

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Miracles of Jesus</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>4</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Matthew 21:17-22</b>		
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### A MIRACLE OF JUDGMENT

Many think that this miracle is extremely out of character of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> These are the same people who are equally embarrassed with Jesus' words on judgment and hell. Like Thomas Jefferson, who composed his own New Testament by cutting out those portions he didn't like,<sup>2</sup> these people want only a sweet and lovely Jesus who is harmless and inoffensive. The Jesus of the Gospels will not be so molded. You cannot pick and choose the kind of Jesus you want. The same Jesus who welcomed little children and did miracles of benevolence is the same Jesus who speaks of the fires of eternal judgment<sup>3</sup> and who curses a barren fig tree, and we do well to pay close attention to this punitive miracle.

**The Setting:** This event occurs in the last stage of our Lord's ministry, during what is usually referred to as the Passion week. Jesus has left Bethany and is on His way to Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> This story is found only here and in Mark, where it is split into two parts (11:12-14, 20-26), with the temple cleansing in between. Chronologically Mark is more detailed. If the Triumphal Entry was on Sunday, then according to Mark, the cursing of the fig tree was on Monday; and the disciples' surprise at the tree's quick withering, along with Jesus' words about faith, were on Tuesday. Matthew has simply put the two parts together in a typical topical arrangement.<sup>5</sup> That time of the year (around mid-April) was too early for full-grown figs, and Jesus would not expect to find any, but neither did he find any of the little green knobs (called *taqsh*) which appeared earlier and were also edible. This particular tree had *nothing on it except leaves* – a sure sign that it was diseased in some way and would not bear any figs that year. Jesus then said, *May you never bear fruit again!* Furthermore, as John Blanchard points out, "There is no record of him ranting and raving, losing his temper, or attacking the tree in any way. He made one simple statement, and the tree withered away and died. Now what was wrong with that? Do we think that a person who uses a chainsaw to cut down a tree or a spade to dig up a bush is doing something *evil*? And incidentally, do you know of anybody who can cause bushes to wither and die just by telling them to do so? If I thought the weeds in my garden would react like that, I would be glad to have a word with them! This incident certainly shows Jesus to be someone *special*; in no way does it show that he was sinful."<sup>6</sup>

- I. **PARABOLIC ACT: JESUS HUNGRY.** Was it not unreasonable to curse the tree for being fruitless when, as Mark expressly says, *it was not the season for figs*? The problem is most satisfactorily cleared up in a discussion of *The Barren Fig Tree* published many years ago by W. M. Christie, a Church of Scotland minister in Palestine under the British mandatory regime. He pointed out first the time of year at which the incident is said to have occurred (if, as is probably, Jesus was crucified on April 6<sup>th</sup>, A. D. 30, the incident occurred during the first days of April). "Now," wrote Dr. Christie, "the facts connected with the fig tree are these. Towards the end of March the leaves begin to appear, and in about a week the foliage coating is complete. Coincident with [this], and sometimes even before, there appears quite a crop of small knobs, not the real figs, but a kind of early forerunner. They

grow to the size of green almonds, in which condition they are eaten by peasants and others when hungry. When they come to their own indefinite maturity, they drop off.” These precursors of the true fig are called *taqsh* in Palestinian Arabic. Their appearance is a harbinger of the fully-formed appearance of the true fig some six weeks later. So as Mark says, the time for figs had not yet come. But if the leaves appear without any *taqsh*, that is a sign there will be no figs. Since Jesus found *nothing but leaves* -- leaves without any *taqsh* – he knew that “it was an absolutely hopeless, fruitless fig tree,” and said as much.<sup>7</sup> The word for hunger is *peinao* and occurs about 25 times in the NT, chiefly in the synoptics and especially in Matthew. The term is used in a literal sense and also very frequently in a metaphorical sense (cf. Matthew 5:6; Luke 6:21, 25). Those who only see this as an example of Jesus seeking physical food have eyes but do not see! “He who patiently waits for daily bread from God would hardly curse a tree because fruit is sought thereon in vain.”<sup>8</sup> His hunger is literal and symbolic. His act here is an example of prophetic realism similar to that in the OT (e.g., Isaiah 20:1-6; Jeremiah 13:1-11, 19:1-13; Ezekiel 4:1-15).

- A. ***Parabolic Symbol: The Fig Tree.*** The OT frequently spoke of the fig tree in referring to Israel’s status before God (e.g., Jeremiah 8:13, 29:17; Hosea 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7, Micah 7:1-6).<sup>9</sup> The presence of leaves indicated fruit – but the *appearance* was all there was.

**NOTE:** It is common to see this as a figure of Israel, and indeed it does graphically illustrate Israel – but not *only* Israel. The hypocrites among the Jewish people, a common theme in Matthew (6:2, 5, 16, 7:5, 15:7, 22:18, and especially 23:1-39), are in view. It is important to note the structure in Matthew and especially Mark (fig tree – Temple figure). “Just as the leaves of the tree concealed the fact that there was no fruit to enjoy, so the magnificence of the Temple and its ceremony conceals the fact that Israel has not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God. Both incidents have the character of a prophetic sign which warns of judgment to fall upon Israel for honoring God with their lips when their heart was far from Him (cf. ch. 7:6).”<sup>10</sup>

II. ***PARABOLIC WORDS: JESUS CURSES.*** The old commentator J. A. Bengel long ago pointed out that while there are many penal miracles in the OT, this is the only one in the NT.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, as Carson has noted, that it is not directed against men should teach us something of Jesus’ compassion.<sup>12</sup> The word “cursed” (*kataraoimai*) is used by Peter in Mark 11:21 to describe Jesus’ actions. It is a perfectly appropriate word. It speaks of a judicial sentence by which evil is denounced on a deserving object and by a competent authority.<sup>13</sup>

- A. ***The Effect.*** The fig tree withered. There is here an eloquent prophecy of judgment. The fig tree not only *mimics* but also *intensifies* the imminent collapse of the temple. It is an expression of God’s judgment of the temple worship at Jerusalem. “The fall of the temple prophesied in Mark 13:2 is shown beforehand to be no accident of war, but rather a stern judgment of God against the worship practices of the temple.”<sup>14</sup>
- B. ***The Lesson.*** The effect on the disciples is underscored. Jesus’ words, prefaced by the solemn expression, *I tell you the truth*, directs the disciples to the power of faith in God. Due to the possible allusion to Zechariah 14:4 (“this mountain”), this reference is to the eschatological day of Christ’s Kingship. The prayer in question is then especially a Passover prayer for God to establish His reign.<sup>15</sup> Jesus is declaring faith in the sovereignty of God – it is a faith that prays!

**CONCLUSION:** This miracle, observed Bruce, “did have some special significance. As recorded by Mark, it is an acted parable with the same lesson as the spoken parable of the fruitless fig tree in Luke 13:6-9. In that spoken parable a landowner came three years in succession expecting fruit from

a fig tree on his property, and when year by year it proved to be fruitless, he told the man in charge of his vineyard to cut it down because it was using up the ground to no good purpose. In both the acted parable and the spoken parable, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the fig tree represents the city of Jerusalem, unresponsive to Jesus as he came to it with the message of God, and thereby incurring destruction. Elsewhere Luke records how Jesus wept over the city's blindness to its true well-being and foretold its ruin *because you did not know the time of your visitation* (Luke 19:41-44). It is because the incident of the cursing of the fig tree was seen to convey the same lesson that Mark, followed by Matthew, recorded it."<sup>16</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> F. Schleiermacher, the father of theological liberalism, found this action by Jesus "incomprehensible," and the Jewish scholar J. Klausner considered it "a gross injustice." Others of similar persuasion consider Jesus' attitude "foolish" and "unbecoming." Cf. H. Van Der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (E. J. Brill, 1965), pp. 691-93 for listing of these views.

<sup>2</sup> Jefferson revered Jesus as a great teacher and thought His teachings were the road to true happiness. However, he rejected the deity of Christ and compiled his own NT, called *The Jefferson Bible*, which removed all supernatural elements. *Dictionary of Christianity In America*, eds. D. G. Reid, R. D. Lender, B. L. Shelby, H. S. Stout (Inter Varsity Press, 1990), p. 590.

<sup>3</sup> "This is the Jesus of the Gospels," writes R. T. France, "the only Jesus history can recover. Many other Jesuses have been invented. The liberal theologians of the last century invented a sentimental Jesus who was all for peace and harmony and social justice, the great preacher of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men. The modern humanist invents a Jesus who is the supreme example of self-giving service to his fellow men. Many of us have been brought up on an anaemic Jesus, friend of little children, incapable of any angry thought or divisive action." *I Came to Set the Earth on Fire: A Portrait of Jesus* (Inter Varsity Press, 1975), pp. 13, 14.

<sup>4</sup> This is the only miracle which Jesus is said to have performed at Jerusalem. Cf. H. Van Der Loos, op. cit., p. 688.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. D. A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, General ed., Frank Gaebelin (Zondervan, 1984), p. 444.

<sup>6</sup> John Blanchard, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Evangelical Press, 1989), p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Inter Varsity Press, 1983), p. 208.

<sup>8</sup> L. Goppelt, *peino* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley, VI (Eerdmans, 1968), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Wm. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 400.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> J. A. Bengel, *New Testament Word Studies*, trans. C. T. Lewis and M. R. Vincent (rpt. Kregel, 1971), p. 248.

<sup>12</sup> Carson, op. cit., p. 446.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1980), p. 309.

<sup>14</sup> E. K. Broadhead, *Teaching With Authority: Miracles and Christology in the Gospel of Mark* (JSOT Press, 1992), p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> Lane, op. cit., p. 410.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce, op. cit., p. 209.