

The Cursing of the Fig Tree
Matthew 21:18-22
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Matthew 21 began with the triumphal entry on Monday of the final week of Jesus' life. Jesus returned *"on the next day"* (Mark 11:12,15) to cleanse the temple in Matthew 21:12-13. This was followed by His healing of the blind and the lame, along with confrontation by the chief priests and scribes over accepting the praise from the children who were at the temple.

Therefore, this chapter juxtaposes the commendation of Jesus by the large crowds on the approach to Jerusalem and by the children in the temple, with the condemnation of Jesus upon the buyers, sellers, moneychangers, and religious leaders in the temple. The theme of condemnation will continue in Jerusalem with the cursing of the fig tree by Jesus, and with the increasing opposition to Him from the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests, and elders. The final climax of their condemnation of Jesus will of course be the crucifixion of Jesus for the sake of the sin of the world.

The cursing of the fig tree (21:18-19)

Matthew's Gospel places the account of the cursing of the fig tree the day after the cleansing of the temple. However, from Mark 11 we see that this was a two part process (Luke and John's Gospels omit this story of the fig tree from their work). The initial cursing of the fig tree occurred on Tuesday, on Jesus' way from Bethany to Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, and the observation of the withered fig tree occurred on Wednesday as Jesus approached the city.

"On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening" (Mark 11:12-14).

The day after the temple cleansing, Mark 11:19-22 reports that the disciples observed the withered fig tree as they returned to Jerusalem from Bethany, *"When evening came, they would go out of the city. As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, 'Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.' And Jesus answered saying to them, 'Have faith in God.'"*

There are several issues that arise from this story that have caused confusion among Bible readers and commentators. One is the destructive nature of this miracle. This is contrary to what we normally see Jesus do, which was to bring healing and restoration, not cursing. However, Matthew 8:28-34 describes Jesus' delivering two men from demonic possession by casting out demons into the swine, who would then rush down a steep bank and perish into the sea.

We can see that God views plants and animals in a fundamentally different way than He views people. While all are part of His creation, only mankind is man in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). The plants and trees were given to man to serve mankind, *"Then God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you"* (Genesis 1:29).

Another criticism regards the issue of property rights. Does Jesus destroy the property of someone else? This question likely explains why Matthew included the detail that this was *"a lone fig tree by the road."* This tree was not in a grove of fig trees that was cared for by a landowner. Rather, this tree was *"by the road,"* indicating that it had just grown there, and was not planted by an owner. This is why it was *"a lone fig tree."* Jesus used a fig tree that was ownerless for this object lesson.

Another issue surrounds why Jesus cursed the lone fig tree for *"finding nothing on it except leaves only,"* when Mark's Gospel adds, *"when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs"* (Mark 11:13). If it was not the season for figs, why did Jesus curse a fig tree that did not bear figs when it was not in season? And why would both Matthew and Mark note that *"He became hungry,"* and imply that He came to a fig tree that was not in its season to bear fruit in order to potentially satisfy this hunger? *"Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves."*

The answer to these questions involve a knowledge of fig trees, which Matthew's Jewish readers would have. The week of Passover was in the early springtime. That the tree was *"in leaf"* shows that the weather was warm enough for the emergence of leaves. The appearance of these leaves normally corresponded with the emergence of green figs that were premature and not typically eaten until June. While these smaller green figs were edible, they were not tasty since they were unripe. Therefore, they would be left until they would ripen when it was *"the season for figs."*

Therefore, Jesus would have approached the fig tree with the expectation that there would be something edible, yet he found nothing. That there were no green figs on the tree, but only leaves, Jesus could observe the obvious, that this was an unfruitful tree since there would not be any figs that would develop in the months to come. This fact would be observable to all, not just Jesus. Being in leaf, the tree showed the promise of producing figs, but in reality, it was not fruitful. As such, it proved to be an object lesson for Jesus.

This object lesson concerns the nation of Israel. Fig trees were prevalent throughout the land of Israel and in the many places in the Old Testament we see the fruitfulness of fig trees as an analogy for faithfulness and prosperity, and the unfruitfulness of fig trees as an analogy of Israel's unfaithfulness and coming judgment.

“I will surely snatch them away,’ declares the LORD; ‘There will be no grapes on the vine And no figs on the fig tree, And the leaf will wither; And what I have given them will pass away’” (Jeremiah 8:13).

“But like the bad figs which cannot be eaten due to rottenness—indeed, thus says the LORD—so I will abandon Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials, and the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land and the ones who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a terror and an evil for all the kingdoms of the earth, as a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and a curse in all places where I will scatter them. I will send the sword, the famine and the pestilence upon them until they are destroyed from the land which I gave to them and their forefathers” (Jeremiah 24:8-10).

“I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree in its first season. But they came to Baal-peor and devoted themselves to shame, And they became as detestable as that which they loved” (Hosea 9:10).

Earlier, Jesus had used the fig tree in a similar way, *“And He began telling this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, “Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?” And he answered and said to him, “Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down”’”* (Luke 13:6-9). This parable is consistent with the Old Testament's usage of the unfruitful fig tree as a symbol of impending judgment.

While understanding the fig tree as an object lesson makes sense of an odd miracle, it also is consistent with the context of judgment upon the corrupt leaders of God's people. The context in Mark's Gospel is the cleansing of the temple, which is preceded by the cursing of the fig tree and followed by the withered fig tree. Matthew's context includes both the cleansing of the temple and the opposition by the chief priests and scribes to the children's praise of Him.

Furthermore, this judgment upon the leaders is a theme in the upcoming chapters of Matthew. Also, in the context of the whole New Testament, we see the result of the unfaithful leadership that has led the Jewish people to oppose their Messiah. God suspends His work among the nation and replaces it with the church (Ephesians 2:11-22), that will become His means to bring salvation to the world, fulfilling the promise to Abraham, "*And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed*" (Genesis 12:3).

We know from Romans 11 that Jesus has not set aside Israel from God's plan forever. The Lord will renew His work through Israel when the rapture of the church occurs and when the tribulation period, the last week of Daniel's prophecy (Daniel 9:27), God will restore the nation in preparation for the second coming of Jesus Christ.

While this cursing of the fig tree represented the end of God's work through the nation of Israel, it did not end His work through individual Jews. Just as the children, the lame and the blind would praise Him, even though the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees were misleading them in hypocrisy, so we see many Jews believe in Jesus as early as Acts 2, regardless of the Jewish opposition to their faith in Christ. During the church age, Jews and Gentiles are one, united positionally in the body of Christ, the church, through faith alone.

The question about the fig tree (21:20-22)

The day after the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple, the disciples saw the withered fig tree, "*Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, 'How did the fig tree wither all at once?'*" The disciples were too focused on *what* had happened, not *why* it had happened. The question that they should have asked was, "why did You do this to the fig tree?" As was common for the disciples before the coming of the Holy Spirit, they were only thinking about the temporal things that they saw, and not the bigger picture of what Jesus was doing and what He had prepared for them. This was a common practice with the disciples of Jesus.

Earlier, after the transfiguration, Jesus had explained why the disciples had been unable to cast out a demon using the same imagery, *“for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you”* (Matthew 17:20). In Matthew 17:20, Jesus’ point was that the disciples’ could do great things through faith in God, according to His will.

In Matthew 21:21, Jesus contrasts faith with doubt. God was faithful to wither the fig tree because Jesus did not doubt and He had faith to do God’s will. The disciples would need to follow the will of God and not doubt as the opposition to Christ grew. When we doubt God’s powerful will, then our fruitfulness diminishes and when we trust God’s powerful will, then our fruitfulness will abound.

Even what appears to be insurmountable is within the power of God to overcome if it is according to His will. The words, *“all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive,”* requires faith according to God’s will. God will give to us the request that we make when they are in harmony with His will (Matthew 6:9-13; 7:7-11; cf. John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24; 1 John 5:14-15). Jesus’ point was that in prayer, we must believe that God is able to do anything that we ask of Him, and that He will do only what is truly according to His will. *“This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him”* (1 John 5:14-15). In this, we can have great hope in the revealed promises of God.

There have been different interpretations regarding what Jesus may have meant by *“this mountain.”* One interpretation observes the concept of a mountain used as a metaphor for a kingdom in the Old Testament (Psalms 30:7; Isaiah 2:2; 41:15; Jeremiah 51:25; Daniel 2:35, 44; cf. Revelation. 8:8; 16:20; 17:9), with the idea of the sea being the Gentile nations (Deuteronomy 33:19; Psalm 72:8; 114:3, 5; Isaiah 11:11; 60:5). If this were true, then this imagery would be either the dominion of the Gentile nations destroyed by the coming kingdom of God, or the sending of the message of the kingdom to the Gentile nations.

In other New Testament references Jesus to *“this mountain”* always refer to a specific geographical location. In Matthew 17:1-2, this phrase refers to the mountain upon which Jesus was transfigured and in John 4:21, the phrase refers to Mount Gerizim (cf. John 4:5). It is therefore highly likely that Jesus spoke of a specific mountain in Matthew 21:21.

There then are two potential mountains that Jesus could have referred to, the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount. One view considers Jesus referring to the Mount of Olives as a fulfillment of Zechariah 14:4 with the coming kingdom, *“In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south.”* However, there is no reference to the Mount of Olives and a sea in this verse.

Another interpretation of the mountain is that Jesus spoke specifically of the Temple Mount. Some have considered this to be a reference to the coming destruction of the temple in 70 AD by the Romans. Alternatively, some have viewed this mountain as metaphorically speaking of vain religion, such as the pride of the religious leaders.

Most likely, Jesus would have meant *“this mountain”* to mean the Temple Mount. This would have been that which is consistent with the context, the judgment of the activities of the temple (21:12-13). In His judgment of the religious leaders, He also brought to an end their practices, for He would replace the sacrificial system by His pending death for the sin of man. Jesus likely referred to the end of the temple practices of the sacrificial system by becoming the one sacrifice for all. Faith in Christ brought true forgiveness of sin, and forever rendered the continued sacrifices of the temple meaningless.

The author of Hebrews verifies this truth when He wrote, *“But He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD,”* (Hebrews 10:12). The temple sacrifices would soon end, for they could never have brought the redemption from sin, *“For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?”* (Hebrews 10:1-2).

In this way, Jesus not only answered their question truthfully, that the fig tree withered through faith, without doubting, but He also reinforced the lesson of the fig tree. The work of God was moving away from the fruitless nation of Israel, who had rejected their Messiah. Christ would become the one true sacrifice for sin that the temple was unable to accomplish.

Conclusion

The cursing of the fig tree occurred when Jesus with the disciples from Bethany to Jerusalem on Tuesday morning. The disciples observed the withered fig tree the next morning, which prompted them to question Jesus about how this had happened. Jesus used this question to instruct them regarding faith, for it was the lack of faith that caused the unfruitfulness of Israel, as symbolized by the withered fig tree.

Faith in God is fundamental to true religion. Those without faith are useless to God, and destined for destruction. Those with faith will be used by God according to His plan, no matter how great or small this plan seems. By faith, as manifested by prayer, we will receive what is God's will. There is no limit to the power of God in what He may choose to do in us and through us. Yet if we do not have faith, we cannot expect the Lord to respond to our desires, regardless of how much effort we put into prayer. *"You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures"* (James 4:2-3).

Since those without true saving faith will be condemned, this incident will set up the final confrontation with the religious leaders leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. These leaders who will question Jesus' authority represent the unfaithful nation that has become fruitless. Jesus, who would conclude this Gospel with the words, *"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth"* (Matthew 28:18), will have His authority questioned and opposed by these leaders, *"By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"* Their leadership would be condemned in Matthew 23, and their worship would be abandoned by God, *"Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!"* (Matthew 23:38).

By faith, we will be the fruitful follower of Jesus who will overcome the world. *"For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"* (1 John 5:4-5).