

THE BARREN FIG TREE

Rejection of a Nation

Matthew 21:18-22

Because Jesus has just been hailed by the people as **Israel's Messiah** and **King**...Jesus' *cleansing of the Temple* and *cursing of the fig tree* were of special and significant meaning. The *cleansing of the Temple* was a denunciation of Israel's *worship*...while the *cursing of the fig tree* was a denunciation of *Israel as a nation*. Instead of overthrowing **Rome** ...**Israel's** enemy...as the people had anticipated...He denounced His own people.

It was inconceivable to the **Jews** that their **Messiah** would *condemn* them instead of *delivering* them...that He would *attack Israel* instead of **Rome**. But He conclusively demonstrated what both His words and His actions had testified all along...that He had not come as a *political* or *military Messiah* to free **Israel** from **Rome** and to set up an *earthly kingdom*...but that He had come to set man free from the *bondage of sin* and to establish a *heavenly kingdom*.

When the people finally realized this truth, they rejected Jesus...and had no use for such a **Messiah**...and certainly no use for such a **king**.

Even though Jesus' *cursing of the fig tree* wasn't nearly as dramatic as the *cleansing of the Temple*...it was equally significant.

I. THE RETURN: (vs. 18)

Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry (vs. 18)...

After spending the night in **Bethany** with **Mary**, **Martha**, and **Lazarus** as He had been doing (**Mark 11:11**)...Jesus was **returning to the city**.

He became hungry...It would seem that **Mary** and **Martha** would have prepared breakfast for Jesus...which would have been proper for them to do since they were hosting Him. So one of two things probably had taken place.

- *He may have gone out very early to pray on the Mount of Olives...which He often did...and had no time to return to Bethany to eat.* Or...
- *He may have eaten breakfast several hours earlier and whatever He had been doing rekindled His hunger.*

In any case...**He became hungry**.

Fig trees were very common in **Palestine** and had great *semblance and value*. It wasn't uncommon for them to grow to a height of **20 feet** and equally as wide...making them an excellent shade tree. It was a favorite place for people to gather.

The presence of a **fig tree** was a symbol of *blessing* and *prosperity* for the nation. Its absence would become a symbol of *judgment* and *deprivation*.

Normally, a **fig tree** produced fruit before it sprouted **leaves**...and they also *bore fruit twice a year*. That's why when Jesus **found nothing on it except leaves only**...He was disappointed...because a tree with **leaves** should have already had fruit.

II. THE REJECTION: (vs. 19)

From **Mark**, we learn that the encounter with the fig tree involved *two successive days*. Jesus *cursed* the fig tree on the morning that He entered **Jerusalem** to *cleanse the Temple*...but it was on the following day that the disciples noticed that the tree had *"withered from the roots up"* (**Mark 11:20**). **Matthew** condenses the two events into one account...making it look like everything happened on one day.

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 (vs. 19)...

No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you...With these words Jesus pronounced the tree's fate. It was now under a *divine curse*...and as a result...it would be perpetually unproductive.

"Being reminded, Peter said to Him, 'Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered'."

~Mark 11:21

In **Matthew's** account it appears that the **fig tree died** instantly. But as was already noted...although the tree may have **at once withered**...it wasn't until the next morning that the disciples noticed it.

The **fig tree** represented *spiritually* how dead **Israel** had become. Its **leaves** represented **Israel's outward religious righteousness**...

the *righteousness of man*...but its *lack of fruit* represented her *spiritual barrenness*.

Paul later described his fellow Jews...

“...that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.”

~Romans 10:2

And that they were...

“...holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power”

~II Timothy 3:5

Fruit is always an indication or manifestation of *salvation*...of *a transformed life* which operates in the *power of God*. People's right relationship with God is evidenced by the **fruit** they bear (**Matthew 7:18; Matthew 13:23; John 15:5**).

Jesus' point regarding the **fig tree** was that **Israel** as a nation had an impressive pretense of religion...represented by the leaves. But the fact that the nation bore no spiritual fruit was proof that she was unredeemed and cut off from the life and power of God.

Just as *fruitfulness* is always evidence of *salvation* and *godliness*... *fruitlessness* is always evidence of *lostness* and *ungodliness*.

This incident wasn't the first time Jesus had used an illustration of a barren **fig tree**. On an earlier occasion He said that for three years the owner of a certain *fig tree* had failed to find *fruit* on it and therefore instructed his vineyard keeper to cut it down. But the keeper pleaded with the owner give it one more year to see if it would bear **fruit** (**Luke 13:6-9**).

Some *forty years* later (in **70 AD**) the **curse** on the nation of **Israel** was fulfilled...as illustrated by Jesus' **curse** of the **fig tree**. At that time, God allowed the **Romans** to overthrow **Jerusalem** and demolish the **Temple**...destroying both the *nation* and its *religion*... because **Israel** had not borne any **fruit**...as it still hasn't to this day.

In *cleansing the Temple*...the message was that **Israel's worship** was *unacceptable*. In *cursing the fig tree*...it was that **Israel** as a nation was *condemned* for its *sinfulness* and *spiritual fruitlessness*.

The people of **Israel** today are still *under God's curse*...*preserved*...but *unblessed*. They are *preserved* because God will yet redeem them in the final days because of His *covenant* and *promise*...but they are *unblessed* because they continue to *reject* their **Messiah**. **Israel will not be destroyed** because God *protects* her. But neither is she being *blessed* because *she will not claim the Son of God*... therefore she *has no claim on the Father* (**John 14:6**).

“He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.”

~John 1:11

In the **cursing** of the **fig tree**...Jesus was setting aside **Israel** for a season but not forever.

“God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! ...so all Israel will be saved...”

~Romans 11:1, 26

III. **THE RESPONSE:** (vs. 20-22)

Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, **“How did the fig tree wither all at once?”** (vs. 20)...A diseased tree typically will take several weeks or months to die. Even a tree that has been poisoned usually takes several days to die. For the **fig tree** to **wither** overnight...was to die virtually **at once**.

The principle taught in this parable was that *religious activity* without *spiritual truth* is an abomination to God and leads to destruction.

At that point Jesus moved from the *visual parable* of the **fig tree** to *another truth* that He wanted to teach the disciples. The Lord now took the opportunity to teach them about the *power of faith* joined to the *purpose* and *will of God*.

And Jesus answered and said to 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** (vs. 21)...

Jesus was obviously *speaking figuratively* since He never used His own power to perform such *spectacular* but *useless* supernatural feats. This was precisely the sort of sign that the unbelieving **scribes** and **Pharisees** had demanded of Jesus (**Matthew 12:38; Matthew 16:1**).

Matthew 21:18-22

Mountain moving **faith** is *unselfish...undoubting...and complete confidence* in God. It's believing in *God's truth* and *God's power* while seeking to do *God's will*. The measure of such **faith** is the sincere and single desire that God *be glorified through the answer*.

Mountain moving **faith** is *activated* by a sincere heart *petitioning* God.

And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive (vs. 22)...

The parables of *the friend who asked his neighbor for a favor at midnight* and *the widow who petitioned the unrighteous judge* ([Luke 11:5-8](#); [Luke 18:1-8](#))...both teach the importance of *persistent prayer*.

Persistent prayer that believes God's Word can't be inconsistent with the action of God's *sovereign will*...because in His sovereign wisdom and grace...He commands such prayer...and obligates Himself to honor it.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN:

- There's a difference between *religious activity* and a life that has been *transformed* and *bears fruit*. One is *empty* and *barren*...the other *blessed*.
- God doesn't *build His church*...or *build up His people*...by *better ideas, better programs, or better methods*. God promises to truly *reveal* and *release* His power only through faithful believers who are *persistent* in **prayer...seeking His will**.
- When the *church* is *impotent* and *powerless* (as so many are today)...it's because so many *Christians* are *impotent* and *powerless*...because they are *prayerless*.

18. **Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry.**
19. **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.**
20. **Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?"**
21. **And Jesus answered and said to 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.**
22. **And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."**