

COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



Spring 2022

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Community Classes

2021-2022

gutenberg.edu/cc

Series: “It’s Complicated: The Histories Behind What We Think We Know”

Every day we make use of ideas, take sides in debates, and rely on historical narratives, but in doing so we can ignore the complex histories that shaped those ideas, sides, and narratives. This series examines an eclectic array of topics, teasing out the historical complexities with the goal of illuminating facets of our lives now. Classes meet every other week on Wednesday evenings at 6:30 P.M. In-person and Zoom options are available. Classes remaining this spring:

May 4: Solutions and Illusions

May 18: Understanding Group Think and Selfhood with the Help of Hoffer and Orwell

June 1: The Legacy of Constantine

Young Philosophers

gutenberg.edu/philosophers

“Life has never been normal,” wrote C. S. Lewis in an address to students at the outset of World War II. If we are waiting for a better time to pursue truth, goodness, and beauty, we may never get started. In the Young Philosophers series, Gutenberg College opens its (virtual) doors to high-school-age participants for thoughtful online discussion of important ideas. Join the next conversation:

May 12: What Is Language?

What makes you think that we speak the same language? In this academic year’s final session of Young Philosophers, we turn our attention to the one thing that every philosophical discussion begins with: language itself. Is it just a bunch of arbitrary signs made up by people no wiser than we are? What, if anything, do abstractions like humanity refer to? Can two people ever really be sure that they are talking about the same thing? Join us as we consider questions like these alongside Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid with his “philosophy of common sense.”



Making Sense of Jesus Cursing the Fig Tree

Charley Dewberry

Charley Dewberry is the dean and a tutor at Gutenberg College, a practicing scientist and stream ecologist, and the author of two books on science. He holds a B.S. in the arts, an M.S. in stream ecology, and a Ph.D. in philosophy.

Jesus cursing the fig tree has been a problematic passage for me, but I recently made significant progress in understanding it. My purpose here is to pass along what I think the passage means and the discovery process by which I reached my interpretation. The details of the passage seem straightforward:

Now in the morning, when He [Jesus] returned to the city, He became hungry. And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, “No longer shall there *ever* be any fruit from you.” And at once the fig tree withered. And seeing *this*, the disciples marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” (Matthew 21:18-20. All quotations are from the NASB.)

The literal action of the passage is this: Jesus is hungry, and when he does not find figs on the tree, he curses it. Apparently, he curses the tree out of anger. If so, cursing the fig tree would appear to be a sinful act, not the act of a sinless Messiah. How could Jesus, who in the first temptation had not eaten for forty days and nights and who told Satan that man does not live by bread alone (Matthew 4:1-4), do this to the fig tree? But if the meaning of this passage is not intended to be its literal meaning, how would I figure that out? Also, if the passage is to be taken metaphorically, what is its meaning and who is the message for? Those are the basic challenges of this passage. The focus of this article is how I discovered the clues that resolved those challenges and arrived at a coherent interpretation.

Let me begin with a few brief comments about “exegesis”—the interpretation of the Bible—and then I will launch into the discovery process by which I came to my interpretation of the fig-tree passage. Exegesis is an art based on a number of skills. Sometimes understanding a passage is greatly aided by a knowledge of the original languages. Other times, the interpretive process focuses on the skill of taking “parts” and combining them into a “whole,” like solving a jigsaw puzzle. And understanding how the parts fit together largely depends on “context.” We can see the importance of context in a simple sentence like “That is a strike, and that is good.” Am I talking about baseball? Am I referring to the pitcher or the batter? Or am I talking about a labor dispute? We cannot understand the sentence unless we understand the word “strike,” and we cannot understand “strike” apart from the larger context of which the sentence is a part. In the example, the context helps us to understand one word, which in turn helps us to understand the sentence. When interpreting the Bible, context helps us understand how a “part” (for example, a word, a sentence, or a paragraph/passage) fits into the “whole”—and ultimately, how even the books of the Bible (“parts”) fit into the Bible as a “whole.”

Furthermore, because our passage about Jesus cursing the fig tree is complex and difficult, understanding it ultimately entails additional skills or tasks, like studying possible parallel passages in Mark, Luke, and John. First we would need to examine each account individually within its own context, and then we would need to determine if the accounts are describing the same events. That process, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

To decide if the passage about Jesus cursing the fig tree should be taken literally or metaphorically, I will focus primarily on understanding the passage within the context of Matthew 21:1-27. Cursing the fig tree in verses 18-20 constitutes a “part,” and verses 1-27 of chapter 21 is the “whole”—that is, the context—I will use to determine whether I should understand the passage literally or metaphorically.

I found the fig-tree passage problematic because it seemed unrelated to the context of the rest of the chapter. Here is a brief sketch of the events in Matthew 21 that precede Jesus cursing the fig tree in verses 18-20: Jesus enters Jerusalem (the “Triumphal Entry” in verses 1-10), he throws the moneychangers out of the temple (vv. 12-13), he heals the blind and lame (vs. 14), the chief priests and scribes become indignant and say a few things (vv. 15-16), Jesus responds and then leaves (vv. 16-17). I could find no connection between these events and Jesus cursing the fig tree the following morning.

Likewise, the verses immediately following Jesus cursing the fig tree seem to come out of the blue:

And Jesus answered and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it shall happen. And everything you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.” (Matthew 21:21-22)

Jesus talks about doubt and faith. He mentions the fig tree, so these two verses are somehow connected to Jesus cursing the fig tree, but I did not see how.

And then Matthew 21:23-27 seems to be about a completely different topic: the chief priests are questioning Jesus about his authority, which also appears completely unrelated to the fig tree. The fig-tree passage seems isolated with no clues linking it to the rest of the chapter. This situation led me to put the passage about Jesus cursing the fig tree on the shelf.

Recently, however, I noticed a clue in Matthew 21:23 that had escaped me before:

And when He had come into the Temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him as He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing **these things** [emphasis mine], and who gave You this authority?”

When the chief priests and elders ask by what authority Jesus is doing “these things,” what are “these things” Jesus is doing that they want to know about? The verse just says that Jesus is “teaching” in the temple. But what if the chief priests and elders were thinking about the day before, when Jesus had cast out those selling in the temple and had healed the blind and lame (vv. 12-14), and they are asking by what authority he had done those things? Verse 19 tells us that Jesus cursed the fig tree on his way back to the city [and the temple] the morning after he cast the sellers out of the temple and healed people. So then, the fig-tree event comes *between* Jesus’ two visits to the temple, which suggests a link between his first visit (clearing the temple, healing, and being confronted by the chief priests), cursing the fig tree, and his second visit to the temple when Jesus is again confronted by the chief priests and elders about his authority to do “these things.” Somehow all these “parts” are connected to make one “whole” of Matthew 21:1-27. The meaning of our “part”—Jesus cursing the fig tree—depends upon the context of the “whole.”

I began by observing that the disciples notice the fig tree because it withered suddenly. Clearly, Jesus meant the suddenly withered fig tree to communicate something to the disciples. No one else could ascertain its meaning. Even if a local person noticed that the fig tree withered suddenly, it is doubtful that he would have a clue about why the fig tree withered. But what could Jesus cursing the fig tree have to do with the disciples? Surely, Jesus is not telling them to curse a fig tree if they do not find figs on it when they are hungry. He is trying to communicate something else to the disciples. Jesus cursing the fig tree is meant to be a puzzle or a parable. The disciples have to reflect on the elements of Jesus cursing the fig tree: Why a fig tree? Why are there leaves but no figs? Why curse a tree? Does the tree represent something else? What does each element mean, and is that meaning related to something else? And so forth. We are in the *same situation*.

(Continued on page 4)



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Gutenberg Welcomes Pam Lee

We are pleased to announce that Pam Lee has joined the Gutenberg community as the College's new enrollment director. The enrollment director is responsible for outreach, networking, and recruiting for Gutenberg.

Pam has a B.A. in History from State University of New York at Stony Brook. She has raised four children, home-schooling them in the classical, Christian tradition with the help of Classical Conversations. During that time, she has filled various roles from tutor to director of multiple Challenge levels, book store rep, practicum speaker and trainer, and support representative. She looks forward to sharing all Gutenberg has to offer with others. In her free time, she is pursuing her own reclaimed education by working her way through such classics as Plato, Boethius, and Dante.

Pam is enthusiastic about Gutenberg's mission and ethos. We welcome her to the community!

Gutenberg Videos gutenberg.edu/hello

We are pleased to announce new, short videos about what makes Gutenberg College distinct. Distribution through advertising, PBS placements, and an email campaign will begin in May. To see our promotional video (about five minutes), go to the URL above. And please share it with your friends!

Making Sense of Jesus Cursing the Fig Tree

Continued from page 3

I finally landed on this possible understanding: Jesus is hungry. He sees a fig tree, and because it has leaves, he expects that it will also have figs (fruit). When the tree has no fruit, Jesus curses it in order to send a message to the disciples about the connection between not bearing fruit and being cursed. A key observation brought me to this possibility: Jesus *expected* the tree to have fruit, but it did not. It only *appeared* to have fruit. But now an obvious question arises: If Jesus wanted the disciples to understand the connection between not bearing fruit and being cursed, what or who is giving the appearance of having fruit but has none?

Since I had established that Jesus intended his cursing the fig tree to communicate something to the disciples, I first thought that Jesus meant the disciples were somehow "fruitless." Perhaps they were giving the appearance of being his disciples, but they didn't really believe—at that moment—that he was the Messiah. The disciples ask, "How did the fig tree wither *all at once*?" If they were truly his disciples, shouldn't they have immediately recognized that the withering of the fig tree was an act of the Messiah? After all, they have been with him a long time. They have seen him do miracle after miracle, and they have done some miracles themselves. In verses 21-22, Jesus says to them that if they only had faith they would be able to wither the fig tree; if they truly understood that he was the Messiah and they were his disciples, they would be able to do miracles like cursing the fig tree or casting a mountain into the sea. They just need to pray to have faith—that is, eyes to see the truth.

This scenario works as a possible solution to what Jesus intended by cursing the fig tree, but there are a couple of fatal flaws in this line of thought. The consequence of only appearing to believe—that is, Jesus being angry and cursing them—does not fit his relationship to the disciples that we see elsewhere in the Gospel. Also, there does not appear to be any connection to this scenario and the passage before Jesus curses the fig tree (when he clears the temple) and the passage after he curses the tree (when the chief priests and scribes question his authority). Clearly, then, the fig tree does not represent the disciples. If the point of cursing the fig tree is to demonstrate the consequence of appearing to have fruit but not actually producing any, there must be another option.

So I looked again at the "parts" of Matthew 21:1-27 for clues to what or whom Jesus might consider "fruitless." The first part (Matthew 1-17) is about Jesus coming to the temple in Jerusalem and the subsequent response of the chief priests and the scribes. The final part (Matthew 23-27) is about the chief priests and scribes in the temple questioning Jesus' authority to do "these things." So, the "whole" passage (Matthew 21:1-27) begins and ends with the temple and the chief priests, and the part about cursing the fig tree comes between. This suggests that the temple and the chief priests are linked to Jesus cursing the fig tree. [A parallel account in Mark 11:11-25 makes this link more explicit. Mark splits the passage about Jesus withering the fig tree into two parts and places Jesus cleansing the temple in between.] Using this link between the temple/chief priests and the fig-tree cursing, I then tried putting all the "parts" together into a coherent "whole."

Matthew 21 begins with Jesus preparing to enter Jerusalem. He enters on a donkey with a multitude proclaiming, "Hosanna to the Son of David [the Messiah]" and the people in the city asking who the man being praised is (vv. 1-11). Then Jesus clears the temple of sellers and heals people:

And Jesus entered the temple and cast out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, "It is written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER;' but you are making it a robbers' den. And *the blind and the lame* came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant, and said to Him, "Do You hear what these [children] are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'OUT OF THE

MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABES THOU HAST PREPARED PRAISE FOR THYSELF?’” (Matthew 21:12-16)

The fig-tree “part” has shown us that we should be looking for something or someone that appears to be bearing fruit but does not. And this first part provides the key to understanding who those “fruitless trees” are by showing us that those who witnessed the events of Matthew 21:1-17 reacted in different ways. The children seeing the “wonderful things” Jesus did cry out, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” thereby recognizing Jesus as the promised Messiah. But the chief priests and scribes who see the same “wonderful things” respond with indignation, questioning Jesus’ authority and being indignant that he does not “correct” the children. The temple is supposed to be the house of God. If anyone should recognize the coming Messiah, it should be the chief priests and scribes in their roles as keepers and teachers of the temple. Yet, the chief priests and scribes who *appear* to be the servants of God do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah sent by God. They—and by extension, the temple itself—seem to be the fruitless tree Jesus has in mind when he curses the fig tree.

Now we come to the part about Jesus cursing the fig tree, which happens the next morning. Jesus curses the fig tree to present a parable, or puzzle, to the disciples. The fig tree metaphorically represents the temple as exemplified by the chief priests who give the appearance of representing God, but they do not bear fruit. As a result, the temple is going to wither as the fig tree withered. Jesus is also signaling that his ministry is reaching a culmination. The disciples do not understand the message at the time because they are focused on how quickly the fig tree withered. But Jesus tells them:

Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will happen. (Matthew 21:21)

Jesus is telling his disciples that if they have faith and do not doubt, not only will they be able to perform miracles as he does, but they will also be able render judgment as he does, like withering a fig tree or even casting “this” mountain—the temple mount toward which they are heading—into the sea, thus destroying the temple. He then tells them, “everything you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.” The context suggests that Jesus is telling them that they *will have* faith without doubting, and they *will be able* to do miraculous things if they pray to God. These things will be done in the context of their being his disciples and apostles.

The final part shifts to Jesus being questioned in the temple about the authority by which he does “these things.” Clearly, the chief priests and the scribes are not responding to Jesus with fruit, and so God will “curse and wither” the temple, which He did in 70 AD. Jesus is righteously angry with the chief priests and scribes for not bearing fruit.

Taken as a whole, then, Matthew 21:1-27 signifies a major change in Jesus’ ministry that begins with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and it highlights the degradation of the temple and the “fruitless” disbelief of the Jewish leaders. Between visits to the temple, Jesus enacts the fig-tree “parable,” signaling to his disciples that the end is near and that he wants them to think about what not bearing fruit means, especially as it applies to the Jewish leaders and the temple, which will be “cursed and withered.” Jesus’ death and resurrection are near at hand, and so he also talks to them about doubt and faith and their need to look to God. While many points need clarifying, this is the thrust of the passage as a whole.

The meaning of Jesus cursing the fig tree had previously evaded me. This time through, connecting “these things” in verse 23 with “the wonderful things” in verse 15, convinced me that they were parts of a whole and not a group of isolated parts. By trying to find the relationship of the parts to the whole, like trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together, I arrived at a whole understanding that appears to be coherent. I will accept this understanding of the passage for the time being. As always, I reserve the right to change my interpretation if I have misunderstood a part or parts or someone presents a better way to organize the parts into a whole.



Great Book Review: Thomas Aquinas

By Brian Julian

I recently had the privilege of discussing with the junior class the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). The selection included the five proofs he gives for God’s existence, but I appreciate even more that there is a proof he rejects, the famous ontological argument of Anselm. Anselm’s argument is still read and discussed today, and it is accepted as valid by many Christians, so why do I appreciate its rejection?

What I appreciate is the way Aquinas is willing to follow what he understands to be true, rather than simply endorsing an argument which reaches the conclusion he wants. This is an admirable example to follow. It might feel difficult to reject an argument for God’s existence, or it might seem counterproductive, since so many people in our culture will dispute the idea that God exists. But God is better served when we follow the truth, and Christians shouldn’t believe based on arguments they find problematic. In fact, we can even call into question the proofs Aquinas gives or ask whether proofs are the right way to gain knowledge of God’s existence—as the juniors and I did in our discussion.

Reading and discussing Aquinas, then, brings more benefit than simply learning a few proofs. It provides a springboard for thinking about the nature of our knowledge about God. Like a great book should, it lets us dive into the deep questions.

Stories of Conversion

SUMMER INSTITUTE 2022

JULY 28-30

GUTENBERG.EDU/SI



The Conversion of St. Paul by Gustave Doré



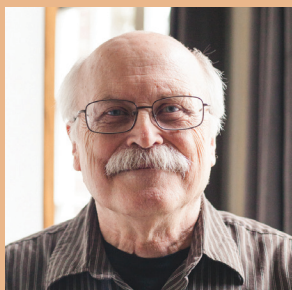
Brian Julian



Nancy Scott



Chris Alderman



Charley Dewberry

Since its beginning, a prominent aspect of Christianity has been the conversion narrative. Sometimes dramatic, sometimes mundane, these accounts tell the stories of how particular individuals committed their lives to Christ. For the 2022 Summer Institute, we will read several of these accounts from throughout history, and we will think about how these stories of particular people living in contexts that differ from our own might nevertheless impact our thinking now. What should we do with the inescapably personal aspects of these stories—can they still speak to someone who is considering Christianity? How can these stories provide encouragement to those who have been Christians for a while already? Is having a conversion experience necessary for being a Christian? Join us July 28-30 at Gutenberg College for discussions, talks, and food, as we contemplate together these stories of conversion.

Thursday Evening, July 28

Discussion: *Confessions* by Augustine

Talk: Brian Julian

Friday Evening, July 29

Dinner

Discussion: *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* by Jonathan Edwards

Talk: Nancy Scott

Saturday (all day), July 30

Continental Breakfast

Discussion: *Surprised by Joy* by C. S. Lewis

Talk: Chris Alderman

Lunch

Discussion: Gospel of John

Talk: Charley Dewberry

Information & Registration:
gutenberg.edu/si

Pricing

(Includes meals for in-person attendees.)

If you register before July 1:

Individual: \$85

Family: \$115

Student: \$40

Attendance via Zoom:

Individual: \$50

Family: \$65

Student: \$25

Financial aid: Limited financial aid packages are available for those who wish to attend. To apply, please contact the office.

Volunteer opportunities: We can also offer reduced costs for volunteers. If you would like to volunteer, please contact the office.

Housing: Rooms may be available at Gutenberg. To inquire, please contact the office at office@gutenberg.edu.

Building Soil

By Isaiah Hall

I build the soil of my olive grove.
I enrich my land before I invite love.
For plump fruit to pick and oil to press;
For other fruits to grow; For others to bless.
I build my soil before planting seeds.
I tear up gnarls, stumps, uproot all weeds.

The four seasons come, the four seasons go.
Spring don't rush winter, summer's always slow.
Sweat and an angry face won't fill your barn.
It took me rushing love for this to learn ...

So, I play my flute, sing my songs—build soil.
I pluck my strings, right my wrongs—precious toil.
Let others shake their fist at heaven high;
I'll wait for rain to fall soft from the sky.
Let them curse all heaven hasn't yet sent;
While you smile, build soil, are content.




Isaiah Hall is a junior at Gutenberg College. Here's how he describes discovering Gutenberg:

"I first moved to Eugene, Oregon, from San Diego California in 2015 to help a growing church. After deciding I didn't want to pursue full-time ministry, I wandered into the local employment center. That's when I met Tobin Johnston, a Gutenberg alum and a career counselor. After asking me questions about what I like to do (I told him I like to read and write and learn), he tried convincing me that Gutenberg College was the perfect fit for me. I liked the idea, but when he told me about Gutenberg, I imagined a place somewhere far off in the woods. Then, walking home

from church one day, about a block from my home, I noticed a beautiful brick building. It had a sign that said Gutenberg College. I knocked on the door, and Audrey and Ian (two Gutenberg students) opened it and handed me a brochure. The pamphlet went into detail about Gutenberg's Great-Books program. Then Toby invited me over for dinner where I met tutor Ron Julian. I told Ron I was reading Mortimer Adler's book *How to Read a Book*, and he told me Mortimer Adler played a big part in the formation of Great-Books colleges. Ron didn't know that I had been praying for an opportunity to be educated by the Great Books. So I joined the madness in the beautiful brick building that is Gutenberg College."

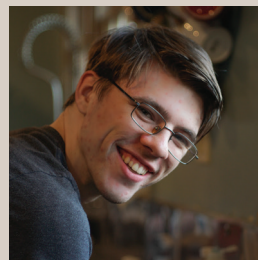
Isaiah actually joined the madness twice. He started as a freshman in 2017, after the story he describes above. But life and finances intervened, and he decided to leave the program and go work in California for a while. He returned in 2019 to join a new freshman class. (We at Gutenberg are glad he did!) Isaiah will graduate next year, and he has plans:

"During the time I've spent at Gutenberg, I've learned a lot about the kind of career I'm suited for. I'm currently an in-home caregiver of all ages and backgrounds. It's a good fit for me! But I want to provide more services to the fragile population I currently serve. Luckily, I discovered Music Therapy, a profession that works alongside a medical team to meet cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs through music. My plans after Gutenberg are to continue developing my music abilities so that I can be accepted into the Music Therapy Program at The University of Limerick in Ireland!"

This year, the Gutenberg faculty awarded Isaiah a **Ron Julian Memorial Scholarship**, given to a student who exemplifies Ron's passion, character, and desire to pursue biblical truth. 

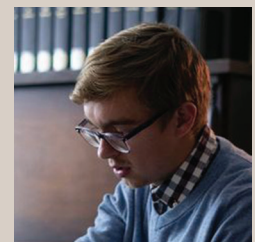
Congratulations!

Aria Jones received the **David W. Crabtree Scholarship** for academic performance and diligence, but most importantly, for having taken the content of the curriculum to heart—thinking about the issues raised and allowing the truth to change the way she thinks about life and how to live.



In addition to Isaiah Hall, **James Hall** (no relation) was awarded a **Ron Julian Memorial Scholarship** for exemplifying Ron's passion, character, and desire to pursue biblical truth.

Connor Clark received the **Søren Kierkegaard Scholar Award**, given to a student who has shown initiative and interest in pursuing a clear direction or path upon graduation from Gutenberg and who is an outstanding representative of the ethos of the college, having displayed diligence and interest in the type of inward purity of heart espoused by Kierkegaard.



COLLOQUY SPRING 2022



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2022 Education Conference **Learning for Life** September 8-10

Fundamentally, educating is the passing on of knowledge and values from one generation to the next to promote living wisely and well. As with all communication, however, the “how” of what we say impacts the “what.” A good educator is at root a good learner who models patient listening and skilled questioning. This year we will explore the “how” by focusing on the art of discussion, where teachers become fellow learners and, together with students, cultivate a life-long passion for truth and a life well lived.

Early Registration (by August 8):

Full conference: \$125 (Individual);
\$215 (Family); \$60 (Student)

Livestream of plenary talks (online): \$85

Groups: \$119 each (5 or more); \$100 each
(10 or more); \$75 each (20 or more)

Volunteer opportunities: We can also offer reduced costs for volunteers. If you would like to volunteer, please contact the office.

Information & Registration:
gutenberg.edu/edcon

Guest Speakers



Andrew Pudewa
Institute for Excellence in Writing



Scott Postma
Kepler Education



Heather Shirley
Classical Conversations



Kathryn Smith
Templeton Honors College