

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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The Barren Fig Tree

Joshua Riggins

Mark 11:12-14, 20-24 (also recorded in **Matthew 21:18-22**) presents an interesting event in Christ's life. As morning came, Jesus was hungry. He saw a tree of opportunity and availed himself with the hope of satisfying the body's needs. The fig was known for its sweet fruit (**Judges 9:11**), and so was a popular fruit among the people.

However, Jesus did not find fruit on this fig tree. Therefore, he cursed this fig tree, saying, "let no one eat fruit from you ever again." **Mark 11:13** records a strange statement, "it was not the season for figs." Why did Jesus curse this fig tree when it was not the season for figs, and what is the lesson for us?

In the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* entry on fig trees, E.W.G. Masterman notes that the fig tree had two crops each year. The early crop grew from "old wood" from the previous year and arrived in June. Then in late August/early September the late crop would grow from the "new wood" of the current year. This accords with Jesus' statement in **Matthew 24:32**, that when fig trees put on leaves it is a sign that summer is near.

Let's note when Jesus and his disciples met this fig tree. According to events recorded in **John 12**, the withering of the fig tree happened within the same week as Christ's crucifixion. As this would be close to Passover, we can safely assume the fig tree incident took place in early spring.

In the spring, Christ saw a fig tree with leaves on it, and he expected there to be figs on it because this would be natural for the fig tree. In the **Song of Solomon 2:3**, reference is made to immature, green figs arriving in the spring. Indeed, we are told that unripen figs were often eaten. The disciples never questioned why Jesus thought there ought to have been figs on the tree, because they too expected figs to be there.

This tree had the appearance of fruit, but there was no substance. This barrenness was an indication that the tree was unlikely to bear a crop that year and perhaps for the remainder of its life.

Earlier in Christ's ministry he presented a parable which nearly parallels this event. **Luke 13:6-9** records,

"He also spoke this parable: 'A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years

I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'"

As Christ's life on this earth was concluding, he gave the sign that this fig tree had had its time. It was time to cut it down. Jesus was not an angry man cursing an inanimate tree. He was not a lunatic who couldn't count the seasons. Rather, he was declaring a message: the year of tending the tree goes by quickly, and judgment will come if the tree remains unfruitful. Are you that tree?

Ask yourself this question: is my faith wrapped up in outward appearance and name alone? Am I concerned more about saying the right things in public than I am about true righteousness and holiness to God? Am I more concerned with how often I meet with the church than how encouraging I make those meetings for my brethren? Do I have bumper sticker and t-shirt faith or genuine, written-on-the-heart faith? Am I more interested in the quantity I give or the use of my blessings to glorify God?

It doesn't really matter if we look the part of a Christian. We can make ourselves do all sorts of good things so that others are convinced of our righteousness, and through their attestation we can convince ourselves of the same. This, though, is self-righteousness. **Romans 8:16** reminds us that the only attestation we need is the Spirit of God. Without the proper Spirit within, everything we do is motivated by self. Without the proper Spirit, we will bear no fruit (**Galatians 5:22-23**).

When the time of judgment comes, will God find in you a heart cleaned and transformed by His Spirit (**2 Corinthians 3:17-18**) through humble repentance? Or will he find a barren fig tree, having all the signs of life, but unable through its own bad root to bear fruit pleasing to the Lord?

Don't just come and occupy a pew in the assembly. Don't just put on your clean clothes and nice shoes. Don't just bear the façade of Christ. PUT ON Christ. Be dead to your old self and let his Spirit transform who you are. And through that transformation, bear fruit to the glory of God.

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may

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be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:14-21).

May each one of us seek to be filled with the fullness of God, that we may bear His fruit and glorify His name!

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Where I Am

Jay Graham

"If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor" (John 12:26).

Recently, I was discussing with a brother about how my life changed one afternoon in August of 1978. I was in, what I noted later, was the last stages of some pretty serious rebellion. I was working at the Tennessee State Fair at a food booth at the time. A young lady and a young man approached my booth and ordered some lunch. After conversing with her, I was very glad to learn the young man was her brother! I asked her if I could call her later and ask her out for a date, to which she agreed. Well, to make a long story short, after dating her for several months I was converted to Christ, and we married the next summer. We are now in our thirty-ninth year. However, the most important change was my conversion to the Lord!

What might have happened if I had not met her? What would the state of my soul be today if I had not started attending the Pond Creek, TN Church of Christ? What if I had never met and heard the wonderful words of the gospel from those brothers who taught in that congregation? Well, I cannot say for sure, but my guess is that I would have probably never become a Christian. I certainly would not be an evangelist among the Lord's congregations. However, by the mercy and grace of God, I did meet Becky. I was introduced to the best people the Lord can produce—His people. It all started that September afternoon so many years ago.

I am reminded of the above words from the Lord, "Where I am, there my servant will be also." The Lord was there at that food booth I was working at through Becky's, and her family's, faith. He was present through the various Christians when I began attending the Pond Creek church. He was there in the lives of the many Christians I met among the Iowa churches when we moved there in 1983. He has been in the lives of His people throughout this world every time I had

contact with them since. And He will continue to be.

And the thing that is truly interesting is that it did not actually start with Becky. It started with Christ with His influence upon His apostles. They then had a direct influence upon the first Christians beginning in Acts 2 as they preached the new gospel of Christ. Three thousand souls were added to the body that day and multitudes have been added to His kingdom since. Even though Christ was in Heaven, He was there in Acts 2 through the lives of His apostles, and He continues to be here on earth through the lives of His people scattered throughout this world.

When we, as His people, go about our daily lives, we are having a positive effect on those around us if we are living and walking by faith. As the verse stated above, where we are, there is Christ. It is like a cycle that began with Jesus and has continued since and will continue until Christ comes again. What a glorious promise and assurance! This is especially so in light of this wicked and adulterous generation we live in, for Christ is still here through the lives of His people! He continues working toward the salvation of souls by the presence of His Christians through their acts of faith and love and through the divine influence of the working of His Grace and Word in the hearts of those attracted to His Truths.

So I cannot say with any kind of certainty what would have happened to me if I had not met this Christian young lady many years ago. But I can indeed praise the Lord for His being there on that day through her. It literally changed my life forever!

If you are a servant of the Lord, He is there where you are. In this same manner, you also can have such an effect upon others you meet whether at your work place, or where you shop or recreate, or through the many contacts among your family and acquaintances.

Let us continue to live our lives as He wills with confidence knowing He is indeed there wanting to influence others through the godly effect of our lives. With this in mind let us strive to live our lives in a godly manner knowing we represent the Lord. Let us allow ourselves to be His tool to further His kingdom and salvation for all we come in contact with.

"Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:11-12).

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:16-17).

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Did Thomas Really Doubt?

Sam Griffin

Happy wife, happy life. Slow and steady wins the race. The early bird gets the worm. There is a phrase for everything, for each and every part of our lives. We use them to describe things, explain things, or give them as life advice. One of the ones I heard growing up was “doubting Thomas.”

During preparation for a lesson, I was reading **John 20** and I reread the encounter between Jesus and Thomas. Jesus told him in **verse 29**, “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*” I began to wonder if Thomas actually doubted Jesus. When someone has a doubt, this means that they had faith to begin with. Earlier in the chapter, Thomas said in **verse 25**, “*Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.*” Thomas didn’t just doubt that Jesus was raised from the dead, he didn’t believe it at all. He had no faith. Having no faith is considered unbelief, not doubt. There is a difference in the two. In order to have doubt there must first be faith, and then some circumstance to shake that faith. Unbelief, however, requires that there be no belief at all. An atheist, for example, has an unbelief in God.

While it may not be accurate to call someone a “doubting Thomas,” there are still many Christians who struggle with doubt. In fact, it would be a safe assumption that all have struggled with doubt at one point or another. Often times it is an outside circumstance that is making us doubt. It is in these moments, when our faith is being tested, that we need to do what Peter did when he doubted. As Peter began to walk on the water, he saw the wind and waves and had doubts. When he began to sink, he cried out “*Lord save me!*” We need to have the same reaction when doubts threaten to drag us down. Crying out to Jesus for strength and help should be our response. James tells us that when we persevere through these times, our faith grows and we emerge as stronger Christians.

Even though most people struggle with doubt at times, it’s not always easy to admit it. When a brother or sister comes and confides that they are struggling with doubt, this is a critical moment. This is not the moment to be harsh on them for struggling with their belief. **Jude** writes to us in his letter, in **verse 22**, to “*Have mercy on those who doubt.*” If we don’t have mercy, we can easily crush the faith of a weak brother or sister. Instead, we are called to build one another up and carry each other’s burdens. Also, ask yourself how you would like to be treated if you revealed to someone you have doubts. Would you rather be belittled or shown mercy? Most would prefer mercy.

Instances of doubt are important moments for Christians.

They are chance for us to grow and increase our faith. Jesus saved Peter when he doubted, and Peter’s faith was strengthened by it. Doubt gives us more zeal to dig deeper into God’s word and find out what His answer is. But instances of doubt can be turning points for Christians, when questions go unanswered and faith is weakened. Left unchecked, doubt can crush faith and lead to unbelief. So, listen to the cry for help when someone doubts. You might be the help they need.

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One Thing

Wade Stanley

Jesus uses crucifixion as a symbol for the sacrifice of self (“... let him deny himself, take up his cross,” **Mark 8:34**). Jesus preferred for the Father to remove His cup of suffering but ultimately deferred to His Father’s will. Jesus knew that in following Him we would face similar choices with eternity-altering outcomes. He calls us to sacrifice what we prefer or, at times, what we love for the sake of His kingdom.

The familiar story of the rich young ruler comes to mind (**Mark 10:17-31**). Jesus does not expect all of His followers to sell everything and give to the poor (although some among us may feel compelled to do so). To be more precise, the young man’s unwillingness to give up what was dearest to him stood in the way of heaven. He would not deny himself.

The rich young ruler teaches all of us to examine our lives with the question, “What must I sacrifice in order to inherit eternal life?” Some choose a spiritual path different from their parents, grandparents, children, etc. Others purposely join small and/or struggling congregations to help the kingdom while others abandon their preferences in order to truthfully worship God. A few dedicate their “retirement years” to advancing the interests of God’s kingdom. Some avoid sin by denying their homosexual attraction. These are real sacrifices. They can be painful and inconvenient. The allure to choose the easier path tugs on the heart. Occasionally, the world ridicules the choice. Even fellow Christians may doubt the wisdom of such sacrifices. And yet, “*the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again*” (**2 Corinthians 5:14-15**).

*All to Jesus I surrender,
All to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him,
In His presence daily live.*

~ **J.W. Van de Venter**

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Please check your expiration date!

Blessed Are the Dead

Woodie Worstell, 87, a member of the **Grand Haven, MI church** for over 50 years passed from this life on May 1 after a brief illness. Woodie, well known for his spiritual service (and his blueberries), will be missed by all but especially by his wife of nearly 57 years, **Janet**.

Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' " "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them."
~ Revelation 14:13

Glory to God!

The church that meets in **Kirkville, MO** praised God when **Sandy Nelson** was baptized into Christ on June 15 and **Leah Baker** was clothed with Christ on July 1. The church was also glad when **Natasha Smeltser Miller** was restored to the body on June 10.

The angels in heaven rejoiced when **Lorraine Martin** was buried with Christ on July 4 during the **Midwest Bible Campout, Eminence, MO**.

The brethren in **Bloomfield, IN** were overjoyed when **Mark Martinez** obeyed the gospel on May 3.

June 10 was a special day for the church which meets in **Ore Branch, IN**. **Brooklyn and Brianna Bucher** were both baptized for the remission of their sins.

Here and There

Your editor received this note from **Dale Loney**:

"I want to thank all the brethren who sent me cards for my ninetieth birthday. I feel great, though I am short on air and on oxygen. Be strong in the might of the Lord!"

On behalf of our readers, you are welcome and many happy returns!

Special Meetings

2018 Meetings

August 26.....White Oak (rural Ethel, MO)
September 1-2.....Pleasant Hill, IA
September 15-16.....Brookfield, MO

"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

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