mt 22:8). So the unlikeliest people are now invited. As had been said just previously, 'I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you' (Mt 21:31). Such warnings fuel the authorities' resentment even further.

The curse in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament the images of the withered vine and the fig-tree have signalled the failure of the people to fulfil the covenant and the promise to serve their God faithfully. Jeremiah says:

> I will take away their harvest, declares the Lord,
> There will be no grapes on the vine,
> There will be no figs on the tree,
> And their leaves will wither (Jer 8:13)

Later in Jeremiah, the prophet utters the dire prophecy of the Lord as follows: 'I will send the sword, famine and plague against them and I will make them like poor figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten' (Jer 29:17). Morna Hooker draws our attention to three more important Old Testament references in which God is shown as looking in vain for the early figs and the prophet expresses intense disappointment at the results:[9]

> When I found Israel,
> it was like finding grapes in the desert;
> when I saw your fathers,
> it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig-tree,
> But when they came to Baar Peor,
> They consecrated themselves to that shameful idol
> And became as vile as the thing they loved. (Hos 9:10)

and just a few verses later:

> Ephraim is blighted,
> Their root is withered,
> They yield no fruit. (Hos 9:16)

In Micah, Israel's misery is reflected as follows:

> What misery is mine!
> I am like one who gathers summer fruit
> at the gleaning of the vineyard;
> there is no cluster of grapes to eat,
> none of the early figs that I crave. (Mic 7:1)

In Habakkuk, the prophet praises the Lord despite the state of the nation, as he admits,

> though the fig-tree does not bud
> and there are no grapes on the vines… (Hab 3:17)

Jonah, nursing his grievance that God has forgiven the citizens of Nineveh, is more concerned that the vine under which he is sheltering has withered than he is about the fate of Nineveh. When the Lord says to him: 'Should I not be concerned about that great city?', he is telling Jonah that the mission of believers should be opened up to those whom we have neglected, distrusted or ignored (Jon 4:11). The message is that the people of Israel must enlarge their sympathies which have become withered and decayed.

While at the time of Jesus' dealings in the temple Jesus links the curse with the withering of the fig-tree, God's curse played a significant part in the early history of the human race as recorded in the opening chapters of Genesis. Because of his disobedience in succumbing to Eve, Adam becomes a victim of the curse that will pursue him throughout his life.

> Cursed is the ground because of you;
> Through painful toil you will eat of it
> All the days of your life. (Gen 3:17)

According to Henri Blocher, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden 'represents ingratitude and rebellion against God's provision, the absurd pretension to abolish dependence and the disastrous misuse of the privilege of being accountable to God.'[10] Blocher sees this as a deliberate, moral 'breaking of the cov-

enant' that God has given to Adam which 'defines … both the generosity of the Lord and the duties he imposes' (Gen 2:15),[11] following the Lord's provision of the paradise of Eden and his call to Adam to cultivate it. Though one could assert that God had presumably created in Adam the free will to reject his call, the decision to do so lies at Adam's door; the consequence of the chain effect of the wiles of the manipulative serpent and Eve's surrender to temptation. Thus Adam is banished from the Garden of Eden 'to work the ground from which he had been taken' (Gen 3:23).

In the history of Cain and Abel, it is Cain who perpetuates the curse, following in Adam's footsteps as the tiller of the soil. When Abel keeps his flocks and Cain tills the soil, Cain kills his brother from jealousy. Before the murder, Cain has been clearly warned by the Lord of the difference between the right and the wrong course of action: 'If you do what is right will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it' (Gen 4:7) – a warning that Cain deliberately ignores. His jealousy seems to have arisen because the Lord favours Abel's offering of fat portions of his flocks as against Cain's mere offering of soil. No other reason is suggested there than the Lord's greater pleasure in Abel's offering, which enrages Cain. In Hebrews 4:11, a reason is given, namely that 'By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.' When Cain kills his brother, he is told:

> Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. (Gen 4:10-11).

By his deliberate choice Cain has brought the curse on himself.

In its full statement of the Law, Deuteronomy has it that a person is cursed for an entire series of moral infringements which are listed. These acts are entirely the fault of the individual caused through their own humanity and waywardness (Deut 27:15-26), but they have already been prefaced by the statement that 'anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse' (Deut 21:23), the punishment supposedly representing God's response to moral failure. This is echoed centuries later in the letter to the Galatians, which will be considered later.

The Greeks and the curse

What is already emerging is a dual pattern. On the one hand, the curse seems to cling inexorably to successive generations of the chosen people who appear to be almost destined to fall into sin; but on the other hand it is clear that these lapses are caused through their own fault, their personal failures of jealousy, greed or lust. This pattern finds its parallel in the most important literature of the time before the birth of Christ, the Greek tragedians, from whose works a few examples will be drawn.

One classical scholar, Charles Seltman, considering forces outside human control, distinguishes between sin and guilt when he writes:

> Clearly the only sin was to commit a personal offence against a divinity. As for guilt, like the guilt of Oedipus or of Orestes, that was altogether a different matter; it had been put upon you by a Fate beyond the gods, and there was nothing for it but to be purified by a god. It was dire misfortune, but no fault of yours.[12]

This view is supported by the theologian John Austin Baker who writes: 'Here the idea of Destiny as the ultimate ruler comes into play. Neither are the gods exempt from Fate themselves, nor are they able to deliver their protégés.'[13] However, in Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, Oedipus himself in his long speech when he is confronted with the truth of his murder of his father both admits his responsibility, 'On me is the curse that none but I have laid', and yet almost immediately places the blame on a god elsewhere:

> Can it be any but some monstrous god
> Of evil that has sent this doom upon me?[14]

This sin against a god as his personal responsibility is confirmed later when he says to the chorus:

> Apollo, friends, Apollo
> Has laid this agony upon me;
> Not by his hand; I did it.[15]

This is confirmed a little later when he accepts full responsibility for his crime. He says to the chorus:

> Touch me, and have no fear. On no man else
> But on me alone is the scourge of my punishment.[16]

However, in his conversation with the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus* he denies responsibility: 'Nothing was of my choosing'[17] and he justifies his action:

> He whom I killed

Had sought to kill me first.[18]

And he attributes this to 'an ancient grudge against our house', saying:

… if my father was foredoomed
By the voice of heaven to die by his own son's hand,
How can you justly cast it against me,
Who was still unborn when the decree was spoken?[19]

This brings us back to Seltman's contention that there is a higher, supernatural power, 'a fate beyond the gods' whom one can never overcome.

The attribution of responsibility to sources outside oneself is found elsewhere in Greek tragedy. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra blames her mother for her own shameful passion for her stepson, Hippolytus, which rages within her and also destroys her sister, refusing to accept responsibility for her own feelings: 'I believe that such misfortune does not arise from inborn folly, since often those who suffer are wise and good.'[20] In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra even blames their daughter, Iphigenia, who, she says, causes the death of Agamemnon and Cassandra although it is Agamemnon who murders his own daughter, Iphigenia:

That Fury,
She steered the blade
Through Agamemnon,
Not I. Not my hand.
The hand of our daughter
Iphigenia
Steadied the hand
Of that Fury.[21]

Clytemnestra has just highlighted 'The curse, the hideous/ Heritage/of the house of Atreus' that had been clinging to generations of the family, thus shifting the responsibility even further back than the innocent Iphigenia. Aegisthus, her lover, in the final scene of the play narrates the full history of the feud in the house of Atreus, a seemingly unbreakable chain of evil extending through generations. Once Clytemnestra has had her revenge on her husband, she tries to call a halt to the slaughter: 'Stop. Stop./The killing is over.'[22] But we know that she in turn is killed by her son, Orestes, in *Choephori*. However, in the third play of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, the goddess Athene, speaking with the reasonableness of Athenian values, heals the situation and banishes the curse through sweet reason and the force of argument:

The sacred power of persuasion
That makes calm the storm in the body,
The presence of God in persuasion
Draws the poison fangs of evil…[23]

The exercise of the power of reason may be convincing to a certain degree, but does not, I believe, meet the deep and powerful emotions that urge human beings to exact vengeance on those who, they believe, have wronged them. In the final scene of *Choephori*, the chorus, having summarised the course of the chain of evil cause and effect thus far, ask the all-important questions:

Can the poor, scorched brains of Orestes
Figure out all the factors? Can he solve
The arithmetic of the unfinished
That shunts this curse from one generation to the next?
Who can bring it to an end?
When can it be brought to an end?
How can it be brought to an end?[24]

Sow and reap

While in light of the coming of Christ a greater answer has been made available, at this stage in the experience and thought of the Greeks, at least willpower is needed to achieve what reason cannot. It is clear that, had Oedipus controlled his temper when confronted by the brutality of Laius, his father, on the road, he would not have murdered him. Similarly, Cain has only to control his jealousy and temper to prevent the death of his brother. In the final play of Sophocles' trilogy, *Antigone*, the blind Teiresias summarises the situation even before the final tragedies have occurred:

You cannot alter this. The gods themselves
Cannot undo it. It follows of necessity
From what you have done.[25]

Evil consequences arise from our human actions and even higher powers cannot change the course of events. When one considers that, as H.D.F. Kitto says, 'To requite one's foes with harm was normal Greek ethics',[26] the problem is rather removed from the jurisdiction of the gods. Kitto further says, this time in relation to Creon in *Antigone*:

The gods are angry with Creon, their Erinyes will punish him; yet the punishment … descends on Creon as it were automatically, out of what he himself has done. The gods are not direct-

ing events from the outside; they work *in* the events.[27]

Hence, while the responsibility lies with the individual for the freewill decision to respond in kind, the Greeks see the ultimate cause to be in the hands of the gods who have implanted such desires in the hearts of their protagonists.

When we return to the Scriptures, we find that they too give warnings of human responsibility for events, but the responsibility for evil acts is placed firmly within the hearts of humankind following the freewill decisions recorded in Genesis. Job is warned by one of his three friends, Eliphaz:

> As I have observed, those who plough evil
> And those who sow trouble reap it. (Job 4:8)

And this is reiterated in Proverbs:

> He who sows wickedness reaps trouble,
> And the rod of his fury will be destroyed. (Prov 22:8)

In the New Testament Paul expresses the same thought when he writes:

> Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction. (Gal 6:7)

In that most popular of morality tales, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the ghost of Jacob Marley, Scrooge's partner who had died seven years previously that Christmas Eve and who now appears to him in chains, tells Scrooge that he, Marley, also reaped what he had sown: 'I wear the chain I forged in life…I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.'[28] This is reiterated later in the story by Scrooge's nephew when, accompanied by the Ghost of Christmas Present, Scrooge overhears the comment about himself: 'His offences carry their own punishment.'[29]

The conclusion that our actions result directly from our own failures brings us back to the fig-tree in another brief allusion in Proverbs: 'He who tends a fig-tree will eat its fruit' (Prov 27:18). We must bear the consequences of our actions. The same spirit of divine retribution is expressed in 1 Corinthians: 'Don't you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him' (1 Cor 3:16-17).

There is a law of cause and effect which means that a person's actions have automatic consequences. In Blocher's words when he reviews the curse on Adam, humanity 'turns a garden into a desert'.[30] This is a foretaste of the response of Jesus in cursing the fig-tree that represents the history of Israel's persistent faithlessness and failure despite God's love and purpose for the nation. The ultimate responsibility for the evil lies in the human psyche, as, when recording the words of Jesus, the down-to-earth Mark argues:

> What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'. (Mk 7:20-23)

What arises out of this consideration of the relative importance of the curse of fate and human responsibility is the realisation that, while the characters involved in the chain of cause and effect see themselves as victims of the build-up of inescapable generational conflict, in biblical terms the choice lies within themselves. The chain of cause and effect can be broken by an exercise of willpower over the forces raging within us.

Lifting the curse

The Greeks saw an inscrutable fate that presided over and intervened in human fortunes, controlling human responses. Christians, while holding that behaviour is dependant on an exercise of free will, also believe that the 'curse' can be lifted by divine forces that do not depend on human responses for their fulfilment. In other words, God can act on the events in question and change the entire emphasis from the negative one of retribution to the positive course of restoration.

If we now return to Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, we find that, despite their disobedience and the suffering that Eve will endure in child-bearing, 'the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them' (Gen 3:21). God allows his children his protection and he ensures their preservation, but they continue in a limbo, in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes as 'twilight', a state between good and evil, wanting life yet held in a spiritual death, 'beyond God's good'.[31] Earlier in the same work Bonhoeffer has said:

> In this fate under the curse … humankind is given the promise of victory, a victory that has to be fought for and has to be won again and

> again, but one in which it tramples the serpent's head underfoot. To be sure, this battle leaves humankind wounded, for the serpent, though defeated, still bites it in the heel. … It is this sort of battle, which humankind takes upon itself as curse and as promise and in which it fights to the end, that it is allowed to live.[32]

In the final analysis God is unable to cease to be a God of love: he will always allow his children, even though he is angry with them, a possible way through with his protection. After Cain has slain his brother, he comes under God's curse and fears that he will be driven from the land as a punishment to become 'a restless wanderer on the face of the earth'. Yet 'the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no-one who found him would kill him' even though they would know and recognise him (Gen 4:13-15). Noah and his family, despite the faithlessness of their race, are given the Lord's protection from the Flood in the covenant, the sign of which is the rainbow, a recurring symbol of God's presence and favour towards Noah (Gen 9:12-16). The promise of God's favour as a prospect for the faithful is expressed later in Micah when, as an echo of Jonah's attempt to find shelter under his vine, Micah tells of God's blessing when 'the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established' (Mic 4:1). A few verses later he says:

> Every man will sit under his own vine
> and under his own fig-tree,
> and no-one will make them afraid,
> for the Lord Almighty has spoken. (Mic 4:4)

The complete picture is that of an enormous coin, one side of which depicts God's anger with disobedience and our failure to live up to his standards, while the other side depicts his mercy which, while he knows our persistent frailty, refuses to abandon his creation.

A prime example of the Lord's grace to the penitent is found in David's confession after his heinous crime in sending Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, out into the front line to his certain death:

> Have mercy on me, O God,
> According to your unfailing love;
> According to your great compassion
> Blot out my transgressions.
> Wash away all my iniquity
> And cleanse me from my sin.
> For I know my transgressions,
> And my sin is always before me.
> Against you, you only, have I sinned
> And done evil in your sight. (Ps 51:1-4)

Such is the depth of David's remorse and acknowledgement of his sin that he is restored to the Lord's great love and purpose for him. This grace anticipates the saving, sacrificial love of Christ through the cross and also clearly defines what we have already seen in God's promise to cover and protect Adam and his descendants.

In the clearing of the temple and the withering of the fig-tree Jesus shows his anger with Israel. In Luke's parable of the vine grower and the man who looks after the vineyard for him, a fig-tree appears as well. This fig- tree is constantly unfruitful and the owner wants to cut it down, but the other man pleads for him to allow the tree just one more year to give it the chance to make amends and bear fruit. 'If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down' (Lk 13:9). Who knows how many more chances the man would have allowed the fig-tree in his refusal to give up on it? And while in Mark and Matthew Jesus is displeased with the evidence that there are no figs but only leaves on the tree that he curses, both evangelists use the leaves of the fig-tree in a positive context later when looking ahead to the future of the Kingdom of God: 'Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near' (Mk 13:28; Mt 24:32).

While it is clear that God provides a redemptive antidote to the poison of the curse, it is also important to see the response that his people are commanded to make.

We are not to be merely passive, though grateful recipients of his promises and grace, but to make a definite, clear response of obedience to his commands. As early as Leviticus, the command is clear:

> Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly, so that you will not share in his guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord. (Lev 19:17-18)

This is echoed with the full authority of the life and character of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount when our Lord says:

> You have heard that it was said 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. (Mt 5:43-44)

Not only are we commanded to avoid revenge, but also to make the positive move of love towards

those who would harm us, to go the extra mile, to turn the other cheek. Stanley Hauerwas extends these injunctions from the personal to the wider context of the political struggles between groups and nations, emphasizing the very topical importance of applying the teachings of the Lord to the relationships between factions and religious groups today:

> If we do not learn to forgive then we will not be forgiven, we will not be part of the … new people brought into existence by Jesus. To forgive and to be forgiven is not some crude exchange bargain to 'get on with life', but rather to participate in a political alternative that ends our attempts to secure our existence through violence.[33]

But we are not only called upon to make the monumental effort to cease from violence and to forgive what may in the past have seemed to be unforgiveable. There has to be a process of dying to the past and being resurrected to new life so that the past is extinguished. As Jesus is recorded as saying in some vivid images:

> No-one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no-one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins. (Mk 2:21-22)

This renewal can only be found in a complete break with the past: our tendency simply to attempt to patch up broken relationships and situations is not sufficiently radical and will fail. When at the trial of Jesus, the people say that they are prepared to 'let his blood be on us and on our children' (Mt 27:25), our Lord's answer from the cross is: 'Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Lk 23:34). When Jesus forgives those who crucify him, he is offering the same forgiveness to us and all people, for without his forgiveness all our efforts to reverse the curse of retribution will be of no effect. We must repent, receive forgiveness when our past and our failings are cancelled, and then we can make a new start.

Jesus forgives us, when the authorities, rather than stoning him to death as was the normal punishment in such cases, want him crucified in what was the cruellest death of all, not simply to kill him, but to fulfil the words in Deuteronomy 21:23 that anyone who is hanged on a tree is accursed. John Austin Baker suggests the reasons why the authorities wanted Jesus crucified rather than stoned:

> … their most probable motive is to be found in the declaration in the Jewish Law, that everyone who is hanged (a term taken at this period to include crucifixion) is accursed of God (Deut 21:23). They wanted to make it clear to everyone for all time that this man's teaching and pretensions were utterly rejected by God.[34]

To all appearances, the death of Christ must have been for the disciples a total failure and defeat, even a curse visited upon their new faith. It must have seemed ironical to the disciples that he who had cursed the failure of the nation of Israel should now be sharing the same curse. Paul emphasizes this in Galatians when, in transforming the reference in Deuteronomy 21:23 that 'cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree', he sees Christ as bearing the entire curse of the sins of the nation of Israel and of the world: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us' (Gal 3:13). It is small wonder that his disciples, not understanding what they witness on Calvary, are defeated and slink away into hiding.

The raising of Christ from the dead transforms the situation from an apparent defeat into a victory over death and our human frailty and sin. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he asks, when writing about the resurrection of the dead: 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?' He answers his own questions with the apparently puzzling remark which moves the focus back to events before the resurrection: 'How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies' (1 Cor 15:35-36). Nothing can be resurrected unless it had already died. And this brings us back to the important point that the lifting of the curse and restoration must begin with a death, the death of the old self, the old ethics of retribution and curse in which Jesus, in cursing the fig-tree, is apparently partaking, but which he is soon to annul through his own death. When Jesus, as recorded in John's Gospel, tells his disciples that his hour has come, he mysteriously deploys the image of a seed falling into the ground, illustrating not defeat but how he will be glorified:

> The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. (Jn 12:24)

The point has already been made vividly in the

Letter to the Corinthians when death is equated with Adam and his disobedience, and life is found in Christ: 'For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive' (1 Cor 15:22). The proclamation that this life is offered to all takes the message of salvation out into the world beyond Israel, just as when at the death of Christ the temple veil is torn down the middle, the good news, at the moment of its most apparent nadir, is opened up to all peoples.

So the curse has been lifted. Christ has achieved this and it is the Holy Spirit who makes this available for all people throughout all ages. It needs Christ's forgiveness and the cancellation of our sin and the curse so that a new beginning can happen. It demands a rejection of retribution and revenge, an end to retributive violence, the death of the ego that demands satisfaction for wrongs, real and imaginary. And it demands a belief that the fig leaves which are thought to promise nothing may indeed be the messengers of a new and promising future of reconciliation and regeneration.

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Notes

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