

# 1. FIGS FOR BREAKFAST, ANYONE?

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And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, Jesus went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once (Matt. 21: 19).

Michael Leunig, Australian cartoonist, artist, philosopher and political commentator sarcastically dismisses Jesus' cursing of the barren fig tree this way,

We might imagine that Jesus had many human faults. He failed most humanly, in my reckoning, when he killed the fig tree just because it didn't bear any figs for his breakfast; that was a disgraceful, bad-tempered thing to do, and to try and make a virtue of it by saying it was a demonstration of faith only made things worse. ( <sup>1</sup> )

William Barclay, in a far more amenable tone --- but with equal consternation --- states,

There are few honest readers of the Bible who would deny that this is perhaps the most uncomfortably difficult passage in the New Testament. If it be taken with complete and unquestioning literalism, it shows Jesus in an action which is an acute shock to our whole conception of him. ( <sup>2</sup> )

Okay. I also must be frank here. The story of Jesus cursing a fig tree has perplexed me too. Blasting a fig tree when **it was not the season for figs** does seem rather petulant (Mark 11: 13). ( <sup>3</sup> ) Look, we all get rather irritable when intense hunger grips us but, are the critics right to say, --- tut, tut Jesus, mind your temper! ( <sup>4</sup> )

Why decree that a tree must never yield fruit for anybody **again forever**? Why blame an inanimate fig tree, as though it had a moral responsibility. Fancy addressing a *tree* as though it were a person, "And he answered and said to it, **May no fruit ever come from you again**" (Mk 11: 14)!

Then, some commentators note how entirely out of character the whole miracle appears for one who never succumbed to using his supernatural gifts to satisfy his own needs. Metaphorically speaking, all through his life Jesus had refused to turn stones into bread so as to meet his own necessities.

Others have demurred by saying the blasting of the fig tree was wanton destruction of property --- for many in our day this would exacerbate our "climate crisis" by destroying a

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<sup>1</sup> "Fig Quotes" in [Brainy Quote.com](http://BrainyQuote.com)

<sup>2</sup> *Gospel of Matthew: The Daily Study Bible*, Vol. 2, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Sixth Impression, 1967, p276

<sup>3</sup> The healthy fig tree is unique in that it bears two crops of fruit a year. Before the leaves appear in the Spring, the tree has some *taksh*, i.e. under-developed green fruit which can still be gathered for sale in the markets. But a fig tree in full leaf should have mature fruit on it, meaning that a fig tree full of lush green leaves with no fruit is barren for the whole season.

<sup>4</sup> The text nowhere says Jesus cursed the tree in anger.

carbon harbour! ( <sup>5</sup> ) We may answer this objection quickly, for the text clearly says this fig tree was not on anyone's private orchard or vineyard. It **was by the road (Matt. 21: 19)**. But does this excuse the destruction of a public asset that was for everyone's benefit and enjoyment?

## TEXTUAL CONTRADICTIONS TOO!

If only we could stop at these challenges. But unfortunately, there are more serious hurdles. When we compare the cursing of the fig tree in Matthew's account with Mark's we must face the fact that there appears to be a glaring contradiction between the two narratives.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus uttered his curse over the fig tree that it withered **immediately**. The disciples were astonished saying, "**How did the fig tree wither away so soon?**" (Matt. 21: 20). Matthew seems in no doubt the blight happened **at once (Matt. 21: 19 NRSV)**. ( <sup>6</sup> )

Mark, on the other hand, seems to indicate that nothing obvious happened straight away, and that it was not till **the following day** when they were passing that way again, that Peter and the disciples noticed the tree had **dried up from the roots (Mk. 11: 20)**.

How do we reconcile these two apparently contradictory time-slots? Commentators resort to various "explanations". **William Barclay** thinks that because Mark's version is the earliest gospel, then **some development has taken place ... and it is equally clear that his version must be nearer to the actual historical facts.** ( <sup>7</sup> ) However, for me at least, it will not do to say that one of the gospel writers later "developed" his story, which is to say, altered some facts, albeit from "memory fade". Sometimes witnesses to the same event can honestly get some details muddled, but we are talking about inspired Scripture here, after all.

I think *the solution comes down to the different styles of the authors*. Commentators are unanimous that Matthew often ignores chronology. ( <sup>8</sup> ) Indeed, **by narrating the withering of the tree immediately after Jesus spoke, Matthew avoids another note of time ...** ( <sup>9</sup> )

So, given Matthew's stylistic preference for not insisting on exact times, and how he compresses his narratives usually with no reference to chronology, and that it is perfectly legitimate to translate the Greek word as **"soon"**, it is perfectly acceptable to have

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<sup>5</sup> Fig trees in the Middle East could be giants, with trunks over a metre in diameter with large girths, huge branches growing to heights of 3 stories or more, and were welcome oases of shade in the heat of summer, as well as providing a nice snack of succulent fruit. They were often planted right next to wells for the relief of travellers and locals alike. No wonder the fig tree was the favourite tree in the Middle East, olives notwithstanding!

<sup>6</sup> **π α ρ α χ ρ ἦμα** /*parachrēma* means forthwith, presently, immediately, instantly, soon (from **π α ρ ά τ ό χ ρ ἦμα** which is comparable to our "on the spot").

<sup>7</sup> *Op Cit.*, p 277

<sup>8</sup> For example, over and over again Matthew will say "**Then** such-and-such happened", but it's clear he is not being time-specific, just that he is using a well-known literary device meaning, "**The next subject** I want to touch upon is ...". Examples where Matthew ignores chronology are seen in this very section where dealing with the cursing of the fig tree is located in Christ's last Paschal week:- He does not tell us when the cleansing of the temple took place, nor when he healed the blind and the lame in the temple, nor when he went to Bethany, nor which day he came to the fig tree. Mark does. Matthew is therefore not so much interested in chronology, just that these events actually took place.

<sup>9</sup> **Leon Morris**, *The Gospel According to Matthew*; The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Eerdmans, MI, 1992, p531

Matthew say, **And the fig tree withered soon thereafter**. Mark tells us how soon thereafter it was.

I do not pretend all these objections are inconsequential nor that they do not raise genuine concerns. But to get bogged down in them will be to miss the powerful application that Jesus' action conveyed to those in his day, and by extension, to his followers today.

Remember, this is the only miracle Jesus performed which destroyed anything. All his many and mighty miracles were restorative, life-giving, healing, a blessing bringing great joy and thanks. In contrast however, this miracle of the cursed fig tree is unique, standing alone. *It's the only one where Jesus takes life and destroys something*. It must therefore carry a powerfully significant lesson, so let's investigate for our profit and blessing!

### **A DRAMATISED PARABLE, A MIRACLE AND A PROPHECY ALL IN ONE!**

Don't forget the cursing of the fig tree happened only a few days --- about 100 hours in fact, before the nation officially rejected their promised Messiah and hung him up in public disgrace. They committed bloody murder. Israel's rejection of their Messiah was the ultimate apostasy and rebellion against the God of their prophets, the God of Abraham, the God of Israel.

We see in this miracle an acted parable of judgment being telegraphed to the Jews of that day. ( <sup>10</sup> ) (This is the one point most of the commentators do agree on!) How remarkable to read Jeremiah's prophecy hundreds of years before against Israel's **continual apostasy**;

**“Thus says the LORD ... Why then has this people, Jerusalem, turned away in continual apostasy ... behold they have rejected the word of the LORD ... therefore they shall fall; at the time of punishment they shall be brought down declares the LORD ... There will be no figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall wither; and what I have given them shall pass away ...” (Jeremiah 8: 4-13).**

Jesus cursed the fig tree in that last week of his life. And that final week was marked again and again by the Jewish authorities butting heads with Jesus. In spite of overwhelming evidence that he was God's promised Anointed one, they wilfully rejected him.

That very week they shut their eyes to Jesus' mighty miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the dead: **“This man is working many miracles”** they were forced to admit, yet still plot to kill him. (Jn 11: 47).

That very week they saw Jesus ride on a donkey into Jerusalem --- fulfilling Zechariah's prediction their King would come **riding on the colt of a donkey (Zech. 9: 9; Matt. 21: 4-5)**.

That very week they saw Jesus weeping, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. You who stone the prophets and kill those sent to you, how often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not”** --- Jesus despaired over their stubbornness.

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<sup>10</sup> Readers familiar with the O.T. will know the prophets often dramatised their message by symbolic actions (e.g. Is. 20: 1-6; Jer. 13: 1-11; 19: 1-13; Ez. 4: 1-15).

That very week they saw Jesus heal the blind and lame *in their Temple* (Matt. 21: 14).

That very week they saw Jesus driving out the profiteers in the outer court of the Temple and witnessed Jeremiah's prophecy being fulfilled; "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves" (Jer. 7:11; Matt. 21: 13).

That very week they challenged Jesus' authority --- "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority (v. 23f)? They knew. But those cowards feared the people more than God and refused to admit that Jesus was God's Messiah.

That very week they heard Jesus' parable about the disobedient son who promised to go and work in the father's vineyard, but disobeyed --- a clear allusion to their wilful sin against the God of Israel (Matt. 21: 28f). And they heard the parable about the wicked tenants who killed the vineyard owner's only son. They knew Jesus spoke this parable against them (Matt. 22: 45).

We could go on. All through that momentous last week, Jesus' woes for the Jews gushed forth. Prophecy after prophecy was fulfilled in front of their very eyes, yet we see official, inveterate, implacable hostility and rejection of their King and Messiah.

No surprise then, that when Jesus cursed the barren fig tree the same theme screams out: Israel, in spite of her privileged calling and chosen status is now like a barren fig tree --- full of the showy leaves of hypocritical pretension but showing no fruit for all that. Jeremiah's prediction is coming to pass in an acted parable ... ***There will be no figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall wither; and what I have given them shall pass away ...*** (Jeremiah 8: 4-13).

## LUKE'S PARABLE

It's worth noting here that the narrative of Jesus cursing the barren fig tree does **not** occur in Luke's Gospel. But he does have a parable that has strong connections to it ;

Then he told them this parable; "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'

He [the gardener] replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13: 6-9)

Who can fail to see the strong parallels? Israel, God's fig tree planted in the vineyard of the nations as His special people, are on notice. God is looking for proper fruits of righteousness. Every care and attention is paid to her. God has marvellously provided for her, and patiently protected her for generations. They have been providentially watered and manured, preserved.

Israel should have been ready to be God's light and truth to the nations when their promised Messiah came. The outcome was in their hands. Would they receive Messiah?

If they persist in stubborn unbelief, and are content with mere outward pretension, then judgment is inevitable --- **cut it down!** It is cursed ... **Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire (Matt. 7: 19).** With privilege comes responsibility.

It helped national Israel not one bit to plead, **"But we have Abraham as our father!"** Pleading pedigree of the flesh without the vitality of connection to the True Vine does not exempt from the withering blight --- when all is leaves with no power of God's Spirit and Truth --- the end is surely near.

## APPLYING THE TRUTH TO OURSELVES

The same principle applies to the Church today, and to each of us. Profession of faith, claiming privilege, failing to fulfill our calling in Christ will lead to the removal and loss of that privilege. As the adage says, "What you don't use, you will lose!"

Most of my readers will remember the well-known story of **Mahatma Gandhi's** early days in Praetoria, South Africa. **Gandhi** was searching into Christianity. Over several Sundays he attended a Christian church, but in his autobiography he says that, **"The congregation did not strike me as being particularly religious; they were not an assembly of devout souls, but appeared rather to be worldly-minded people going to church for recreation and in conformity to custom."**

**Gandhi** concluded that there was nothing in Christianity which he did not already possess. He was lost to Christ and to the Christian gospel with incalculable consequences to his homeland in India and to the British Empire and indeed, to the entire globe.

**The Seven churches** in **The Book of the Revelation** are told that if they fail to rise to the level of their responsibility that God would **remove their candlestick**. And it has happened; the very districts those 7 churches occupied are now under the curse and control of Islam, a religion that denies God's Son died on the cross for our salvation and is Lord of all.

The history of many Christian denominations is no different. An original vision, a mighty movement of God in revival by the time the third and fourth generations roll around has petered out to a lifeless whimper. The passion of the first love is now a lukewarm formality. **Having a form of godliness they deny the power thereof (2 Tim. 3: 5).**

And we may rest assured that those countries where the Bible was once believed and loved but are now turning their backs on God will go the same way ... lands like Great Britain, the U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand, etc. Abandoning God brings the curse of madness for, **although they knew God, they did not honour Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened (Rom. 1: 21).** Are we not seeing the cursed withering rapidly spreading in our lands?

## THE PERSONAL APPLICATION

On a personal level, God is looking for every Christian to be fruitful and useful in His work. Failure to develop the gifts and talents God has given us invites disaster ... **For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away (Matt. 25: 29).**

Do we realise that we will be judged in terms of our usefulness? God has given you and me a gift, each and every one of us, and a special place in His body, and it's up to us to be fruitful in that call (I Cor. 12: 7ff). The Father **removes every branch in me that bears no fruit, and whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers ... it is gathered ... and burned (Jn. 15: 2,6).**

You may think you are too old or too weak to be of any good in the master's cause. Not at all. Even a bed-ridden believer can be of great use in the Kingdom by their patient continuance and indomitable spirit of joy in Christ. Some of God's greatest people have seen God's strength perfected in their weakness. The power is the Lord's, not yours or mine.

Even a cripple or a blind and deaf saint can open heaven's door of blessing through intercession and prayer. None of us is useless to the Lord! Plead with your God to give you fruit for His Name and glory! Do not be content with only leaves.

What lessons we learn from the cursed barren fig tree! It was more than a case of Jesus being piqued because he couldn't eat figs for breakfast! It was a powerful prophetic picture, a dramatised parable, a miracle demonstrating the universal principle --- that profession of faith without real fruit --- always leads to withering and irreplaceable loss.

Appearances can be deceptive. **He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**

**To be continued ...**