

The Fig Tree: A Sign to Israel and the Church

Or Did Jesus Throw a God-Tantrum

Readings: Hosea 9:10, 16-17; Mark 11:1-25 • Text: Mark 11:12-14, 20-25

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Introduction

How many times have you ever been cut by other drivers and you wish they would just get pulled over or even worse, crash somewhere. In the Philippines, no one gets upset when a driver cuts into another driver's lane – very closely. Motorcycle drivers are the most notorious of this lot, and I would admit that sometimes I even gloat when I see a biker injured in an accident. Obviously, God demands repentance from sinful, vindictive thoughts like these.

Our text involves a prayer by our Lord Jesus Christ pronouncing judgment on a fruitless fig tree – to some critics, a poor, innocent tree that just so happened to be in the way of our Lord. What makes it more unfair is that it was not even in season. Why would Jesus pronounce a curse on a fruitless fig tree when it was not in season? This is just one question out of many that we would try to investigate in this text.

Mark 11:1-25 involves a sequence of events at the beginning of the last week in the life of our Lord before his death on the cross. Jesus first enters Jerusalem on a donkey, and then goes to the Temple to look around the goings-on there. Then, since it was getting late, Jesus and his disciples overnight in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem.

The next morning, as they were on the road back to Jerusalem, they passed by a fig tree with leaves, but had no fruit. Jesus then pronounces a curse against the fig tree by praying, *"May no one ever eat fruit from you again."* He now proceeds to the Temple and cleanses it of moneychangers and traders. Then the group retires back to Bethany for the night.

The following morning, traveling on the same road, they again passed by the same fig tree, and Peter notices that the fig tree that Jesus cursed was now withered. Jesus answers them saying, *"Have faith in God,"* then proceeds to teach them about prayer.

All of these events in our text seem to be disconnected, but are they really just snapshots of two days during the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry? Or are these events connected in some way, and if they are, how?

Since it had no fruit because it was not in season yet, why did Jesus curse the tree anyway? Was it because he was hungry and it had no fruit? Isn't that a sin of selfishness, short temper and capriciousness?

When Peter noticed that the fig tree had withered, why did Jesus answer, *"Have faith in God,"* and then talked about prayer?

This afternoon, we will try to answer these questions concerning the cursing of the fig tree in our theme, **"The Fig Tree: A Sign to Israel and the Church"**:

1. Of Judgment Against Unbelief and Fruitlessness
2. Of Blessing for Faithfulness and Fruitfulness

Of Judgment against Unbelief and Fruitlessness

The events in Mark 11 are part of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. The first major part of his ministry was spent in preaching, teaching, and performing miracles in Galilee.

In Mark 10:33-34, he told his disciples that he intended to go to Jerusalem to accomplish his mission: to suffer and die at the hands of the Jews,

"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

When he finally arrived in Jerusalem, the Jews welcomed him and declared, *"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"* (Mark 11:9-10) They wanted to make him King of Israel to lead their revolt against the Roman occupation (see John 6:15), and not as King of the Kingdom of God.

Then as was his custom, he went to the Temple. Mark says he "looked around at everything," like someone on a reconnaissance mission before the actual plan is put into action. And what did he see? He saw moneychangers and those who sold pigeons, oxen and sheep (see John 2:14-16).

Can you imagine worshiping God and offering your sacrifices while the people outside were hawking their wares and bargaining and the sheep and oxen were constantly bleating? Or the disorder and the garbage in the outer courts where the Gentiles are supposed to be worshiping? Or the foul smell from the animals, instead of the aroma of burnt offerings that are pleasing to God?

Jesus did not find true worship in the Temple. The people had the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. They thought that they would forever be God's people because they had the Temple, even if they did not keep his covenant.

When Jesus saw all of this, he knew that the sacrifices offered by the people in the Temple were not accompanied by contrite hearts in repentance of their sins. The thank offerings and peace offerings were not given in thankfulness for God's blessings. Their worship was all outward show and was not accompanied by obedience to God's will. The priests performed the ceremonies only out of duty, and did not help the people understand the real meaning of the sacrifices.

So after looking around that evening, Jesus knew what he had to do the next day: he had to expose and condemn their false worship of the true God of Israel. The following morning, he went back to the Temple and cleansed the Temple of all the merchants and their tables and merchandise. He rebuked the merchants, saying, *"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations' But you have made it a den of robbers"* (Mark 11:17).

In other words, the merchants and the people had turned the Temple from a place of the worship of the God of Israel into a public marketplace. And the traders were also dishonest, fleecing the people and the pilgrims of their hard-earned money. Because of this, the chief priests and the scribes plotted all the more to kill him.

Since they had no place to overnight in Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples stayed both days in Bethany. We know that Jesus' friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary lived there, and the travelers probably slept in their house. The following morning, they went on their way back to Jerusalem.

One other event happened on the road between Bethany and Jerusalem, a distance of only about two miles (John 12:18). On the road from Bethany to Jerusalem, Jesus saw a fig tree full of leaves in the distance. Since he was hungry, Jesus looked to see if it had ripe figs for food. But the fig tree had no fruits, because it was still not the season for bearing figs.

What is so perplexing to us today, and probably even to the disciples, was that Jesus prayed an imprecatory prayer against the fig tree: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." Why curse the fig tree for not having fruit when it was not the season for bearing fruit? Isn't this unreasonable? Did Jesus lose his temper because he was hungry? *Did he sin?*

No, no, and no. The prayer of cursing that Jesus prayed was not the result of unreasonable temper due to hunger. Because he is God, Jesus knew exactly what he was doing.

In Israel and throughout the Middle East, fig trees were found everywhere. They bore a very tasty fruit – figs – twice a year. Their branches were wide and their leaves were large, which provided travelers a welcome shade from the heat of the sun.

In the Old Testament, fig trees are mentioned in relation to Israel's blessedness as God's people. The Promised Land as a land of milk and honey was also a land of "vines and fig trees" (Deut 8:8). When God first chose Israel, he delighted in them, as one who finds "the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season" (Hos 9:10). Solomon's peaceful kingdom is a land where Israel "lived in safety... every man under his vine and his fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25). A coming time of peace is described as, "they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree" (Mic 4:3-4; also Zech 3:10; Isa 36:16).

The fig tree – one that is full of leaves and abundant with fruit – therefore is a symbol of God's blessing and of peace and prosperity.

The reverse is also true – a barren fig tree, one that does not bear fruit and has no leaves, is a symbol of God's judgment against Israel: "When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered" (Jer 8:13). Another prophecy of Israel's destruction by an invading nation is described in this way, "It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches are made white" (Joel 1:7). In Amos 4:9, the destruction of unrepentant Israel is of a pestilence that strikes its trees, "I struck you with blight and mildew; your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured; yet you did not return to me."

A more sweeping depiction of God's judgment against disobedient, rebellious and unbelieving Israel is of a barren land: *"The Lord will strike you with wasting disease and with fever, inflammation and fiery heat, and with drought and with blight and with mildew"* (Deut 28:22). As well, rebellious Israel is like a vineyard without fruits: *"And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes"* (Isa 5:2), and *"Ephraim is stricken; their root is dried up; they shall bear no fruit"* (Hos 9:16).

Jesus knew what he was praying about: he was pronouncing woe, doom and judgment on Israel because it did not bear any good fruit. He even told a parable concerning this in Luke 13:6-9, where Israel is likened to a barren fig tree. The owner waited in vain for three years for it to bear fruit. So he wanted to cut it down, but his vinedresser asked the owner to give it one more year to bear fruit. God had been very patient with Israel, giving it many chances and a long time to repent and return to God. For more than three years, Jesus preached the good news of salvation to them, but Israel did not believe, so God will pour out his wrath on his covenant people.

Before Jesus came to preach repentance and faith to Israel, John the Baptist warned them in Matthew 3:10, *"Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."* Israel's destruction will be complete, all the way down to its very root.

Jesus warned the unfruitful Jews in Matthew 21:43 about their impending destruction: *"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits."* After he cursed the fig tree because of its fruitlessness, Jesus took his disciples to the Temple to show evidence that he was meting out justice in cursing the tree. The leaders and the people were unfruitful. They worshiped God falsely. They had leaves, all right, but they had no fruits – godly on the outside, but no inward faith and repentance. They showed their unbelief and ingratitude by their rebellion and disobedience to God's will.

We know from history that in A.D. 70, about 40 years after Jesus' crucifixion, God sent the Roman legions to destroy Jerusalem and its Temple. This was the final declaration by God that Israel's time of being God's chosen covenant people has ended. The time of the church made up of not only Jews, but of multitudes of Gentiles from all nations, has arrived with the preaching of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The fig tree was a sign of judgment against Israel. But it was also a sign to the Church.

Of Blessing for Faithful and Fruitful Prayer

After Peter noticed that the fig tree that Jesus cursed had withered, Jesus said to the disciples in verse 22, "Have faith in God." Huh? What a strange and surprising answer! It does not even seem to be connected to the topic at hand. What does having faith have to do with the cursing and withering of the fig tree?

Then even more strange is that he follows it up with his short discourse about faithful prayer and its effectiveness. He says that prayer can move mountains, and if you just believe what you prayed for, then you will receive the answer to your prayer.

What then was the connection between prayer and the cursing of the fig tree?

The curse that Jesus pronounced on the fig tree is actually a prayer, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." Since the fig tree is a symbol of Israel, he is pronouncing judgment on Israel. Israel will be destroyed, and will never bear any fruit again. This was prophesied, as we saw, in many places in the Old Testament. Both Jesus and John the Baptist also prophesied this.

So Jesus was praying along God's will. He knew that it was by God's will that Israel will be as the barren fig tree. And God answered Jesus' prayer when the tree withered and died.

So the first lesson about prayer is that we are to pray according to God's will. How do we know God's will? We can read all about it in Scriptures. Is it God's will for me to dream about winning the lottery? No, because covetousness and greed is a sin. Is it God's will for me to work on Sundays when it is not required? Or to go on outings? No, because God requires us to honor the Lord's Day. Is it God's will for me to marry the man of my dreams even though he is an unbeliever? No, because God forbids being unequally yoked with an unbeliever.

If we pray for things that we know are against the word of God, then he will not grant them. True, he might allow us to violate his will, but he will count that against us, and there are consequences that follow our disobedience.

Jesus then gives an illustration in verse 23: *"Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him."*

This verse, frequently abused and taken out of context, is a favorite among prosperity gospel and Pentecostal preachers. "Just name it and claim it. Just say the word, and it will be done to you," they would tell the people. "Just say to someone who was born blind, 'Open your eyes, and you will have sight!' and claim that it's already done, and God will do it for you." And if the blind does not see, it is his fault, because he does not have enough faith. This is in utter contrast to Jesus' command to pray, "Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." And in the Garden when he prayed, *"Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will"* (Mark 14:36).

What was Jesus referring to when he said "this mountain" will be thrown into the sea if they did not doubt in their hearts? It was not just "a mountain" in general, but "this mountain." Some people contextualize this to mean "a mountain of debt" or "a mountain of trouble" to be overcome. Others believe that it is the Mount of Olives, where Christ will stand when he returns (Zech 14:4). But what do the Mount of Olives and the return of Christ have to do with God's judgment on Israel?

Notice that in our text and in Matthew 21, "this mountain" is mentioned right before Jesus cleansed the Temple and in close proximity to the cursing of the fig tree. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that he was specifically referring to Mount Zion where the Temple stood, the mountain frequently identified with Israel and the Temple (Psa 48).

Jesus' prayer in cursing the fig tree literally moved a mountain, the Temple in Mount Zion. This was confirmed by his prophecy about the destruction of the Temple, *"There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down"* (Mark 13:2; Matt 24:2). The Roman army fulfilled Jesus' cursing and prophecy when they burned the Temple down to the ground in A. D. 70, and later plowed the whole city of Jerusalem.

Then Jesus summarizes in verse 24, *"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."* The second lesson is to believe that God will grant your requests. Whatever you ask? Yes, if they are according to his will. This means that in order for you to pray according to God's will, you have to have a good knowledge of what the Bible says is God's will.

What if the Bible does not tell us whether or not we should accept a job offer in another place? A couple of considerations might be in order. Is there a faithful church near the place we are moving to? Does the job require us to work most Sundays, such as in stores or restaurants? Is there great potential to be tempted to sin, such as in casinos or singles bars?

What if we do not know what God's will is? This is all too common in terminal disease situations. James Boice, pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania until he died of cancer in 2000, addressed his congregation after he was told that he had only a few months to live:

A relevant question, I guess, when you pray is, pray for what? Should you pray for a miracle? Well, you're free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to do miracles – and he certainly can – is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place. So although miracles do happen, they're rare by definition. A miracle has to be an unusual thing...

Above all, I would say pray for the glory of God. If you think of God glorifying himself in history and you say, where in all of history has God most glorified himself? He did it at the cross of Jesus Christ, and it wasn't by delivering Jesus from the cross...

Pastor Boice did not know if healing was part of God's plan for him. We should never pray the "name-it-and-claim-it" prayer, because we do not know God's will for things that the Bible does not reveal to us. Instead, pray that God's will be done in any situation, and that all things should bring praise and glory to God alone.

Lastly, in verse 25, Jesus warns us, *"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."* When we pray, we are not to pray with sin in our hearts. We may be thinking, If Jesus prayed for God's judgment against Israel, why can't I pray for God's judgment against my enemies, or the person I hate, or the friend that did me wrong, or my boss who did not give me a promotion? Psalm 66:18 tells us, *"If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."*

Sometimes behind our prayer to punish evildoers, there is an element of hard feelings, hate, unforgiving spirit, or even vindictiveness. These are not reasons to pray that God's curse will fall on others. Instead, pray that your hearts will not be vindictive, and pray that the other person will repent and believe and reconcile with you.

Jesus cursed the fig tree, but what did he do afterwards? He cleansed the Temple of evildoers, but while doing so, he preached repentance to the people. His prayer that God's judgment would fall upon Israel was not accompanied by vindictiveness, but rather, with tears over God's coming wrath upon Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), and with a sorrowing heart and a longing for repentance, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt 23:37)

Conclusion

Just like Israel, we too were unbelieving and unfruitful people. We were not part of God's vineyard until Christ came and grafted us into his olive tree. Because of sin, we were an accursed people. We used to think that our good works will merit God's blessing. But Paul says, "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, *'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them'*" (Gal 3:10).

Because of God's grace alone, Christ came down from heaven to set us free from God's curse. He who cursed the fig tree willingly became a curse for us on the tree, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'*" (Gal 3:13). The tree became a symbol of the curse that God laid upon him, the curse that we, not him, deserved. As he hung on the cross, God poured out his wrath on a people under his curse. He did this not only for us Gentiles, but for some of those Jews who sent him to that cruel death. And on the tree, he even asked the Father to forgive them, because "they know not what they do."

This is what your prayers should be. Not for God to curse those who have offended you, but for God to grant them repentance and faith. Not for God to take vengeance on them, but for you to have hearts that forgive, not hearts that hate.

As people who belong to God's vineyard, you are to ask God to give repentance and salvation to those who are outside of his vineyard. Through these prayers, the kingdom of God would then blossom like a fruitful fig tree. It would bear much fruit. Pilgrims and strangers, sinners under God's curse, would find satisfaction of their hunger for righteousness in its fruit and rest for their weary souls under its shady leaves. *Amen.*