

Matthew

Bible Study

The Fig Tree

Matthew 21:18—22

Jesus and His Disciples have been spending the week previous to Jesus' death in the temple proving that He is the Messiah Israel was looking for. This last week is filled with events that line up with Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah. Those who did not harden their hearts were able to understand that Jesus was the Messiah through the Father (Matthew 16:16—17). The rest hardened their hearts and wanted nothing to do with such nonsense. Those who hardened their hearts were left in the dark about the true identification of Jesus (John 12:36—40; Ephesians 4:18—19; 2 Corinthians 4:4 note: this last reference shows Satan blinding the minds of those who have already decided to not believe). God has given light to the world and those who follow that light will be given more light (John 1:9). When people reject the light given them, God allows them to go in the direction they desire to go. How unpleasant it would be for unbelievers to be forced to spend an eternity with Christ when they spent a lifetime refusing Him as their Savior.

These are the events to date: On the road to Jerusalem Jesus again tells His Disciples that He will be put to death but rise again the third day (Matthew 20:17—19). James and John desire a special place with Christ in the Kingdom (Matthew 20:29—34). As they come into Jericho, Jesus heals two blind men (Matthew 20:29—34) and Zaccheus is converted (Luke 19:1—10). Jesus and His Disciples arrive in Bethany six days before the Passover. That evening Jesus eats with Mary, Martha and Lazarus (John 12:1). The next day Jesus heads for Jerusalem and coming down from the Mount of Olives He rides on a colt while the people shout "Hosanna" (Matthew 21:1—11). He weeps as He approaches Jerusalem knowing of Israel's future (Luke 19:41—44). He enters Jerusalem then goes to the temple. He then leaves for Bethany with the twelve (Mark 11:11). We now pick up on Monday morning when Jesus curses the fig tree.

Jesus curses the fig tree (verses 18—19; Mark 11:12—14; 20—24)

As they are leaving Bethany the next morning and heading for Jerusalem, Jesus became hungry and thought that a fig tree in the distance would contain some edible fruit. The tree was barren of fruit and Jesus curses the tree saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." The next morning the Disciples were amazed the tree had withered from the roots up.

This story on the surface sounds straightforward enough. It shows Jesus' power over nature and teaches the Disciples that they can have this same power if they pray, believing. He taught them the same thing in Matthew 17:20. During the Tribulation when the sixth seal is opened every mountain and island will be moved out of their place (Revelation 6:14). Perhaps this is something faithful believers are able to do by the power of God. Jesus is teaching the Disciples to completely trust in Him without wavering.

This story goes deeper than the surface account and an understanding of the symbolism used will draw out its richer meaning. Scripture identifies certain plants with Israel. The olive tree points to Israel's spirituality. The fig tree speaks of Israel's religiosity. The vine is a symbol of Israel's national identification and the bramble symbolizes apostate Israel (see Judges 9:7—15). The Olive tree, representing Israel's spiritual life, can be understood by reading Romans 11. Israel was cut off from the olive tree because they refused to accept their Messiah. Israel is cut off spiritually from all that was promised to her. Being a part of the olive tree meant Israel was in a place of privilege. God is no longer dealing with Israel but is dealing with the Gentiles according to the Mystery as revealed through the apostle Paul.

The symbolism of the fig tree can best be understood by going back to the Garden of Eden right after Adam sinned. As soon as Adam ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil their eyes were opened, they were cognizant that they were unclothed and felt embarrassed. They attempted to take care of their sin by sewing together fig leaves to cover themselves up. They were hoping their man-made covering would hide their spiritual lack. The Pharisees did the same thing with their religion. On the outside they

appeared to be properly clothed. They used the Law, their robes, fasting and prayers to show others how spiritual they were but inside they were rotting corpses. Their lack of true spirituality was camouflaged by wrapping themselves in their religion (Matthew 23).

I believe that when Jesus cursed the fig tree so that it would wither that He was in effect cursing the religious system set up by the Pharisees. God told them in the Law what they needed to do from a religious standpoint but they used it incorrectly by adding to what God demanded and using religious rites and traditions to puff themselves up before men (Mark 7:1—13). The end of their religious system was effectively brought to an end with the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D.

There are many today who cover up their lack of spirituality by covering themselves in their religion. Outwardly they appear as the holy elite but inside are completely bankrupt. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having religious traditions and in fact many of us embrace Christian customs because we enjoy them. However, our religiosity needs to come out of our spirituality. If we confuse spirituality with religiosity then we will take comfort in our actions thinking that we are spiritual because we are acting spiritually. If we are truly grounded spiritually in Christ then outward displays of our connection with Christ are absolutely appropriate. If a person is not connected to Christ then he is not spiritual and all appearances of looking spiritual will be nothing more than a sham.

Mark 11:13 oddly states that when Jesus went to see if the fig tree had any fruit on it He found nothing for it was not the season for figs. Sounds like Jesus cursed the tree for not bearing fruit when it wasn't suppose to. This seems to be like cutting down an apple tree in the spring because there are no apples on it. However, Fig trees are a little bit different. The fig is not a fruit as we think of fruit but a syconium, a fleshy stem containing a mass of flowers that when pollinated will produce a cluster of tiny individual fruit on the inside. The fig tree (at least certain varieties) produces two crops, an early crop in spring (breba) and a late crop in the fall. The breba crop forms on the old growth branches and can begin to develop before the leaves have fully formed on the new growth. The main crop forms on new-growth branches and is usually the better crop. When Mark states that it was not the season for figs he was speaking of the main crop of figs. This would have happened in mid to late spring when the breba crop would have been ready to eat but before the main crop would have developed. Since Passover was only a few days away we know it was probably sometime in April that this occurred.

Acting in faith (verses 20—22)

This incident with the fig tree was for the benefit of the Disciples. They were amazed at how quickly the fig tree withered after Jesus cursed it. Jesus tells them that if they have an unwavering faith that they will be able to do the same and even greater things. He promises them that they will receive everything they ask for if they only believe. This was repeated to them a number of times (Matthew 7:7; John 14:13—14; 15:7, 16; 16:23).

The disciples actually experienced this after Christ's ascension as they take over the ministry of Jesus Christ as recorded in early Acts. They were healing the sick, bringing the dead back to life, speaking in tongues, had special knowledge and even could take people's lives (Ananias and Sapphira). There were many miracles that weren't recorded (Acts 2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6, 7, 13). As these things were happening, the Tribulation was looming being only probably a few months away. These special powers will be revived again when God begins dealing with Israel after the rapture of the Church. They will be needed to survive Satan's onslaught against believers.

Today, there are many that seek to experience the same events that were happening in early Acts. They desire the same excitement, the same feelings and the same emotion that these Israelites were experiencing. This is unfortunate because by doing so they are missing out on the wonder blessings that we can enjoy right now by resting securely in Christ. Ephesians spells out all the blessings we have because of our position in Christ. This is something far better than having a special emotional experience.

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