

# The Final Straw (21:12-22)

If you've got a bible, **turn with me** to the passage we just heard, **Matthew 21**. The 2010s were not a good decade for **celebrity church culture**. Not at all. Just do a basic Google search for names like Mark Driscoll, Carl Lentz, Ravi Zaccharias or Brian Houston—and you'll quickly find out why. It seemed to be the decade for *scandal* among church leaders. Those pastors and more were exposed for everything from bullying to unfaithfulness in their marriage to sexual abuse an addiction to substances. There was a period of time where it felt like every month there was a new moral failure among church leaders in the headlines. And much of that has continued on to today.

And *personally* for me, as someone *in* a position of leadership in the church, it was interesting to watch the **wide range of responses** to those scandals. Some people immediately got *defensive* of those leaders: people would jump on their social media accounts to remind people of how much *good* those leaders had done and how this was probably them being *unfairly* accused...that is, until many of the accusations were verified and proven to be *true*. And then for *other* people, the reaction sounded something more like *see? I told you so*. For many, those *headlines* just proved what they already knew to be true: *Christians in general, and Christian leaders specifically, are all a bunch of hypocrites anyway. Of course these pastors did shady things; we shouldn't have ever trusted them in the first place.*

But I *also* think **for many of us** watching it all play out, it left us with some *questions*. Questions like *how should we feel* when stuff like this happens within the Church? And maybe more substantially, **what does Jesus feel when stuff like this happens within the Church?** And then **what is he doing, if anything, about all of it?**

And believe it or not, those are **questions** that I think **our passage today speaks directly to**. Last Sunday, we jumped back into our series through the book of Matthew in the bible. We kicked it off with a story about Jesus entering the city, and people celebrating him as the *Messiah*: the long-awaited liberating king of Israel. And then we unpacked how Jesus both *was* and *wasn't* who they expected him to be. He *was*, in that he was the *Messiah*: he *repeatedly* claimed to be that. But he *wasn't*, in that he wasn't going to liberate them from *Rome*; he was going to liberate them from something else entirely. And *today's* passage is going to make that distinction all the more obvious. Because after entering Jerusalem, it turns out Jesus *doesn't* march straight over to Pilate's governor palace and square off with the Roman soldiers keeping watch there. **Instead, he engages in a different type of altercation altogether—with the religious leaders of Israel, at the temple.**

Now, **to understand the significance** of that decision, we're going to need a little **background** on what the **temple** was and how it operated. *Otherwise*, today's text is just a passage about Jesus breaking into a really nice building and making a mess. Which would be *interesting* and a bit *rude*, but not all that *spiritually* significant. We need to actually understand what was *happening* at the temple, that would make Jesus respond in this way.

So let's talk for a moment about the *temple*. **The temple**, at the time of the events in Matthew 21, was the **epicenter of Jewish life** in Jerusalem. It was also the epicenter of God's presence on earth. *When you and I think of God's presence today, chances are we think of it being everywhere*. And to *some* extent, ancient people thought that way too. But at the same time, they knew that if they wanted to *meet* with God, *interact* with God, *commune* with God—all of that had to happen at or near the *temple*. The temple, in their minds, was where heaven and earth overlapped. It was where God's presence *resided*. **It was where he came to meet with his people.**

But in order for him to do that, **something else had to happen** first, and that's **sacrifices**. The temple was where *sacrifices* were offered. *Sacrifices* were a God-ordained way of grasping the holiness of God, and the *gravity* of being in the *presence* of God. **A sacrifice was a way of saying you understood that God's presence wasn't something to be taken lightly.** To say that you understood that your *sin* created *separation* between you and God. So what people would do is bring some type of sacrifice *to* the temple—generally an animal—and they would *offer* it as a sacrifice *at* the temple.

Now usually, they would be **assisted in doing that by** the temple **priests**. The *priests* were a group of people that were uniquely authorized to offer people's sacrifices at the altar, and were familiar with all of the regulations and procedures for doing so. They were basically *facilitators*: they *facilitated* people's worship at the temple and helped people interact with God in that environment. They were meant to be *helpful* to the general population. ~~And even if the whole process sounds strange to us today, this was all just a normal part of Jewish life at the time of Jesus—it was all they knew.~~

And **when the temple system was working** as intended, it was a beautiful, intricate part of people's relationship with God. **But just like any system run and operated by imperfect human beings, much of it became warped and distorted over time. Over time, the sacrificial system, the temple, and the priesthood that operated it, became riddled with corruption and injustice.** And **in today's passage**, we're going to discover exactly how Jesus feels about all of that, and what he intends to do *about* it.

So **with that context** in mind, let's start reading in Matthew 21, v. 12:

**12 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.**

So the **"temple courts"** was the area surrounding the *outside* of the temple. The reason that area was significant is because of **what was happening there** at the time. As we mentioned *last* Sunday, during this particular time of the year, Jewish people from all over the ancient world would travel to Jerusalem, where the temple was. And *all* of those people needed to offer sacrifices. But if you're traveling *miles and miles* by *foot* to get to Jerusalem, you're not going to bring an animal *with you* as a sacrifice. That would make the trip unnecessarily cumbersome. **Plus, who wants to make the whole journey with Fido, knowing that Fido is about to go bye-bye? That's just cruel.** So instead of bringing a sacrifice *with you*, you would wait and *purchase* one once you arrived in Jerusalem.

**Hence the market** in the temple courts. *There*, merchants would set up shop where people could *purchase* animals to offer as sacrifices. But there was **another logistical hurdle**. Most people were carrying *currency* from all over the ancient world; not money that could be used at the temple in Jerusalem. So they *also* had to exchange their *currency*, in order to *purchase* the sacrifices they needed. Hence the "moneychangers" Matthew mentions. Now, **none of these things were inherently corrupt or sinful in themselves; they were just practical arrangements made so that people could offer their sacrifices.** They were all probably *helpful* in their original form.

**But over time**, they had become more and more corrupt. Over time, the temple courts became a place to take *advantage* of the fact that people *had* to offer sacrifices, *and* that they didn't have any other way to purchase them. The *price* of sacrifices had gone through the roof. To the point that they were basically price *gouging* people—*especially* the poor. **Matthew mentions specifically the merchants selling doves. Doves were the sacrifice you would offer if you didn't have enough money to purchase anything else. Doves were supposed to be dirt cheap, so that money wasn't a barrier for anyone who wanted to come and worship.** But evidently, these merchants had even inflated the prices of *doves*; meaning they were taking advantage of the *poorest of the poor*.

**Plus, the exchange rate** at the temple had climbed to an *absurd* level. So they were gouging people through the price they charged for sacrifices, *and* through the exchange rate. **Every chance they got, they were taking advantage of people who were simply there to worship. And who do you think likely benefitted, financially, from all of this price**

gouging at the temple? Well, the people in *charge* of the temple: the *priests*. They, in all likelihood, got a significant *cut* from all of this.

So **Jesus**, suffice it to say, is not a fan of any of what's happening. In fact, he's quite frustrated by it. Frustrated the point that he enters the temple and begins *driving out* everyone involved. The gospel of John tells us that Jesus *did* all of this with a *whip* that he made himself.<sup>1</sup> ...So that's exciting. But Jesus just systematically works his way through the temple courts, driving out merchants and animals, cracking the whip, and turning over the tables where they were selling and exchanging money. Quite the scene. I'm picturing animals running away terrified from the whip, money everywhere all over the ground, people confused about what's happening, children laughing because they think the whole thing is hilarious—just pure *chaos* at the temple.

But **remember the reason** for all of this: **Jesus is furious; he is indignant at what the temple has become. It was intended to be a place where people from all over could come and offer sacrifices in worship to God. But instead, it had become a place where barrier after barrier was being set up to prevent people from worshiping God. Or at least make it incredibly difficult for them to do so. Nowadays, if you wanted to worship at the temple, you had to jump through a lot of hoops and spend a ridiculous amount of your money in order to do it. In many ways, the temple had become precisely the opposite of what God intended the temple to be.**

And **directly responsible for all of this twisting and distorting of the temple system were the priests**; some of whom are the “*chief priests*,” that Jesus interacts with here in just a moment. **The priests were the ones tasked with making sure the temple functioned properly; that it operated the way God wanted it to operate.** But by *this* time, they had *instead* become strict *gatekeepers* around the temple. They had begun to pick and choose who *could* and *couldn't* have access to God, based on really arbitrary factors like how much money you had and what sacrifices you could afford. So do you see why Jesus is infuriated by all this? **There are few things that anger the heart of God more than unnecessary barriers placed between him and his people.**

And all of *that* is the basis of **Jesus' critique** in v. 13. Look with me there:

**13 “It is written,” he said to them, “My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”**

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<sup>1</sup> John 2:14-16

Jesus quotes from two different Old Testament passages: one from Isaiah and one from Jeremiah.<sup>2</sup> He says that “[his] house” (i.e. the temple) was *supposed* to be a “house of prayer.” A place where people could come and commune with God: worship him, pray to him, interact with him. And **instead, it has become a “den of robbers”:** a place where people are being stolen from, taken advantage of, and oppressed. And *inhibited* in their access to God. Jesus is infuriated by all of this, and he wants it to stop. He wants the temple to *return* to what God *designed* it to be. Which is in many ways what he *does* next. Look with me at v. 14:

**14 The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.**

Now *traditionally*, people like this weren’t allowed anywhere *close* to the temple altar.<sup>3</sup> But *here*, Jesus not *only* welcomes them *in*; he *heals* them. He takes *away* any barrier that exists between them and God. **So notice the contrast: the temple priests were making it *harder* for people to worship at the temple; Jesus makes it *easier* than it’s ever been. The priests are *constructing* obstacles between people and God; Jesus *clears* the obstacles. In a very tangible sort of way, he is giving people a glimpse of what God *intended* the temple to be all along. Verse 15:**

**15 But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant.**

At this point, evidently, even *children* in the temple courts are recognizing who Jesus is and the significance of it all. *Son of David*, as we mentioned last week, was a title Jewish people reserved for the *Messiah*. *Hosanna* means *God, save us*. **But the powers that be** at the temple don’t like this at all. To them, it’s *blasphemous* to call Jesus that. And if they thought *that* was blasphemous, they’re *really* not gonna like what Jesus says next, v. 16:

**16 “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they (that is, the chief priests) asked him. “Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, “From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise’?”**

Okay, **here’s why they’re not gonna like that** comment from Jesus. *First*, Jesus just asked a group of people who find their *identity* in how much bible they *know*, if they’ve ever read their bibles. So *that’s* uncomfortable. **But *second***, they’re not gonna like it because the verse Jesus just quoted is a *psalm* about how even *children* will worship *Yahweh*, the

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 56:7, Jeremiah 7:11

<sup>3</sup> See Leviticus 21:16-24

God of Israel.<sup>4</sup> The chief priests didn't like that these children were calling Jesus the *Messiah*; Jesus suggested that he's not *just* the *Messiah sent* by God—he *is* God himself. Which means it's *right* for the children to worship him as God. Which, to the chief priests and teachers of the law, was the blasphemy of *all* blasphemies. Jesus is pulling out all the stops here: no stone left unturned in offending the sensibilities of the religious establishment.

In fact, the **gospel of Mark tells us** that it was after this very interaction, that the chief priests and teachers of the law started plotting how they could *kill* Jesus.<sup>5</sup> **This in many ways is the last straw in their minds towards Jesus: he has just struck at the very center of their identity and livelihood.** The religious system that they had poured their *life* into, from *their* perspective, is under attack. Jesus comes in and upends it *all*, because they had *allowed* it to become something it wasn't supposed to be.

But they don't see that. **They think Jesus is tearing down what God set up. But at least right now, he's just tearing down what they made out of what God set up.** Okay, **this one's for free**, but as Christians, sometimes we *have* to realize that **people attacking what we made out of our faith is not the same as people attacking our faith.** There are times where people *are indeed* attacking our faith in Jesus. And that's frustrating, even if it is expected. But there are *other* times where people are simply critiquing what we have *allowed* our faith to *become*. They're critiquing the parts of our faith that aren't consistent with what we claim to believe. And when people do *that*, sometimes, we'd do well to *listen* to their critique.

But because the chief **priests don't understand the difference** between those two things, they in turn want to kill Jesus for doing what he's doing and saying. Which is probably why he has to get out of town for a bit. Look at v. 17:

**17 And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night. 18 Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. 19 Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.**

Now we can be honest: this **feels a bit weird**, yeah? After the whole thing at the temple, Jesus goes out of the city to spend the night. And on the way back *in*, he...*curse*s a tree for not having fruit on it?? On the surface, this seems like quite baffling behavior. Kinda makes it seem like Jesus was just having a bad day and took all his frustration out on a

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 8:2

<sup>5</sup> See Mark 11:18

tree. What makes it even *weirder*, I think, is the fact that this is the only time we have on record of Jesus doing a *mean* miracle. *Most of the time, Jesus' miracles are restorative—he heals someone or restores someone's sight or feeds people.* This is the only time that a miracle by Jesus seems to *harm* instead of help.

So we have a **couple options on how to make sense** of what we just read. We *could* just chalk it up to Jesus being in a grumpy mood. We could say that Jesus gets hangry just like we do, and *sometimes*, evidently, he gets hangry enough that he calls down curses on trees for not having food on them. That's *one* option. **The *other option* is that we could ask if there's some amount of context we're missing for understanding what just happened.** I would argue that's the *better* option. **In fact, just as a general bible reading tip: anytime you read something weird in the bible—something that just feels completely random and even a little out of character—it's always good to ask: what am I missing?** And *often*, there are clues *in* the *passage* that help us sort it out.

So **what clues are we given** in *this* passage? Well first, Matthew tells us the specific type of *tree* that Jesus interacts with: a *fig* tree. That feels like more details than we need if the point was to just show us Jesus angrily destroying a tree; it was *specifically* a *fig* tree.<sup>6</sup> So, is there anything significant about *fig* trees in the bible? Well, if you just do a search for figs and fig trees in your bible app, you'll get quite a few results.

Specifically, **in the Old Testament, a fig tree** is sometimes used as a metaphor for the nation of Israel, and often, specifically for the *leaders* of the nation of Israel. When God goes to his people expecting righteousness and justice, and instead finds corruption and *injustice*—he will compare that experience to a person who walks up to a fig tree, expecting figs, and doesn't find any.<sup>7</sup> So here's my question: do you think Jesus, who was steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures, had in mind passages like *that* when he cursed the fig tree in this story? I'd be willing to bet he did. **Think about it: Jesus has just gone to the temple, which God designed as a place of righteousness and justice; and instead, he found corruption and injustice there.**

So I would imagine **this isn't so much a destructive miracle from Jesus, as it is a symbolic one.** He came to the temple expecting to find *righteousness*, and instead found *unrighteousness*. And because of that, for Jesus, *this* is the final straw for the temple itself. **I think Jesus is foreshadowing for us that the temple itself will soon be destroyed, much like the fig tree was. Which, as it turns out, is exactly what happens. The temple will soon be destroyed—both literally, by Rome (more on that in a moment), and figuratively, as the primary way that people interact with God.**

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 11:13 actually tells us it wasn't even the season for figs, which also hints at a deeper meaning.

<sup>7</sup> For examples, see Jeremiah 8:12-13, Micah 7:1-2.

But I think all of this **helps us understand the interaction** that follows. Pick it back up with me in v. 20 and let's close out this passage together:

**20 When the disciples saw this** (meaning, what happened to the fig tree), **they were amazed.** "How did the fig tree wither so **quickly?**" they asked. **21 Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. 22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."**

Now, **some people read this** part of the story as just a *generalized* teaching from Jesus on the power of prayer. And Jesus *does* believe in the power of prayer. He even says elsewhere that prayer can *indeed* "move mountains."<sup>8</sup> But I'm inclined to think that *here*, Jesus is talking about something more *specific* than that. In fact, I think Jesus is talking about a **specific mountain**. Remember his language: "*this mountain.*" Think about the *context* with me. We're told that Jesus and the disciples are *outside* of Jerusalem, to the East, and are walking back *into* the city. The next passage is going to tell us that they were specifically headed back *to the temple*.<sup>9</sup> Which means that right in front of them at this point in the story, clear as day, would have been what was called the "*temple mount.*" The hill in Jerusalem that the temple sat on *top* of. I think when Jesus says that they can say to "this mountain," 'be uprooted and thrown down,' that's because it really *will* be.

I think Jesus is **again alluding to** the fact that the temple's days are numbered in Jerusalem. Historically speaking, in the very near future, that very temple will be *toppled*. Roman armies will lay siege to it, and level it to the ground. The temple will be no more. **But Jesus is making the point here that though, on the surface, that seems like the actions of the Roman empire, it is actually a demonstration of God's judgment on the temple. On how corrupt the temple and its leaders had become. On how it had come to embody the very opposite of what he intended it to be. And not only does that make Jesus angry, it makes him angry enough that he decides to condemn the temple to destruction altogether.**

Okay...**how's everybody doing?** You awake? Some of you are like "barely. I'm *barely* awake." I realize that was a lot of information to take in. But here before we're done, I want us to take a step back and try to discern **what all of this might mean** for us today. **As I mentioned at the very beginning, I think this passage gives us lenses for how God feels**

<sup>8</sup> For example, Matthew 17:20.

<sup>9</sup> See Matthew 21:23.



about *corruption* within the Church. And here's why I say that: one of the things the New Testament makes clear is that in many ways, **the *temple* of Jesus' day has now been replaced by the *Church*—the community of God's people.**<sup>10</sup> **Today, God's presence doesn't reside in the physical structure of the temple, but rather within the community of believers gathered in Jesus' name.**

Now, **that has quite a few practical implications**, all of which we don't have time to get into this morning. But *one* thing we can conclude, based on that, is that **Jesus likely feels much the same way about corruption in the *Church*, as he did about corruption in the *temple*. Anytime there are corrupt leaders benefiting themselves, all while making it more *difficult* for people to know and worship Jesus, you can be sure that Jesus is deeply frustrated by it.**

But listen: **it's not just that he feels a certain way about it; he does something about it.** Quite a few bible translations actually put a *heading* over this story in Matthew. In your bible, it might say something like *Jesus cleanses, or purifies, the temple*. That's what Jesus was doing in the story: *purifying, cleansing* the temple. And make no mistake about it: even today, Jesus is still *cleansing*, he's *purifying*, his temple—the Church. He's doing it by *exposing* corrupt leaders. By removing them from positions of authority where they stand. And he's doing it, sometimes, by *closing* churches that no longer represent what he is about. That's not the case *every* time a church closes, and not every church that *should* close, *does*—but sometimes, that is what's happening.

And **often, when God does those sorts of things**, we either respond by *defending* that ministry or that leader, as if they can do no wrong; or by losing faith and trust in the institution of the Church altogether. But **to me, it seems like there's a third, more hopeful explanation for what is happening in those moments: God is purifying his Church. He's ridding it of the things that *don't* represent him, and restoring it to what he intended it to be.** And sometimes that's not *pretty* when it happens—it wasn't pretty *at all* that day at the temple. But it is sometimes *necessary*. And **when all of that returns the Church to what God intended it to be, it is a beautiful thing, regardless of how messy it is. So maybe instead of responding in defensiveness or dismissal, we should respond with gratitude—for anything that God uses to purify his Church.**

I'll **even put it this way**. I **pray this never happens**, but if there *ever* comes a day when I, or any of the leaders at City Church, or City Church as a whole no longer embodies the things that Jesus says the Church should be about—I **pray that God will shut me or us down—that he'd take us out of the picture—if that's what he sees fit.** Because this

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

isn't *my* church. It's not about me, or any other leader here. It's not even about *City Church*. It's about *God's Church*. And he gets to do with it as he sees fit. Does that make sense?

But **here's the uncomfortable part**—you ready? **In this new version of the temple called the Church, we can't blame everything wrong with it, on its leaders.** Church leaders have a *responsibility* to lead their churches in healthy ways, to be sure. But at the same time, **in the New Testament vision of the Church, there are no longer any priests.** There are no longer those that stand *between* “regular” people and God, in order to mediate between the two. The *New Testament* actually says that *all* of us as followers of Jesus are now *priests*.<sup>11</sup> God is making *us*—regular followers of Jesus—into what Peter calls a “royal priesthood.” *All* of us.

**And that means first,** that we all have *direct* access to God through Jesus; we don't need anyone to mediate that for us. But **second,** it means that *with great power, comes great responsibility (Spiderman)*. **Because we are all now the priests, that means each of us have the ability to shape the community we're a part of—for the better, and for the worse.** Every posture of your heart right now—good *and* bad—is *shaping* our church into something as a result. Every word out of our mouth *to* or *about* another person—is *shaping* our church *into* something. Every way that you deal with *conflict* between you and others—or *neglect* to deal with it—is *shaping* our church into something. Every way that you *do*, or *don't*, pour into other people and help them become more like Jesus—that is *shaping* our church into something as a result. **Do you see the monumental responsibility this is for each of us?**

**Even your repeated refusal** to be an active part of a local church shapes *the Church into something as a result*. 1 Peter, in that very same passage that calls us *priests*, also calls us *living stones*. As in the stones that God is using to *build* a new kind of temple. **Every person in this room who claims to be a follower of Jesus is now a part of the new temple God is building. Which means every person in this room now has a role to play in helping the Church become who God made it to be. And in helping prevent it from becoming what it shouldn't be.**

So **here is the unpleasant part.** If we truly *want* Jesus to purify his *Church*—if we want him to cleanse it and make it more and more what he designed it to be—that means we're going to have to be *open* to him purifying *us*. At an *individual* level. **If we want to see the Church return to what it's supposed to be—that means we need to consider the possibility that we need to do some returning ourselves. If we want to see revival**

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<sup>11</sup> See 1 Peter 2:4-5

in the Church, that means we need to let *revival* happen in our *own* hearts and minds. In our postures, in our attitudes, in our willingness to serve and sacrifice and put others ahead of ourselves. And in our willingness to be an active part of communities that are and always will be imperfect.

And **doing that is going to involve** us returning, time and time again, to the good news of Jesus. Here's the entire context of the passage in 1 Peter that I keep mentioning. Take a look with me on the screen:

*As you come to him (Jesus), the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house* (same word Jesus used today when he said the temple was a “house” of prayer) *to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*<sup>12</sup>

**To become the “house”** Jesus made us to be...to become the house of *prayer* and *communion* with God that God intended the Church to be...to be a holy *priesthood* offering sacrifices to God in worship...to be *all* of that, we must *never, ever, ever* lose sight of *Jesus*. We must never, ever lose sight of the *gospel*: that he who knew no sin, became sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God.<sup>13</sup> That is where all of this begins *and* ends. It's where the ability to be the living temple of God comes from; by knowing that Jesus, through the cross, has made it all possible. By understanding that this whole thing is about *him*. It's about people coming to know, and love, and worship, and interact with him. It's not about serving ourselves, making much *of* ourselves, it's not about turning the church into what *we* want it to be—it's about making much of *him*, and becoming what *he* wants it to be.

**So every week, we go to the tables** together and we remember what Jesus did to make that idea a reality. We remember that his body was broken and his blood was spilled on the cross on our behalf, that we might *become* everything he created us to be: together, the temple of the living God. A house of prayer for all nations.

So let's pray together.

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Peter 2:4-5

<sup>13</sup> See 2 Corinthians 5:21



